

CASE STUDY

MATT – KEYBOARD TECHNICIAN / BACKLINE TECHNICIAN



I design, build and maintain on-stage MIDI / Keyboard / Computer setups for musicians. I'm currently on tour with the Chemical Brothers, maintaining equipment and keeping the whole system running during a tour. Sometime I set up instruments such as drums and guitars. I also work during rehearsals, fixing, programming and generally running all things related to band gear. Before this, I used to be a Signaller in the Army, using and maintaining radio equipment, before doing an HND in Music Technology and working as assistant engineer / programmer in a studio.

During the rehearsal process, I'll design and build the system including making leads, programming sounds, saving patches and songs, sorting all flight-case repairs, manufacture and general problem solving. My day usually lasts about 12hrs.

On a gig day, I load band equipment into a venue at about 11am and spend the next 3-4 hours setting up that equipment on stage for the gig that night, repairing faults where I find them. Setup includes erecting stands, desks, laptops and keyboards, anything that is used during the gig, then plugging in and testing the equipment prior to sound check. The band arrives at 4-5pm and sound checks. I double check everything before the gig, pack it all away afterwards and load back onto the truck for the next show, before finally heading off backstage at about 2am for beer and sarnies!

TIP

Matt's tips

- 1 Make sure you have a good knowledge of current computer software and systems, mostly Apple Mac - you have to do general 'first aid' yourself ; MIDI, audio signal paths and devices that they run through e.g. mixing consoles, FX units, DIs etc.
- 2 You'll need basic maintenance skills, but you are not a service engineer so don't have to go too deep (you may invalidate equipment warranty).
- 3 Be able to get on with people easily and have good communication skills.
- 4 Keep teaching yourself new stuff all the time, get into the habit of learning things such as new versions of operating systems and patches. College courses can help.

MORE TASKS

- 1 Spend some time evaluating your last performance. Consider the following:

Audience reaction – what was it and how could you have improved it?
Timings / smooth running
The set / choice of material
Technical issues – equipment, sound etc.
Performance – did you get your message across?

Now decide how you can improve for next time!

- 2 Consider getting more performance experience in ANY capacity! Think about the following:

1) Offering your services as a stand in performer for other artists, or working with non-instrumentalists in a live setting, such as DJs or performance poets.

2) Busking – remember to check out any requirements of your local authority first!

3) Turning up to play at open mic / acoustic nights / folk clubs / jam sessions / karaoke nights / DJ / MC events

4) Entering for battle of the bands type events – it's very, very tough to get up to play one or two tracks maximum, but great experience.

- 3 Take photos of your performance and evaluate your image – preferably with some help from others!

Does your image come across in the dark? Is it powerful? Do you need to improve your 'brand'? Do all the members of your band project a joint image?

- 4 Watch some DVDs or other film of famous performers, such as:

Jimi Hendrix / Led Zeppelin / Pink Floyd / Aretha Franklin / Billie Holiday / Frank Sinatra / Count Basie / Pat Metheny

What worked about their performance?

How did they build excitement?

How did they communicate with the audience? (Speaking, moving, gestures as well as music!)

What impression did the 'stage show' give? (Use of special effects, choreography, lighting.)

For 'More Information' – weblinks, books, magazines, look at P42.