

How to Hold a House Concert

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When Bev Walkling and her husband, Gord, lived in Calgary, they got a regular folk fix through their membership in a folk club and season's passes. When they moved to Sarnia in 1987, they faced withdrawal; the music just wasn't available in as many places ... or as often.

So they took matters into their own hands. Armed with Alistair Brown's number when they arrived, they booked him for a performance in their home three months later. As Bev recalls, if they guaranteed a fee, it was very small. But 42 people showed up, and donated \$10 or more each for the privilege.

"Alistair said Grit Laskin was looking for work in the area, so we booked him next," says Bev. "Then out of the blue, Eileen McGann's agent called, and said Eileen would like to do a concert. Then Stephen Fearing's agent called."

And it grew from there. Now they hold these shows monthly, from September to May, with an audience of anywhere from 50 to 70 coming to catch performances by such well-known artists as Garnet Rogers, James Keelaghan, Lucie Blue Tremblay, Loreena McKennitt, Ian Tamblyn, Lynn Miles and Cathy Miller.

Why are artists willing to do it, when big halls mean a bigger income?

"You may not have a venue big enough, or an audience base big enough, in your area," says Wiarton's Tom Ashman, who has held a few house concerts. "But you can perform in a house and make it work. I think their primary concern is they want to perform and if they can receive a small amount of money, and if they've got some product they can sell, that's even better."

And it's a whole different experience for the performers. "The rapport is very close and intimate—a lot of interaction back and forth—and during the break, the performers are usually walking around and interacting with the audience as well," says Bev.

It's a lot of work, and you can't even expect to recover all your costs, but how else can you see and hear and get to know your favourite artists this intimately? Want to hold a house concert? Here are some points to keep in mind.

1. *Your house.* Figure on space for about 50 people. As time has passed, Bev Walkling has seen her audience overflow into the dining room, which still affords a good view. She keeps an eye out for chairs, preferably folding ones, wherever she can, and says she's been known to stop at the side of the road and grab old chairs people have discarded. Folding chairs allow you to move them out of the way in the breaks, to allow people to stretch their legs and mingle. You may have to move bulky furniture out of the way; Bev's family carries theirs down to the basement during every show, and pushes couches along the walls, leaving space to sit on the floor.

2. *The artists.* It probably goes without saying, but choose

artists you enjoy. With an established name, membership in the Ontario Council of Folk Festivals and a listing in the Council's venue directory, the Walklings are often contacted by agents. But they also attend folk festivals in the summer and approach artists they've particularly enjoyed. "We occasionally do it from a very good demo," says Walkling, "But if I can't promote a performer and say that I really like what they do, then there's no point in my having them. CBC did a thing on house concerts recently and interviewed some of the people that attend regularly, and there was one gentleman who comes from Detroit every month, and he said: 'Half the time I've never heard of the performers, but I trust Bev's judgement.'" And book about three to four months in advance. Artists travel all the time, and you'll need to book them when they're fairly close.

3. *Sound system.* With a small room, you may not even need one. But as the Walklings' audience has grown, they've spread into other rooms. "Loreena McKennitt didn't feel there was a need for it, and Grit Laskin has done it without a sound system as well, but now that we tend to have a very full house, and we have people spread around so they're not all in one room ... we generally use it just to get a little balance in, mostly for people in the back room or off to the side. It's not really to increase the volume significantly."

4. *Promotion.* Some pointers from Bev: "Invite all your friends, even if you think they're not interested, because initially people will come just because it's a new and novel idea and they want to find out what it's all about. And a lot of times, once you get them coming they're hooked; they'll enjoy it and they'll want to come back."

Start building a mailing list right off. "Initially we were hand addressing all the envelopes; it's only within the last year and a half that my husband put together a software program. And within the last six months we've had a couple of people who attend regularly, who've said they'll help." With a mailing list of a few hundred, some financial assistance from the Home County Folk League as part of their outreach program has also been welcome. The Walklings mail twice a year now, informing their audience of shows coming up over the next few months.

Then she hits all the local media she can, along with the CBC, to let them know about the event. This usually generates free publicity right before the event, reminding the people already mailed, and attracting new ones.

5. *Tickets/Donations.* It's easiest to ask for donations at the event itself, but setting a minimum amount is a good idea. Many will pay more. Bev Walkling finds that few artists ask for guaranteed fees, and if they do, she said "Garnet Rogers doesn't need one." That usually settles it.

When your seating is so limited, cancellations are a problem, so tell people it's important to let you know if they have to cancel. If someone cancels without letting you know

more than once, you may want to start asking for prepayment. The Walklings have begun offering season's passes: a dollar off each show.

They also offer to take care of selling tapes and CDs, so the artist is free to mingle during the break.

Ask the artist if you need to take SOCAN licensing fees out of the gate, or whether they'll pay it.

6. *Accommodation.* Do you have an extra room? Most of the performers who play the Walklings' stay overnight, and are served dinner and breakfast. Bev checks on any allergies or food preferences beforehand.

7. *Food.* Tom Ashman tells everyone his shows are potluck and BYOB. Bev Walkling makes brownies, and usually finds that people bring food. She also serves coffee

and apple cider, and puts out a basket for donations to cover these costs.

8. *Special considerations.* Both Bev Walkling and Tom Ashman stress that they've had no problems with people attending their concerts. But remember some things. If your house is smoke-free, let people know as soon as possible. And if you have pets, you should publicize this as well. Some audience members (and some performers) suffer from allergies and may not be able to attend. Wheelchair accessibility could become an issue, as you may be short of parking nearby, and your house will likely be crowded. If you can accommodate, you'll probably want to protect carpets from wet wheels.

9. *Have fun.* Don't let the organization of your event get in the way of your enjoyment of it. Keep it simple.