

Screwing Up Onstage! Everyone Does it, Here's How to Recover

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To err is human, and no musician is a stranger to making mistakes. Any player who's put in a good amount of time onstage will most likely have a collection of train wrecks to tell about—moments that resulted in the creation of strategies for being unflappable when things fall apart before an audience.

We asked a cross-section of seasoned musicians to share stories of mistakes they had made onstage and tell us how they recovered, and to offer other pearls of wisdom on the subject. While these artists play in a wide range of styles, they all share a common skill: They've learned to handle mishaps as skillfully as they do playing their instruments, and are able to maintain cool under extreme pressure onstage.



CALI ROSE, a Los Angeles-area singer-songwriter and ukulele player, greets mistakes with warmth and good humor:

I screw up onstage all the time! If I don't, then it's like a miracle. We are human after all. And I've been performing for most of my life. When I make a grand flub, I respond with humor because I think if the audience knows you are OK with making a mistake, they rally and support you.

I might say something like, "Well folks, charm rather than perfection... ha, ha, ha." I mean, come on, it may be just a note or two that's a half-step off the mark. Will the earth stop orbiting the sun because I made a mistake?

One of my friends, a renowned jazz pianist, tells me that when she makes a goof onstage, she repeats the same mistake through the rest of the song so the audience thinks it's part of the performance. Besides that, so-called mistakes can lead to unexpected and wonderful discoveries.

But this is the story that changed my life as a performer: Years ago I attended a Linda Ronstadt concert. At the time, she was the hot new thing and her music was topping the charts. She and her band had begun playing one of her hits when she waved her arms and stopped the musicians. Mid-song! She leaned into the microphone and let go the "F-bomb," loud enough to hear two counties over. The audience went crazy. They cheered and yelled. I was so happy and relieved and inspired to see this artist make a big mistake in front of a big audience, stop the band, articulate her frustration with herself, and begin again. We all make mistakes, and when a performer cops to this very human happening, it helps the audience, it helps all of us be kinder to ourselves and a little more magnanimous toward the struggle we all have as artists and human beings.