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The Basics of Busking

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Imagine this: You are hired as the lighting director/programmer for a two-day corporate event. The script is straightforward: typical keynote speakers, video rolls, and awards ceremonies. Then you notice that day one ends with a band onstage for the last hour. Upon asking about the type of music, the set list, and the setup, you are told, “There will be a band onstage.”

This scenario and others like it play out on stages around the world every day. As the lighting operator, you will need to “play” the lights along with the band or performance without having any premade cues. This is typically known as busking, punting, or winging it. It is important to prepare accordingly with a solid plan, a great layout of playbacks, and an understanding of musical timing.

Many wonderful resources can help you learn the specifics of busking lighting, including YouTube videos, online learning sessions, and a chapter in my book *The Automated Lighting Programmer's Handbook*. In this article, I will focus on the basic principles that are essential for a great busking performance.

Preparation is key

The basic premise of busking is that you don't have specific cues prepared for songs or moments in a show. However, you cannot simply start with an empty console either. You will need playbacks and other tools at the ready, enabling you to create improvisational lighting looks as you respond to the action happening on stage.

A great strategy is to give yourself the common building blocks of cues to assemble looks on the fly. Many people find it best to stack these blocks in a cue list/sequence to provide many choices organized by parameter type. For example, one stack has many cues, each of which changes the position of the fixtures on the stage. Another stack will contain colors or color combinations based on fixture types or physical location. Yet another will allow you to choose between different gobos and effects. By combining these three stacks in different manners you can continuously create new lighting looks throughout a show.

I also like to build faders and flash keys that control various groupings of fixtures in my rig. I might divide them by type (spot, wash, beam) or location (overhead, floor, audience). During the show, I can easily turn on/off different portions of the rig, which greatly changes the look of my previously mentioned building blocks. Plus, if I time things well I can induce unique moments by toggling from one set of fixtures to another as I simultaneously select a different cue in



the position stack. Don't forget to have light on the talent and give yourself easy access to a stage wash!

Another key busking element is premade chases with adjustable speed ability. A dimmer chase, stage ballyhoo, audience ballyhoo, can-can flyouts, and color chases are always valuable tools. At any moment you should be able to trigger a chase and adjust the speed to match the desired tempo. Speed adjustments can be applied via faders, knobs, or even tapping a button to the beat.

Lastly, you need a transitional cue or get-out-of-jail-free card. This will disable all the chases and effects, reset the cue stacks, and leave some light on the stage. It will provide a fresh start for the next song or moment in the show.

How to busk

A perfect busking page, full of useful playback—combined with touch-screen options and clever macros—provides a wonderful setup for any performance. However, there are three more essential requirements to be successful at busking: rehearsing, timing, and repetition.

First and foremost, you must practice using your busking layout and become intimately familiar with where you assigned all your options. During a show, you won't have time to look down and locate the strobe button you placed on playback #7. By rehearsing you will get comfortable with your playbacks and build up muscle memory to enable

instantaneous triggering of looks.

Next, it is vitally important that you understand musical timing and structure. Given that you have no idea what type of music will be played, this can be an insurmountable task. Luckily, most music genres are structured in a familiar method, usually involving an intro, verses, choruses, and an ending. You can often anticipate the changes in a song based on the structure and tempo. Plus, if you can count the beats, you can often find the time signature (3/4, 4/4, or 6/8) and trigger playbacks accordingly.

Lastly, repetition can play a key role in determining your success when busking. Audiences like to feel connected with the performance; carefully repeating many of your looks along with the music is important. For instance, if you command a yellow audience ballyhoo with a cone gobo during the first chorus of a song, you should strive to repeat that same look when the chorus is sung at other times. While this sounds simple, it can be difficult to achieve because you are building these looks live as they happen. When the second chorus starts, you must remember what you did previously and quickly recreate the same look.

Practice makes perfect

The biggest secret for successful busking is continual practice. I mentioned earlier that you need to rehearse with your layout to build muscle memory. You also need to hone your musical and impromptu lighting design abilities by rehearsing your busking skills.

The best method is to sit with a real rig or a visualizer and play back to random music. Put in your earbuds and hit random on your favorite playlist. Now play back lighting for entire songs for about 30 minutes. That was just your warm-up! Now select some crazy playlist from the Internet filled with music you would never listen to; make sure it is a different genre than any you prefer, too. Now start playing along for another 30 minutes and see how you do. Remember that a real show will rarely involve songs you know or like.

I find it helpful to frequently practice busking as I can always hone my skills and adjust my playback layout. Remember, the goal is to provide a great-looking light show no matter what music is played.

Busk away

The term “busking,” originally used to describe street performers, has also become synonymous with lighting on the fly. A good busking session can be satisfying and fun for you, the band, and the audience. Take the time to create a system that works well and practice often. Ensure your musical timing is on par and remember to repeat looks when possible. Utilize restraint by not using everything for every song while also creating a dynamic and changing set of looks. Busking is your time to perform with a lighting rig so give it your all and have fun improvising with light. 🎧