

Counting the cost of touring

Time was when bands would supplement their income from selling merchandise. Now, though, greedy venues want their share of the proceeds.

There's a famous dressing-room scene in the Led Zeppelin concert movie "The Song Remains the Same", where their manager Peter Grant lays into concert staff after discovering the sale of illegal merchandise at the venue and accusing them of getting kickbacks.

The lengths Peter Grant would go to in protecting the interest of his artists are legendary. If he were alive today, I wonder how he would have dealt with the current practice of venues charging a 25% + VAT commission for allowing a band to sell their merchandise (T-shirts, posters, CDs, etc) at their shows?

When I bring up the issue of illegal downloading and copyright protection I often get the response: "Well, times have changed - bands should accept that they'll have to make their living off of touring now."

What I think many people fail to understand is that unless you're already really successful, touring costs. Hence why, traditionally, the record labels have provided tour support for up-and-coming acts. But even that source of support is now drying up, as labels scramble to compensate for lost CD revenue.

A manager of one of these up-and-coming bands (actually, they made the top 10 on the album chart recently) told me that when he asked their label for tour support for a European tour he was told that they'd only give it to them in return for 50% of all merchandise takings - not only for that tour, but for the future too. As the band had largely built up their fanbase on their own, by slogging away on the proverbial "toilet circuit" before getting a record deal, they believed that that income belonged to them.

And we're not talking tour support of huge amounts here - the band needed £20K. In the end, the manager asked the band members' respective dads to pitch in with £5K each, instead of essentially borrowing the money from the label at such a high interest. But I can't help but wonder what would have happened if the band members came from a poor background or had parents who weren't that supportive. Has the class divide finally hit one of the last supposed bastions of rebellion?

Everyone wants a slice of the pie. Whether they're entitled to it or not means little, once they realise how to put the pressure on to get it - some might even call it extortion. Which brings us back to the venue commission. This practice is spreading like a disease across the globe - an estimated 80% of British venues, 40-60% of European ones and almost 100% of American ones follow it - and most artists aren't even aware of it unless they do their own bookings.

It started with the big arenas, years ago, but now it's trickled down to medium-size venues and it appears to be only a matter of time before even small venues get in on the act (pardon the pun). For a band playing small to medium (2000+ capacity)-type venues rather than arenas, selling merchandise on tour can make the difference between an overall loss and an overall profit.

Lucy Jordache, Marillion's manager, who's spearheading a campaign against this practice, countered a venue's demand for 25% of merchandise by asking for 25% of the bar takings in return. Oddly enough, the venue wouldn't go for that.

Hers is not as bizarre an argument as it may initially seem. Venues charge artists quite a substantial amount of money to hire the place, provide security and pay for other running costs. They also take tons of money across the bar from people who wouldn't be there if it wasn't for the band. Not content with that, they now demand a cut of the artists tour merchandise - sometimes for simply supplying a booth where the band can set up their products; a booth which would be there whether the band had merchandise or not.

And this in turn can affect the fans, as many artists see no other option than to add the cost onto the price. Others, like Marillion, choose to not pass it on to the fans but to not play the venue at all, disappointing fans in that particular city.

The late Peter Grant's methods of dealing with issues like this may have been seen as unorthodox and over the top, but he considered the band his family and would fight their corner till the end. Many bands facing this kind of bullying today may wish that there were more managers like him around to stand up to the bullies.

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