

Showmanship

What is Showmanship?

Wikipedia states that showmanship is the skill of performing in such a manner that will appeal to an audience or aid in conveying the performance's essential theme or message.

It has been said that showmanship is the act of being a great Showman. But, what really is a showman?

- A performer who has a flair for dramatic or ostentatious behavior.
- A notably spectacular, dramatic, or effective performer.
- A very talented musician.
- An extremely funny comedian.
- A great singer.
- A fantastic choreographer.

A great showman is all of these things and more!

A Showman Sells Themselves

To be a showman you must first sell yourself and your skill set. If your style as a caller is a great singing voice – you perform singing calls that enhance that talent, perhaps by performing a wide range of music styles from country to jazz.

There are quite a few singing calls that explore a wide vocal range. Maybe you yodel or show an affinity for songs that require a high falsetto.

If your talents lie in comedy, crazy behavior or movements, then you should capitalize on them. If your “thing” is choreography, then, by all means push the envelope on material. Be careful that in the course of pushing the dancers to their limit you don't leave them out in the cold – never allowing them to win a single sequence. Many dancers resent this and will just stop coming to your dances.

Identifying Stage and Screen Performers

Here we will look at many different performers and great showman. The first of which is the great Bing Crosby.

Harry Lillis “Bing” Crosby (May 3, 1903 – October 14, 1977) was an American singer and actor. Crosby's trademark bass-baritone voice made him one of the best-selling recording artists of the 20th century, with over half a billion records in circulation.

A multimedia star, from 1934 to 1954 Bing Crosby was a leader in record sales, radio ratings and motion picture grosses. His early career coincided with technical recording innovations; this allowed him to develop a laid-back, intimate singing style that influenced many of the popular male singers who followed him, including Perry Como, Frank Sinatra, and Dean Martin. *Yank* magazine recognized Crosby as the person who had done the most for American G.I. morale during World War II and, during his peak years, around 1948, polls declared him the “most admired man alive,” ahead of Jackie Robinson and Pope Pius XII. Also in 1948, the *Music Digest* estimated that Crosby recordings filled more than half of the 80,000 weekly hours allocated to recorded radio music.



Crosby was one of the first singers to exploit the intimacy of the microphone, rather than using the deep, loud “vaudeville style” associated with Al Jolson and others. Crosby's love and appreciation of jazz music helped bring the genre to a wider mainstream audience.

What was it that made Bing a success as a showman?

Leslie Townes “Bob” Hope (May 29, 1903 – July 27, 2003), was an English-born American comedian, vaudevillian, actor, singer, dancer, athlete, and author. With a career spanning nearly 80 years, Hope appeared in over 70 films and shorts, including a series of “Road” movies co-starring Bing Crosby and Dorothy Lamour. In addition to hosting the Academy Awards fourteen times (more than any other host), he



appeared in many stage productions and television roles and was the author of fourteen books. The song “Thanks For the Memory” is widely regarded as Hope’s signature tune.

Celebrated for his long career performing for the USO entertaining active service American military personnel – he made 57 tours for the USO between 1941 and 1991 – Hope was declared an honorary veteran of the United States Armed Forces in 1997 by act of the U.S. Congress.

Hope participated in the sports of golf and boxing, and owned a small stake in his hometown baseball team, the Cleveland Indians. He was married to performer Dolores

Hope for 69 years. Hope died at age 100 at his home in Toluca Lake, California.

Can you think of what it was that made Bob so special as an entertainer and showman?

Władziu Valentino Liberace (May 16, 1919 – February 4, 1987), mononymously known as Liberace, was an American pianist and entertainer.

A child prodigy and the first generation son of working class immigrants, Liberace’s career spanned four decades of concerts, recordings, television, motion pictures, and endorsements. At the height of his fame from the 1950s to the 1970s, Liberace was the highest-paid entertainer in the world with established residencies in Las Vegas, and an international touring schedule. Liberace embraced a lifestyle of flamboyant excess both on and off stage, acquiring the sobriquet “Mr. Showmanship”. Liberace was recognized during his career with two Emmy Awards, six gold albums and two stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.



Liberace released a book on his life, and performed 21 sold out shows at Radio City Music Hall which set box office records a few months before his death in Palm Springs, California on February 4, 1987.

Worth over \$110 million at the time of his death, Liberace bequeathed the bulk of his estate to his scholarship foundation, but his official museum closed its doors in 2010 due to an economic downturn. In November 2013, a few dozen of his famous costumes and cars went on display for a six-week period at the Cosmopolitan Las Vegas in an exhibition titled “Too Much of a Good Thing is Wonderful”, Liberace’s unofficial motto, and an often-used one liner from his act.

How many costumes does it take for someone to be the worlds greatest entertainer?

Elvis Aaron Presley (January 8, 1935 – August 16, 1977) was an American singer and actor. Regarded as one of the most significant cultural icons of the 20th century, he is often referred to as “the King of Rock and Roll”, or simply, “the King”.

Presley was born in Tupelo, Mississippi as a twin-less twin and, when he was 13 years old, he and his family relocated to Memphis, Tennessee. His music career began there in 1954, when he recorded a song with

producer Sam Phillips at Sun Records. Accompanied by guitarist Scotty Moore and bassist Bill Black, Presley was an early popularizer of rockabilly, an up-tempo, backbeat-driven fusion of country music and rhythm and blues. RCA Victor acquired his contract in a deal arranged by Colonel Tom Parker, who managed the singer for more than two decades. Presley's first RCA single, "Heartbreak Hotel", was released in January 1956 and became a number-one hit in the United States. He was regarded as the leading figure of rock and roll after a series of successful network television appearances and chart-topping records.

In November 1956, he made his film debut in *Love Me Tender*. In 1958, he was drafted into military service. He resumed his recording career two years later, producing some of his most commercially successful work before devoting much of the 1960s to making Hollywood movies and their accompanying soundtrack albums. In 1968, following a seven-year break from live performances, he returned to the stage in the acclaimed televised comeback special *Elvis*, which led to an extended Las Vegas concert residency and a string of highly profitable tours. In 1973, Presley was featured in the first globally broadcast concert via satellite, *Aloha from Hawaii*. He died in 1977 at the age of 42.



Presley is one of the most celebrated and influential musicians of the 20th century. Commercially successful in many genres, including pop, blues and gospel, he is the best-selling solo artist in the history of recorded music, with estimated record sales of around 600 million units worldwide. He won three Grammys, also receiving the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award at age 36, and has been inducted into multiple music halls of fame.

When you think of hip movement – which Callers come to your mind?

Michael Joseph Jackson (August 29, 1958 – June 25, 2009) was an American singer, songwriter, record producer, dancer, and actor. Called the King of Pop, his contributions to music and dance, along with his publicized personal life, made him a global figure in popular culture for over four decades.

The eighth child of the Jackson family, he debuted on the professional music scene along with his elder brothers Jackie, Tito, Jermaine, and Marlon as a member of the Jackson 5 in 1964, and began his solo



career in 1971. In the early 1980s, Jackson became a dominant figure in popular music. The music videos for his songs, including those of "Beat It", "Billie Jean", and "Thriller", were credited with breaking down racial barriers and with transforming the medium into an art form and promotional tool. The popularity of these videos helped to bring the then-relatively-new television channel MTV to fame. With videos such as "Black or White" and "Scream", he continued to innovate the medium throughout the 1990s, as well as forging a reputation as a touring solo artist. Through stage and video performances, Jackson popularized a number of complicated dance techniques, such as the robot and the moonwalk, to which he gave the name. His distinctive sound and style has influenced numerous artists of various music genres.

Jackson's 1982 album *Thriller* is the best-selling album of all time. His other albums, including *Off the Wall* (1979), *Bad* (1987), *Dangerous* (1991), and *HIStory* (1995), also rank among the world's best-selling albums. Jackson is one of the few artists to have been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame twice. He was also inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame and the Dance Hall of Fame as the first and only dancer from pop and rock music. His other achievements include multiple Guinness World

Records, 13 Grammy Awards, the Grammy Legend Award, the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, 26 American Music Awards – more than any other artist – including the “Artist of the Century” and “Artist of the 1980s”, 13 number-one singles in the United States during his solo career, – more than any other male artist in the Hot 100 era – and estimated sales of over 400 million records worldwide, Jackson has won hundreds of awards, making him the most awarded recording artist in the history of popular music. He became the first artist in history to have a top ten single in the Billboard Hot 100 in five different decades when “Love Never Felt So Good” reached number nine on May 21, 2014. Jackson traveled the world attending events honoring his humanitarianism, and, in 2000, the Guinness World Records recognized him for supporting 39 charities, more than any other entertainer.

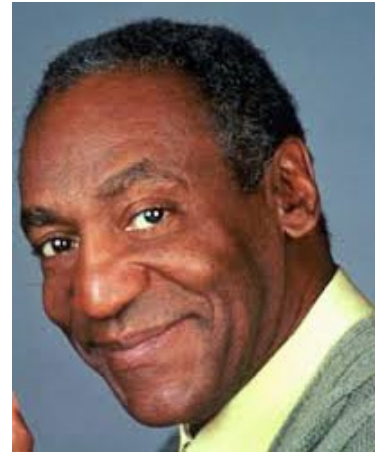
Jackson’s death triggered a global outpouring of grief, and a live broadcast of his public memorial service was viewed around the world.

What aspects of Michael’s showmanship do you remember?

William Henry Cosby Jr. (born July 12, 1937) is an American stand-up comedian, actor, author, and activist.

Cosby’s start in stand-up comedy began at the hungry i in San Francisco, followed by landing a starring role in the 1960s television show *I Spy*. During its first two seasons, he was also a regular on the children’s television series *The Electric Company*.

Using the Fat Albert character developed during his stand-up routines, Cosby created, produced, and hosted the animated comedy television series *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*, a show that ran from 1972 to 1985, centering on a group of young friends growing up in an urban area. Throughout the 1970s, Cosby starred in a number of films, occasionally returning to film later in his career. After attending Temple University in the 1960s, he received his bachelor’s degree from Temple in 1971. In 1973 he received a master’s degree from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and in 1976 he earned his Doctor of Education degree, also from UMass. His dissertation discussed the use of *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* as a teaching tool in elementary schools.



Beginning in the 1980s, Cosby produced and starred in a television sitcom, *The Cosby Show*, which aired from 1984 to 1992 and was rated as the number one show in America for five years, 1984 through 1989. The sitcom highlighted the experiences and growth of an affluent African-American family. Cosby produced the *Cosby Show* spin-off sitcom *A Different World*, which aired from 1987 to 1993; starred in the sitcom *Cosby* from 1996 to 2000; and hosted *Kids Say the Darndest Things* for two seasons, from 1998 to 2000.

How does comedy relate to showmanship?

Carol Creighton Burnett (born April 26, 1933) is an American actress, comedian, singer, and writer. She is best known for her long-running TV variety show, *The Carol Burnett Show*, for CBS. She has achieved success on stage, television, and film in varying genres including dramatic and comedy roles.



After a difficult childhood in San Antonio, Texas with alcoholic parents, Burnett discovered acting and comedy in college. She performed in nightclubs in New York City and had a breakout success on Broadway in 1959 in *Once Upon a Mattress*, for which she received a Tony Award nomination. She soon made her tele-

vision debut, regularly appearing on The Garry Moore Show for the next three years, and won her first Emmy Award in 1962. Burnett moved to Los Angeles, California and began an 11-year run as star of The Carol Burnett Show on CBS television from 1967 to 1978. With its vaudeville roots, The Carol Burnett Show was a variety show that combined comedy sketches with song and dance. The comedy sketches included film parodies and character pieces. Burnett created many memorable characters during the show's television run, and both she and the show won numerous Emmy and Golden Globe Awards.

During and after her variety show, Burnett appeared in many television and film projects. Her film roles include Pete 'n' Tillie (1972), The Four Seasons (1981), Annie (1982), Noises Off (1992), and Horton Hears a Who! (2008). On television, she has appeared in other sketch shows; in dramatic roles in 6 Rms Riv Vu (1974) and Friendly Fire (1979); in various well-regarded guest roles, such as in Mad About You, for which she won an Emmy Award; and in specials with Julie Andrews, Dolly Parton, Beverly Sills, and others. She also returned to the Broadway stage in 1995 in Moon Over Buffalo, for which she was again nominated for a Tony Award.

Is there a difference between a woman's role as a showman and a man's?

What makes past and present top traveling callers stand out?

Developing Showmanship

In order for you to be a showman you have to be an expert on the three "P's": People, Program and Performance.

People

You have to understand what makes people tick – how they react to environmental and social change. The best entertainers love people and crowds. They are willing to step out and put their emotions and performances on the line. If you can imagine a pirate ship filled with dancers, and the only way in which you can please this group is to walk the plank and even jump into shark infested waters... great performers are more than willing to comply.

A Showman Makes a Connection with the Dancers

Get to know your dancers. Spend some time circling the floor during breaks or in between tips by speaking with your dancers. Thank them for attending your dance – after all, they could have just as easily went to another callers dance. Find out what they do for a living, how their children are, where they have traveled, etc... Become a great listener. It shows that you are interested in them.

Attempt to memorize their names. Learn how to spell both first and last. Always announce special anniversaries or birthdays.

I can't emphasize this enough: A great showman doesn't have to be a great singer, a fabulous comedian or an unbelievable choreographer. They usually have a little of all of these qualities and put a performance together to entertain the dancers.

Be Prepared for Change

It is always a good thing to be prepared for your program. Do the research, write the material and have it all available for immediate use. A good entertainer knows that their program will change. It is inevitable – it will change. You may have a totally different crowd than you did a year ago, a month ago or even a week ago. It will change.

A Showman Consistently Reads the Floor

Watch the square dance floor for dancer reaction. Did they enjoy the last singing call? How did they react to your joke or pun? If they're reaction was positive – continue along the same path. If, on the other hand,

they reacted poorly, or appear to have no reaction at all – shift gears, change direction and keep trying a different approach until you get a positive reaction, then hold it there. Every dance, every party and every workshop will be different in some way, even if they are the same group of dancers. There are many factors that can change dancer attitude to your performance.

The weather can affect your dancer’s attitude: if it’s raining, or snowing – even high winds can affect dancers. Extreme temperatures can make a dancer especially tired or edgy – either heat or cold.

The conditions of the hall can also be a factor. Is the floor particularly hard to dance on tonight?

Did something happen locally? A political election that went awry, a sports team that lost an important game? Even a club member that suddenly had taken ill or passed away will effect dancer reaction to your performance.

Sometimes, something simple like changing your patter music can make all the difference in the world. A drop in voice volume can help as well.

Work on Sound Problems

If the sound is particularly bad, work on it – try and solve it. If the dancers can’t hear you, you are useless to them and you might as well go and sing karaoke in a bar somewhere.

If the sound is bad and you are consistently working towards a solution, the dancers will “cut” you some slack.

Listen to their suggestions... they might be right!

Is the Floor Danceable?

Are there problems with the floor? Can they be avoided? When you arrive at the hall, check it out. Can a quick sweep or mop solve the problem? You don’t have to do it yourself, but, by bringing it to the attention of a club officer the job can get done.

Heat/Cold

Is it too hot for the dancers? Who has access to the thermostat? One club that I know points a heat lamp at the thermostat to make it think it is hotter than it is, ergo, the air conditioner kicks in to make it cooler. Perhaps it is too cold. Be careful here – it might just be the right temperature for the dancers when they are dancing.

How Can You Tell?

How **can** you tell if the dancers are having a good time? Facial expressions, for one. If they are having a good time they usually are smiling, singing along with you. Some will whoop and holler with glee as they dance.

Look at their posture. If they seem to be hunching a little with their arms crossed, they are in a bad mood. Sometimes simply shaking their hand and thanking them for coming to the dance will change their mood.

Have you noticed that if the dancers that sit on the door and take money are friendly and up-beat, the rest of the dancers will feel positive about the dance from the beginning?

So, if you make a point of talking to your door people first, make them feel important, get them to smile at the very beginning of the evening, your job will be so much easier!

On/Off Stage Performance

Is your on-stage persona different from your off-stage persona? Think about it. If the dancers feel you are personable on stage, shouldn’t you appear friendly and positive off stage?

If you run outside after every tip, and then approach the stage without saying a word to the dancers. They will get the impression that you don't care about them.

How do these things affect my Showmanship?

Okay, so you are probably saying to yourself right now; “How do these things affect my performance or showmanship?” Directly – No, Indirectly – Yes. It will make it that much easier for the dancers to feel that they are having a great time. You will be able to focus more clearly on your overall performance if the dancers are happy to begin with.

Bill Cosby is quoted as saying; “I don't know the key to success, but the key to failure is trying to please everyone.” Don't try to please everyone, do try to please yourself – never perform a singing call that you don't like. You can't sell anything you don't like.

Programming

This is a stand-alone topic that will be discussed in detail at another session. Here we will discuss subjects that affect showmanship in general.

What Are Your Goals?

Before you can program a dance, class or workshop you must do a little homework. Is this a festival session, dance, class or workshop? Although you will need the same showmanship skills, they are all approached differently.

A festival session can run anywhere between a five-minute singing call/patter session, up to three hours of workshop or dance. In this case, you need to put your best foot forward. Never do something that is not your best. Only do songs and material that you are comfortable with and are strong in their performance.

In a dance environment, you can introduce new songs and material that you have tested and believe will entertain the dancers. You should follow the Rule of Three: introduce no more than three semi-new items (song, patter music, material and/or a combination of all three). Spread them over the entire dance. If they fail for any reason, follow them up immediately with something that you do extremely well to compensate for the damage you have done.

I use my Class or Workshop environments as testing grounds. I use the Rule of Three with stuff that I am working on or just created. Again, I use no more than three brand new “Elements” during the evening/afternoon. I immediately follow any failure with stuff that always works for me.

For example: during my Class or Workshop I may do an unsymmetrical sequence that I have just written (usually around 3:00 am that morning). If I can't communicate the sequence to the dancers effectively to them so they can accomplish it without some workshop, I consider that a failure and will follow up with a singing call that I know very well.

I will do it again at following classes or workshops, adjusting my “Helper Words” in each subsequent session until it works the way I want it to. It is now ready to be used at a dance.

Is There a Theme?

I love dances with themes! I dress for it. I usually have material for it. And I dive in hook, line and sinker. Dances with themes take most of my programming worries away.

Some callers I know have a whole series of singing calls lined up for each theme.

Everything is for a Reason

Everything that I do or say is for a specific reason. A joke, a pun or a double entendre is to teach a lesson or to get the dancers thinking about a specific sequence of calls that they would not normally give a second thought about. Sometimes it is for pure entertainment purposes only.

Performance

(The dancers should feel like they are on vacation for a night)

1. Music
 - Categorize your Patter/Singing Call Music into a minimum of three types
 - High-energy/Medium/Low-energy
 - Show-Stopper/High-energy/Medium/Medium-Low/Low-energy
2. Comedy
 - The use of props
 - Appropriate Jokes & Timing
 - Unusual or Out of the Ordinary Reactions/Behavior
 - Voice Inflection
3. Choreography
 - Trick or Treat
 - Are you trying to trick the dancers or giving them a Treat?
 - Gimmicks – Good or Bad?
4. Singing Call Performance
 - If they can't hear your commands – you are useless.
 - Avoid performing a piece of music you don't like
 - Emotion
 - Voice Inflection
5. Voice
 - Developing a pleasant voice
 - Yodeling
6. Attire/Costumes
7. Working with Round Dance Cuers
 - Their use of music can make or break your program
 - Their attitude can add to or bring down a program