

Building and Maintaining A (Great) Coffeehouse Series

Questions and Answers

by Del Suggs

In General

What is a "Coffeehouse"? It's a performing environment that rarely exists outside of the college campus. Briefly (and vaguely), it is a venue designed for an intimate performance for a small audience. That means a small act (rarely more than 3 performers) utilizing minimal sound equipment (small PA) performing for a small audience (generally 100 people or less) in a small space. The idea is that the performer puts on a show (as opposed to just playing songs, etc.) and the audience actually pays attention (as opposed to chatting and drinking). It is actually much more fun than it sounds on paper. Most people rarely get the opportunity to see an entertainer up close in an intimate setting, instead of being in a concert hall with several thousand other people. It is a wonderful experience.

Where did they come from? They began as alternative performance sites in the 1950s, as musicians, poets, and other avant-garde performance artists sought out places to perform. In the 1960s, students brought them on campus. They don't really have an off-campus counterpart, except for the rare "listening room." A coffeehouse is very different from a bar.

What happened to them? In the 1960s, students found these smoky basements and storage rooms on campus and turned them into cool places for music, comedy, poetry and films. In the 1970s, they put on polyester clothes and went out disco dancing to the BeeGees. In the 1980s, they shaved off parts of their hair and pierced odd body parts. And in the 1990s, they rediscovered acoustic music and songs with a message... and the coffeehouse. Since the beginning of the Twenty-first century, the coffeehouse has been on a major boom on campus!

Where are Coffeehouses now? Most campuses no longer have a room used just as a coffeehouse. They are more likely to be held in a student lounge, snack bar or cafeteria, campus pub, or even on the patio or green area. Today's coffeehouse is usually held in a

converted space used for something else. Almost anyplace can be utilized, if it can be used for an intimate performance.

What kind of entertainment? Small musical acts that are generally "acoustic" instead of electric. Comedy and novelty is also very popular, along with poetry readings, and foreign and art films. The idea is to have a show where the audience and the performer are in close proximity. Because of the nature of the coffeehouse show, it is necessary that the artists be professional touring acts. It's not your local or student acts aren't good. It's just that professional touring acts are accustomed to working in the coffeehouse setting and performing for college audiences. They know how to present a coffeehouse show. They know how to work an intimate audience. They will provide you with the advertising and promotional materials you need. They understand what you are trying to do. They will not be rude or profane to your audience-- and they have a reputation you can check out by calling other schools.

Starting a Series

Why can't I just do one coffeehouse show and see if it works? Because nobody at your school knows what a "coffeehouse" is! If you want your coffeehouse to be successful, you should plan a Coffeehouse Series or Program. It's like advertising-- repetition helps make it successful.

What is a Coffeehouse Series? It's a program with a number of regular, consistent shows. Hold them on the same day or night, in the same place.

How do I do that? First of all, get a commitment from your Activities Board or Director of Student Activities. Take the budget you receive, and divide it by 1000. For example, you are allocated \$4000 for your Spring Semester: divided by 1000 equals 4. You should then plan on doing four shows for your Spring Series, because most Coffeehouse Acts will fall into that price range. That doesn't mean pay \$1000 for every act! That's your average. You could pay

\$750 each for two shows and \$1250 for another show and still meet your \$1000-per-show budget.

Next, find a location. This will be easier at some schools than others. Some obvious places are the Student Center Lounge, the snack bar or cafeteria (after meal hours), dorm lounges, a ballroom, etc. Even the lobby to a dorm can work, or a game room.

Choose a day or night for your program which works in your academic and social schedule. If you are at a "suitcase college," don't plan the series for Saturday night! If your school has a strong (and large) greek system, don't schedule it during chapter meetings. If everybody parties off-campus on Wednesday night, don't plan your coffeehouse then. And don't go head-to-head with major sporting events. If you can, choose one consistent day (Tuesday nights, for instance), or a range (Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday). Try not to do one show on Saturday night and the next show on Tuesday night. Be consistent. You may want to try a regular schedule, like the First Wednesday of each Month for a monthly series, or Every Tuesday for a weekly series.

Check the room schedule, and try to get a priority on the days you want. Then schedule the acts you want for those days. Take advantage of Block Booking. Refer to your notes from this conference. Check your files for promo. Talk to artists and agents over the phone. Watch the videos, and listen to the tapes. Book a variety of acts, not all white-male-guitar players or all comedians. Diversity is always important, and there are many wonderful-- and diverse-- acts.

Book your series One Term (semester or quarter) In Advance. This is the easy part.

Promotion

How do I promote the Series? First, come up with a name for the series, something catchy and memorable: "Wednesday Night Live" or just

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"Tuesdays" helps people remember when it is. You may want to name it after the room: "The Outpost" or "The Orange & Brew." You can name it after your school mascot: "The Eagles' Nest" or "Club Tiger." You can even use the word "coffeehouse" in the title, although some people won't know what it means. (They will also expect you to serve coffee). You can also name it after somebody important or special: "Edgar's" was the name of the Coffeehouse at Clemson University, located in the Edgar-Somebody Student Center. And Campbell University named their Coffeehouse after a student who died suddenly, and called it "Chelle's Place." Or how about borrowing the MTV concept: "Unplugged."

Then plan a whole publicity campaign for the series-- not just one show at a time. You want people to attend every show, not just one. If your activity board does a calendar, get your Coffeehouse listed. Print your own schedules and distribute them. Do T-shirts, posters, buttons, stickers, whatever you can afford. Just make sure you get the word out.

Do a separate publicity campaign for each individual show, using the materials the performers will send you and your own ingenuity. You should attend a Promotions Ed Session at a conference for more ideas.

Most importantly, make sure your Activities Board knows about the show, and all of your friends. Make them attend! In a small (100 seats or less) room, 12 or 15 people is a good start for a crowd. And if they tell everybody they know, you'll have a full house.

The Show

What is a "Show"? Your coffeehouse programs should be "Shows," not endurance events. They should have a beginning, and an end. It's like a movie, or a lecture. Don't expect your artists to play for three hours and your students to drop in at their leisure. Schedule a Show: Ninety-minutes (or less) is the norm. You can do two-hours, with a break-- but you may lose part of your audience when you break. Most

coffeehouse shows are around 60-75 minutes.

What about the room? The Venue for your coffeehouse needs to be comfortable, cozy, and intimate-- yet not too familiar. If you are using a familiar place, like a lounge or cafeteria, rearrange it totally for the show. Make it look like a new place the students have never been before! Don't just put the chairs in rows. Use the tables, put on table cloths and candles. Turn off TV's, Video Games, cover the pool tables, etc. Make it look and feel different.

Make sure you have a stage. Even small rooms need a stage, but make sure it fits in scale with the room (not too high). Make sure you have stage lights. Stage lighting help the audience focus on the performance. Know how to turn off the room lights.

What about Sound? Make sure you understand the sound requirements and have taken care of them if you are providing the sound system. If the act is doing their own sound, schedule a load-in and arrange for a few strong backs to help carry in equipment. Allow them time to do their sound check, and get it right. Then make sure you have some help to load-out after the show.

How does the show begin? Open the doors 30 minutes before the show. Have some music playing which will set the mood for the program. Have some table tents or fliers with the performer's bio and other information on it. Have your program schedule available. Make sure all of your activities board members and your other friends are there, and sitting down front. At show time, dim the room lights and fade down the recorded music (then turn it off). Get a student from your program board to introduce the act on stage, through the sound system. Then turn it over to your performer.

What about when the show is over? When the performer finishes, just sit tight. Allow for an encore, if the audience wants. When the performance is over, have your emcee go back on stage and thank the performer for a great show, and thank the audience for

attending. Announce the next show ("Come back next week for another great performer, Jill Doe.") Keep the lights down, and let people visit with the artist, talk, and drift out. It won't take very long, and will leave a much better impression than flipping the lights on and running every one out. Don't be in a hurry!

Any other suggestions? Don't forget that these are intimate shows. Don't expect 400 people to attend. If they do, it's not a coffeehouse-- it's a concert!

Utilize the audience to recruit volunteers for for your program board. There are people in the audience who would like to help out, but they don't know how to get involved. After the show, have your emcee recruit: "If you'd like to be a part of the Student Center Productions Committee, come by room 207 for an application."

Some coffeehouses have the Emcee announce or use table tents to let the audience know that the performance is for listening. It's okay to ask people to be quiet and refrain from talking during a musical performance. It's also rude for audience members to request songs (usually just yelling out "Freebird!") UNLESS the performer has asked for requests. Make sure your Board knows this once-common audience courtesy.

The next day, tell everyone you see that they missed the greatest performance on the planet. Make them aware that the series happens, when it happens, and that they need to be there. Your series will be a success! Good Luck!

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