

Getting on a festival line-up

Playing a festival is a great stepping stone for a band. It puts them in front of a large crowd of people, many of whom wouldn't have seen them before. But how is an act able to get such a slot in the first place? Fortunately it's not just a case of who-you-know (though that might help). Let's consider some of the steps along the way.

By Gareth Shute

BEING A WELL-PRACTISED LIVE BAND

This may seem obvious, but it's worth unpacking. There's plenty of acts playing bars across the country that can entertain a crowd in a haphazard, shonky sort of way. Yet being on a festival stage is going to shine a big spotlight on any sloppiness in your performance. There can be a lot of new factors that an act is unprepared for: they may need to play in the daytime with no lighting to aid how they look; there is likely to only be the shortest amount of time to set-up; and there will be the added pressure of looking at hundreds (if not thousands) of unknown faces.

Festival bookers have this in mind when looking for new acts to consider. If they see a band that is enjoyable, but keeps messing around between songs or who need to re-start a song that isn't going right, then they'll be wary of booking them. If the songs and performance were strong, then perhaps they'll file the name away as someone to look at again in future. However they're not going to risk putting an act onstage who are possibly going to fall apart under pressure or - worse yet - take too long to get through their set and put the stage line-up behind schedule.

It isn't necessary to be uptight and overly businesslike when it comes to your performances, but there is a base level of professionalism that you need in order for a festival booker to take a punt on you. There's no way around it but to practise regularly and play lots of shows until you are experienced enough that you can adjust to any curve balls and play on without faltering.

STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD

There is a certain amount of 'x' factor that draws festival bookers to take an interest in an act and some of this might be unquantifiable. However there's plenty you can do to create a buzz. Think what type of extras could be added to a live show to make it rise up above the rest: would it work if you styled the group members in a matching way?; can you add extra musicians/dancers for big shows?; are there elements of or stage craft that you can bring to the fore?

Another thing you can do is to organise your own headlining show and then try to bring in as large an audience as you can. For example, if an emerging band is able to sell-out a venue, then word will inevitably spread that they are becoming a serious drawcard (especially if it's a slightly larger venue than you'd expect them to play). Therefore it's worth focusing on one particular show and getting everyone you know to come along (with their friends in tow), then try to make it a big night that will stand out.

Remember: festival bookers are music lovers. If there's hype building up around a particular act in a genre they follow, then they'll hear about it. They'll also be working alongside a bunch of people who go out to shows regularly and get to hear about any new artists that are exciting. If you do the hard work to get your name on people's lips, then word is sure to get back to local festival bookers that you're worth checking out.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

The most obvious way to be considered for a festival is just to email the booker/s. It pays to remember that these are very busy people, who have a lot to organise so they often look in their line-ups far in advance (anywhere from six to nine months ahead of time). In some cases, there is a standard application form - most notably in the case of the Auckland Council's Music In Parks series that takes place every summer. More likely though, you will need to find the correct email and then carefully provide all the information that they might need.

Put your best foot forward. That means listing your biggest achievements right at the top - if you've broken x amount of streams, sold out a venue, received radio play, or featured in other mainstream media then let them know that at the top. A photo could also be included, which perhaps shows a particularly successful performance (otherwise a professional, eye-catching promo shot will do).

A couple of paragraphs of information about the band should be sufficient, but then there needs to be useful links to hear your music and find out more. Let them know about any upcoming shows and offer to put their name on the door. The aim is to have the booker thinking: this sounds like one of the city's hottest bands, I better check them out. What you don't want is a reaction like: this email is a rambling mess, these guys haven't got themselves together at all, I can safely just ignore this.

If its possible to meet a festival booker person-to-person then even better, though this can be

a fraught process. If you're going to approach someone when they're out on the town or at an industry event, then you're best to be extremely polite and not push too hard or you'll end up making your chances worse. The same goes for follow-up emails if you don't hear back after a first application. This might be a time for a more casual, joking tone - where you let them know you're excitedly waiting for a response, but don't get into pestering them. It's a fine line, so keep it short and friendly.

DON'T BE DISHEARTENED

There are never going to be enough slots for each act that applies to a festival each year. There are many reasons why they might not be chosen: an act's fanbase may have not reached the necessary level, they may be too early in their career, their live performance may still need work, or they simply don't work in the festival line-up. It may take multiple applications until a festival has an appropriate slot that would suit a particular act.

Therefore it pays to remember that just because you haven't been successful, it can be just a matter of timing and so you need to continue pushing forward until your moment arrives. Certainly it isn't going to help your case to get bitter and complain about it (especially not in any public forum, since that's just shooting yourself in the foot). Festival bookers are on the constant look-out for new acts, so they'll already come across any great local artists on the scene. You just need to keep doing the hard work until they see the time is right for you to play at their event.