

## FROM TWENTY FRETS, NO NETS: ADVICE FOR THE SOLO GUITARIST

### A WORKING REPERTOIRE

"The word 'no' is a very good word in a singer's repertoire." - Kiri Te Kanawa

Thirty years of working as a solo guitarist/vocalist has taught me that if I play a song in the first half hour that each age group in the crowd recognizes, I can play pretty much anything the rest of the night and they will accept me. The initial few songs set the tone for the evening, and winning the crowd early makes for a good gig.

Restaurant work, gigs that are called “casuals” in the profession (wedding receptions, banquets, private parties, etc.), and “ambiance gigs” (e.g. playing by the fireplace in a resort lodge or strolling table to table) often involve crowds ranging from children to senior citizens. It’s always good to have a song or two in your permanent play list to appeal to all ages and tastes. A few basic approaches to compiling a repertoire for solo performance include genre, artist, era, and “most-requested.”

Unless the crowd is exceptionally chatty, my rule of thumb is twelve to fifteen songs per hour for solo venues, allowing some patter between numbers. I play a mix of styles and types early in the first set to gauge the crowd and see what gets notice and applause then adjust my choices accordingly. A little fishing pays off in the tip jar.

A genre play list makes this relatively easy. Figuring fifteen songs an hour, you can include one or two current (within the last year) top-40 songs, one or two country tunes (preferably one modern and one traditional country), a few soft rock numbers, a folkie number from the sixties, a blues tune or two, and one jazz or big-band era song.

When you choose tunes, pay attention to music awards; they’re a window on the public taste and if someone asks for a country song or a pop tune, it’s a crowd pleaser to pull out a “song of the year” Grammy winner (past or present). The genre play list is also useful when someone requests a song you don’t know; as I’m fond of telling the audience, “If I don’t know the song, I’ll play something that sounds like it.”

The artist-based play list is a second approach. Occasionally I get an off-the-wall request for something by Leonard Cohen or Michael Franks, but the majority of requests are for material by a relatively small group of artists, including: Gordon Lightfoot, The Beatles, Elton John, James Taylor, Ray Charles, Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Elvis Presley, the Grateful Dead, Green Day, Bruce Springsteen, The Eagles, Jimmy Buffet, Jim Croce, Garth Brooks, Willie Nelson, Simon and Garfunkel, and Cat Stevens. It’s a good idea to have two songs by each artist so that if you have already played one and a request pops up for another, you’re ready.

It also helps when someone requests a song you don’t know by an artist on your list. I may not know Bruce Springsteen’s “Glory Days,” but I can play “Thunder Road,” and “Born to Run”;

that usually satisfies the Bruce fans.

The era play list is a third repertoire format. A group of songs from the big-band era, some fifties doo-wop, some sixties tunes, some classic rock, and some contemporary numbers may serve you well. The “sounds-like” feature applies here too.

The most-requested-song approach is a fourth possibility. I receive the most frequent requests for “My Way,” “Fire and Rain,” “Yesterday,” “The Lady in Red,” “New York New York,” “Misty,” “Come Monday,” “I Can’t Help Falling in Love,” “American Pie,” “The Boxer,” “Hotel California,” “Time in a Bottle,” and “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald.” If someone requests a song you don’t know, take note of it and give it a try next time you pick up your guitar. See if it suits your style.

When you’re playing a restaurant or lounge and one of the regulars asks for an unfamiliar tune, it’s worth your while to learn it and trot it out next time you see him or her. Touches like that build your following and fill your tip jar.

For children, songs from Disney films are familiar and popular. I keep Randy Newman’s “You’ve got a Friend in Me” from Toy Story and “When you Wish upon a Star” from Pinocchio in the lineup for those occasions. Other good bets include The Irish Rovers’ “The Unicorn Song,” Roger Whittaker’s “Boa Constrictor” and Peter Paul and Mary’s “Puff the Magic Dragon.” Suffer the little children. You will shine with the adults.

If you play any venue between Thanksgiving and January second, have a few Christmas songs in the lineup in case one is requested, and don’t plan on playing a New Year’s Eve gig without “Auld Lang Syne.” Working up a full evening of Holiday music opens more opportunities for seasonal party work.

And then there’s “Free Bird.”

The national anthem of barflies everywhere has become a cliché to the point that I’ve even heard an inappropriate request for the Lynrd Skynrd tune in an episode of Justified. It has become a “stump the band” sort of put down. In the 80s I played for a funk band called Roundhouse, and we regularly got drunken hoots from the crowd to, “Play Free Bird!” So, we bowed to public pressure and learned the song. Then when people requested it, we played it adequately, and instead of smiling, they pouted like spoiled children because they couldn’t make fun of us. It still comes up in the same context for me as a solo performer. My advice is to have it tucked away and ready to play, but wait for a request. Ditto for “Stairway to Heaven”; usually the first third of the song before it swings into rock mode is sufficient to prove your chops.

Here’s an example of an artist-based play list that could serve as the core for a solo repertoire for casual gigs:

Elvis Presley: Love Me Tender, Can’t Help Falling in Love

Ray Charles: Georgia on my Mind, You Don’t Know Me

Jim Croce: Time in a Bottle, Operator

Simon and Garfunkel: The Sounds of Silence, The Boxer

Gordon Lightfoot: Sundown, Pussywillows, Cattails

Frank Sinatra: Fly Me to the Moon, My Way

The Beatles: In My Life, When I’m 64

Elton John: Candle in the Wind, Your Song  
James Taylor: Fire and Rain, Sweet Baby James  
Tony Bennet: San Francisco, I Wanna be Around  
Willie Nelson: Always on my Mind, Crazy  
The Grateful Dead: Friend of the Devil, Uncle John's Band  
Green Day: When September Ends, Good Riddance  
Bruce Springsteen: Thunder Road, I'm on Fire  
The Eagles: Peaceful Easy Feeling, Desperado  
Jimmy Buffet: Margaritaville, Come Monday  
Garth Brooks: The Dance, Friends in Low Places  
Cat Stevens: Wild World, Moonshadow

A cross-section of these songs coupled with your own choices should prepare you to play for just about any occasion.

To work almost anywhere, a soloist must be able to play almost any style of music. Most solo performers regularly add to their play lists, giving their performances more depth and variety. In time, you may be able to develop enough songs in any given genre that you can play that style an entire evening with no repeats, expanding your marketability. The more you learn, the better you play, and the more you'll work.

One alternative that some people have found viable is the fixed repertoire. An area violinist makes a pretty good buck with this act: He places a fixed song list on all the tables at a reception or banquet, then strolls around table to table playing requests from the guests taken strictly from the list. He runs the violin through a wireless rig and a p.a. system, entertaining the whole room while he pleases individual patrons.

It makes an enormous difference to be able to read standard musical notation. In 1987, I wrote a guest editorial for the 20th Anniversary issue of Guitar Player magazine entitled "Man Does Not Read by Tab Alone." In it I stressed the need to be able to pick up any standard sheet of music at any time and be able to play it. I said it then, and I say it today: if you can read only tab, you are limiting yourself to what other people have put in that form, but if you can read standard musical notation, you go anywhere in the world and whether you speak the language or not, if someone puts a sheet of music in front of you, you can play it.

In 2016 Guitar Player is running a series of basics for people who cannot read standard musical notation. My advice, if you are a musical illiterate, is to study and learn. It will expand your horizons immeasurably.

End of sermon.

Copyright © 2016 by Fred C. Adams, Jr.