

Music BC's Phoenix Program Part 2: Lessons Learned

By Michael Raine

Last issue, we spoke with Music BC Executive Director Alex Grigg, Nettwerk Music Group's Terry McBride, and program founder Mariel Beros about Music BC's Phoenix Training & Professional Development Program and, more broadly, why better business education for artist managers, agents, and indie label owners could have a profound impact on the Canadian music industry. But what lessons did the participants of the Phoenix program take away? Here, we catch up with a few attendees to find out.

"I'm sitting here right now with a binder that's probably 60 to 100 pages of [information] and, I mean, this is all quotable stuff," enthuses Lyle Chausse, a B.C.-based radio promoter, merchandise supplier, and an artist manager for the bands Toque, The Wild!, and Whale and the Wolf. "One of the things that Phoenix taught me is to better secure my business. One of the biggest concepts I came away with is; what are you offering people? As an artist, I think you have to ask that question, and then as a business, you have to answer that question."

One of the key practices employed at Phoenix during the first of two three-day courses was to get all attendees to do a SWOT analysis of their business – that is, identify their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. It's as applicable to artists with career aspirations as it is to any business or industry professional. It helps clarify where you are and where you want to go, professionally speaking, and most importantly, how to get there.

"It stopped becoming about, 'Well, my artist is doing this' and 'My artist is doing that' and 'This is happening and that's not happening.' It became about what our own goals were for the business. What we wanted to get across. I think that often, in the business of music, we get so caught up in who we are working with or what we identify with that our own goals are [put aside]," says Kate Wattie, founder of indie label and management company Tonic Records, which represents The Harpoonist & The Axe Murderer, Leeroy Stagger, and others. "We forget that that should be our first priority, maybe not in a selfish way, but, 'Here's our long-term goal.' It was great to have to think about it objectively like that."

Wattie says Phoenix made clear the reactionary nature of the music industry – that labels, managers, and artists should keep an eye on long-term goals and not be so single-mindedly focused



on the current tour or album release. Obviously immediate tasks and needs require attention, but a lack of long-term vision and planning can create short-term paralysis if things don't fall into place ideally. "We've always had strategic plans, but this is more about building goals and how music and life can work together. How can we build this so that it's not just about one album or, 'With the next album, we want to get here?' How do you want your music career to look? I found that taking that pressure off the immediate album that we're working on or with or whatever, I find that it's already making some changes with those artists."

"I'll give you a good example with Harpoonist that just happened," continues Wattie, explaining that a year ago, after playing bars in Toronto for years, they considered playing The Great Hall but balked at the suggestion because it could be too much of a leap. When the band was back in Toronto in January of this year, they went for it. "Obviously, a year ago we chose not to take that risk, which was probably a good move, but primarily because we were over-thinking it. Now, our long-term goal is to break out of that, partly just for our own creative challenge. So, in one or two years from now, if it fails, will our lives be over? No, no one will even remember. In that sense, I think it has made a huge difference because it's those kinds of things that seem very small but where I find that my thought process has changed," she says before adding with a laugh, "Thank god the show actually did do well because if it didn't, that would've been fully on my head."



As a manager, Chausse says he learned the immense importance of intellectual property agreements. "If I'm building a brand or band, it's understanding what I should be negotiating for intellectual property, because I am building that with that artist. So if we're pulling them out of a garage and they're going to have a career for 10 or 15 years, making sure you understand and have a plan and, shall we say, a business agreement as to what everything is and how all the intellectual property is related back to me as a manager. At the end of the day, I'm a business partner with [my acts], not just a manager, and management in this day and age is very, very different than it was 20 or 30 years ago," he says, noting that the old model of the manager getting a 15 per cent commission doesn't work in the era of streaming micro-payments. "What if all of a sudden you get that song that 10 years later ends up in a Dentyne commercial or something and that's the band that you found in a garage in Oakville, Ontario 10 years ago? Do you have a piece of that?"

"One thing they really broke down off the bat, especially as a manager, is that a lot of the things we're doing as managers are basically things labels used to do," adds Colin McTaggart, an artist manager with Amelia Artists representing electronic duo The Funk Hunters, punk band No Liars, and singer-songwriter Luca Fugale. "Especially with independent artists, we are wearing a lot of hats, and how can we manage that more effectively in what we're doing?"

As a mentor in the Phoenix program, Terry McBride, co-founder of Nettwerk Music Group and one of the most respected artist managers in Canada, was adamant that managers, labels, and artists need to pursue markets outside of Canada and that data analytics (from Spotify, Shazam, YouTube, etc.) now provide the tools to do that smartly. Using Harpoonist as an example again, Wattie says streaming data has offered a wealth of useful information.

"Using these analytics has given us a really great [understanding] of where their audiences are, which is not what we assumed it was. That is really strange. For example, I made the assumption, a kind of loose assumption, that I wasn't sure how well they would do in France," Wattie says, "and it shows exactly how wrong I have been." Since November, after completing Phoenix, Wattie's team at Tonic Records has been using analytics to target the band's on-

line presence, which has quadrupled their YouTube views in four months. Amazingly, 50 per cent of that growth came from France. "It's good to know that I can look at that and not base it on my assumptions or what I think their audience is or where their audience is."

The other key takeaway that Chausse, Wattie, and McTaggart stress is the importance of financial modelling. Unlike simple accounting, which is about the past, financial modelling is about planning for the future and using projections to work backwards from a defined goal.

"From that moment, and it was only two-and-a-half months ago, I immediately made changes. Like instant changes to how we track our finances, how we are projecting for the future, and how our artists are projecting for the future," says Wattie. "In fact, my goal is we're all going to sit down and do this financial modelling together. I have almost all the data together that we need to put in there to do it and I think it'll make a huge difference for all our artists, including the developing artists. It just gives us those tools to realize either what we need to cover if we want to reach some certain goals versus, not winging it, but to a certain degree we have had those goals but at the same time been winging it more than I realized we needed to."



The faculty & participants of the 2017 Phoenix program

Across Canada, millions are spent each year to educate and support music artists. That is fantastic, and MIAs should continue to advocate for artist support programs and funds. But it could also be in vain if the industry around the artists isn't giving them the best chance for success. That's what Phoenix, or any intensive programs targeted at mid-level music industry professionals, could help with.

"I lobbied hard to bring this to Canada and I believe the Canadian music business could really benefit from it," says McBride as we end our conversation. "I have nothing to gain by doing this other than an understanding that this could give Canadian artists the opportunity to have long-term success and I think that is a good thing."

Applications for the 2018 edition of Phoenix are being accepted from March 1st through April 3rd. Full details are available at www.musicbc.org.

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