

## Industry Profile: Harris Goldberg

— By Larry LeBlanc (CelebrityAccess MediaWire)

### **This week In the Hot Seat with Larry LeBlanc: Harris Goldberg, president/owner, Concert Ideas.**

Harris Goldberg knows that live entertainment is a major draw at college venues across the country, but he likely wants to keep that his secret.

For nearly four decades, his feisty Woodstock, New York-based agency, Concert Ideas, has been the prime power player in the sector, serving as the middle agency between colleges and talent.

While many big American booking agents are wary of trying to set up concerts directly with students or even work within an academic mode, Goldberg and his six staff assist both parties with artist bookings, price negotiations, production, and everything in between, including educating student talent buyers about what in-demand acts may be seeking.

In most cases, colleges are represented by a student-run campus-entertainment board, which oversees which acts are brought to the school.

Presenting talent at any American educational facility can be difficult due to rules and restrictions imposed by the school, including guidelines for doing business on behalf of the school. There may also be security and policing stipulations.

As well, students live in their own “bubble world” and are difficult to reach through traditional forms of advertising. Radio, television and newspapers have little relevance anymore in promoting live shows. Digital marketing, particularly e-mail blasts, has become effective in marketing such events.

Nearly 75% of college tours run during the spring, when most colleges are seeking to buy talent for year-end blowout events for outdoor festival-type settings, gymnasiums, auditoriums, ballrooms, theaters or arenas.

Even in this tough economy, campuses are an attractive target. With thousands of students eager to ease the stresses of college life by watching their favorite act perform, America’s campuses are the ideal place to develop newbie talent.

As well, there are plenty of established bands who know that the college market is where the bulk of their fan base is, and there are enough agents and managers who know that as well.

Acts that used college markets as a key developmental step in their careers include: the Dave Matthews Band, Third Eye Blind, R.E.M., Hootie and the Blowfish, Phish, the Counting Crows, Uncle Kracker, Lifehouse, and Weezer.

Also, the decade-old, annual MTV Campus Invasion tour has brought exposure on the college circuit to Muse, Moby, Wyclef Jean, Cobra Starship, Hoobastank, Fabolous and Talib Kweli.

### **Why do you still do what you do?**

Why do I do what I do? I don't know. I still love music. I don't know if that's the reason. It's what I have learned to do. I came very close to going to law school, but I didn't. I am not sure that me being in the music business—in my position—is any different than selling a CD at Wal-Mart. I think we can say that middle agent has never been considered a glorious part (of the music business.) But I do what I do and I think that I do it well.

### **Concert Ideas acts as a middle agent?**

I don't think we are a middle agent. We are a buying service for college. We represent the college's needs, the (bigger) agency represents the act's needs. We help with everything from advertising plans, to where they print tickets, to where they get the sound and lights from, to trying to get the lowest possible price and, most importantly, getting them dates with the act that they want.

Some schools will call (us) up out of the blue; some schools, like the University of Connecticut, University of Rochester, Binghamton University, and University of Massachusetts, we have worked for those schools forever. There's such a trusting relationship there.

### **You keep quite a low profile in the industry.**

I don't have to be on the front page of Billboard, or written up by this or that magazine. We do our work. This company has been successful. We're not a company that borrows money. We are not promoting the shows.

### **Don't you have two offices?**

We have a satellite office in Indianapolis with (talent buyer) Dave Stevens who works for us (since 2001). I've had a few people work for me and one of them came to work a year and he's been here 14 years, which is Adam Tobey (senior VP). He's number two (here) and he will take over the company. He's been amazing on the booking front. I have six people working for me now.

### **What is the reach of the agency?**

We book concerts throughout the country, but there are more schools in the Northeast. Especially in spring time, you can route things. You can't route too many things in Nevada, but we do California and Oregon too.

### **Spring is the big season for college bookings?**

Yes, it's the big season. This office did more than 400 shows last year at colleges. That's a lot. That's Homecoming, Spring Flings and so forth. What you do for Homecoming you can't do for

Spring Fling. And with comedy bookings, what you can do for Homecoming, you can't do for when the parents are there. We don't work for clubs. We don't have that relationship with clubs.

**How do you work in a sector that is continually changing?**

You either adapt or you don't. You develop a relationship with directors. Students change every year. Directors, you have to have relationships with directors.

**Is this a sector of live music that agents at bigger agencies are jittery about working?**

I don't think that colleges are respected by agents or acts. It is (about) when (an act's) career is building or when their career is waning or they throw in a college date. But it is a very useful thing to build acts through college. Acts come through the college circuit, and build up followings.

**College is where the base of support is for so many established acts.**

Absolutely. But then (colleges) are ignored by their agencies because "We have to play in a major city venue" or this or that.

**Acts could do an "exclusive" booking at a school, and still keep a market clean.**

To some extent they will do that.

**As the middle party, how do you balance the needs of the students and the needs of the acts?**

The most important thing that we found out is that you don't lie to the agents; and you don't lie to schools.

The most important thing is that we are not out there lying to the schools or lying to the agents that this act is worth this or that much. You have to be straight forward (to agencies and managers), and say, "You know what? This doesn't work in colleges."

It used to be—and I haven't seen this in the last 10 or 12 years—that acts have carried sound and lights with them in general. But it used to be, "Let me add another \$1,000 to put a generator on (the contract), to rent a generator." Doing things like that, you end up pricing yourself out of all markets.

**The schools don't have to make a profit.**

No, but they are interested in breaking close to even. The economy has changed too. We aren't there to lose money either. The schools are not there to lose money. (Their attitude is), "We'll supplement or we'll break even or we'll lose a little money here." But they can't say, "Okay we can lose \$30,000 on a show and walk away and be happy."

**But schools can often pay higher guarantees.**

Sometimes. Sometimes.

**With the downturn in the economy are schools cutting back or, perhaps, going with two or three smaller bands instead?**

No. There's a big thing in April that I call "Stupid Money Times." There are three weekends in April that people fight over the same acts. I will offer \$20,000 to an act that should be getting \$10,000 because we need them for that (specific) week. I will offer \$100,000 to an act that should be getting \$60,000 or \$70,000. I don't want to go through who, but I have done this within past year. It's become stupid money. But, it can be justified if they sold the tickets, and if they have budgeted what they can or cannot lose. There may now be only two weeks (like that) with Coachella now expanding to two weekends.

**Both parties rely on you to take care of details.**

We take care of details. Not me alone—me and my staff. I will give you an example. I booked my first show at the State University of Fredonia (SUNY), which is right below Buffalo, six years ago. We had booked the Dropkick Murphys. I got a call that the show was canceled. At the end of the day, the phone rings in my house, not in my office—so I can pick up a call. I didn't get the call (from the band,) the girl from the school heard from the road manager at midnight the night before the show. Then, I got the call. The girl was very upset, "What am I going to do? It's 12 o'clock at night. The show is the next night."

I start thinking, "Who's around?" It's a \$15,000 or \$20,000 show. "Who's around?" I remembered that we had booked a number of dates with Reel Big Fish. I had them in Rochester, New York at 4 o'clock the next afternoon. So I called their tour manager, and we put the deal together.

That's where you build reputations. Anybody can book a show with a telephone—it is what you do before and after the show. The Dropkick Murphys couldn't make the gig at the last minute, it happened at midnight—and that's what (schools) are paying us for. They are paying for (us solving) the problems; for, hopefully, holding their hand; and walking them through (the date), and doing this and doing that. We are there to help in any way possible.

**With tours, that kind of thing can happen as well.**

We booked the Crocs NextStep Campus Tour with OneRepublic and Fabolous two years ago. We booked the whole tour. Of course, he (OneRepublic singer Ryan Tedder) played basketball the day before, pulled his Achilles tendon and they canceled the rest of the dates. We had to fill in with another act that was around and who could open for the four or five dates that we still had to do.

That's what we are there for. We are there for not disappearing. We are there to take your details, make sure that they have not been fucked up.

**[In 2008 OneRepublic was forced to cancel nine shows, after lead singer Ryan Tedder suffered a serious tear to his Achilles tendon just before the band was to play Central Michigan University on their college tour. The injury required immediate surgery.]**

**You get to work with many artists at the start of their career.**

Well, yeah. A lot of people came out of the college circuit—that's true—Dave Matthews and Springsteen. We booked Dave Matthews for \$1,000 or \$1,500 a night. I can think of a thousand people from Red Hot Chili Peppers onward. They were begging us to give dates away for the Chili Peppers. They were a blues funk band. It was in their early days. O.A.R. was built in the college market. Do you know who has done a nice job in the college market? Third Eye Blind. They still have a career because of the college market.

**Any new acts impressing you?**

Do you know who's an interesting new act? Brett Dennen, and CAA has him. He's managed by the people who manage John Mayer (Mick Management). He has opened for Dave Matthews a few times. He has a song "Sydney (I'll Come Running)." Take a listen to it. Also, "Ain't No Reason," another song he has now. He reminds me of what Paul Williams used to look like—a munchkin with red hair. He's a very interesting artist. There are a lot of those.

**Due to routing, it's often possible to land a hot act for a college date. John Peters at MassConcerts told me recently how he had the chance to book U2 early in their career at Tufts University for \$3,000.**

I did seven dates on U2. I have a poster on my wall from RIT (Rochester School of Technology) for U2 on April 28, 1983). I did the seven dates for U2 at, I think, \$7,500 (per show). It was a big thing. There was an agent at the time, Ken Kohlberg, who said, "C'mon they are going to be big. You've got to help me out."

**How often do you hear those two phrases?**

Oh, I hear "Help me out," or "The album is going to be great," and "The price just went up because the album is going to be great." But I think that this business is a business that eats its own. I am also a member of an organization that I believe that does the same thing, NACA (the National Association for Campus Activities, established in 1960) which has an (annual) college booking conference. What it is (in the sector is the attitude) that you develop an act, and you either grab the money quickly, and you ruin the career of the act.

**Comedians are very visible on the college circuit.**

We have always booked comedians. We have probably done 25 or 30 dates with Lewis Black over the years. To me, he's the best of the best. We did lots of dates with Dave Chappelle in the time. We did dates back in the day with Eddie Murphy and everybody else. I booked Jon Stewart two or three years ago.

**Booking comedy is also sometimes a safer move because it has a wide appeal to students from all walks of life.**

Well, a lot of comics are not the most friendly people in the world, either.

**Do you book acoustic shows for campus coffee houses?**

We don't do a lot of those. We book a few. Who you deal with on the acoustic scene or for coffee houses is different than who you do for the dances and major concerts where you are dealing with four different committees.

**Do you book guest speakers?**

Oh yes, but not as many as we should. We booked Karl Rove debating Howard Dean at Albany last year. (Adam) Taylor, in the office, has booked Barbara Walters.

**Where are you from originally?**

Providence, the East Side.

**How did you become a booking agent?**

I went to a college that no longer exists, Windham College in Vermont (located in Putney, Vermont on the campus that is now Landmark College). I booked Sly & the Family Stone there. I think it was for \$10,000. I've got the contract still in my drawer. He didn't show up, but I booked it. I don't know if he canceled beforehand or not.

**You hooked up with other schools for block bookings?**

I found out that if I put my school together with x, y, z schools in Vermont we might be able to get a better price. It was still small potatoes. Then when I got out of college I took a year off. I came to visit someone in Woodstock, and I stayed, and I started putting shows together.

**You started putting together dates for artists.**

I started putting together dates. There was a college agency (College Entertainment Associates,) which was in its waning years. It was run by Eddie Micone, who is now at Paradigm in New York. I sorta became competition to them but they were running out. I just filled a void, and developed it as a business.

**When did Concert Ideas start?**

1978 or 1979.

**Acts like Harry Chapin, Jackson Browne, and David Bromberg were college staples during those years.**

A friend of mine (Mark McKenna of Band Artist Management) now manages David. I learned more about booking when I started out in this business by putting five or six David Bromberg dates through Magna Artists in New York—a real nice commission booking—than when I did a Green Day date. You learn more (while working) on their survival, and with your own survival.

**Colleges have traditionally been an entry point for people wanting to get into the music industry.**

I booked a few dates with Rob Light (managing partner, Creative Artists Agency) when he was in Syracuse. At the same time Mike Piranian, was at SUNY Albany; Mike was at CAA, he repped Dylan at CAA. He died of a heart attack. Who came out of radio at Syracuse University was (Live Nation talent buyer) Harvey Leeds. Harvey's brother Steve (VP Talent and Industry Affairs, SIRIUS/XM) was also at Syracuse, I think, also.

**[Mike Piranian passed away in 2000 at the age of 48. His clients then included Kiss, and Lenny Kravitz. He had worked with Rod Stewart, Stevie Nicks, and Bob Dylan.]**

**Are colleges still a fertile ground for music industry talent?**

Oh yeah. I see a lot of bright talents. I wish half of them I could hire. In CAA, they have brought up certain people. They have an (agent) program. Someone that was coming to be a national agent, they took to California to study for three months. If they worked in my office, learned what we do, and learned how to get in the ground level of something, it would probably be just as much an education. Not the CAA way, but they'd understand how schools work and everything.

At certain schools, there are people who think that they are going to move on and become managers in the entertainment business. I tell them, "Go to law school you will learn more."

**People used to work from the bottom up.**

That's true. If they trained as an agent, they were put in the mail room. Chip Hooper is one of the wonders (of the business). He's one of the principals of Paradigm, but he's also (the agent for) Dave Matthews, Phish, and O.A.R.

I remember Chip showing a book for the Missoula Mountain Band. He worked for the Good Music Agency. At a NACA convention in Chicago, I took him out to a Burger King because there was nothing open. So for the next two or three years we were trading things back and forth. He's sending me gift coupons and I sent them back to him. But Chip learned from the ground up. He learned the business. He learned how to book big things, and small things.

**You were also a manager.**

I have managed two people in my life. One was (singer/songwriter) Tim Moore, who I still think is an incredible songwriter; and Denny Dent who was a rock and roll painter. He painted six foot high canvases of Jimi Hendrix and other artists. He developed this (rock and roll) art form, and he was making quite a bit of money—\$50,000 a night. He did a lot of corporate (shows), and a

lot of colleges. He built up a big college following; but he got more or less too expensive for the college market, but he still did a few dates a year. He developed his art a year after John Lennon was shot (in 1980).

**[Denny Dent has been described as the world's only "rock and roll painter".**

**His performance—which he described as a "Two-Fisted Art Attack" — consisted of him rapidly painting on a six-foot-tall black canvas with multiple brushes in both hands, as well as painting with his bare hands to a musical accompaniment. Over the course of a few songs, he would complete a portrait of such artists as John Lennon, Jimi Hendrix, Elton John, Mick Jagger, Billy Joel, Frank Sinatra, Tina Turner, and others.**

**Performing before 300,000 people at the Woodstock '94 concert, brought Dent sizable celebrity. Ira Robbins of New York Newsday described his appearance as, "The weekend's first defining moment... The prayers of the crowd... had finally been answered." Dent died in 2004 at the age of 55.]**

**Tim Moore is a damn good songwriter.**

He's an incredible songwriter. (His song) "Second Avenue" is a classic. Listen to "Yes" which became a very big hit in South America (#1 in Brazil for 10 weeks). Tim never broke through like he should have. "A Fool Like You" is going to be re-recorded someday. It is still an amazing song. "Rock'n'Roll Love Letter" is another one that almost became ubiquitous but (his version) was killed by the Bay City Rollers. The problem was that every time Tim would want to release a song, someone else did the same song. Art Garfunkel released "Second Avenue" and they both killed each other. I have heard that Keith Richards loved (his original version of) "Rock'n'Roll Love Letter."

**[Tim Moore and Todd Rundgren were both members of the Philadelphia blues band, Woody's Truck Stop. Moore later joined the Muffins, who recorded for RCA Records. Next, Moore teamed up with Daryl Hall to co-found Gulliver which released one album on Elektra Records.**

**While living in Woodstock, New York in the early '70s, Moore signed with the Paramount label. As his single "Second Avenue" was climbing Billboard's Hot 100 chart in 1974, the label abruptly ceased operations. At the same time, Art Garfunkel released a competing version of "Second Avenue" which peaked at #34 on the Billboard Hot 100. Moore's version stalled at #58. Moore went on to record for Asylum Records with little success.**

**Performers who have recorded Moore's compositions include: Cher ("Love Enough"), Bay City Rollers ("Rock'n'Roll Love Letter"), Etta James ("Charmer"), the Records ("Rock'n'Roll Love Letter"), Maxine Nightingale ("I Think I Want to Possess You"), Ian Matthews ("A Fool Like You"), and Cliff Richard ("Love Enough").]**

**Did you manage Tim during that "Second Avenue" period?**

Did I manage? If you are a hit artist, you manage. If you aren't a hit artist, you mis-manage. He had his own label through Paramount, and then signed with Asylum Records. The record came out and I think that was the time that (David) Geffen was involved with Cher, and his interest in the music business went out the window. But there were some great people at the Asylum label. (Elektra-Asylum chief) Mel Posner, Freddy DeMann who was the assistant head of promotion, and Ralph Ebner who, I think, ran the NY office.

**It's disappointing that Tim never quite broke through as an artist.**

Sometimes it happens, and sometimes you miss by a... We came very close to signing with Clive (Davis) as opposed to Geffen. Clive had just gone over to Arista. Who knows if we should or shouldn't have?

Speaking about beautiful songs. Do you know who I loved as a songwriter and who I still think is one of the best? Tim Hardin—"If I Were A Carpenter." He lived in Woodstock, and I helped him out with a couple of things. He came so close. If you refer to him, and say, "You have to listen to this person," people say that Rod Stewart recorded his songs (including "Reason to Believe"). On his first two albums ("Tim Hardin 1" and "Tim Hardin 2"), when you can hear the plucking of the strings on guitar, that's a gem to me. That was the beauty of him.

**You own a music publishing company.**

I wish I owned more (songs). (I have songs by) Tim Moore and Robbie Dupree. Basically, that's it. I own part of the copyright from "Steal Away" by Robbie Dupree (which reached #6 on Billboard's Hot 100 chart in 1980). I helped finance that record. At one time, we were close friends, parted as friends, and now we're back being friends again. (My management partner) Johanan Vigoda has part of the rights to (Jerry Jeff Walker's) "Mr. Bojangles." He negotiated the first Beatles' deal in the country representing the record company Vee-Jay Records. Then he was Atlantic Records' first corporate lawyer. He goes back.

**[Johanan Vigoda, in fact, was Steve Wonder's long-time lawyer, and was the judge in the extended version of "Living For The City" who sentences the young man to 10 years in prison.]**

**Students live in a bubble world. They study, and work. Isn't it hard to reach those students with traditional advertising?**

Yeah. Nowadays, it has even changed even more so with the internet. What we found out also is that people from—let's take the University of Connecticut for example—people from Hartford, Connecticut do not go to Storrs, Connecticut. People in Storrs go to concerts in Hartford, but it's not the reverse. So they are living in an insulated community. That is how they have decided to market (events) there. The internet has become important but newspaper ads don't really do anything. College kids don't read newspapers.

**Does campus radio airplay have any impact?**

Not really. Even though campus radio is something, I'm not sure a lot of people listen to campus radio anymore. (Years ago) people would (be played) on the radio who would come to town. It was more than just a college radio station. There's still a big one (WFDU) in New Jersey at Fairleigh Dickinson University (in Madison,) which I think is more of a commercial station than it is a college station. But the rest of them, you listen to them over the wires of the heating pipes. Now those are going because people get the internet radio.

**The live music market has certainly been since transformed.**

How about the promoters who started out years ago, like Don Law, and Larry Magid—who started out in the famous club scenes in Boston and Philadelphia? There was something great about that whole scene. I don't see it anymore. I think that stadium plays have taken away all of that stuff. If you ever were in Don Law's Tea Party club in Boston, you saw people like Joe Cocker, the Who, Led Zeppelin, and Roshan Roland Kirk. It was amazing. There was a whole circuit of those types of clubs. Also at the same time Dennis Arfa was promoting shows through his company Layla Productions, and started his own company, Home Run Agency, booking Billy Joel. Bruce (Springsteen) was being booked by Barry Bell at Premier. We booked a lot of college shows at that time.

**Live music has become big business.**

It's become more about T-shirts, and that type of crap. It's overkill. We eat our young. When it comes to stadiums, and you have to pay \$20 for Ticketmaster, then you pay a surcharge for parking even though you may take the subway (to the venue), who wants to go?

**With a Gold Express Card, you can meet your favorite act. Where's the mystery?**

No. Give me a black American Express card and I'm impressed. I actually think (the mystery) is the whole thing about music. The mystery of rock and roll was what was interesting. When you become ubiquitous, when you become so out there, there's no mystery left. There's nothing about it. Wasn't it exciting when you knew Cat Stevens and nobody else did? I come from an era when at a college you took speaker systems outside, and played the new Beatles or Rolling Stones records. When is that done right now? It was exciting at that time.

**Larry LeBlanc is widely recognized as one of the leading music industry journalists in the world. Before joining CelebrityAccess in 2008 as senior editor, he was the Canadian bureau chief of Billboard from 1991-2007 and Canadian editor of Record World from 1970-89. He was also a co-founder of the late Canadian music trade, The Record. He has been quoted on music industry issues in hundreds of publications including Time, Forbes, and the London Times. He is co-author of the book "Music From Far And Wide: Celebrating 40 Years Of The Juno Awards.**