

You Gotta Work The Room

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By JOHN LEHMANN-HAUPT

I HAVE been playing guitar in New York restaurants for more than a decade. To many of my classical musician friends, performing in a clattering, bibulous dining room is only one notch above strumming in the Union Square subway station.

True, it isn't Carnegie Hall, but it's not like playing to a brick wall, either. Just as customers sometimes use (or abuse) musicians, we, in subliminal ways, manipulate them.

For example, I constantly scan the dining room for signs of customer awareness: drumming fingers, a tapping foot or even a certain tilt of the head. Sometimes I divert myself from the routine of playing the same songs over and over, night after night, by trying to read the crowd and responding to the mood. It is difficult to say exactly how this works, since it is more of an intuition developed over the years than anything else. The soft-featured, demure lady over on the right may strike me as a candidate for "Memory" from the musical "Cats," while the austere academic types off to the left should go for anything crisp and baroque-ish. I'll play my hunch and look for the telltale tap. It works about 70 percent of the time.

One evening, a party of six feisty young men came in with a certain swagger that I thought might lead to a raucous "Stairway to Heaven" request after a few drinks. And then something — it might have been their age, their dress, their expressions — told me that they were more Billy Joel than Robert Plant. I shifted into "Just the Way You Are." Sure enough, halfway through the first chorus, the man at the head of the table looked at me and said, "I can't believe it. That was my wedding song." For the rest of the evening, I had them in my pocket as surely as Bruce Springsteen playing Asbury Park.

Music can do much to set the tone of a dining room. I often collaborate with the service staff on this. For several years I have been playing at Cellar in the Sky (at Windows on the World), which is generally an exceptionally civilized venue. But when I started there in the early 1980's (this was before the "dram shop" law rendered restaurants liable for the actions of patrons who drink too much there), some customers tended to get quite animated, not always to the amusement of their fellow diners. This happened most often on Friday and Saturday nights.

The maître d'hôtel and I found that if I stuck with classical music for the first set on those nights, the cacophony level throughout the evening tended to remain below the red line. Still, if some parties grow obstreperous, the maître d'hôtel signals me to go into what I call the lullaby medley: "Send in the Clowns," "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," "Someone to Watch Over Me" (but not too fast) and so on. The pacifying effect is gradual but unmistakable.

Songs like "New York, New York," on the other hand, can be downright dangerous. The insistent rhythm seems to sound muster for the 101st Fork-and-Spoon Table-Thumping Corps. And the most incendiary song of all, one that I play only when Windows on the World security guards are nearby, is Roy Orbison's "Pretty Woman." I don't know what emotional chord this tune strikes, but countless experiences have demonstrated that if a beast lurks within a man, a surefire way to unleash it is by playing "Dah-dah-dah-dah-DAH..."

Then there are requests. Some people see a guitar and think "folk music" regardless of what they have been hearing me play all night, and more than once I have had to segue from something like "My Funny Valentine" into "Puff the Magic Dragon." This kind of thing is to a musician what the "well-done steak" and "medium-rare sushi" requests are to chefs. Our professional instincts tell us not to comply. Our pocketbooks remind us that the customer is always right.

I usually do learn any song that is requested more than once, but for years I refused to tackle the ever-popular "Malagueña"; some residual snobbism made me shun what seemed to me a guitarist's ultimate cliché. To deal with the inevitable requests, I had concocted a song and dance about how my deep respect for the flamenco tradition forbade the blasphemy of my play-

ing it without having steeped myself in Spanish gypsy culture.

Sometimes, however, we can be shamed into playing songs we do not know or do not care to play. One evening as I was finishing my set, a customer asked for "Malagueña." It was late, I was tired, and rather than go through my usual routine, I just said, "Sorry, I don't know it." As I was putting my guitar away, I heard him say waspishly to his companion, "That's like an accordion player not knowing 'Lady of Spain.'" My bubble was pierced; within two weeks, I was thrumming away at "Malagueña" like an aficionado.

But the best "Malagueña" request story happened to my friend Dennis Koster, a concert classical and flamenco guitarist who in 1968 was playing for \$17.50 a night in the cocktail lounge of a Spanish restaurant in Manhattan. One evening, a large, well-lubricated Texan walked in, herding an entourage into the dining room. He spotted Dennis and, after seating his party, returned and accosted him with "Hey, boy, do you play that 'Malagwainey'?"

"Yes, sir, I do," Dennis said.

"Well, I want you to play it for my wife," the Texan said, directing him into the dining room. He produced the inevitable roll of bills and peeled off a 20. After the finale, as Dennis was returning to the lounge, the man followed and stopped him by a pay phone. He peeled off another 20-dollar bill, dialed the phone and extended the receiver, saying, "Now I want you to play that 'Malagwainey' for my girlfriend."

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THRUMS UP: John Lehmann-Haupt used to shun "Malagueña." Now, he's practically an aficionado.

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