

Guide to Hosting a House Concert

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Guide to Hosting a House Concert

House Concerts Guide

Here is a 30-minute read on how to start a house concert series. If you move your lips while you read, it could take longer!

What is a House Concert?

It's an invitation-only concert in someone's home, presented by a host who does not profit from the event.

Most house concerts are:

- held indoors and on weekends
- attended by 20-50 people
- paid for by a \$10-20 donation per guest (to the performer)
- known to include light snacks, beverages or a pot-luck dinner
- attended by the host's friends, neighbors, co-workers, and maybe a few fans of the artist
- attended by a 25-60 age group
- performed by solo acts, duos and small groups
- performed with a very small sound system or no amplification
- very intimate — the audiences sit close and are attentive
- performed in two, 40-minute sets with a 20-minute break
- stronger for artist's merchandise sales than traditional venues
- known to house and feed the artist for the night

Each house concert is a collaboration between an artist, a host/presenter, and their friends and supporters. What will yours be like?

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Where, When, and Who? These are the first three decisions you'll probably make regarding your house concerts. The fourth decision is: thin or stuffed-crust?

Choosing a Location Basics: Although similar results can be achieved in different locations, a house concert takes place at a house. When the weather turns seasonally ideal, some hosts do patio, garden, or backyard shows, but you always need a backup (inside) in case the weather doesn't cooperate. Indoors, the living room is usually the best choice, often providing a balance between a cozy spot and the opportunity to stretch into an adjoining area. Also, a window or fireplace can make a nice background scene for the performer.

Consider: You'll probably need to re-arrange some furniture. You'll most likely use every chair in the house (dining room chairs, barstools, ottomans, office chairs, especially barstools — which make a great back row.) Just make the room comfortable and accessible.

Options: There are few spaces more cozy than a living room. However, basements work too. If you live in an apartment or condo, there is often a clubhouse or common area that can be reserved at little or no expense. Some hosts, who aren't satisfied with their space, recruit like-minded friends to co-host the shows in their homes. It can be terrific to work with a close friend as a partner in these events.

Tip: Most people underestimate the number of guests they can comfortably fit in their living room. To estimate your capacity, clear the middle of the room (coffee table, etc.) and move the couches to the side or against a wall if possible. Then, start arranging available chairs (dining room, kitchen, office chairs) to get an idea of the number of people your space could hold. Once you've set up a few rows, it's easy to imagine how the rest of it would fall into place. Remember to allow at least a 4' by 6' area for the performer.

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Choose the Date/Day of your House Concert

Although some great events have been thrown together with little advance notice, it's best to allow at least six weeks to promote your house concerts. Many hosts book their schedules three to twelve months in advance to secure shows with great acts.

Basics: If you choose the act first, then you'll need to collaborate with them to choose a date that works with their touring schedule. However, if you plan on hosting house concerts on a regular basis, it can be helpful to choose a consistent schedule that makes it easier to plan and build a strong repeat audience. For example, you could decide to host events on the first Thursday of every month, except for the winter months. That would give you 8 or 9 shows per year.

Consider: For most people, hosting weekend shows (Saturdays are very popular) makes it easier to draw a larger crowd. It also keeps them from having to pull things together quickly at the end of a long day at work. However, choosing other times (Sunday afternoon, Thursday evenings) can give you a great edge for capturing amazing talent when they tour through your area. You will be astonished at the caliber of artists who would be grateful to fill a Thursday night show for a modest crowd and a free place to stay.

Tip: Be aware of local events and celebrations in your area that could interfere with the audience turnout of your event. Sporting events (especially playoffs) can wreak havoc on concert attendance. It's also very challenging to keep a concert/listening atmosphere if you combine your house concerts with birthday celebrations. It's best (at least until you have an established audience) to keep your guests focused on the music.

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Your Invitation List — Let's Get it Started

Basics: One of the first steps to take as a house concert host is to compile a list of as many invitees as possible. Attendance, for many hosts, is the most challenging part of hosting house concerts.

For some people, throwing a party and getting people to attend is second-nature. They have tons of acquaintances, are involved with many clubs, groups, charities and maybe even a reputation for holding great events. For most of us, however, it takes a bit of work and some planning. A full room adds so much to the feeling of a concert — whether that number is 15 or 1500. Performers really sense and feed off the energy in a room when they play. Empty seats, however, suck the energy out of any event. Whatever the size of your space, do your best to avoid empty seats, even if you have to hide some chairs! There's a common expression in music — “the crowd made the show,” and you'll see it happen first-hand when you host your events.

Consider: First, it's important to get some leverage. If you think purely in terms of people you see consistently and know personally, you will seriously limit your resources. List everyone you could invite.

Second, don't neglect to invite someone simply because you don't think they'll be into it. Time and time again the biggest compliments come from people who thought a house concert wasn't their kind of thing, who then were blown away by the quality and fun-factor of the show. Your invitations will provide information and links to the artist's music, and let people decide for themselves if they should come. Finally, your invitation list will always be a work in progress. You'll have a nice sign-up form to display at each of your events to enlist anyone who may have come as an invitee of one of your friends. As your list grows, your events will become easier to promote.

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Options: Most house concert presenters use their email accounts to create a list from their address books, and use our free, attractive e-flyers to promote their events. However, in addition to your current email program, there are many websites and programs (like Evite, or Punchbowl) that can also help you do this. Create a list of everyone you know within an hour's drive of your home. List your friends, neighbors, co-workers, club members, parents of your kids friends, and soccer-moms. Even the fantasy-football buddies? Well, maybe not them. Gather any missing email addresses (and phone numbers if you like).

Tip: Keep a notepad, index card, or some visual reminder with you for the next 3 weeks. Get in the habit of adding people you meet, or have overlooked in your invite list. You'll be amazed at how many people you meet or bump into each day that escaped your mind when you made the initial list. "I'm hosting a music event soon, and I'd like to invite you, can I get your email address?"

Suggested Donations:

Technically, house concerts are free. You are not selling tickets. You are not running a business. And the best way to make that point (to those who would be concerned) is to have a "suggested donation." However, it should be clearly understood by all your guests that their donations are how the artist is being paid. You might announce before you introduce the artist, "If you can't afford the suggested donation this evening, that's O.K., but please pull me aside sometime tonight so that I can make up the difference in the donations jar." That'll get the point across, and very few people (if any) will take you up on your generous offer.

How much should you suggest? \$10-20 per person is the usual range, depending on the caliber/requirement of the artist, and the comfort level of your guests. You can choose a fixed number like \$10 per person, or a range (\$10-15.)

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Guarantees:

Some artists may ask for a minimum guarantee payment in case the audience turnout is small. Usually, the amount is quite reasonable but it is completely your right to decide if and how much to guarantee. You would only make up the difference if the donations fell short of the guaranteed amount. \$200 guarantee - \$150 in collected donations = \$50 payment from the host.

As the House Concert Date Approaches

Guest List: Use a notepad, spreadsheet, or program to keep track of RSVPs. Be aware that 10 - 20 percent of the people who say they will attend will not show up on the day of the show. In time, you'll come up with fun adjectives to describe them. **Waiting List:** If you are uneasy about over-booking (accepting more RSVPs than you can seat), start a waiting list and promise to contact those folks when seats open up. You'll send a reminder email 2-3 days before the show to confirm everyone.

Two to Four Weeks Before the Show

You'll want to check in with the artist, and take care of last minute details. What time should they arrive? Give them a reasonable time window of at least a few hours.

Additional Details:

- Do they have accurate directions to your place?
- Are you both promoting the same date and time? (mistakes happen!)
- Do you have each other's cell phones in case of last minute delays/emergencies?
- Do you have a reasonable amount of guests interested in attending the show?

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Weak List? If you are having trouble getting RSVPs, and sense that the artist could be disappointed with the turnout, let them know. This is an opportunity for you to brainstorm a few ideas to make the event more appealing, or to give the artist the option to look for other opportunities in the area. Do NOT just cancel... most often it will be too late for the artist to re-route their travel plans. It's possible that some of your guests will RSVP late, and for an artist with heavy travel expenses, sometimes a low-turnout house concert is better than none at all. But it's still worth having the conversation.

Two or Three Days Before the Show

Send out the reminders. Let your RSVP'd guests know that they are expected, and remind them how special this event will be. Tell them how much it means to you and the artist that they will be there. If they have doubts about attending, now is the time for them to tell you so that you can try to find someone else to fill their seat. You might say something like, "We're so excited to have such a great artist playing in our living room, it's very important we give him/her a full house."

What should I provide?

Some hosts love to have a pot-luck dinner before the show, and others find it to be a distraction. I've seen great house concerts that provide only tea and cookies, and some where the food almost eclipses the music. Many of your invitees will ask if they can bring something, so it's good to decide ahead of time. Alcohol will be covered later in this booklet.

Make up signs for the event.

A few examples: • "Suggested Donation: \$15-20 per person"

- "Additional bathroom downstairs"
- "Don't let the cat out."
- For the front door... "Please come in quietly if the show has already started."

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Day of Show

Prepare the rooms — for the artist and for the show.

Artists really enjoy having a secluded place to warm-up and relax before the show. If you don't have a dedicated guest bedroom for them, try to find a space (basement, office, etc) where they can have some uninterrupted time alone for an hour or so. It really helps artists perform at their best if they don't have to be constantly in "mingle-mode" for the entire visit. Artists will appreciate a few bottles of water, and an available light snack could hold them over until the potluck. Tea and coffee are good to have on hand as well. If you are providing snacks and beverages for your guests, you'll want to have that set up ahead of time. Make it easy for people to serve themselves. Mind the alcohol though, if it's part of your event. This responsibility is a great thing to hand off to a trusted volunteer.

Property, and your property: Although you'll be acquainted with most of the people who attend, it's still good to take a few precautions. Valuables and breakables should be stowed, and safety hazards addressed. Check outside lights, clear the walkway, tighten the toilet seat and handrail to the stairs. You get the idea.

Setting up the Performance Room

Key points:

- Leave enough room for the performer (and speakers if needed!) •
- Make sure there's an aisle
- Use the shortest chairs down front, taller chairs and barstools in the back.
- Try to face all chairs toward the performer.
- Try to aim some light toward the performer, and have the rest of the room a bit darker. An adjustable desk-lamp on the mantle, or a clamp-on light from Home Depot can do wonders.

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Merchandise Table

Make sure the artist has a high visibility table for their CDs and other merchandise.

Greet guests, collect donations, re-establish expectations.

Have your RSVP list handy as the guests arrive, and have the donations jar/hat in an obvious place where you can direct them. “Hi Pete, Hi Sally, welcome. If you’ll step over here and take care of the donation right away that would be great. Then help yourself to the refreshments...”

Showtime!

The Host in Control: Turning a Crowd into an Audience

What should a host do to gather a respectful and attentive audience for a house concert?

Basics: As a house concert host, it is your responsibility to educate your invitees, and to manage their expectations. This is especially true for your first events, when you haven’t yet built a core audience that will set the right example at every show.

Set the right expectations with the first email. Reinforce the concert message with every conversation and every invitation. It should be part of the show’s introduction and the intermission. It’s a CONCERT. Emphasize the word. Don’t let anyone get the impression that it’s a party with music. Accomplish this, and your new attendees will behave like an audience. Remember, you’ll ask them to bring a spouse or some friends, so be clear and consistent to help them explain it to others.

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Consider:

Even the most seasoned performer can lose their spark when they have to work to get the crowd's attention. Instead of playing music, being warm and comfortable, they start spotting audience problems and plotting solutions, and this lovely experience we call music starts to look and feel like a job. If that job necessitates announcements for people to be quiet and be respectful, no one wins. The artist will not sell as many CDs, and your audience will have missed the opportunity for a truly inspiring experience. Some may not come back next time.

Tip: Make sure your flyers, invitations, and emails say "concert" and not "party." Even though house concerts can turn into very festive events (with certain performers) - let that be the surprise.

As people arrive (or ahead of time) pull a few of your friends aside and ask them to take seats in the front row when the time comes. Unless the artist is well-known, new audience members have a tendency to select seats like they are entering algebra class. Have a few "good students" set the example early.

Twenty minutes before the show make an announcement like this... "Hi everyone. In about 10-15 minutes we'll need to have everyone seated before the concert starts. If you want to use the restroom, or refill your drink, please do that in the next few minutes."

A few minutes before the show make the next announcement. "O.K. everyone, please find a seat as we're about to start the show. The first set will be about 40 minutes, and then you'll have a break to stretch your legs, use the restroom or get a refill. Please help us keep distractions to a minimum, silence your phones, and get comfortable."

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Introduce the Artist

There is no penalty for being brief. “Hi Everyone, thanks so much for joining us at our (first?) house concert. Tonight we’re pleased to bring you, all the way from Lawrence, Kansas, Fran Snyder!”

Hopefully, you won’t have to goad them for applause. The introduction is a great way for you to stall as the last few people settle in. But wait until they are quiet... make them uncomfortable with your silence if you have to, then smile. “Welcome everybody!”

Tip: Even if you are comfortable as a public speaker (OK - it’s a living room), this is a great way to get one of your guests involved. If you sense that one of your friends would be good at (or even enjoy) the role of announcer – delegate! Give them the scripted lines above so they are prepared, and share the spotlight. Choose someone with a strong and clear voice, who can speak with some authority and a friendly vibe.

During the Break: Encourage CD Sales and Mailing List Signatures

Artists can sometimes sell as much merchandise during the break as they do at the end of the show. Encourage this, nurture it if you can... (help unwrap CDs for them to sign, etc.) Have a Sharpie on hand for the musician to autograph CDs.

Starting the Second Set

After 15-20 minutes, dim the lights and make the announcements to get people back in their seats.

After the Show If you had alcohol at your event, this is your last chance to spot guests who’ve had too much. This is not a problem unique to house concerts, but it’s worth mentioning. As your friends tell you they had a wonderful time, see if you can muster up your best “Aw shucks.” Encourage them to sign your guest list if they didn’t get invited directly from your emails. Follow up with a thank you email, ask for more help, and promote the next show.