

Seventh Chorus – Food

As you can imagine, food is a valuable commodity on the road. Being hungry can make you really miserable, which isn't great for your performance. This chapter deals with the problems of eating on the road and offers some tips to keep you nourished and healthy. We'll cover these points:

- **Eat Now, Lose Weight Later** – why it's essential to eat what you can when you can while you're on the road.
- **Charm The Caterer** – why it's important to foster a good working relationship with the caterer when you play function gigs.
- **Careful Eating** – how to avoid getting ill when you're travelling.
- **Tuck** – what you can do to keep the hunger pangs at bay.
- **Eating On A Shoestring** – why it's difficult although necessary to economise sometimes.

Travelling, by its very nature, means that anything even vaguely resembling a routine will be interrupted, and this includes meal times. This can be the case even when just gigging around generally.

It can be a bigger problem than it might at first appear to be. Hunger, like sex, is a physiological drive that needs to be satisfied. Without them, the human species would cease to exist, so it's important that you satisfy your hunger drive if you are to function properly – the sex drive lies (thankfully!) outside the scope of this book. Here then, are some thoughts on eating adequately and safely on the road.

Eat Now, Lose Weight Later

We've seen that a good bit of general advice is to eat at every opportunity as you can never be sure when you'll be eating next. If you put on a few pounds during the course of a tour,

so what? Provided, of course, that you can still get into your stagewear, you can always lose this weight later when you're back in some kind of regular eating routine.

If you're anything like me, your general demeanour changes if you have not eaten properly. It becomes harder to concentrate which, of course, will affect your performance; and as we know, *giving your best possible performance must take precedence over everything*. I used to work with a bass player who always maintained that 'you can't play good time on an empty stomach'. Or good anything else, I would suggest.

It is well worth taking into account that not eating properly can affect your mood. If you feel crotchety (no pun intended) or intolerant towards your band mates when you haven't eaten properly, cut them some slack – take that backward step to look at the situation and you may just find that the problem lies with you. (See 'Sixth Chorus' – 'Sharing Rooms').

- Eat at every opportunity.
- Lose weight when you are back in a regular eating routine.
- Be aware that not eating properly can affect your concentration.
- 'You can't play good time on an empty stomach'.
- Be aware your mood will be affected if you don't eat properly.

Charm The Caterer

Many's the time I've turned up on a gig fully expecting to be fed, only to find the caterers deny all knowledge of having to feed the band. Of course, these seem always to be wedding gigs being held in a marquee in the middle of a field, miles from anywhere. You find yourself stranded out in the country with nothing to eat and insufficient time to get back to 'civilisation'

to get something. I have often found that unscrupulous agents tell the bandleader the band will be fed, but somehow forget to tell the client.

The scenario above highlights the importance of having someone in the band willing to liaise with the caterers on this sort of gig. The problem with this, as you'll understand if you've ever been in a hotel or restaurant kitchen, is that these are hot and busy places full of people working flat out. Being interrupted by a musician asking where their food is will be about as welcome to these people as a pork pie at a bar mitzvah (if you'll pardon the gastronomic metaphor).

I spent some time in a band that did a fair amount of weddings and, over time, it became my job to deal with the caterers on this type of gig. My *modus operandi* was always to find a lady of a certain age on the catering staff and turn on the charm. I would aim to do this before they started service and would always say, "Hello, we're the band, we're working with you here tonight." Of course the magic word *with* instantly set up a kind of unspoken 'we're on the same side' rapport that usually worked wonders, and (most of the time at least) made the caterers see us as allies rather than pests. We'll come back to dealing with caterers and agents later.

I once found myself on exactly the type of gig I have described here – a wedding in a marquee in the middle of nowhere, a few hours drive from London. I did my usual thing of finding a lady of a certain age on the catering staff, making sure they were aware we needed to be fed, and generally chatting to her while it was quiet. Well, I must have done a pretty good job because, in addition to being well fed, we came off to a huge pile of bacon rolls. "I thought you might like something before your long drive" the lady said as she offered us the steaming fragrant packages of loveliness.

Incidentally, I always refer to bacon sandwiches/rolls as ‘vegetarians’ downfalls’. Ask any lapsed vegetarian what made them fall off the wagon and I can almost guarantee it’ll be a bacon sandwich.

Here’s another yarn concerning me and ladies of a certain age. I really should have what this woman said to me put on my business card, or it’d make a great epitaph for my gravestone.

I was working at the Stables Theatre in Wavendon and during the interval found myself alone in the green room. Now, the Stables Theatre is partly run by a tireless group of volunteers who have a rota for doing ‘green room’ as they like to meet the artistes.

On this occasion a lady came into the room and asked if I’d like some more coffee. “That would be lovely, thank you very much,” I replied. I went back to the magazine I was reading and she busied herself with the coffee machine. After a while she said “You’re very nice boys you know.” Flattered, I countered with “That’s kind, thanks very much.” She then added the immortal line “*So much nicer than Jefferson Starship...*”

The much-missed drummer Johnny Piper gave me a great bit of advice very early on in my career: ‘Never upset anyone who’s serving you food.’ He was convinced that if you got even remotely shitty with a waiter they would spit in your meal before serving it. Although I took this with a pinch of salt at the time, I think that there may well be something in it. After all, in the UK, there is quite a high turnover of waiting staff, and their wages are poor so they probably don’t have much to lose. I did actually hear a story about this – let’s hope it’s apocryphal.

A pianist was working in a swanky London restaurant. It was one of those traditional establishments where the kitchen has ‘in’ and ‘out’ doors to the restaurant floor. Our pianist was tinkling away and, as two waiters passed as they entered/exited the kitchen, one was overheard to say to the other “He ate it”.

- Try to establish that the client knows you need to be fed.
- Nominate a band member as ‘catering liaison’ person.
- Avoid disturbing a kitchen in the middle of service.
- Be charming and emphasise you are working *with* the caterers.
- Avoid upsetting anyone who is serving you food!

Careful Eating

If you are travelling further afield (or even to provincial towns...) it is worth giving some thought to the possible consequences of what you are going to eat. It might be an idea to avoid anything *really* rich or spicy, particularly if you don’t eat these kinds of foods at home. You might also want to avoid any kind of food that has the remotest reputation for possibly being ‘dodgy’. For instance, I aim not to eat seafood in hot countries. One of my colleagues became a victim of this – here’s how the incident was reported in my blog at the time.

...Soundcheck over, we were whisked back to our hotel for a slap-up meal. Three of the guys opted for the spicy seafood soup starter and they all commented on how good it was. I've always been warned off seafood in hot countries and I'm glad of the advice, because it only takes one bad clam... and indeed one of the chaps had to vacate the bandstand in a hurry during the gig. When he reappeared one song later he looked like death warmed up – he'd taken on a ghostly pallor and I could see the stage lighting reflected in the huge beads of sweat that had formed on his forehead. Troupier that he is, he settled back down quickly and played really well for the remainder of the show, albeit with one twitching eye on his best escape route.

When we finally came offstage at 3am I dashed downstairs for a pee to be greeted by a truly spectacular sight – it looked like someone had blown up a horse in the lavs. A veritable vomitorium. How does anyone manage to get it on the ceiling?

You can read my blog at **www.petecooksax.com**

You will probably have to eat at some take away restaurants in the course of your travels. There's not much advice I can give you here except that if it's crowded, it's a good sign – it means the food must be good. Moreover, they must turn it over quite fast which will reduce considerably the chances of it making you ill.

Here's a piece of completely irrational and unfounded advice I sometimes offer to people on this subject: never eat at any establishment with the word 'golden' in its name. You know the sort of thing, 'The Golden Ricebowl', 'The Golden Curry', 'The Golden Plaice', 'The Golden Chopsticks'... Of course I'm joking, but there's many a true word spoken in jest. I remember arriving at a gig once and the drummer bounding up to me and

saying “Hey Cookie, me and my wife ate at a restaurant with ‘Golden’ in its name the other day. We thought of you as we walked in, and guess what? It was awful!”

I was once playing one of those posh marquee-in-the-middle-of-nowhere wedding gigs. I arrived to find the drummer lying on the bed in his van complaining of feeling a bit duff. Apparently he’d stopped at a Chinese takeaway en route to the gig.

We started the gig as usual and all was going swimmingly. The drummer (a pro to the core) waited for the end of the tune and then politely asked the bandleader for a ‘sick-break’. As we were without drums, we continued with a heartfelt rendition of a tender ballad, which we played to the sound of our chum’s noisy retching on the other side of the marquee canvas.

A nice coda to that story is that I seem to remember being on another gig with the same drummer some time later at Sheffield University. This time he didn’t have time to wait for the end of a tune and just left the bandstand in a hurry and waddled very fast down a corridor towards the Gents.

Well, it seems some people just love to play Russian roulette with their digestive systems. The self same drummer left the following comment on my blog a while ago.

Funny you should recall my various digestive problems. It happened again the other day whilst playing for D**** F***** at a very posh venue down in Devon. The meal was of the knee-gnawingly pretentious variety - no dish was complete without a 'compote' or a 'coulis' or perhaps a drizzle of vanilla truffle oil... the only edible thing on the menu was the beef, but when it arrived it was so rare it was still twitching.

The dish had also a secret ingredient – noro-virus! Yum yum! The effect of this questionable addition did not kick in until after the first set when my stomach went into spasm and after a noisy session peppering the porcelain (doubtless to the great amusement of other users of the men's room) I returned to the bandstand for the second set.

I realised that all was not well when the cramps returned ten-fold. I think it was in the third chorus of Mississippi rag – a suitable reminder of an unending flow of brown liquid. Anyway, I somehow held on until the last number, which I had to play standing up! This was the only way to exert more force with my buttock muscles – I think the audience thought it was part of the act. Anyway, as the final chord faded away I had to run as fast as I could to the hotel. The gig, you see, was in a big marquee on a golf course some distance from the nearest bog and in my haste I fell head first into a bunker ruining my suit and inflicting a huge gash across my side which is still there as I write! Somehow I made it to the loo, although in retrospect a better place to have gone would have been to the chef's door to leave him a little message.

I later heard I was not the only one to suffer that night... Give me a chinese takeaway any day!

- Avoid anything *really* rich, spicy or greasy.
- Be careful with potentially dodgy foods e.g. seafood in hot places.
- Only use busy takeaway restaurants.



Luckily, there are steps you can take to avoid inadvertently ordering 'The Salmonella Special'...

Tuck

As we've seen, there seems not to be any kind of routine to eating on the road, so you will almost certainly need to stock up on some kind of 'tuck'. This is stuff you will graze on in the bus, in your hotel room after work, etc.

There seem to be two schools of thought on whether tuck should be fresh or non-perishable. I come down on the non-perishable side, due in the main to my once having got in a bus where somebody had forgotten to take their food with them when they left. It did *not* smell pleasant I can tell you.

Worse perhaps than this was when a chum got into a bus in which someone had left their sweaty stagewear a week or two previously. The offender was a chap who had a reputation for being a bit 'spicy' at the best of times. Apparently, so awful was the stench, my chum thought there had been a death in the bus.

With stories like these in mind, I aim to carry stuff like cereal bars, mixed nuts and raisins, and plenty of water.

The fresh tuck argument is that eating fruit replenishes what you don't get from the rubbish you tend to eat on the road. My colleague Dan Faulkner puts this case very convincingly:

'On gigs you rarely get a choice of what you eat. It's almost always the quickest or closest option unless the venue or promoter provides food, in which case, 9 times out of 10, it'll be something cheap, easy to serve and nasty. When working on tour this can lead to stomach problems and lethargy on stage, so take vitamin supplements, always have a bottle of water and maintain a bag of fruit, topping it up at every chance as on the road, these opportunities are few and far between.'

Sound advice indeed and I'm nearly convinced, especially since non-perishable food tends in the main to be very salty. Funny,

although I never really eat them at home, I get an uncontrollable craving for Pringles whenever I have any kind of overnight stay.

You should have noticed that there is one thing common to both viewpoints – water, and plenty of it. I really can't stress enough the importance of keeping yourself well hydrated when on the road. You lose a lot of fluid sweating on a bandstand, and the effects of alcoholic drinks will compound this.

You can normally monitor things from the colour of your urine. A bit of internet research has suggested the following as symptoms of mild dehydration:

- thirst
- headache
- loss of appetite
- dry skin
- dark coloured urine
- dry mouth
- fatigue or weakness
- chills
- head rushes

It's pretty obvious that some of these symptoms are not conducive to a good musical performance, and as we know – *giving your best possible performance must take precedence over everything*. So keep that bottle of water to hand.

- Keep a stock of tuck to eat in the bus or hotel room.
- If it's non-perishable, watch your salt intake.
- If it's perishable, make sure you don't leave it in the bus.
- You may like to think about taking vitamin supplements.
- Keep yourself very well hydrated.

Eating On A Shoestring

This section could just as easily have been called ‘Haute Cuisine on a Lightbulb’. You may find yourself on a longish tour for not very good money, where you try to economise by eating as cheaply as you possibly can. This might involve a bit of ‘self-catering’ as the stories that follow show.

There is a 1920s style band in England who seem to do most of their work in mainland Europe and always go in the band bus. One of their number (who always looked to me as if someone had drawn him, caricature style) used to take his seat in the bus with a box full of tinned sardines and cans of diet Coke. Apparently he used pretty much to live off this when on the road.

One of my chums was in a hotel on tour and one of his band-mates, a very affable Northern chap, called him and said “It’s dinnertime, come to my room”. On arriving he found his host with one of those funny little heating elements for making a single cup of tea dangling in a mug of water. “I’ll cook you some snap, duck,” he said and proceeded to add cous cous to the water. Not wishing to appear an ungrateful dinner guest, my chum had no choice but to stoically eat the stuff.

If you’ll forgive another gastronomic metaphor, this one takes the biscuit:

A famously tight-fisted trombonist, while working abroad, was walking back to his hotel one evening. Passing the pavement cafés, he noticed a pizza, barely touched, on a plate at a recently vacated table. Having surreptitiously scooped up the remains, he rushed back to his hotel, where he proceeded to warm it up – in the trouser-press.