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The Concert Business: Then and Now

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When I started producing concerts in 1971, it would have been impossible to imagine doing so without printed tickets, a local postering effort, or extensive radio play. Thirty-five years ago my partner and I literally looked up Charles Mingus' phone number in the New York City phone book and called him to see if the legendary jazz bassist, bandleader, and composer would be interested in doing a show for us! He was. Today the concert business can be as high-tech and corporate as any other major industry.

The biggest change is that large corporations now produce a substantial share of the concerts. Live Nation, a publicly traded company, and AEG Live, a subsidiary of Anschutz Entertainment Group, a privately held business, are responsible for most of the concerts produced today. Both companies not only produce concerts, they also have divisions that sell tour merchandise, produce sporting events, and own or manage venues.

Recently Live Nation has gone even further by contracting with artists such as Madonna, Jay-Z, and Shakira for what are called "360-degree" deals. For a very large sum of money guaranteed to the performer, Live Nation gets to control almost all aspects of the artists' careers. In the case of Madonna, the Artist Nation division of Live Nation will control most of Madonna's future music-related businesses, including the exploitation of the "Madonna brand," new studio recordings, touring, merchandising, fan clubs, web sites, DVDs, music-related television and film projects, and endorsements and sponsorships. According to *Billboard*, this contract will last for ten years, and Live Nation will pay Madonna a reported \$120 million—guaranteed.

Years ago there was a concept in concert production called "promoter of record." Artists' booking agents used this idea to get promoters to take risks with up-and-coming acts. The thought was that if the act eventually made it as a top-level ticket seller, it would come back to the risk taker—the promoter of record—and work with them going forward. With the current "360 deals," that concept is no longer viable. Live Nation and AEG can easily bid on national tours given that both companies control many venues across the country. Again, the independent promoters who

may have given the act a start, and even lost money in the early days of the artist's career, may not ever get the chance to present that act again. In fact a promoter who takes a national tour one year may not get it the next.

A small but very significant change in concert production can be seen with ticketing. In the early 1970s, Ticketron was a start-up venture. It was convenient for a ticket buyer to go to an outlet, usually in a record shop or department store, and buy a ticket without going directly to the venue box office. It was worth the service charge added to the ticket price so that the purchaser didn't have to travel a long distance to buy the ticket in advance at the theater. Remote ticket outlets today are few and far-between—and probably won't be available much longer. Online purchasing of tickets, followed by telephone purchases, are the methods of choice.

Fan web sites are also important ways to buy tickets. Many artists seek to reward their loyal fans by giving them the first opportunity to purchase tickets—before they go on sale to the general public. Modern technology allows the buyer to print tickets at home via the computer, and barcodes can be text-messaged to a cell phone, which is simply scanned at the venue. Although the consumer pays for these conveniences, it is a time-saver. The promoters also benefit since they get the advantage of knowing early that tickets are sold. Ticketron is long gone, acquired by its competitor, Ticketmaster, in 1991. Ticketmaster adds revenue to the promoter by sharing some of the service charges.

Live Nation recently announced that it would start its own ticketing service, replacing Ticketmaster at the venues it controls. It is interesting to note that at one time tickets were actually printed on a printing press, and the time it took to print the tickets needed to be factored into production schedules. I can recall that in the mid-1970s we didn't add a second show for a three-act sold-out blues show starring B.B. King because it would have taken too long to order a second set of tickets. After that incident, we often ordered a second set, which went unused if there was no demand for another show.

Marketing a show has also changed dramatically. Getting the word out was done using a mix of print advertising, radio ads, and direct mail to potential ticket buyers. Posters, or "snipes," were hung in appropriate, well-trafficked areas, and flyers were given out at events or concerts that attracted a similar audience. In addition to paid advertising, press releases were sent to the music press to interest them in interviews and calendar listings. Photos were sent to members of the print media with the hope that

an editor might choose a photo of the artist and add a caption stating the date and place of the show. Little has changed in public relations, except for the method of sending out press releases and photos, and the speed at which this can happen. Rather than using the U.S. mail, everything is done via email.

Over the past five years, paid print advertising has diminished considerably. Due to the widespread use of personal computers and PDAs, newspapers are read less and less. Young concert ticket buyers rely on the internet for a major portion of their news, cultural or otherwise. Opening the Sunday *New York Times* to see what concerts were being announced was a ritual in many homes. In New York the Wednesday *Village Voice* was also a very important vehicle for music news. One learned about new recordings and concert news in the *Voice* and other alternative newspapers such as the *LA Weekly* and the *Boston Phoenix*. Today this information is online and instantaneous.

Radio listenership has also been affected by the growth of the big conglomerates. Many radio stations are now part of coast-to-coast chains. In order to reduce costs, the programming is done in a central location and syndicated to the network. This has hurt the concert business in many markets. Local bands get less attention given that programming is done centrally. Since the on-air announcers may be located in a studio across the country, concert mentions for a band in town just doesn't happen. The same is true for satellite radio.

For the most part, people interested in music get their information from the internet. They sign up for email blasts from concert promoters, fan-based web sites, and portals such as Relix and JamBase. Ticketmaster and other ticket vendors also allow potential customers to sign up for email notices by venue, artist, genre, or date. Promoters capture potential ticket buyer information from online lists of customers who attended previous concerts. Once a buyer purchases a ticket online, the promoter has a way to reach that customer for the next show. Often these ticket buyers are given first option for shows before the tickets go on sale to the general public. Some of the very large promoters offer ticket clubs. For an annual fee, sometimes as much as \$300, the club member has the privilege of purchasing tickets first. The promoter can increase his revenue significantly through ticket clubs without sharing any money with the artist.

Larger companies who often don't find it worth their while to invest time, staff, and special marketing in smaller shows, might overlook jazz or

world music artists. These shows tend to appeal to a very limited segment of the concert-going public, and large companies are usually not interested in them since the chances that these acts will grow into huge-grossing attractions are slim. Exceptions to the rule are vocalist Diana Krall, singer Michael Buble, and pianist Herbie Hancock. Mr. Hancock, since his recent Grammy for Album of the Year, is now playing for the pop promoters. Most world music, jazz, folk, and ethnic shows can still work for promoters who are up-to-date on finding potential audiences and know how to target ticket sales. In urban centers throughout America, pop singers from Greece or Mexico, for example, consistently fill large halls with audiences made up of their fellow compatriots. With these shows, print and radio can still be effective.

When I started my company in the early seventies, I was the young upstart. There were large promoters who appeared to monopolize the concert industry; Ron Delsener in New York City, Don Law in Boston, and Bill Graham Presents in San Francisco seemed to get all the important acts. When we attempted to present well-known attractions, the artists' agent would basically tell us that those attractions would only work for the major promoters. Sometimes we were offered lesser-known artists in jazz, blues, or folk—artists that the “big” promoters were not interested in. We managed to take club acts, package them differently, and sell out concert venues like Carnegie Hall, Avery Fisher Hall, and the Beacon Theater. The major promoters, who concentrated on artists that were “household names,” overlooked artists like Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, Muddy Waters, Phil Ochs, and Jesse Colin Young. We consistently managed to reach the appropriate audiences and sell out 2,800-seat venues. The situation was more or less the same then as it is today, with AEG and Live Nation versus everyone else. The only difference is scale. The big players from the 70s have been incorporated into today's conglomerates, yet there are young promoters across the country, striking out on their own by presenting their local bands, working hard to build word-of-mouth, and eventually touring them on a budget. In spite of the large companies who appear to monopolize the industry, there is room for smaller, creative promoters who have an individual approach and are willing to put in the time.

There is still no substitute for an audience enjoying great musicians performing live; people identify with the artist and get to share the experience with others. This is as true now as it was then.

JULIE LOKIN, Art Weiner, and Seth Willenson were all friends and jazz freaks who during the sixties had produced jazz concerts in college. Art and Julie met as members of the Jazz Society of Hunter College and Seth produced concerts at Cornell University. In 1971 while they each worked in related aspects of the motion picture industry, all three remained dedicated jazz lovers and decried what appeared to be the demise of jazz in the Big Apple. With youthful naivety and unbound enthusiasm, they decided that they would trigger the return of the New York jazz scene by organizing a major jazz event at a major New York venue. That event would prove to be a truly historic concert performance by the great Charles Mingus.

Founded in 1971 as a concert production company, New Audiences has grown to include many other facets of the music business, including personal management, tour management, consultation services, and concert advertising and marketing.

For more than 34 years, New Audiences has built its reputation and success on the solid foundation of knowledge, experience and commitment to quality music and performance. New Audiences produces concerts using carefully planned and executed marketing strategies after evaluating new musical trends and directions, and matching specific performers to carefully identified audiences.

New Audiences produces many concerts and events each year, including shows at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Town Hall, and the Beacon Theatre. In addition to presenting concerts by such diverse artists as Sonny Rollins, Take 6, The Rippingtons, Chick Corea, B.B. King, David Grisman, Ute Lemper, Violent Femmes, Barenaked Ladies, David Bromberg, Joan Baez, Indigo Girls, Tony Bennett, Yanni, Dar Williams, Joshua Redman, Ruben Blades and Lyle Lovett, New Audiences has achieved recognition as an innovative producer for its ability to pair artists from different genres and consistently attract a cross-section of their respective audiences.

In 1997 New Audiences was nominated by Pollstar Magazine as Independent Promoter of the year.

Lokin served as Adjunct Professor of Concert Management at New York University, teaching in their Music Business program (1998–2002). He has contributed chapters for two textbooks used in music business programs in many universities, Baskerville's *Music Business Handbook and Career Guide* and *A Music Business Primer* by Diane Rapaport.

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The *MEIEA Journal* provides a scholarly analysis of technological, legal, historical, educational, and business trends within the music industry and is designed as a resource for anyone currently involved or interested in the music industry. Topics include issues that affect music industry education and the music industry such as curriculum design, pedagogy, technological innovation, intellectual property matters, industry-related legislation, arts administration, industry analysis, and historical perspectives. The *MEIEA Journal* is distributed to members of MEIEA, universities, libraries, and individuals concerned with the music industry and music business education.

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