

## THE AUTHOR

Neil Blake has been playing to audiences for over 20 years, either as a professional player, or semi-professional. He has undertaken virtually every aspect of work an organist or keyboard player could possibly do, including: teaching, playing for artistes, playing for dancing, busking, church work, theatre work, restaurant work, clubland, publand, songwriting, doing backing tracks, musical director work, karaoke, singing & playing, old folks' homes, forming a duo, forming a group, summer seasons and many others. He also spent 7 years with Fox's Music, selling organs, keyboards and related equipment.

In recent years, he's been slogging it out at the seaside doing seasonal work, on a diet of curry, chips and beer. "Time to move on", he says, before it gets so bad that he can't see his...shoes anymore. Whilst at the coast he came up with this idea of putting his experience in print, to guide other would-be professionals safely from the living room to the dressing room.

He has now scaled down the workload that keeps him away from home, and is content to just fulfil his weekend commitments, whilst spending time with his wife and 2 girls Tamisha (aged 2), and Tiegan (aged 6 months). His other baby is his software business - '**Style Disk Warehouse**' -, which has grown in stature since the little acorn was planted 10 years ago. SDW create 'style disks' for Technics and Yamaha keyboards and organs, and is an ever-expanding business. Neil is planning to retire from summer season work completely (before his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday!), and concentrate on the business – though he'll still take local bookings and fulfil local engagements to 'keep his hand in'.

As a result of Neil's experience, you now have in your hands a book packed with ideas, information, song lists and reasonable jokes that you can feel free to use on stage as you wish. Neil says he only wishes someone had done this 20-odd years ago! He admits he would have paid the cover price of the book for the song lists alone! Never mind Neil!

Please bear in mind that this book doesn't go into the subject of teaching. There's plenty of information about that already out there for anyone wanting to find it.

Enjoy the book - and we all wish you the very best of luck in your future endeavours.

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# **TURN PROFESSIONAL: A Guide For All Organists And Keyboard Players**

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## INTRODUCTION

### ***Thank You Mr. Rolf Harris!***

I guess I owe it all to Rolf Harris – and my Mum and Dad of course. For it was they who shelled out the (then princely) sum of around £19 for a “**Stylophone**” way back in the early 1970’s as a Christmas present for me (gone were the days of endless Lego - as I was approaching my teens at this time). Rolf comes into this equation simply because he launched it here in the UK with his endless TV ads for the “incredible Stylophone” ( say it in an Australian accent then!).

For those who don’t recall, a Stylophone was a terrific new invention, all the rage at the time. Yes, a mini synthesiser for under twenty quid! It was about the same size as a VHS video cassette, sporting an octave or two of flat, flush metal keys, which were designed to be touched by a special “pen” which was attached to the unit by a thin wire. When you touched a note on the keyboard with the pen it made a circuit and the result was reminiscent of Sooty’s friend Sweep getting his nose stuck in the door – at the pitch requested by the magic pen.

Quite a few kids at school had one of these wondrous instruments already, and I – like they – eventually resorted to scraping the pen up and down the keys as fast as possible just to hear the horrendous cacophony of noise that ensued (Mum and Dad must have been beside themselves with joy at this!).

Anyway, like many things an 11-year-old gets, it was quickly played with and soon confined to the cupboard after a few weeks, though I did return to it now and again to try out a few ‘exercises’ suggested in the accompanying manual. But a couple of years later, 1973 to be exact, something happened which drove me to drag it back out again and learn how to play it properly.

### ***Magic!***

During our 1973 Summer holiday to Ingoldmells, on the East Coast of England, a little piece of magic happened to yours truly. Well, it was magic to me, and it paved the way for my future career and way of life. I was forever exploring the endless amusement arcades, as the weather was forever English and frankly there was little else to do for a young teenager at such a (then) quiet resort. During one visit, someone had put a record on a jukebox that occupied a dusty corner of the arcade. That record was called “**See My Baby Jive**” by a band called **Wizzard**, which had just been number one in the charts. Something about that song pricked up my ears and I would return everyday for the rest of that fortnight just to stand at that jukebox listening to it over and over.

On our return home I would sneak the wireless (radio) out of the kitchen and up to my bedroom every night just to listen to Radio Luxembourg under the bed covers. Perhaps I’d catch that song again, or something equally as exciting? Well, that WAS an understatement!

Radio Luxembourg was a station of particularly poor reception, especially during the evenings, and as the signal was very weak, you'd get around 30 seconds of music before it faded to silence for the same period (my first experience of the effect of an expression pedal upon the ears!).

A few weeks after the summer holiday I was listening to the wireless one night when a second piece of magic happened to me. Radio Luxembourg were airing tracks from 2 Beatles compilation albums - now referred to as the "Red Album" and the "Blue Album" (**The Beatles 1962-66** and **The Beatles 1967-70**). Nothing special to you, perhaps, but my older brother Ian had been a huge Beatles fan during the sixties, and he'd religiously collected all their LP's, 45's and EP's as they were released – and played them to death (as you should ANY Beatles record!). I was just a child at the time, being born in 1960, and the music was nothing special to me. It played in the background while I played with my Lego or Action Man, and when he left home to get married in 1967, the records were left under the old mono Alba record player to gather dust. That period of 6 years or so between hearing those wonderful records again must have seemed like the longest period of my life. All the memories came flooding back, and I was filled with emotions I had never experienced before (tell me if I'm getting too carried away here!). The day after the radio program, I begged my parents to show me how to operate the record player ( I half expected it needed a crank handle!). Those old records were dusted off, and as it was the weekend, I sat there all day long playing them one after the other, then all over again. And again. And again. My poor, poor parents (not to mention Mrs. Thompson next door – who would in time come to learn that I had a musical streak in me – unlike she, who in twenty years never learned to knock on the wall in time to the beat of the rhythm units on the upcoming succession of organs I was to own).

Hearing those beautiful melodies again after so long was like coming out of a long sleep, and I still get that feeling when I (sometimes deliberately) lay some of my favourite records to one side for a few years with the intention of pulling them all out again at a later date to enjoy. The records I was mostly referring to, by the way, are the Beatles albums RUBBER SOUL, REVOLVER, and SERGEANT PEPPER, though the earlier ones also contain a little magic, namely PLEASE PLEASE ME and WITH THE BEATLES. If you've never heard these albums – WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN???

From that weekend on I would save up my pocket money and spend every last penny on completing my Beatles collection – hoping that my brother would never ask for his old records back (I would have rather given him a kidney!). In the process I'd thereafter be glued to TV programs like TOP OF THE POPS, THE OLD GREY WHISTLE TEST, LIFT OFF WITH AYSHEA and of course, the Top Twenty show on Radio One.

Music affected my school work too, although it was only 'Games' and P.T I'd tend to sneak out of to spend an hour in the music room on the old piano they had in there. I'd tinker around with the keys - which were becoming more and more familiar due to my renewed interest in the Stylophone, and I would seek out any old sheet music, especially Beatles stuff, and learn it note-for-note. The music teacher, Mr. Dickinson, must have spotted my interest, and would take me more seriously than most of my other classmates, giving me extra homework – even though at the time music wasn't one of my chosen lessons. And after leaving school, I would return for extra lessons with the Night School crowd, though I never actually took any exams on the

subject! I was fascinated with four-part harmony, and my pieces were always the first ones Mr. Dickinson would try out on the piano.

### ***It's Well Worth Shopping At...***

Upon leaving school I worked as an apprentice electrician for the Coal Board, and saved up the princely sum of £215 for my first organ from - Woolworths! It was a 2 manual Magnus organ, no bass pedals, and just 6 rhythms and 6 sounds (4 for the upper and 2 for the lower manual). Yet I played it for often 6 or 7 hours a day religiously, depending on the shift I was on, until I started attending College as a full time electrical apprentice to get my grades. There I made friends with a couple of fellow music enthusiasts who suggested we form a group. Though this particular group never came to fruition due to the fact that we had to pass a pub to get to rehearsals, I did meet my best friend through them (he remains my best mate to this day), and as he wanted to learn bass guitar, I agreed to us both attending weekly private lessons at a music shop in Doncaster – with me taking organ lessons while he was in the next room pounding out the bass.

My (first) organ teacher was a gentleman called Harold Barker, the spitting image of Peter Sellars, who claimed he was a pupil of a pupil of a pupil of Chopin. So that makes me a pupil of a pupil of a...oh, forget it! At the time I'd still got the Magnus which had no bass pedals, so I had to draw them out on a big wooden tray to go through the motions of actually playing them. Do you know – it worked! I picked the bass pedals up in no time, and I still think it's one of the easiest aspects of learning to play the organ – until you're met with 2 octaves of the damn things.

I would look forward to my weekly lessons and in my quest for more knowledge I would soon start taking lessons twice weekly, practising at home into the early hours with my headphones on. My best friend soon dropped out of the bass lessons, but I continued going for another couple of years until the music shop decided the lessons were too cheap and decided to make them too expensive instead, whereby I started lessons elsewhere for a while.

Around this time I'd managed to save up enough money for a better instrument, as I was in fulltime employment and desperately needed something with, well for a start – bass pedals! So in 1978 I paid a visit to Wilson Pecks in Sheffield, and after a demonstration decided to purchase a Cavendish 2 Portable Organ with separate Leslie speaker (Sonorous model). I fancied a portable for obvious reasons, but it was only portable to Arnold Schwarzenegger, and the speaker could have been loaned to the BBC as a stand in for the Tardis! They were both purple in colour to boot, but I suppose that at least they looked as though they BELONGED together.

It's funny how certain things never get past the neighbours in a small rural area, and it was only a matter of days before I was invited to join a local group – **Sorcerer** (who I'd never heard of) – or were they asking the organ if it wanted to join? I'm not sure. Anyway, I seized the opportunity following a visit to one of their rehearsals, as the music they were playing was pretty much what I was into in those days, and I stuck with them for around 18 months. We had lots of fun but it was short lived as the band members began to stray – one got married, another was poached by a different group, one “grew up” etc. On hindsight, we never made ANY money as it just got liquidised into beer or petrol (in some places you just couldn't tell the difference!).

## **Clubland Beckons**

I heard about a vacancy at our local Working Men's Club shortly after the band split. They were looking for a new resident organist as the old chap who previously held the position died. Well, no, he didn't die, but he went to work at Albion Road Club in Rotherham, which is the same thing. As the resident drummer was only 17 at the time, I figure they liked the idea of me being only 19, and our combined ages totalled less than the previous organist's grandson – or something like that. So after a brief audition (playing a few sing-along numbers) I landed my first professional job as a working organist on £15 a night, contracted to do Friday to Sunday nights inclusive. This was quite an excellent second wage at the time, and I was there for nearly 3 years. But I was landed in the deep end, as I'll explain later on in the book.

From there, I worked in dozens of clubs, mostly for backing artistes or playing for dancing, and a lot of initially "one-off" gigs ended up being residencies for up to around 3 years or less (I always tend to become suicidal after 3 years in the same place – strange that!). Thereafter, I became disillusioned with the whole clubland scene and decided to try playing in pubs, which usually tended to turn into "Free & Easy" evenings. I'll explain about those later. During this time (the late 1980's) I was also on several agents' books and was used to "depping" (*deputising* for resident organists who, for some reason or other, had not turned up on that particular night). This is where you REALLY learn!

I also enjoyed engagements in theatres, churches, restaurants, showcases, Old Folks' Homes – and finally ended up doing summer seasons in Blackpool and Skegness, where I remain to this day, though on a much scaled down timetable to what I was doing before my wife and I decided to have our little girls.

Before I started the summer seasons, I had experienced some terrible TERRIBLE singers, who the audience seemed to love (and some truly excellent ones too, I must add). These spirited folk would eventually give me the "*if they can do it so can I*" attitude and I learned to sing – though I still sound like a trapped cat, I figure there's more for the audience to look (and laugh) at if you're having a go at singing, rather than just sitting there playing, though it's often difficult to do both at the same time – especially if you're dodging the tomatoes!

The only thing I regret about doing the summer seasons is that my playing standard hasn't improved since I started them in 1993. You just don't seem to have the time to practise – or the access to the instrument during the day. However, it's good money and I still consider it to be the best job in the world. Music is the finest language in the world: universal, able to instil a roller coaster of emotions and the best form of communication and relaxation I know. I love to play and I love to GET PAID WELL FOR DOING IT! And if you've read this far, I guess that's exactly what you'd like to do too.

Well, YOU CAN! And armed with the advice I'm going to be dispensing within these pages, you'll have absolutely no reason not to get out there and earn some extra pennies for something YOU also love doing.

But first of all, let's look at THE MAJOR PROBLEM – and the ONLY problem you're initially thinking of - The Audience!



## THE AUDIENCE

You're nervous, aren't you? Go on - admit it! And the only reason why you're nervous is because of the daunting prospect of playing in front of an audience. Well, you're not the only one you know. Each and every person who has ever had a hit record, played a mammoth concert, appeared on Top Of The Pops, grabbed a gig at their "local", or even tinkled the ivories for a group of friends and neighbours has been in exactly the same boat. In fact, it would be totally unnatural NOT to be nervous in such a situation.

But listen! The audience are PEOPLE, just like you and me. They're not out there to judge you or throw tomatoes at you if you get it wrong. They're there to be entertained by you, and they'll dismiss the odd mistake, and will usually encourage you and applaud you for your courage to actually be up there in the first place!

If you're worried about making mistakes, well doesn't EVERYONE make mistakes? Yes, they do don't they? I make them every night without fail. It's just that with experience you learn to cover them up and 'mask' them a little better (one mistake I regularly make is to walk up to the bar and order a drink when all my friends are stood there with about ½ inch of beer left in their glasses – guess who cops for the refills?).

Mistakes, mistakes! We are all allowed to make more than one mistake (except perhaps Parachutists and virgins!), and the audience won't pull you down for it. On the contrary, they'll even APPRECIATE the odd mistake, as it proves the show is live (for once!), and they'll support and sympathise with that, you'll see. The only ones to watch for are the ones with guns. Seriously though, DON'T BE NERVOUS! At the end of the day the audience knows you're there to do a job, and if they expect perfection they should be sat in The London Palladium instead!

### ***Overcoming Nerves***

One tip if you're nervous is to read the above again, hopefully for a morale booster! If that fails, I'd definitely recommend you stay away from the bar! So many showbiz people tend to have a few drinks before they go on stage, but quite frankly, the only thing that'll do is blur your vision and concentration. With these effects taking over, you'll obviously make more mistakes, and if you're talking or singing, you'll slur your speech, stutter and forget lyrics, too. So drink is a no-no, OK?

If you smoke, that's fine, they're your lungs! But it's unwise to smoke if you're about to sing. No problem if you're just playing. But if you touch the funny stuff, well that'll do the same things as drink will, so stay off the "wacky baccy"!

Perhaps the best tip I can offer you when you get up on stage is not to look AT the audience, but to look OVER them. For all they know you could be looking at someone at the back. Try to fix your gaze on several things just above (their) head height, like a clock, empty pint pot, exit sign, length of flocked wallpaper – you know what I mean. This will give the impression that you are,

indeed, looking at someone, though no one in the audience knows WHO. It won't bother them either, so don't worry about that. They're not all going to be following your gaze – just make sure you shift it round a little (don't stare at the same thing all night).

You can also try looking AT them, but actually looking THROUGH them. Try looking at someone or something without actually focussing your eyes on them. They become a blur, like an optical illusion. It's easy to do with a little practise, until you get the courage to look them in the eye. Just don't, whatever you do, simply stare at the keyboard all night. Would you like to watch someone who does that?

Nerves are going to be something you get for quite a while, but with practise and experience, you WILL learn to control them instead of them controlling you. In fact I guarantee that after the first 3 or 4 songs you'll be twice as relaxed as you were when you first walked on stage. By the middle of the evening you'll actually be enjoying the experience, and by the end of the night you'll be looking forward to your next engagement. Guaranteed!

One word of warning – try NOT to do any local gigs unless you can drum up enough favourable support to be sat there in the audience. People who know you from a distance tend to be more critical than strangers (who often couldn't care less), and they'll sometimes be LOOKING for you to make a mistake. So while it's comforting to be on your own doorstep, it can backfire. That is unless you make it widely known that it's your first gig, and indeed, that you're very nervous about it. You should then be appreciated and even encouraged.

Mistakes are inevitable, and you will make them. But luckily enough, there are ways to actually make mistakes work FOR you rather than against you.

## MAKING MISTAKES

Your prime fear will obviously be making mistakes in front of a crowd, which is quite natural. Well, as I said earlier, everyone makes mistakes, even the best players in the country, but there are ways to disguise them.

Presuming you'll have access to a microphone during your gig, the best thing to do when you make an obvious mistake is to diffuse the situation with humour. Don't be embarrassed about it, but draw attention to it and turn it into a joke. You see, the worst thing you can do to your audience is to embarrass them. If you make a mistake and allow yourself to appear physically embarrassed, this will almost certainly do the same to your audience, therefore putting THEM in an uncomfortable position. This won't do the rest of your act any good, and although they will feel *unconsciously* uncomfortable, it could be enough for them to walk out on you. But lets look at ways to avoid this situation altogether.

### **Adding Humour**

The best way to handle mistakes is simply to gloss over them. And we do this by using humour as our weapon. You could try one of the following lines:

- *“Oops, sorry about that little mistake, I'm not used to playing at seances! NOW WAKE UP YOU LOT!”*
- *“If you lot make anymore mistakes like that I'm walking out.”*
- *“Sorry about that little mistake there, but my mind keeps going blank. I used to sniff Tippex. But I went to a correction centre!”*
- *“Anymore mistakes you hear will actually be on the disk – it's not me making 'em.”*
- *“Did anyone spot the deliberate mistake there? I'm just checking to see if you're awake, or indeed, alive” (don't try this one in an old folk's home by the way!).*
- *“Sorry about that mistake there, but I was put off by this gentleman down here (point to someone). Sir, can you please stop moving your face / can you please stop breathing?”*

This last line actually gives us the opportunity to change your whole rapport with the audience, and show them the cheeky side of your personality, which I honestly think is a vital asset to any performer wanting to *entertain* the audience. The people out there love nothing better than a little manipulation – and having someone else to laugh at – especially if it's one of their own flock! So now a little gentle leg pulling is in order.

I find a good way to do this is to liken a member of the audience to a famous celebrity – one that they all know. In particular, a celebrity or character often open to ridicule, or even one with a comedic name. For example:

- *“I'm sorry for that mistake, but I was put off when I noticed we had a famous celebrity in tonight. Look, it's Les Battersby!” (point to someone with ginger hair)*

You've instantly taken the focus away from the mistake you've made and placed it upon a poor unsuspecting member of the audience – who incidentally should find the comment funny, and take it all in their stride. At the same time you've instilled humour into your act and hopefully pricked up their ears! Now you can expand this “thread”, and perhaps later point out various other celebrities therein.

Give yourself time to look around, perhaps before you go on stage, and make a note of the ones you can pick out later.

Let's give you some ideas. Take a look at the next page.

- Point out one of the following with the words “*Look folks, it’s...*”

The Chuckle Brothers	Two men sat together
The Crankies	A man with a small woman
Rod Hull and Emu	A man and a thin woman (be careful with this one!)
Tinky Winky	A large, tall man or woman
Rab C. Nesbitt	A slightly dishevelled man
Danny Devito	Short man
The Dingalls	Any family or group of people (slightly rough-looking)
Dolph Lundgren	Any muscle man/stocky
Jerry Springer	Bespectacled man
Michael Caine	Bespectacled man
Ronnie Corbett	Bespectacled man
Kwai Chan Caine	Oriental looking man
Fred Flintstone	Unshaven, chubby type
Uncle Albert	White-bearded man (“during the war...”)
Mr. Bean	Any lanky looking man
Basil Fawltly	Moustachioed man
Pop Larkin	Man with sideburns
Dame Edna Everage	Any middle aged lady with glasses & “tall hairstyle”
Alfred Hitchcock	...you’ll know him when you see him!
Dot Cotton	ditto
Grant Mitchell	Bald headed man
Butch Dingall	Younger, bald headed man
Scary Spice	Any woman
Old Spice	Any older woman
Daktari	Anyone in khaki
Vanessa (Phelps)	Any large lady with blond hair
Sgt. Bilko	Bald & glasses
Captain Manwairing	Glasses, moustache, squat type!
Dick Dastardly	Thin moustache
Rita, Sue & Bob too	Any man sat with 2 women
Mork & Mindy	Any couple
Pavarotti	Large man with beard
Steptoe & Son	Old man sat with younger man
Bart Simpson / Homer	...you’ll know them when you see them
Charlie’s Angels	Any three women
Gumdrop	Any person with no teeth in
The Addams Family	Any group of people sat together
The Dingles	As above
Randall & Hopkirk	Man in dark clothes with a man in light clothes
Yul Bryner	Bald & tall
Del Boy & Rodney	(obvious)
Trigger	Any dopey looking character
Beavis & Butthead	Two young men sat together

Worzel Gummidge	Any dishevelled looking character
Victor Meldrew	Grumpy looking old man

...you'll get the general idea. Incidentally, foreign readers will no doubt gaze in awe at some of these names, so substitute the names for someone famous in your own country.

You can always add your own ideas to the above suggestions, or string out the fun with something like:

- “*We have a famous celebrity in tonight (point to an elderly lady) – look, it’s that woman in the wheelchair in “Psycho”!*”
- “*And here we have the stars from that popular TV program NEIGHBOURS FROM HELL*” (point to a family or group of people).

It’s also a good idea to keep coming back to these people, using their “new” name, and bringing them into the act more. For example:

- “*That was one of my favourite songs – did you like it Worzel?*” (to the dishevelled chap you ‘introduced’ earlier in the evening).

There are lots of different directions you can go off in from these mild “insults”, just be careful who you single out, and if they do look as though they’re not taking too kindly to your comments, quickly move on to someone else...*a la*:

- “*What are YOU laughing at, Bilko?*”

...you get the general idea (again).

Don’t be afraid to give this formula a go. It’s great fun, and can instil a wonderful atmosphere if you pick the right circumstances (and the right people!).

And to think we started all this off by talking about making mistakes! Incidentally, if the world does come crashing in and you have to actually STOP your performance due to a major mistake (remember that old adage ‘THE SHOW MUST GO ON’?), a big visual “*Tut!*” and the crank of an imaginary handle on the side of the organ/keyboard can usually help to gloss over it.

The bottom line? Forget about making mistakes and ENJOY YOURSELF! Or at least smile and look as though you’re enjoying yourself. It’ll show in your performance, and your audience will adopt a relaxed manner, which can only rub off onto you in turn. ANYWAY, WHAT THE HELL ARE THEY GOING TO DO ABOUT IF YOU DO MESS UP? (There! Feeling better already now, aren’t you?!).