

Most rock musicians will roll their eyes and shudder when you mention "showcase nights," low-paying gigs that are taken to get the band's name spread around. The following is based on actual events that took place this summer during my time playing guitar and keyboards for a local band.

Our Volkswagen van, fully loaded with five people and half a ton of sound equipment, finally swerved into the tavern's parking lot, right next to the reeking garbage dumpster. "Oh Gawd, what a dive!" said our sound man as he surveyed the place. It was difficult to find, as it was coated with the dingy gray gunk that covered all the buildings in the neighborhood, right next to the industrial district of northwest Portland.

Wriggling out from our perches on top of monitor cabinets and under piles of microphone stands, we started unloading. My dreams of a ballroom filled with mobs of happy dancers started fading when the drummer, who had an amazing ability to be totally wrong about any subject, promptly said, "I think it's a strong possibility we'll really pack 'em in tonight." I rolled my eyes and hefted a speaker into the tavern.

It's difficult enough to weave between tables in an unfamiliar bar while carrying a huge speaker, but when the lights are dimmed to their lowest level, the job becomes almost impossible. Somehow I managed to crash in to a couple of chairs and a table full of empty glasses before I finally figured out where the stage was. My wife, who drove up separately, didn't fare much better. She followed the drummer halfway into the men's restroom.

After our eyes became accustomed to the light (or the lack of it), we got a good look at our surroundings. "What's that white thing in the corner? Is that a huge rat, or what?" asked the bass player. We grabbed our guitars, ready to beat the thing to death if it attacked. A white bunny, the bar's pet, hopped out into the light. Everyone at the bar laughed.

The walls of the room were covered by the works of an obviously amateur artist. Oil paintings and charcoal etchings stared at us from every corner, and the subject was always the same: an emaciated nude female in various poses. Directly behind my spot on stage hung a portrait of a woman with hollowed cheeks and skin that barely clung to her ribs, stretched into a position that would be fatal for most people. I felt myself blushing, although I knew no one could tell.

I asked the tavern owner if we might take them down temporarily. He said he'd rather not, as they were done by his daughter and he was rather proud of them. He asked if they

offended me. Trying to hide another blush, I mumbled something about mixing two art forms, and slunk behind an amp.

Soon the stage was pretty well set up. While assembling the electric piano, I decided to put in all the bracing instead of just the essential pieces I normally used. I wanted to make it as solid as possible, just in case the crowd got too rowdy. By now my dream had changed from a huge mob to about 30 dancing couples, all smiling and enjoying themselves. Without throwing beer bottles.

We plugged in all the mikes and energized the System for a trial run. We were instantly surrounded by the sound of a twenty-story beehive. The sound man snuck off to get a much-needed beer, and the rest of us carefully analyzed the situation.

While we spent the better part of an hour plugging and unplugging everything, an obnoxious drunk we named The Jerk suggested that maybe the hum was because the guitars

were out of tune. We finally noticed that the hum grew louder every time someone started playing a video game. After stretching a ratty extension cord across the bar, the System was fixed. We calmed ourselves and settled down to do a sound check (and fix everything we'd messed up searching for the buzz).

My brother was his normal pre-concert image of calmness. "OK, OK, everyone got their song lists? Hey, where's my

guitar? Where's my guitar? We couldn't have left it in Eugene, could we? Oh, thanks," he said as his wife handed it to him. "OK, let's make a quick check. All the mikes working? How's the sound out there? Well, that'll do. Everyone all tuned up? Extra guitar all set? You have extra strings? All right, let's get ready, we're on in five minutes."

By the time we hit the stage, my dream had been reduced to being satisfied with 20 people sitting around chatting quietly while we played. Instead, we were alone with a solitary couple, the waitress and The Jerk.

As usual, we ripped through the opening song about twice as fast as we should have. I got up from the piano and got my guitar on for the second tune. Suddenly I realized what I'd forgotten. "Pssst, Dave," I whispered. My brother whirled around, adrenaline coursing through his veins. "You got any extra guitar picks?"

Horror froze his face as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of Kleenex and a nickel. I rummaged through my wallet while my brother pretended to tune for five minutes. I found an old I.D. card and tore it into small triangles. Although I'd probably break a few strings, it was better than nothing.

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by matt meyer

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