

Photography

Musical Performance Photography

December 20, 2017 | Charles T. Low, Photographer

Performance Photography

Recently, I have been visiting [Richard's Coffeehouse](#) and, after asking permission from all parties involved, photographing musical performances.

These have ranged from jazz ([Sue Baker](#)) to [Irish](#), and points between such as folk-rock-pop, if there is any way to define [Josée Brault](#).

I have loved all of it, although my motivation has admittedly been a bit mercenary: I have large prints for sale, hanging at Richard's, and am doing what I can to promote the coffeehouse in return for added exposure for my art. The musicians get co-marketing in the mix, and it all feels like goodness in the sense of non-competition between coffeehouse, musician, and photographer.



Prints for sale, Charles T. Low Photography, Richard's Coffeehouse, Brockville, Ontario

Most recently, it was jazz again, The [Lifters Jazz Band](#), far from home, at the [Beach Street Station](#) restaurant in Goderich, Ontario, where I went to hear a quartet in which my brother plays piano, and, unbeknownst to me, sings.

They were marvellous - really talented, dedicated musicians.

My job at performances, possibly my primary job, ahead even of aiming towards transcendent photography of musicians in action, is to stay out of the way, not distract the audience from the music, and not be in the way of the servers. If I add in lighting, it also must remain unobtrusive.

So far, all good.

Except: the conditions of work from a photographer's perspective are ... well, not put too fine a point on it ... **abysmal**.

The formidable challenges associated with live-performance photography of musicians, if restricting oneself to ambient light, include these factors:

- too dark;
- sometimes too bright a background;
- capturing the decisive moment during singing;
- grouping of the performers.

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From the Brockville Irish Cultural Society. This is just tough, for a photographer - dim, indoors lighting, outdoors sunlit background light - non-trivial to overcome!

Dark

Many of these performances are indoors, and/or after dark. The light provided by the venue, while adequate for the human eye, is not adequate for the camera.

It goes like this: our eyes can accommodate a brightness range of a billion times. (That is simply amazing!) The range of digital-optical sensor sensitivity is much less, let's say something in the order of 500 (which is still way more than any film can do), and complicated by factors such as:

- the need often to hand-hold (even with the modern marvel of image-stabilization);
- decreasing image quality as the sensitivity of the sensor is "turned up", i.e. as the "ISO" setting is increased;
- the need to stay back from the stage, requiring telephoto lenses, which need higher shutter speeds, which reduce the light hitting the sensor.

Now ... sometimes one might be able to use a tripod, but that doesn't keep the subject from moving, so slowing the shutter speed, as one could for a still-life, still entails limitations. And a tripod restricts the photographer's ability to move quickly, getting different vantages in the rapidly-changing dynamic of a live performance. So, tripods have their place, but some work is still going to be hand-held.



Inside the Beach Street Station Restaurant (The Lifters Jazz Band in the distance) - slow exposure, some movement blur

The photograph below, for example, was made at 1/30 seconds at ISO 6400, meaning I'm asking the digital light sensor to work with very little light. To illustrate how high that is: the camera prefers "ISO 200". Now, some higher-end cameras can go above 6400 and still produce good images, but it's quite remarkable, and not at all consistently reproducible, even with my really nice camera, that this photograph turned out as well as it did. That's really "pushing" the camera.



Josée Brault in performance - with very little light! It looks bright only because the camera makes it look bright - it wasn't!

This photograph's shutter speed of 1/30th of a second, using a telephoto lens at six-times magnification, was also "pushing" the *photographer*! Not every shot under those conditions is going to be reliably this crisp.

Bright

At the Baker jazz performance, the musicians were against a background of windows in daylight. Lots of light was good; lots of backlight was not. Again, remarkably, some of the shots turned out quite well, despite less-than-ideal conditions.



Such strong backlight is not easy.

Flash Lighting

So, what about artificial light? These come in two categories, one of which is static, meaning just very strong lights, and the other is what in North America we call "flash" lighting, or in the UK, "strobe" (different meaning here).

Static lights of enough intensity for a camera would be so bright as to disturb the musicians and audience alike. Often, they get so hot that one must take precautions against thermal damage. On a stage at a major event: maybe, although even then, we're not always talking anything even close to "daylight" intensity, but in a smaller venue, I think that in general the answer is simply "no".

That leaves flash, and fortunately for all concerned, this can work out pretty well. For one thing, few advanced-skills photographers would aim a bare flash directly at the musicians. At the very least, the flashes would be "off-camera", triggered by one of several types of remote controls, and would be through a diffuser of some sort - an umbrella or a soft-box, for example - which makes them less objectionable. These flash-modifiers, however, take up space, block views, and with a spread-out band of musicians, cannot cover them all without multiple flashes. In a small space (e.g. coffeehouse!), this just isn't going to fly, and I haven't used them.



In this make-shift [barn-studio](#) (long story ...), there was room for an umbrella, its purpose being to diffuse and soften the light from a photographic flash. That would however be a major visual obstacle if set up near performing musicians.

Guess what else coffeehouses and restaurants have: windows! It can be troublesome to find an angle at which the flash lights the subjects well, but doesn't create a reflective glare in the window. In the following photo, I had to go to extraordinary lengths in later editing to tame very harsh glare in the window behind the musicians.



You don't want to see the original photo, with severe window-glare.

Another very well-known way to use flashes, whether off- or on-camera, is to bounce them. At Richard's the ceiling is white, so it's a good reflector. At the Beach Street Station, the ceiling was dark, and very high, and that was more difficult.

Regardless, a ceiling is large, so bouncing flashes there - or from walls - creates a large light source, which is gentler in terms of the shadow transitions in the photograph, and also much less likely to be noticeable in window-glare.



All indirect lighting, bounced off nearby reflective surfaces, creating a good, strong but gentle light.

The above photo of the very talented "Fletch" on the saxophone was made using indirect light, i.e. bounced, off-camera flashes, as was the following of the whole band.



Flash lighting, 3 flashes, 2 of them remote, bounced off the ceiling.

Grouping

You will also notice that the musicians need room, and that in this example the drum-set and the piano enforce quite a physical separation of the band-members, and that just makes it hard to get a good group-shot.



"Ambient"-light shot of the band, showing that in performance they don't make a good photographic grouping. Also, at these slow shutter speeds, camera on tripod, their movement shows.

As well as illustrating how spread-out musicians often are, the preceding photo also shows what happens without flash. That was a 1-second exposure. I quite like the movement ... but it is not a "conventional" portrait photograph.

An unexpectedly nice thing about camera flashes, especially when they are aimed away from the performers or the audience, i.e. bounced, is that no one notices them. I have inquired many times if the lighting was disturbing anyone, and the universal answer has been that people don't really know what I'm asking about.

Facial Expression

So, having discussed the challenges of getting good light, and of getting group shots, I will add at least one more nettlesome issue: facial expression. These people are not there posing for a camera: they are playing music! I as a photographer quickly sink below their consciousness, which quite rightly focusses on their own artistry, and on their rapport with the audience.

Worse, not only are they not posing, but they are also actively almost un-posing. Performers spend an inordinate amount of time with their eyes closed, their faces scrunched up, and their muscles showing clear signs of the tremendous effort which they are exerting.

That can be good. It certainly shows that they are in the moment, working at their craft. The musicians themselves however often don't like it later.

by ctLow Photography, Brockville, Ontario



Russell Drago Trio - Russell feeling the music, not posing for the camera! (It was a very nice evening!)

The above photo may be from where it all started, for me, quite a few years ago, hearing my old friend who headlines the Russell Drago Trio, at the Waring House in Prince Edward County, Ontario. I wasn't yet working professionally, wondered if a pro could have got him in more portrait-like moment, but in retrospect I think that the answer was no; he was performing, and I got performing-moments!

The Work-Around

There is a way around all of this: simulate the performance. This can either be done at the actual venue, before the performance, or less likely afterwards, or during rehearsal, or in the studio, setting it up as if really performing.

If this sounds like cheating, then I will simply say that it is a common technique, and results in fabulous photographs, in that it creates conditions in which the extra control allows everyone to focus on the photography.

One photographer I know specializes in theatre photographer - plays, largely. He admits that his best work is often done at dress rehearsals: the actors are in costume, the props are in place, and the director and producer know the value of getting good photographs, and allot time just for that. The photographer can set up lights, take the necessary time to get good poses and expressions, and repeat the photograph several times until satisfied with the result.

With that as an option, one might ask why a photographer would even ever attempt actual live concert performance photography. The answer is complicated, but involves the band and/or photographer finding or making the time, devoting an hour or more which often they have trouble justifying in already busy lives, "just" for pictures. At certain points in a band's career, the priorities vary, and photography is often an afterthought.

I understand that. At another point, it will deserve more attention.

There of course is also the *immediacy* of the actual performance. Things happen there which are difficult to simulate, or which one might not even wish to try to simulate. Sometimes the intensity of the performance, and the energy absorbed from an audience, is worth the photographic perils of a live concert shoot.

All of the obstacles put together are enough that some photographers would refuse such an assignment. The results will be too unpredictable, and who wants clients who might be less than totally satisfied, or to have one's name associated with variable-quality work?

It is risky!

But when it works, it's magic. The band loves it, the restaurant or coffeehouse loves it ... and I love it.

I get to hear very skilled, emotive musicians!

Lots of people see it later on social media, among other places. The co-marketing can be wonderful.

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See you at the performance! (And if I do it well - you won't see me.)