

Crank Organ Digest—An Interactive Series— Part III

Grinding for Success: Tips on Marketing, Booking & Advertising

Gordie Davidson

You spent thousands on a street organ and now desire to do more than just entertain in your living room or at rallies. Why not crank for real money? The truth is you can be an income producing grounds attraction with a little bit of planning, effort and expense. Yes, the old adage that you must spend money to make money applies. I will attempt to share some of my lessons learned from the past 13 years of grinding street organs in and around the Greater Kansas City Area. Keep in mind there are many successful folks in this hobby utilizing different formulas for success. My thoughts are descriptive only and not meant to be prescriptive.

There is one common thread for success that sets professionals (pros) apart from amateurs. Simply put, the pros look, sound, and conduct themselves in a professional manner. We discussed how to look like a professional in Part I (issue #34 of *Carousel Organ*). In Part II (issue #35 of *Carousel Organ*) we provided some tips and tricks for your routine. This issue, the final of the “Grinding for Success Series,” will provide some insights on marketing yourself along with a few lessons learned on booking your attraction. As an interactive series for COAA, I will continue to post supplemental images, videos, and supporting files on my web site at www.gordiedavidson.com.

For this issue, the assumptions are

- (1) you look and sound like a professional,
- (2) you landed your first paying gig, and
- (3) you’ve developed and rehearsed a knockout routine.

Assuming total success, how are you going to market yourself and land more gigs? Provided below are a few tips and insights to jump start that creative node within your gray matter—go forth and crank for FUN and PROFIT!

Tip—charge an appropriate performance fee. The #1 curiosity question, but rarely asked is how much do I earn at a gig? My performance fee has remained the same for several years due to the current economic environment. For me, this is a paying hobby; therefore I consider any income as a blessing. I first consider the entity requesting my services as an entertainer. Is this a non-profit entity? For-profit entity? Other entity? Rephrased—does the requestor have money to spend? It takes me about 30 minutes to load my Raffin 20/78 and accompanying gear. I always arrive an hour early as it takes another 30 minutes to unload and set-up—somehow that hour early just gets

consumed with things to do. Factor in travel time and you quickly have three to four hours invested not including the performance time. By example, I invest about seven hours of my time playing a three-hour gig at the Country Club Plaza. Most requestors have no idea what a street organ is let alone the logistics of moving one to and from a venue. The assumption is that you just throw the organ in your car trunk like a trumpet case. In the early days, I said yes to many gigs and cranked for peanuts simply to get seen and heard. My performance fee today is \$100 for the first hour and \$75 per hour thereafter. I offer a 10% reduction for multiple bookings at the same venue. This fee schedule is simple, competitive and works—I rarely negotiate for less. There is an occasional situation where the promoter has something of value to offer in lieu of cash. For example, I play a local vineyard’s Oktoberfest for five bottles of my choice per hour—taken home that is, not consumed. I receive many inquiries for short gigs such as a 30-minute birthday party or event opening. The \$100 first hour fee is easy to present and justify. I always explain that the hard part is getting to the venue—once there, I’m self-sustaining. I also explain up front that if we’re having a good time with your guests, you can usually get another 30-minutes out of my hide with a sandwich or coke—I just don’t shut down if we’re having fun. If somebody insists on offering you \$25 for three hours, don’t argue, politely offer them the name of a local face painter or balloon artist. A good line I use with assertive cheap folks is—I would-

n’t be able to sleep tonight knowing I undercharged you so much. Now the exceptions—I always stick to the minimum first hour fee, but have played longer for non-profits—perhaps two to three hours for \$100. Non-profits have a budget and in many cases can find a sponsor to pay your minimum performance fee. I rarely play for free unless there is a personal connection such as my church or a neighborhood street event. There are times I wish I owned a smaller busker organ to perform for an hour or less at the local nursing home or senior center—this I would do gratis for the honor and fun. Finally, beware of the promoter who is offering you the opportunity to be seen and heard at a mega-event he is producing. I get these calls occasionally from promoters—most recently to perform at a bridal bazaar for free: no thanks.

Tip—prepare a contract. There will be venues that require or at least feel more



Figure 1. Author’s earlier business card with smaller image and contact information.

comfortable with a contract of some sort. Some promoters have their own contracts whereas some venues will expect an agreement from you. The promoter who hires me for the Country Club Plaza provides a contract that covers the basics of what, when, where, who and fees. The contract I use is basic and has worked for 14 years (**Figure 2**). At one time I required or at least attempted to get a deposit on bookings. This was unnecessary and only created extra work for me. I have always been paid in a timely manner as agreed. Over half my bookings are agreed upon without a contract. I generally follow-up and confirm the facts discussed over the phone with an email. Always talk with the promoter—it just adds a professional touch. Do not be overly businesslike or neurotic on the phone—again, come across as a professional who will assure the promoter’s guests have fun—**Sell yourself—you will get paid—don’t worry about it—remember, this is a paying hobby, not your livelihood.** The contract I use is posted on my web site.

Tip—get liability insurance. When I performed full time, I carried performer’s liability insurance. The venues were state and county fairs where I entertained with Ozzie the Robot. A declaration page or binder was often required with the contract. I have not been required to provide liability insurance for almost 10 years. For me, it is an acceptable risk to crank a street organ at eight to twelve gigs per year. I may occasionally offend somebody with Franco the monkey, but certainly not enough to require liability coverage. If you feel more comfortable with performer’s liability insurance, or you do perform extensively, I recommend the Specialty Insurance Agency at www.specialtyinsuranceagency.com. The annual premium is about \$200.

Tip—freely play copyrighted music. This subject has been debated for decades. The basic question is, can I play *It’s a Small, Small World* in public? Yes, there is no issue unless you are performing in Las Vegas nightly to a sold out audience for a

performance fee of \$50K. I have never been approached, kidnapped, mugged, ejected, fined or interviewed by the FBI for playing anything, anywhere, anytime.

Tip—use a promotion agency. Using professional representation or a booking agency can be a good thing if you’re (1) readily available, and (2) comfortable with most venues. I have worked for several agencies in and around Kansas City—the experience was pleasant and profitable. I personally would con-

Davidson & Associates d.b.a. European Street Organ Grinder	
Affordable people magnet - Unique - Family oriented - Audience participation	
Subcontractor Contract	
AGREEMENT MADE THIS DAY OF 3/27/2008 BY AND BETWEEN	
<u>Gordie Davidson – Davidson & Associates</u> (Subcontractor)	AND <u>Robert Jones – Worlds of Fun</u> (Producer)
THE PRODUCER HEREBY ENGAGES THE SUBCONTRACTOR AND THE SUBCONTRACTOR HEREBY AGREES TO FURNISH THE FOLLOWING DESCRIBED UPON ALL THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS HEREIN SET FORTH.	
EVENT: Worlds of Fun Oktoberfest Weekends	
DATES, TIMES & LOCATION: 4 days, September 6&7, 13&14, 2008; 1:30-5:30PM, Worlds of Fun, KC, MO	
DESCRIPTION: Performance by European Street Organ Grinder	
PERFORMANCE FEE: \$400.00 per day x 4 = \$1,600.00	
PAYMENT TERMS: Payable by check on September 14, 2008	
REMARKS: Producer to provide parking passes for duration of event	
Standard Terms and Conditions	
TERM. The term of this Agreement shall commence on the date hereof and shall continue until the Producer and the Subcontractor have discharged their obligations hereunder.	
CONTROL OF EVENT. In order to insure proper compliance with city ordinances, building policies and material use, the Producer has sole and exclusive control over the manner in which an event is produced.	
COMPLIANCE WITH LAWS. The Producer will observe and comply with all applicable laws, rules, and regulations for the City, State and venue in which the event is being produced. In addition, Producer will secure all licenses, permits and approvals required for the Event. The Subcontractor agrees to abide by all City, State and venue laws, rules and regulations.	
RELATION OF PARTIES. The relationship between the parties hereto with respect to the production of the Event shall be solely that of independent contractors. Nothing in this Agreement shall be construed to cause the relationship between the parties to be that of partners or joint ventures.	
LIMITATIONS OF LIABILITIES. Subcontractor assumes all liability for withholding tax, social security, state tax, and workman’s compensation insurance. Subcontractor assumes all general performance public liability. Producer assumes all liability for capital fixtures. The individual signing on behalf of the Producer, if the Producer were a corporation or other organizational entity, shall not be personally liable for any of the terms of the contract, except that such individual warrants their authority to sign on behalf of the Producer.	
CANCELLATIONS. The Producer or Subcontractor may cancel any performance date(s) and/or the Event for any reason. Both parties agree to hold harmless the other party in the event of any cancellation(s). Subcontractor’s primary employer takes precedence in the event of any unforeseen scheduling conflicts.	
DONATIONS. Subcontractor agrees to not solicit donations or tips nor accept same if offered.	
ACCEPTANCE. This agreement contains the entire understanding of the parties. No modifications of the terms of this agreement shall be valid unless in writing. The proposed dates and terms of this agreement shall not be confirmed or binding upon Davidson & Associates until a signed copy of this agreement is received by Davidson & Associates.	
PLEASE SIGN BOTH COPIES AND RETURN ONE TO SUBCONTRACTOR	
_____ Signature of Subcontractor Gordie Davidson Davidson & Associates 408 Hillerest Street Lansing, KS 66043 913.683.3645	_____ Signature of Producer Robert Jones – Director Worlds of Fun 5454 NE Worlds of Fun Drive Kansas City, MO 66098 816.303.6019
To GUARANTEE your dates and performance rates, please return one copy of this contract to Subcontractor’s address by April 25, 2008	
Thanks for doing business with us, we appreciate your support!	

Figure 2. The author’s current performance contract.



Figure 3. Ted Guillaum's business card with full size image.

sider exclusive representation, but I do not meet criteria #1 above, that of being readily available. Professional agencies need quality acts they can count on being consistently available. If the opportunity arises, recommend you only deal with long established agencies. An example of such an agency resides locally in Lawrence, Kansas, Vodvill Entertainment at www.vodvill.com. Do not be concerned about promoter commissions—management will work with you to determine a “win-win” fee schedule. He wants a grounds attraction in his stable that clients will book—concentrate on being professional—the theme of this series.

Tip—advertise. What happens when you don't advertise? Nothing!

Tip—get a quality business card. The best advertising, as with most endeavors, is from referrals and people experiencing your act. People will remember the organ, the sound and your stage presence. What they won't remember is who you are. Simplest solution—a quality business card. What is that? Simply put—anything not done on a home computer. You have a professional appearance, a superb sound and fun act—don't downgrade the memory of yourself with an amateur looking, computer generated, inkjet printed business card. Every reader knows what I'm talking about. Those flimsy, light-weight cards with serrated edges and five different fonts. Of paramount importance on your card is a picture and contact information—less is better.

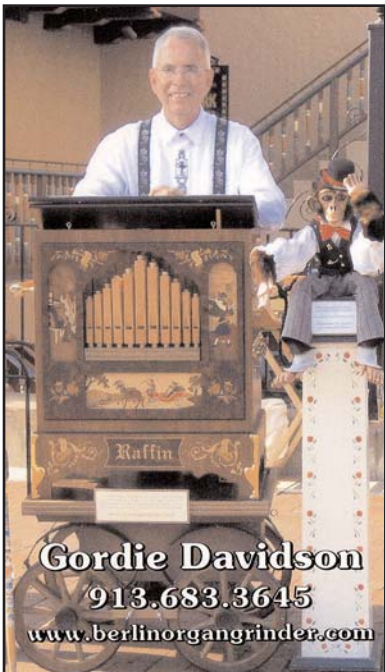


Figure 4. The author's current business card with full image and contact information printed on 80# card stock

Recommend a full size image—avoid postage stamp size images (**Figures 3 & 4**). All of my recent cards have included an image of the organ and monkey. Spend what it takes for a quality layout and printing on heavy card stock.

Tip—do not use any form of yellow pages. I failed here twice—first year naive, second year stupid. Why? People use the yellow pages for “right now” requirements. In one year, I received about six calls, none of which generated a gig. Callers usually wanted me for a birthday party that night for a fee of \$35. I recommended they call a face painter or balloon artist. I spent \$40 to \$60 month for a small display ad. I look back now at all the time I wasted meeting sales people, designing ads and writing checks—don't go there.



Figure 5. Author's current web site designed to be informative and user friendly.

Tip—get a web site (**Figures 5 & 6**). The Internet has enhanced my ability to inform potential clients on what an organ grinder does, looks and sounds like. The web supports my marketing efforts and adds a touch of professionalism. I always



Figure 6. Web site designed and built by Jan Bender.

refer people to the site to view online images and videos. Web sites are easy to do poorly. It seems that everyone has a computer, instant web software and a natural gift for designing. Unfortunately—that is not the case. Recommend you find a geek who can assist you with all that is required to design, develop and upload a site. One of the best on the Internet is www.bendermelodies.com, the site for Terry and Jan Bender.

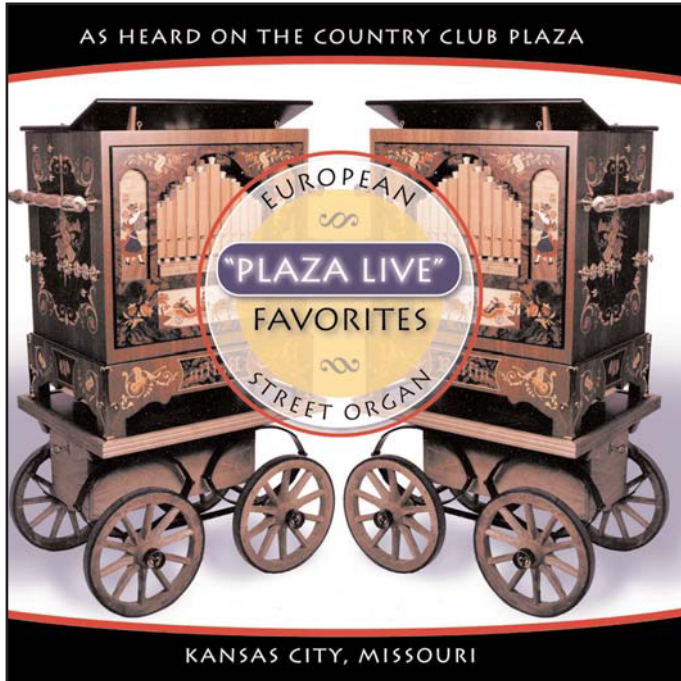


Figure 7. Author's CD front tray—professionally designed and printed.

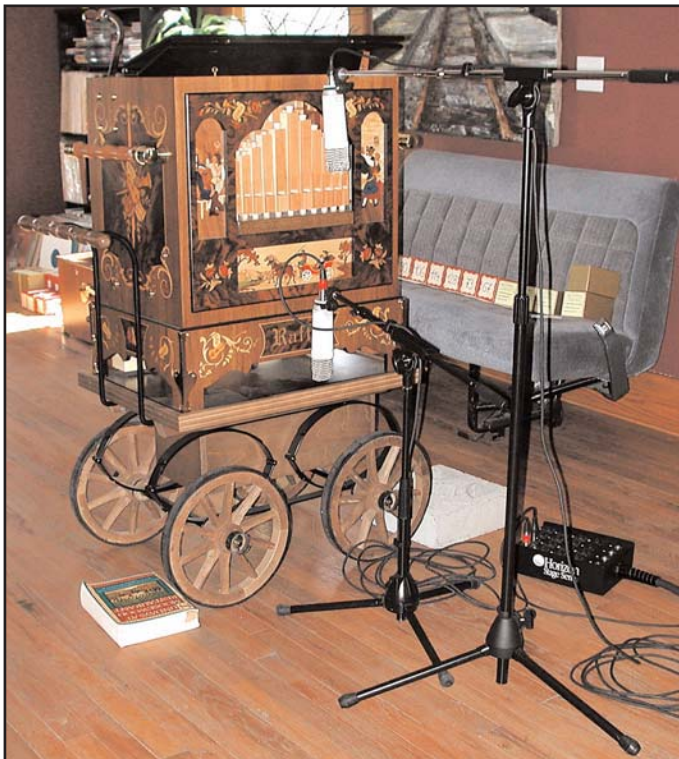


Figure 8. Microphone placement for Raffin 20/78 recording. Notice quality studio seating in the background.

Tip—produce a professional CD. This activity is easy to recommend, but difficult to do well. As with web site development, it appears everyone is a recording engineer with his or her laptops, software and camcorders. Producing a homemade CD is easy to do poorly. This is OK if you intend to give the CDs away free. Unfortunately, I have seen too many folks attempting to sell CDs with stick on labels, poor recording technology and amateur graphics. I don't know anyone who has made a profit selling CDs and audio tapes—I certainly have not. I spent approximately \$3,000 producing 1,000 CDs. Primary expenses include recording, graphics and production—your time does not count—remember, this is a paying hobby (Figure 7). Would I do it again? You bet! Why? The CDs have turned out to be a tremendous advertising medium. I sell about five to ten at most gigs, which buys my coffee for a week or two. I always give one to the promoter and frequently give several away during “Name that Tune” sessions at private gigs. Recording the CD was fun. I found a bright, young, geek graduate student at KU who assembled a recording studio in his student ghetto house (Figure 8). It was like a time capsule for me to see all this pristine recording gear he purchased on eBay: Ampex everything. I even purchased four new 15" reels of tape on eBay. Bottom line—we worked 12 hours to record, manipulate and output four CDs of music. My student-recording engineer had the most fun ever as I was not his normal Rock & Roll oriented client.

Producing the graphics was a team effort between a local graphic designer and myself. Of interest—a local studio photographed my Raffin against a green background, which provided an image to manipulate for the CD tray (Figure 9). I provided copy-ready images and edited sound tracks to the CD producer. He in-turn produced 1,000 shrink wrapped CDs with graphics. In sum—CDs are more an advertising medium than income producing commodity. Produce one for fun and consider yourself a non-profit here.



Figure 9. Author's organ photographed against a green background for future image masking.

This closes out our three-part COAA Interactive Series on Grinding for Success. My intent was to provide some insights and tips for those readers who may be interested in earning a few dollars with their street organs. If you're in the hobby for pure fun—GREAT! Hopefully there's a tip or two you can use in your routine. A super “Thanks” to everyone who gets out, grinds and makes people smile with the *Happiest Music On Earth!*

Gordie Davidson is a retired army engineer officer currently working as a defense contractor at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. His interest in mechanical music began in 1981 with his assignment to the Berlin Brigade. He has performed professionally in and around the Greater Kansas City Area since 1995. He and his wife Sue, reside in Lansing, Kansas. His web site can be found at www.stree-torgangrinder.com. For feedback and correspondence, please use gordiedavidson@gmail.com.