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Leadoff: Indie Talent Agencies Band Together To Survive And Thrive

By: Ryan Borba



AP Photo / Jeff Roberson Closed--There is still little clarity on when the business and venues, such as the Ember Nightclub in St. Louis, Mo., will fully reopen.

The concert business as a whole has shown ingenuity, resourcefulness and improvisational skills just to get through these unprecedented months of being virtually shut down altogether, with prominent livestreams, music releases, virtual concerts and drive-in shows among the highlights.

Most publicly the artists, like Marc Rebillet who announced the first full drive-in tour; venues, like Brooklyn Bowl Nashville's empty opening with Jason Isbell and Amanda Shires; and streaming sensations like the 11E1even Group's Live From Out There series have taken the reins to keep business afloat.

But the talent agencies have not sat on the sidelines. United Talent Agency, for instance, was instrumental in putting together Rebillet's first-of-its kind tour of drive-in movie theatres.

The indie and boutique agencies have been just as active, with Sound Talent Group recently moving more than 7,000 tickets for the four-band, Clutch-topped "Live From The Doom Saloon" ticketed livestream event May 27, while Michigan-based Fleming Artists was

early to adapt with a full digital roster, teaming with venues for livestreams and putting on its own virtual festival of its clients in the early days of the pandemic.

However, independent talent agencies in particular operate with the expectation of dozens of full tours taking place every spring and summer to keep the lights on, employees paid and artists compensated and making a living from their live business – and that's just not happening right now.

"We're all excited for people who are able to start doing limited-capacity situations, drive-in concerts, or other promotional events and make that work. However, for 98% of our artists, those sorts of things don't work for touring, and our artists are ready to get back to touring," says Madison House President Nadia Prescher, who co-founded and owns the Colorado-based company that represents major touring draws like Bassnectar and The String Cheese Incident.

"Also, with most of our artists we are finding just because they can do a show doesn't mean they're going to until they can return to a touring model. Doing shows for 100 people for the majority of our artists is not financially viable."

Although some markets have opened back up gradually and handfuls of actual in-person, regular concerts are taking place, the touring model that talent agencies and their artist clients rely on is not feasible yet.

“Touring is contingent on other markets reopening, and one of the bigger issues we’ve talked about on some of our calls is the ability for more testing to be done, so venues can at some point open to full capacity when there is a vaccine,” adds Stormy Shepherd of Leave Home Booking, known for representing some of the most legendary punk bands.

The problem remains as it was in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic – much is still unclear about what the future holds, or, more importantly, when touring can resume.

“What’s confusing and difficult to reckon with is when this actually resolves itself and how,” says Frank Riley, a staunch independent for the last 20 years whose High Road Touring represents major artists such as Robert Plant, Wilco, Emmylou Harris and dozens of others with many of his clients dating back to the early ’80s.

“If it’s another year from now, that represents a significant hurdle to how we actually survive. That’s what NITO was formed to address, how we get through this period and how do we survive.”

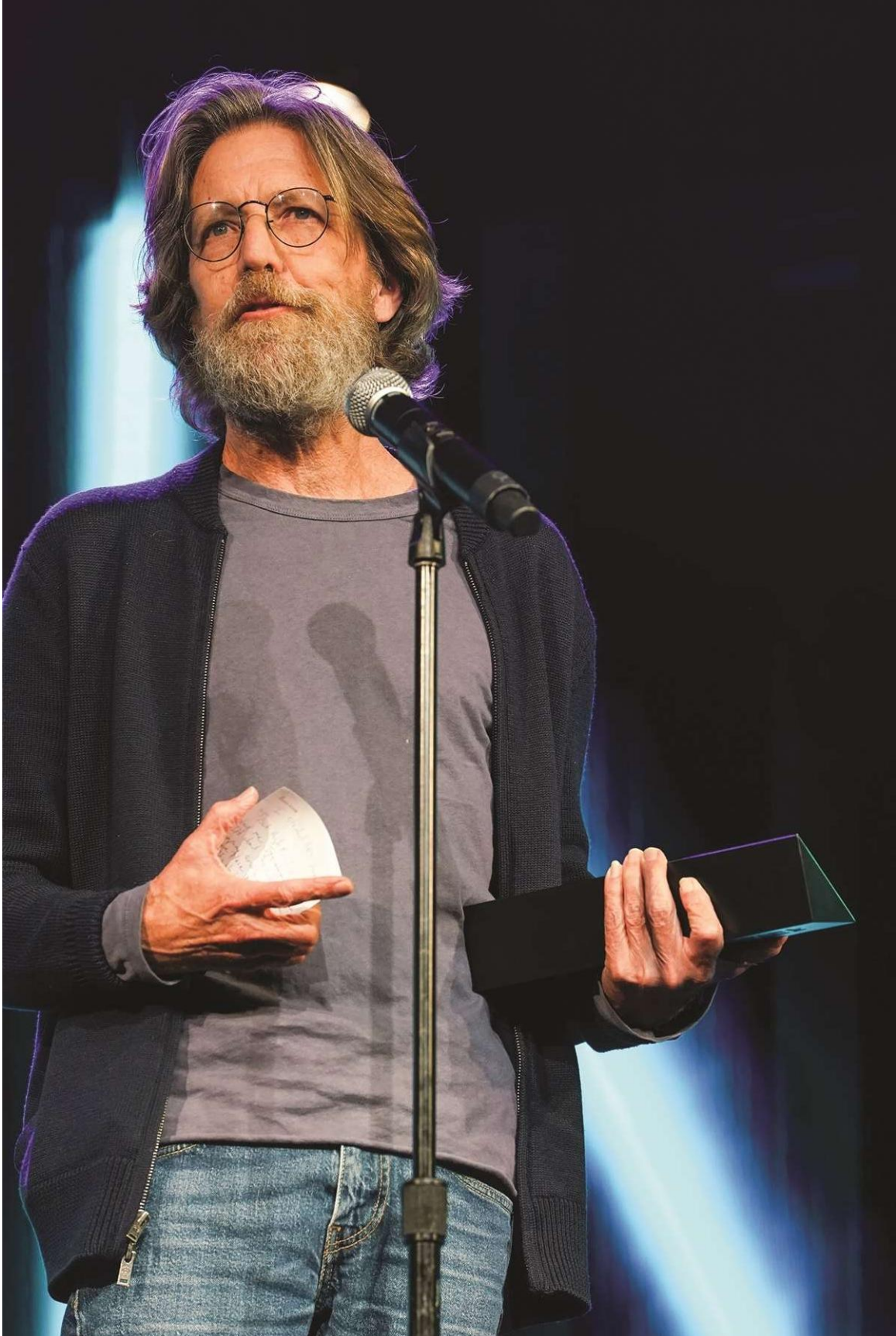
[See: The Need For NITO \(Q's With\)](#)

Riley somewhat accidentally kickstarted the formation of the National Independent Talent Organization (see Page 7), first sharing information with other agents and while working with the National Independent Venue Alliance, with which they are closely aligned.

The goal became to present a unified front to get their concerns heard in Congress, with 14 founding members including major figures in the agency business such as Ground Control Touring’s Eric Dimenstein, New Frontier Touring’s Paul Lohr, Pinnacle Entertainment’s Scott Sokol, Panache Booking’s Michelle Cable, Partisan Arts’ Tom Chauncey and Hank Sacks, Sound Talent Group’s Dave Shapiro and others. NITO’s membership now totals 58 talent agencies as well as associate members including artists Billy Squier, Blue Oyster Cult, Conor Oberst (Bright Eyes), Greensky Bluegrass, Kurt Vile, Robert Plant, Rancid, The String Cheese Incident and others.

There is strength in numbers, with the group's members combined booking more than 40,000 concerts in 2019, moving 12.5 million tickets and \$500 million in ticket sales grossed.

"The focus has been how do we survive, how do we get through this period and resume our jobs by retaining as many people as we can at the High Road organization, but also by reaching out to the artists we represent to try to sort out ways to support them as well, some of which is ancillary income by streaming or other ideas that may generate some money," Riley



says.

Frank Riley Frank Riley after his company won the Pollstar Award for indie agency of the year in February. The High Road Touring founder somewhat accidentally formed the mighty NITO group of indie talent agencies.

“There will be supplemental things, there are efforts to do shows at drive-in movie theatres, or to monetize streaming, there are a bunch of things like that, but it’s a stopgap, it’s a Band-Aid on a major wound. These things can supplement and provide visibility and promotional opportunities if nothing else, but it’s resuming touring that is going to resume income for the artists and for the (industry) community that supports these artists. All of our efforts are focused on when we can reopen on a full-capacity basis. That’s when our job resumes.”

Those efforts include direct lobbying in support of the RESTART Act, the Small Business Protection Act, the Keeping The Lights On Act and other efforts, finding commonalities with artist managers as well as differences in the tax code and other challenges presenting themselves these days.

While everyone wants touring to resume in a safe and timely manner, there is still demand for shows from artists, promoters and fans, and operating as an independent can provide some advantages at this time.

“We launched stuff in July because the buyers called me and said, ‘Hey, we have every single weekend full right now, in Texas, Arizona and Southern states, full of cover bands, but no [agents or promoters] know we’re even open,’” says Trevor Swenson, founder and CEO of Dynamic Talent International, a NITO member that represents dozens of artists that normally live on the club circuit.

“I started calling around to my friends at other agencies and told them, ‘Hey, I just booked a bunch of tour dates. This is it,’” Swenson said tickets went on sale Friday and sold around 100-200 tickets for each show, with 800-capacity venues at half capacity still being feasible for the artists, and with potential for bigger headliners.

“If you take a larger artist that wants to be working, you could book four days in a row and play a different set each night, and if they sell out at 600 tickets each show, they’re still making good money, with added merch money and a lot of other things,” Swenson says. “There’s a lot of out-of-the-box things that can be done.”

Swenson notes that it's important to do the shows safely, and just as important to get the right messaging across to ticket buyers, noting a possibility that the shows don't happen, and making it clear to buyers that refunds would be swift and automatic.

"People keep telling us they want to work, and we're going to get them work, but it's of the utmost importance that everything we do is safe," he adds. "If it gets to the point that it affects the safety of anyone, then we won't be doing this anymore."

"This is not about my clients in particular, but if you can get people working and they think they go out and do this, they're going to either do it themselves or find a company that will do it for them," Swenson says, noting that a lot of developing artists are struggling right now, especially those with younger fanbases where it's crucial to continuously build the live audience. "At this time you have to try to make some money. It sucks to say that but that's just the way it is."

Still, a form of being proactive right now may be pushing things to next year, with much at stake for major artists and so much uncertainty from week to week.

"We instructed all of our artists to move all of their touring propositions to 2021 – 100% with everything we had into next year," says Dan Rozenblum, co-founder of 33 & West, another NITO member and whose company represents dozens of artists.

"We're a financially secure company so we're fortunate to have other avenues to explore," he says, noting that the company's biggest client, Dance Gavin Dance, was set to kick off a major tour in mid-March as well as stage the second-year edition of its own-

curated Swan Fest in Sacramento, which 33 & West co-produces and last year sold more than 7,000 tickets at City National Grove in Anaheim, Calif.

"We're working heavily in developing the company's touring components, and neck deep in the motion picture and television segments of our business where more seems to be happening sooner than later, so to speak," he adds.

Rozenblum says much could change by the end of the year, but with so much uncertainty, as well as limited time to roll out a tour and market effectively, it makes more sense to wait to 2021 as a general mandate.

“If someone wants to have some conversations about club touring in December and we have eight weeks to market it, sure, but we’ve strategically moved everything,” says Rozenblum, whose social media handle is “Napalm Dan” after longtime client and metal band Napalm Death. “What, are you throwing spaghetti at the wall and hoping something sticks? Also, not all artists are

open to those situations, perhaps not going into a club or putting fans in that kind of situation. It depends on the artist

itself. ”

While strategy and opinion may differ from agency to agency at this time in some regard, everyone wants to get back to work quickly and safely, which is not a surprise. What may be somewhat of a surprise, however, is getting hundreds of fiercely independent entrepreneurial minds together from what is often known as a cutthroat sharktank of a business.

“I’m absolutely amazed,” Riley says, laughing. “The 14 founding members haven’t had any disagreements. Well, I take that back, but there hasn’t been anything antagonistic or controversial.

“Everyone has common ground and has treated each other with mutual respect. Longtime relationships are going to emerge from this. In this time of need, to find each other has been a revelation, at least for me.”