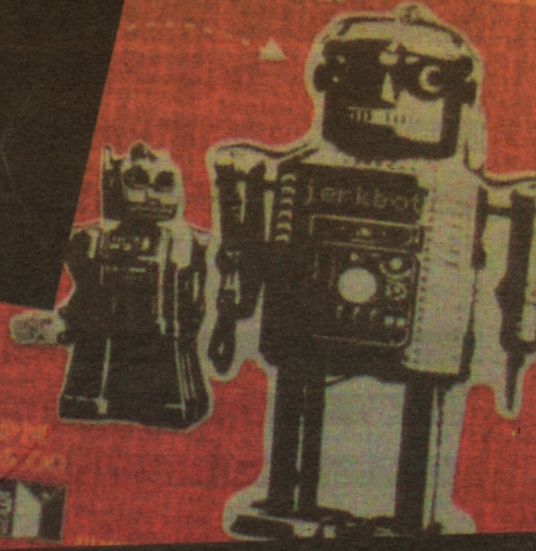


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GETTING THE GIG

What downtown clubs look for and what experienced local musicians have to say

by Jamie Manser

So you have a band. So you are good. Moms and friends are nice for support, aren't they? Now you want to play out. How do you do it? Ask yourself the following questions:

Do you have a recording? Can you draw a crowd? Can you entertain that crowd and make them drink? What is your style? Do you really believe you can make money without shameless self-promotion? Do you really believe you can make money just being a musician? Can you or someone you know market your band and get press coverage? Do you have the right connections?

On a recent Wednesday night, Club Congress' booking manager Kris Kerry is busy getting a band situated for their show later that evening, but is able to make some time for an interview. The lobby of the hotel is busy and loud so we ascend to the second floor and chat while sitting on a couch in the hallway.

Kerry was brought into the Congress fold about three months ago. The club that has a "mystique" and "coolness factor", according to local musicians, has also been a live music cornerstone for almost twenty years. The club's website - www.hotelcongress.com - says Congress "has been inventing Tucson nightlife since 1985".

One musician described the venue as being hard to book shows at because "if someone at Congress doesn't think you are 'cool,' you won't be able to book a gig there." Another stated that a band won't get to play there unless "you're famous or know somebody."

Kerry dispelled those myths by saying "I have booked both bands that I know and bands that I don't know from Adam. The coolness thing translates to a band being creative, talented and who can command a presence on stage."

Why would a musician want to play Congress? Jesse Stanley, lead singer of Truck put it this way: "When a show goes well and the place is packed, it's a rock 'n' roll wet dream."

"The high stage makes you feel cool and the sound is so loud you hear yourself for weeks. I love Congress."

In order to achieve your own rock 'n' roll wet dream at Congress, you first need to cough up a demo.

"What I need is a demo if I haven't seen them out live," Kerry said of bands looking to score a gig. "I don't want cover bands. If I get a cover band CD, I throw it away."

"I'm looking for interesting, creative stuff that stands away from the crowd - they don't have to be the most technical band, but I want them to be creative."

Noel Chester, co-owner of Vaudeville, agrees. "My interest is in putting together as much variety of entertainment I possibly can. I can't really do cover bands or certain genres because they just don't work."

Both have acts they would like to see perform at their respective venues, but this is a business and some things

don't draw.

"I don't just book genres of music that I like," said Kerry. "If I think our clientele will like it, I'll book it."

Kerry also said that if there is a genre of music that he loves, "but if there is no people, I have to look at that. If there is no money coming in, there is going to be no venue to play at. Balancing the art with trying to make some money...it's a hard thing to do."

Chester cut to the chase by saying, "It is how the band is received and how the bar sales are."

Bret Thompson at 7 Black Cats said, "If they are really good and no one comes, it doesn't do me any good."



If you can play it well, if you bring in a crowd that will drink, you will be invited back to play.

Kerry said that if "the band does a good job, they will get another show. You want to be a band that commands the attention of the room, regardless if there are 10 people or 200, but if the 10 people stop talking, I see the potential there."

It is a numbers game, kids - The number of people that you bring in, the number of hours that you work the venues, the number of hours that you play and practice - it all translates to more shows, and hopefully, more money and exposure.

In order to get to that level, especially if you are wet behind the ears, these are things you can do:

Piggy back a more established band by opening for them. This may get you around the demo CD requirement of most clubs.

"We were lucky to have friends in bigger bands like Greyhound Soul and Fourkiller Flats that set us up with opening gigs in cool clubs like Plush and Congress," recalled Truck's singer Stanley. "Those same bands also gave us gigs in Phoenix, which would have been impossible without a CD."

Chester, Kerry and Thompson all said that if they see a band they are impressed with, they would book them with a more established band.

Thompson put it this way: "If a band came in and they

were nice and they rocked, I would try to get them on a bill with more of a draw so they could get exposure."

Local drummer with The Stellas and Vaudeville's Thursday night booker, Kini Wade, suggests playing for free.

"Offering to play for free is of course a sure way to attract a club's attention. Before doing any of that, the surest way to get gigs - once your band has its act together - have a house party or cook out and invite everyone you know. This way, you are creating an audience that will always feel a part of the band."

This is excellent advice. It is always important to let people know about your band and tell everyone you know about your shows. Don't be afraid to talk about yourself!

Chester said, "the most difficult thing is advertising. It is very difficult to get the word out when you have four nights

of entertainment. I use the free listings and my ad in the *Weekly*. I encourage the bands to also contact the media and let people know.

"You have to be a self-promoter because I can't afford to promote on that level. Some musicians are committed to getting a following, others aren't. It doesn't have to do with talent necessarily, some very talented bands don't have a following

because they don't or can't self-promote."

All the venues pay the bands differently. As my mom says, "You are only as good as you negotiate." More established bands that draw a crowd will make more money, as will bands who work hard and entertain the crowd.

Chester said, "You want to book things that will make the band, bar and customers happy. These bands don't make money and the clubs don't make money off the band, it's off the bar."

Kerry said there is a lot of risk involved with having live music. Shows "are educated bets. Sometimes you make money, sometimes you lose" money.

At Vaudeville, Chester said "Sometimes I get off when it's working and other times I want to put my head through a window because I think they are talented and no one is there."

Here's a run down of a few of the local live venues, listed in alphabetical order:

Che's Lounge, 350 N. 4th Ave:

Co-owner Jill Vanza said that Che's isn't a venue per say. "We have shows on Saturday nights because we love music and want to support the local music scene. We wanted a place where people could go see bands without having to pay

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a cover." Booking bands is a collective effort and they require a demo. They are open every day at 4pm and you can drop the demo off with a bartender. "We look for original bands that are experienced enough to play at least two sets, maintain a reasonable volume, play music that appeals to a diverse crowd and doesn't suck."

Club Congress, 311 E. Congress St.:

Kris Kerry requires a demo if he hasn't seen the band live. Don't send him to a web site because, "I don't want to listen to MP3s that are broken. I'm really open to talk to anyone - they can go to the web site (www.hotelcongress.com) and email me from there. Bands need to be proactive. Bookers aren't going to call someone they haven't been talking to - the squeaky wheel gets the oil kind of thing." Bands love Congress for their sound and the stage. Congress has live music Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays with singer/songwriter happy hours Wednesday-Friday.

Oasis, 375 S. Stone Ave.:

Call Jenny at 884-1616 to book your band.

O'Malley's, 247 N. 4th Ave.:

Owners Scott and Brian and their manager Dave book the bands. Dave said they "request a CD or tape and a set list. We usually stick to cover bands but we have original bands too. Greyhound Soul plays here and even cover bands have some originals." O'Malley's hosts live music on Thursdays and Saturdays during the summer and they book original acts on Fridays during the school year. Plush, 4th Avenue & 6th Street:

Plush, 340 E. 6th St.:

Plush has a booking committee that requires new bands to submit a CD and press kit. Kits can be mailed to Plush Booking, 340 E. 6th St., 85705 or dropped off at the bar. Plush opens Sunday-Tuesday at 6pm and Wednesday-Saturday at 4pm and they have live music 7 nights a week. Weekly booking meetings are held, submissions are listened to and a schedule is collectively made. Don't expect to talk to someone if you go down to drop off a kit. Most bands really enjoy gigging at Plush. Jesse Stanley of Truck said, "This is the best over-all club to play. The staff is always kind and helpful and the sound is incredible."

The Red Room at Grill, 100 E. Congress St.:

Jim Howell books the gigs at this small venue. Howell requires a recording that can be dropped off with the bartender. "They can also email me (truckmail@earthlink.net) with a link to a web site with an MP3. We like people who have original material. We cater to the singer/songwriter and light acoustic due to the nature of the room. It's a small room and if it's a loud band, it's loud and sounds terrible. We have no cash arrangement. We provide food and drink and sometimes they (musicians) will collect donations and sell merchandise. They have to agree to play to the constraints of the room. We have a 4 channel PA and a couple of mics. We are also the only venue in town that has a baby grand piano." Howell normally books

acts Thursday-Saturday. Hank Topless said, "The Red Room might be the very best due to the intimate atmosphere and top-notch staff."

The Rialto Theatre, 318 E. Congress St.:

Jeb Schoonover said, "Obviously for local bands, it's very difficult to book The Rialto. Occasionally we will do a multi-band local bill, but we more or less rent The Rialto out to promoters. Bands can try to contact the promoters to open for touring acts." The biggest complaint bands have about Rialto is the sound, but Schoonover defended the Rialto by saying, "The sound is a problem because it's difficult to have good sound people. The room itself isn't inherently bad. It's such a big room and if it (the sound system) isn't being handled correctly, then it won't sound good." Bands can send press kits to 318 E. Congress St., 85701.

7 Black Cats, 206 E. Congress St.:

Co-owner Bret Thompson requires a demo and wants a band to "fit in with what we do, which is indie and punk." Thompson also said that he would book a band at this established rock 'n' roll venue if someone he knows can vouch for the band. The bar has live music a "minimum of 3 nights, Thursday-Saturday. Sometimes other nights." Demos can be given to Thompson Thursday afternoons, Friday between 2pm-10pm and Saturday and Sunday nights after 8pm. The sound at 7 Black Cats isn't that great, but Thompson said getting a better PA is a work in progress.

Sharks, 256 E. Congress St.:


Four different people book for Sharks and they schedule live music on Friday nights. Their genre is "rock in español."

Skrappy's, 201 E. Broadway Blvd.:

According to their web site (www.skrappys.com), this venue is "in most cases interested in hearing local acts of all styles of music. If you want your band to play, record a 2-song demo. Quality of the recording is not considered." Demos can be mailed to Kathy Woolridge, 1245 W. Wetmore, 85705.

Vaudeville Cabaret, 110 E. Congress St.:

Noel Chester: "First I want a CD with a contact number. Never leave a message with a bartender because there is no guarantee that I'll get it! I get it, listen to it and pass it along to the other booking people and we call. People need to be patient, it won't be in 2 days, it can be 2, 3, 5 weeks. I cannot return calls to every single band." Vaudeville opens Wednesday-Sunday at 8pm and Friday at 4pm. CDs can be given to the bartender and it will be placed in a box that will be picked up by Chester.

So there you have it. Record a demo, get a crowd by networking and self-promotion, be organized (aka, have your shit together), respect other people's time (be cool, baby), and don't suck. Remember that not every band can play every bar for a number of reasons. And if you can, then go on tour! 

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