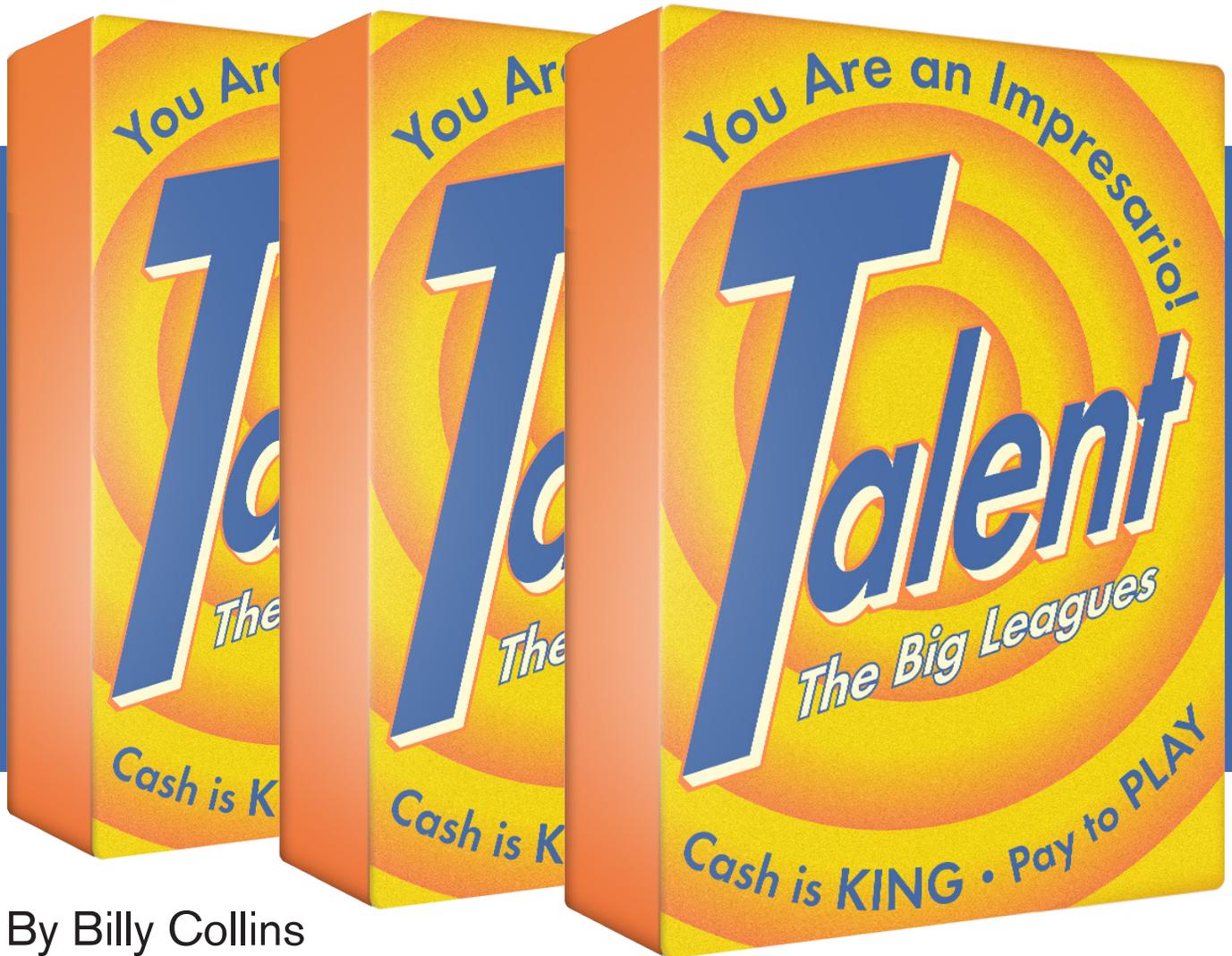


BUYING TALENT: Top 5 Things You Should Know



By Billy Collins

Booking 'talent' for your festival or event can be an intimidating process that often creates anxiety in the would-be buyer. This article is aimed at informing the novice talent buyer about how to avoid some of the pitfalls of negotiating with those most notorious of entertainment industry players, the *talent agent*. In order to prepare yourself to become a qualified and respected buyer of talent, I reached out to several industry veterans for their comments on what they would like you, the buyer, to know. This is real-time, real-life advice. So, if you are new to the business of booking, here are a few key things you should know before picking up the phone and calling Jay-Z's agent

(assuming they will take your call that is).

To begin with – and before you even get started with the booking process - you need to do your research. As Todd Jordan of Paquin Artists Agency (PAA) in Canada says "I like that a buyer has some concept of an artist's value before calling us. Nothing wastes more time than a buyer with a \$1,000 budget calling for a \$100,000 band." Or even worse he states, "is when they hope the artist will consider multiples less than their normal fee because it will be a 'cool experience.'"

The best place to start is to reach out to your industry colleagues and ask around to get some general information about what artists cost. Or at the very least, you should know how much you

can afford to spend on talent, above and beyond other production costs like sound and lights, staging, etc.

This Is the Big Leagues

When you promote a show, it's a gamble. You need to accept that and more importantly, your organization (including the board of governors) needs to accept that. When you make an offer and it is accepted, that sets off a whole set of arrangements and subsequent agreements on the side of the artist, as well as your group. As United Talent Agency (UTA) agent Darcy Gregoire says "When you're a concert promoter, you're in 'win, lose, or draw.' Never expect that an agent will let you off the hook over poor ticket sales or if

you stand to take a bath on a show." At the end of the day, bills need to be paid and agents are not happy to waive or reduce their commissions (typically 10-15% of the artist gross fee) because you did not honor the contract. Furthermore, a presenter needs to also be aware that as soon as you make an offer, and it is accepted, that's binding. Jordan adds that *"A presenter should respect that an offer is binding, and not move forward with a formal offer unless they can live up to the terms."* According to him, too often a first-time buyer will send in an offer and then pull out when it accepted, thinking the offer was simply a way of exploring an artist's interest. *"Nothing,"* he says, *"can ruin a relationship with an agent more quickly than not being respectful of the offer process."*

Cash is King

Nothing says 'confirmed' like a deposit, so make sure you are going to be able to agree to and pay a deposit, and the sooner the better. You never know who else is looking for the same artist on the same day and it could be that their event is larger and more attractive than yours, so don't let the agent take the artist you want somewhere else because you hesitated over paying a deposit. As Gregoire advises, not only pay deposits in the first place, but *"Pay deposits on time. Unless you're a well-established promoter, if you want to be taken seriously as someone who can be relied upon and who legitimately has enough cash flow to properly promote a concert, you'll win an agent's confidence by paying deposits promptly upon receipt of a contract."* And speaking of cash flow, make sure your LOC is large enough to handle up to 50% of your programming budget. Deposits are negotiable however, and you can pay in more than one installment, so negotiate as best you can to maximize your cash flow and confirm the talent. It's a reality that some customers with spotty reputations only receive confirmation after they pay 100% of the artist fee in advance. You don't want to be one of those people. But if you are a new event, or new to the agent, that just might be your reality. It's a simple fact that agencies collect their fees (and manage their own cash flow) from the deposits and send along the remainder to the manager/artist post-gig. Deposits are a necessity.

Pay to Play

Not much has changed since the good old days and any road manager worth their salt won't let the artist walk on stage or play a note before getting paid what you still owe them. *"Never be late on paying an artist, ever,"* says Gregoire, *"Credibility will be lost immediately if you're*

ever late on a final payment, not to mention that an agent might never risk working with you again if you've given reason to believe you'd ever be capable of stiffing an artist." We are not going to go into 'settling' gigs here, because that is a whole other beast, but trust me, you do not want to be staring across the table at an angry road manager while 10,000 fans are standing in your fair grounds, waiting.

Stuff Happens

But then you know that by now! The secret to dealing with such change is to be adaptable. As Jordan counsels, *"Artists are obviously by nature very creative folk, and often their muse takes them in new directions. I would encourage presenters to welcome that creativity, rather than get upset if what is on stage ends up being a bit different than what they expected."* That may sound like a scary prospect, especially when you expect to get what you paid for (the full band for instance, not the solo acoustic). However, it can work both ways as well. *"Be adaptable and accept that things change,"* says Gregoire, *"An artist who thought he was going to perform solo may later decide to have accompaniment after terms of a show were agreed upon. Your relationship with the agent will gain strength when she knows that you're easy to work with by not making a fuss if an unexpected show cost increases."* Again, some of this is negotiable (your expenses may go up so maybe they will relent elsewhere, like in hospitality or accommodations or ground transport) and you don't have to bend over backwards, but if you can make this dialogue easier for the agent and artist, that is going to go a long way with them. Even if it's the agent tacking on an extra flight for themselves. Use that opportunity to meet them and sell your event to them – after all, there's always next year to start thinking about. The 'schmooze' remember, is a dance for two.

You Are an Impresario!

The reason why you do what you do is because you love it. Channel your inner Bill Graham. As Gregoire advises *"Be hospitable, thoughtful, and creative. Some of the most legendary promoters were loved by the artists that they presented."* Promoting live music is still the realm of the bold, courageous and creative (read: crazy). Playing live music on the other hand is the territory of the talented, dedicated and sometimes delicate individuals (read: needy). Gregoire observes *"The road can wear you down. Making an artist feel comfortable by showing some love, great hospitality, and a job well done from the minute you start promoting the show until the end of the night when the artist and crew leave the venue will help build your*

reputation as someone that an agent wants to work with and that the artist will also want to remain loyal to. Remember, if you make the artist feel good by doing a great job all around, you'll make the agent look good, and thus she will want to work with you again." It's all about relationships. 'Nuff said!

According to Jordan, there is one last thing to remember, and that is a presenter should understand that the agents' role doesn't end when the show is confirmed. *"Too many times" he says, "a presenter will ignore calls for marketing plans or ticket counts – or worse yet take offence at the agent asking for them, as though we are questioning their ability to do their job."* The agents job is to ensure the artists they work with are being promoted properly and agents want to make sure tickets sell. They can be a great resource when a show is in need of a push. This is a business where who you know is at least as important as what you know, therefore it is recommended that you do your best to treat agents like real people (although they can have big fangs, they don't bite) and get to know them in-person whenever you can. Attend the 62nd Annual IFEA Convention, Pollstar Live!, SXSW, or another conference or event where you can gain access to them, buy them dinner or a drink and begin to build that relationship. It all goes a long way and is money well spent. Consider it an investment, for you and your organization.

The live music industry has never been more popular or dynamic. It's an ever-increasing pool of buyers as destinations and locales decide to create festivals and events to help boost their tourism industry, brand their cities, and diversity their economies. Everybody is doing it! The supply of artists however – especially those who can draw an audience – is finite. You need a competitive advantage in such a crowded marketplace and great talent is one way to position your event. Therefore, you need strong relationships with the agents that represent them.

Billy Collins is a recovering music agent. He is currently a Senior Lecturer at Thompson Rivers University in beautiful British Columbia where he champions the event management program. He is looking forward to finishing the CFEE certification this fall and continuing his search for the best tacos in Tucson. Billy Collins can be reached at: bcollins@tru.ca