

Touring the UK in the Modern Age – a Comprehensive Guide

By James Islip

Taking your music to the people. Sweating tears when you get lost on a Belfast cul-de-sac. Getting screwed over by the man on a nightly basis and treading in squatter's dog shit every time you wake up. Going on tour is every young punk's dream.

It is inevitable however, and as in most walks of life, most people you meet may not share your vision. The technology we associate with touring is an ever-changing landscape. Gigs are not always limelight, free love and big pay. The streets (not to mention the venues), are indeed, full of cunts.

Help is now at hand! Thanks to up-to-the-second research methods and severe use of the M1, I have put together a guide that will hopefully highlight some of the pit-falls and tribulations a modern DIY musician may face whilst 'on the road'.

Money & Getting a Gig

You probably won't have any money, but you shouldn't let that put you off. DIY touring means 'doing it on the cheap'. You only have to pay for musical equipment (£20K), vans/cars/insurance/tax (£10,000K), not to mention the money you invested in your own DIY record label (100K) and then the wad you had to fork out on releasing your debut album on triple-gatefold minidisc to sell at gigs (500K). When your finances are low, just simply ask Daddy for some more cash. If you are in the position of being 'poor' or 'working class' however, you may have to resort to trying to earn money at gigs; not the most reliable source of income at the best of times. This is why real working class musicians like the Streets or the Beatles couldn't adopt the DIY approach; they really were too poor to begin with.

Remember, it is important to have some money when you are on tour to buy petrol, booze and food.

The best place to get gigs is on the internet. Difficulties arise because of the anonymity people can have via email contact. It can be impossible to tell whether or not the 'promoter' you have met online is a cool guy or ruthless bullshitter, hell-bent on ruining your life.

The only way to find out is to 'accept the gig', enrol at the school of bad-knocks and learn the hard way. As soon as you show up at the venue and meet the promoter, it won't take you long to work out which category s/he will fall into. If you are led to a banquet hall, filled with piping hot vegan delicacies and ale flowing out of every available orifice, you are onto a winner and it is safe to assume there will be some money come the eve's end. However, if the promoter is stood on the sandwich he made for you six weeks ago and asks if you want to trade some pills for your Travis Bean, chances are, you are going to have a duff night. But remember, DIY music is all about the relentless acceptance of adversity and even if you've been treated like Gary Glitter's hard drive and end up playing to one deaf sound engineer, you must play like your life depends on it. Always...

Before accepting any gigs, make sure you ask the promoter if he will 'cover the band's costs'. This is DIY code that the promoter will interpret as NOT GIVING YOU ANY MONEY AT ALL. Instead of cash payment, s/he will provide you with a tearful story about just being made redundant or how they had to trade a vital organ just to use the photocopier in Office World.

Sleeping Arrangements

High intensity musical performance and liver-destroying drinking antics can make aspiring mega-punks very sleepy. Usually, it is best to try and stay the night with friends (or even at your own house if you have one) and thus avoid gambling on the promoter's domestic situation. If s/he is aged between 11 and 16, chances are you'll be sleeping in Mum's bed (with Dad). They may not even have a house; they may live in a cave, a squat or boat. You may get presented with a bed made of broken glass and fag-ends with sheets covered in moss. Have you ever inhaled Carbon-Monoxide all night? It's not very good for you...

Worse still, you could be taken by the promoter to a third-parties abode, thus forcing you to inflict your crusty, smell-riddled lifestyle on the promoter's unsuspecting partner/friend. The drug-addled promoter chews his mouth off all night, forcing you to stay up with him, drinking and talking about 'the scene'. Meanwhile, innocent and credulous young children are upstairs asleep, dreaming about becoming astronauts and vets. It is important to be very careful that you do not dent their impressionable minds. Your promoter's influence in their young lives alone may have already tipped the balance from a prosperous, wholesome life to teenage years in borstal, drug addictions etc.

To be certain of avoiding any kind of hygiene/morality related dilemmas, you should always sleep in your car/van. Even in winter, with a hand brake pressing up your snout all night, you'll find it preferable to any of the above

Food

Some promoters think that bands graze on vegan grass all day, fuel themselves on pints of booze all night and thus don't require any further subsistence. Worse still, most UK cities/towns/villages are trying to cull population figures by only offering unhealthy/repulsive meals to citizens, usually in the guise of the Subway sandwich. This particular outlet is, unfortunately, the only eatery open to the musician post 6pm. Prepare yourself by going to shops in the daytime and buying fruit - a great vitamin provider. You can stockpile food in your tour vehicle for use later (food stocks usually decay and turn into compost which you can sell to gardeners to help balance-the-books post-tour). Freeganism is an even more cost-effective eating solution whereby you look for food in bins. Larger food companies like Ginster's & Bird's Eye support freeganism by producing food so rancid that consumers put it straight in the bin after their first mouthful. If you however feel that you are above eating from bins, try restaurants. Be warned; in order to pay for such frivolity, you may have to sacrifice other luxuries, such as shoes or housing.

Try and tell the promoter in advance of any dietary requirements you may have. For instance, you may have particular meals you like or brands of beer that you prefer. You may want 12 bottles of water and canapés on the stage when you perform. There is no harm in being as particular as you like; you won't end up with any of it anyway.

Travel & Navigation

So, you've booked some gigs on the internet, you've got places to stay and food to eat, all that's left to do is to pack up your car/van and hit the road! What do you mean you 'don't know where Hereford is?' Try going to a shop and buying a map. A map is a physical representation of internet sites, such as multi-map or Google Earth, which you can carry around in your car/van. Maps of the UK plot where each City/Town is in relation to other Cities/Towns, roads, seas/rivers etc.

When planning your route, it is traditional to arrange the places you plan to play in an order that will maximise the amount of miles to travel. This means you can spend endless, pointless hours on the motorway, thus instilling 'cabin fever' within yours and the minds of your companions.

Fatigue and insanity can be used to enhance a musician's image; tiredness can make you look drug-addled, bohemian and therefore cool. Not washing your hair, clothes and skin can help this too. Likewise, being a bit mad can be construed as 'being intense'. Intense druggies are thought of as cool by many music fans; Kurt Cobain or Nick Cave are famous examples of this. Be careful though because mad crusties, like Pete Doherty or Michael Jackson, are *not* cool, so be sure you are projecting the correct vibes at all times.

Future

From the 1950's onwards, it was necessary to have a band and/or songs in order for you to perform to people and hence 'go on tour'. Nowadays you can use a Myspace page to create the illusion of having a band/songs without having to waste any creative energy. Using pre-defined categories such as band/artist information, influences etc, you can pretty much say everything you need to, artistically speaking, about your band/music. Playing gigs online, from the comfort of your own bedroom, will become commonplace within the next few years, making the travelling, eating & sleeping parts of touring much less hassle. The internet will also make things much easier from a social perspective too. Being able to project a certain image to people, without having to actually meet them face-to-face and converse at any point, will make the management of your tour very simple indeed.