

Jeff Apregan

The Apregan Group / Venue Coalition

Jeff Apregan's story should be required reading for every student slaving away on their college programming committee, cleaning

parking lots and catching flak over bookings, because it's a fine example of where hard work can take someone with an entrepreneurial spirit in a business that can be tough to break into.

He's gone from the programming committee of his alma mater, California State University, Fresno, to owning two businesses that play important roles at venues throughout the United States and Canada. In between, he's handled business affairs for Avalon Attractions, managed artists, booked fairs, run a major amphitheatre, and forged a longtime touring and professional relationship with Neil Diamond among others.

But today, Apregan's focus is on venues. His Apregan Group assists venues in talent buying and project management on a start-to-finish basis, among other consulting services. A major client is Gridiron Stadium Network, 10 stadiums he consults for and helps book content into among other services.

He also heads up Venue Coalition, a company he envisioned in 2005 with a handful of Canadian venues but which has grown dramatically since its first gathering at the Concert Industry Consortium conference.

Venue Coalition now boasts some 60 member venues, rang-

ing from those in tertiary markets to major market sports hubs.

Apregan has spent a good deal of his adult life on the road and, just when one might think he'd close that chapter and be content to work the phones from his base in Westlake Village, Calif., a new project – Nitro Circus Live – will see him traveling again in 2014.

He's surrounded himself with a young but highly experienced staff, many of whom also got their starts in college programs. Key to his companies is Venue Coalition EVP Andrew Prince, who honed his skills with Neil Diamond's Arch Angel Concerts, Shoreline Amphitheatre and Bill Graham Presents. He is also a graduate of IAVM's Public Assembly Facility Management School.

"We have an amazing team of people who are passionate about this business and about servicing our members and clients. I've been very fortunate to have surrounded myself with great people and have lots to be thankful for," Apregan told Pollstar.

You've worn a lot of hats over the years. What's your focus now?

I'm president of two companies; Apregan Group and Venue Coalition.



JEFF (center) and his Apregan Group staff (L-R): Eric Gardner, Andrew Prince, Lisa Cusworth, Jeff, Kelly McCormick, Justin Karch and Andrew Saunders.

Apregan Group is a company that provides talent buying services for specific clients and special events, but also provides tour direction, project management and strategic planning services. Our clients include Gridiron Stadium Network, Nitro Circus Live, Mammoth Mountain Ski Area, Steamboat Strings Festival, the Bakersfield Fox Theater and a number of others.

The Gridiron Stadium Network is a group of NFL stadiums for which we provide consulting services. As a booking advocate for these stadiums, our objective is to find incremental content for them and to help craft compelling deals and strategies that will attract promoters and artists.

One of the big projects that we are involved with is Nitro Circus Live. Apregan Group is providing tour direction services for this first-ever North American tour in January.

Venue Coalition is our other business, which consists of a group of nearly 60 arenas in North America. We are actively engaged on their behalf to identify new business opportunities and to help drive events to their venues.

Between the two companies, we are servicing over 70 venues between theatres, arenas and stadiums. That keeps us pretty busy.

So it seems you've found a very successful niche that defies definition.

Niche is a great word for what we do. Fifteen or 20 years ago, I could have never imagined that we would have the kind of companies that we have (and the number of clients that we answer to).

As our industry continues to evolve, the level of competition has never been greater. The reality is that when looking at arenas alone, there are more venues in North America than there are acts and attractions that can consistently fill them. Add in fairs, festivals and casinos, and there are lots of places for artists to play.

Among other things, part of our job is to reach key decision makers, provide them with useful information and to make compelling arguments (and in some case offers), so that an agent, promoter or producer will bring their shows to the venues we represent. Our Venue Coalition members benefit from having us out there helping to tell their story.

You've had just about every job there is in the industry. How did you get your foot in the door?

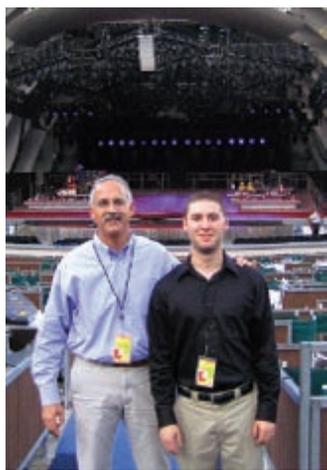
I have been very fortunate to have seen the industry from a variety of perspectives; as a tour promoter, an artist

representative and as a venue operator.

In high school, I was always the guy that was booking bands at other schools. Later, while attending Fresno State to get a business degree, I was booking shows on campus. As graduation approached, I decided I really wanted to pursue some kind of career in the music business.

After graduation, I moved to Los Angeles, hoping to land a job in the mail room at William Morris. That didn't work out, but I was able to get a job at Management III / Concerts West, which was a huge management and concert promotion company at the time. They managed John Denver, Bob Dylan, The Beach Boys, Neil Diamond, The Moody Blues and a number of other artists. Concerts West was really one of the very first national concert promoters, promoting shows throughout North America. It was a very early version of the national tour promoter model that exists today.

I started out in the accounting department reading and reviewing show files and learned at a very early point about show expenses and how shows made money. I eventually graduated into a tour manager / promoter rep position



JEFF AND HIS SON, Jeffrey, take a moment before a Neil Diamond show at Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles before the crowds take over.

while I was there and toured with John Denver, Bob Dylan, The Blues Brothers, Eric Clapton and, in 1982, did my first tour with Neil Diamond.

At this point, I have to mention my two greatest mentors in this industry, both of whom I am incredibly grateful to: Tom Miserendino, who gave me my first job at Concerts West (and others afterwards), and Sal Bonafede, who I worked closely with for many years. The friendships I have with Tom, and also with Paul Gongaware and John Meglen, who I also worked with, go all the way back to those early days at (the original) Concerts West.

When I left Concerts West, I went to work for a company called Eric/Chandler Ltd.

Eric/Chandler had acquired a stake in Avalon Attractions at the time and was also the managing partner for Irvine Meadows Amphitheater in Orange County, Calif. I was with that group of companies for about 11 years and in that time ran Irvine Meadows and handled business affairs for Avalon Attractions. I was later involved with several radio stations that we purchased and operated as well.

Tell us about your long working relationship with Neil Diamond.

Neil Diamond tours have been one of the common threads throughout my career. He's an incredibly loyal artist and has kept much of the same team in place for many, many years. He was very good to me.

I did numerous tours with Diamond and literally hundreds of shows over a span of more than 25 years. Even after I left Concerts West and was with Eric/Chandler, I was still involved with Neil's North American tours and, in 1998, after I had already started Apregan Group, I was again involved in all of Neil's North American tours all the way up until 2009.



JEFF HAS SPENT MUCH OF HIS CAREER TOURING with Neil Diamond, including the superstar's 25th sold-out concert at NYC's Madison Square Garden in 2008. Jeff (R) celebrates backstage with manager Irving Azoff, AEG Live's Randy Phillips, Diamond, MSG's Jay Marciano and Azoffmusic's Katie McNeil.

I was Neil's North American tour promoter for many years, and after Sal (Bonafede), passed away, I was his tour director, taking over additional responsibilities including international touring. I literally grew up on that tour starting when I was only 24. It was a great touring family for me and it was always great to be able to work with many of the same folks over such a long period of time.

Because of my involvement with Diamond, I had the opportunity to work with some of the most talented people in our industry and it was how I got to know guys like Doug Clouse, Patrick Stansfield, Doug Pope, Michael Weiss and so many others.

One of the great joys for me was taking my son Jeffrey out on the 2008 tour and having the opportunity to work together with him. It was his first tour at the time and having him on the road was a reminder of how fortunate I have been to have worked with Neil and his organization for all those years.

Were you there for Neil Diamond's famous runs at the Forum in Los Angeles?

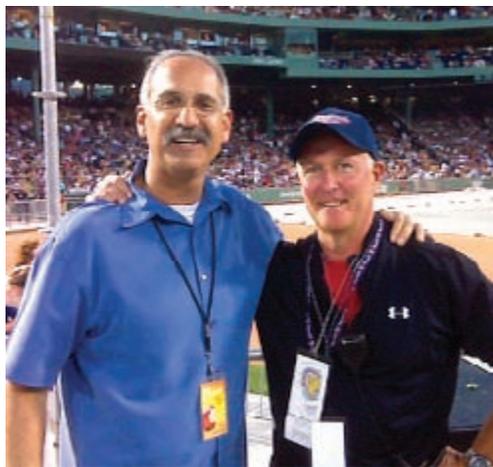
I remember doing a couple of long runs at The Forum. I know one of them would have been in the '80s, and that was a run of something like 10 or 11 dates at The Forum. No one had ever done anything like that before.

Another run of dates I remember very well was in March 1992, doing two shows, with one night off and then another four. My wife, Nancy, was very pregnant at the time and we induced labor on that off day; the day our daughter Erin was born.

When did you start working with Sal Bonafede?

I met Sal when I started working at Management III/Concerts West in 1980. The first time I worked with him was on a Bob Dylan tour, which was also the very first I had ever been on.

We also worked together on John Denver tours while still at Concerts West, and from 1982 until Sal's passing in 2007, we worked together on many, many Diamond tours. For many years, we promoted Neil's tours entirely in-house, so Sal and I routed the tours together, cut the venue deals, scaled the houses, coordinated the on-sales, and marketing. Every detail about promoting those tours, we did together.



JEFF AND DOUG CLOUSE from AEG Live Touring take in the sights at Fenway Park in Boston, where fan favorite Neil Diamond prepares for a sold-out concert.

He was a tremendous mentor but he really became a great friend to me. His passing, which was right after the Pollstar conference that year, was very sudden and it was a huge loss for me. I am proud of the work we did together and I am grateful to this day for his friendship.

How much influence does the artist have on how tours run on a business level?

I think it really depends on the artist. There are definitely artists that have a very clear understanding of how the business works and they have well defined objectives that they want to meet and exceed.

Creative decisions about production elements, sets, musicians, etc. at some point in time intersect with the business of putting together a tour. The size and weight of the production, the number of people on the road, the number of trucks and buses, all influence decisions about where the show can or should play. In addition, the timing of an album release and singles may affect decisions about the timing of a tour and when certain markets should be played in the album cycle. Once these parameters are defined,

planning for a tour starts to take shape.

Every tour has a personality, in a way. It usually starts with the artist and the team of people he or she has assembled. John Denver tours were always very fun and relaxed. We would do short tours, but cram as many shows as possible into that window.

I can remember doing runs with 14 shows in 18 days, something like that. We would hub out of a city, allowing us to stay in one hotel for nearly a week at time, flying back after each show. I can remember staying out by Pine Knob Amphitheatre in Michigan, flying out to do a show at Poplar Creek in Chicago, and then back to Detroit after the show.

With Diamond, there were more moving parts. In my early years with the tour, we would fly out to each city prior to putting the tour on sale and do a full-on advance meeting. It was an insane schedule. I can remember doing 10 different cities in a span of three days – physically being in those cities doing a four-hour advance, going over every detail of the show before putting tickets on sale.

It was a tremendous education because you've got to be able to handle a million different things at the same time, and pay attention to the smallest details. But it was always a great experience and very rewarding to see those tours come together.

How did the idea for Venue Coalition come about?

The genesis of Venue Coalition came from a conversation at the Pollstar conference in 2005.

Kevin Donnelly, who runs the MTS Center in Winnipeg, Gilles Paquin of Paquin Entertainment, and I were standing behind the Century Plaza Hotel one night talking out by the pool. I don't know how we got on the topic but Kevin said, "These venues in Canada could really use some help."

We kept the conversation going after that conference and before the end of that year, Gilles and I had started Venue Coalition with nine members in Western Canada. By the middle of 2006, we had picked up a few additional buildings.

We ran the business for another year and a half, and I was really beginning to question whether this could be a sustainable business with so few buildings. We had already started to get shows for our buildings, but I just wasn't sure how effective we could be with such a small number of members. In early 2007, we decided to invite a large group of arena operators to a presentation that we made at that year's Pollstar conference. At the time the majority of attendees were arena operators in tertiary markets.

We walked into that conference with maybe 12 members and walked out with 32. Guys that said, "We want to do this. This makes sense to us." From that point forward, it was clear that we needed to operate differently in order to make sure that we were servicing the members of our group.

Andrew Prince, who is now our executive vice president, had been working with me since 2005, first doing a Diamond tour with me, and later working on special projects. Andrew began to focus all of his time on Venue Coalition and he has played an important role in helping to grow the business and running day-to-day operations.

As a tour promoter, I had the opportunity to work in numer-

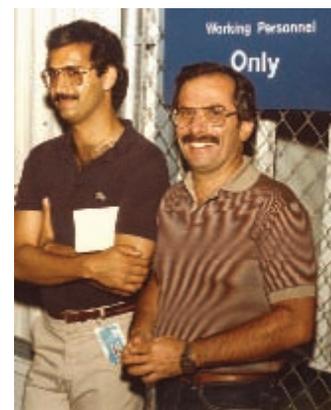
ous arenas and got to know a lot of venue managers. I developed an understanding of how venues operate and had an appreciation for the work that venue operators did. I had no idea at the time how relevant those relationships would become so many years later.

What is your Venue Coalition pitch?

It's pretty simple. Every venue needs more event days and fewer dark days. We can help them with that. We describe our role as an advocate for our venues. We actively reach out to the industry to learn about upcoming tours and booking opportunities that we can share with our members. We are on the phone every day with agents, promoters, producers and managers, attend shows and industry functions and try to be as visible as possible to help represent our members.

We communicate with our members daily and work together with them to identify booking opportunities that are relevant to their markets, and we go after those opportunities on their behalf.

We have worked hard to develop systems that allow us to provide agents, promoters and producers with real-time avails,



Jeff (L) and Tom Miserendino, a long time ago in a shed far, far away – what used to be known as Irvine Meadows Amphitheatre, where Jeff was executive director of the California venue.

