



Establishing a Musical Identity in a Major City

by Jim Goodin

"Next!" echoes the Sidewalk Café's Monday night open-mic host as he calls from the overfilled sign-up list for a queue of musicians that will perform through the evening and into the early morning. Open-mic evenings are one of several performance opportunities that enterprising musicians seek out for exposure in the undimmed limelight and promise of New York City.

Whether it's an open-mic or a paying gig, maintaining and marketing a unique and successful musical identity in a major urban area such as New York City is a constant challenge. In a market such as this where there is such an abundance of competitive artistic talent, it's important for a musician- particularly an acoustic guitarist- to be creative, proactive and entrepreneurial to find opportunities not only for income but equally important exposure, particularly in the city's live venues. In this article I'll be focusing on gaining visibility and exposure rather than on income as, beyond private event bookings such as weddings and parties, the "buzz" factor generally has to occur before the dollars follow.

There are several approaches one might take, but what I've come to learn in recent years is to target my pitches to venues that really make sense, that is- where the booking contact may actually listen to my CD!

Not to put a damper on your ambitions, but many booking agents in this city receive so many press kits that some materials are never properly reviewed. I've seen this happen with my own eyes and, by contrast, it's very reassuring when you realize that someone has actually listened to and read your materials!

I've played the popular New York City CBGB's Gallery 313 club several times over the last few years, most recently pitching a new ensemble project with percussionists Will Romano and Ray Istorico; With the response I got from the booking agent, it was very clear that we had been heard, leading me to shout "Yeah!" in jubilation. The gig was a last-minute scheduling, one that I juggled dates to accept; the contact at Gallery 313 said, "We really like your stuff and it'll be a great night between two popular drawing artists." Little did my colleagues and I know that we were to meet and be complimented by the popular actor Keifer Sutherland that evening, an added bonus to what was to be a very cool show for us. Sutherland was in the audience and appeared briefly on stage in support of another artist whose label he endorsed.

In defining myself in the New York market over the last few years - particularly in the club world- being a largely instrumental guitarist has produced a "unique calling" that has sometimes distinguished me from the "here's one more" of the vast number

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of singer-songwriter's in this town. This line of thinking brings me to a major point that I want to make in this article: Offer something unique in what you do and try to stand out in the crowd! To underscore this point, try to present yourself in a way that the booking agent can visualize your work producing the desired response- "If the muse is there, people will follow."



Let's take yet another approach; say you are new in town and looking for a way to gain exposure and locate prospective performance venues. Here I'll address the subject of open-mic nights as introduced at the beginning of this article. Open-mics present good, sometimes excellent opportunities- as long as you know when to move on. A club will stage these events on what are generally their "slower" nights such as Monday or Tuesday, and use the format to draw an audience. Naturally, the club owner hopes that each performer will bring along a couple of friends.

From the musician's perspective, however, the whole point of participating in an open-mic is to either impress the host or connect with the person who books the paying gigs for that particular venue. From the club's point of view, despite the artists' feeling that the host is honestly bringing new talent to the fore, it's really more about getting people through the door to purchase food and drink on a night that would normally be "slow". So once again I want to emphasize- know when to move on.

One amusing open-mic that I attended several times a few years ago took place at a place on the Lower East Side of Manhattan known as "The Fort", actually the music room for the Sidewalk Café; it was emceed or rather commanded by a host who went by the name of "Lach" (Latch). He ran an open-mic night that I would later describe as a "cattle-call evening". With a long list of musicians seeking their "8 minutes" of fame, it was common for the show to begin at 8:30 p.m. and go on until 3:30 a.m. the next day! Lach would sit off to the side at a mixing console whose audio fader control served as the legendary "hook". When the auditioning talent had exceeded their time or Lach's attention span, then away with them! Their microphone output would be faded down as if to usher them off the stage.

Another path that may open doors beyond the "club" or bar scene can be found in coffee bars and particularly Borders Bookstore cafes, where I've performed not only in New York City but throughout the country. Borders changes policies often; there are stores that don't host any music and others that regularly work with local artists, so you have to sound out each individual store. It is challenging to earn audience attention in these venues as oftentimes you are there simply to provide ambient music for bibliophiles; it can become a wonderful stage, however, as musicians are typically given a two-hour performance window as opposed to a 30 or 45-minute set at a bar.

As the environment in bookstores and coffee shops is intentionally laidback, I've often had people stay with me for the entire two-hour set, ultimately buying a CD. Another possible benefit from performing at Borders Books is derived from the fact

that the events coordinator or community relationship manager, as the booking person is sometimes known- may be responsible for scheduling entertainment at several stores in the region as was the case for Long Island stores. So, doing well in one store may well lead to a gig at another. This is certainly true in the stores I have played in the New York area.

Another frequently overlooked performance venue can be found in churches that sponsor occasional concerts or offer seasonal music programs. Churches have discovered that they can enhance their level of community involvement by embracing artists outside the standard liturgical music realm. While such opportunities can be found in Catholic churches in the New York area, don't neglect other denominations, particularly Episcopalian churches where I have often performed. Usually, a church's music director would be the person to approach, but if you know the minister or someone else in the body, then he or she would be your best channel. I've found that churches are very warm and receptive towards acoustic artists. If you present the idea of doing a concert as a benefit for some program the church is involved in or would like to be involved in, you'll find that they are even more open to working with you.



Throughout this article I've encouraged you to market your musical skills in the most unique way possible, looking beyond your principal audience and thinking outside the box regarding your normal genre or style. I recently did a show with my trio in a jazz club called the "Kavehaz". Prior to this opportunity I had not considered what I do to be jazz per se. Initially, I had even pitched my project to a sister club to the Kavehaz called "Satalla", which caters to more of a World Music clientele.

The booking person at Satalla liked what we did but passed me on to Kavehaz, feeling that we were a better fit for that club; in the end, the referral produced a paying gig. The lesson to be learned is that, although you may think you are perceived as playing in one style, in the end- the person who listens to you and responds to your music may consider your style to be something else entirely. As artists and practical entrepreneurs, we must be flexible and open to that perception. That flexibility is a key element to achieving success in a market like New York, but it really applies globally. Certainly, it's important to identify your core audience, but leave room for their interpretation.

In closing, you should yearn to play live as the returns are so great in addition to giving you a chance to offer your gift of music to listeners. As my greatest influence, the late Michael Hedges once said, "I'll play guitar for anyone".

Best wishes,
Jim Goodin

To learn more about fingerstyle guitarist Jim Goodin, please visit his website at:
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