

With over 1,000 shows per year, Cellar Door

Concerts owner Jack Boyle is America's busiest concert promoter. While many of his peers decry the state of the business, Boyle says "I'm bullish on our industry. Deals are tighter, gross profits are down from the promoter's point of view, and the risk is greater, but there are more shows and more tickets sold and anyone that runs it like a business is going to do well."

The low-key Boyle normally shuns publicity but spoke with POLLSTAR this week on his thoughts about the past, present, and future of the concert business.

After a stint in the service, Boyle went to Georgetown University on an academic scholarship. He worked in local bars before and after he graduated from college in 1959. While working as a systems analyst for the federal government he won \$1,100 in a poker game and bought a piece of a little neighborhood bar. According to Boyle his departure from public service came easy.

"Just inside of two years I owned three bars and I was paying somebody twice as much to run the bars as I was making working for the government ... so I left and went to work in the bar business."

A Fats Domino show in 1965 was Boyle's first foray into the national concert business. He first opened the Cellar Door club in 1963 but sold it that same year. In 1970 he bought it back and built it into one of the country's major showcase rooms. It was in 1971, with a Gordon Lightfoot show at Constitution Hall in D.C., that Boyle made the full plunge into concert promotion.

Today Cellar Door Concerts has offices in five states and also backs several other promoters around the country. The operation is expected to sell over three million tickets this year and over five million by 1992.

"Basically the people who run these offices are my partners. Rick Franks in Detroit, Wilson Howard in the Carolinas, Bill Reid in Virginia, Ron Cohen in Florida, and of course Dave Williams spearheading the whole thing from D.C. Their income rises when the company profit rises, their income falls when the company profit falls. I always felt that a man whose own pocket is affected by a show takes much more care of what he pays for it, how he advertises it, and what he does. We have been very fortunate having good young people with us. We also own nightclubs, restaurants, and other businesses, so that we've developed a tremendous amount of good young management talent that allows us to expand. And every time Cellar Door has expanded into a new area it's never been us looking for a market, it's been acts or agencies asking us to go into the new markets."

Boyle thinks that a promoter has to first be a good businessman in order to be successful.

"Basically, a promoter is a banker who gives non-recourse loans at high interest rates. If the show wins, he collects money at a high interest rate for what he risked, and if it loses he has no recourse to get his money back. So our only inventory besides good will is cash. Those promoters who go broke, and there always will be some in our business, are the ones who never learn to say 'no' to certain acts and certain demands. The business has become very capital-intensive and the smaller operations have a difficult time competing. But in Florida alone we must have twenty different companies promoting shows, and if they pick and choose and start with the smaller shows and follow them up through their career like the rest of us did, there's plenty of room for everyone."

Sometimes the competition can be heated. After years of partnering shows with Cecil Corbett's South Carolina-based Beach Club Booking, Boyle was sued by Corbett in November 1987 for allegedly creating the conditions which forced Beach Club into bankruptcy. It has gone unreported until now but Corbett has quietly dropped his lawsuit with prejudice, which means it cannot be re-filed.

Boyle says, "Neither I nor Cellar Door paid him or anyone else a penny to settle this. I feel totally exonerated."

Boyle says he doesn't think it's healthy for the business for promoters to fail. "If another promoter makes money, I don't lose any; if another promoter loses money, I don't make any."

While nearly all his peers have been scrambling around to develop amphitheatres for their markets, Boyle has bucked the trend and laid back.

"I don't think you need them to survive. On the contrary, Cellar Door is in many markets where we compete against amphitheatres. Many arena managers realize that they're going to lose virtually all their shows to the amphitheatres unless they give good deals, and work with the promoter and the acts. They realize that they have to change the rates to get the business in the summer. I have found for Cellar Door that by allying ourselves with the buildings we have done better than if we had owned our own facilities."

Boyle did, however, recently purchase the 4,100-seat Sunrise Theatre in South Florida.

"I bought it because it was an economic necessity to buy it, not because I needed the building. For the price, I couldn't turn it down. In five years the land alone will be worth what I paid for the Sunrise. I may not be the best promoter in America but I think I'm the best businessman as a promoter."

Boyle is making the venue, which he describes as his "new baby," available to other promoters and is especially interested in encouraging MOR and fine arts promoters to use the facility. He hasn't ruled out owning his own amphitheatre someday but after looking at different deals, he hasn't found anything that excites him. He briefly explored the feasibility of taking on the recently shuttered Hollywood Sportatorium but that deal made no financial sense.

He explains, "The day of just being a promoter is gone. You have to be a promoter and a businessman. And just because you want to build an amphitheatre, if the economics aren't right, having it is not going to change anything because we're all working for the bottom line in this business."

For those interested in breaking into the business, Boyle cautions that, "I can't think of any of us [major promoters] who would want our children to do it. It's such a tough, tough business. Most of the children of promoters have lived a very nice life. And most of the promoters have had to work very hard for what they have. There aren't any promoters, with the exception of one or two, that came from a monied background. Most of them clawed their way up. Warn these kids fresh from college that it's not that easy to survive in this business. If you look through the ranks of major promoters who were around just 15 years ago, you find over half are missing. And of the ones that are left, over half are fronting for someone else. There's not many of us left that are real promoters that risk our own money."

Boyle is now retired from the concert business.