

The Music Puzzle:

EXPLORING BOOKING PRACTICES IN EUROPE

- *Synthesis*



LIVE
UMA



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INTRODUCTION

The European network Live DMA represents over 2280 music venues and clubs in Europe, scattered over 16 countries. For this new study, Live DMA sought inspiration within on-going academic works tackling booking practices, but also within a Working Group they hosted in early 2021, when the whole sector was still shaken by the Covid-19 pandemic. The multiple gigs and tours cancellations, the rebooking patterns, and the jam they provoked when live music started to resume, put the bookers in the spotlight, along with their responsibilities.

These working groups gathered 15 bookers from different European countries, during which the wish for fairer practices within the booking community was acknowledged. The final objective of this research is then to be an incentive towards a European Fair Practice Code, which drafting implies more transparency but also a better understanding of this role. As such, **this study aims to give an overview of who the bookers from Live DMA are, to investigate their daily tasks, to highlight the main challenges of live music programming, to identify the main partners bookers work with, to allow for more transparency within these operators, and eventually to pave the way for more social and artistic diversity.**

METHODS

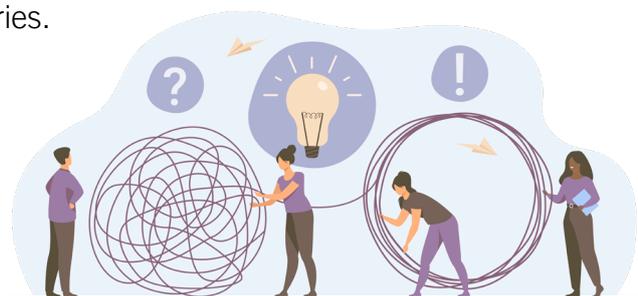
The methodology behind this study relies on both a quantitative and a qualitative perspective. A survey totaling up to 82 questions was elaborated, exploring six main categories: the sociological indicators, the musical background, the educational and professional path, the current job description, the venue description, and the programme description. **30 full answers were collected, and furthered with 9 in-depth qualitative interviews following a semi-structured format.**

DISCLAIMER

The results displayed in this study are to be considered as an overview of booking practices that are being held in Europe. They are a starting point meant to open up the debate and share further experiences, work habits, feelings, concerns... They do not claim to be extensive or representative of a community made of very disparate realities. Instead, they are meant to be mobilized as a tool or base to elaborate from, and they call for futures endeavours.

THE PUZZLE METAPHOR

Over the research process, when asked to describe the way they were acting as bookers, several participants used the same metaphor, saying that they job was about completing a music puzzle, combining headliners and young artists, combining musical genres, combining arts forms sometimes, combining local, national and international levels, and so on. The study takes from that image and is shaped as a puzzle, also. In name of chapters, Live DMA offers 12 puzzle pieces that encompass the data collected over the past 6 months within the Live DMA European network, thanks to the participation of 30 bookers scattered over 9 countries.



RESULTS

Piece 1 - Who are the European Bookers: Meet the Puzzlers

- Sur-representation of male within the panel (83%)
- Under-representation of younger bookers (3% are under 30's)

Piece 2 – Becoming a Music Lover: The First Puzzle

- 73% of the panel got into music before the age of 12, mostly through receptive postures (listening to recorded music and/or attending concerts and festivals);
- Predominance of pop-rock music among their personal musical tastes;
- Experience of live music as a musician for 90% of the panel.

Piece 3 – Composing an Educational & Professional Background: The Second Puzzle

- Lack of degrees / training programmes dedicated to booking;
- No educational pathway to a booking position (no degree, certification or major requirement);
- 83% of the bookers have worked in another sector than music;
- Previous work experiences in the music field are focusing on direction / management, administration / coordination, or production/communication;
- Most bookers don't feel like aging is compatible with a booking job (feeling of disconnection with the target audience, tiredness of working nights...)

Piece 4 – Dealing with a Transversal Position: The Daily Puzzle

- Half of the bookers occupy a double position: “booking AND...”;
- Booking itself is described as composed of administrative, managing, promotion and production duties, with an ability to “chose wisely”;
- “Not enough time to listen to music”

Piece 5 – The HR Puzzle

- 77% have a permanent contract; 13% are freelancers; 10% are volunteers;
- Average wage ~ 2000€ net per month, with important pay-gaps according to the country / the work agreement;
- 56% are working full-time, 37% are working part-time;
- Working hours appear extremely difficult to assess due to a combination of factors: peak periods, versatility of the position, working nights, “satellite work”, etc.

Piece 6 – Venue-based Agenda: Shaping the Puzzle Frame

- Main guidelines are about musical genres presented (seeking diversity and/or displaying a focus), artistic status (headliners, professional, emergent, amateurs...) with economical or environmental sustainability in mind;
- Guidelines are also managerial (venue team availability, limits on working hours, rota...);
- Community guidelines: necessity to work closely according to surrounding venues' agenda / schedule;
- Increased difficulty for venues located outside major cities or touring routes to secure acts to come play their venues.



Piece 7 – Social and Sectorial Agenda: Defining the Puzzle Colors

- Dealing with the pressure emanating from international booking agencies, including local branches that pick up younger artists, resulting in a general professionalization of the music market, a massive rise in artistic fees and a uniformization of the musical scenes;
- Dealing with national regulations or standards: technical costs, freelance and payroll costs, energy costs are rocketing, and booking strategies are altered in order to maintain financial sustainability of the venue;
- Difficulty to align national standards with the ones' of neighbouring countries (i.e. VAT rates);
- Gender-representation on stage;
- Switch in audience practices making it harder and harder to anticipate;

Piece 8 – Finding the Right Pieces: Within the Puzzle

- 77% of the venue bookers say that they are working totally on their own or with occasional participation from other people;
- When support is provided, it is centred around advice on booking choices, acts suggestions and administrative support;
- When support is provided, it mostly emanates from colleagues from within the venue, then from other venues, the from audience members, and lastly from programming boards or committees;
- Support and/or inspiration can also come from very formal sources (automated data, number of streams on platforms, professional rosters and newsletters, direct requests from bands, agents, audience members, showcase festivals...) but also from very informal sources (scrolling own social networks, family, friends, own tastes or attendance...).

Piece 9 – Evaluating its Matching Skills: Observing the Puzzle

- Bookers usually take joy or pride out of informal indicators (audience members satisfaction, working with like-minded colleagues, observing artists career paths...) or out of collaborative or social-oriented projects (towards young audiences, families, communities...).
- Their utmost source of difficulties lies within formal constraints that they have to play by (heavier selection processes, predominance of economic factors, growing distance from music...)
- 63% of the bookers confess experiencing feelings of isolation and insecurities, and call for further training (mostly in support functions: admin, budgets, contracts) but also data analysis, booking collaborations or networks, or audience development.

Piece 10 – Personal and Professional Overlap: The Dangers of Puzzling

- Professional practices are often informed by bookers' personal tastes or own musical experience;
- The pro/perso connection acts for better or for worse: a deep sense of fulfilment when personal and professional interests align, and a deep feeling of stress or pressure when professional life invades personal space (working nights, workload, constant email flow, feeling of being on watch)

Piece 11 – Booking amidst Love and Money: Puzzling Away

- Worktime, when positive, may be perceived as leisure;
- Leisure-time tends to encompass professional curiosity (personal event attendance, scrolling own social media, listening to the radio, building work-related playlists to listen to when doing chores at home...);
- Impacts upon personal sociability (colleagues who become friends, lacking time to see other friend circles);
- 83% of the panel engages with music-related activities out of the job (playing music, volunteering, managing bands, teaching classes... and also booking for other venues, clubs or festivals).

CONCLUSION

The study is to be perceived as a start to a bigger research process: it anchors where any booking practices starts, in the realm of individual journeys in favour of music. It is meant to get to know the bookers and their processes, both at personal and professional level, in order to get a better view of where they speak from and a clearer depiction of the daily tasks they operate. **The booking position brings along many romantic conceptions of occupying a curating position:** being the trigger of a musical discovery / emotion, participating into the development of a musical career for the artists, shedding light upon a niche musical genre, that would be freely operated by the bookers.

While some of these incentives remain vivid, they are heavily weighted upon by a series of constraints that put the idea of individual booking freedom at a distance. Understanding the highs and lows of the booking position and its interconnection with the personal, individual realities of each booker allow to get a better view of what is at stake behind the stages: the stress, frustration, pressure, and sometimes misconnections between personal hopes and aspirations and professional requirements might be rooted within the working conditions (wages, work hours) but can also be due to a poor alignment of the personal aspirations that have motivated the application to become a booker, and the realities of the job once hired and settle within a venue. **Altogether, the work/life balance and the physical and mental health of the bookers appear among the hottest topics.**

A large set of responsibilities are then relying on the bookers' shoulders: the economic sustainability of the venue, the political and ethical guidelines, the audience expectations... Those constraints may be perceived rather positively as a game to play by, or as heavy constraints that block the way to a booking strategy that would be completely aligned with the bookers' individual preferences, motivations or opinions. The fact that some of them do undertake booking duties as a volunteer beside their daily booking job is no hazard: the side booking activities are mostly undertaken to take advantage of the experience, knowledge and network collected during the day job and to infuse them onto a different project that would be more aligned with their personal preferences, especially as far as the music genres are concerned.

The study also underlines the persistence of a “booking bubble”, since most bookers have been born and raised with music around, possibly music-education, and have ever since matured their connection to music through a variety of perspectives: listening, attending, playing... and then booking. Once on the job, their main inspirations come from their own circles: they work with colleagues and peers, seek advice from family and friends, and although several more collaborative processes have been spotted, **there is still room for more “booking coordination” rather than “booking on my own” processes. They seem rather called for by the bookers, since a majority of them take pride or comfort for the part they play in setting up events with a core social, educational, collaborative or inclusive component. Furthermore, the recurrent feeling of pressure and/or isolation depicted throughout the study might be eased if the bookers' call for more initial training, professional certification, and bookers collaborations is heard.**

This research is to be perceived as a starting point opening diverse perspectives. It shall be mobilized as a tool, a base to elaborate upon, a summary to initiate a debate or a reflection. It was not aiming to draft answers, solutions or recommendations, but to initiate further exchanges. Future works can thus be easily rooted in this study, but taken further:

- On a quantitative aspect, increasing the response rate to allow to cross variables;
- On a geographical aspect, identifying European hubs;
- On a qualitative aspect, investigating further topics;
- On a sectorial aspect, exploring in more details the meta-concerns of the music field;
- On an academic aspect, analysing the results at the lens of sociological, legal or political frameworks;
- On a longitudinal aspect, keeping in touch with the participating panel to portray the evolution of their booking careers;
- To be continued!



Credits

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Live DMA would also like to emphasize that this data presentation consists of totals and averages of the music venues and therefore no comments can be made about individual music venues based on the data provided in this report.