

# How to create a set list for your musical performance

– a good set list makes a more effective performance  
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Creating a good set list can make your band's performance more polished and effective. This article tells you how to put songs together so they flow well and have more impact on the audience.

## Step 1

Organize your songs by **tempo, style & key**

### ORGANIZE YOUR SONGS BY TEMPO

Simple organization by Tempo:

1. Upbeat/ fast
2. Medium
3. Slow/ ballad

## Step 2

ADD MORE SPECIFIC TEMPOS (ESPECIALLY IF THERE WILL BE DANCING)

Other categories of songs:

1. Latin
2. Waltz
3. Punk Rock Revelry
4. Specialty (e.g. College alma matre song, birthday, anniversary etc. as occasion calls for)

## Step 3

NOTE WHAT KEY EACH SONG IS IN

This is crucial for creating set lists that flow smoothly and with the most emotional impact. It is best to arrange songs so they move upward in keys as you go along. For example:

SONG ORDER BY KEYS (complete with fake song names!)

1. Happy welcome song - (key of) C
2. Life is good - D
3. Uh, oh, I'm having a bad day - Em
4. Never mind, it's okay after all - G
5. Yahoo! It was great being here tonight! - Bb.

This kind of set lifts the listener (in a subtle way), so that the performance continues to generate more energy as it goes along.

Think of a group of songs as a mini Broadway musical that tells a story. How does the story unfold? What kind of emotional journey will the listener experience (happy to questioning to shocked to sad to resolved to happy again??)? The order of your songs will determine how the story unfolds.

## Step 4

Sample set list by Category

CREATE SET CATEGORIES BY GENERAL MUSICAL NEED/ INTENTION

e.g. create a "dance music" category, a "background music" one, etc. based on the needs of the audience/ club/ venue. For example:

1. Light pre-performance prelude music
2. Background dinner music set
3. Dance set
4. Special Songs  
(e.g. anniversary, awards to be made etc.)

5. EXTRAS (extra ones to have on hand, just in case)

### **Step 5**

#### **FILL OUT YOUR SET LISTS TO CREATE FLOW AND CONTRAST**

1. Choose songs that move UPWARD in key (so energy rises -- even when moving to an introspective ballad)
2. Put songs together that flow thematically (e.g. 5 songs: Love is great; uh-oh, something's wrong; wah broken hearted; mending; Hey, love is great)

### **Step 6**

#### **EXTRA HINTS**

1. Always start and end a set with your best songs.
2. Have your opener and closer songs sum up your overall theme/ message
3. If you have a larger pool of songs (e.g. more than 50 to 100) from which to choose, have a master set list by category, and create a list of mini 3 song sets that flow together. Then, each time you create a new set list, you simply put together each set of three to create a larger set of 12 for one set list.
4. Depending on your band's instrumentation (and inclination/ ability to take solos) 12 songs usually fills 45 minutes to an hour.

### **Step 7**

#### **KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE**

1. Make sure your style and abilities suit the needs of the audience. Ask what age span the audience will be; what general style/ feel of music they're looking for; what percentages of background, performance, and dance music they want; what kinds of special presentations will be made and might need supporting incidental music.
2. If you are not the right band for a venue, help them find one who is. It is best (for everyone involved) to play venues with which you are a good fit.

### **FINALLY:**

Sing/ play the beginning and end of each song as you put songs together in order. See if they flow together well.

If you have a mix of vocalists and instrumentalists, make sure you don't put too many of the same arrangements/ styles together. Mix it up to give it contrast and flow (unless switching too much between instruments causes issues with the sound system setup)

The set list examples shown in this article are real ones used by a small jazz combo, and may not reflect the style/ feel/ needs of other styles of groups. If you play elevator music or heavy metal, you'll need to create your own categories of sets. :-)