

The Gigging Steel Band

By Gene Fambrough

Over the past five to seven years, our steel band at UAB (the University of Alabama at Birmingham) has developed a steady stream of outside gigs during the summer months. This is the result of a process that has taken several years to develop into a self-fulfilling activity of community engagement and professional experience for my students. I would like to share with you some methods that can be employed to hopefully gain some more exposure to your own program.

GETTING STARTED

Our school-based steel band performs one concert each year during the spring semester. We use this as a means to start learning new repertoire that will be a base for the summer gig season, as well as to train any new members of the ensemble. We generally learn five to six charts for this short, 30-minute concert; our group does not have a separate course meeting time, so we have to work our rehearsals into the regular percussion ensemble time slot during the course of the semester.

One of the main reasons we are able to gain outside work is the location of our university. We are an urban-based school set in downtown Birmingham. This provides access to many different functions within an immediate traveling distance. Also, our student body is made of mostly local students or students who live fairly close. Even if they do live a little farther away, many will gladly come back into town for an extra paid gig if they have the time.

During the spring months leading up to the concert, I send emails to many local schools, businesses, and other potential clients inviting them to our concert. Of course, publicizing your event is another subject altogether, but the more people that see your group, the more potential gigs you may land as a result. Obviously, make sure your group is well-prepared and puts on a great show; nothing will sell future gigs better than great performances!

BUILDING CLIENTELE

There are several ways to go about setting up a steady stream of incoming requests. Some of these may result in “freebie” concerts, but ultimately those can lead to paid gigs. A great resource is the local public school system. Besides being excellent recruiting trips to high schools and excellent service activities for performing at middle and elementary schools, the teachers, administrators, and parents

who may see your group at these events offer potential future bookings. Many will ask if you are available for outside performances, so be prepared to discuss the process of hiring your band, and have plenty of business cards on hand.

The more you play in the community, the more you will realize just how many subsequent gigs are results of these performances. For example, we recently performed at our local hospital’s spring cookout. It just so happened that the caterer was looking for a last-minute substitution for a band that had cancelled the very next evening. We were available, and were able to pick up that gig as well. Two of our most successful outside ventures were fully funded (and paid) trips to Sandestin, Florida, to perform at an annual corporate retreat. This connection came about through the husband of the agent for the booking company, who had seen us perform at a local country club a few years earlier and just happened to suggest contacting us.

Some other examples of venues and

activities that we perform for are retirement communities, private parties, church parties, restaurant openings, company picnics, award dinners, department stores, and others. The key is to be flexible and open to almost any scenario you might encounter.

BUILDING A SET LIST

Using our spring concert repertoire as a foundation, we have a few extra rehearsals to add more tunes into our book for the summer. It is important to be prepared for many types of settings, so typically we try to add several different styles into our additional tune list. Some standards that work very well (and are almost expected) are tunes like “Margaritaville,” “Oye Como Va,” “Late in the Evening,” and classics like “St. Thomas” and “Mary Ann.” Being flexible and having several pop or rock tunes in your book will appeal to a broader range of audience members. Although we’ve done classical arrangements on our concerts from time to time, we generally leave these out of the rotation over the summer.



We generally try to work up around 60–75 minutes of music for our book. This gives us plenty of variety when we perform and allows us to play a longer set without repeating anything. If a client asks for a two- or three-hour gig, I tell them up front how much music we have prepared, and that the cycle will repeat. Normally you can work this into a discussion of how often you will take a break during the performance, and most people are perfectly fine with that.

Another great way to take up more time during longer gigs is to repeat tunes that you've already played, but in a different style. Playing "Mary Ann" as a slow bossa nova or "St. Thomas" in a reggae style adds excitement for the group, and is a good way to repeat a tune without it being noticed by many (if at all). Always be on the lookout for new charts that will add excitement and variety to your set list; keep in mind the needs of your clients as well as the needs of the group.

DECIDING YOUR FEES

You will have to do some experimenting to decide what a good rate is for your particular area and situation; knowing what the market will handle will ensure a steady inbox. Find a reasonable rate, and keep it the same for each gig. Our rates are pretty simple; we have a specific dollar amount per person/per hour, and we can provide anywhere between two



and ten players for each setting. This way, the hosts of the events can decide what is right for their budget and situation. Occasionally, the client will need some guidance in determining how many players to use. My recommendation changes depending on the setting; factors may include whether the performance is inside or outside and whether we are providing background music or are the feature.

Most people will not be picky on the exact instrumentation you choose, but they will want to make sure they have the distinct "pan" sound that they are looking for. Occasionally, we have been asked to provide a single player (which certainly can be done), but we have found it is much more interesting to go with a duet as the smallest size. This gives us a little more flexibility (as well as less pressure) in longer gigs.

A couple of other considerations to keep in mind are cartage fees and fuel. If the location requires a lot of foot travel between parking and the actual gig location, you could ask for a cartage fee of \$15–20 per person. Some of our performances have been in the middle of a mall or the third floor of a conference center, which requires a great deal of extra time and effort transporting the gear. The additional factor of loading zones and potentially moving vehicles to park should be discussed ahead of time. If a performance is farther than 60 miles from UAB, I will add a fuel charge to reflect the driving distance to the event.

You may also want to determine a specific amount (or percentage) of the total that can be donated back to your school's percussion fund. Most students will understand the need to invest in their area, and putting money directly back into the steel band itself only makes sense.

Last, be sure to have a signed invoice from both parties ahead of time. The vast majority of the time there won't be any problems, but

you don't want to be caught without an invoice when there is a problem.

INSTRUMENTATION

As mentioned, our smallest size is a duet. This consists of one player on lead pan and one on double seconds. Depending on how the chart is scored, this may mean the double player is responsible for a double tenor part on the concert and a double second part for smaller gigs. In order to help fill out the sound, these players have a selection of auxiliary instruments (timbales, shakers, splash cymbal, drumset-style tambourine, etc.) as well as foot-operated instruments (foot-operated cabasa, cowbells, woodblocks, and pedal maraca).

Keeping the main duo unit of one lead and one double together, I usually stick to a general formula as I add extra players, which is as follows:

Number of players	Added instrument
3	Bass guitar
4	Drumset
5	Cello
6	Double tenor
7	Additional lead
8	Auxiliary percussion
9	Bass pans
10	Auxiliary percussion

Due to the space requirements of transportation and stage area, the bass pans are (unfortunately) one of the last pieces of the puzzle to get worked in. This has proved to be a fairly successful approach to deciding the instrumentation of various size groups. As mentioned before, the size of the group depends on the situation; the larger band is needed for outdoor gigs and/or featured



settings (if the budget allows), and smaller sizes work best for indoor, lighter settings. Use your best judgment without trying to “overbook,” and be honest with the person seeking your help.

DURING THE GIG

Obviously, we may have to change our approach based on the setting. Our standard four-piece group will play differently for an indoor beach-themed party at a retirement home than for a late-night outdoor gig for a restaurant opening. Being flexible with your book as well as your stylistic approach is crucial for repeat business.

Make sure you have a unified look within the group. Many clients will ask if you will be wearing print-style shirts, so be prepared with one of the following options: all wear the same shirt (provided by the school), or all wear different print shirts. We have had equal success with both approaches, but make sure you have one of those options, if not both. We use khaki shorts for outdoor gigs or khaki pants for indoor gigs. Otherwise, follow your standard rules of professionalism: well-groomed, polite, early, and prepared.

AFTER THE GIG

Make sure you communicate clearly with the host about how the gig will end. There are many different possibilities for what happens at the event after you stop playing: awards presentation, end of the entire event, canned music, etc. Make sure you stay on time, and if needed play an extra tune or two depending on how the performance is going.

As soon as you are finished, take a few moments to thank patrons in the audience away from the stage. You will probably have a few questions, and some people will even want to go look at the instruments. There are generally one or two brave people that will actually try to play your instruments; be polite as you ask them not to, or if you don't mind, give them ground rules and help them understand how delicate they are. I prefer to demonstrate for them if they start asking questions.

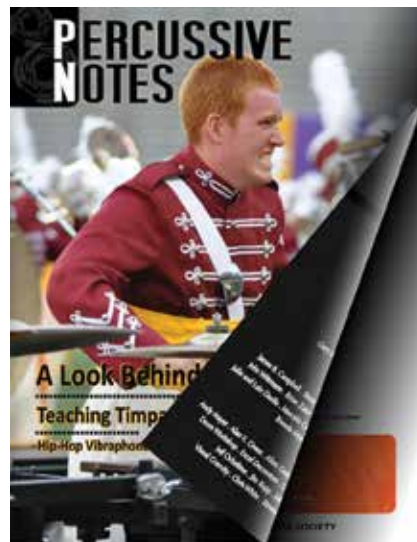
Always follow up with a phone call or email a couple of days after the event to make sure that everything went well with the client. Be sure to ask them to contact you if they ever need you again, and to please recommend your group to anyone else that may be interested. This type of networking is crucial to keeping your stream of gigs flowing.

In conclusion, the gigging steel band is one of the most enjoyable things that we do. Even better, it is also one of the most well-received activities we engage in throughout the year. Hopefully this article has provided some inspiration and enlightenment toward how to make this work for you and your group.

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