

# Every Gig is a Union Gig—

By Bruce Fife, International Vice President

One of the benefits of our Union structure is that while I have my role in the governance of the Federation, I also continue to be a Local officer with my hands in the day to day running of a Local. The obvious advantage of that relationship is that it allows me to directly inform the International Executive Board (IEB) of the many challenges and experiences faced on a daily basis by a Local Officer in the “real” world.

A significant component of the job includes the daily interactions with our membership, and I’m fascinated by the diverse opinions espoused by our members as it relates to their view of “unionism”. We all joined for different reasons. Some because it was required by the contracts we’re working under. Others because of the variety of services provided, how they benefit us, and how they augment our individual business models. Or some, just because they believe in Unionism in general and support the work we do.

As members, we also relate to our Union in different ways. There are those that begrudge their membership and its obligations. Others have “the religion”, but probably most just see it as a part of their musical business world and may not even think much about it until some event or job creates a direct interaction.

Within this context, it’s also intriguing how members divide their live performances into “Union” and “Non-Union” work, as if there is some kind of magical line. I’m always surprised when a musician tells me a gig wasn’t a Union job, and while there are many descriptors for this distinction, I’ve never quite understood the reasoning or logic behind this “Union” vs. “Non”.

As we move forward with our new AFM Entertainment project, it will be very obvious when you land a job through the booking service that it is a Union gig. We will have contracted the gig for you. When you’ve gotten a job through GoProMusic or your Local referral service, the Union made that happen, even though it didn’t actually draw up the paperwork. Ironically, I’ve had some members question whether those are “Union gigs”! Historically, getting our members a job was never the key role of the Union. Our primary job is to negotiate the wages and working conditions found in the multitude of Collective Bargaining Agreements you work under, to support you in your work with a wide range of services, benefits and protections, and to advocate and lobby on your behalf at the local, state and national levels, within both government and industry.

So that leads to the question: how is it a Union gig if you land the job yourself without any assistance from the Union?

First, being the good Union musician that you are, you contracted the gig for at least Union scale. That means the Union (you, the member musicians) set that scale to not only create a baseline rate of pay that is competitive, but also to maintain a standard, a recognized value of your worth within the marketplace. You would not believe how many calls we receive at the Local from non union musicians wanting to know what Union scale is for specific types of work, because we assure the most recognizable standard in the workplace.

Second, it's a Union gig because if that job goes south on you, it's your Union that'll take that contract and work to make things right. We're the ones who will make those phone calls, attempt to negotiate a settlement, and if that doesn't work and there's a legitimate case, take the purchaser to court. While individual Locals have their own way for dealing with the myriad of additional problems that can come our way, like when there is no contract, just an e-mail thread, we still strive to have your back at every juncture. It's not always possible to secure an acceptable solution, and sometimes members overreach with their expectations when they have given us no tools to work with, but you are never on your own. You have access to the Union's resources.

The last example that demonstrates it's a Union gig is also the hardest to quantify. That's when the advocacy work the Union has done in the community creates opportunities for the work to exist at all. A perfect example of that in our state was when the Oregon Liquor Control Commission made it illegal for minors to perform in the clubs. It had always been allowed, but when they changed the statute, we took them on and a year and a half later, were able to get that ruling overturned. That means that every musician that was under 21 years old was now able to work in the clubs because of the combined efforts of the Union and its membership. Whether they knew it or not, those were Union gigs.

I bring this up because it's important to remind you of the role the Union has played, is playing, or will play in the future of your work, even when you may not recognize or be aware of it. There are times where we are clearly advocating specifically for our membership only, but there are other instances where the challenges are bigger than our membership and we take those battles on for all musicians. For example, the victory just achieved in regard to the new instrument carry-on guidelines. All musicians will share in that benefit as they fly to their next gig.

Every day your Union Officers work to improve the environment you perform in. Be proud of the role the Union (and that means all of us) plays in your musical workplace, and be proud to say, "I'm a Union member, and this gig, every gig, is a Union gig".

Play well.