



Michael Schivo

The Jazz Promoters... Promoter

By: Chris Walker



John Lennon



Wilton Felder



Wayne Henderson



Chick Corea



Diana Krall



Boney James



Four Play



According to Roger Cowan's well-known business primer, there are "Rules for Success." But often many entrepreneurs find that the rules are created as their business

develops. The only guide many often have is their gut feelings and common sense. That clearly was the case for smooth jazz concert promoter Michael Schivo, who splits time between Seattle and Las Vegas. Back when he started doing jazz oriented events in 1980, the smooth jazz category didn't exist. Then, the music was classified under the banners of either contemporary or fusion.

Nonetheless, the audience was there and Schivo recognized it immediately. However, it wasn't just a chance opportunity for him. He had a clear advantage over others who were considering going in that direct then—he was already a seasoned promoter. Actually, he was a bit more than that; he was an established veteran with about thirteen years of experience doing rock concerts. "My first shows were Steppenwolf and Three-Dog Night when they were arena acts," he stated in a matter-of-fact manner by telephone from his Seattle office.

"I come from a gaming family in Las Vegas," he continued. "We owned at one time, five casinos and I had a real cool upbringing. My baby-sitters were virtually Spike Jones, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington, so I was absolutely born into [entertainment]. As a five year-old five-year-old in Vegas, I was able to go into all the showrooms and see all kinds of acts. That included Victor Borge, the Mills Brothers, and a lot of dancing groups. I even saw the 'Rat Pack' with Sinatra, Joey Bishop, Sammy Davis, and Dean Martin. By the time I was sixteen, I knew everything about them.

"So in terms of entering into the rock concert promotions business in the '60s, everything was just coming down the pipe. I was lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. While I moved in circles of the rock business and doing Las Vegas' and Reno's first rock shows, I also had this love of jazz.

The timing was right when one day someone said 'You know there's just no jazz here' on the contemporary level." Schivo reacted quickly to the person's lament, first starting with Larry Coryell and later Spyra Gyra.

Notably, he didn't initially go into this new venture without some advice. That came from someone that Schivo considers a pivotal influence—Monk Montgomery, the older brother of the legendary guitarist Wes Montgomery. He is regarded as being the first electric bassist in jazz, and was well known in Las Vegas as a jazz entrepreneur and founder of its Jazz Society. He however, was strictly mainstream and promoted late-night shows that catered mostly to other musicians and showgirls getting off work. Schivo, however used to dealing with large audiences, sought to do the same with contemporary jazz audiences.

"We started by booking clubs and some hotel show rooms on off-nights, much like Monk was doing," the promoter recalls. "So in terms of that we moved [the shows] into a legitimate performing arts center and wow—it worked. We sold fourteen hundred out of two thousand the first time at Artemus Ham Hall at UNLV—that was incredible. Especially considering some of these artists weren't working that large a venue in Los Angeles. The situation was good and we followed with others such as Michael Franks, Pat Metheny, David Benoit, and Larry Carlton. It was still in the '80s, about '83-'84, we flip-flopped between there (Artemus Ham Hall) and moving back into hotels. I remember how satisfied we were when I looked up at the Sands huge electronic marquee. It said we were presenting George Howard for one night and Tito Puente the next night. That was a lot further than Monk ever took it (he died in 1982), nevertheless he was a consummate mentor."

While his contemporary jazz shows were developing, Schivo continued doing rock shows and other things. He was extremely busy then and remembers a typical weekend. David Sanborn played at Ham Hall Friday night, Saturday was a truck and tractor pull at the Thomas & Mack Center, and the Moody Blues performed there on Sunday. For the promoter it was part of his regular routine and he was just as attentive to the jazz shows as he was with his other events. He thinks that's a point that other contemporary jazz promoters overlook and credits his rock background for instilling that caveat in his business philosophy.

The promoter explained, "The fire in the belly as a rock promoter is something that if you can outlast the lifestyle and use your common sense, will give you great amounts of enthusiasm and energy for what you do. Consequently, you learn to pile it on. Rock n' roll compared to jazz, has a way of shouting at you. Jazz speaks to you softly. So if you can stay calm as a jazz promoter, keep that fire and enthusiasm from rock, and approach your business with passion, you're going to have an edge over a lot of other promoters."

Schivo's candor almost equals his ambitious nature and he pulls few punches when talking about the current state of music, especially pertaining to live shows. Complacency as far as he's concerned, is the basis for all the woes the industry currently faces. His mantra, contrary to "safe no risk taking" attitudes that he believes presently prevail, is to be "aggressively right." The biggest challenge for him is, "staying on top of the fire." "When I hear something on the radio and go 'Wow,'" he emphasizes, "I get on the cell. I want to know who that was. Because I felt that musician, whomever he or she is, and eventually they're going to be somebody. Unfortunately, I don't hear that many artists like that anymore because not many people are breaking through."

However, when the multi-city promoter, currently covering about fifteen markets, hears something that gets his attention, he starts making deals. Usually he's one of the first to book emerging talent and gladly accepts the risks. "You create something cutting-edge," Schivo declares, "and that's the name of the game, instead of going to the Internet to see what R&R has to offer. Now that I'm fifty-six and not on the street as much, I network. I know most of the record executives, producers and DJs out there. So I reach out to them."

Schivo believes that his biggest competition is the Casinos, but thinks he's about two years ahead of most of them. Just the same, he won't let himself become stagnant and is starting to concentrate on doing festivals and special one-op projects. At his peak he estimates that he was producing forty to fifty jazz shows per year. Some of cities he works out of besides Seattle and Las Vegas are St. Louis, Kansas City, Dallas, Salt Lake City, Denver, Phoenix, Spokane, Portland, Sacramento, Fresno, and Laguna Beach.

"We like one-ops and will do them," the promoter affirms. "We've done them for Dianna Krall when she was breaking. I think I was the only promoter in the US lucky enough to have six independent cities under the 'When I Look into Your Eyes' CD tour. I sold all the houses out in advance. So we'll do things like that when it makes sense. But our thrust right now is that we're on our way to owning six jazz festivals. I've done mainstream and smooth jazz ones, and like them both. Our festival in Las Vegas (City of Lights Jazz) is in its tenth year. I own and



founded that one, also I produced the San Dia Festival (Albuquerque) and last year I produced a two-day event in Phoenix (KYOT Smooth Jazz Festival on the Green). This year we're holding dates in St. Louis and Kansas City. We've kind of invented the festival in Seattle at the San Michele Winery."

Schivo truly does seem to have the festival bug and

thinks that they present better opportunity for promoters due to the current woes of the economy. Also tours are more limited and record companies aren't always able to support acts on the roads like they once were able to. The promoter intimates, "I guess I got really interested in festivals after founding the 'Las Vegas City of Lights' one and then I put together the first jazz festival in The Republic of China in '93. We were there with Lee Ritenour, Phil Perry and Ernie Watts. It was very well received and ended up doing a show in Koala Limpur, Singapore, Tai Wan and Tai Pai." Naturally, from a business aspect, the question has to be asked if the festivals are more lucrative than doing single concerts and club dates. Schivo responds, "It can be...but remember the more it's calculated—the greater risk, the greater the gain. I've been rained on, and hailed on out of the blue," he laughs.

Michael presents... the 14th Annual Las Vegas City of Lights Jazz and R&B Festival go to: <http://www.yourjazz.com/>