

The Touring Musician's Survival Guide

What to expect, to watch out for, to maintain, to do, to learn...
all with the aims of making you a more well rounded, equipped
and employable musician in today's industry.

Written by musicians for musicians:



By Ross Craib

The Touring Musician's Survival Guide

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Table of Contents (DEMO):

About the Author

Introduction

Chapter 1: Preparation

Tour Management

Musical Gear

Rehearsal

Packing for Tour

Chapter 2: Lifestyle

What to Expect

Transport: Sleeper Bus v's Splitter Van

Downtime Efficiency

Daily Timings

Chapter 3: Attitude

Money

The Business: Do's & Dont's

Dealing with Stress & Negativity

Chain of Command

Chapter 4: Health

Diet

Alcohol

Sleep

Fitness

Mental Health: Anxiety / Depression / Burnout

Tips to Alleviate Symptoms

FREE CHAPTER → Chapter 5: Getting the Gig & Networking ← FREE CHAPTER

What is Networking?

My Success Story

Networking on Tour

What is a Musical Director & What do they look for in Musicians?

Chapter 6: Money Management

What are Expenses?

What is Claimable?

Getting Paid - Invoicing

Set up your Business the correct way

Chapter 7: Support Slots

How to get Support Slots

Reduce Your Footprint

Benefits of Simple Setups

Merchandise & Promotion

Chapter 8: Quick-Fire Questions

Chapter 9: Advice from the Pro's

Chapter 10: Post Tour

'Post Tour Blues'

Cushion Yourself

Conclusion

References

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ross Craib

Arriving in London to study music in 2010, professional musician Ross Craib immersed himself in the London music scene. He has since climbed the ranks and 9 years on, boasts an impressive CV having performed on a Top 5 Official UK Album, 4 BBC Radio1 singles, The Graham Norton Show, Main Stages at some of the worlds biggest festivals and opening the Olympics Ceremony in London 2012.

It has not been an easy road by any stretch of the imagination, however as most musicians will tell you – overcoming the struggles make the successes even sweeter.

Having embarked on 10+ International tours across more than 20 countries, Ross felt it was time to share some of his experiences and stories from the road that could benefit other musicians about to take the leap into professional music with aspirations of touring.

Currently on tour with singer-songwriter dodie, Ross has a busy touring schedule and is set to head out on tour number 8 with her throughout 2020/21.

Introduction

After answering similar repeated questions from friends, family and colleagues about what it's like to go on tour, I decided to sit down and try to explain in the simplest terms what can be expected for the modern day musician in 2019.

Welcome to a very honest publication about the challenges and expectations of a musician on tour and some of the complex relationships and situations you may come across during your time on the road.

Covering everything from preparation and attitude to lifestyle and networking, the concept behind The Touring Musician's Survival Guide is to educate younger, aspiring or existing musicians about the realities of a life on tour; What to expect, to watch out for, to maintain, to do, to learn...all with the aims of making you a more well rounded, equipped and employable musician in today's industry.

Written by musicians for musicians from first hand experience, consider me your checklist, your first aid kit, your careers advisor and your life coach all rolled into one step-by-step musical manual.

Welcome to the Touring Musician's Survival Guide!

First Things First

Before we delve into the how to survive a life on tour, it is important to acknowledge why we do it in the first place.

Touring is big business!

Artists go on tour for a multitude of reasons, but the main overarching factor is the fan base! Music is International; fans stream and buy music from every corner of the globe, so it would be foolish not to visit these target markets with the aims of capitalising on the other viable income streams aside from record sales; These include ticket sales, booking fees, merchandise, signings and appearances.

It gives the fans the chance to see their favourite artists live and it is important to give back to them; These are the people that will keep careers afloat, so it is important to cherish every single person who supports your craft.

In a nutshell, touring is about making money and maintaining an audience with the aims of building a sustainable and long lasting career.

When an artist tours, they will need a band, a crew and a team. If done correctly it can become the biggest source of revenue for all involved. Touring in itself is a big business and for some people, their only business - in a successful economy, live music serves not only the fans, the artists and the musicians, but it can also generate many other jobs, allowing our ever changing music scene to thrive;

In 2016, UK Music released an online document showing live music in the UK alone generated £4 Billion in music tourism revenue creating close to 50,000 full time music jobs and these figures have been on the rise ever since!

As long as there is demand, musicians will *and should* always tour to ensure they enjoy a slice of this increasing and very much thriving musical 'pie'!

...So, now that we've gotten the generic reasons and business foundations as to why musicians tour out of the way, it's time to get stuck in to the real life elements surrounding a tour and focus on you!

The further we delve into this book, the more you will evaluate your own reasons for performing and touring and how *you* would like to succeed at it!

My aim is to give you the insider knowledge needed to tailor your own happiness around this industry's chaotic lifestyle, by arming you with the most important information I've learnt along the way.

The Touring Musician's Survival Guide is here to serve you – take from it what you wish and survive in this game the best way *you* can!

The age old question – “How do you get the gig?” Truth be told, there is no correct way or golden bullet to this! However, there is a word that will help in your journey – *Networking!*

What is networking?

Networking is essentially growing your professional contact base by creating meaningful relationships, best achieved by socialising and just being yourself.

I remember my first day at music school where we got told this would be the “greatest tool in your arsenal” – I couldn't get my head around where to even begin. Fast forward 10 years, it's in fact very simple – be a good person and chat to others; Go to events (gigs, jams, parties, trade shows etc.) and be current in people's minds.

Now, I'm not saying go to these gatherings to 'fish' for work – this will be very obvious and likely turn people off giving you any potential future work! What I mean is, just go out, be present and let your personality shine; Music in itself is about personality, so you have to be able to get yours across in social settings.

Conversation is key!

This doesn't have to be all about music! Chat about anything...sport, movies, politics, relationships etc. If I'm honest, I'd rather have a meaningful conversation about general *stuff* than talk about what drum heads I use or how many plies of maple my snare drum has! This can be said for the majority of professional musicians and will leave people with a stronger lasting memory of your personality for the next time you meet.

And meet again you shall...

What you will come to realise very quickly is that music is in fact a very small 'network' of people with similar faces appearing at many different events – rather than 5 degrees of separation, it's more like 1 or 2 at most, so try to be upbeat and a fun person to be around! Word spreads quickly in musical circles and the last thing you want is a negative reputation.

In my experience most, if not all of my biggest gigs have come from friends or word of mouth. Less so from auditions, however, these can still be a viable route if the opportunities arise.

A good friend of mine and Musical Director, Sam Kennedy, states that most of his musical successes in the beginning came from A&R'ing the artists he wanted to work with himself:

*“Don't write to all the MD's because we have millions of people asking us for gigs. The most successful way of being a session musician or an MD is having a good ability to **A&R** the artists you want to work for.*

*In the beginning for me, people like **Jess Glynne, Foxes, John Newman**...all people I was fortunate to work with, (MD'ing, recording, producing or writing) were all voices that I had just gone out and found. I'd never written to an MD, Agent or Booker – I had just searched for the best talent I could find and hit them up to work together. This way it will become your gig and will be your best ticket into the industry. MD's or agents will then see you on stage with these artists or you will end up meeting each other at a gig and your details will be exchanged.”*

Be brutal when deciding who to invest your time with if you go this route; Don't waste your time on a project if they have a great voice, but poor songs – it's likely not going to go anywhere. Invest your time wisely – search Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, go to open mic nights, check out 'Mahognay' or 'Balcony TV' etc. and try to find artists who need what you offer (piano, guitar, drums, writing). It's the best place to start and a far more proactive way of getting gigs versus spending 5 hours on your laptop sending profile pictures of yourself to agents, who probably have that 100 times a day.

The road to the biggest gig of my career:

I had a quiet Christmas one year, so in true pioneering fashion, I decided to go in search of the work myself; I scoured the internet looking at 'drummer wanted' ads and eventually stumbled on a singer with a great voice and some lovely songs.

I approached her with my then reasonable CV and told her I could put a band together for her. There wasn't a lot of money in it, but I decided to take a punt anyway just for the love of the music and, well...you just never know where it might take you.

I took to Facebook in search of some musicians and due to the low paying nature of this gig didn't have too many responses. One chap popped up – his name was Pete; It emerged we had worked for the same Major Label artist, Martin Luke Brown, but just at different times in our career; (We had in fact met through said artist at a Wetherspoons once upon a time, which began our online friendship, however, this was our only encounter.)

I gave Pete a call and explained all the info on the gig – He liked the vibe of the project and alike me, decided to take a punt on it – Until now, we had never played together; Of course this requires trust, but trust is built on the network in which you have mutual friends – I trusted them, so in turn, I trusted Pete. Never did I know where this one gesture would lead us both within 4 years.

We performed together a handful of times, recording an EP for this artist, but nothing really came of it. Fortunately though, a similar scenario had arisen where Pete had been asked to look after another emerging artist; Because I was fresh in his memory and we'd had a good time working together, he offered me the gig and our working relationship grew even stronger.

We played one show together and I remember it being KILLER...one of the best I've played – we still talk about it to this day, in fact! During load out Pete told me he was very excited about another artist he had just heard from – her name was dodie; A singer-songwriter superstar in the making who had amassed millions of fans from her Youtube content.

She needed a band for a tour and Pete had been asked to MD the band; Unfortunately for me, another mutual friend of ours was first in line for the throne, however there were some clashes in his diary – as it emerged he had just taken on a touring theatre show for the next year. My phone rang the next week and the rest, as they say, is history! I joined the band in December 2016 and have never looked back!

Pete and I have since toured the world 7 times together with dodie and performed on her Top 5 UK Official Album, 'Human'...And it all stemmed from that one little Facebook post all these years ago and a couple of beers in Wetherspoons; This, in my eyes, was the perfect example of networking combined with musicianship paying off.



Photo credit: Stevie Kyle

Pete Dinklage & I backstage at The Barrowlands, Glasgow 2019



Photo Credit: Kyle Jones

dodie – Human EP, which charted at No.5 on The UK Official Album Chart

Networking On Tour

On tour there are a vast amount of learning resources at your fingertips. Keep your eyes and ears open and you will become a better professional!

Watch how others work; If there are a few bands on tour with you...check out what you counterpart is doing, how they play, how they interact. Learn from their set up – is there anything you could incorporate into your own playing?

Use your surroundings as an education. See who is working with whom and learn their personalities - Some of my best touring friends aren't even band members. It's easy sometimes to go a whole tour without really getting to know certain crew members, so make the effort.

Use common sense - Don't make a nuisance of yourself by getting in the way, but you won't do much harm by being around with a smiley face. Offer cups of tea or coffee every now and again; It will go a long way – these are the guys behind the scenes who make you look and sound great.



Ross with Clean Bandit, Anne Marie & Bry at Frequency Festival 2017

Musical Directors

What is a Musical Director?

A Musical Director is the person responsible for the musical aspects of a performance. They will likely source the musicians, arrange and coordinate the show and lead rehearsals to ensure everything is ready for the tour, allowing the artist to focus on the performance.

They will have an in depth knowledge of technical playback softwares, such as Ableton, MIDI controllers etc. and all the programming that goes with it. As such, they will need a good grasp on all the hardware required and often be competent multi-instrumentalists to know what is playable live and what will need to go on 'track' (if applicable).

Their job is to replicate, to the best of their ability, the sound recordings of the artist in a live environment and bring it to life. It can be a stressful job, but is a very employable attribute to add to your CV.

In their own words:

“An MD’s role varies from project to project. In a sense, the title of ‘Musical Director’ covers such a vast amount of responsibilities depending on who or what you’re working for – that covering the entire position across all musical projects, from orchestras to musicals to choir leaders to pop artists would require an entire book on it’s own. For this case, we’ll focus on an MD’s role from a pop music standpoint.

An MD’s primary role is to understand the artist’s musical vision and direction, and translate that into a live music environment. This in itself means that the working relationship between an artist and MD has to be a very close one, as it is their expertise in technology, arrangement and musician contacts that can help realise this vision. It’s a two way street though, as the MD should also have a very strong of understanding of the music, not just on an instrumental level, but lyrically too. This will help build trust and understanding between the two parties and as such, a mould for a setlist/show should present itself relatively easily.” - **Pete Daynes (dodie, Orla Gartland)**

“The long and short of it: The MD is responsible for all elements of a live show, from who is appearing on stage, to what songs ultimately are being played and how they are being played...even

down to who the Front of House sound engineer is going to be. All the elements that go around this combine to make for a fairly hefty job – there are a lot of moving parts.” - **Anon**

What do Musical Director's look for in Musicians?

This is a vast question, so I decided to bring in some external MD's to help answer in their own words what attributes they look for in the musicians they employ. Due to the honest nature of this section, I've opted to keep some of the contributors anonymous to protect identities, as they are some of the most respected in the UK industry.

It is also important to note - these are opinions from a range of different people and they will vary and likely contradict each other in some way as one size does not fit all when it comes to music!

The long and short of it...There are a lot of moving parts!

“It's important to understand this, simply because when you're looking at booking a band or musicians, you are essentially *not* going to be interested in anybody who would cause more stress or more work. I've booked people in the past who have sent me emails, texts or calls asking if their tube fare is going to be covered, or they tell me they can't get on the tube with their guitar for fear of it being damaged and therefore wanting me to find out if there is a budget for a taxi to the rehearsal; These are fairly inexperienced questions, but it puts me in a position where I think “I can't be dealing with this – I just need you to know your parts, turn up on time, play them well and go home – It really is that cut and dry to be honest.” - **Anon**

Be a good player

“When you have that much responsibility for a show you don't have time really to be worrying about the tiny details you would expect a session musician to have covered. So really you are looking for a session musician who obviously needs to be a good player – that's a given. But by 'good' player, I don't mean Joe Satriani or Mike Portnoy! When you're talking about a good session player, you are talking about somebody who can perform proficiently; So for drummers, that is ability to play to a click track. For a guitarist, someone who has a very reliable sound and feel and can just play the parts as they appear on the record;

I think that's a very good rule for any session musician – PLAY WHAT'S THERE on the record; Do not play anything else! I'm not interested in guitar solos, gospel drum chops, bass fill licks – Just play what's on the record and what the MD sends you on the stems! (If you work with a well organised MD they will probably send you these for the parts they want you to play. Stems are essentially isolated tracks. i.e. If you are a piano or keys player, it can often be confusing as to which parts you might be playing on a pop record – there might be synths, strings, pianos, organs...all sorts, so the MD will have decided ahead of time what parts he wants you to play.) Listen ahead of time and get your parts in order, but also be prepared to play, or at least be familiar with, the other parts you haven't been asked to! This way if things change, you can **adapt!**” - **Sam Kennedy (Jess Glynne, Foxes, John Newman)**

“Different positions will require different levels of player depending on the requirements, but generally, I'd be looking for an exceptional player at their given instrument. If they haven't got any past credits or experience within the field, that's definitely not a deal breaker. However, I would have to trust that they can get the job done and more so, somebody who is working as a full time musician already would be more preferable.

I also really look for somebody who is unique. A lot of higher education music schools will churn out carbon copies of the same player, all believing that because they are a certain way, it will make them more employable. I can only speak from personal experience, but when I'm watching a gig, there's nothing more inspiring than seeing band members with a THING. What I mean by that is a flair, an individuality that elevates the performance rather than a guy in black at the back of the stage soullessly playing the parts. A good band is the sum of its parts, and when you have awesome individual parts that compliment each other and the artist, you're on to a winner.” - **PD**

Be Self Sufficient

“As with all session musician's, you need to be self sufficient – bring your own gear and make sure it is of good quality! Don't turn up assuming everything will be ok on the day – even small things like guitarists with pedal boards forgetting extension cables and requiring one from the venue. Keyboard players without suitable stands for more than one piano at a time. Check ahead of time with the MD regarding your gear - tell them what you have and they will likely green light you or advise you on what else you may need. It sounds obvious, but these are things that really go against

you. If you turn up to rehearsal and you have a very slick, tidy, self contained rig, where everything just comes out the box and it's set up in minutes where all you're saying is "I just need a plug socket" - that is the dream really and a very good first impression.

A note for guitarists and bassists – be realistic...We are not gonna be touring your 4x12 cab! It's actually pretty unusual for guitarists to be using amps on smaller gigs anyway. Usually you will just be DI'd, so make sure you have a good DI or Emulator for your sounds and tones. Alternatively have a smaller amp like a Fender Princeton...change the speakers in it so it sounds good. Don't rock up to a gig with just a pedal board expecting to plug into a house amp as your sound is going to be different every time. All of these factors add to being self contained unit and thus more employable!" - **SK**

Playability and Gear covered; Next on the agenda is **image**; This comes in two forms – attire and personality.

"There's that typical session player look which is black skinny's, boots, a long black Tee and a leather jacket – This by default is the stereotypical session outfit. But, it's a good look because it's safe. You're not offending anyone by wearing a bright orange tee shirt with pink trainers and taking the attention away from the artist, which I think is an important mentality to have. You need to be able to blend in 90% of the time, causing no fuss, problems or having any big opinions, but when you get on stage you need to look slick and perform with lots of energy. I'm looking for session players who realise it's not about them – it's about the project, it's about the artist." - **SK**

"Physical appearance will matter solely on what the artist is looking for. There's no one size fits all answer for this topic, however, being in good physical shape, having a good haircut and dress sense will help you in most pop music outfits.

For me, your personality is on a par with your playing ability in terms of importance. There are 24 hours in every day and you're probably only going to be playing for a maximum of 3 of them. This means there is a lot of time spent sitting around passing time, whether in a van, or a car or bus. For me, finding people that will fit together personally is as important as musically. Vibe is everything on a tour and cohesion is key. Be nice, open, keen to work hard, trustworthy but most importantly – honest." - **PD**

I've had players before who's ego has been greater of that of the artist and they've obviously been sacked as that is not what we want. It's not about you and your guitar solo; It's about coming in and playing the correct parts, being nice and polite, asking lots of questions about other people, rather than just telling everyone about your gear and parts and ideas. So from a personality point of view – we are looking for people who are very charming, very nice, very humble, honest and agreeable. Leave ego's at the door with and enter with your understated cool look!” - **Anon**

Money and Rates

“Here's an interesting point; There is such a thing as the **125 club** – a phrase coined between a few people over the past 10 or so years and that is the perception of how much a player is worth; There are lots of fantastic players who are brilliant musicians, but they never get booked because in my eyes or in the eyes of others, you don't really want to book a player who is going out for £125 a day - they're just a bit too cheap for the project.

Believe it or not, the rate you set yourself will define your ability to have a successful career and will affect you image. If you start your career at £100 a day, you will spend the next 5 years struggling to get it up to £200. You can dream of going from £100 to £300, but I think there is a certain perception that if you are on a solid day rate, which these days is probably £250, your reputation just looks better and more attractive to an MD.

If you had the option to choose someone who is a good player and has been working successfully on a proper day rate, opposed to someone who has been going out for £75-100 for a long time, you are more likely to choose the more professional on paper. It sounds horrible, but it's the truth and I'm just being honest. The 125 club may be full of great players, but it's players who have set a bad example.

I think one of the greatest frustrations as an MD is organising rates for musician's. Obviously, I want a great rate and I want my band members to be on a great rate. I'm usually quite open with how much money I'm earning with my band members, because ultimately I'm responsible for the budget. If I say to them “I'm really sorry, there's not enough money in this budget for us all to be on £300 flat a day, I'm on X and this is how much money I can get you” - I think that's a very reasonable and honest way of of making people know I'm trying to get them the best fee for the gig.” - **Anon**

Rates: Bad Practice

“I think it is a really bad vibe when musician's say “It's fine, we'll go out for £100 a day, that's cool.” I think it ruins the ability for others to make a living in music. For all the 20 year olds out there who are happy to play for a signed artist under these conditions, what you're doing is teaching record labels that they can get musicians to just do the job for next to nothing, which devalues the entire career.

If you want to be a session musician into your 30's and 40's, you want to buy a house and have a family, pay your taxes etc. you need to be on a good day rate and you need to be busy! **Agreeing to low rates puts you in a bad bracket, limits your career and makes your life a lot harder**, so when you've stopped having your party lifestyle at £100 a day for however many months or years, you realise you're never going to be able to buy a house because you're not on enough money and because you've been telling your management or label you're happy with free rehearsal or travel days – it's a difficult position to be in.

We've all been there; I started my career (hand on my heart) programming for £75 a day and it was abysmal! I did it because I was super young and I didn't have anybody telling me this - Don't charge that, charge a minimum of £200/250 a day. If I'd known that, I wouldn't have spent the next 5, nearly 7 years, crawling up the ladder trying to get to a sustainable rate. I shot myself in the foot from the beginning and I understand why people do it, but it is a case of education and MD's should be saying to session musicians getting into the game **DO NOT GO IN CHEAP.**” - **Anon**

Am I worth it?

Money is a big talking point in this game, really; Am I worth it? Ultimately you're never going to feel worth the fee you are charging in the beginning, but you somehow need to make yourself believe you are! The fee that you begin with will probably be the fee you are stuck with for a long time.

Negotiation

“Rehearsal days in my opinion should not be a half rate – don't agree to this because they are 10 times as long and require 10 times as much effort. My advice – try to get a flat rate fee, don't work for a half rate rehearsal and you could probably agree a lesser rate for a travel day. The sooner everybody gets on board with this and the sooner the session musicians have the balls to stick to it, the more money everyone is gonna start making.

Sometimes you have to be willing to lose a gig to earn more money – I personally turned down an entire support tour for a HUGE Global Artist because the management decided the band should take a slashed travel day rate, which was completely different from the rates we had originally agreed. So I walked away from the gig and someone else ended up taking my place - but the time I wasn't on it, I ended up MD'ing one of the best artists I've ever worked for, for twice the money, if not 3 times! It just goes to show if you stand up for yourself and you make a bold decision it can benefit you in the long run. I have zero regrets about turning down this tour, when everyone said “You're crazy!”. Know your worth, know your value and be confident.” - **Anon**

Stay Active

Play other genre's for your own sanity! I think it's very easy to fall into a trap within the pop industry of only playing pop and rock, which could limit your musicianship and take away from the colourful playability you had growing up. Keep your palate of skills wide and diverse.

It is a difficult industry

“Being a session musician is a great life for a finite period of time in my opinion. If you want to see the world, be on TV, radio, be involved in big commercial projects etc. it is great fun. I'm not sure how sustainable it is as a lifestyle choice, however – If you want to keep your relationship in tact or have a family, it can be a tough balance. If you can make it work, you have to get really lucky to earn enough to live comfortably solely on a session musician wage – more often than not you will have to supplement your living with teaching, corporate work, part time jobs...At this point it's probably a good time to note: You will earn WAY MORE MONEY being a successful covers band musician vs. being a session musician in the pop industry, unless you make it into the top 1%. It's important to know the way it is so you set your career up in the right way! ” - **SK**

Summary

“As illustrated, there’s not a one size fits all answer as to what MD’s look for in a band. Something I learnt a long time ago was that you’re not going to be right for every single gig or audition that comes your way, so working on everything within your own control is key. Work on playing, style, personality, relationships with other musicians, but most importantly trusting in yourself that if it feels right, you’re doing it right. “If You Build It, They Will Come.” - **PD**

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By Ross Craib