

Session 2 – Live Music Strategy

You have been told about the ‘diagram’, and the relationship between the four components of the live music business – the artist, the artist manager, the booking agent and the promoter. All the four parts will have expectations about the artist’s participation in the live music business and it is initially up to the artist and artist manager to manage these expectations. Also, the artist manager may have to manage the expectations of a record company, if one is involved.

There are two reasonable expectations:

Expectation 1: Playing live will help to market the artist

Expectation 2: There will be a strategy to do this.

There are also the ‘background’ assumptions that will shape those expectations:

- Playing live is expensive
- Playing live is time-consuming to organise
- It is difficult to organise in the early days of an artist career
- There is competition from other music and non-music events

Expectation 1: Playing live will help to market the artist

How? - Support an album release

Playing live served a very basic purpose in the ‘old days’ (pre-1999) – to support an album release. An artist released an album and then went on tour to support it. (This does still happen now to a certain extent and with some differences.) A period of touring was often named after the album, for instance, Guns N’ Roses ‘Use Your Illusion Tour, January 20, 1991, to July 17, 1993, with 194 shows in 27 countries (Wikipedia, 2012).

In any case, the period of activity surrounding the release and marketing of an album is called the ‘campaign’.

It would be common for bands to fall into an ‘album-tour-album’ cycle – release an album, go off on tour to promote it, maybe for a year, have a break then write and record another

album, release it and go off on tour to promote it, have a break, write and record another album...

[Cop Shoot Cop – ‘Ask Questions Later’ 1993. ‘Release’ 1994 (22 years ago)]

Some would argue that an artist now releases an album to publicise a tour. Certainly, legacy bands such as the Rolling Stones do not trouble the official sales charts with their new album releases, but nonetheless, do tend to release albums to coincide with large concert tours. (The albums Steel Wheels (1989), Voodoo Lounge (1994), Bridges to Babylon (1997), and A Bigger Bang (2005), for instance, all had associated tours.) Contemporary artists are also adopting a similar approach.

[John Digweed – live album available on his website with upcoming tour dates]

How? - Continuity for the artist

Legacy artists tend to tour for the sake of continuity – keeping them in the public ear. For more contemporary acts, touring may be vital in keeping the ear between releases, as customer loyalty and attention dwindles.

[Maverick Sabre. Introduced in 2011, released his debut album, ‘Lonely the Brave’, in February 2012. Toured throughout 2012 as part of album campaign, then performed at festivals in 2013 and 2014 as way of keeping the audiences ‘ear’.]

...and let’s not forget, the artist manager will still be receiving a commission from their artist’s live revenue. Handy if the artist is no longer selling recorded music.

How? - Establish and 'hone' the artist

The artist and artist manager will probably look to the artist playing live to establish the artists appeal and career. Initially, this live performance may be limited to playing where the ‘taste-makers’ are – certain bars and clubs are known for talent-spotting. In London there used to be pubs such as the Camden Falcon, later The Barfly, for instance, that were frequented by record company A&R people), and industry events such as South By South West (SXSW) or new talent showcases.

Once the taste-makers are onboard, and an artist has backing regarding a record deal or other finances, then the manager should seek to hone the artist’s musicianship and stage presence, adding to the artist experiences, and presenting them to the public, by booking as many shows and tours as possible. Supporting (or ‘opening’) for more established acts is one traditional way of doing this.

Another way to hone the artist is to sign them to a development deal – a record deal with money to record material and budget to go out and play shows, again opening for other artists. A development deal that includes touring would also require that a major booking agent is also involved as someone will have to persuade promoters to give an unknown band lots of gigs. You shall look at the actual role of booking agents in later sessions.

“That’s the way it was done in the old days. Hordes of A&R men (it was always men) would converge on the Falcon, Dublin Castle, The Bull & Gate in London, CBGBs and Arlene’s Grocery in New York and sign up thin young men in leather jackets to development deals, who would go on to sell ...not much.”

Andy Reynolds, 2015

Now, an artist can be established in a more ‘organic’ way, which opens the way for multiple taste-makers (bloggers, venue owners, web-based radio stations, etc.), as well as the public, to discover and promote new artists. Social media and word-of-internet allow artists to find and keep fans, hopefully turning them into record and ticket-buyers, by using strong live performances.

INTERLUDE - THE BBC ‘LONG LIST.’

The BBC in the UK has capitalised on this organic approach to A&R by introducing its ‘Sound of .. (a.k.a. ‘long list’) campaign, which uses a network of ‘pundits’ to predict which artist will be successful in the forthcoming year.

But, and it is a big but, how many of the pundits see the act live before nominating for the ‘long list’? In fact, how many of the acts do play live before being nominated?

Live performance is still vital to establish and hone the artist for the public ‘ear’, especially given the potential exposure from being on the long list.

How? - Capitalise on artist success

Finally, we would expect that playing live will capitalise on the success of the artist. This capitalisation could follow one of two paths:

Two paths:

The typical path is the slow building of the artist’s live career, capitalising on previous live performance success. An example would be the artist undertaking their headline

tour after several support/opening tours with other artists. The artist and artist manager will always be looking to book the artist to bigger tours, with more sales.

The second path is to capitalise on an unintended or unexpected event that promotes the artist. The 'BBC Sound of/long list' would be an example of this. The artist team would obviously be hopeful of exposure through something such as the long list, but once nominated, would then have to capitalise on the increased exposure, both to taste-makers and the new fans, by playing live.

Or it may be a combination of the two, as in the case of James Bay, another BBC Long List nominee. A screen grab from March 2015 (3 months after the long list was released) shows theatre dates for October of that year already sold out!

How? - Capitalise on artists' economic potential

The two paths we explored previously should take into account the potential to increase the artist earning potential. As the artist plays increasingly bigger venues, they should be able to sell more tickets, at a greater price, for instance.

We will be examining how much money an artist makes from a live performance in subsequent sessions and for now it is necessary to know that ticket sales mostly generate the artist's live performance income. A good indicator of an artist's potential income from a show is to multiply the ticket price by the capacity (the number of ticket buyers the venue will hold). The sum of that calculation gives us the 'gross potential' of the venue – the amount of money that could potentially be made if all the tickets are sold.

It is interesting to explore the correlation, if any, between an artist's recorded success and their live performance success. The screen shows a table of the top 10 albums and tours of 1995, and now, 20 years later. Notice that legacy acts such as the Rolling Stones and the Eagles feature in the both concert charts and that there is no correlation between an artist appearing in the recorded charts and the concert chart.

Expectation 2: There will be a strategy to do this.

Why?

We have examined the marketing that occurs when an artist undertakes live performances, and we have studied the assumptions that go with it. To prove those assumptions wrong (or at least to minimise their effect on the team's progress), we need to develop a strategy for the artist's live performances. The best way to explain a good strategy is to demonstrate a bad strategy.

How?

At a basic level, you want your baby band or artist to play as much as possible but have a strategy in mind. Define your objectives/goals. For instance, do you have a new release to promote? Do you need to earn money from playing some live shows? Or are you simply trying to establish and hone the act?

Pick your venues. Certain venues are synonymous with a certain genre. Underworld in Camden and The Whiskey in LA are known as rock venues. Some venues are more 'taste-maker' friendly than others. You should, therefore, pick your venues accordingly.

You can create impact by perhaps booking a show in a venue not known for your genre or a non-music venue. Bear in mind this only really works for showcase-type events and obviously may cost more in time and money to organise.

[Union Chapel]

Under-play. Nothing builds anticipation with an established or legacy act better than playing smaller venues or a lesser number of tour dates than the act would usually be associated with.

[Soundgarden, who have sold more than 10.5 million in the USA alone, broke up in 1997. They reformed in 2011, playing a tour that consisted of club shows] (Wikipedia, 2004).]

'Buzz' shows for single or album release or to promote major touring works for non-established acts. Acts often do this for major festival appearances – the 'Reading warm-up' show in a small venue, usually in London, preceding a band's appearance at that festival

[Bands such as Biffy Clyro and Tonight Alive had 'warm-up' shows this year ahead of their Reading & Leeds festival appearances.]

DJ sets. Dj'ing need not be genre-specific, i.e. rock bands can get a 'DJ set' together. Playing out, under the acts normal name, will all help to establish the brand and promote a new release. And the money can be useful.

[Maribou State]

Supporting/opening slots. While these are very difficult to secure (as you shall learn in other sessions), opening or support slots are often seen as a 'holy grail' when establishing and honing an act. Any offer of a support slot must be considered carefully – what is the potential exposure and what are the other benefits? Is it likely you can sell a lot of merch, for instance? One of our assumptions is that touring is expensive – touring is an opener can be very expensive, for reasons you will learn about in subsequent sessions.

When?

The 'when' of your live strategy can be applied to the career timeline and also to the annual calendar.

A career-based live strategy could include milestones such as, 'the act should be headlining 500-1000 capacity shows' within one year of the debut album release', for instance. It is then up to the artist team to work towards that goal, implementing a strategy to enable them to achieve that goal.

A calendar-based approach will see the artist team take into account the following:

Touring traffic. The live music calendar has ebbs and flow which are seasonal and event-based. For instance, summer in Europe means outdoor, green-field festival – lots of them. Your aim would be to perform at one or more of them. And there is no point organising club shows during this time if you are not. Most of the fans, and the promoters will be attending the festivals. Likewise, you might want to avoid the heavy post-holidays period as people have been partying hard and are spent up.

The screen shows how the touring year looks in Europe, North America.

Festivals. As mentioned, your live strategy should include performing at festivals, which satisfies two requirements for establishing and honing an act – good exposure and large income.

However, if you are a total 'baby-band' and/or you do not have a booking agent you will not get a slot at a major summer festival. Yes, there are Unsigned/new-band

stages and, yes, hundreds of bands perform on them every year. And you are telling me that a significant number of the 75,000 ticket buyers, who have paid upwards of €175 each, are going to rush over to the Unsigned/new-band stages and miss the established acts they have paid to see? No, they are not.

Include festivals in your strategy once you have become established i.e. you can headline a 300 capacity tour, and/or you have a booking agent.

Release timing. Touring is supposed to promote a release and it is always a good idea to let tracks filter into people's minds for a couple of months before announcing shows or a tour that supports that release.

Ticket timing. When do you announce your show and when do you put tickets on sale? Or, put another way, when do most people get paid?

Where?

Go where demand is. The demand can either be from taste-makers or ticket buying fans. It's fairly easy to go where taste-makers go – they like venues near their offices or that have early shows, and don't open at weekends. It's different for ticket-buyers (aka punters).

In the old days as it was difficult to tell where your albums or singles were selling. You would have to go on historical data or gut feeling. Now you can use data from Internet-based analytics such as Buzzdeck or Google and find out where you have sold, you're your tracks downloaded or discussed.

There are still a few rules of thumb when it comes to playing where the demand is.. Martin Atkins, author, lecturer and former drummer in Public Image Limited, says stay east of the line in the USA. The screen shows a map of the USA. Imagine a line between Minneapolis to Monterey. You should concentrate any touring activity on the east of that line, especially in the baby-band phase of your career.

3. The record companies' expectations of their artists playing live.

"Most labels view commercial radio airplay as the most important promotional outlet for new music, but right behind radio are live performances through touring."

(Hutchison, et al., 2010)

The record company should or may offer tour support as part of their commitment to marketing the act through live performance. Simply stated, tour support is financial aid paid to an artist to offset costs of touring. It is effectively an amount of money that is recoupable, meaning it is a loan from the label that will be paid back to the label from the sale of recordings. Tour support comes in the form of money advanced to the artist to cover the losses incurred from being on the road.

Tour Support

The label will take a decision to offer tour support. The decision will often be based on the following criteria:

- Has the artist done well in this market before?
- Are radio stations expected to support the single with airplay?
- Do the local print media write about and support entertainment?
- Does the tour sponsor have a presence in the market?
- Is there a possibility for a media partner in this market for the tour?
- Is this a good retail market for the genre and the artist?

(Hutchison, et al., 2010)

The return for the record company

The screen shows a screen grab illustrating sales of U2 records, city by city, following concert appearances by the band. This data is available in the USA through Soundscan, by Nielsen and includes digital as well as physical sales – even those sold at venues. (Nielsen, 2015)

Live promotional shows and tours ('promo')

"The difference between a promotional tour and touring, in general, is that a promotional tour is not funded by public appearances and it is designed to promote the artist as a commercial product to the industry before he is promoted to the consumer." (Hutchison, et al., 2010)

Examples of promo would include 'radio shows', in-stores and large events such as EMA and BRITS.

[Apple Music Festival]

Conclusion

We started with some expectations and assumptions about playing live.

You should now understand those expectations, and be able to work with, perhaps even refute, the assumptions. This will form your strategy.

In any case, live performance is a fundamental marketing activity for music artists... .. and can be lucrative as well.