



Getting Gigs

by Jacey Bedford of [folkWISE](#)

folkWISE is the organisation run for performers by performers.
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I'm going to assume that you've already covered the basics; you have a repertoire of material which you perform proficiently enough to charge an audience money to experience. So, how do you get the gigs? For most people, their starting point will be the folk club circuit, with a few festivals thrown in for good measure.

Research Your Market

Find out where and when the folk clubs are. How? There are a number of local folk magazines which have up to date information; you can find a list of these on the FolkWISE web page at www.folkWISE.org or in Direct Roots, the UK folk world's definitive directory, which can be ordered from Mrs Casey Music on 01629 760345. More details from www.direct-roots.com. But no directory will be as good as your own personalised database. Keep a record of every performing opportunity you come across. If you're not a computer buff, keeping them of 6x4 record cards is also a good option.

Make Contacts

Once you have a target list of clubs, venues and festivals to play assemble a set of promotional material, including a demo CD, which represents you fairly, you can start to make contacts. Grit your teeth, even though you feel this is like a salesman cold-calling to sell double glazing. If you don't make the calls, you won't get the gigs. End of story. Many of the calls you make will be fruitless, but mostly, they will be met with politeness as long as you follow a few simple rules. Marketing experts will tell you that you have to knock on a door seven times before it opens for you. Don't get downhearted if you don't get a gig first time. You have to let your details sink in and mature. The gigs will only start to flow once people recognise your name.

Case Study

One folk club organiser who was, himself, an agent, booked someone to play at his club who he had never heard of and certainly never seen. After the gig (which was excellent) he had a long conversation with the performer and confessed that he never booked sight unseen and couldn't quite comprehend what had made him book the performer in the first place. The performer grinned and told the organiser that before becoming a folkie, he used to be in marketing, and this was how he's conducted his campaign.

He'd sent out three mailshots, several weeks apart, on the supposition that the first (a cheap one to establish his name) would probably be glanced at and then binned. The second one (slightly more detailed and impressive) might be read and might not be disposed of immediately. The third, glossy and more expensive, would get properly looked at. Then, after the third mailshot had landed, he made the first phone call. By the time he phoned, instead of getting a "Never heard of you" answer he got an "Oh, yes, I've heard of you, keep seeing your name about all over the place."

This is just one way of doing it.

Basic Plan

If you plan to send out five packages and make at least five calls each week, and stick to your plan you'll be surprised how much work you can generate. Don't burn out by making twenty calls in a night and not leaving time to do the follow up.

Lead Time

For UK folk clubs allow anything between 9-12 months as lead time for a tour. Often you can still get gigs four or six months in advance, but if you need to book a tour which is limited by time or geography, allow plenty of time.

For festivals, allow eleven months lead time. You should be sending your promo packages out just after the current festival has taken place. In the UK a lot of festivals start to look seriously at programming in September for the following year. They've usually completed most of their booking by December. Festivals like to hit the Folk Roots April issue (the big Festival supplement) with their guest list advertising. Folk Roots goes to press for that issue in mid-February, so once that deadline is past, you've missed the boat.

The Day Book

Have a day book, just a simple, cheap notebook, in which you can record each call. Make a note of the date, the venue and the person you're calling, with the phone number and then make brief notes to help you to remember the conversation. If any action needs to be taken, write that too and put a post-it note flag on it until you've done whatever needs doing. When you've successfully booked the gig or had a firm refusal, and the note no longer has any relevance, just cross it through so you know that there's no more followup needed. If you ignore this simple day book idea, you'll suddenly realise that you've missed doing something important or calling someone back.

Making the Calls

My method is to call first to say,

"Hello I'm Fred and I'm part of a band that plays Moldavian nose flute music. I'm trying to arrange some gigs and I'd like to send you some publicity and a demo."

If you get a positive answer, make sure you get a postal address if you haven't already got one, say thank you and cut the call short with a few pleasantries. It doesn't hurt to begin to get to know your folk club organiser if he/she sounds particularly interested, so a few penn'orth of phone calls now may pay dividends in future.

Update Information

Update your records constantly. Make a note of any information you get about the club, i.e. they only book guests on the first Friday of the month, or, they do book guests but never guarantee a fee - just pass the pot around and give the performer what's in it at the end of the night.

Take Action

Then, if you've promised to send the information/demo, send it promptly, nicely packaged and with good information about who you are and what you do. Send a personalised covering note and state your intent to follow up the package with a phone call,

Dear Erasmus,

Nice to talk to you, here, as promised, is a demo for the Merry Moldavian Nose Flute Quintet. I'll call you an a week or so when you've had chance to listen.

Call Back

Allow time for postage, plus the aforementioned week then call back, saying something like.

"I wanted to check that it had arrived and see what you thought about it." At all costs avoid trying to bulldoze the organiser into a deal he's not ready to make. Be prepared for the answer to be *"I've been too busy to listen, leave it with me."*

Have your answer ready, *"Shall I call you back next week then?"* if the answer is "Yes", make a note in your diary to call back at the time you've arranged. Be persistent but polite. If you say you'll call back, do it. Getting gigs really depends on whether you are selling what the management wants to buy. Be professional. Don't act desperate for a gig at any price.

Remember the old "Lead a horse to water..." If, after all this, your horse still will not drink, go and find another horse, or consider changing your bucket of water for one that is more palatable.

How to Deal with Rejection

Politely!!

I can't stress this enough. The folk world is really very small. It's surprising who knows who. Don't risk antagonising the people who are your bread and butter. If the answer to your sales pitch is an emphatic "No", react with good grace. Wish them well for the future.

Excuses

Organisers can find really inventive ways of saying “No.” Many of these are genuine, others are obviously not. but it’s often their attempt to let you down gently when they say no. be tactful. Some excuses can be overcome, others cannot. Here are some fairly common ones:

- The club is closing in six months time. (And then it doesn’t.)
- We only book traditional/contemporary acts (Pick out the one you aren’t.)
- I’m working to a wish-list my members have given me (and you aren’t on it.)
- The pub landlord might be changing soon and we don’t know whether we’ll have to move premises.
- We’ve already booked a harmony group/female singer/bluegrass band (insert your musical genre here) for the festival/ for this folk club season. (So they can’t have two different ones?)
- We haven’t got any money. (You can’t argue with this one.)
- We’re all booked up for the rest of the year and I don’t want to start booking next year for another six months. (Some clubs do book a whole year in one frenzy.)
- I’ll have to talk to the rest of the committee. I think you’re brilliant, but I can’t make a decision by myself.

An organiser who can’t say No.

These are dear sweet people who don’t know how to tell you they don’t want to book you, so they keep putting you off, hoping you will give up and go away. Of course, if you’re following my method, you won’t!

If you get a string of brush-offs (“*Call me in a fortnight,*” followed by “*Call me in six months,*” followed by etc.) you are entitled to say, politely, “*Look, I honestly don’t mind if your answer is ‘No,’ but if you really want me to call you in four months time when you start booking for the autumn, I will. If you’re not really interested, but just don’t like to disappoint me, don’t worry about it. You can say ‘No,’ with no hard feelings.*”

And when you say this, **mean it.** The folk world doesn’t owe you a living. Everyone has their own preferences. If Moldavian Nose Flute isn’t high on this particular organiser’s priority list, smile and give in with good grace.

Telephone Attitude

Smile with your voice. Always be pleasant. You can be businesslike and persistent without being pushy. Many of these people you are calling will become your bread and butter, some of them will become good friends, will share their home and supper with you when you’re on tour and will receive a pint or two from you in the beer tent at a festival. The folk scene is a small world. Don’t get a reputation for being difficult to shake off or being “hard” before you’ve even started.

Tips for Telephoning

Make sure you call at a reasonable time. Most folk club organisers have day jobs so you have to call at evenings and weekends. After 6 is cheaper but just after 6 is the time when many people are arriving home from work and having a bite to eat. The prime calling time is between 7 and 8.30 in the evening.

You can call at weekends. Be prepared for people to be out on Saturdays. Ten answering machines in a row can drive you off your chump. Sunday morning is not always a good time to burst in to family life, but Sunday afternoon is not a bad time to try. Just in case I’ve caught my target-person at the dinner table, I always like to ask, “*Have I caught you at a bad time? I can call back if you’d prefer.*”

Negotiating a deal

If the answer is “Yes.” Congratulations, you’ve made a sale, but don’t get all excited and forget the basics. They want to book you, now you have to negotiate a deal. Have a prompt card or a homemade form to remind you to ask all the right questions. Write all the information down while you are talking. (By the way, I use a telephone with a headset that keeps my hands free and saves me from getting a stiff neck trying to hold the phone between my ear and my shoulder.) Don’t expect to remember it afterwards. Get the following basic details written down for both your memory’s sake and for contract purposes:-

- Venue/address

- Name and full postal address of the organiser. Don't forget the post code.
- Phone number (Yes, I know you've just dialled it, but make sure you have it written in a relevant place where you can find it easily afterwards.)
- Phone number (i.e. box office number) to put on your own advertising for tickets/enquiries.
- Does the venue need a PA? If so does the venue provide one or will you have to bring your own?
- Can the organiser offer suitable accommodation? Make sure you tell them how many bodies will need accommodation and whether any of them are couples. (Stick to this figure. Don't take anybody's wife or husband unless you've made sure it's OK and that you are not stretching hospitality too far.) Especially important--if you don't need accommodation that you've arranged, always call before hand. Don't let someone struggle to get spare beds ready and then not stay over as planned.
- Often the last thing to be discussed will be the fee.

Negotiating a fee.

You will have already considered what is a fair fee for your services, based on sound economic principles. Here's where ideals meet grim reality. Expect folk clubs to pay modest amounts. Ask around; talk to others and see what sort of fee a performer/group like you will generally be able to ask for.

Small clubs

Small clubs may only offer to pass the pot round. This can be any amount. The risk is yours. Some only offer 'the door.' This can be anything from £10.00 to £200.00 so if you are prepared to risk a 'door' deal be sure to find out how many bodies their club holds, how much they charge per person and what their average audience is for an ordinary club night i.e. not a well known name. That way you minimise your chances of earning £7.00 when you'd imagined coming away with £120.00.

Many club organisers prefer to offer a flat fee and then they don't have to do any accounting to you on the night. Clubs can't pay double fee for double people, so don't expect to get twice what a soloist performer would earn if you are part of a duo, or four times if you are part of a band.

Some may offer a minimum amount as a guarantee against a percentage of the 'door'. i.e. you get (say) £100.00 as a basic fee. If they take more on the door, you get a percentage of that, although expect them to deduct their basic expenses for hire of the room and publicity, so you get a percentage of the nett door not the gross. Some well-known folkies, who regularly pull good crowds, do a standard door deal. One well-known performer charges £250.00 against 75% of the nett door, whichever is the greater. He requires a minimum ticket price of £7.00 and very rarely comes away with his minimum fee because he's a genuine crowd-puller.

Please note. Any figures quoted are for examples only and should not be taken to reflect the current market value of any folk act. The figures themselves are irrelevant and change with inflation. The basic principles remain the same. One ex-folk club organiser in Huddersfield still has the promo letter he received from a certain aspiring singer-songwriter called Paul Simon. Paul wanted £10.00 to play the Huddersfield club. The organiser turned him down because he was too expensive!

Negotiation

Start slightly on the high side of what you can reasonably expect to get. Be reasonable or you'll blow all credibility when you ask for £300.00 and accept £60.00. The organiser may say yes to your first figure (in which case you make a mental note to check whether you've priced yourself too cheaply). If you don't get an immediate yes, you could pause only fractionally and add, *"but of course I don't want to charge more than the club can realistically afford."*

This opens up the way for the organiser to make you an offer. If it is massively under your expectations you are obviously at liberty to refuse it (nicely). If it is obvious you're not going to get enough to make it worth your while, bow out gracefully. *"I'm sorry; it sounds like a really great club but I can't afford to travel 150 miles for a £40.00 fee. Maybe you could contact me if the situation changes, or if I'm on tour in the area and I have a blank night I could call you*

and come when I don't have to pay the petrol from home." Fillers are always useful when organising a tour. Better to earn a low fee and have your accommodation taken care of rather than have a night without work and have to pay £30 for bed and breakfast.

On the other hand, if they regularly get 70 people in at £5.00 per head and they are only offering you £40.00, try to negotiate a guarantee against a percentage of the nett door if you think it might be worth it. Ask what their likely expenses will be and ask whether they can provide accommodation if you need it.

At this stage it becomes horse-trading. Some organisers horse-trade with relish. Others are uncomfortable talking money. Try and pick up on their attitude and make it as painless as possible while making sure you get a fair deal and give one too. At the end of the day if you overcharge and under-perform, the clubs will suffer. If you cost them money, you might be the last straw and the club gives up the struggle to remain solvent and folds.

Only experience will tell you which club organisers are genuine and which ones are crying poverty unnecessarily. Most are dead straight. They operate because they love the music and they want to see it thrive in front of a live audience. At the end of the day if there isn't enough in the kitty to pay you, it comes out of their own pocket.

More about a "door deal"?

Here's an example. You've agreed a basic minimum of £100.00 against 75% of the nett door. The venue is charging £5.00 per ticket, but they are letting floor singers in free if they perform. You count 50 heads in the room and start to rub your hands at the thought of 75% of £250.00. But... six people have done floor spots. The organiser and his wife don't pay and neither does the club treasurer and the person who takes the ticket money. So you've already lost 10 ticket sales. So you have a total revenue of £200.00. OK, so you reckon that's still £150.00 as opposed to your basic £100.00. At the end of the night the organiser comes up and gives you £100.00 and you count it in disbelief, but he gives you a copy of his accounts and you see that it costs him £46.00 to hire the room and the newspaper advert costs £24.00. This is deducted from the box office receipts of £200.00. The net door revenue is therefore £130.00. and your 75% is £97.50. Since that is less than your minimum guaranteed figure, you get your basic £100.

If the organiser had been charging £6 per ticket, the net door would have been £240.00 Deduct costs of £70.00 and you get 75% of the remainder, which is £127.50.

If you are playing in a theatre or arts centre the management will also have to deduct VAT as a cost. Even though you are not registered for VAT, the theatre is, and accounting for VAT on ticket sales and theatre hires is a legal requirement.

There are all sorts of variations on door deals. Make sure if you don't understand what is being offered, you ask the organiser to explain.

Sending the Contract

After you have negotiated the deal, print out/write a single page gig sheet with all the information you need. This is for you to keep as a marker in your contract file until the contract is returned. Send two copies of a contract (or written confirmation) requesting that one copy be signed returned to you immediately. Keep checking to make sure the contract is returned with all the information you requested. Have a system of filing returned contracts in date order. A loose leaf ring-binder with plastic pockets is a simple system and you can file your gig info sheet in there, pending the return of your contract. In that way you can see at a glance which contracts have been returned and which have not.

Servicing the Gig

It's a good idea to send a basic promo kit with the contract (containing one of every piece of promo you can offer) and a promo request sheet, so that the organiser can ask you for the required number of copies of photos, flyers, posters, press releases etc. If you are willing to do press and radio interviews before the gig, by phone or in person, say so, and also say if you are willing to offer CDs for radio airplay.

Advantages of Playing a Festival

Folk Festivals are wonderful melting pots in which folk music and dance comes together for a brief time. They fizz with energy for a weekend and then sleep for another year. If you are new to the business, this is a great shop-window for your music. Getting festival gigs is a big advantage. It launches your career, gives you vital experience with a wide variety of audiences, enables you to see, meet with and learn from other performers and in addition to all that, you'll have a great time. If you have an album it gives you chance to sell it to a wider public. You can also put each festival on your promo under the 'performed at... list. Unfortunately for your bank balance, Festival Directors are pretty sussed about this. They operate a kind of casual tier system. The lower down the ladder you are, the less likely you are to get paid much, however don't despair - ladders can be climbed.

Many people who are just starting out are happy to attend festivals without being paid in cash. Instead season tickets and (maybe) free accommodation constitute the fee. Fledgling performers get the opportunity to perform to a larger audience alongside established performers. This is OK for your first season when you are totally unknown and are sure you can impress people with your amazing Moldavian Nose Flute playing. You'll get more festival gigs and more club gigs if you are seen to be pleasing an audience.

Getting Festival Gigs

The method is the same as for folk clubs, however, you need to be aware that most festivals do their booking in the autumn and like to have their guests lists finalised by Christmas. Some festivals are still booking in January, but the copy date for advertising in the April FRoots festival supplement is mid-February, and so that has become the cut-off date for most festivals, too. (The Froots festival supplement is a good source of festival information as well. It's usually on their web site- www.frootsmag.com - as well as in print.)

Your chances of being booked at a festival increase if you can offer something in addition to straightforward performance, maybe a workshop on Moldavian Nose Flute playing or a one man show about that great folk-blues player, Blind Melon Honeydew.

If you are an established performer with a reputation of your own and a good folk club following you can expect to negotiate a reasonable fee for festivals. Only the headliners, the fail-safe folk favourites, the big stomping bands or the visiting megastars from foreign countries get big bucks on the strength of their names being a draw.

Getting Gigs at Arts Centres and Small Theatres

Arts centres and theatres are a hard market to move into unless you have a strong fan-base. Having a large mailing list will do wonders for your booking potential, so if you don't already maintain one, it might be worth considering. If you have your own publicity machine, such as an active web page and/or regular folk press adverts, organisers are much more willing to book you. They can see that new people are drawn to their venue because of your publicity, you will become a more desirable commodity.

Do not make your move into arts centres too early in your career without laying the groundwork to ensure a successful night. If you wheedle your way into an arts centre booking and do not draw an audience, you won't get invited back.

Arts centres generally need LOTS more publicity material than a folk club, say, a minimum of 500 flyers each (for overprinting) and around 50 posters. Some venues ask for 1,000 flyers and 100 posters. One even asks for 5,000 flyers. This can be expensive, so check to see how much promo they want when you are negotiating the fee.

Promoting your Gig

You can do yourself a favour by trying to promote the gig too You can try: word of mouth; mailing lists: promo to folk clubs you've played before; approaches to local radio stations with offers to do freebie interview spots etc. All this takes time and effort and has to be allowed for when scheduling rehearsal and preparation time.

Why You Don't Get Gigs

This is a thorny question. Suppose you follow all the step-by-step good ideas in this chapter and you still aren't getting the work you think you deserve, or promoters who booked you once aren't offering returns.

- **Check your promo package.** Your promo, (posters, flyers and photographs) should be as professional as your act.
- If you aren't a high street name or one of the folk-world's fail-safe artists, you'll need to raise your profile.
- Increasingly arts centres and theatres favour performers who will bring their own fans to augment their audience. You have no mailing list.
- Yes. It really does count. I can't stress this enough. **If you are not nice to deal with, you won't get a second chance.** Remember that the performers who have something to be bigheaded about are often the most self-effacing, charming and straightforward people around. Learn from them.
- You are trying to run before you can walk. Build up your audience base before you try for the bigger gigs. Every gig you play should add to your fan-base. Don't curl your nose up at the little stuff, you never know who's in the audience.
- Your product (you and your music) is just not suitable for the market you are trying to sell it into. Maybe Moldavian Nose Flute playing is not as popular as you thought; try learning the fiddle.
- You are under-rehearsed. This is a polite term for the word 'crap.' If you aren't good at what you do, don't ask people to pay for the experience of listening to you. Enjoy your music in the privacy of your own bathroom or in the company of like-minded folks at the local singaround. If you are determined - keep practising. Up is a very good direction.
- Market forces. You want more money than organisers are prepared to offer.
- You have a reputation for cancelling gigs at the last minute due to 'pressure of work.'
- You've played too many gigs in the area recently.
- No-one has ever heard of you.
- It's just the luck of the draw. There's a lot of competition out there and you aren't different enough from the rest, even though you are very proficient at what you do.

Identify your errors and learn from them. Good Luck.