

Booking Agents 101

A plain-English primer on what a booking agent does, what they cost, when your artist actually needs one, and how to get and keep one.

What a Booking Agent Does

A booking agent's one job is to **get your artist paid live work** — shows, tours, festival slots, private/corporate gigs, and college dates. Day to day, a good agent:

- **Sources and pitches dates** to talent buyers, promoters, festivals, and venues.
- **Routes tours** so dates make geographic and financial sense (no 600-mile zig-zags).
- **Negotiates the deal** — guarantee, percentage/backend, billing, set length, support, radius clauses, deposits.
- **Issues offers and contracts** and chases deposits.
- **Holds and confirms dates**, manages the calendar, and avoids conflicts/overplaying a market.
- **Builds the live story** over time — moving the artist from opener to headliner, small rooms to bigger ones, club to theater to festival.

The agent works the **buy/sell side of live**. They do *not* manage the artist's career, day-to-day business, releases, or finances — that's the manager. Agent = live bookings. Manager = everything.

Commission: What It Costs

- **Standard agent commission is 10% of gross performance fees** (the guarantee or the deal's payout) per show. This is the long-standing norm in the US live business.
- Some agents take **15% on certain deal types** (e.g., some electronic/DJ bookings, smaller agencies, or specific territories). 10% is the default expectation.
- Commission is on **live performance income only** — not recording, publishing, merch, or brand deals (those run through management and other partners).
- In some states, talent agents are **licensed/regulated** (notably California's Talent Agencies Act and New York). A legitimate agency works within those rules. Be wary of anyone who wants commission on *everything* or charges **upfront fees** to "consider" your artist — real agents only get paid when the artist gets paid.

Quick math: A \$5,000 guarantee → \$500 to the agent, \$4,500 to the artist (before other tour costs and the manager's commission, which is calculated per your management agreement).

When an Artist Actually Needs an Agent

Agents are **demand-driven** — they sign artists they can already sell. You generally don't need (and can't get) one until there's a live story to work with. Signs you're ready:

- **You're consistently selling tickets** in multiple markets, not just your hometown.
- **Buyers are reaching out** to you, or you're fielding more offers than you can handle well.
- **Streaming/audience growth** is translating into real draw (paid attendance, not just plays).
- **You're outgrowing self-booking** — routing a tour or vetting offers is eating the manager's time and you're leaving money or markets on the table.
- **You have momentum to leverage** — a release cycle, festival interest, or a support offer that an agent can build around.

Before then, self-book. Most artists' first 1–3 years of shows are booked by the artist or manager directly (see *Talent Buyers 101*). Self-booking proves draw, builds relationships, and creates the data an agent will want to see. An agent who signs you too early, with nothing to sell, will let you sit on the roster.

How Agencies Work

- **The spectrum:** from the big agencies (full rosters, global reach, deep festival and promoter relationships) down to **boutique/independent agents** and regional agents. Bigger isn't always better — a hungry boutique agent who prioritizes your act often beats being a small fish at a mega-agency.
 - **Roster reality:** every agent has many clients. Where you sit in their priority list matters more than the logo on the door. Ask how many acts they handle and who else is at your level.
 - **Responsible agent:** at larger agencies, one agent is your “responsible agent” and point of contact; assistants and sub-agents may cover territories.
 - **Territories:** agents often split **domestic vs. international** (a US agent + a separate EU/UK or rest-of-world agent). Festivals and certain markets may run through specialists.
 - **The agreement:** you'll sign an **agency agreement** — term length, territory, scope (usually live only), commission rate, and how it ends. Get an entertainment attorney to review it. Watch term length and any “sunset clause” (commission owed on dates booked during the term but played after you leave).
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How to Get an Agent

1. **Build a real live story first.** Ticket counts, sell-throughs, routing history, streaming-to-draw evidence. Agents want proof, not potential.
2. **Get a warm intro.** The best path is a referral — your manager, a label, a promoter who likes you, or another artist on the agent's roster. Cold pitches work far less often.

3. **Target the right tier and lane.** Find agents who already work your genre and your size. An agent who books your favorite comparable act is the right call.
 4. **Pitch like a buyer would be pitched:** short, numbers-first, one EPK link, a clear live track record, and what's coming up (release, tour interest, festival holds).
 5. **Show momentum, not desperation.** "We're selling out [rooms], buyers are calling, and we need a pro to handle the volume and route it right" is the message.
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How to Keep an Agent

- **Keep the artist sellable.** Release music, grow the audience, and keep the draw climbing. Agents stay engaged with acts that are moving up.
- **Deliver at the shows.** Sell tickets, show up on time, play well, treat buyers right. The agent's reputation rides on every date.
- **Communicate through the manager.** Keep the agent looped on releases, press, content, and tour goals so they can pitch with current ammo. The manager-agent relationship is the engine; keep it tight and respectful.
- **Make their job easy.** Fast responses, clean advances, reliable settlements, and realistic expectations on fees and routing.
- **Set goals together.** Where should the live business be in 12–24 months? Align on markets, room sizes, festival targets, and fee growth so you're rowing the same direction.

Bottom line: an agent is a force multiplier *once you have something to sell*. Build the draw, get the warm intro, sign a clean deal, and feed the relationship with momentum.