

How to Eliminate Stage Fright From Your Performances

A Guide for Performing Songwriters

by Anthony Ceseri

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You're Not Alone

As long as there have been performances, there has been stage fright. Thousands of performers have experienced the queasy stomachs, shaky hands and much worse, before getting on stage. So you should take comfort in the fact, that not only is it a common problem, but one that can be dealt with head on.

Part 1: The Mental

"Life is ten percent what happens to you and ninety percent how you respond to it."

Feeling good about your stage performances is all about mindset. *Anyone* can put themselves in a positive mindset to deliver a great performance that they can feel good about before, during and after they're onstage.

The problem for most people tends to be that when they're dealt a negative mindset by a scary situation, such as playing in front of a group of people, they tend to allow that negative mindset to dominate them, affecting their thoughts and possibly even their performance.

It's important to realize that by changing your mindset, you can more easily act on your fears. It is very possible to take the negative thoughts associated with jumping up onstage and flip them to be positive ones. Part 1 will show you how to do that.

Just keep in mind that like anything worthwhile in life, this may take some effort and practice on your part. But if you stick with it, you will improve.



Reframe the Situation

Reframing is a great mindset technique to use when you need to look at a situation in a new light. It's looking at something in a new perspective. In the case of overcoming stage fright, it's a way to take your fearful emotions and turn them into positive ones.

First let's step back and look at an example of what reframing is. As a simple example, think about walking around a big city, like New York. If you were to look up at the buildings you may think to yourself, "Wow, these buildings are huge!" However, if you got on a plane leaving from JFK airport and looked down on those same buildings, you may comment to your neighbor about how small all those buildings look. In these two situations, the buildings haven't changed at all, but your *perspective* did. That's what's important to realize. Performances (and life) are all about mindset. How are you looking at the situation you're in?

So how does this apply to performing? Well, let me count the ways...

Wrap Your Emotions

One way to use reframing is to wrap your emotions with other emotions. It sounds crazy, I know, but bear with me here. When you're performing, you tend to feel such emotions as fear and anxiety, either before or during a performance. These are scary emotions. But you can "wrap" those fearful emotions with positive ones. You'll need to practice this, but it's very doable.

I'll share a quick story that can help you out with this concept.

One time I had a single song to play at Berklee College of Music in Boston. I was there for their Summer Performance Workshop. Everyone participating in the program was to play one song at the end of the three day seminar with one of Berklee's house bands. It was a pretty cool opportunity to say the least.

We got to have a brief rehearsal with our band the day before we performed. I decided to do a cover of the song "My Hero" by Foo Fighters. I love the song, and I thought it would

be a great song to play with a full band backing me up. The rehearsal went great and I was feeling good about how my performance would go.

The next day I looked at the list of performers and I was performing somewhere in the middle. I was happy with my placement. I had been performing a lot that summer, so I was feeling positive as a performer, in general. I had been doing all my recent gigs as a solo acoustic act... just my acoustic guitar and me. So it became second nature for me to get up in front of a group with my guitar and perform my set. But this gig was different. It was only one song, but I started realizing that I wouldn't be physically holding my acoustic as I performed. What would I do with my hands? How would I hold the mic? Plus I was leading a professional band. They had played with each other before, but not with me. I hadn't done this stuff before in front of a crowd.

When it was each performers' turn to be next onstage, he would stand in this "on deck" area right next to the stage. As I stood there watching the act before me, I started to get really nervous. I felt all of the typical stuff that I had been ridding myself of by playing so much lately. I had sweaty palms, shaky hands and all the usual signs of nervousness. As I watched the person before me perform, I realized in about three minutes that would be ME up there onstage, without my guitar to hide behind. I'd be showing my full self. The first time I'd be leading a full professional band, as a vocalist. All this stuff hit me at once and I was in full blown stage fright mode.



I needed a way to control my nerves RIGHT NOW, and I came to a great realization as I stood there in fear. Normally I go through my routine every day, doing the same things from when the sun comes up to when it goes back down. But in this moment I felt SO alive. I GOT to feel so alive because of this moment. What I was feeling in that moment was a gift that I normally didn't get to experience. In thinking this, I had wrapped my negative emotions with positive ones. All of a sudden, I began to look forward to my performance. I looked forward to it because I realized it was such a unique experience that I was feeling in that moment. So I went with it... and it felt great!

I just stood there thinking to myself... "I feel so alive right now, and this feels awesome!" I channeled that negative energy and wrapped it with positive energy to feel great. And

when I got onstage I rocked, because I *used* that energy to my advantage, instead of letting it cripple me.

If energy's there you can shape it to be what you want it to be. The important thing to realize is that the energy's there for you to use. If you let it control you, it will. If you take control of it, you can dominate with it. It's truly your call.

The simplified version of what I did was I looked at my situation from a new perspective. That's all. By doing so, I controlled my own energy, and felt great about it. You can do that too.



Fast Forward Your Situation

Another great way to get a different perspective on your situation is to visualize the future, before it happens. So as applied to a performance, you'll be imagining the end of your gig, before you even start playing.

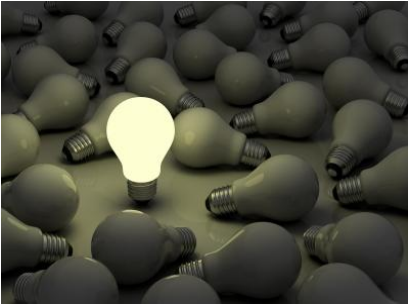
When you're feeling nervous before you play, imagine your show being over. Picture how well the show went. Imagine the people in the crowd telling you how great your performance was as they buy your CD. Not only will this make you feel good, but it'll give you a visualization to subconsciously work towards while you're performing.

Our subconscious minds are funny this way. If we feed them positive information, and give them something to work towards, they tend to gravitate that way. If left to their own merit, who knows which way they'll go. So feed yourself positive images to work toward, and let your mind seek them out. Do it short term as I mentioned, by picturing the end of your show going well. But also do it long term, by thinking about where you want to end up in your career.

Eliminating Mistakes

In light of viewing things in new, positive perspectives, another great concept to share here is the idea of making mistakes.

Making mistakes is one of the main things we fear when we're onstage. We don't want to look stupid and risk social rejection by playing a wrong chord, singing a wrong lyric, or getting a microphone feeding back on us. Making mistakes is what's at the root of the fear we feel before or during a performance.



The truth is, everyone who's considered great at what they do has made a ton of mistakes to get where they are. They've had to. That's what has contributed to them being great. You may have heard that it took Thomas Edison 10,000 attempts before he effectively discovered a way to make a working light bulb. Do you think you would have been able to keep it together enough to withstand 9,999 "mistakes" before you figured out how to do something the "right" way?

The idea here being that if you take a lesson from every mistake you make, you can *never* fail (how's that for a reframe?). Think about it. As the story goes, Edison claimed he didn't make 9,999 mistakes, but he effectively figured out 9,999 ways that a light bulb won't work. He took a lesson from each time a light bulb wouldn't light, learned from it, and applied his newfound knowledge to his next attempt.

Apply this concept to your performances. If you get onstage, don't be afraid to try something crazy that you think might not work. Don't be afraid to try something simple that you think might work. Don't even be afraid to just get up there and play your songs. If it doesn't go as planned, don't worry about what the audience thought of you. Instead, take a lesson from it. Take note that what you tried didn't go over as expected and maybe you should eliminate it from your act. Or maybe it's something to be tried again in front of a different crowd. Take a lesson from what happened and let it help you move forward, instead of backward.

Let's take a simplistic example. Let's say you're playing a gig. It's going great and you're feeling good. Then all of a sudden in the middle of a song, you get some loud unexpected feedback ringing through the speakers. You don't know what to do. You hadn't even considered the possibility of this happening.

Well there are two general mindsets you could take in this situation. You could take a defeatist attitude and go into a downward negative funk, thinking about how stupid it was

that you didn't know what to do, and how bad it must have sounded to the audience. You could take that negativity so far that you may never want to perform in front of people again. Don't do that.

Instead, take a lesson from what happened. Maybe that performance didn't go the way you wanted it to, but if you go back and prepare yourself for that same event in the future, then you've effectively turned that "failure" into a positive lesson. You might leave the gig and Google what causes microphone feedback and the best ways to prevent it. You may even realize that joking about the situation to the crowd is the best way to handle it.

Whatever your approach, you'll think of some ideas to do, in the event that it happens again while you're onstage. The point being next time, you'll be more prepared. You'll be a better performer because you took a potential mistake and turned it into a lesson for your own improvement.

Make Good Use of Your Mental Space

Have you ever been playing onstage and started to think thoughts that you normally don't think while you're rehearsing? Things like "wait... what chords come next?" or "what's the next lyric?" You just can't understand why these thoughts only happen when you're onstage, when it actually matters.

This happens because while you're rehearsing, or at home practicing, you're calm and relaxed, and while you're onstage in front of people and nervous, all of your fears start to surface.



There's a great way to minimize the chances of this happening. You need to make proper use of your "mental space." This is a great concept I learned from Steven Memel, who's a vocal and performance coach.

The idea is, at any given moment, you can only be focusing your thoughts on one thing at a time. When you're onstage presenting a story through lyrics, vocals and stage presence, you need to be emoting your story properly. For all intents and purposes, you're an actor when you sing a song, delivering your character's story to your audience.

If your song has an upbeat and positive message, you need to be showing those emotions on your face, in your body language and through your voice. You need to be fusing your emotion with your words, the same way you would if you were speaking those words to someone with that same emotion.

If you use your mental space to focus on the type of emotion you (or your story's character) is experiencing, it won't allow you to think about silly things like "oh, wait – what's the next chord?" You'll be too busy concentrating on being in character and there won't be room for anything else.

If you're singing one of your own songs, you obviously know what the lyrics mean and how you should be emoting them. If you're playing a cover song, you should be focusing on what the lyrics mean to *you* and emoting and displaying the song in terms of your own interpretation.

This concept will serve you very well in performing. It benefits you because it eliminates the negative thoughts, and adds the positive benefit of getting you into character to properly emote your message. It's a win-win approach for you and your audience.

This will take effort on your part, but it can absolutely be done with some practice. Eventually, it will become your way of thinking when you're onstage.

Part 2: The Mechanical

Practice Makes Perfect

As you can see, mindset is practically everything when it comes to not letting that pesky stage fright control your performances. However, the other part of battling nerves is being prepared with your material. This section will cover some important concepts in being prepared, so you're less likely to feel scared.



Vary Your Songs When Practicing

The better you know your songs, the better off you'll be. So practice them a lot. A great way to really make sure you're thoroughly prepared with your songs is to practice them in completely different ways each time you play them. When you rehearse, play them the standard way and then try playing them at an increased or decreased tempo. If you're playing with a band, try playing the songs without one or more of your band members. Try playing the songs with the same structure without the lead vocalist singing.

The more you can vary your songs, the better prepared you'll be to play your songs the "same old standard way" each time you get onstage, when the pressure is on. Steven Memel refers to this technique as "earthquake proofing" your songs. In other words, no matter what happens while you're playing live, you'll be able to handle it because you've become so accustomed to playing your songs in so many variations. You're used to your songs not always being played in the standard way, so you can roll with anything.

Perform... A Lot

The first time you do practically anything new will be a little scary. Especially if it involves doing it in front of a group of people. That's why your first performance is likely to be your most terrifying.

But don't worry. Every time you're courageous in life by doing something you fear, you build more confidence in that area of your life. So, the more you perform, the less you will

fear performing. If it helps, you can start small by playing at practically empty open mics until you build your way up to full blown gigs. But it's important to keep doing it. Each time you perform, you will have more confidence as a performer. The scarier the situation seems before you do it, the more confidence you will build by going through with it.

That applies as long as you take on a "I did it!" attitude when you're done, and NOT an "Oh, I can't believe I got through that - It was awful" attitude. Doing the latter will not help you improve your confidence. You need to own each performance and realize it's a stepping stone to making you a more complete performer, for better or for worse.



Aside from building confidence by playing a lot, by playing frequently you simply make the environment of being in front of a crowd more normal by being there more often. The more normal that environment is to you, the more comfortable you'll be. If you're comfortable onstage, you'll own the stage.

One Specific New Routine Per Month

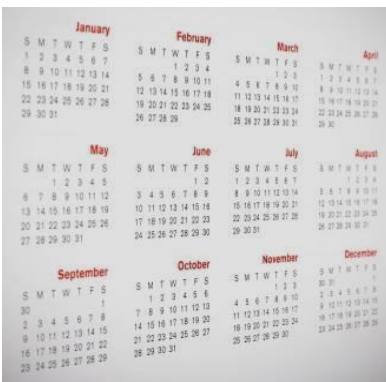
As humans, we're creatures of habit. We tend to fall into the same routines day in and day out, whether we realize it or not. We can let this ruin us, if we form bad habits, or we can use it to our advantage by building a routine of good habits.

Think about how many people fail at keeping up with their New Year's Resolutions (have you kept yours?). The predominant reason for that is most people make their resolutions too vague. They say something like "I'm going to practice guitar five times a week." That's bound for failure due to lack of specificity.

Someone much more likely to succeed would be the person who says "I'll practice guitar Mondays - Fridays from 8pm to 9pm. And if I have to miss one of those practices, Saturday will be my back-up day from 8pm to 9pm." THAT person is bound to make that his practice routine happen. He has a plan. He worked a routine into his day. He played into the fact that we're creatures of habit and used it in a positive way.

As far as rehearsing for your shows, you should be very specific about when you'll do it, and what you'll be doing. You'll be much more likely to succeed with a rehearsal schedule by doing it that way.

It may be difficult to stick to the schedules you set for yourself when you first add them into your daily or weekly routine. That's why if you're vague about adding a new routine to your life, you're much more likely to stop doing it. Force yourself to stick with your new routine for a month. The first few days will be easy, since you'll be excited about it. After that it'll get tougher, but once you get to the end of the month it'll be old hat.



I wouldn't recommend adding more than one new routine a month. Focus all of your will power on that one routine for the entire month. By the time it's routine for you a month later, you can add a new one and focus all of your will power on that. Just remember to be specific each time you add a new routine.

For example, on July 1 you might start doing a vocal exercise routine every morning, from Monday through Saturday for twenty minutes when you first wake up. Stay with this and focus your will power on that.

Once you've powered through that and made it routine, you can add a new one. On August 1, in addition to your morning vocal exercises, you might add a performance practice. Every Monday, Wednesday & Friday, from 6pm to 7:30 pm. During those practices, you'll roll through your set list, practicing each song in a varied form of the original version, as mentioned in Part 1.

Keep building on new routines until you've added all the pieces you need to practice to be a great performer.

Don't Talk About Your Nervousness Onstage

Many performers experience stage fright, but haven't you noticed it's pretty rare that you actually see someone performing that *looks* nervous? Well, the same goes for you. Even

though you may be feeling nervous while you're performing, the audience probably isn't noticing it.

You've probably taken a class in school and done a presentation where before you started your presentation you felt the need to proclaim to the class "I was going to make the last section a little longer, but then I ran out of time." At which point the teacher told you not to talk about the negative aspects of your presentation, because the rest of the class would have never noticed them had you not said anything... but NOW they're fixated on them.

For that reason, NEVER tell the audience that you're nervous. If you didn't look nervous to them before, now they're seeing you as weaker than they did before you mentioned it. And they'll focus on that, *instead of* your performance.

Final Word

Don't fight your emotions by trying to tell yourself they're not there. Instead rework what you're feeling and use it to your advantage. And practice!!

Performing is about having fun and delivering the message in your songs. So use the tools you learned here, get up there and enjoy your time onstage. Of all the minutes in a week, you spend too few of those minutes onstage. So enjoy the opportunity to be up there. If you're having fun, then it's much more likely your audience is too.

Detach yourself from the outcome of your performance, whether it's good or bad. It doesn't define you. It's just a single performance. Remember that each and every time you play in front of people.

Have a great show and I hope to see you up there soon!