

FILM THE GIG

A working musician's short guide to capturing live nights that are actually worth watching

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Before anything else: what this is

I play five gigs a week, often more, and I film most of them. Not because I love filming — because a gig that nobody filmed is a gig that only the people in the room ever knew about. Over a few hundred nights I've made most of the mistakes there are to make: cameras pointing at the wrong thing, faces blown out by my own stage light, footage from two phones that looked like two different nights, whole sets lost because a battery died twenty minutes in.

This book is everything I've learned about capturing a live gig, kept short on purpose. Each chapter is one topic, a few minutes' read, and there's a checklist at the end you can glance at in the van. None of it needs expensive gear. Most of it is about decisions you make before the first song, because that's the honest truth of filming live music: the night is won or lost at setup, not in the edit.

CHAPTER 1

Being clear on your expectations – and what's required on your part

I'm putting this chapter first because everything else in the book depends on it. Not on believing anything — on being clear about what filming a gig can give you, and what's required on your part to get it.

Start with something you already accept every time you record sound. If a vocal clips on the way into the desk, that distortion is in the file forever. You can EQ it, compress it, bury it in reverb, and what you'll have at the end is a distorted vocal wearing effects, because no plugin can put back a waveform the converter never captured. Musicians don't argue with this. We've all winced at a crackly board recording and known the only fix was to record it properly next time.

Blown-out video is the same thing — it's clipping. A face burned to pure white by a light a metre away is a clipped signal, and there's no detail behind the white for any software to recover, mine included. It's the same physics, and it deserves the same acceptance. The edit can cut your night into songs, match your cameras, grade the colour and make the sound feel like the room on a good night. What it can't do is un-blow a highlight, un-blur a missed focus, or invent detail that was never there.

I learned that on my own footage. I had a gig where I stood right next to my LED panel all night — I knew I was close to it, and I told myself it would be fine. The camera clipped the highlights on my face on every song, and no amount of grading could bring back skin that was recorded as solid white. The problem was created at half past seven when I put the light stand down in the wrong place.

But there's another half to the expectation, and it matters just as much: not every imperfection is a failure. I once clamped a phone so close to a speaker that the bass physically shook the camera on the low notes. By the rules in this book that's a mistake, and I kept it — the picture pulsing with the low end felt more like being at that gig than a locked-off shot would have, and mishaps like that can genuinely add to the feel. Another night a phone lost focus partway through the set and the last five songs came out a tad blurry. Nothing could rescue them, because no app fixes what's baked into the picture without regenerating it — and once software has regenerated your footage, it isn't your footage any more. Sometimes we just have to deal with it.

One more, because it's the whole philosophy in a single night: my wireless mic transmitter went out of range, so the desk recording never took, and I got home to footage that looked awesome with nothing clean underneath it. I ran the camera audio through the edit and shared it anyway. It sounded like a phone in a room, because it was, and people loved it, because the night was good. Share the experience, not just perfection.

Musicians are perfectionists — it's half of why we're any good — but perfection is often found in the imperfections that happen to work, and those moments are wasted if you spend them wishing they were something else. If you want proof I practise this, have a look at my YouTube channel: I post everything, the imperfect included, because with a bit of ingenuity and creativity and assertiveness — being bold and going for it — a real night shared beats a perfect night that never left your hard drive.

So what's required on your part comes down to two things. Get the avoidable mistakes out of the way before the first song, which is what the rest of this book is for, and accept whatever's left as live music. The more you do it, the more consistently you'll get clean footage — so when the moment comes, the night everything lands, the work was already done.

CHAPTER 2

Phones count: the gear you actually need

You do not need a cinema camera. I've delivered videos shot on a phone clamped to a speaker stand that look better than footage from cameras costing ten times as much, because the phone was pointed at the right thing in decent light.

What actually matters, in order:

The position matters more than the lens. A cheap camera in the right place beats a good camera in the wrong one. And be realistic about what "the right place" means in a working venue, because some rooms make it hard to even position a phone — people walking in front of it every two seconds, gear getting knocked as it's carried past, and the one perfect angle sat exactly where the bar staff need to walk. Height is your friend: a camera above head height on a speaker stand or a clamp sees over the room instead of through it, and it's out of reach of elbows and trays of drinks.

Two angles beat one better angle. One wide that always sees you, one closer shot with some character. The cut between them is what makes it feel like a produced video instead of CCTV.

Storage and power. A 4K night is a big file and a hungry battery. Full charge, empty card, and if the phone's your camera, aeroplane mode — one phone call ends the wide shot for the night.

If you have money to spend, spend it on a second angle and a way to record the desk before you spend it on a better main camera.

Where there's a will there's a way

Here's what that looks like on real nights. Lights attached to the speaker stands or hidden behind them. The wide camera at this gig was a stand velcro-strapped to a table leg. And at a micro pub with nowhere to stand anything, I put the wide camera on a pillar in the room — the angle it created was amazing, and you'd never know how small the room was.



The close camera's view – panel light on a stand, one step back from my face.



The wide – from a stand velcro-strapped to a table leg.



Horse & Groom – the close camera on its stand.



The wide – from a camera on a pillar in the room. You'd never know it's a micro pub.

CHAPTER 3

The desk recording is the spine of everything

The single biggest upgrade to any gig video is not visual. It's recording your mixing desk.

Camera microphones hear the room from wherever the camera stands — a boomy, distant, chattery version of the night. The desk hears what you actually played. When the clean desk recording carries the performance and the camera sound sits underneath it as the atmosphere of the room, the video suddenly sounds like a release instead of a memory. It takes amateur-looking footage and makes it look professional, purely because the sound is so clean — I've watched it happen on my own videos again and again, and it's why this chapter sits ahead of anything about cameras.

The best way I know is a separate recorder, or a mixer that records. A desk that captures to USB is one press before the first song; if yours doesn't, a small recorder sat on the desk's outputs does the same job for not much money, and a phone recording a feed is better than nothing at all. But the honest advice is simpler than any shopping list: whatever way you find to do it, find a way. The gear matters far less than the habit.

And treat it as a habit you practise, not a thing you set up on the big night. Run it at rehearsal, run it at soundcheck, run it at the low-stakes Tuesday gig, so you've met the problems — levels, cables, where the files land — before a night you care about. Record the desk every single time, even soundchecks, because the recorder you only switch on for special occasions is the recorder that's off when the special thing happens. Start it before the first song and don't stop it between songs; one long file is worth more than twenty tidy ones, because the gaps between songs are where the applause lives.

And a lesson from a night I'd rather not repeat: check it's actually recording after the first song, not after the last one. A desk recording that started twenty minutes late means the opening songs live or die on camera sound alone.

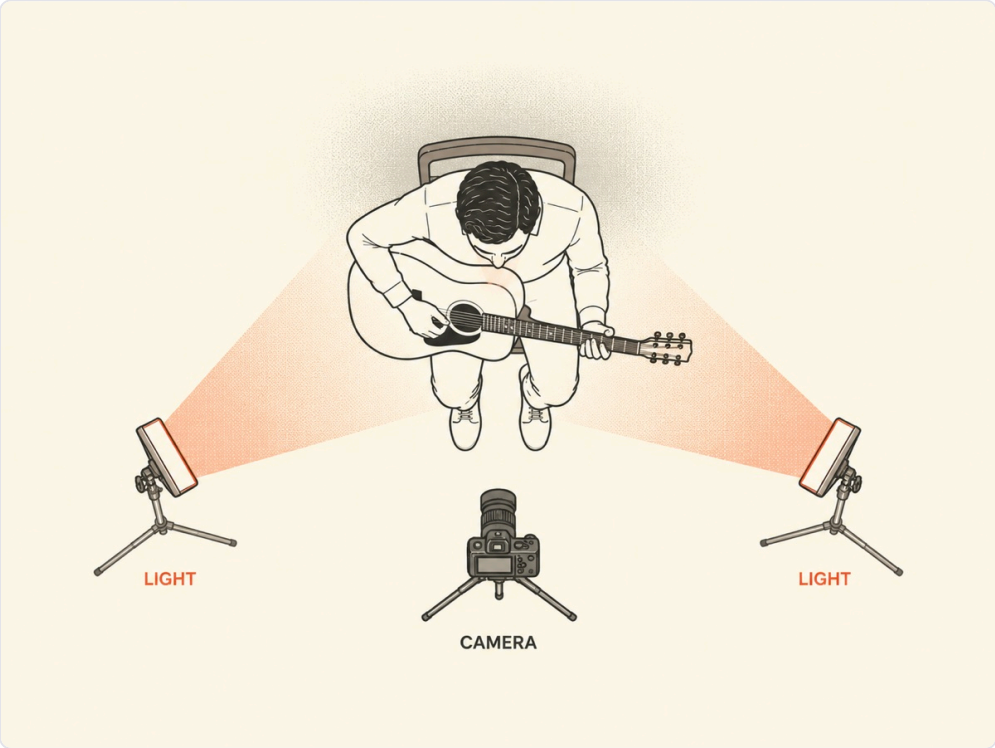
CHAPTER 4

Light ruins more footage than anything else

Not darkness — light. Badly placed light.

A dark pub is workable. Cameras are better in low light than they've ever been, and a moody picture can be graded into something with real character. What can't be fixed is a hard light source at close range pointed at a face. It clips the skin to white, it makes one side of you a different colour to the other, and it burns a hole in every frame it touches.

Bring your own light, and use it every time. An LED panel comes to every gig with me and it goes up unless I'm outdoors in blazing sunlight, because it's the one light in the building I control. Pub lighting is whatever the landlord screwed in five years ago; your panel is a known quantity you can place, aim and soften. And because the light is handled, keep a phone or camera up and recording whenever you're playing under it — you never know when the moment's coming, and controlled light means that when it comes, it's captured properly.



The placement that works: lights on stands either side, angled in – never straight at your face from close range – with the camera front and centre.

My rules, learned the expensive way:

Distance is everything. The difference between a light one metre away and two metres away is enormous — light falls off fast with distance. If your face is going shiny-white on the camera screen, move the light back before you touch any settings.

Bounce or diffuse if you can. A light aimed at a wall or ceiling near you gives a softer, wider glow than the same light aimed at your face. A cheap diffuser sock does more for your footage than a better camera.

Watch for the half-and-half face. Warm bulbs one side, cold LED the other gives you a face that's two colours at once. Where you can, keep the light hitting you the same temperature — the room can be as mixed as it likes.

Check the camera, not your eyes. Your eyes handle harsh light far better than a sensor does. Thirty seconds looking at the actual camera screen during soundcheck — is my face holding detail? — saves the whole night.

CHAPTER 5

Exposure: protect the highlights

If your camera lets you set exposure manually, one principle covers ninety percent of it: **protect the highlights.** A slightly dark picture can be lifted. A blown-out one is finished.

Set exposure during soundcheck, and be strict about what "performance conditions" means. Stage lights on, first — switching your lights on brings the exposure down, so a camera set in a dim room before the lights go up will clip the moment they do. Keep the light at the same distance it'll be during the set, because a panel that gets nudged half a metre closer after soundcheck quietly undoes everything you just dialled in. And since you can't stand at the mic and look at the camera screen at the same time, get someone to stand at your mic while you set it — a bandmate, the barman, whoever's about — because skin under your actual light is what you're exposing for, not an empty stage. Set your main camera first, then match the second camera to it rather than setting each one by eye. Get the brightest thing on the stand-in's face just below clipping, then leave it alone.

If the camera only does auto exposure, keep strong lights out of the frame edge, because auto exposure sees a bright lamp and darkens your face to compensate, then swings back when you move — and that pumping is baked in forever.

The same soundcheck check covers focus: lock it on your position if the camera allows it. Auto focus hunting for a face in a dark room is how you get a beautifully sharp mic stand and a soft singer.

CHAPTER 6

Two cameras, one night: keeping them believable

Put two cameras on the same stage and you'll discover they disagree about everything — one thinks the room is orange, the other thinks it's blue, one exposes for the lamp, the other for your shirt. Cut between them raw and it looks like two different venues.

Software can pull cameras towards each other, and good matching gets them close. But matching has physics-shaped limits: it can shift colour, it can't invent detail, and the further apart the cameras start, the harder it has to pull. So help it at setup:

Lock what can be locked. If a camera offers manual white balance, set both cameras to the same setting. Auto white balance drifts during the night, and it drifts differently on each camera. If you're filming on phones, the free Blackmagic Camera app is worth installing for this alone — it gives you proper manual white balance on a phone, so two phones sat in different light at different distances can be locked to the same temperature instead of each one guessing its own.

Make one camera the reference. Your best camera, best positioned, becomes the truth of the night — expect everything else to be pulled towards it, and give it the best seat in the house.

Don't mix wildly different devices if you can help it. A five-year gap between phone sensors shows. It's workable — I do it constantly — but the closer the family, the easier the match.

CHAPTER 7

Framing: set it, then forget it

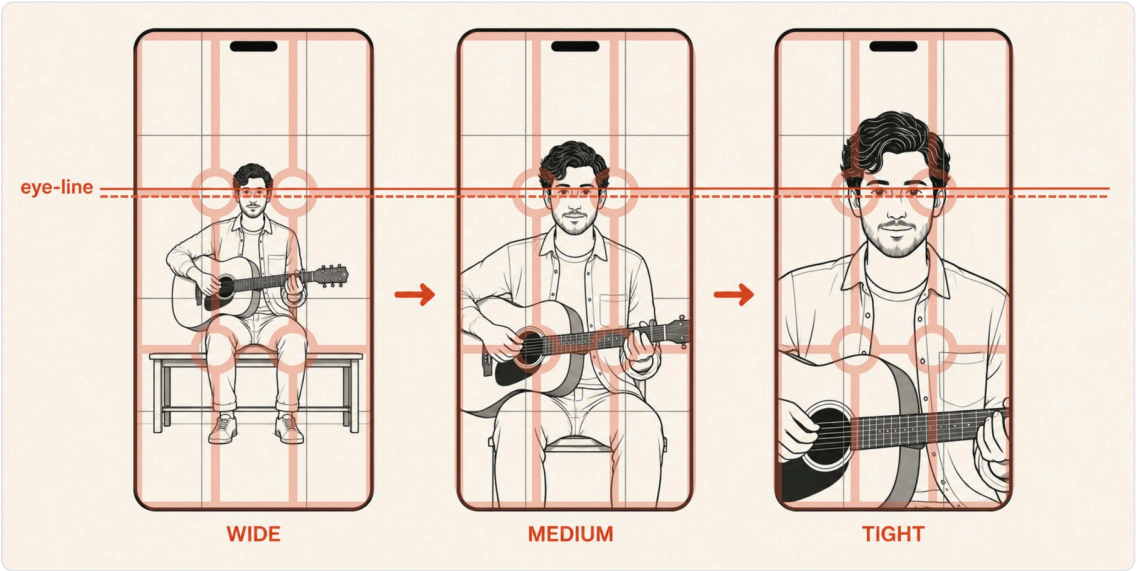
The best framing decision at a gig is the one you never touch again. Nobody's operating these cameras mid-song — you're working. So frame for the whole night:

Leave room to move. Frame wider than feels right. You will drift, lean, step back for a solo. A frame that's tight and perfect at soundcheck is a frame you'll walk out of by song three.

Keep your face and the mic in shot for the wide. The wide's job is to never lose you. Character comes from the second angle.

Think about the vertical crop while you set the horizontal. Every phone-first platform will want a tall slice of your wide shot. If you're at the far left of frame with the drummer's cymbal at centre, the tall crop has a decision to make and neither answer's great. Stage yourself so a vertical slice through you makes sense on its own.

Height: eye level or a touch above. Cameras looking steeply up a nose or down a bald spot are doing nobody a favour. Speaker-pole height is usually about right.



Wide, medium or tight – the eye-line stays on the same level, in the top third of the frame.

CHAPTER 8

Record everything, bin later

Storage is cheap; a moment that wasn't recorded is priceless. Press record before the first song and stop after the last. Don't stop between songs — that's where the applause, the chat, and the moments a whole video can be built around actually live. The forgotten cover you threw in because someone shouted for it is, reliably, the best-performing clip of the month, and it only exists if the camera was already rolling.

Then, after the night: get the files off the cards and onto at least one other drive before you delete anything, and check the copy by size, not by name — two files can share a name and not be the same footage. I once cleared a card on the strength of a matching filename and lost recordings I can't get back. Sizes match or nothing gets deleted.

And once the copies exist, don't let the files squat on your drives forever. Filming every gig only stays sustainable if the footage keeps moving, and that's the next chapter.

CHAPTER 9

Render, upload, remove

Filming every gig creates a problem nobody warns you about: the footage piles up faster than you'd believe. A 4K night is tens of gigabytes before you've edited a frame, and a few of those a week will eat any drive you own. The habit that keeps it sustainable has three parts, done in order, every week: render, upload, remove.

Render first, and be honest with yourself about the time. A two-hour gig takes my machine eight or nine hours to render — that's a real number, not a worst case — which is why the render happens overnight while I sleep, never while I sit watching a progress bar. My own setup is an iMac doing the heavy lifting, a laptop alongside it, and about twenty terabytes of drives, because I film everything. But you don't need that. Lean works, as long as you actually do the next two steps instead of letting "I'll sort it out later" become a full drive with nothing findable on it.

Upload everywhere next. Every finished song goes to every platform I use, and anything I don't want public yet gets scheduled rather than left sitting in a folder. A video on a platform is out doing its job; a video on a hard drive is a liability with a filename.

Then remove. Once the uploads are confirmed live — actually open them and check, don't trust the progress bar — the original footage and the render leftovers get deleted, and I keep only the keepers: the handful of performances I'd genuinely mind losing. Everything from the last chapter still applies up to that point; nothing gets deleted until it exists somewhere else and the sizes match.

The thing that makes removal feel safe is using YouTube as storage. Upload at 4K in the highest quality you've got, even for videos you keep unlisted and never promote, because it's your upload and you can download it back later if you ever need the file again. Two honest cautions before you lean on that, though. I upload a lot of cover songs, and covers usually pick up publishing claims — that's normal and doesn't stop you posting, but I'd double-check whether a claim affects your ability to download that video back before you delete your only copy of it. And YouTube's terms change over time, so what's true as I write this may not be true when you read it — check the download side with your own account before you rely on it. Keep local copies of the recordings you'd genuinely grieve, whatever the platform promises. Dropbox and Google both give you a bit of free space too, and that's plenty for the keepers if the rest of the night lives on YouTube.

CHAPTER 10

What the edit can do – and what to do when footage was too harsh

Everything above is about giving the edit something to work with. Here's what a good edit (LiftShot's or your own) does with it: finds the songs in the night, cuts on the beat, keeps your face framed, matches the cameras to the reference, grades off what the footage actually measures, and puts the desk sound and the room sound together so it sounds like the night felt.

A good grade reads the picture before it touches it — and the skin gets the final vote. The look belongs to the room; your face is measured off the actual frames and protected from it. Footage that already looks right gets passed through, not repainted.

But some footage argues. Harsh, clipped, inconsistent light gives any grade bad information to work from, and once in a while the result on one song will just look wrong — too red, too pale, a face that's fighting the look. When that happens, don't fight it either. Re-render that one song plain — no look, just the honest cut and the good sound — and either take it as it is or lay a light grade of your own over the flat version. A plain edit of a great performance beats a styled edit of a broken picture every single time. The performance is the product; the grade is the suit it wears, and some nights the suit stays on the hanger.

CHAPTER 11

The pre-gig checklist

Stick this on the van dashboard.

- [ ] **Power and space:** batteries full, cards empty, phone on aeroplane mode.
- [ ] **Desk:** recording armed, one long file, confirmed running after song one.
- [ ] **Light:** panel up unless blazing sunlight, off faces at close range, pushed back or bounced, one temperature on you.
- [ ] **Exposure:** set at soundcheck with stage lights on and someone stood at your mic, highlights protected, then hands off.
- [ ] **Focus:** locked on your spot if the camera allows.
- [ ] **White balance:** manual and matched on both cameras if offered.
- [ ] **Framing:** wide never loses you, room to move, vertical slice makes sense, eye level.
- [ ] **Roll:** record before song one, stop after the last, never between.
- [ ] **After:** files copied to a second drive, sizes checked, then and only then clear cards.
- [ ] **Then:** render overnight, upload everywhere, confirm the uploads are live, keep only the keepers.

Ten lines. Twenty minutes at soundcheck. It's the difference between a night you can use and a night you apologise for — and it's the whole reason the edit gets to look effortless.

> *I built LiftShot because I could never face four hours of editing after every gig: you drop the whole night's footage and the desk recording in, go to bed, and wake up to a finished video of every song. If that sounds useful, there's a free 7-day trial at liftshot.app — the whole app, your own gig, no card. Either way, film your next one. Cheers, Aaron.*