

# How to Hire a Band

*Some things you should know before booking live entertainment*

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**B**ooking a live band for your special event is always a solidly great choice. Live music adds atmosphere to any gathering, and is capable of turning any party into an event that will be remembered for a long time. Try this test: Ask yourself how many office parties you've been to where there was nothing special going on other than the same people you see every day at work: everyone puts in an appearance, socializes for a while, then goes home. Now ask yourself how many live concerts or shows you've been to? Think about the excitement in the air at a concert. Think about the audience: everyone cheering, dancing, and having a great time. It's a good bet that some of these concertgoers even save their ticket stubs to put in a scrapbook when they get home. Wouldn't it be great to have a similar level of excitement at your event? A live band can help you give your guests an evening to remember!

However, hiring a band for a special event is sometimes intimidating for those who have never done so before, and it does involve additional planning and expense that should be taken into consideration well in advance in order to minimize any last-minute "surprises" that otherwise might come up. It helps to be as informed as possible when negotiating a price with the agent or bandleader, and it is especially important to communicate your expectations to the bandleader so that the musical portion of your event goes off without a hitch. Bandleaders may also have some expectations of their own; it is a two-way street, and like any business transaction the objective is to create a win-win scenario whereby you, the band, and your guests can all call the evening a success.

This article will focus on how best to achieve that win-win scenario, so as to make your event a memorable one that will achieve its desired goals. The first section will provide some ways to help you plan your event to include live music as a centerpiece, the second section will provide some information that everyone should know

before starting to negotiate a fee with the bandleader, and the third will focus on the actual day of the event. The information in this article will help make your event a Dream Come True and not a Nightmare!

## *The Planning Process:*

**Plan your event:** The first thing on anyone's to-do list should be to come up with an overall plan for how you want your event to flow, and where you want the band to fit in to this equation. Will there be dancing? Will there be quiet dinner with background music? Will there be a cocktail hour? The answers to these questions will determine what type and size of band will suit your needs. (*fig.1*) Having a 17-piece Big Band for your dinner hour would be too loud for your guests to hold a conversation, but having an acoustic jazz trio for a crowd of dancers is also a mismatch. Assess your needs realistically, and hire a band that meets those needs. Be sure to communicate those needs to the bandleader too; he/she needs to know what you're expecting.



**Fig. 1: Some successful musical matches:**

Cocktail/Dinner music: .....	Small, acoustic Jazz trio or quartet
Wedding Ceremony: .....	Pianist, organist, Classical Duo/Trio, Brass Quintet
Swing Dancing:.....	Large band with a drummer and lots of horns
Disco Dancing:.....	Variety band with a vocalist

*Many bandleaders will be able to work with you to accomplish all of your goals. For example: it's not uncommon for a large swing band to divide up into a smaller jazz unit to play during dinner and then have the full band assemble in force for dancing after dinner.*

**Consider the logistics of your venue:** Along these same lines, it's important to make sure that your location fits your needs. If you're hiring a large band, make sure the stage area is large enough to hold them all comfortably. (it doesn't even need to be an elevated stage, just an area where the band can set up and hold court). If the event is to be held outdoors, the stage area should be covered in case of inclement weather, as should the sound system. If it's going to be an evening event or after dark, make sure there is adequate power for lighting on stage. It is helpful to provide as much of this information to the bandleader beforehand as possible too.

**Consider the visual impact of your event,** and choose music that's right for that theme. A good band will always entertain your guests, but a good band in a well-decorated room will transform your guests and bring them into an entirely new world for a night.

**Hire Professionals:** Sure, you might be able to save some money by getting so-and-so's brother-in-law who played in a band in college to come jam with his friends at your party, but ask yourself: isn't your event important enough to give your guests the best? Professional musicians do this for a living! They will take your event seriously, work hard to entertain your guests, and will work with you to suit your event's needs instead of just hanging around playing their instruments for their own gratification.

**Budget Accordingly:** Remember that most professional musicians have a great deal of time and money invested in their abilities and their equipment. A Journeyman-level musician typically has had as many years of schooling and practice on their instrument as a doctor, lawyer, or dentist. Many professional musicians have degrees in music, Bachelor's, Master's, and

sometimes even Doctorate degrees in the Musical Arts. Many are also music educators in public schools or privately. Musicians who teach privately usually earn anywhere from between \$30 to \$80 per hour teaching, and often they are giving up some or part of that income to work in bands. Musicians usually work as independent contractors, which means they're responsible for their own health insurance, self-employment taxes, retirement plans, and other expenses that the rest of the working world gets through their employer.

What's more, the physical effort of playing an instrument is very demanding. Medical studies have shown that a concert violinist burns as many calories during a typical day of practice (4 to 6 hours) as an athlete training to run a marathon. Most working musicians carry their own gear to and from the job site, ranging from at least two or three brass instruments to a full set of drums. Musicians are prone to RSI's (Repetitive Stress Injuries) and other job-related maladies. All of this contributes to added medical costs and higher insurance premiums for which the musician must bear the cost.

And let's not overlook transportation costs! These days, fuel expenses are significant, especially for the larger-sized vehicles most musicians must drive in order to transport their equipment.

All of the above factors contribute to the band's *Cost of Doing Business.* (fig.2) You should expect to pay these musicians fairly for their time while they're performing at your event. That being said, you don't have to break the bank to get the band you want. Come up with a realistic budget for live music based on the size of the band you want (number of musicians) and the appropriate costs involved for each musician.

**Fig. 2: Cost of Doing Business: Budgeting for a Band**  
(prices are per musician, non-holiday private events)

<b>Musician Wages:</b>	The wage a musician earns for practicing and performing (typically ranges from \$75 to \$125 for the first 2 hours; \$50 each add'l hour)
<b>Leader Fee:</b>	Additional percentage to cover the bandleader's cost for making phone calls, arranging music, scheduling rehearsals, managing the band, etc. (typically add 10% to total musician wages)
<b>Agent Fee</b>	Additional percentage taken by booking agents for the work they do in booking the band. (typically add 15% to total musician wages)
<b>Rehearsal:</b>	Wage paid to band members for extra rehearsal time. (typically \$25 per hour)
<b>Cartage:</b>	Bonus paid to musicians who carry large instruments or equipment, such as drum sets, keyboards, amplifiers, etc., to and from the job site. (\$45 per large instrument)
<b>Doubling:</b>	Bonus paid to musicians who must learn and maintain skills on more than one instrument in order to perform an engagement with the band (\$25 per add'l instrument)
<b>Mileage:</b>	Bonus paid to musicians to cover fuel costs to travel to and from the job site (45 cents per mile for engagements outside Metro area)
<b>Travel Time Premium:</b>	Bonus paid to musicians who are required to travel more than 30 miles to perform an engagement. (usually \$12.50 for each 50 mile increment)
<b>Sound System:</b>	Covers the cost of professional sound reinforcement, including the use, cartage, and maintenance of sound equipment and a professional sound engineer to operate it. (\$200 to \$800 depending on needs and size of room)
<b>Stage Lighting:</b>	Covers the cost of use, operation, and maintenance of professional stage lighting. (\$50 to \$150 depending on stage needs)
<b>Payroll/Employment Tax:</b>	Covers all Federal, State, County, and Municipal taxes and fees associated with Contractor wages as reported on IRS Form 1099-MISC (add 20% to musician wages)
<b>Insurance:</b>	Covers musical instruments and equipment against loss, damage, theft, or other unforeseen circumstances (cost varies depending on individual rates and policies)

*The bandleader will have considered his/her cost of doing business when providing a price quote. If they haven't, they either don't care whether or not their business loses money, or they are too inexperienced to consider all of the factors involved and will be looking for ways to earn additional money later on. Either way, you should expect to budget accordingly for the band you plan to hire. The table above will give you a ballpark idea of the costs involved when budgeting for a band.*

### ***The Booking/Negotiation Process***

***You're now ready to begin negotiating.*** Having planned your event's overall flow, being informed about what the bandleader is likely to charge, and having budgeted and planned accordingly, you're now ready to bring the band into the equation. Arrange a meeting with the bandleader or agent. Meeting in person is best, but taking care of business over email is acceptable too. Email is often better because it leaves a written record of all of your correspondence, which makes it easier to look back and find out what's already been discussed.

***Watch out for extra fees:*** An ethical bandleader will not try to add in additional costs, but once in a while you'll get a leader who tries to charge a more than realistic amount. Although some leaders may not be willing to share information on how they pay their musicians, fortunately you can use the above table to figure out if you think they're charging an unreasonable amount for their services. As always, though, the cornerstone in this business is communication: If you feel you're being charged an unreasonable amount, you can always ask the bandleader to explain why he is charging so much. If he gives you a reasonable explanation for his fee, then it's probably legitimate.

**Get a contract.** A written contract is more than just your assurance that the band will perform their duties in a professional and timely manner. It is also the band's assurance that they will be paid at the end of the night. Having a legally binding document outlining terms of service is a sensible and recommended part of any business dealing, and dealing with a band is no exception. The contract can contain anything you both agree to, but it does need to have a few key items: at minimum, your contract should contain: Your name and address; the name and address of the signatory musician; the location and time of the performance, and the amount of compensation agreed to. Beyond that, there are some terms the bandleader will probably insist on, such as the fact that no commercial recordings will be made of the performance without written release, etc. There are usually also some legitimate concerns bandleaders have about the band's working conditions while onstage. (fig. 3)

The bandleader most likely already has a standard contract boilerplate that he/she usually uses; this is normally very straightforward and shouldn't pose any problems. Any aspect of the contract can be discussed and worked out to your mutual satisfaction; it's just a matter of sitting down and talking about it.

**Communicate your needs to the Bandleader,** up front. If you're going to need the band to play Calypso music for half of the night and then Polka music for the other half, communicate that at the time of negotiation, not later on. If you have a favorite song for the Bride/Groom dance and would like the band to play it, the bandleader needs to know early on so he/she can prepare and arrange the music, and rehearse it if it's not already in the band's repertoire.

**Allow the Bandleader to communicate his/her needs to you.** Remember that these musicians are accustomed to being treated professionally while on the job. This doesn't necessarily mean you need to lay rose petals at their feet or separate all of the green M&M's out of the bowl in their dressing room, but you should treat them like respected business colleagues. As with any business negotiation, it is a two-way process. Remember that the musicians are performing their job in a different location each time they perform, and as such they will be very conscious of their work environment and working conditions being up to certain standards.

### **Fig. 3: Working Conditions for Working Bands:**

Here are some of the things that a bandleader may ask for as part of the band's jobsite or working conditions:

- **Safety:** Make sure the area where your engagement is to take place conforms to building codes and is safe for occupancy.
- **Breaks** – the band will not be able to maintain their energy level if they are required to play solidly for 3 hours straight. Most bands divide the time up in 1-hour sets with 15 minutes of break-time in between, although this is usually flexible based on your event's needs.
- **Setup:** the band will need some time, ahead of time, to set up their equipment on stage. It is best to allow at least 3 hours prior to the arrival of guests, so that the heavy equipment can be loaded in without being in anybody's way,
- **Refreshments:** The bandleader may request that water pitchers or bottles be available to musicians while onstage. Even if they don't specifically request this, it's a good idea to offer it.
- **Food:** The band usually needs to eat something – and it's usually quite disruptive if they have to send out for pizza during their break – so it's common practice to provide meals for them. They don't have to eat at the same time as your guests, especially if they're contracted to play during dinner, but they do need to eat sometime during the evening.
- **Sound System:** if the band's price includes the sound system, make sure the bandleader and/or his sound engineer has a chance ahead of time to get to know the acoustic properties of the room. If the sound system is being contracted separately from the band, make sure the sound company has a chance to check out the room ahead of time. This small amount of preparation will make all the difference in the world.

*Whenever possible, make sure working conditions are discussed and put in writing in the contract. This will protect you from potential liability later on if any accidents happen.*

**Deposits:** A bandleader will usually ask for a deposit to reserve the date. The amount varies from one individual to another, and will usually range from as small as \$100 to as large as 50% of the total engagement fee. The bandleader usually holds the deposit in a special bank account until the date of the engagement.

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### ***On The Day of the Event:***

You've planned the event. You've hired the band, paid the deposit and signed the contract. Here are some things to keep in mind on the day of the event:

#### ***Have the business items prepared in advance.***

Make the check out ahead of time so you can hand it to the bandleader smoothly. If you're planning on reporting the event as a business expense, make sure you have the bandleader's social security number or Tax ID number for your 1099-MISC,

***Have a liaison or contact-person available*** at the venue location early enough to let the band in so they can start setting up. Allow the musicians plenty of time to get the heavy lifting out of the way so they can take a few moments to relax before having to be at the top of their game when the music starts.

Give your bandleader the cell phone number and contact information for your contact-person so they can call if they have any questions or problems. Having the means available to solve minor issues before they turn into major ones will make all the difference!

***Don't micromanage:*** Chances are, you've got enough to worry about the day of the event without worrying about the band. Fortunately, you've hired professionals! Let the bandleader do the job you're paying him to do. He will make sure the musicians under his employ will conform to whatever conditions you have discussed with him ahead of time. If you have a favorite song, it's acceptable to make a request, but there's no need to dictate the band's entire song list to them – let them do their job!

***Expect the Unexpected.*** Live music is unique in that it takes place in the moment. No two live performances are ever exactly alike. Each musician is constantly striving to make every performance unique and wonderful. Don't expect your band to sound exactly like the recording – expect them to sound better! Expect them to interact with the audience a little bit, let them "work the room" and personalize their show for you.

***Enjoy the music!*** Remember that live music is the best way to turn an ordinary party into an Event (with a capital E). Your guests will bring home memories that will be with them for a long time to come.



#### ***About the Author***

*Pete Petersen has over 20 years experience as a working professional musician and music educator. He graduated in 1993 from the University of Denver's Lamont School of Music with a Bachelor of Music degree, emphasis in Jazz Studies and Performance. He has performed with many nationally recognized and world-class jazz artists including Kevin Mahogany, Jack Walrath, Nancy King, and Stefan Karlsson. He has been featured on National Public Radio's JazzSet program and has also performed with many "Legends-once-removed" including Howard Crosby (nephew of the legendary Bing Crosby), Steve March Tormé (son of vocalist Mel Tormé) and the Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra (under the direction of Bill Tole). He has also performed in the horn sections of many soul/funk/rock artists including the Psychedelic Zombiez (opening act for Primus, Spin Doctors, and the Wallflowers), and the Portland-based Tower of Power Tribute band, Soul Vaccination. Currently he resides in Portland, Oregon where he leads a successful Swing band and teaches a modest studio of 25 to 30 private clarinet and saxophone students.*