BEST AND WORST GIG

What defines a successful gig?  What defines a lousy one?  Are the bad ones preventable?  These are questions I grappled with, as I drove long hours from gig to gig, across North America.

During college I made my first CD.  Shortly afterwards, I moved from Toronto to New York City and began networking with other indie musicians.  I quickly learned that the most successful musicians were booking their own tours, and without hesitation, I joined the trend.

On the road, I discovered it was confusing to know if I had had a successful show.  Do you measure it by the number of people in the audience, by how many CDs you sell, or by a certain ‘vibe’?  No matter your definition, one thing is certain.  It is near impossible to predict the outcome of a gig.

I’ll give you an example.  I was about to play a trendy bar in Regina, Saskatchewan.  My publicist had succeeded in getting us an article in the local paper.  Everything seemed lined up for a stellar show.  I walked in and the place was packed.

The local band opened for me.  The audience talked through their set, but this wasn’t unusual for a rowdy Saturday night.  It didn’t mean that people weren’t listening, or that CD sales wouldn’t be high.  It was my turn to go on.  Not soon afterwards did I hear people booing.  Booing!  Never in my life had I been booed!  Then I heard someone yell “Stop Singing!”  It was unbearably humiliating.  I stopped my set short and got off stage.  “What’s happening?” I asked the opening act.  “This has never happened before,” they mumbled apologetically, “the city is going through a sanitation worker’s strike and it seems they are all here, getting more and more drunk.  They’re pissed because they’ve been out of work for weeks.”  Even though I knew it had nothing to do with me, I couldn’t shake the feeling for a long time.

A few weeks later, I was on my way to perform in a small town in Michigan.  I had to drive 7 hours to get there from my previous engagement.  Looking back now, I don’t even remember why I booked the gig, but I seem to recall that I had connected with an optimistic college student who somehow convinced me to come.  As I was driving down the dirt road into the middle of nowhere, I kept thinking, “I have made a terrible mistake”.  Finally, I arrived at the venue.  The college student was sweet, but nervous.  I set up my gear and waited.  Within an hour, the place was packed with hundreds of students.  When it was my turn to go on, a hush fell over the audience.  I performed to a crowd that hung on my every word.  It was an ecstatic, out of body experience.  Afterwards, I had dozens of students lined up to get my autograph and buy CDs.  Somehow, word had gotten out that I was coming, and that I am an out lesbian performer.  It was frosh week, and I had become THE event to go to if you were an LGBT student.  It was the best gig of my life, made all the more glorious because it was completely unexpected.

In this roller coaster ride of an industry, I am saddened when I see so many artists blame themselves if they experience a failure.  So long as you are doing your craft and putting yourself out there, the rest is completely out of your hands.  Enjoy the ride and know that it will be wild.