



Hanging out at some of the loveliest places on earth is all in a day's work for events planner Sarah Balfour





# I get paid to party!

Lights, bubbly, action! Sarah Balfour ditched her gruelling job as a session musician for a dream-come-true career planning big-budget parties

PHOTOGRAPHS **JP Masclet**  
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**I**t was an amazing night. The room was packed with A-listers knocking back champagne as thousands of fairy lights twinkled in the ceiling. We helped ourselves to oysters from silver platters and danced until morning. At one point, Robbie Williams sidled up to me, Cristal in hand, and made flattering noises about my dress. The evening of a lifetime? For most of us, yes, but for party planner Sarah Balfour, it was just another day in the office.

As she's quick to point out, her life wasn't always like this. Only five years ago, Sarah, 32, a talented pianist, was working all hours as a poorly paid session musician. 'It's not just a case of turning up in a lovely dress and playing to enraptured audiences,' she explains. 'Of course it had its glamorous side - I've accompanied stars such as

Charlotte Church, played in the West End, and won awards - but there's also a sleazy, exhausting side to it all. One particularly low moment was when a leading music manager invited me for a meeting, implying that he could make me a star. At the interview it was quite clear that this depended on me sleeping with him, so I walked out immediately. That was the moment I knew I'd had enough of the music industry.'

Inspired by all the amazing events she'd played at as a musician, Sarah turned to party planning in 2004. It was so successful that she launched her full-time business, Orchid Events, three years later. 'I still play my baby grand every day but now I have the pleasure of hanging out in some of the loveliest places on earth - and spending other people's money!' One weekend she might be organising a magical wedding on >





Sarah has always loved throwing parties. Clockwise from above: Her first professional bash - a bat mitzvah for 200; a magical wedding at Ravello on the Amalfi coast; winter wonderland costumes at a Christmas party; a Mozart extravaganza complete with powdered wigs

guests, gifts, budget and seating plans, and I give each host their own event website. I had no training whatsoever, the only thing powering me was pure determination! But I did have a secret asset - my little black book bulging with contacts. My selling point was that I could deliver fabulous music at any party I arranged.'

**What was your first day in business like?**

'The first event I arranged, in 2004, was a Moulin Rouge extravaganza for a bat mitzvah party with more than 200 guests. The venue was an empty studio with white walls, strip lighting and no furniture. My heart sank because it had zero atmosphere. In fact, it was quite a depressing space. But I managed to transform it into a Parisian nightclub for the evening, with can-can dancers, champagne fountains, candelabras draped in feather boas, and tables piled with gorgeous food. I kept picturing the glamour of Nicole Kidman and Ewan McGregor in the movie and it started to come together. The party was a brilliant success - I'm still getting work from people who've heard about it. Everyone said the room looked amazing; they couldn't believe the transformation.'

**What's been your biggest success so far?**

'A Mozart street party in London in 2006. I put my heart and soul into the proposal and beat off three other established companies to win the contract. I dressed all the musicians in huge powdered wigs and went over-the-top camp with a purple and pink colour scheme. We had lavishly dressed footmen, Mozart-themed cocktails and canapés served on violin-shaped trays.'



**Are all your events extravaganzas?**

'Huge themed events are amazing, but I love planning private parties, too. The hosts give me the keys to their homes and go out for the day and, by the time they come back, the place is almost unrecognisable. I set up a bar, fill the rooms with beautiful scents and music, and make sure the glasses are sparkling and there's lots of chilled bubbly. I even put out a rail for people to hang up their coats. I've arranged a Chinese New Year themed party, a winter wonderland and a crystal Christmas. The hosts are often incredibly nervous - even captains of industry and big celebrities get really worried about whether people will have a good time. I promise to offload all the stress and encourage them to enjoy every stage of the planning process. I show them my checklist, and that really reassures them.'

**What's a typical working day for you?**

'There are site visits, menu tastings, meetings with florists, caterers, production companies and lighting specialists, then I go back to my office to update the clients. My office is divided into two areas: one with the computers, printers, filing and so on, and one with the fun stuff. That's where I do the arty-crafty work such as the mood boards I make for every party. I put together table linen samples, invitation >

the Amalfi coast, next a celebrity-studded bash at Claridge's, then an intimate house party in Notting Hill. It's a dream life, but how did she make it happen?

**What was your life like before?**

'I worked as a piano teacher during the afternoons, practising between lessons, then I'd glam up for gigs in the evenings. I toured with pop stars and opera singers, performing at amazing concerts and on TV, but life as a full-time musician was tough and often soul-destroying. I never knew when or where my next gig would be, I was always chasing late payments, and I risked injuring my hands from playing too much.'

**What gave you the inspiration to start party-planning?**

'I was playing at the premiere party for Bridget Jones's Diary in 2001. It was a lavish event, dripping with celebrities including Hugh Grant. Every part of it reflected a 40s theme - even me! I'm sure I looked ridiculous in my blonde wig and thick make-up, but I was impressed by the set-up. I thought to myself, "I could do this and, if I did, music would still be part of my life." I've always loved throwing parties and making sure the arrangements were perfect. This way, I could combine my two favourite things in life.'

**Did you have to blow your savings to change your career?**

'My office was my spare room, so I bought a laptop for £300 and that was it. I didn't even know how to operate the computer when I first got it, but it's amazing what a lot of geeky knowledge I've gathered in a short time. I picked the brains of all my techy friends and spent hours puzzling over computer manuals. Now I have software for clients to track their

## A DAY IN MY LIFE

**I wake up** at 7.30am and dive straight for my BlackBerry to check if there are any urgent emails. Then it's tea, a bowl of cereal, a shower, and work in front of GMTV in bed.

**At lunch** I love being with clients. Favourite places include Pearl - the restaurant at the Renaissance Chancery Court, and Claridge's.

**My office** I share it with hundreds of files, mood boards, menus and my assistant.

**I switch off by** going to concerts, playing my baby grand or watching Sex And The City.

**My daily guilty pleasure is** hot chocolate.

**My hours** Thanks to my portable office - my BlackBerry - I'm on call pretty much 24/7. But I do treat myself to time off.



Sarah has found running her own business empowering



and menu ideas, a design for a logo, ribbons, and stils from films. I love every bit of it, though the downside is that I work most evenings.'

#### What are the main pressures?

'Having the responsibility for everyone's big day on my shoulders. I try to be as methodical as I can. I now have a full-time assistant and employ freelance help so I don't have to lay every table myself, but I couldn't cope without my 'bible' - a check-list of music, food, travel details, accommodation and timings. It's colour-coded, highlighting all the different elements of the party, so nothing, however tiny, slips on the day. Of course, mistakes do happen. Weddings can be particularly fraught - heads have fallen off figurines on cakes and needed to be iced back on and there's always tension in the air when the two families get together. I've planned several weddings overseas, including quite a few fusion

ceremonies where the bride and groom are from different cultures. At a wedding I organised in Italy last year, the musicians arrived too late to accompany the happy couple down the aisle. Thank God I'm a musician! I had to leap to a piano and play *Clair De Lune* as though it was all part of the plan. My heart was beating overtime with stress but the bride didn't know anything had gone wrong.'

#### How do you cope with stress?

'Weekends away, spa visits and frequent holidays help me get my sanity back. I give myself long weekends or sneaky mid-week breaks at least every couple of months, which I could never afford as a musician.'

#### What do friends and family think?

'They're really proud and happy for me, though they think I'm a workaholic. Since last year I've been single and everyone, including me, is waiting for

my Mr Darcy to come and sweep me off my feet. I certainly go to enough balls, so I hope it's only a matter of time.'

#### How has your new life changed you?

'It has given me more commercial sense - I'm more savvy than when I was a musician and devoted myself to hours and hours of practice. Running my own business has empowered me.'

#### What makes you feel fabulous inside?

'Helping my favourite charity (I'm on the committee of Breast Cancer Haven); playing my baby grand piano; buying a friend a gift I know she'll love.'

#### And on the outside?

'I like my hands to look glamorous so a good manicure does the trick; cooking a fantastic meal and hearing everyone rave about it; diamond earrings - especially when they're bought for me.' □

[www.orchidevents.co.uk](http://www.orchidevents.co.uk); 020 8209 3248.

## Could you do it, too?

Party guru Peregrine Armstrong-Jones, who planned Posh's wedding and Elton's 40th, shares his secrets



**1** You've got to remember it's not your party. You have to be relaxed but with crazy attention to detail.

**2** If things go wrong, remind yourself, 'It's only a party, not a train smash.'

**3** You can take a degree in event management, but the best training for this job would be to go to drama school and

study skills such as lighting, sound design and set building.

**4** Hot right now are simple looks. The fad for drapes and thousands of flowers has died.

**5** Be guided by the venue itself. A party in the Tate Modern is a world away from a celebration in a medieval castle.

## How we made it in...

### THE PARTY WORLD



#### THE COCKTAIL QUEEN

Former model Hayley Menzies, 31, used her contacts to set up a glamorous party drinks service called Foxy Shots.

She sent a bunch of girls on a crash course in cocktails and lotted them out in 50s-style debutante dresses. Now her elegant team glam up parties and premieres with her chef rustles up gorgeous canapés or a full roast lunch to order. 'The secret to keeping good staff is to treat them well and pay them quickly,' she says.

[www.foxyshots.co.uk](http://www.foxyshots.co.uk)



#### THE MARQUEE MAESTRO

Secretary Katherine Hudson, 28, went on holiday to Morocco and, inspired by Arabian Nights-style tents she saw there, commissioned

a tent maker to make something similar. From there she started the Arabian Tent Company, hiring out exotic marquees to a host of celebrities including Davina McCall, Prince Charles and Kate Moss. 'I love creating fantasies,' says Katherine. 'People who want to add elegance to their parties hire the Very English Tea Tent, or, for Bollywood glamour, the Bombay Boudoir.' [www.arabiantents.com](http://www.arabiantents.com)



#### THE DREAM CATCHER

Party designer Pippa Dainoff, 37, stumbled on her new career when temping for an event organising company. 'Eventually I struck out on my own,' she says. 'My

party was on the eve of the Millennium Claridge's, for a wealthy American who hired a penthouse suite so his friends could watch the fireworks.' Now she specialises in transforming blank spaces into wonderlands. 'For a midwinter wedding recently we turned the marquee into a summer rose garden. The gasps of delight when guests walked in were great to hear.' [www.pippadainoff.com](http://www.pippadainoff.com); 020 8968 8100