



HEY RUBE!

by David Tamulevich

Tips, hints & ideas to foster a good working environment among folk music's community of performers

FINDING AN AGENT

Let me start by making two points that I believe are invaluable considerations for any artist looking to be in this business seriously:

1. Do everyone a favor and spend some time booking yourself. It will be one of the greatest pieces of education you will get. Learning firsthand how hard it is to find dates and put real tours together for yourself is the only way you will ever be able to understand and relate to the agent you will hopefully one day have. It will also give you the knowledge you need to evaluate successfully what an agent tells you. Your relationship with an agent should be a partnership, and you will always be at a disadvantage if you don't bring any expertise to the table.
2. The time to look for an agent is not when you want gigs, but when you are doing well enough that you need someone to handle the booking of gigs for you. I'm not saying that you need to have people beating down your door before you look for an agent. It is a common misconception that an agent will make you popular. The agent's job is to use his or her influence and connections to get promoters interested in you. *You* have to make yourself popular, and if you aren't doing that before you approach an agent, it is highly unlikely the agent will do it for you.

That said, I'm going to proceed under the basic assumption that you

have been performing for awhile, have met with some success, and that you want to see how far you can go in the business. The first thing you should come up with is a theoretical "plan" for your career. It should be the foundation from which everything springs, and may be, ultimately, the most important factor to an agent who is considering working with you.

This "plan" is a basic management plan. Look at where you would like to be in six months, a year, three years, five years, ultimately. Define what success means to you at each of those points. Remember that this is an outline that will only change as you change. Look at what you need to have in place to accomplish your goals. Look at your strengths and weaknesses, and see what help you will need. Don't expect all the answers at once; it's a process.

Your "plan" should also give you a series of questions to research, and you will find that the answers you come up with will also answer many of the questions a prospective agent will ask.

At some point in your plan it will probably say "Get an agent." It's important to do your homework and spend some time evaluating potential agents/agencies. Remember that the more time you've spent in preparation for your initial contact with an agent, the better. Agents are extremely busy. You should make it as easy and straightforward for them as possible: It is all too easy for the agent to put your press kit in a box of tapes to listen to "eventually," where it will often sit for months until it is thrown out.

Make a list of agents who stand a good chance of being interested in what you do. It is a waste of

everyone's valuable time to approach agents who are obviously not interested in your style of music; i.e. if you sing country blues, don't approach an agent who represents exclusively jazz artists. Either talk to the people in the business who know you and can recommend agents who may be interested in what you do, or identify several artists who write or perform in a similar vein to what you do and already have representation, and find out who their agents are. Once you've done this, put them in priority order, starting at the top with the agent with whom you would ideally like to work with.

Once you have your publicity materials ready (which I'll cover in a moment), begin calling the agents and asking if they are accepting unsolicited submissions. The standard agent response is generally "No, we have more than we can handle at this time." But, **DON'T LET THAT DISCOURAGE YOU!** Realize that in all likelihood, they truly have a full plate. That's just the way it is. There is far more good talent out there than there are agents to book it.

It is now your job to make yourself stand out from everyone else. Put that agent on your mailing list. Try to play in the agent's hometown so that it will be convenient for him or her to come see you. If you do get a gig in the area, invest in working on whatever local radio/media is available. The key is to get your name from the "I've never heard of them" bin to the "That name sounds familiar, maybe I should check them out" category.

Let's assume that now you have an agent interested and the agent says, "Send me a press kit." What you will need is:

1. A representative demo: It can be an unreleased studio or live tape or a finished recording – ask the agent what he or she would like to hear.
2. A press kit: This is not the place to cut corners. Treat your press kit as you would yourself, and how you want others to treat you ... with respect. You don't need to spend a fortune and it doesn't have to be extensive, but it should be laid out nicely, and look good. Typically you should

include: a bio page (a bit of your history, your influences, where you are currently, why you're something special, etc.); a fairly current news article or interview (you don't really need more than two of these); a quote page (it's succinct, and much better than including 10 different articles that each have a good quote. If you really want to include the articles themselves, then highlight the quotes in some fashion so the agent doesn't have to go

digging for them); letters of recommendation from people in the business who the agent might know (these may or may not be included on the quote page); and finally, a good photo.

If the agent is interested in pursuing it further, the following will, in all likelihood, be the questions you are asked next. You should have the answers prepared before you begin your initial calls:

- Who is doing you bookings now?
- How many gigs a year do you do?
- Can you send me a current itinerary?
- What do you make a year?
- What are your strongest markets?
- How many recordings do you have out? Are you on a label? If self-produced, do you have distribution?
- Do you have management?
- Who does your publicity?
- Who gets your product to radio?
- Do you have a mailing list?
- What is your "plan" for your career?

Our agency generally asks for a touring history for the past two years which includes when you played, where, what the deal was, what you made and any comments you might have about the show/promoter/market. We will call promoters with whom you have worked to check you out. We consider how you respond to the above questions as a mark of basic professionalism, an indicator of how seriously you take yourself, and what it will be like to deal with you. You'd be surprised how few artists are prepared to deal with those questions.

A note about being "rejected" by the agency, or agencies, of your choice: It is always a disappointment, but how you deal with it is a measure of your maturity as an artist and as a professional, which has an impact on your future success, or lack thereof.

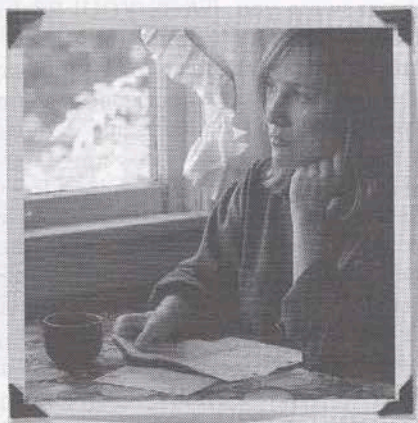
Our agency declines to work with (a kinder and more accurate way to say "rejects") 99.9 percent of the acts who approach us. There are a five basic criteria that affect our decision as to who we're interested in representing:

"DeMent distills love, heartbreak, disillusionment and humor in songs that go straight for the heartstrings."

—Jon Pareles, NY Times

"DeMent writes songs that have such a warm, universal edge they seem like folk tunes that have been handed down for ages, soaking up character at each step along the line."

—Robert Hilburn, LA Times



Iris DeMent *My Life*

The new album (4/2-45493)



©1994 Warner Bros. Records Inc. Shouldn't you know why the critics are talking this way?

1. We just don't care for the material. We won't work with an artist if we're not enthused about his or her material. This isn't something to take personally, we all gravitate toward music that moves us and it is not a judgment of the art or the artist's worth or work. All it means is that at this place and time, what you have presented us doesn't capture our imagination. It doesn't mean it won't in the future. It doesn't mean that there isn't an agent out there who won't be knocked out by it: It's just not for us right now.

2. We can't handle the workload. It's true that agents almost always have as much as they can handle and, at our level of the business, people are agents because of a passion for the music and the artists, not because they expect to make a lot of money. Thus, it usually follows that they care about doing a good job first for the people they currently represent. There are only so many hours in a day, and we won't take someone on unless we feel we can spend the time doing a good job for them, and that it won't be at the expense of the artists we already represent. This causes us to pass on many excellent acts, but that's just the way it is.

3. We don't feel we can make money with the act. We aren't volunteers. And even "spare time" agents have to make enough money to more than cover their costs. It's not a whole lot different for an agent than it is for an artist. If an artist is just making enough to get by, how do you think an agent can do it earning only a small percentage of what the artist makes?

4. Differences in style and goals. Life is too short to spend time working with prima donnas or people who are hell-bent on being stars above all else. The music industry exists for people like that. We're interested in artists who, first and foremost,

want to be artists. We've found that those whose primary goal is stardom or money inevitably will compromise their ethics and integrity in that quest. We are, after all, a family, and if you want to be part of it, there are some simple rules you must at least try to live by.

5. The X factor. Intuition, gut feeling, experience, call it whatever you will, it is a major factor in our decisions, and will often be the deciding factor in whether we take someone on or not. It is, though, strongly influenced by all the other points I have listed. The classic Dylan line is as true as ever. "Know your song well before you start singing". This goes for your craft, as well as for the business end of your career.

One final thought, and something to remember if you do establish a relationship with an agent. An agent does his "gig," so to speak, when he books the date/tour. Oftentimes that is four, six or eight months before the performance. Then, once the job is played, it's often a matter of several weeks before an agent receives the commission check. (We all know that deposits are not a common thing in folk music.) Think of how you would feel if you did a gig, and then had to wait months to be paid for it. It is a mark of a professional to realize that when you are paid for a gig, part of that money is not yours; it has been earned months ago by your "partner." Paying your agent promptly shows respect, appreciation and will make that agent want to work all the harder on your behalf. Best of luck.



David Tamulevich is a partner with the Roots Agency: www.therootsagency.com and is based in Ann Arbor Michigan. He is also one half of the contemporary folk duo Mustards Retreat, so he brings a unique two-sided perspective to the Artist/Agent relationship. This column derives its name from the traditional carnival workers' cry for assistance from her/his coworkers. Here performers share information with their contemporaries-folks who work on the road singing, dancing and telling tales. Each column features a guest writer - a professional who has particular news, experiences or information to share with his fellow tradespeople.

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