What I've Learned About Starting A Youth Worship Band

by Mark Cole

I was recently asked if I could give some advice on how to start a Junior High Worship Band. One of the churches that I worked at had a small Christian school and I was put in charge of working with the worship team. I worked with that team for a number of years and they all became very good. In fact, when I was doing outside ministry, they were usually the group that I took as my band. Now, a number of them are leaders in their own right. Here is what I learned through the process.



1. Get the kids to take private lessons

Of the core group that I inherited, more than half of them took private lessons. Two brothers took private electric guitar lessons and became quite strong players. The drummer and the piano player also took lessons and improved immensely over the course of 3-4 years. When you don't have to teach the basics of the instruments the team moves along exponentially faster. You just have to teach the music, not the instrument.

I would still help the drummer understand the groove that I needed. I would write out and play the piano riffs that I needed the keys player to learn. And I would still help the guitar players understand the lead lines and strumming patterns that they needed to play. But at least the kids had some basic skills that I could help them build on.

I also taught an acoustic guitar class. It was great to see the kids develop their guitar skills quite quickly and join the worship team. I highly recommend that you encourage the parents to get the kids private lessons. At the least, have your older players come in and set-up some kind of mentoring system.

2. Run separate rehearsals for vocals

Most young singers are not that good at picking out harmonies. I would write out the vocal parts and have separate rehearsals with the vocals. My general pattern was to put the song in a good key for guys. The top note

would be a C# of D and they would sing the melody. I would stack the harmonies (2 or 3 part) on top of that with the girls on the tenor and alto part.

Then I would give the kids the written music and teach them the parts by singing through them. After a while they got quite good at following along and picking out their parts.

I actually had a large group of students sing in my vocal class. Then I would have auditions for singing on the actual worship team. My experience is that only about 10% of students are actually musical enough to be on a worship team.

3. Rehearse as much as you can

Since this group was in a Christian school, I ended up having three separate rehearsals per week with them. First, the one hour, vocal only rehearsal. Secondly, the one hour band and vocal rehearsal. And then, a rehearsal just before the chapel to work on the flow, worship and performance details.

That school team also became the backbone of the youth worship team. That meant they would also rehearse one night per week and lead for the youth services. That gave them the chance to grow on their own. It also meant that they were doing worship music a minimum of 3-4 hours per week. As they became older, they also joined my Sunday team. That gave them added experience and time spent playing, singing and worshipping.

4. Repeat the music on a regular rotation

I taught two new songs per month and had a regular rotation for the music. I would repeat the new song the next week, give it a week off and then bring it back for the fourth week. That helped the chapel group really learn the songs and also helped the student body learn to be confident with the worship songs also. Also, we only did three songs per week in chapel. That gave us time to really work on those three tunes.

5. Teach the team about stage presence and worship

I would frequently encourage the kids about getting over their stage fright. When you are young it is often a little frightening to be up in front of your peers. We would talk about fears and insecurities and I would tell stories of my triumphs and failures so they would understand how common this is for most people.

I would also explain and model how important it was to be an example in worship. I would show them where I wanted them to clap, or raise their hands. I frequently reminded them to smile and look at the people they were singing to. I also got the singers to memorize the lyrics.

6. Bring new leaders along slowly

For many years I would lead most of the worship times. Then when I was away, I would often get one of the kids to lead. When I came back, I would find out what worked and what didn't work and help them learn from the process.

My goal was for them to be successful. I would give them the tools, rehearsals, music, systems and experience so that worship would be a fun experience. I would give them the support they needed so they could grow in confidence.

7. Challenge them to be excellent

I have found that my toughest teachers were the ones that helped me to grow and learn the fastest. So, I have learned to be a little tough with the kids. In rehearsals, I would really get on their case when they sang flat or missed cues. I really challenged them to concentrate and play to the best of their ability. I expected them to be excellent.

You do need to quickly read the characters and personalities of the different students. You need to learn when to be tough and when to be patient. You need to sense when kids are struggling for personal reasons or just being lazy. But, challenging the kids to be excellent really is the best way to get the maximum results. Trust me, it works.

Do you struggle with any of these actions of worship? Can you add to this list?

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The article above and many additional insights may be found on Mark's blog at http://markcole.ca/

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