

Great Music, Great People, Great Events Publicity Pulls Them Together

By Joe Ross



Martha Moore

Many bluegrass bands know exactly what they're saying with their music. They convey coherent, emotive statements directly. Like good chefs, they deliver perfect portions of melody, lyrics, and phrasing so we're fully satiated without feeling stuffed or underserved. So, are these talented bands destined to stardom? Have they mastered the art of successful communication from artist to listener? Far from it. Even with an excellent product, a great-sounding band



Cash Edwards

only really *makes* it when they also put considerable effort into their image, packaging, publicity and promotion. These industry buzz words represent key concepts in the business of bluegrass.

Most bands don't initially realize that it's a full-time job taking care of business. Once you have your goals and priorities straight, much behind-the-scenes work is done by publicists—folks who generate or enhance a band's image. The publicist is an integral part of an artist's team who is responsible for getting the artist placed in media (print, radio, television, internet), telling their story, and helping to fashion their public image. While it's possible for a musician to do their own publicity, it can be a full-time job. Publicity and promotion help you get your music heard, establish credibility, gain recognition, and build a professional image. Publicity is a very powerful tool because it not only gets a band's name out to the public, but it communicates what you do to all the right people. Publicists are the people who connect you.

To further understand this pivotal aspect of the music business, I contacted four professional publicists: Martha Moore, Cash Edwards, Karen Byrd, and Erin Scholze. While education, experience, and training have all played key roles in their careers, they all agree that it's been the great music, people and events that drew them to their work and continue to excite them.

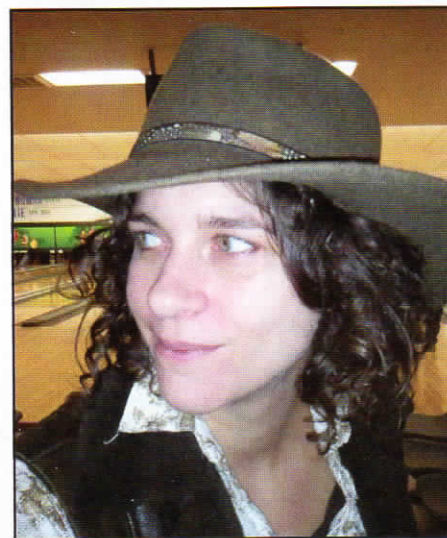
While attending the University of Tennessee to study communications, Martha Moore initially landed in radio as a commercial writer, then got hired in 1977 as a publicity coordinator for ABC Dot Records (Nashville) which later became MCA Records. From 1981-'88, she headed up Mercury/PolyGram's Press & Artist Development Department which saw her working with pop, rock and R&B artists, as well as country artists. In 1988, she launched her own boutique PR company and continues to work with a



Karen Byrd

wide array of country, Americana, bluegrass, and Texas musicians. Martha earned the nickname "Skates" at the conclusion of an Oak Ridge Boys tour in the late-'70s. To efficiently coordinate PR in large arenas, Moore donned roller skates to work the room. "I still skate a little," she chuckles. Her current bluegrass clients are the Grascals, Ricky Skaggs, and The Roys.

Cash Edwards started listening to the bluegrass of Robert Earl Keen's first band, the Front Porch Boys, when she was in graduate school at Texas A&M working on a master's in economics. Running around with that group took her to



Erin Scholze

festivals large and small. Edwards got into the music business when she moved to California and started as a volunteer publicist at the Freight & Salvage Coffee House. She learned a lot from Diane Rapaport's book *How To Make And Sell Your Own Recording*. She's done publicity for Laurie Lewis, Alan Munde, Kathy Kallick, Tony Trischka, Psychograss and Front Range. At present, Edwards is being hired by many Austin artists who play a variety of styles.

Karen Byrd majored in music business at Nashville's Belmont University. In 1982, Byrd began working as a Pennsylvania rep for Leon Everette's fan club. After working in Garth Brooks' management office from 1991-'98 and then as vice president of publicity at Capitol Nashville from 1998-2000, she started her own PR firm in 2000, with Brooks as her first client. Current clients include Dailey & Vincent and Steve Wariner. Besides Brooks, former clients include the Grascals, Mountain Heart, Steep Canyon Rangers, Jimmy Fortune, Buddy Jewell, MerleFest, IBMA World of Bluegrass, CMA, and *Nashville Star*.

Erin Scholze calls her career path a "serendipitous build up." Erin grew up in Pennsylvania and Ohio and was always known for a good party. At Ohio State University, she studied cultural anthropology, as well as the "way that people celebrate and form bonds." After college, Scholze moved to Asheville, N.C., and traveled to any festival that had her favorite acts. Who knew that she would later work with some of them! Besides roots music "from the mountains or the swamp," she's also still into the newgrass festivals that have a "bit of a mix and are smaller and more intimate with the backstage pickin." After working several jobs, Erin decided to focus solely on publicity and events as her career. Besides education, she credits her friends, mentors, street credentials, and on-the-job training for her success. Some clients include Donna the Buffalo, Larry Keel & Natural Bridge, Acoustic Syndicate, Tara Nevins, Galen Kipar Project, Dehlia Low, Big Daddy Bluegrass Band, Mad Tea Party, Sanders-Cardine-Pond, and Jonathan Scales Fourchestra.

Publicists play an important role on the team with artists, agents, and managers. Goals and strategies are developed collaboratively, and then team members maintain constant communica-

tion to stay on the same path and achieve those goals. "A publicist heightens awareness of a group and their music through media to the general public," emphasizes Edwards. Whether you're touring far and wide or just playing at the local barbecue joint once a month, publicity is essential. It helps your career.

"I have personal relationships with all of my clients, and we talk often," says Scholze. "I often talk with the booking agent to get a clear itinerary of shows. I work with management and the label or band rep to organize album release details. Sharing updates among the team and reworking the bio are very important to keep things fresh."

Publicity is one aspect of the marketing strategy tailored to fit the artist's strengths, music, and audience. Typically, it's the artists with management (as well as record labels) that have more extensive marketing plans. "In a perfect world, an artist is surrounded with experts in many areas — booking, public relations, management, social media and marketing," explains Moore. "Each team member keeps ideas fresh and makes the machine work."

Byrd has created the publicity component for several marketing plans. "They're essential because they put goals and strategies in writing. Plans provide a road map for what you're trying to achieve." They also allow you to monitor accomplishments and track progress. Cash Edwards says that all of her artists have marketing plans.

Scholze admits that some younger bands don't have such plans, but they work together to find creative ways to get their name out, stay focused, and accomplish goals. "Finding a good story angle, and relating the facts without fluff are some of the best PR techniques," declares Scholze.

The primary responsibility still falls upon the artist's shoulders. Edwards reminds us that all successful publicity is still totally dependent on the artist to create and maintain a career. "I don't create. The artist creates. I network. I let the world know about it. If the artist is not creating, I have nothing to talk about. To be successful, artists simply need beautiful music and a dynamic stage performance."

A publicity campaign doesn't need to be elaborate to be effective, but the consensus is that any and all media available should be used to spread information. "That includes print, online,

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radio and TV," says Moore who approaches each differently, according to her relationship with the outlet. "It's essential for a band to have a web presence. My clients utilize all the social media they can. They are on interactive websites, Twitter, Facebook, ReverbNation, YouTube and AirPlay Direct." Some artists hire someone to help, but that can be expensive. Doing it yourself can be time consuming. "A flip cam and good digital camera are good investments," suggests Moore. "Their own website is the place to go for correct and approved facts," says Edwards. "Facebook is fun and user friendly with dynamics that let you invite and share. A YouTube channel of your own with clips of live shows is easy...Twitter if you're into that."

New technology has certainly changed the way that publicists do their jobs and has transformed the world of public relations. Isn't it great that we're not stuffing envelopes anymore, and phone time has decreased considerably? We're now seeing a more level playing field for developing acts. Moore adds, "The speed of information and artwork delivery is a real plus. Just in the past year, newspaper deadlines have shortened to as little as one-two days before print date which often allows me to get more coverage. Many online editors will post videos and even electronic press kits (EPKs). They need content, and if you have a compelling story, it's a win-win."

For that reason, Scholze continually uses social networks to meet new people, as well as spread the word about artists and shows. "Gmail documents are also very useful," she says. "They format things easier for plugging text into an e-mail. You can make copies and then just change necessary details. I also like to get on the audio archives after shows and post to new ones shortly after they're up. I check YouTube a lot for new fan videos to post on social networks."

Byrd submits, "Obviously, the Internet has become a dynamic, immediate way of sharing information. It's also an arena where more doors open with fewer gatekeepers. Often the information posted is exactly that which you have provided. For me, having a current online press kit is an excellent tool for the media. The use of e-mail and the Internet has made life as a publicist much easier! I can save tons on postage by either uploading information for media or sending necessary materials

in an e-mail. I also use MyEmma for press release distribution, which makes it easy to update and monitor my contacts, create groups that appropriately segment my audience, and disseminate information quickly and accurately." For a website, Scholze suggests that an artist can make a wordpress blog for free if they cannot afford something fancy. She also suggests offering free downloads through sites like SoundCloud or CD Baby, as well as getting on ArtistData or a similar Internet location to sync up tour dates across the various sites.

Every good carpenter or mechanic must have a good set of tools. The same is true for the publicist whose tools include band name, logo, photo, product, promotional material, talking points, press kit, news releases, and reviews. What specific products do publicists need from a band or label to succeed? Karen Byrd emphasizes the most important ingredients in the recipe for success: talent and drive! "In the band, I must have a product I believe in," she stresses.

Basic public relations assets are a well-written bio, several high resolution interesting JPEG photos, a personal fact and career highlight sheet and a song-by-song for any CD being promoted. Clearly defined budgets for marketing, advertising and promotion are appreciated. Byrd adds, "It's crucial for me to have promotional video, too. I need access to tour schedules and a calendar for the artist where I can directly place the interviews I've arranged. An open line of communication is essential. From the label, I need an ample number of promotional CDs."

New album releases and tours present their own unique challenges. "Each CD project I work is unique," reflects Moore. "The strategy is to find the best way to maximize exposure while working within media deadlines. A combination of e-mail blasts, press releases, EPKs, advance mail-outs to long-lead publications, interviews, special promotions, postcards and compilations have all worked." Edwards approach is to figure out the music and area being toured, write a press release, send it out widely by e-mail blast (and MyEmma.com), written to a targeted market with the CD. Then she starts contacting the media.

To varying degrees, music publicists track and analyze market research. "I try to stay knowledgeable on trends in the music industry, particularly changing social

media, but I can't say that I rely on any specific research," says Moore. It's helpful to read several LISTSERVs, magazines, social media sites, and attend workshops, conferences and use google alerts. Publicists gauge interest in what people seem to like by monitoring Facebook and Twitter, as well as talking with others about their experiences.

The four professional publicists have good advice for artists who contemplate becoming their own publicists. "Develop relationships with local media," suggests Moore. "It's the best way to get their press kits started. But the two investments I highly recommend are: the bio needs to be written by a professional bio writer or journalist, and photos need to be shot by a good photographer. Artists can certainly develop media relationships if they take the time, but it takes years to cultivate a solid media list. I still work at it every day."

Karen Byrd agrees. "Publicity is a full-time job that belongs to someone with experience, contacts, and the time to do it. As an artist, if you try to handle all of the business aspects of your career by yourself, you won't have time to focus on creating great music!" Cash Edwards submits that artists could handle their own publicity if they set aside two four-hour periods each week to do publicity, booking and office work. Scholze says you'll need to plan on spending a lot of time on the computer and doing research. "You need to be thorough," she explains. "But, the main number one is to be nice and make friends. You just never know who you are talking to."

Martha Moore loves her job. "I've had the pleasure of working every day with truly talented and creative artists for over three decades. It's the best job in the world!" Karen Byrd enjoys being a part of a team and seeing the results of hard work. She reflects, "I like the fact that no two days are ever the same."

As all the elements of marketing music fall into place, you'll observe a common denominator that drives all success. It's the publicity that comes from having good time management, organization, creativity, communication, and business acumen (all without over-the-top "shameless self-promotion"). By wisely using all available resources and staying within budget, a successful publicity campaign results in much to be gained. Moore adds that a successful

publicist also needs “energy, persistence, patience and an honest belief in the clients and projects you work with,” while Byrd emphasizes the need for “people skills, organization, a sense of humor, and a thick skin!” Edwards adds, “Persistence and a happy frame of mind seem to be helpful attributes.” Scholze summarizes, “You

can’t take things personally. Introduce yourself and talk to a lot of people. Keep track of who they are and what they do. Write with brevity without being super fluffy. Find good story angles. Keep dates and clients organized. Keep up with interviews and shows.”

Because we expect bluegrass artists to be somewhat humble, modest and self-effacing, the topic of “shameless self-promotion” is worth mention. “Part of social networking is being social,” states Scholze. “Please don’t always talk about yourself. Show interest in others.”

“And at some point,” opines Edwards, “the artist has to realize that more practice will serve them better than anything else. One of my mottos is ‘If you have time to complain, then you have time to practice.’”

Each of the publicists have their own personal optimistic visions for the future and productive growth of bluegrass. “I love the way the genre embraces so many ‘colors of blue,’ from the new progressive acts to the tried and true traditionalists,” offers Moore. “If it continues down this path, it will continue to grow. Using the Internet, cross-genre recording and touring will also play a big part in its future.”

Edwards also loves bluegrass in its many forms. “I was so lucky to see Bill Monroe, Jimmy Martin, Mac Wiseman, Chubby Wise, and so many who created this American music. I love the West Coasters that started a new ‘grass of music based on one culture in America that journeyed to another. Lines have become rather blurred.”

Scholze recommends we get outside of the box with how people think of bluegrass music. “It doesn’t always have to have a certain traditional sound. Some artists have gotten really progressive. Expect to see it all over the place and fused into other styles.” If you’d like to become a working publicist, Scholze proposes that you work with people whose music you genuinely love. Work with an artist because you like them.

Byrd recommends you take a look at the artists you respect and admire, and find out who’s doing their publicity. Then, try to work out an arrangement where you can intern or work for that person. There’s no substitute for experience. Go into each job situation with a great attitude and a willingness to work and learn. Work with integrity.

From my own seat as a journalist, publicity assistance is also a great way to help others out. If you’re a decent communicator who enjoys music, why not adopt a few bands, take them under your wing, and heighten awareness about them? You can be part of their extended team by telling their story, enhancing their image, building hype through social networks, and creating some buzz about their music. Mark Twain once said, “Eighty percent of life is showing up.” With that other twenty percent, you can make a difference helping others. And if you’re a musician, don’t overlook the importance of publicity! A professional publicist is certainly a great way to go, and they can do immediate things for your music career that you can’t. With that essential person on your team, you can concentrate on your music while also staying focused on your marketing goals. Great music, great people, and great events will be the result.



Joe Ross, music journalist, folklorist, musician from Roseburg, Ore., has publicized and reviewed others' work for decades. He created and moderates NWBluegrass on Yahoo! to publicize events in that region.

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