

CONCERT AND LIVE MUSIC PHOTOGRAPHY

pro tips from the pit

J. DENNIS THOMAS



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“I know it’s only rock ‘n’ roll, but I like it.”

-The Rolling Stones

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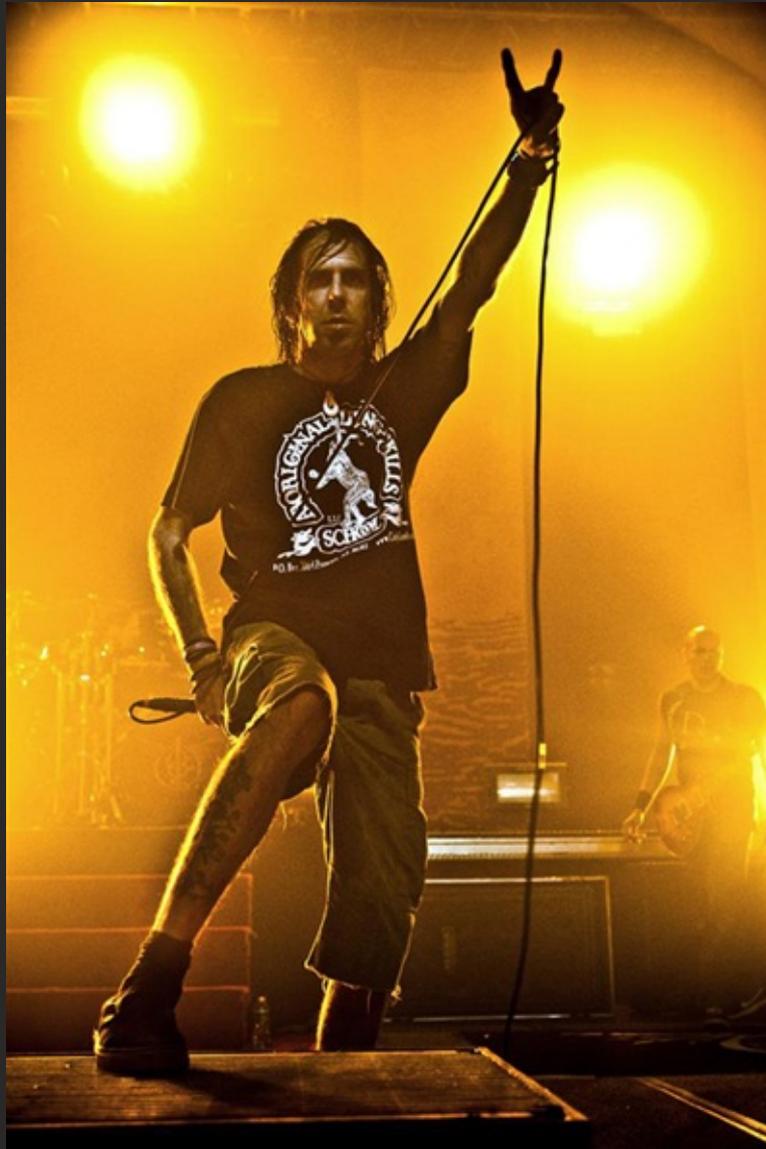
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GEAR

Before you can start taking concert photos you need the gear. As with any type of job, from auto mechanics to information technology, having the right tools makes it infinitely easier to get the desired results. The right gear doesn't necessarily have to be the newest or the most expensive, but it should have the attributes you need to get the job done.

There's a tendency among some photographers to get into debates over which camera systems are better, Nikon vs. Canon vs. Sony, etc. I won't be covering that topic here. For all practical purposes, a camera system has one purpose, which is to collect light and to record an image.

A common question that I get is, "What gear do I need to get started?" The short answer is that you can do concert photography with even the most basic gear, but as with any type of photography there is specific gear that will make the job easier, and there's an almost infinite amount of gear and gadgets that can be acquired.

In this chapter I'm going to cover the basic necessities of a camera system: the camera body and the lenses, and the pros and cons of the different types of each.

CAMERA BODIES

Every camera manufacturer has numerous types of cameras, from the basic entry-level camera to the high-end professional model. Each level of camera has strengths and weaknesses, and even the top-of-the-line professional camera may have some attributes that you may not want or need.

If you're in the market for a new camera you should sit down and assess your wants, and more importantly, your needs, before you rush out and buy the newest, most expensive camera on the market. A lot of times you don't need all those bells and whistles, and they can be a hindrance when it comes down to the real work of actually shooting.

Resolution

Probably the first thing people look at when buying a camera is the resolution. The number of pixels on the camera's image sensor determines the resolution of the camera. Resolution is expressed in megapixels, the number of which is ascertained by counting the number of pixels in the height and width of the sensor and multiplying them. For example, $4608 \times 3072 = 14155776$ pixels, or about 14.2 megapixels.



1.1 My camera bag has an extraordinary amount of gear, but I rarely take all of it with me. I generally mix and match depending on the venue and the scope of the assignment.

At first glance you might think that the higher the number of megapixels the better the camera, but this is not always the case. Although higher numbers provide you with more resolution, which translates into bigger images and a little more detail, there's the tradeoff of a smaller pixel pitch, or in laymen's terms, the size of the pixel. This in turn reduces the camera's ability to have higher usable ISO settings due to the smaller pixels' reduced ability to collect light.

When you're looking at purchasing a camera using megapixels as a measuring stick, one great thing to keep in mind is what the output of your images will be. If you are planning to print your images at a large size, more resolution is better, but if you're only planning on posting your images to the

Web, a camera with less resolution will suffice. For all practical purposes a camera with 12 megapixels is usually more than enough resolution for almost any application.

Keep in mind that with a higher resolution your image files are also larger, resulting in longer transfer times that can fill up the camera buffer faster, which may cause the camera to bog down when shooting in bursts.

Bottom line is that these days most camera manufacturers use resolution as a marketing tool. A camera with 24 megapixels isn't necessarily twice as good as a camera with 12 megapixels. In truth, especially when dealing with the kind of low-light photography that concert photography often is, the 12 megapixel camera will outshine the model with the higher megapixel count.

Build and Durability

Two of the most important things to consider when looking at a camera for concert photography are build and durability. If you're considering making this a career, you're going to want a camera that is built to take the rigors of heavy use. Concerts held in outdoor venues can be dusty, or it may be raining or muddy. In this case you'll want to look for a camera with weather sealing, which can also be a plus indoors shooting a small club show where there could be beer or drinks being splashed around. Trust me, I've had beer spilled on my camera on more than a dozen occasions, especially when I was starting out.

Most of the mid to higher level cameras have a magnesium frame, as opposed to the polycarbonate or plastic body of the more entry-level models. A magnesium frame adds a much higher margin of durability to your camera. Camera bodies can be knocked around and sometimes even dropped when photographing in a crowd at a club or even in the photo pit of a major event. I highly recommend looking at magnesium-framed camera bodies for this type of work. These types of bodies are more robust and take a bit of a beating without suffering major damage. They are substantially heavier though.



1.2 While photographing the popular Austin punk band the Lower Class Brats at a tiny venue in Austin, the air was damp with sweat, condensation, and especially beer. Taken with a Nikon D700 with a Zenitar 16mm f/2.8 fisheye lens; ISO 200 for 1/4 sec. at f/5.6, TTL flash on, spot metering.



1.3 As you can see here, while photographing the performance metal band GWAR at the Austin Music Hall, I was repeatedly doused with “alien blood” and “slime.” The weather sealing saved my camera. Taken with a Nikon D700 with a Nikon 14-24mm f/2.8G at 14mm; ISO 2000 for 1/200 sec. at f/2.8, spot metering.

Another good point of a magnesium-framed camera is that when using heavier lenses such as a 70-200mm f/2.8, you have less of a chance of warping the lens flange if you have the camera and lens hanging from a strap. Although quite rare, plastic-bodied cameras have been known to warp slightly from the weight of the lens and in a few ultra-rare cases the lens flange has ripped completely from the body.

Smaller entry-level cameras are usually manufactured from a durable polycarbonate plastic. These cameras have the advantage of being much lighter, which can be a real asset when shooting an all-day-long festival. If you're not planning on doing a lot of heavy shooting, this may be a great lightweight option for you.

ISO Capabilities

The ISO capabilities of a camera are one of the more important features of a concert photographer's camera. The better the ISO capability of your camera, the less noise you will see in your images, which results in images that are cleaner and much sharper.

Another facet to a camera's ISO capabilities is how the sensitivity can be set. Most newer cameras have the ability to set the ISO sensitivity to at least

3200 to 6400. Keep in mind that not all cameras are created equal: different manufacturers use different image processors and sensors, which can affect how much noise appears in your images at a given ISO setting.



1.4 The Nikon D700 is known for its exceptional capabilities at handling high ISO settings with little to no noise. This image of Lemmy Kilmister of the legendary metal band Motörhead was shot at ISO 3200 and has no noise reduction applied at all. Taken with a Nikon D700 with Nikon 28-70mm f/2.8D; ISO 3200 for 1/200 sec. at f/2.8.

Camera resolution also plays a role in the camera's ISO capabilities. Cameras with larger sensors and lower resolution have larger pixels, which are more efficient at gathering photons of light, which in turn translates into images with almost no noise even at ISO 6400. The Nikon D3s is a 12 megapixel camera with a full-frame sensor that turns out pristine images at ISO 6400 with a top ISO setting of 12800 while the D3x with its full-frame 24 megapixel sensor is limited to ISO 1600, with ISO 800 being the usable limit (in my personal opinion).

Full Frame vs. Crop Sensor

In the earlier days of digital SLR photography this was more of a

consideration than it is today. Since the selection of lenses that are available for crop sensor cameras (cameras with sensor smaller than a frame of 35mm film) has made the problem of obtaining a true wide-angle field of view a nonissue there are other things to take into account, namely concerns about ISO capability and the ability to get a *smaller* field of view from lenses with longer focal lengths. When using a crop sensor the camera magnifies the image either 1.5x for Nikon cameras, or 1.3 or 1.6x for Canon, depending on the model. This allows your 70-200mm lens to give you an equivalent field of view of a 105- 300mm lens on a full-frame camera.

An advantage of having a full-frame sensor is that the pixel pitch is larger in comparison to a smaller sensor with the same number of megapixels. Larger pixels are more effective at capturing light, which allows the sensor to produce images with less noise.

Autofocus System

Autofocus, or AF, as it's commonly referred to, is a great feature for a concert photographer, but it's only useful if it actually *works*. Different cameras have different AF modules, and not all of them work the same. Some cameras focus great in bright light but can hunt for focus when the light is low, which obviously is going to be the norm when shooting a concert. Faster lenses with larger apertures are a great help at speeding up the AF.

There are two types of AF sensors found in cameras today, horizontal and cross-type. Cameras that have AF modules with more cross-type sensors are usually quicker at achieving focus in low-light because they are better at detecting contrast (which is how the camera determines focus). Most cameras have at least one cross-type sensor that is often in the middle. Higher-end cameras usually have five or more, with a camera like the Nikon D3s having fifteen cross-type sensors out of fifty-one.

The number of AF sensors should also be a consideration. The more sensors you have the better the ability to pinpoint your focus. With a camera that has a limited amount of focus points you may have to lock focus on the area and

recompose the frame slightly to get the right composition. This takes only a fraction of a second, but gives the performer just the right amount of time to move enough that your focus can be off.

While having a lot of focus points can be beneficial, sometimes they can also be a drawback: using the multi-selector to navigate amongst 51 focus points takes a lot longer than it does to navigate through 11 points. You can also miss a shot simply while trying to navigate to the right focus point for the composition. Fortunately, most cameras with a high number of focus points have settings that allow you to reduce the number of available focus points in use, making it quicker to get to the point you want to use.

Most cameras these days have AF systems that can track the subject if it moves away from the selected point. It's referred to a number of different ways, such as predictive focus tracking, 3D tracking, or some other variation depending on the camera make and model. I do not recommend using this type of AF setting when shooting concerts or live music. The flashing lights and quick movements usually overwhelm the AF system, making it unreliable.

Vertical/Battery Grip

In my opinion, this is one of the most important accessories you can get for your camera. Most top-of-the-line professional cameras such as the Nikon D3s and the Canon EOS-1D series have this built-in. Not only does having a vertical grip make framing vertical shots much easier for you, it also helps you avoid interfering with other photographers in the pit.



1.5 To avoid confrontations with your fellow photographers use a vertical grip.

My colleague Randy Cremean related a story to me about his first-ever big concert shoot: “A crusty old pro slapped my elbow and told me to turn my camera the other way when I went vertical so the elbow wouldn’t be up in the air, blocking people behind me.” The vertical grip allows you to hold your camera normally so as to avoid the *elbow in the air* syndrome.

Most vertical grips also offer the option of having an extra battery or even a larger battery with more power, allowing you to shoot more images without running out of juice. This option comes in particularly handy when doing all-day shoots at festivals.

The vertical grip also adds more weight to your camera. When using large pro lenses, this can offer an improvement in ergonomics, making the camera more evenly balanced.



1.6 *My trusty Nikon D700 with its well-worn vertical grip the MB-D10 attached.*

LENSES

Arguably the most important part of your camera kit is the lens. Even with the most expensive camera body money can buy, if you put an inferior lens on it your image quality is going to suffer. In these days of digital SLR cameras, it seems that a new camera with more and better features is always being released. For practical purposes, if you're a pro or semi-pro, you can expect to upgrade your camera every two to three years. In contrast, a good lens can last a lifetime if properly cared for. The Nikkor 28-70mm f/2.8D AF-S is my main workhorse lens, and it is more than ten years old. I've gone through more than a dozen camera bodies in the same timeframe. Although it doesn't have some of the features of the newest lenses, it's still a high-quality pro lens that gets exceptional results.

Focal length and aperture are the two main features to look at when selecting a lens for concert photography. Focal length determines the *angle of view* of a lens, or in lay terms, how much of the scene you can see in the frame. Wide-angle lenses have lower numbers and fit more of the scene into the frame, while higher numbers have a narrow angle of view and allow you

to focus on a smaller part of the scene and help to pull far-off subjects close into the frame. From wide-angle to normal to telephoto, each type of lens has its uses in concert and live music photography. I cover each different focal length category individually in the following sections.

Zoom vs. Prime

This is a bit of a sticky subject, but it's definitely one that needs to be talked about. The main difference between a zoom lens and a prime lens is that the prime lens has a fixed focal length. Prime lenses are available in all types, from ultra-wide to super-telephoto and everything in between. Prime lenses are often sharper than zoom lenses, but in recent years zoom lens technology has grown by leaps and bounds. A lens such as the Nikon 14-24mm f/2.8G, or example, is actually sharper than either the Nikon 14mm f/2.8D or the 24mm f/2.8D prime lenses.

One of the main advantages to a prime lens, however, is that it can be made with faster apertures than zoom lenses because there are less lens elements to deal with and it can be made in a smaller package.

It never fails that whenever I see an online discussion about what lenses are recommended, there is always a percentage of people who say, "Get a fast prime" This sounds like the obvious answer due to the fact that most concert and live music venues are low-light situations, but the truth is that most of the professional concert photographers I work with do *not* use prime lenses, and there is a very good reason for that. Composition. Generally when you are doing this type of photography, you are confined to a very small space with a number of other photographers in there with you. A prime lens severely limits your ability to get a great composition. More often than not you end up cutting out guitar headstocks, appendages appear to be severed or hands appear to be floating at the edge of the frame. When using a wide-angle prime, your subject can appear to be very small in the midst of the frame. A zoom lens allows you to actively compose your shots while shooting in a small area, which is a great advantage over fixed focal-length lenses.