

How Musicians Can Work with Schools to celebrate



April is Jazz Appreciation Month. The American Federation of Musicians (AFM) and the Music Performance Fund (MPF) are major partners helping communities celebrate JAM.

As a performer, you would like to offer a concert to your local school or school system. But as many musicians have discovered, even offering a free performance to a school system can be a daunting task. You may feel like the school system, inexplicably, is reluctant to let you bring free enrichment into its domain.

Once you understand how to work with schools, you may find that the rewards of performing for students far outweigh the problems dealing with school bureaucracies. Here we offer a few tips that can make your relationship with schools easier and more rewarding for both performers and students.

BEFORE YOU START

Learn about the School

Before you call the school to offer your services, learn about what music enrichment is already being offered:

- Contact the music teacher, a classroom teacher, or a parent and ask about the music classes being offered in the school.
- Talk with the classroom or music teacher about what the class is studying. Discuss ideas about how your performance can complement the curriculum.
- Use your skill and knowledge to help solve a problem. Are there academic topics or playing techniques with which students are having trouble? Perhaps an interactive performance can enhance their understanding. (For example, kindergarteners' knowledge of prepositions can improve if you point out the rise and fall of notes on the scale. Encourage them to move up and down with the tune. For older students, American History can come alive when students listen to songs from the era; or you can help struggling math students by talking about, and counting out rhythm. The possibilities are endless.)

Contacting the school

- Although you can talk to the area supervisor or start at the top, we suggest you start at the classroom level. Take advantage of personal relationships you may have with people at each school. Talk informally with a parent or teacher about how you might work with a class. Ask them how to proceed in navigating through the bureaucracy at that school.
- Offer a simple idea for a concert that you think will benefit students.
- Start small: Build your program from the ground up, not the top down. Start with a short performance to a small group, before you aim for bigger things.

Learn about your audience

You can't get students involved in the music if you don't know who they are. Ask your contact to explain:

- What grade(s) will your audience be from?
- What is the age range of the students?
- What is the economic, geographic, and racial/ethnic composition of your audience? Will you have students with special needs?
- How many students will attend the concert?

Find out where you will perform

- Find out where you will be performing.
- Will you be in the school auditorium, cafeteria, etc?
- What else can they tell you about the performance space? Is there a P.A. system? Where are the outlets?

WHEN YOU GET THERE

Personalize the music

Make the performance relevant for the students. Try to humanize the music and personalize the experience. Become a cultural partner with the school.

- Introduce yourself and the band members.
- Tell the students your story: how you got into music, who inspired you, and what you do when you aren't performing.

What is Jazz?

The purpose of Jazz Appreciation Month is to teach people about jazz. A good place to begin is with the basics. Briefly:

Demonstrate the elements of jazz and give a short example of each:

- Rhythm
 - Syncopation
 - Swing beat
 - *Suggestion*: Demonstrate a simple tune that everyone knows by giving it a Latin beat and then swinging it.

- Call and response
- Freedom within structure—improvisation
- Blue notes
- Individual tone or sound
- Improvisation
 - *Suggestion*: Play a melody all students will recognize—such as *Old MacDonald Had a Farm* straight, then improvise on it.

Listening Etiquette

Don't forget to tell the students what is expected of them. Many students have never been to a live concert; many adults have never been to a live jazz performance.

Therefore, it's a good idea to tell them a little about listening etiquette.

- To be well-behaved, the audience should be attentive and not disruptive. Turn off your cell phones and don't make loud noises.
- Explain that for the sound to be pleasant, instruments need to be tuned to each other. Therefore, before you start, you will tune your instruments. For best results instruments should be tuned at the last minute, so that's why you wait until you are on stage.
- One of the elements of jazz is solo improvisation. Therefore, unlike listening to classical music when the audience only claps at the end of a piece, it is okay to acknowledge jazz soloists by clapping during the middle of a piece.

Finally

Have fun and the kids will catch your enthusiasm!