

BOOKING AGENCIES AND THE FESTIVAL SEASON

by LOTD

A FESTIVAL FOR EVERY ARTIST

Booking agents generally only want one thing: for the bands they represent to play as many shows as possible. But is playing at a handful of festivals just as important as having your own club tour? Three seasoned owners of booking agencies talk about the influence of festivals on the music industry.

COULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR AVERAGE WORKDAY?

Bas: "It varies a lot. Sometimes it's just sitting in front of the computer all day. The most important tasks in our line of work are planning and coordinating shows and you do that sitting at your desk. But I also have a lot of contact with managers and labels who, for example, want information about ticket sales or plans for festivals. So, I'm constantly communicating with a lot of people, mainly by email, but also by phone."

Eleanor: "I'd say 70 to 80% of our work is all email based. We do calls whenever you have a lot to go through with somebody, for example with your artist when you're planning and strategizing for the upcoming releases and plans for the following year. But most of your time is spent emailing with festivals and promoters. Obviously, the type of work that you do is dependent on the time of year. Usually, the season would kick off in September and that would be when you start pitching festivals for the following summer. Aside from that you're always booking tours or shows for your artists depending on their release campaign."

Bas: "It's also networking and going to shows regularly. Just to connect with the band and feel the temperature at the show so to speak; was it a good booking, or not? Is it worth doing it again, or was the band on a stage where they actually didn't belong? I learn a lot from that for a next time with another band. And when you're at a show, you're basically talking to your artist all of the day and that yields a lot for the long term. Trust, for example, but also insights into how they do things. So, it's a lot of computer and phone work, and a bit on location."

HOW DO YOU USUALLY FIND BANDS THAT YOU WANT TO REPRESENT?

Eleanor: "That question is one that comes up all the time when you do like any panels or conferences. There's no one definitive answer for it. The majority of the time when you sign someone, I would say for me it comes from kind of a trusted source. And that person could be a manager, a label, an industry friend. I would be more inclined to start working with somebody whenever I've been tipped off on a band from multiple other sources."

Steve: "If I like it, and I feel I can sell it and, you know, convince other people that there's a reason to book it, then that's enough for me. I don't really subscribe to metrics, statistics, Spotify plays and Facebook and Instagram likes. Obviously, they're all helpful, but I think first and foremost, music's got to speak for itself. And if you really like it, you can feel passionate about it enough to tell someone else. That's how this game has always worked."

Bas: "There isn't really a standard formula for how it works. It's a gut feeling; do I feel it's worth taking the risk and do I have time for this band. Not necessarily in that order. I've had a lot more time to scan and search for bands during the pandemic. I used to do that a lot more, but at a certain point you are just so busy that you hardly get around to it. But then I really just started scanning through Spotify and YouTube. I found some bands that had barely done anything, like Ghost Woman from Canada. I immediately felt that it was a band that suited me, so I emailed them directly. They were completely amazed that there was someone in Europe who liked them."

BUT BANDS DON'T OFTEN GET "DISCOVERED" THAT WAY, RIGHT? AS A BAND IT IS PROBABLY BETTER JUST TO REACH OUT TO A BOOKING AGENCY YOURSELF?

Eleanor: "It's a tricky one to answer. If you're an artist and you decide that you're just going to reach out to a bunch of agents, at first you need to do your homework to make sure that you're reaching out to the right agent and that their roster is suited to the music that you produce. Doing that kind of "cold calls" isn't always the best way to go about it. It might be better to create your own scene. Create your own kind of buzz first, and then things grow organically. I personally prefer when it happens like that rather than, you know, this kind of really →



Steve Backman (Runway)
Steve works as an agent at Runway and is also a director of the company. Runway was set up in Covid with Matt Hanner. Prior to that Steve worked at Primary Talent for nearly 20 years. His roster includes The Mission, Public Image Limited, A Certain Ratio, Langkamer, Mandrake Handshake and Naked Lungs.



Eleanor McGuinness (PlayBook Artists)
Eleanor is one of the directors and booking agents of PlayBook Artists, founded in May 2021, which represents about 130 North American, British, and European artists. PlayBook Artists' European roster includes acts like Weyes blood, Angel Olsen, Andy Shauf, Arooj Aftab, Beverly Glenn Copeland, and traditional folk singers like John Francis Flynn among many others.



Bas Flesseman (Belmont Bookings)
After being a musician for about 15 years, Bas Flesseman started his own company named Belmont Bookings in 2000. Belmont is European Agent for The Tallest Man On Earth, Mattiel, Daniel Norgren, Preoccupations, Ghost Woman a.o. and their Dutch promoter roster includes Bon Iver, King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard, Weyes Blood, Lankum and Protomartyr.

big pitch coming towards me. At the end of the day, everybody will always listen to the music and make a judgement whether or not the music is for them.'

Bas: 'I also have to believe in it myself, musically speaking. That comes first. I'm not out to make a quick buck, but I have to have the feeling that the collaboration with the artist is for the long term. The foundation is always my own taste and their quality.'

DO YOU PICK THE ARTISTS YOU WORK WITH, WITH THE AIM OF ACHIEVING A CERTAIN LEVEL OF SUCCESS?

Steve: 'All bands have different ceiling levels. They may well be happy to just play to the 1,500-capacity theatre circuit every other year on a good ticket price. They may never have had the longing to play in an arena, and they could be perfectly happy with the environment they're in. But a lot of the corporate world is all about getting the act to the arena, and big-ticket money as quickly as possible. For me, that strips all of the artistry out of what we do. It's supposed to be art. And it's subjective at all different levels. Take someone like Swans, for example, Michael Gira is never going to be commercially viable. But he's had a career for a long time, he doesn't play massive venues, and yet he's got an audience that will go and see him every time he plays. Is that successful? Yeah, in my opinion, that is totally a successful artist.'

WHEN YOU START WORKING WITH AN ARTIST, AND YOU START PLANNING GIGS FOR THEM, DO YOU ALSO THINK ABOUT FESTIVALS RIGHT AWAY?

Eleanor: 'You're usually looking at it from a 12-month plan for the artist. They're going to have a strategy involved, for example, the record comes out in February and then maybe they want to play some shows in April, then they want to do summer festivals and tour again in the fall. So, I think it's really important to also have November indoor festivals because you use them for the same reason that you might use a festival in the summer. Also, those tend to be smaller, so you'll tend to have a more focused audience that are just there for kind of that type of music. The outdoor festivals are more about building, going to the next level. When you're already slightly established and you want to go to the bigger audiences, where you're going from 1,000 to 5,000 for example, then the big festivals in the summer make more sense because the strategy then will build you up to that level. So, you kind of need all types of events for lots of different reasons.'

Steve: 'The space for new acts on festivals has been squeezed so much that even at the bottom end of a lot of festivals they're still looking for names that have had a certain amount of radio play and a bit of press to warrant having some

'There are too many festivals with hardly an own identity'

form of an audience to be in front of them at the festival. Whereas, you know, 10, 15 years ago there were plenty of spaces for completely new bands to play. Festivals still wanted to put on new music for people to discover. So, I think it's less of a question of how important do I feel it is, to how easy is it to get these bands on festivals. It's just getting more and more difficult.'

BUT IF YOU DO MANAGE TO BOOK A FESTIVAL, HOW WOULD YOU FIT IT IN WITH THE REST OF YOUR PLANS?

Bas: 'It differs per festival. If a festival is a kind of discovery festival with small bands like the Great Escape, or Left of the Dial, or SXSW, then the fees are often small, but the impact can be noticeably big. That makes it worth looking for some extra shows around that festival.'

At other festivals there usually is a substantial fee - especially for well-known bands - and then you can use that to build a tour around it. That's what they call an anchor fee, a fee high enough for the band to catch a plane and travel from there. Even then, it depends on many things. The routing must be logical, but the backline also plays a role. Does the festival arrange for backline, or do you have to bring your own?

I also work with festivals in Norway that are in the Arctic Circle. You can only get there by plane, so you have to use their local backline. Then you already know that you can't book certain bands there, because some bands are very explicit about what equipment they want to play with. But those kinds of festivals take particularly good care of the bands. The fees are good, they pick up bands from the airport... they have to, otherwise no one would even consider traveling all the way north.

On the other hand, for example, The Great Escape, which is so iconic and well, industry approved that they can afford to not look after bands at all. So, you don't get a backline, no hotel and you have to figure out everything all yourself. As a booking agent it's a whole different ballgame. You can't make any money there, but you can network, you can make sure that important people see the band. That is a big added value, of course.'

SO OBVIOUSLY, THOSE BIG FESTIVALS ARE IMPORTANT, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE SMALLER ONES?

Eleanor: 'I think it's really important to get support from a grassroots level, so that all levels of artists can develop. That's probably one of the biggest concerns at the moment in the industry, a lot of the grassroots everywhere, they need to be more supported. If we don't have those festivals, if we don't have the exposure of those festivals in different territories, we don't have the local partnerships in those markets. And if we don't have those relationships, then how do we get a band to grow and develop their network in other countries.'

Bas: 'I think festivals overall are still very important, but one of the things I'm struggling with more and more is that there are too many festivals with hardly an own identity. The very big ones will always survive, because there is so much money behind them, they just throw together a bunch of big names and then people will automatically come. But that doesn't make it a good festival. A good festival also generates a certain recognition and real excitement. That's something you build up to and I think there's just too much right now. Especially after the pandemic there are far too many festivals, and they clash. When it comes to ticket sales, they're all fishing in the same pond, aren't they?'

Steve: 'There are too many festival, yeah. It's the new record label, management company or agency scenario of people starting festivals to get them to the level to sell them to a major. I truly believe that's what's going on in a lot of cases. I'm not dissing them for that, I get that there could possibly be a big payday in the end. But unfortunately, what happens when those festivals sell? They may still have the identity of the name, but the booker that made it that festival quite often sticks around for another year and then goes elsewhere and it just becomes another bland corporate festival with the name that used to be a cool festival, but they have the same bill as the other 17 bland corporate festivals, because they've done a deal to book X, Y, and Z act. The booker can ring up and book for all festivals with the one agent. But it doesn't really create an identity of what that festival used to be.'

Bas: 'I sometimes wonder whether those big festivals really need to put on so many bands,

because it causes them to make the tickets more expensive to be able to pay for it all. I wonder if there isn't some kind of overkill. On the other hand, I also want to be able to get my bands booked and I also see that it is becoming increasingly difficult to get small bands on the lineup of big festivals. Unless there is already a very tight industry connection. If you book a huge name at a festival, as a booker you can demand that one of your smaller acts is also added to the lineup. That happens a lot. Well, I don't have that many of those big names, so I often have to get bands booked purely on the music.'

BUT HOW IMPORTANT ARE ALL THOSE FESTIVALS REALLY FOR AN ARTIST'S CAREER? DOES IT MATTER HOW BIG A FESTIVAL IS?

Eleanor: 'I think all levels of festivals are quite important, so artists can develop. If you're a small UK based artist, for example, and you're trying to play in the Netherlands, then it's much better to have low risk and not to be relying on yourselves to sell all the hard tickets, what we would call a headline show. A festival will give you more of a built-in audience, more of a cushioned experience where there's multiple artists in the lineup and there's multiple people supporting the promotion of that festival. It's a really good way to make connections and get in front of people. It's something you can do initially and then you can follow up with headline shows or play the bigger festivals. There are building blocks to develop a career in each market. We all rely heavily on festivals for that.'

Steve: 'As an agent, obviously I can sit here and moan about booking bands on festivals, but everyone wants festivals and it's part of the job. The artists want them because there's more exposure and more money. You have to play the game. It's true there's a quantifiable thing when you play a festival; you can see it once you put another club tour on sale and new people have discovered them at a festival, sales will go up. But that also goes hand in hand with whatever output the band are putting out. Like it's one piece of the puzzle.'

Bas: 'I think festivals are an ideal opportunity for bands to weigh themselves against others. Not so much from a competitive angle, but to measure the level you're at, and whether you can actually create something that makes you

stand out. More so than with a headline show, because then you play to a crowd that already knows what you are about. At a festival you get the chance to connect with an audience that doesn't know you yet.'

Steve: 'Exactly, you just might have exposed a band to some more people who wouldn't ordinarily pay the ticket price to go and see them because they weren't sure. There's always the opportunity to convert people into being fans. So, yeah, it has its value, definitely.'

Bas: 'I also think it is extremely important for the bands to connect with other bands at festivals. I always tell upcoming bands with ambition: Don't just sit around and wait for the industry to do it for you but build your own network. If you come across a band at a festival that you look up to, or feel at home with, talk to them. It's an ideal place to have a beer in the dressing room and really make contact. If that band needs a support act, that's the strongest foundation to get it done. That works much better than a booker proposing a support act.'

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHICH FESTIVAL IS SUITABLE FOR YOUR ARTISTS? DO YOU VISIT EACH AND EVERY FESTIVAL BEFORE YOU DECIDE TO BOOK A BAND THERE?

Steve: 'I don't, is the honest answer. Just ask as many questions as possible. Depending on what the act is, if it's an acoustic act, for example is the tent far enough away that there's no noise bleed from other stages. How big is the tent? You don't want to find out it's a 20,000-capacity tent, but you're only worth 100 people in the marketplace. You know. Try and ask the questions.'

Eleanor: 'Well, that's why we work with a lot of partners in each market, right? We'd have our trusted partners in each country, the national promoters, or subagents. We rely on them for their local knowledge and for them to be pitching the right events. That's why we do so many emails, because we have so many people to talk to all the time. We ask them if they think this artist should play a certain festival if it makes sense to do so. And they feed that information back to you and you work in collaboration together to pick the right events. That's why the local partners become really important in the whole career trajectory. You not only rely on their knowledge, but also on the curation of the festival, who are they booking, what's their brand or what's their identity and how are they positioning themselves and does that make sense for the artist that they're trying to book. Does it match?'

Bas: 'Sometimes I call Nikita, another PlayBook agent, to ask how certain shows went. He does the same with me. Such a network and the trust you have in each other is extremely important. Just to check in and see what the general feeling is after a certain festival. You can also use Instagram for that. Do people post about the festival? Did the →

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band share anything about them having a good time there? I try to keep track of those things.

But yes, it is always better to have actually been to a festival. You especially want to be there when one of your own bands is playing. I was at Roskilde for the first time about six years ago, because Courtney Marie Andrews played there. Then you see what an artist is like in that context. Before you might be thinking, oh dear, Courtney Marie Andrews that's more country music, how is it going to go down with all those 21-year-old kids? Will it be worth playing there at all? But I immediately saw wow, this is perfect. People have never heard the music and you would say that's an obstacle, but if the artist is good, it has a huge impact. Those people have no prejudice they are just open to being blown away.'

ARE THERE MORE EXAMPLES OF FESTIVAL SHOWS THAT HAVE MADE SUCH AN IMPACT?

Steve: 'A Certain Ratio have been a band for 40 years and they are a cult band. They're still putting out new music and had an album this year, but last year we played a headline slot on the third stage at Latitude and on the main stage at Blue-dot Festival, which was the day Bjork played. You could definitely feel an elevation. There wasn't anything visible or tangible, but it just felt like that there was finally some recognition of how important this band are in musical culture, and bands that they've influenced. We've opened doors to a new market because even though they're older and older people go to those festivals, there's also a lot of young people, at Latitude the audience was a mix right through the ages. Those youngsters may not have ever bought a ticket, but they probably will after seeing that.'

Eleanor: 'I have an artist called Son Lux who did an amazing show in Poland for Off Festival right at the very beginning of their career, and that completely changed the trajectory for them in Poland. It was kind of a risky play because they were put on the main stage a little bit earlier, but it just went off completely. And then after that we were able to sell like thousands of tickets for their own shows. Son Lux was also doing okay in other countries, but it wasn't the same kind of immediate response. It wasn't the same kind of like, oh, my God, what just happened? And it was largely thanks to the booker of the festival. He just took that risk and went: "You know what, I'm going to put them on the stage at this time. Yeah, and it'll work." And it did work!'

SO, A BOOKER FOR A FESTIVAL CAN REALLY HELP A BAND BY PICKING THE RIGHT SPOT FOR THEM, BUT DO YOU ALSO HAVE EXAMPLES WHERE THINGS JUST WENT HORRIBLY WRONG?



Grizzly Bear at Lowlands (3voor12)

Steve: 'I've probably got a lot of examples, but I'm not willing to talk about them. There are times when bands say that they want to play somewhere and part of the job of being an agent isn't just to fill the calendar. It's to advise them of what you think is right and wrong. And there's definitely been times where I've said no. Reading and Leeds in the UK, for example, is a 16-year-old upwards festival, and bands quite often pass the point that they should be playing there. But they still want to. And you say, well, no one's going to come because your audience is now older, and they've moved on. I've definitely had stuff playing at Reading where I was like, I told you, there's your parents, me, and a handful of other parents who's 16-year-old kid is watching something on the main stage. It ticks the box, you're playing Reading, but I suppose the people that aren't there are never going to know that that happened.'

Bas: 'I wasn't working with them, but I've seen Grizzly Bear at Lowlands in the Netherlands. I was quite impressed by their records and was glad to finally see them live. I don't remember exactly which stage they played, it was a long time ago, but it was a total mismatch. People walked away, or were loudly talking, while it's pretty fragile music. But without the right focus, it's nothing. It breaks my heart when I see that happen, even if I have nothing to do with the artist professionally. It's supposedly a huge step forwards to be on such a big stage, but it's just a total failure. With my own bands I have also had the situation that they were on a very good spot at a festival, but that they just played a terribly bad show. And yes, that can happen. Things aren't automatically perfect when you book the right spot for them, in the end the band has to live up to it. I think in that regard, the music industry overestimates their own influence; they sometimes think they are God. While, if there were any gods, it would be the bands themselves.' 🙄