

Live Lessons: 5 Tips for Better Tone Live

There are endless ways to enjoy being a musician, from jamming with your friends to recording your music, even something as simple as playing by yourself can bring an immense sense of satisfaction. But for most, no which way is more satisfying than getting up on stage and plugging in and playing to a room full of complete strangers. It's what fuels the fire in our musical hearts, and why shouldn't it? The rush of playing live is a feeling that can be hard to find elsewhere, and it is something I believe everyone should experience at least once in life.

Equally however, there is nothing worse than putting time and hard work in to a performance only to get to the day and leaving the show feeling like you didn't play your best. Or even worse, completely bombing! Sometimes it's unavoidable. Life can just be cruel and decide that that day was just not your day, but most of the time a bad gig can come down to something as simple as tone. Ever felt like your songs sound amazing in the rehearsal room but then feel slow live? Bad tone. Ever been at a gig and felt like your face melting solos aren't cutting through? Bad tone. Ever played a show where the singer's vocal is completely lost during choruses? Bad. Tone.

Bad tone is the pitfall of almost any band that doesn't cut the mustard live, and it can be so easy to forget when you're running round trying sort out other issues that come with playing live; like dealing with difficult promoters or trying to sort out guest list for your mum.

Well I won't idly stand by whilst fellow musicians are out there getting themselves into all kinds of musical peril. Today, I'm going to give you a five-step workout plan that's going to get your flabby tone in shape. No more unheard

solos, no more dynamic-less songs, and no more washed out vocalists. Its time to get in shape!

Tip 1: Dialing the amp tone to the room



One of the most overlooked concepts in the book, dialing your amp tone based on the room you're in is a fundamental part of playing live. We've all missed it as well; I remember the first proper gig I played as a session guitarist I spent weeks getting my tone in shape. I had this really lovely clean sound that was full and warm, and then when I stuck my overdrive on I had a sweet lead sound that felt like it was going to blow the heads off of every audience member in the first five rows. Unfortunately come show time my guitar sounded like it was being played in the next room and *I* didn't even hear my solos let alone any of the audience. This is because I was playing in a venue, not my bedroom. A room that had lots of different materials on the walls and corners that sound can get trapped in and change the perception of my tone and was full of sound absorbing people (trippy concept but so true).

Put simply, you don't have a signature tone. There is no one setting on your amp that will work for every gig you play. You have to keep your wits about you when setting up at a gig and make sure you're thinking about the way your amp

sounds on the day, not what settings you had on it last night. This can be as simple as dialing back the reverb or adding more mids so you cut through. Its not rocket science, it just requires a final bit of care right before you play, and we can all agree that you'd rather spend another five minutes sorting out your tone so that you have a great gig right?

Tip 2: Cutting Bass



This may feel like an extension of point one, and it kind of is, but I felt like it was so important to the guitar player's live sound that it deserved its own section of discussion. Despite how many times Meghan Trainor tries to convince us, guitar players are NOT all about the bass, quite the opposite in fact. If you consider the four members of your band as frequencies rather than instruments, then it all becomes clear. You've got your drummer, who takes a good 60% of frequencies with their bass heavy kick and high frequency cymbals and snare. Then you've got your singer who (unless

they're Johnny Cash) will sit usually in the mid to low-highs, and then you have the bass player. Bass. Player. Who will dominate all of the lows and is the one musician us guitarists want to avoid.

We tend to forget about the relationship between guitar and bass because for a lot of us, we jam in our rooms alone and want a nice full sound so we turn the bass up on our amps and get this well-rounded tone. Well add a bass player to that sound and suddenly were not as full as we once thought. However, it's a really simple fix, just cut the bass knob on your amp! Imagine you're trying to sound like Brian May at Wembley when dialing in your tone. Once you reach a point where playing a loud chord is almost unpleasant by yourself, you've got your sound. It'll feel weird when you're doing it, but you'll hear the difference in your tone almost instantly once you start playing your set.

Tip 3: Ride your volume



There's at least one band at every gig that suffers from this. They come on stage, count themselves in and then you're hit

with this wall of sound that gets you saying 'Alright, this band sounds huge cant wait for their set' and then 16 bars into the song and here we are still feeling like the song has just started because no one has turned down or stopped playing to help develop the song. This is called dynamics, and is arguably THE most important asset any musician can have when playing live. If you all just play constantly through an entire song then there isn't going to be anywhere to go or come back from, its just three minutes of solid sound that ends up feeling unstructured.

If a song starts out big then try dropping your volume in the first verse, give the song some space to breath. Then, once we've established a foundation of volume to work from, we can gradually build up until we hit the chorus where you can turn back up to eleven again. Equally, if the song starts out soft then think about where the song is going. Does it need to lift in the pre-chorus? Or do you need to wait till the chorus to start pushing the volume. These little adjustments will improve your live playing ten fold, and the audience will be more engaged for it. At the end of the day we all want to have our moment in the limelight, but if we all try and do it at once then everyone loses, so is it really worth it?

Bonus tip – If you're a guitarist in an originals band, try considering not playing anything in the first verse or other areas of the song that need space. Space is one of the most useful arrangement tools out there; it can sometimes contribute more to a song than any guitar part could, and it's easy! You'll literally get credit for doing absolutely nothing, and how often can you say that?

Tip 4: Know your gear



It's all well and good spending two grand on your board and bragging to your mates about how your new delay is rack unit quality and you can't see yourself ever going back. But if it starts producing endless feedback on stage and you have to spend five minutes trying to work out whether it's a loose cable or a dodgy preset then you're going to look like more of a novice than the guy who turned up with just an amp and a guitar. This tip is super simple: KNOW YOUR GEAR. I love seeing tons of pedals and effects on stage as much as the next guy, arguably more. But if you're not going to take the time to master it then you're setting yourself up for disaster. Complicated pedal-boards that have lots of functionality require work, and I don't just mean getting all your pedals in a nice order to soothe your OCD, I mean understanding every part of it. You need to know how to solve a problem that comes up when you're performing pretty much instantly otherwise you risk losing the audience. You will never look more amateur than if you turn up with all the gear, and have no idea how to use it when the time comes. So take some time to master your board. You never know, you

might find some bonus info that you can brag about at the next Namm show, neat!

Tip 5: Less is more



The main message of this article has been to understand your role in a live show, when to be prominent and when to take a step back, and adapting your sound to suit the show you're playing. The final tip takes that same advice and applies it to your pedal-board. Like cutting bass to sit better in a mix, or controlling your volume to contribute to the dynamics, dialing in better sounds from your pedals is no different. In my opinion the three key pedals are delay, reverb, and distortion. They're everyone's favourites, I get it, who doesn't love a washed out guitar or endless delays. The problem with those sounds is similar to adding too much bass to your tone; it sounds good in your room, it sounds messy live. I've personally found that adding a simple quarter note delay with a few repeats has done more for my tone in a song than any multiple delay ever has. Same goes

for distortion, too much of it and you end up dominating frequencies and losing dynamics. Remember that the core tone of your guitar plays a role in your sound too, and the marriage between your core guitar sound and your pedals is what makes a great sound. Don't get lost in pedals, it easy to do but fight the urge. You'll be better off for it.

By Dan Tredgold