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Stage Fright: Don't Make me go out There!

By Virginia Roberson

In a town full of performers, how do people handle stage fright?

Your stomach is churning. Your heart is racing. You're about to go on, and you've forgotten all the words to the song. And that solo guitar riff? Forget about it. Your fingers are trembling too madly to even strum the strings.

If you've ever faced stage fright, you already know there can be a lot more to it than a few butterflies.

ATR recently spoke with some brave Nashville performers who face on-stage fears night after night. After all, the show must go on!

JOHN LASITER AGE: 24

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JUST PICTURE

PROFESSION: Actor, singer and songwriter

"There's still a knot in my stomach every time I go on stage," actor John Lasiter says. "My throat closes up, my palms sweat and I don't want anyone to talk to me before a performance. But doing what you love is more important than feeling afraid. And the more you do it, the easier it gets."

John's first experience with stage fright occurred when he was cast in a high school production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. Even though his role required him to be on stage for only seven minutes, he was afraid at every performance.

"I realized that I had to do something about my stage fright," he says. "With the help of my actor friends, I began to gain more self-esteem. But I still had to force myself to do it every time."

After recently landing a role in a sitcom at Play (a comedy about backstage drama at a drag queen show), John realized it was time to face his fears or give up his lifelong dream to be on stage. He's received overwhelming encouragement and support from his actor friends, like his co-star, Bianca Page.

"It was do or die," he says. "My friends have really helped me realize that I belong on stage with all these talented people. I still get nervous before the play, but I'm improving. My voice, once timid, is getting stronger every time."

HEATHER HORTON (A.K.A. HEATHER HO) AGE:
29

PROFESSION: Comedian

While John continues to face his inner demons, comedian Heather Horton says she has won her battle with stage fright.

It's such an old chestnut for dealing with stage fright that it's almost a cliché. Somebody is certain to tell you at some point to imagine your audience is sitting around naked or in their underwear. OK, but does anybody actually do this? And, more importantly, does it work? ATR asked some local performers about this particular piece of advice:

"I wish I *had* tried that — I've been in front of some pretty good-looking audiences!"

—John Lasiter, actor

"Actually, I've sung in front of a nudist colony, and you really *don't* want to picture people naked. There are some things you *don't* want to see."

—Karen Renee Robb, singer

"Picturing people naked? Um, no, I haven't tried that, and I don't think I want to. I think it would just be distracting. Although it could be funny to visualize people in their underwear. You could do a comparison of boxers and briefs!"

—Heather Horton, comedian

"I don't really want to picture people naked or in their underwear. I don't think that would help too much."

—Michael Samis, cellist

"I've pictured people naked and I do think it helps. It's not something I do all the time, (but) I think everyone's tried it at least once."

—Fleming McWilliams, singer-songwriter

"I don't know why that would possibly work. Whether your audience is good-looking *or* bad-looking, it could be distracting."

—Rik Roberts, comedian and instructor

"I wouldn't recommend it. You want to focus yourself, and you don't want anything that could be a distraction."

—Vatsal Thakkar, M.D., assistant professor of psychiatry

"I used to be so nervous before getting up on stage," she says. "But I'm holding my own now. But you know, if I hadn't gotten that laugh my first time, I don't know if I would still be doing this."

Heather has gained confidence through the support of her friends.

"I invited a lot of my friends to my first open-mike night to make sure I didn't back out," she says. "My knees were knocking, but I got some laughs on my first line, which gave me the courage to go on. It's surprising I was so nervous, since I've been on stage all my life. (She used to be a dancer.) But when people are expecting you to make them laugh, it's a lot of pressure!"

Heather says having friends nearby at her shows helps calm her nerves before she goes on stage.

"I like to converse with my friends and have fun, instead of cramming, like some people do before a test or a performance," she says. "I just take a deep breath and try to relax. It's worth the butterflies. Comedy is a great rush, especially when someone gets your joke!"

FLEMING MCWILLIAMS AGE: 38

PROFESSION: Singer-songwriter (frontwoman of Fleming & John)

In spite of the national attention she received as the powerful voice of Fleming & John, Fleming McWilliams still gets nervous before every performance.

"Sometimes I see the people in the audience talking and I wonder if they're talking about me," she says. " 'Do they like my dress? Do they hate it?' It's amazing what runs through your head when you're on stage."

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Fleming finds radio and TV appearances to be especially intimidating, and was extremely nervous before her debut on the Conan O'Brien show.

"It's pretty scary when you only get to do one song," she says. "At a live performance you have lots of songs, so it's not a big deal if you mess one up. Whenever I'm on TV or on the radio, I almost feel like I'm having a heart attack. But somehow the words magically come out of my mouth."

Fleming has picked up a few tricks over the years for handling her nervousness, like removing her contact lenses before a performance so she can't see the audience.

"I found it less distracting when I couldn't see their faces," she says. "And I like to visualize myself doing a good job. Some 'alone time' before hitting the stage gives me the chance to prepare everything in my mind. You really have to access a whole other part of your brain."

And it never hurts to be prepared for a performance.

"If I'm nervous before a show, it's usually because it's a new song I've never performed before," she says. "But you don't want to get so comfortable with a song that you take it for granted. One time I forgot the words to a song that I knew by heart. There were no nerves before that show, (so) sometimes it *helps* to be a little nervous. It gets your blood pumping and makes you pay attention!"

MICHAEL SAMIS AGE: 28

PROFESSION: Cellist with Nashville Symphony and ALIAS Chamber Music Ensemble (performs benefit concerts for local non-profits)

Cellist Michael Samis says a big part of stage fright is worrying about the fear itself.

Like Fleming, Michael thinks a little nervousness can be good for a performance. "You can use that fear in the music and transform that energy into your performance," he says. "But there have been times when I've experienced actual stage fright, where I physically felt fear before a performance."

At a junior recital in college, Michael's hands went numb and parts of his body began to shake. He realized he had a serious problem. He says that for musicians there are two

different kinds of stage fright. With the first, the fear hits right before getting on stage. The second happens during the months of preparation — worrying about what can go wrong.

"I dealt with it through meditation, yoga and exercise," he says. "It helped with the long-term *and* short-term anxiety. And it helped me to focus. I'm more centered right before a performance. You have to learn not to try so hard. It's really a matter of letting go."

Michael has learned to rely more on his fellow musicians, too, which puts less stress on his individual performance.

"You must recognize that the power of music is beyond your ability to play it well," he says. "At some point you have to just listen and be a part of the music."

KAREN RENEE ROBB AGE: 38

PROFESSION: Singer and director of marketing/administration at Gibson Guitar

Singer Karen Renee Robb has battled stage fright throughout her career. Even though she has sung the national anthem in front of thousands of people, she finds performing in Nashville to be especially intimidating.

"I've sung the anthem at large sporting events, and I'm fairly well-known in the San Francisco area," she says. "But when I moved to Nashville I was once again a little fish in a big pond of talent. There are some incredible singers and musicians out here. I really had to start my career all over again."

But this classically trained singer is determined to carve her niche in Nashville. She wants to inspire people with her music, and says some of her nervousness comes from wanting her audience to get value from her performance.

"I want to make an impression or touch someone in a certain way," she says. "And that pressure can cause a lot of butterflies. Sometimes I'll get a stomachache or my mouth gets really, really dry — which is bad when you're a singer. And drinking water only makes it worse."

Karen uses her past performances to get her through the onset of stage fright. She says once you've come through a show successfully, you can call back that moment where you persevered.

"I now take the time to center myself before a performance," she says. "And it never hurts to have a friend or spouse close by who believes in you."

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