

Playing Together: The 100% Rule

by Ed Kerr

(Excerpts from the Worship Leader Workshop video and handbook)

One helpful concept in learning to play together as a worship band is "The 100% Rule." Think of the rhythm section as a pie. If the band's final sound is 100% of the contributions of the players, then each player contributes only a portion of that total. So if there are four of us, each of us gets a quarter of the pie. If there are two of us, we split it in half.



With a song like "Lord, I Lift Your Name On High," which is so acoustic guitar oriented, the whole song could be played with just an acoustic guitar. But if you have a rhythm section, you'd need to involve the other players so that they complement what the guitarist is playing, while at the same time, they build the arrangement as it progresses throughout the song.

Now, let's say you're in a band where your guitar player doesn't have technical skill or is not comfortable carrying the song with finger-picking. In that case, the keyboard player might take a more acoustic approach. The keyboardist would imitate that finger-picking style and the guitarist could just strum the acoustic guitar.

And, since "Lord, I Lift Your Name on High" consists of basically a G chord, a C chord, and a D chord, most guitarists are going to be able to comfortably strum it. So, the keyboardist and guitarist can easily exchange roles. Just because the recording of the song started with a guitar doesn't mean that in your context you have to do it that way.

If you have more than one keyboardist, one of the keyboards might play a pad sound that sounds like a string section. The pad sound doesn't contribute any movement, but is a backdrop to what the rest of the band is doing. It fills in the sound beautifully and doesn't draw away from the other more rhythmic sounds.

The drummer may start with just a shaker or light percussion, then move on to the whole kit as the song builds in energy. And as far as the bass is concerned, because he is in his own frequency range, his part speaks clearly.

Now, obviously at some point the singers are going to join us. When the vocals come in, the players will change some of what they're playing. If the players maintain as much movement when the vocals come in, the sound might get a little too busy.

Ideally the music will be like a conversation. When the singers are making their statement, the band tries to back out of the way and accompany the vocals. When the singers finish a phrase, the band might choose to answer a little bit on their instruments with the melodic pattern.

You may at times feel like your part is not conspicuous, busy or virtuosic enough, especially if you're a classically-trained piano player. But many times what is called for is the discipline to know how little to play. I don't mean that we ought to think how little we can get away with, but rather what is going to really work.

So don't be disturbed if your individual contribution on a particular song would not sound wonderful if recorded on its own; that would only be the case if your part were 100% of the sound. What makes your part great in a band context is what it contributes to the whole, so it allows the rest of the band's contributions to be heard.