

Music workshops: how to choose, prep, and “work” music industry events (by Michael Gallant, July 2014)

Learn to get the gigs you want! Network with star-making producers! Mix your track like a pro! Get your music placed in film and TV!

These are just a few of the taglines that might show up in your inbox or web browser advertising music industry workshops, which aim to help artists – independent and otherwise – achieve a wide array of goals.

When it comes down to it, though, how can you be sure the enticing-sounding workshop on “Remixing with Ableton Live” or “Booking a College Tour” is meat, rather than hype? And if you decide to pay the cost of admission, pack up your business cards, and show up ready dive in, how do you make the most of your time and elevate your career in the process?

Approached the right way, workshops can be outstanding resources when it comes to education, networking, and generating new ideas. To help you make the most of your investment, we’ve got tips from Jim Boitnott (Executive Vice President of Product Services for Presonus) and Mark Frieser (CEO of the workshop-hosting company Sync Summit) – two industry veterans who know the world of workshops inside and out.

Vet the event

Attending workshops can involve commitments of time and money; so how do you make sure an event you’re eyeing is worthy of the expenditures?

Start with some common-sense approaches, like doing a web search on the event, looking for reactions from previous participants and researching whoever is hosting it. “If there’s some legacy aspect to it, like if the organization hosting is something reputable like ASCAP, that helps,” says Boitnott, who has participated in the ASCAP Expo multiple times, both as a musician and a company representative.

Beyond that, Frieser recommends carefully examining the agenda. “Look at the list of people attending and the list of speakers,” he advises. “For a sync event, there should be a good cross-section of people in TV, film, video games, and advertising. If an event has the right people there, it can be worth checking out.”

In addition to having a promising guest list, Frieser adds that an event that includes dedicated opportunities in the schedule to network – both during the day and at night — are signs of a workshop that could be worth your time and registration fees.

Get your music in order – both physically and digitally

Whether the event you’re attending is a workshop on mixing vocals or getting your music placed in reality shows overseas, it’s always a good idea to line up a way to share your music, quickly and memorably, with any interested and interesting folks you meet.

Frieser recommends a unique physical media strategy. “If you go to an event, it may cost a little money, but try making 12-inch vinyl records of your music,” he says. “Everybody is going to remember you. We may be talking an investment of \$500 or \$1,000, but I guarantee you that, if you put vinyl in the hands of a crazy music supervisor, he or she will give you all sorts of crazy love back. People in the sync world in particular are really into the music. Very seldom do they get something that’s cool and different, so vinyl can be a neat way to get noticed.”

Boitnott recalls seeing a fellow ASCAP Expo attendee giving out thumb drives — and making quite an impression doing so. “He had copy-protected loops on them and he was just passing them out,” Boitnott says. “I got one, thought his material was great, and ended up buying some of his work. He was a really interesting character to begin with,” Boitnott continues, “but it definitely helped that, right away, he had these cool jump drives with his name on them. It was really memorable and served him well.”

Regardless of whether you’re passing out CDs, vinyl, thumb drives, download cards, or anything that’s cool and interesting, make sure you include all your necessary contact info. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve gotten a disc where it doesn’t have an email address, or even band name on it,” Frieser says. “Nobody will ever listen to something like that. Nobody cares if they don’t know who you are.”

As far as your digital presence, Frieser strongly recommends making sure that you have a SoundCloud playlist, with all of the music you’re trying to share, posted and ready before you step foot in any industry workshop.

“Also, make sure that you have your metadata correct, and that any links or USB drives you pass out include all necessary information about getting in touch with the publisher, label, and writer, as well as the name of the track, genre, and things like that,” Frieser says. “If you’re trying to license music, make sure that you have 100 percent clearance on everything you’re pushing. If you didn’t write, record, produce, and play every single thing on a track, make sure that you have a piece of paper from everyone who contributed, saying that you either own or have attained rights to shop your song.

“If you find a music supervisor who wants to use your track, asks to see documentation that you are allowed to use it, and you can’t provide that,” he continues, “game over.”

Do your research

Frieser cautions against showing up to a workshop uninformed and expecting to get the most you can out of it. “It’s super important to do a little research,” he says. “If you’re going to an event with a particular music supervisor, for example, go to IMDB and check out what kind of music he or she uses and what projects are listed as credits. If somebody is doing something Nashville oriented, don’t corner them at a workshop and pitch them on something that sounds like Kaskade. By the same token, if there’s a reality show about Las Vegas, they’re probably not going to want something that sounds like Merle Haggard.”

“It may sound simplistic,” he continues, “but it happens all the time. People think, gee, maybe there will be an exception, but no, there never will be. So use IMDB and resources like it to get to know people before the event — and approach them in an appropriate way that’s relevant to their work. That will take you a long way towards success.”

Choose sessions wisely, and speak up

Boitnott cautions that, just because an A-list name may be presenting a session at a workshop doesn’t mean that said session is the best one for you to attend. “Someone may be famous, but that doesn’t mean that you’ll learn a lot from his or her presentation,” he says. “Some of the best workshops are very specific in solving problems related to anything from music licensing to mastering audio. Those are the ones that usually turn out to be truly great, where you walk away having learned the most about what you’re specifically trying to do.”

Boitnott encourages any session attendee to raise a hand early and often. “Ask the questions you want answers to,” he says. “Everybody is trying to find an answer for something, so be sure to bring up your own questions. Even if you’re embarrassed, or afraid that you will sound too uninformed or unsophisticated, if the answer would help you, ask.”

The same advice applies whether you’re in a large workshop or simply going up to someone showcasing a software product, wanting to know more about how it works. “If you have access to people who know things that you want to know, whatever the context, use your time and ask questions,” he says. “And take lots of notes!”

Make friends with everybody

One of the best parts of attending a workshop is not just gleaning wisdom from presenters, but getting to know your fellow attendees. “Building relationships at workshops can be great,” Boitnott says. “Just from starting conversations with random new people, I’ve gotten opportunities to write music, play in sessions, and work on other interesting projects. There are always new opportunities to find by making new friends.”

Frieser further recommends doing your best to befriend, or at least cordially introduce yourself to, the organizers of an event. “If you build a relationship with the people running things, they will try to be helpful to you,” he says. “All conference people are that way.”

Try not to broadcast an agenda when networking and never be rude or dismissive, even if you find yourself speaking with someone who you couldn’t imagine ever helping your career. “Try not to make it look like you’re making a quick judgment when you start talking with someone as to how ‘useful’ a contact they are,” says Frieser. “The best thing to do is make an earnest effort to get to know each person you speak with and exchange business cards. Even if there’s not much of a conversation there, or you need to exit quickly and speak to someone else, just end it politely and say something like, ‘Thanks so much. It was great to have the chance to talk with you. Let’s definitely follow up.’”

One personal note — I've learned that meeting unexpected new people at music events can often be a blessing in ways I never could have predicted. Many of the contacts I've made at such events, some by total accident, have turned into some of my closest musical friends and most helpful industry allies.

Dress the part

Frieser recommends polishing not just your music, but your looks as well when you show up to an industry workshop. "Wear something that's memorable," he advises. "People at conferences tend to dress in similar ways, so it's good to stand out."

So... revealing lingerie, latex body suits, or absurd clown makeup? Maybe not, says Frieser. "If you show up in a bikini, the people who matter really won't care that much. If you're a guy and it's the summertime, maybe wear a nice seersucker suit. If you're a woman, wear something that accentuates your personality — maybe a Stevie Nicks flowy dress or, if you're a salsa musician, something that evokes spending time at the beach. The idea is to wear something that underscores who you are and what sort of music you make, not just a ploy to make people look at you."

Bring an open mind, and maybe an instrument

"Don't go into a workshop thinking you know it all," says Boitnott. "Be ready to learn, and to admit that you may have done things wrong in the past. Sometimes I see people who aren't willing to communicate or engage with the presentations, or other people there. It's really a missed opportunity."

If you're attending an event that has significant hotel presence, or another dedicated area to hang, consider bringing along your guitar or other instrument, in case inspiration and community strike. "At the ASCAP Expo, there were mini jam sessions happening all the time," says Boitnott. "It was great to see."

Finally, Boitnott advises, even though you're there on business, don't hesitate to have fun. "Every time I go to something like this, I feel refreshed and motivated," he says. "I leave wanting to create music again. Let yourself get into it and see what happens."

Sync Summit Hollywood, taking place on September 8-9 at the SLS Beverly Hills, is the world's premiere event for makers and owners of music looking to connect with people in film, TV, advertising and video game projects.

Disc Makers' regular contributor Michael Gallant's debut trio album Completely received a four-star review from DownBeat magazine and a five-star review from Critical Jazz. Learn more, download now through iTunes, jam along with the new JamBandit app, or purchase through CD Baby. Follow him on Twitter at @Michael_Gallant or on Facebook.

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