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TOURING AS AN INDIE

Strategies for booking, promoting, and thriving on the road

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Touring as an indie doesn't mean getting on a luxury bus and having a tour manager handling logistics, accommodations, and meals. We're talking about getting your indie band on the road, maybe for your first gig ever. Or you may be searching for a strategy to help you build your band's reach by playing gigs in new towns. Or perhaps it's time to hit the road for a multi-gig tour that spans hundreds of miles or more.

There are plenty of books on the subject, and hundreds of details to keep track of. What we've got in this guide are bits of good advice culled from loads of blog posts and articles we've published. These highlights should get you thinking about the variables involved with getting your show on the road.

Section 1: Are you ready to tour?

1) Do you have something to promote?

A CD is the most obvious thing to promote when you're striking out, but there are other angles you can push when promoting your shows. Did you place a song on a TV show or movie? Open for a national act? Win a song contest? Find an angle that local press can latch onto, or something to add to your flyers, posters, and press releases to give people a reason to look twice.

2) Do you have a road-worthy show?

Don't strive to be ordinary onstage. If you want to command the attention of a room full people who have never seen you, put yourself in their shoes. What would you want to see from your band on stage?

Before you work on a stage show, take a long hard listen to your live performances. Audio tape them, video tape them, and study them. Are your songs good? Are you performing them well in live settings? Where can you improve a performance or arrangement? Does the set flow, or are there minutes of awkward silence in between tunes? Before you hit any stage, you'd better work hard at playing your songs well, and presenting them well, too.

3) Plan a strategy

There's a focused and unfocused way to go about booking and playing gigs, and the difference can spell success or failure. An unfocused approach might include booking gigs in towns you've never played without doing any research into the club you've booked. Or it might simply be booking yourself too frequently in the same area or booking too big a room.

A focused approach will help you establish goals and work toward fulfilling them. In time, you can gauge your success by how you measure up to your goals. Are you playing to bigger and better crowds? Are you playing better rooms than you were six months ago? Broken into a new city?

4) Solo road trip

If you're a singer/songwriter who typically plays with a full band, doing a tour without the band could be an option. It takes courage and dedication to grab your guitar, a few changes of clothes, and get in your car and go. But traveling as a single person (having a co-pilot is always nice) is certainly less expensive and less intense than putting four or five people on the road. If you can swing it, a solo trip playing house concerts or coffee shops can pave the way for a full-band tour later down the road.

Section 2: Booking strategies

1) Think small

Whether you've brought 75 people to a 150-seat club, 300 to a 600-seat theater, or sold 5,000 tickets for a 10,000-capacity arena, those vacant chairs are going to weigh on you and your audience. A concert promoter is not going to pat you on the back for bringing in enough fans to fill half a venue. Conversely, "SOLD OUT" has a certain ring to it, doesn't it? Even if you've only sold out a coffee shop that holds 30 people, the venue will want to have you back, and word will spread that you packed the place. Maybe it sounds counterintuitive when you want to build a fan base and make money, but some well-placed sold-out shows in smaller clubs can go a long way.

2) Plan the big gig in your town's A room

1. Get familiar with the venue's calendar. Look for clues. Do they have a standard number of bands on the bill every night? Is there a night where they tend to give new bands a shot?

2. Look for holes. Once you pick up on a club's booking patterns, you can find holes in their schedule where they need an act.

3. Make sure your music is a match. Once you've identified the shows where the venue is possibly looking for bands, narrow it down to the show where you music is a true fit.

4. Target that specific show in your email/phone pitch. Now you are prepared to approach the club booker in a way that potentially helps them out. Put the show name and date in the subject line of your email and let them know you would be a good fit to round out that bill. Your chances of getting a response–and a gig–just went way up!

3) The Five-Pointed Star Strategy

Before you book the big show at the dream club out of town, consider Martin Adkins' (author or *Tour Smart and Break the Band*) five-pointed star strategy. Before you book your big show, book five shows in smaller cities/towns surrounding your big gig, all within manageable driving distance. Do everything you can to make fans and friends at these shows, and get email addresses everywhere you go. Maybe this process takes two or three attempts before you've got enough legitimate fans, but once you do, you're ready to book that big club and use your new-found fan base from all five points as a draw.

4) House Concerts

A house concert is just what the name implies: a concert in someone's home. Typically, a house concert is an invitation-only event presented by a host, with all the proceeds going to the artist. As a general rule, house concerts are:

- intimate shows with 15-50 people sitting close to the performer

- $10-20 per guest

- performed by solo artists or small groups with little to no amplification

- likely to house and feed the artist for the night

Sprinkling house concerts in between club dates can be a great way to fill out your itinerary. It does take coordination to connect with a host and organize the event, and you are relying on your host's ability to get enough people in the door to make it a success. But house concerts can be an excellent way to personally connect with fans, sell merch, and make decent money.

Section 3: On the road

1) Your gig takes up 25% of your day...

... don't waste the rest of it. Have a set of acoustic versions of your songs rehearsed and ready. For each town where you've booked an evening gig, contact local coffee houses and record shops and ask if you can do a daytime performance free of charge (with a tip jar). Also see if there are local radio stations where you can play, do an interview, and spin some tracks. Even if the listenership or turnout is minimal, in-studios and in-stores are excellent video and photo opportunities that make great content for the web!

2) Don't break down

Make sure to get your van, car, or bus serviced. Make sure the oil is changed, brakes are good, etc. If you're renting a van, try to find a reliable source and do your best to have it checked out before you hit the road for any extended trips.

3) Use social media

Your social media exploits will be more effective if they're targeted.

- If you've played in the area before, reconnect with the folks you met the last go-round.

- Create a Facebook event for each show and invite attendees based on their location.

- Check out the venue websites where you're going to play. Do they have Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter pages you can follow? Who are their most active fans? Reach out to them.

- Do you have an email list you can segment by state and city? If not, now is the time to start. Send a personalized email to the groups of people who live within driving distance of your show.

- Keep a tour diary. This can be as simple as a few sentences and pictures from your adventures you can post on your blog.

- Who are the other artists you're playing shows with? Find them online. Begin a dialogue. See if you can interact with some of their online fans, because some of them will be at your show.

4) Document Everything

Take pictures, video, and audio – not just of your concert, but of the people you meet, the places you go, the landmarks you see, and your band cruising the city. Interview audience members and upload to YouTube. Post the videos on your blog, on Facebook, and Tweet like a bird.

5) Sleep

Getting sleep and staying hydrated are essential to enjoying a tour. You won't last if you're partying all the time. You're out there to perform: everything else comes second to keeping yourself in performing shape, especially if you're a vocalist.

If you're traveling on a budget and not always staying in hotels, finding a comfortable place to lay your head can be a challenge. Pack inflatable AeroBeds, at least one pair of earplugs, and a sleep mask to help when you're trying to catch sleep in odd places at odd hours.

6) Get resourceful with accommodations

Veteran touring bands often stay in houses of people they've met at gigs, and these often become a regular stop if the band tours the same route again. A key to success: be a good houseguest. Buy your hosts toilet paper, or offer to cook breakfast. You're cultivating relationships that could be very useful for future trips.

7) Make healthy choices

Eating healthy on the road can provide you with more energy and better moods, which can positively affect your songwriting, performances, and relationships. One quick tip: pass up a fast food restaurant for a stop at a local grocery store for a healthier meal that won't break the bank.

Stock the van with a cooler and with dry foods like fruit, cereal, granola, bread, vegetables, nuts, seeds, raisins, dried fruit, veggie chips, corn chips, peanut butter, yogurt, and hummus.

Section 4: At the gig

1) Arrive Early

Get to the venue 20 minutes early. It will show the venue you are serious, and also it gives you a chance to get friendly with the sound guy, who should be your best friend that evening.

2) Always ask EVERYONE to sign up on your mailing list...

... and get their city, name, and email address. Offer a free gift, like a free download, and encourage people to find you online after the show. Make sure your website is printed on your CDs, posters, and merch. Announce where you can be found online during your set.

3) Maximize your earnings

Getting as many fans as possible to your merch table should be one of your goals at every show. Some tips to making the most of your merch sales include:

- Step up Your Presentation. If you want to sell merch, you need to SELL it. Present it in an attractive way and put your best salesperson at the helm. Bring a tablecloth, create a sign with style, and bring tape, tacks, and hangers and display your wares in an orderly fashion.

- Set up the merch table before you play, and make sure it's attended to during and after your performance. After you play, have the band congregate at the merch table and tell the audience you'll be there after the show.

- Provide Payment Options. Sign up for CD Baby's Swiper program or use a smartphone app and take credit card payments at your shows. Have plenty of one-dollar bills on hand for change for cash sales.

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- Sell More than Just CDs. Sell download cards and vinyl. Sell T-shirts, mugs, stickers, and skull caps. Make bundles that discount multiple items or throw in a sticker with a purchase over $10.

4) Play the empty club...

like it's the biggest gig of your life. Sometimes, the club's empty, but you need to treat the 10 people in attendance to 100% of your A game. They paid their hard-earned money to see a show, so give them a show to remember. You'll likely impress them for giving it your all, and that could even amount to merch sales as they feel compelled to make up for the lack of bodies in the room.

And of course, you never know who's in the audience. One of those few folks could be connected to someone who could make a difference in your career. And in the age of the smartphone, anything can make it online in the blink of an eye. Play something lousy, do something idiotic, it could be shared with the world before you know it. Play something great, do something amazing, that could be there, too. Always shoot for the latter.

Section 5: Being prepared

1) Have a stage plot

A stage plot should be a graphic representation of your band's setup when you perform live, including everyone's names, placement on stage, and what gear you use. If you can't create a stage plot, send the venue an input list that spells out how many musicians are in the band, including amps, instruments, mics, and DIs. Email your stage plot/input list to the booker and the live-sound engineer as soon as the gig's confirmed.

2) Budgeting for a tour

Start with a comprehensive list of all the things you'll need money for (food, gas, tolls, parking, accommodations, etc.), and plan for the unexpected. It's a good idea to determine clearly beforehand what constitutes a "band" expenditure (strings and drumsticks?) and a personal expenditure (new "stage" clothes?) to avoid any confusion or arguments on the road.

Once you've made your exhaustive list, see where you can save. Get the clubs to feed you a meal. Work on those alternative accommodations. Save on food by buying bulk and avoiding restaurants. Consider your club guarantees as your income, and perhaps you can have a estimated take on merch sales. But don't overestimate what you'll make and leave yourself stuck for cash. This is where busking, or playing for tips between gigs can help pay the tolls. It's easy to find ways to spend money, and more difficult to create earning opportunities.

3) Advancing a show

Confirming in advance all of the details surrounding your gig with a venue contact is always a good idea, including a confirmation of what you're getting paid and who you'll be collecting from. Once you've confirmed your show, the booker should send you a contract or email with all the necessary show details, including who your main point of contact is.

4) Promotion

Who's promoting the show, you or the promoter? If it's the promoter:

- How many posters and flyers are going up, where, and by when? Who is making the flyer? You or the venue?

- When do tickets go on sale and through what outlets? If there is a presale of tickets, get a link so you can share it with your fans in advance.

- Has the local media been notified about the show?

5) Be organized

Especially when you're on the road for multiple gigs, over the course of a week, a month, or more, put a tour book together. Print out all the relevant information you're going to need. Use a 3-ring binder and arrange the pages in a neat, orderly fashion for quick reference. Don't rely on iPhones and WiFi. Have the following information printed for every gig:

- The name and address of where you are staying.

- The name and address of the venue and who your contacts are.

- Driving directions to venue and streets to avoid.

- The best place to park.

- Load in time. Sound check time. Door time. Show time. Set length.

- Club contact with name and phone number.

Section 6: More Resources:

Sites/publications to help you book and manage a tour:

INDIE ON THE MOVE
www.indieonthemove.com

TOUR SAVANT
toursavant.com

MUSICIAN'S ATLAS
www.musiciansatlas.com

INDIE BIBLE
www.indiebible.com/discmakers

Disc Makers indie touring posts

blog.discmakers.com/2012/02/indie-touring-posts

CD Baby's touring posts

diymusician.cdbaby.com/the-diy-musicians-complete-guide-to-touring

Tour Smart website

www.toursmart.tstouring.com

Indie Guide online

www.indieguide.com

Concerts In Your Home

www.concertsinyourhome.com