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The Business of Folk/Acoustic Performing Arts

Essential Tips and Planning for a Career in the Performing Arts

Synopsis

Perhaps the most important aspect of the business of acoustic music for the self-managed artist is their examination of the business itself, and to determine how much of the artist's perception of the business is fact or fiction. In most cases, the artist's perception of the industry is overly simplistic and naïve. The topics below are fundamental issues that an emerging artist must examine if they are contemplating a career in acoustic music in the United States. Because the industry changes and fluctuates constantly, there is no formula or curriculum that can guarantee success. In many cases, success is attained through trial, error, and most importantly...luck.

Part One: Perceptions and Expectations of the Business of the Performing Arts

- A.** First, one has to examine their perception of the entertainment business with regard to acoustic music
 - 1. How you think it works vs. how it really is
 - 2. How do you fit into the field of acoustic guitar
 - 3. Can you (or do you wish to) make a living at it
 - 4. Popular myths
 - 5. What exactly is your market (PACs, theaters, clubs, festivals, cffhs, street)?

- B.** Second, the realities of the marketplace
 - 1. Why the performing arts business is illogical from the artist point of view
 - 2. The true reality of presenters and their goals (filling seats)
 - 3. Agents (sellers) v. Presenters/Promoters (buyers)

- C.** Third, where do you fit in and what do you seek to gain from performing (i.e., why do you want to do it)
 - 1. Money
 - 2. Fame
 - 3. Recognition
 - 4. Love of the arts

- D.** Fourth, what are your long term projections
 - 1. How long can you sustain the rigors of breaking into the business
 - 2. Do you love what you do enough to try to make a career out of it

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3. Which markets can I graduate into?

Part Two: Determining Level of Performance Experience is Crucial

Like many professions, your level of experience will dictate which market you will realistically do well in. For example, it is very unlikely that you would be considered for a judgeship right after graduating from law school; or becoming a professional baseball player just after finishing little league. Determining where you are at any given moment will help you more in determining where you want to go.

- A.** First, determine which venues have you performed in
 1. Why it is unlikely you will get booked in a 1,500 seat PAC if you have never performed in public at all.
 2. Categorize the type of places you have performed in
- B.** Second, how often you are performing annually will also determine where you are and might be going
- C.** Third, how much travel, session work or live performance have you done, or are you willing to do
- D.** Fourth, are you a music educator
 1. why you need to be able to teach & lecture as well as perform

Part Three: To be successful at the business of the performing arts, you must behave like a business person and know when to “not be” the artist.

As a self-represented artist, you are already at a great disadvantage because of the prevailing belief that artists are not savvy business people, are unreliable, egocentric, incapable of handling rejection, and excessively temperamental. While these perceptions are not exactly untrue, it is a generality that is a tremendous obstacle to overcome when trying to get bookings. Knowing how to conduct yourself as a professional business person is the best way to undo the stereotype attached to self-managed artists. Having knowledge and experience in e-marketing, distribution, promotion, expense analysis, various software programs, graphic design, contracts, tech riders, and other legal matters, will serve to increase your chances of succeeding in the performing arts.

- A.** What is your level of business management experience
 1. Do you have a business plan
 2. What are the strong parts & weak parts
 3. What business models do you find useful
- B.** Product
 1. Do you have a product, and if so, how professional is it
 2. Do you have distribution of the product
 3. What outlets

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4. Do you have some sort of distribution contract
 5. Are you an original works composer/artist, or protected works artist
 6. Do you have familiarity of copyright issues if you are using protected works
- C.** Reference guides
1. Which have you read and/or are using
 2. Do they make sense
 3. Are they reliable sources
 4. What are your business theories
 5. Do they hold up
- D.** Telephone expertise
1. Cold calls & follow ups
- E.** E-marketing
1. Why it is essential in the performing arts
 2. E-mail lists
 3. Website design
 4. Consumer behavior, statistics and tendencies
- F.** Grant & fellowship writing
1. Partnering w/ arts agencies for professional development
- G.** Honesty or Dishonesty
1. Should you employ schemes to get bookings & distribution (i.e., false representation, deceptive marketing, etc.)
 2. Being yourself or being phony when dealing with presenters/promoters
- H.** Developing relationships
1. non-verbal communication skills
- I.** Handling booking process
1. Contracts
 2. Follow-up
 3. Technology (e-mail, .pdf, etc.)
- J.** Professional Conferences
1. Why you should or shouldn't attend
 2. Which to attend & for how long
 3. expectations
 - a. cost
 - b. longevity
 4. myth v. reality
 5. Make sure you are fully aware of what conference mission is or what the purpose is
 6. Will it meet your expectations?

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- K.** Knowing all aspects of presenters' venues
 - 1. Staying on top of current presenter information
 - 2. Using the Web for information

Part Four: Willingness to Travel

The absolute hardest part of making a living in the performing arts is the travel. Getting from point A to point B is stressful, tiring, unpredictable, and requires the most planning on a tour. Traveling is also one of the leading causes for personal problems (spousal breakups, divorce, kid issues, etc.). If your goal is to make a living at the performing arts, you must travel, sometimes great distances, which means you will be away from home. Before investing your time and money, examine whether or not you will even be able to travel. Most artists will never make it to the level of extensive traveling, but if you are lucky enough to be that successful, how will you deal with the travel issue?

- A.** Traveling while having a day job
- B.** Which regions to develop first
- C.** Music markets – which ones and should I even care

Part Five: On Your Own or With an Agent

- A.** Pros & cons
- B.** Myth & reality
 - 1. mid levels, majors, boutiques, start ups
- C.** Expectations of agent v. artist
- D.** Current status of emerging art re booking and what an agent has to think about