

Camera Settings For Beginners

The correct camera settings are key to getting great photos in small and murky concert venues. As we've seen and discussed before, the automatic mode on your camera simply won't get the job done properly. Take the following basic camera settings as a starting point.

Get used to your gear, and learn where all the buttons are located on your camera. You should be able to find and change the settings even in a pitch black concert hall, because, once you know your gear, you can focus on the more important stuff, like what's going on on-stage.

Let's see which camera settings will work best for you when shooting your first concert. I'll break down all the settings for you. It's important that you understand what these settings mean and how you can use them to achieve the best results. I'll keep it here at the very basic level with the aim that you can immediately go out after this lesson and start to shoot your first concerts.

EXPOSURE MODES. Exposure modes determine how the Aperture, Shutter Speed and ISO settings are selected by your camera. All DSLR cameras, from entry level to high-end professional cameras, have at least four exposure modes: Program Auto (P), Aperture Priority (A,Av), Shutter Speed Priority (S,Tv) and Manual (M). You can find them on the mode dial located on the top of your camera. Entry level cameras often have "scene modes" such as landscape, macro, portrait and sport. While these modes might be a good idea to use in the specific situations they're named after, never use these for concert photography. The camera takes control like it does when set to auto and you won't have any idea what the camera is dialling in and probably get mediocre shots at best.

Program Auto (P)

For concert photography, the Program Auto (P) mode isn't a much better option than using the Full Automatic mode (often depicted as a green square or AUTO). Just as in the Automatic mode, your camera chooses the aperture, shutter speed and even ISO (when set to automatic). The only difference is that you can manually adjust either the aperture or shutter speed. Still, you have to keep in mind that the camera is reading

the light via the light meter setting and sets the other variables accordingly. Since we have to deal with constantly changing, low-light situations on-stage, your camera will have a hard time getting consistent images. So it's better to skip the Automatic and Program Auto modes on your camera.

Shutter Priority (Tv)

In this mode, the photographer sets the shutter speed, and the camera sets the aperture accordingly. I don't use this setting for concert photography, because I want to control my aperture myself. The only time I set the shutter speed rather than the aperture is when I want to get motion blur effects. For instance, you want to get a motion effect of a car passing by. Or you want to get the "dreamy" or ghostly effect of a waterfall. This setting is a good starting point but I prefer the next two settings.

Aperture Priority (Av)

This is the mode I used for the first couple of years when I started out as a concert photographer. The Aperture Priority mode will let you set the aperture and the camera will set your shutter speed accordingly. I used to set my ISO manually. So I started by setting an f/number of f1.8, adjusted my ISO to 1600 and shot some frames. Then I checked the LCD monitor to see if I got a good exposure. If yes, then I continued to shoot with these settings. If the photos were underexposed I used a higher ISO setting e.g. 3200. If the photos were overexposed I lowered the ISO setting to ISO 800. I think Aperture Priority mode is the best mode to start out with and, if you need some assistance from your camera, you can use the AUTO ISO setting in addition.

Manual Mode (M)

The manual mode will give you complete control over your camera. This is the mode I currently use the most. Since this lecture is aimed at photographers who are just starting out, I will leave the explanation of this mode to the next module.

USE YOUR LEN'S LOWEST APERTURE NUMBER. Set your aperture to the smallest number possible. This could be as low as f1.8, which reflects the largest aperture on a 50mm lens. This allows the most possible light to hit your sensor and is a must-have setting in ultra low-light stage conditions.

USE A FAST SHUTTER SPEED. Most of the time, you'll want to freeze the action on-stage, so you'll need a fast shutter speed. Try to get at least a shutter speed of 1/200sec. and, as a rule of thumb, don't drop below 1/50sec. when you're hand-holding your camera.

USE A HIGH ISO. You can either use Auto ISO or set the ISO values manually. I prefer to set it manually and start with an ISO setting of 1600 when shooting in clubs with low light situations on stage. Take a photo and have a look at the LCD monitor on your camera. Is the photo blurry? If so, your shutter speed's too slow. Crank up the ISO setting to 3200 and try it again.

AUTOFOCUS. The autofocus on your camera will make your life a lot easier when used correctly. I love to shoot with old analog manual focus cameras and lenses for my portraits, but for concert photography, the autofocus setting on your camera is a must. The AF function is also tied to the shutter button in the same way the light metering mode is. There are different Autofocus modes on your camera, but for now I want to focus on the Auto Area Autofocus mode.

Each camera has a set of autofocus points, anywhere from 3 points in entry level cameras to 65 points in some Canon pro cameras, but the amount of AF points really doesn't matter for us.

All cameras, have the Auto Area AF mode, which let's the camera decide where to focus. This example shows the viewfinder of the Canon 7D Mark II. Here the red rectangles indicate that the 65 point automatic selection is active. The camera will most likely choose the nearest subject to focus on. This setting will serve you well for your first experiences as concert photographer and I'll discuss the other options for autofocus in the next module.

METERING MODES. Your camera has a built-in light meter, which measures the light in a scene. Depending on this reading, the camera sets the appropriate aperture, shutter speed and ISO.

Every camera has different metering modes, all of which will be activated when the shutter button is pressed halfway down. For the beginner concert photographer the Matrix or Evaluative mode is a good compromise.

In this mode, the camera takes a light reading of the whole scene and tries to match it to a built-in database of similar scenes to try to calculate the right exposure. This metering mode is called matrix metering on Nikon cameras and Evaluative metering on Canon cameras. You see here a photo of [Dolores O'Riordan](#), the singer of The Cranberries. If the Matrix mode is chosen the camera will take a reading of the whole viewfinder, indicated as red overlay. This metering mode works pretty well in normal lighting situations such as a cloudy day outside, but it will also work for evenly lit stages. However, this setting is not perfect for concert photography, but it's the easiest option when you're starting out so therefore we'll go with it.

USE AUTO WHITE BALANCE. Let me explain what the white balance setting is. Take a piece of white paper and go outside on a sunny day. Look at the paper and it will appear white. Now go to the shadow and have a look again. Still white. Now go back to your house and take a look at the piece of paper in different lighting situations. Place the piece of paper under your desk lamp or a fluorescent light. The paper always looks white because our brain adjusts our view of these differing lighting situations and we always see white when we're looking at a white piece of paper or other object we know to be white under normal lighting conditions. For a camera, it's different. A camera sensor just records the light it sees. Therefore, if you take this white piece of paper and view it under the different lighting conditions outlined above and take a photo, you'll see that it sometimes has a blue, red or green "cast" or shade of colour, rather than being pure white. This is also the reason why you have so many different settings for white balance on your camera. You can also see the effect here at this photo of Kirk Hammet of Metallica. On the far left you see the Auto white balance setting of the camera. In the middle photo the White Balance setting was set to Fluorescent and you can recognize a blue cast of color. In the right picture The White Balance setting Shade was used which gives you a warmer shade of color. You can even set the specific color temperature in Kelvin. So for concert photography, the different white balance setting don't really

matter much, So leave the white balance setting on auto and you're good to go most of the time. If you have to change the WB setting afterwards you can always do this in your post production workflow (I'll talk about it in more detail later).

USE JPEG FORMAT. JPEG is an acronym for "Joint Photographic Experts Group" and is the standard format for all digital cameras. Basically it stands for a compression of digital images. This format has limitations, but the big advantage is that you won't have to process your photos afterwards, so as a first step, it's absolutely fine.

For the people who disagree here, I'm a 100% RAW shooter, but I think when shooting your first concert, people might not be familiar with post-processing RAW data. It might be too frustrating and I want you to succeed from the get-go and keep your motivation levels high.

So if you're just starting out and you don't know about the RAW format, stick to the Jpeg format for your first few concert shootings. If you're already advanced stay tuned to the next module where I'll explain the settings for advanced concert photographers.

NEVER USE FLASH. In general you are not allowed to use a flash in concert photography. Imagine ten photographers burst their flashes at the same time. This would be quite annoying for the artist and this might also be the reason why they came up with the rule "no flash" in the photo pit. My recommendation is to learn concert photography using the available light. In smaller clubs you might be able to use a flash, but if **you want to take concert photography serious**, you better get used to the struggle of low light. Therefore we discussed the concert photography settings that work **without using a flash**.

Let's sum up the camera settings you need to master for your first concert.

As I mentioned before, these settings are the very basic settings to cover your first concerts and to get your first decent concert photos. I'll go into more detail which exact settings the pros are using in the next module.

So, time to get out, get to know your equipment and shoot some concerts!