

Choosing the Perfect Band for your Wedding



Introduction

Apart from selecting the person you wish to marry, choosing the right band is probably the single most important decision you will make in creating an unforgettable wedding! Your friends and family will remember the fantastic atmosphere that a band can create long after they have forgotten about the food, the flowers or even the bride's dress.

I have prepared this guide to help you through the process of finding a band for your wedding reception and to give you some advice and inside tips that you may not have considered that will help you choose the perfect band and make sure that your big day goes off without a hitch.

What type of atmosphere do you want to create?

Choosing a band is much easier if you have a clear idea of what you are looking for. Have a think about the kind of atmosphere and energy you want the band to create. Do you want a sophisticated and jazzy feel or a high energy dancing party? Do you want a particular style, or era of music, or a band that can cover everything from Aretha to Beyonce? How do you want the band to look? Think about your end goal – what kind of experience do you want for you and your guests? How do you want people to remember your wedding party? Think about your friends and family and picture what you would like them to be saying about your wedding on their journey home. The clearer a picture you have, the more focused and selective you can be when you start to look for a band.

About the author

Danny Richman is the manager of Hula Groove, one of the busiest function bands in the UK. He has performed at and organised hundreds of wedding and parties in every conceivable type of venue from marquees to the most prestigious castles and hotels around the world.

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The Venue

Many couples will have booked the venue long before they consider the type of reception they are trying to create. However, your venue may impose restrictions on the type of band that you can book.

Ask the venue manager the following questions that could have an impact on the type of band that you can choose:

- 1) "Do you have any restrictions on the size of band?"
- 2) If yes, "Does this limit also apply to singers?"
(Many venues restrict the band size due to space and noise concerns. Singers take up very little extra space and add little to the overall volume)
- 3) "What is the maximum amount of floor space available for the band?"
(Most bands will need an area approx 6mts wide by 3 mts deep)
- 4) "Can you provide a separate room for the band to change in and rest between live sets?" (Most professional bands will require this)
- 5) "Are there any obstacles for the band when bringing their equipment into the venue?" e.g. stairs, narrow doors, restricted parking etc.
(Some bands may charge an extra fee for venues with poor access)
- 6) "Are the caterers able to supply a hot meal for the band on the night?"
(Most professional bands will require you to provide them with a hot meal)
- 7) If the venue has supplied you with a list of recommended bands ask if they receive a commission from those bands or their agents. This is common practise and may make their selections of bands less than impartial.
- 8) "Does the venue use a Sound Limiter?"
Many venues in residential areas are faced with restrictive controls by their local council over the sound level of live music on their premises. Many venues won't tell you about this at the time of booking but this can have negative implications for your reception.

Before you book a venue ask the manager if they are subject to any noise restrictions, what those restrictions are and whether a Sound Limiter (**see side panel**) is installed at the venue.

As you can see there are many important considerations that could affect your choice of venue or the type of music being played at your reception. Some venue managers do not make these requirements fully clear at the time of booking. This can cause a lot of disappointment if you do find the perfect band but then later discover that you cannot book them for one or more of the above reasons.

Sound Limiters

At its simplest a Sound Limiter is an electronic device that measures the level of sound in a room. There are 2 types of Sound Limiters; the first simply measures the level of sound and rarely presents a problem. A reasonable volume limit is 95 decibels (95db) while a limit of 85 decibels could make it difficult for the band to create the right sort of atmosphere.

The other type of Sound Limiter not only measures the level but also shuts off all power to the stage if the limit is reached! If your venue has this type of Sound Limiter you may find that many bands won't play at your venue as a sudden loss of power can seriously damage their equipment. You may also find that you are personally liable for any damage that the Sound Limiter may cause.



Choosing the Perfect Band

There are several sources that you could use to find your band:

1) Personal recommendation

If a band have been personally recommended to you or you have seen a band you liked at a friend's wedding then this is probably your best option.

2) Search on Google

Try searching on Google for terms such as "wedding bands", "Soul bands", "bands to hire", "Motown bands" etc. Google lists sites in order of authority and popularity so the best bands should appear close to the top of the main listing.

Note however that Sponsored Links on Google are paid advertising that give no indication of a band's popularity.

3) Use an Agency

You will see many band agencies advertised on Google and in Wedding magazines. Agencies offer varying degrees of service. Many may not even have seen their bands perform before adding them to the roster. Most agencies will add a 15-20% commission to the band's fee.

What makes a good wedding band?

A good function band is quite different from any other type of band. Most types of bands decide on the style of music that they want to play, choose the songs that they want to perform and then perform to a niche audience that happen to share their taste in music.

A good function band on the other hand needs to understand that the people they are playing to are not their audience - they are *your guests*. They understand that their sole objective is to create the perfect atmosphere for your wedding reception and to help your friends celebrate your marriage. They should make each performance personal to you, your family and friends and put the maximum amount of energy, enthusiasm and dedication into every performance no matter how many weddings they have performed at that month.

The differences may seem subtle but it takes a great deal of experience and professionalism to make this work successfully for every event.

Book Early

Good bands will get booked up early. Peak dates for function bands are Fridays and Saturdays between May and September and the last 3 weeks of December. If you are planning a wedding during these times you should be booking your band at least 12 months before the date of the wedding.

There are many factors that go into choosing a perfect band:

The Sound

Bands broadly fall into the following musical categories:

- Soft Jazz/Background music
- Swing/Rat Pack
- Rock/Pop
- Soul/Disco/RnB

Choose a style of music that appeals to you and will have the most appeal to your guests. Try not to allow your decision to be too influenced by parents or elderly relatives who may not share the same tastes as the majority of your friends and family members. A good Soul band that can play everything from Motown to Michael Jackson to Beyonce is often the perfect choice to please a wide age range yet still provide enough energy to get everyone on the dance floor.

Always look closely at the band's repertoire on their website and let them know if there are any specific songs that you do or don't like. However, do also bear in mind that an experienced and professional function band will have honed their set list over many years and may have a better idea of what songs will be popular with your guests.

The Look

A band with a cheap or "cheesy" appearance can completely spoil all of the attention to detail you have considered for the other aspects of your wedding. Musicians in scruffy clothing, singers with too much make-up or dresses that reveal far too much can all detract from the sophisticated look that you want for your wedding. Ask to see pictures or videos of the band performing at a formal event.



See the band in action

It is not always possible to see a band playing live before you book them. Most professional bands will have their diary full of private functions and most of their clients are not happy to have strangers at their wedding. Some bands do occasionally perform public events or showcases but unless the date of their public performance is imminent there is a strong possibility that the band you want will be booked up by someone else before you have had the chance to see them perform.

Many professional function bands will have a video of their performance either on DVD or on their website. A video will give you a good idea of how the band will look and sound at your wedding. Audio recordings can be helpful but do be aware that these may have been "tweaked" in a studio and may not even have the same musicians and singers on the recording that will be performing at your wedding.

How Much Should I Pay?

As with most things, you really do get what you pay for when choosing a wedding band. There are many factors that will affect how much a band has to charge:-

Musician's time

Many musicians will be highly sought after and often working on a number of different projects and studio recordings. The difference between a professional musician and an amateur will have a huge impact on the quality of sound they will be able to produce at your wedding.

To play at your wedding the musicians will have to load up their equipment early in the day, travel several miles to get to your wedding venue, unload heavy equipment, set it all up at the venue, test the sound levels, wait around during the wedding breakfast and speeches, perform, break down all of the equipment, load it in the van, drive several miles back to their base, unload all of the equipment and finally arrive home in the early hours of the morning. A professional musician will understandably need to be paid for all of the time that this entails. As you can see, the actual performance is just a very small part of all the work that needs to go into making your wedding an enjoyable and hassle-free event.

Size of band

Obviously, the larger the band the more they will charge. While booking a smaller band may seem like a good way to economise, do also consider whether a smaller band will be able to produce the same quality of sound without using pre-recorded backing tracks (see side panel on page 6 to learn more about **Backing Tracks**).

Location

The distance from the band's base and your wedding venue will have a big impact on the price the band will charge. In particular, if the band need to travel 3 hours or more to reach your venue they will probably include the cost of fuel, overnight accommodation and the travelling time required for the journey. If you are working on a limited budget try to look for bands that are based close to your venue.

Setup Time

The more time a band has to spend waiting around at your venue the more they will have to charge you. It may therefore save you a considerable sum if the band is able to setup and perform in a different room from where your guests will be eating. If that's not practical then consider whether your guests can leave the room for a short while the band sets up.

Book Direct

If at all possible try to book directly with a band rather than through an agency. Not only will this make communication more efficient but it will also save you 15%-20% commission that an agency normally charges to the client.

Insurance

A professional function band should have at least £5m of Public Liability insurance. This is necessary in the event of any unfortunate accidents or damage that may be caused by the band or their equipment. If your band does not have adequate insurance your wedding venue may refuse to let them play. Check this before booking!

PAT Certificate

By law, every professional function band must have their electrical equipment PAT tested to ensure that it is safe and in good order (much like an MOT test for a car). If your band does not have a valid PAT certificate your wedding venue or the local authorities may refuse to let them play. Check this before booking!

Sound Engineer

A professional band will usually hire an experienced sound engineer to control the mixing desk and ensure that the sound of all instruments is clear and well-balanced without any nasty feedback. Experienced sound engineers don't come cheap and this cost will normally be included in the total fee that the band has quoted.



Timing the Live Sets

If 2 live sets are to be played, the first set is normally performed immediately after the wedding breakfast/speeches/cake cutting. The second set is normally timed so that it ends 5 minutes or so before the evening is due to end (typically 23.55). If a third set is to be performed this is normally slotted midway between the first and last set.

Either side of the live sets the band will want to take a break in the rest area provided by the venue. During this period the band will normally arrange for recorded music to be played through their own PA system. Many bands are also happy to play your CD's or music from your iPod. Unless you are an expert in selecting dance music suitable for a wide range of ages, it may be better to leave the selection of recorded music to the band.

Overnight Accommodation

If your reception is due to finish later than Midnight or is located more than a 3 hour drive from their home base, many bands will include the cost of overnight accommodation in a local hotel. The cost of any overnight accommodation (if required) will usually be included in the rate quoted by the band.

Band Size

Factors such as your budget and the amount of space at the venue will often determine the size of band you are able to have.

As a general rule, the larger the band the richer and more dynamic the sound they will produce. A band with just one lead singer may be a little monotonous to watch and listen to. Bands with a number of vocalists who all share the lead will offer a lot more variety and put on more of a show.

Past Experience

There are few more effective ways to ruin the atmosphere of any wedding reception than by hiring a band who are inexperienced and do not have a proven track record of performing at weddings and private parties. There are countless disaster stories of people who booked an inexperienced band because a friend or relative agreed to perform at a preferential rate.

If your budget is so tight that you cannot afford to pay for an experienced function band, I recommend that you to hire a professional DJ instead. They are likely to be much less expensive and much less likely to turn your wedding reception into an occasion where all of the guests leave early to avoid the noise.

Testimonials & References

Any experienced function band should be able to supply you with a selection of testimonials and positive references from past clients. In particular, try to look for testimonials where the client's name is shown. Also look out for positive comments from known and independent sources such as press reviews or well-known companies.

Most bands should be happy to supply you with a list of names and contact details so that you can speak to their past clients and hear how they felt about the band's performance at their wedding.

Admin and Communication

A professional function band should have at least one person responsible for handling all of the administration and planning of your wedding. There are many bands with excellent musicians and singers but disorganised and slapdash when it comes to making the arrangements necessary to make your big day run without a hitch. Speak to the band manager and try to get a sense of whether they act in a professional and organised manner.

Set Duration and Timings

Most bands will perform for either 2 sets of 60-70 minutes or 3 shorter sets of 40-45 minutes for a typical wedding. Although many clients think that it would be better to have the band performing continuously for the entire duration of the evening this is not recommended or practical. Performing live music requires a huge amount of physical and mental energy from the musicians and singers. Hours of energetic live music can be too much for people to listen to without a break. A band that performs in shorter sessions will not only give a better performance but will also have more impact on your guests.



Looking after your Band

As with any other profession, musicians and singers perform better if they are well looked after. Here are a few tips for keeping your band happy and making sure that they can give you the best performance possible:

Food and Drink

The band will have spent most of the day preparing, loading and travelling to your wedding. They will probably not have had an opportunity to eat until after their first performance break. Most bands will make it a condition of the booking that your caterers supply them with a hot meal and soft drinks in the evening. While it may be tempting to economise in this area, serving a band with stale sandwiches and a single bottle of mineral water will only result in a grumpy band with empty stomachs arriving on stage feeling much less inclined to give their best for you and your guests. There is no need to serve the band the same food as your guests but do make sure that your caterers are instructed to look after the band and make sure they have a good filling meal and plenty of soft drinks.

Rest Area

It is important to make sure that your band have a comfortable area in which to rest and change with enough seating for all members of their party. If your wedding is in a marquee and there is no indoor space available make sure that the marquee contractors are instructed to create a separate area for the band with seating and heating. A band that are expected to change and rest in a cold tent, toilet, kitchen or small bedroom will not be in a very positive mood when you need them to perform on stage.

Backing Tracks

Smaller bands will often compensate for a lack of musicians by using backing tracks similar to the music used for Karaoke. In my opinion, hiring a band that uses backing tracks goes against the very reason you wanted a live band in the first place.

A band that uses backing tracks will never sound truly live and can destroy all of the dynamics, energy and spontaneity that a live band offers. If you are considering hiring a band that use backing tracks, my advice would be to save yourself some money and hire a DJ instead!

After Booking

If there any aspects of your chosen venue that are likely to cause difficulties or complications with gaining access to the hall, it may be wise to ask the band manager to do a Site Visit of the venue. Some bands may charge for the time this incurs.

Logistics

It is a good idea to prepare your own Logistics document for the band and any other service providers involved with your wedding. This document should include:-

Venue Directions

Many wedding venues are based in remote areas that may not be shown on maps or Satellite Navigation devices. Include detailed directions to your venue and a map marking the exact location.

Timings

- Earliest time band can arrive to setup
- Time of guests arrival at venue
- Time that the wedding breakfast is due to start
- Time of any evening buffet being served
- Time of any other entertainment planned
- Time reception is due to end

Do bear in mind that few wedding run exactly to time. Guests take longer than anticipated to be seated for their meal and speeches nearly always take longer than estimated.

Contact Details

Include on your Logistics document the names and contact details for:-

- Bride and Groom
- Parents of the Bride & Groom
- The Best Man
- The Venue Manager
- The Caterer
- The Band Manager
- The Toastmaster (f booked)
- The DJ (if booked)



The Sound Check

The acoustics of every venue are different. Therefore, most bands will want to perform a Sound Check once their equipment is setup and ready for use. A Sound Check normally consists of the band playing through 2 or 3 songs to allow the Sound Engineer to check that all of the levels are correct and that no feedback is produced.

If a full Sound Check is not possible either because the band have limited time to setup or due to a spill-over of noise during your speeches, the band may be forced to perform a Line Check.

A Line Check is a short test of the volume levels of each instrument and microphone. A Line Check should take just a few minutes and will cause little or no disruption. There is however a risk that the Line Check may not have highlighted some acoustic problems that could cause feedback once the band starts playing.

If at all possible try to allow the band enough time for a full Sound Check before their first performance.

It is always a good idea to speak to the band manager and the venue to check over the last minute details a few days before your wedding:

First Dance

Make sure that the band knows what song you want for your first dance. If they are to play a recorded version of the song it is often a good idea to assign the Best Man with the task of handing over the CD or MP3 player to the band's sound engineer.

Microphone for Speeches

If your venue does not have its own PA system you may need to ask if you can use one of the band's microphone and speakers for your speeches. Check with the band manager if this is permitted and whether the band's PA system will be available for use at that time.

Timing

Check that the band know what time they need to arrive to setup, start and end their performance.

Payment

If you have not already paid the full balance to the band, make sure that arrangements are made for someone to pay them when they arrive at the venue. Most bands will not start their performance until the final balance is paid so assign this task to the Best Man to avoid any embarrassment on the day.

Clothing

Make sure that the band are aware of the dress code for your reception. You will not want to have your guests dressed in their finest suits and ball gowns and the band dresses in scruffy jeans and T-shirts!

Summary

This guide may make it seem as though booking a band for your wedding is a complicated affair littered with obstacles. In reality, a professional and experienced function band that are used to performing at weddings will make this entire process run smoothly. Their experience will give them the skills and knowledge to deal with all types of situations. They will liaise with the venue manager and other contractors to ensure that your day goes without a hitch.

Having a professional live band will create an atmosphere at your wedding that cannot be matched by any DJ or other form of entertainment. A good band will understand how much this day means to you and they will do everything they can to make your wedding reception a truly memorable night.

If the band gave a fantastic performance at your wedding do remember to drop them a line and say thank you. No band can have too many positive testimonials from their clients!

If you are interested in booking Hula Groove for your wedding, please visit our website at www.HulaGroove.co.uk or contact me directly at danny@hulagroove.co.uk

Whichever band you book, I hope that your wedding day is a joyous occasion remembered forever for all of the right reasons!

All the best

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Running Late?

My own band, Hula Groove has performed at hundreds of weddings. Approximately 95% of those weddings did not run to schedule. Photographs are delayed because family members have gone missing, guests take longer than anticipated to sit down for dinner and speeches always run on longer than originally planned.

Don't worry too much about trying to time your wedding reception down to the last minute. An experienced function band will be prepared for delays and will simply reduce the length of their breaks to make sure that you still get the same amount of live music and that the reception still finishes on time.

Checklist

- Decide on the type of atmosphere that you want and the type of band that will help you to create your ideal wedding reception. ✓
- Speak to your venue manager to make sure that they can accommodate the type of band you want. ✓
- Search Google for suitable bands or ask friends and family for personal recommendations. ✓
- Ask to see the band live or watch a video of them performing before you book ✓
- Don't go for the cheapest option. The band is not the best area to economise for your wedding. An inexperienced or "cheesy" band could ruin your wedding day. ✓
- Book direct with the band to save agency commission and book early! ✓
- Speak to the band manager. Do they seem efficient and reliable? ✓
- Check that the band has adequate insurance and a PAT safety certificate for their equipment. ✓
- Check out the band's testimonials and references. Are they from a reliable source? ✓
- Prepare your own Logistics sheet with all contact details and directions to the venue. ✓
- Make sure that the band are aware of the dress code for your reception. ✓
- Look after your band and they will look after you! ✓
- Enjoy your own wedding and dance the night away! Wedding guests are more likely to spend time on the dance-floor if they are joined by the Bride and Groom. ✓