

101 STAGE MANAGEMENT

A festival organisation is lost without stage managers. They're responsible for getting the artists onstage on time and ensuring that for instance the drummer doesn't accidentally leave with another band's drumsticks. They are a hospitable bunch of folks, but are also known to be firm when artists turn their soundcheck into a full-blown rehearsal. Whether you're organising a massive festival or a small event with just a few bands, having a stage manager is essential for a smooth operation. If you choose to handle these responsibilities yourself, quickly go through this crash course in stage management to be well-prepared.

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The lingo

Backdrop: A banner that's hung behind the band on stage. Whether the festival backdrop needs to be visible, or the band can hang their own logo, would be the biggest discussion you might run into.

Backline: The gear on stage a band needs to play their set. Ever since Brexit, it's become quite a costly endeavour for artist to bring their own, so this likely needs to be provided.

Buy-out: Money for an artist for mainly two things: either accommodation, or food. If you don't have catering at your festival, you offer the artist a buy-out.

Change-Over: By the audience this is perceived as a break in the timetable, festivals however use this time to get the gear from one artist off stage and that of the next artist on stage.

Curfew: The time an artist needs to have played its last notes, for instance the festival can only put on live performances until 11pm.

FOH-mixer: The front of house-mixer is the console that takes care of the sound in the room or on the field. The technician that operates it, is responsible for how the audience perceives the sound.

Hospitality rider: Food and drinks requested by artists.

IEM or in-ear-monitor: Also referred to as in-ears. Similar to a wedge (further down this list) but it fits in your ears.

Line-check: A super short soundcheck during which the technicians mainly check if everything that should be coming through to the mixers/consolas, is in fact coming through, and to see if the volume isn't too different compared to the previous act.

Monitor-mixer: The mixer that takes care of the sound onstage. If you see a bandmember looking towards the side of the stage while desperately pointing upwards, it's about time the technician starts to turn some knobs on the monitor-mixer.

Advancing or pre-production: Weeks before the festival date, a member of the production team will gather information on what the bands need and in return this person provides the time and place where artists are expected to be on the festival date, how long an artist can play, and if a hotel has been booked. Theoretically, advancing should leave the stage manager with virtually nothing to do, in reality bands tend to not always sort through all that interesting and vital information sent beforehand; they'll wait and see what's expected of them when the date rolls around.

Rental: Not a car, but shorthand for the backline that has been rented.

Risers: The audience would like to at least get a glimpse of the drummer, therefore the kit is often placed on a riser: an additional tiny stage placed upon the stage. For bigger festivals with room to spare, rolling risers are often used. A band can start setting up backstage and as soon it's change-over time, one riser is rolled off stage and a fresh one is rolled on. Hey presto!

Stagehands: When a band brings truckloads of gear, be sure to hire some stagehands to help them carry everything onstage.

Technical rider: A summation of all things needed on stage for an act to perform their show.

Tour manager: The contact for an artist during their tour. There are many exceptions to the rule, but on average the demands of tour managers go above and beyond of what any artist would actually ask for. They could for instance insist that their band simply can't play before being hydrated by the finest of Icelandic spring waters, while the artist would be completely content with some seltzer.

Wedges: Speakers placed towards, and in front of bandmembers so they can hear themselves and each other play. They are located at the front of the stage and are often used by artist to climb on top to enthusiastically implore the audience to join them in song. Something you can't do with IEM's.

Preparation

Preparation is crucial. Mentally walk through every possible scenario and think of answers to any questions you might expect: do you know where the bands can park their vehicles? Is all the requested equipment available? Does each artist have their dressing room? Is dinner taken care of? Do you know how many drink tokens were promised and where to find them? Do you need to arrange transportation for the artists after the show, or are they taking care of it themselves? Will there be a cash payment on the night? Many bands want printed setlists; do you have access to a printer, or should you bring a stack of A4 paper and a Sharpie? Consider every possible situation that might arise during the festival to avoid unexpected surprises. Memorise the names of tour managers so addressing them awkwardly with a simple "hey" can be avoided. If you aim for top-notch performance, listen to the music of every artist, as it can prepare you for the type of evening to expect.

Artist Get-in

When the artists arrive, welcome them with open arms. Ensure you have one designated contact person for the night, typically a tour manager, with whom you will primarily communicate. This approach prevents you from answering the same questions repeatedly for each band member. Immediately go over the night's schedule with them, including details like when dinner will be served or when the stage needs to be cleared for the next performance. While they should have received this information beforehand through advancing, it doesn't hurt to review it and ensure the tour manager is fully aware of what's expected from everyone involved in the show.

If you're stage managing a festival in a small venue with multiple acts, allocate space for each band to store their gear. Ensuring that everyone leaves with the same equipment they brought in is quite crucial. Avoid the hassle of returning equipment to its rightful owners after the event by organising each band's gear neatly in separate areas.

During the festival

Typically, at festivals, acts are only allowed a line-check. Only the first act on the stage gets a bit more time for a soundcheck. They arrive early, even before the punters, and as the sound for the stage needs to be tested anyway, this task is reserved for the first slot. Some artists tend to spend excessive time on the soundcheck, especially when the festival marks the start of their tour, which might lead to delays. However, you need to be clear about how much time is left and should not hesitate to notify the sound-checking band that there's only half an hour remaining. Check in with the sound engineers to inquire about the expected time needed to complete the sound setup; they often have enough experience to estimate what remains to be done. Keep in mind that the process won't be expedited by complaining. If technical issues arise, figure out a solution without impeding the professionals working to resolve the problem. In the worst-case scenario, step outside and inform the eagerly waiting queue that there will be

a ten-minute delay, accompanied by a sincere apology, of course.

Changeovers at festivals are often brief; artists need to quickly remove their gear from the stage to make room for the next act. Having a solid plan is essential. Every band member who has just performed should know how to break up their gear, and the next act should be ready to set up theirs. Changeovers can be exceptionally quick if consecutive acts use the same backline, but it's nearly impossible to dismantle and set up an entire drum kit in under fifteen minutes. Just ensure that everyone knows their roles and plan ahead.

After the show

When an act finishes their set, be ready with towels, extra water, and a friendly comment. Or offer a stern reminder if they need to speed up their gear breakdown. While it's unusual, there may be space for an encore at festivals. It's up to you to decide if it's possible, and it's also your responsibility to prevent the band from playing one if time is running short.

If everything has concluded, it's time to settle the financial matters. While it's becoming less common, some acts prefer to be paid in cash on the night. Double-check that all necessary documents and signatures are in order with the accountant before handing over the fee. Even if payment isn't immediately required, it's wise to ensure that all necessary information has been collected. Some festivals may need a setlist or copies of passports, for instance. It's much easier to address administrative matters while the band is still on-site rather than chasing them afterward.

To ensure you're parting on good terms, ask the artists if they know how to reach their hotel and remind them not to leave any gear in their band bus overnight, especially if it's parked in an area known for car break-ins. If the artists aren't ready to call it a night, they'll always appreciate tips on local spots to visit. When it's time for them to bid their farewells amicably, your job is complete!

Pitfalls and FAQ

"Can we get more drinks?" is probably the most frequently asked question to a stage manager. For most acts, it's wise to create a situation where only band members have access to free drinks. Friends and entourage should remain in the venue, as otherwise, drinks tend to vanish rapidly. Another smart move would be to save any requested bottles of liquor until after the show. It's not advisable to have all band members thoroughly intoxicated before they even play their first note. Some artists are infamous for consuming another band's beer, so ensure that everyone can enjoy the hospitality equally. As a good host, make sure the fridge remains stocked, within reasonable limits.

Guard your boundaries. While you should assist artists to the best of your ability, remember that you are not relegated to being a personal shopper sent all over town for unrelated tasks. Determine whether additional requests align with the smooth operation of the event. Do they genuinely need a fresh pair of socks to perform well, or are they trying to take advantage of your goodwill?

It's not only the artists who can be challen-

ging; you may also encounter staff members who are not in the right mood. Take responsibility for aligning everyone working for the festival. This may require you to be empathetic and understanding why people aren't doing what you need them to do. Find ways to involve them more positively. Ultimately, it boils down to effective communication; people are more likely to follow your directives when they understand the reasons behind them.

Final advice

This job isn't exactly rocket science and with basic logic, you'll certainly survive your first festival. You'll learn from experience. Realise that this job demands commitment. You are not there as a fan, even if you're stage managing your favourite artist. If you want to be taken seriously, refrain from introducing yourself and immediately asking for selfies with the singer. Avoid recording anything during the soundcheck; while it might make for a great Insta-story, artists need that time to prepare without distractions and they certainly don't want their run-through of a brand-new song going viral.

Whatever you do, always be attentive. You won't have time to casually enjoy the entire show or socialise with friends. You're expected to stay alert and ready to act when necessary. Most artists are easy to work with, but in the rare event that you encounter a particularly difficult one, don't hesitate to step in or enforce certain rules and boundaries. Remember, if someone truly proves to be the spawn of Satan, it's unlikely they'll be invited back for future events. If, for some reason, they do return, you'll be experienced enough to hand over the stage management duties to a colleague for that particular show. 📌