

Group Corner—Talent Buying and Touring Acts

by Jeff Martell

If you are the talent buyer for your dance or group, then you know how difficult it can be to land bigger name touring bands and callers. First the band or caller actually has to be planning a tour, then there is the question of whether or not this tour is coming anywhere near you, and of course the last question, is whether or not you can afford to pay a bigger name act!

Well, the good news is that, with a little bit of proactive planning, you can exert some influence over at least two out of three of those questions! The two things that drive any touring act, whether band or caller, are routing and scheduling. Any act needs to have their last and next gigs be a reasonable distance apart, preferably a half day's travel or less. They also need to keep nights off to a minimum. An act on the road is still incurring expenses on a night off, without generating any income.

So what does all this have to do with you and your dance or coffeehouse series? Lots! If a touring band or caller has the choice of an unpaid night off, or a low paying Tuesday night gig, they'll take the gig. It is how they stay on the road, and, to be frank, it is how a lot of full time listening clubs have stayed in business. You may not be able to come close to affording "Memphis Timmy" on a Friday or Saturday night, but if he was in city A last night, and is in city B tomorrow night, and you are in town C in the middle tonight, you might just be able to make a deal, at least provided you can get a crowd out to see Timmy on a Tuesday night. Do some realistic math before booking the show though, bearing in mind just how much you can afford to lose, even if they offer a great deal!

So, what if you are not lucky enough to be in the middle of the tour? Well, then taking control of routing might be your best bet. You may not be able to get "Big Jim's Floor Shakers" to fly in and fly out for just your dance, but if you were to contact them with four dates in four cities all nicely lined up then they might just sit up and take notice, and on top of that you might just all get a better deal on the nights. (Of course you can still expect to pay more for prime nights, Friday and Saturday, than other nights, but that is just the way it is.) Greg Rohde, from Childgrove Country Dancers in St. Louis, has set up a grid which shows all the dances within eight hours of St. Louis, divided up by night of the week, month and location. He also provides contact information for all of the dance promoters on the grid. So when he contacts a band to play his dance, he can hand them the tools to line up a few nights in the area so it is worthwhile for them to come through! Some folks go even further; I know of several large scale music festivals whose buyers belong to informal buyers groups, where they share information on who is going to be touring, where and when, and many of them make offers in conjunction with other festivals to take control of routing, and save money on both talent and backline/production costs.

So, if you are hankerin' to reel in some bigger fish, get to know your neighbors! Maybe you can even form a buying group with a few other dances in your region!

Jeff Martell is the CDSS Sales and Group Services Manager and a professional musician.



Fiddlefem Country Dancers, Owen Sound, Ontario (Will Henry)