



FAR-West Conference First Timers' Handbook

How to Get the Most Out of FAR-West

This piece is adapted from a longer and more comprehensive piece on how to make Folk Alliance work for you by Paul Barker of Austin, Texas. He does presentations at Folk Alliance annual and regional conferences and they are great. Catch one if you can, but in the meantime...

If you decide to attend the FAR-West conference, do so with long-term expectations. Keep in mind that you are NOT attending the conference to simply book gigs, although that does happen many times over. You are at the conference to build relationships with people: with venue operators, with radio people who will play your music and with other musicians. Don't expect your efforts to pay off like a slot machine. Expect rather to develop budding relationships with your target venues that will lead to mutually rewarding career-long opportunities.

Activities related to helping your career as an artist can be grouped into three time-related efforts: What you do before the conference, what you do during the conference, and finally, what you do after the conference to follow-up.

BEFORE YOU GO

Start your planning early. The sixth annual FAR-West conference will be held November 6-8, 2009 at the Hyatt Regency in Irvine, California. As an artist, you should begin your preparations for the conference right now. Spring is not too early to get started. If you try to make contacts, book showcases and arrange an Exhibition Hall table in the last few weeks before the conference you'll be frustrated and less than your best.

In the fast few days of the conference you'll be meeting lots of people, and getting them to hear your music will be easier if they already know who you are. Start by registering early: your name will be posted on the FAR-West website as a registered conferee for all to see.

• SHOWCASES

Showcases are your chance to do brief shows for the people you want to hear you. There are three kinds of showcases at FAR-West: the juried PREMIERE SHOWCASES which feature the music the showcase committee wants everyone to hear. Only a limited number of acts are featured and it's a big honor. The Other Conference-sponsored showcase is the one-song opportunity at the Susanne Milsapps Memorial Coffeehouse. Use the contact on the website to schedule yourself a time to sing there. One song can make a difference! The third category is the PRIVATE "GUERRILLA" SHOWCASES operated by conference attendees. Anyone registered for the Conference can host one.

Start by applying for the MAIN SHOWCASES -- The deadline is June 30.

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Note: If you're scrambling at the last minute and it's not happening for you, not being involved in showcases your first year is a great way to get started. For one thing, it's not simply a matter of getting a place to sing and play. If you're too late to accomplish many of the pre-conference marketing activities, don't despair. Read on, pick up some tips, attend the conference and benefit from it by having "big eyes and big ears," the classic way to learn. Attend the conference with the attitude that it's strictly a learning experience this year and by next year, you'll hit the ground running and be prepared.

Watch the FAR-West website and the list-serve to find out who's hosting private "guerrilla" showcases. Contact the hosts and make an expression of your interest. If you aren't well known -- and most artists aren't -- it's appropriate to provide the prospective host with a demo CD (but not a promo pack) or refer them to your website. Some will have "rules" regarding their submission times and what they require. Others aren't as formal. Simply ask what their requirements are in your first contact.

How do you know who's running showcases five months ahead of time? Drop an informative email to the FAR-West group's list serve. Let them know who you are, and what you do, and that you are looking for a showcase opportunity. They will contact you in regards to what kind of music they are focusing on, and what time slots they have available.

Set a goal of confirming your showcases as soon as possible. The general rule for show-casing is "more is better -- up to a point." Don't schedule just one or two showcases because one or both may put you up against a perennial favorite that no one wants to miss. It's better to schedule multiple showcase times so venue representatives won't have to make a difficult choice that would leave you out. Try to line up two or three show-cases per night. Earlier is better, the really late ones are less useful.

When you, as an artist, walk through the door of the FAR-West Conference, the ratio of artists (seller) to venues (buyers) is probably 10 or more to one. If you're still awake at 3:00 a.m. in a showcase or a music jam, that ratio is more likely 100 artists to one venue. Most of the venue representatives you would want to meet, get to know, and eventually play your music for have gone to bed. Read the schedule for the conference in detail. Don't book yourself opposite the Friday evening Reception or other great opportunities to meet the folks you want to meet.

When you plan your showcase slots, be sure to vary the content of each one. If a venue has interest in you but wonders if you have enough material for two 45 minute sets, they will very likely return to catch another of your showcases just to see the extent of your repertoire. Use your best material, don't introduce new material that you haven't fully worked out, and ALWAYS stay upbeat.

Ask the showcase sponsor who will be the "Gatekeeper" that keeps the showcase room on schedule and how strictly they follow the posted schedule. If the sponsor seems lax about the schedule, think twice about being part of it. The venue representatives count on the showcases staying on schedule so they can move from room to room and count on the artist they want to hear being when and where they are supposed to be. Don't waste your time or money showcasing with someone who isn't business-like in what they do.

Finally, if you run into a brick wall coming up with showcase alternatives, go around it! Start your own private "guerrilla" showcase and then trade slots in your showcase with others to increase your exposure. If you leap in and create a new showcase, you will be surprised at the caliber of artists who will approach YOU and ask to be part of it. Contacts, mutual interests, openers, and career opportunities will flow from helping others while helping yourself. If you take this route, be sure to make it a real showcase and not just your personal promotion.

Once artists begin to inquire about your showcase, take the time to learn about them before offering them time slots. The quality of performers associated with your showcase will be a reflection on you. Try to attract artists who are more established than you are. It adds to your credibility as a performer, and the reputation of any future showcases you might host. Another rule of thumb for showcase hosts:

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don't play too many of the timeslots yourself. If you can help it, don't play more than two or three of your timeslots on a given date. Doing so diminishes the credibility of your showcase and reduces its attractiveness to artists and venues.

• **BOOK YOUR FLIGHT AND HOTEL**

Book an early cheap flight. Your marketing funds are just as important as your CD production funds -- without one, the other will be useless. Spend your marketing dollars as wisely as you do your studio time dollars. It's a sad situation, but those who can least afford it wait the longest to buy their plane tickets and their conference registration, so they end up paying the most. If you plan to save or borrow money for the conference, save or borrow less in September. It's your career; plan for it.

Book a room at the conference hotel. I know there are cheaper places to stay nearby, but you'll need to have your promo stuff, demo CDs, and instrument nearby. In addition, if you're in the conference hotel, you can pop into your room to "freshen up," take a quick power nap, grab a snack, etc. The ability to do that can be most valuable. Conference hotel rooms are expensive, but save money by finding a roommate early, NOT by staying several blocks away.

Book an Exhibit Hall Table as soon as possible. If you're just beginning your career, you can team up with another artist for a half table, or you can rent a full table and increase your exposure. If you attend the conference and only showcase, you will likely only get to meet a small percentage of the venues. If you get a table in the Exhibit Hall and work it (be there every hour it's open) you will have the potential to meet, contact, or catch the eye of nearly every venue representative. Book your table early. Tips on how to present and manage your table activities are in the next section.

Gather the names of everyone you'd like to contact while at the conference. Make a plan. Figure out where these contacts will be. If they're a house concert host, they'll undoubtedly be at the House Concert Peer Group Meeting on the schedule. Plan to be there; plan to meet them; know what you're going to say when you do meet them. Say something about yourself, and more importantly, say something about their venue. As part of your visit with the venue representative, get "closure" with a request such as, "I'd really like you to hear my showcases," "Can I give you one of my promo packs," etc. Ask artists you know who've played a particular venue if they'd mind introducing you to one of your targets. Friends introduce friends all the time and friends give work to their friends. It isn't a difficult concept.

Your plan shouldn't include more than a few target venues. It is preferable to attend and have modest success and closure with a few venues rather than attending with a diluted effort. Choose venues in areas where you'd like to work or that book the kind of music you perform. Be familiar with your target venues: know who's played there, how often they host shows, what kinds of music they prefer, etc.

AT THE CONFERENCE

When you get to the conference, have your promo materials with you at all times -- even a fanny pack can contain card-stock flyers and CDs -- **DON'T EVER LEAVE YOUR ROOM WITHOUT PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS.** The elevators, restaurant lines, and sharing a table in the dining room are great locations to meet people. A neat trick is to place a small number of your business cards in the back of your conference badge so you can grab one quickly and avoid fumbling through and unzipping a bag to find your card. While you're setting up your badge this way, make sure you have a pen just as handy so you can jot down something about the person you just met as soon as you or they walk away. Those notes will become invaluable memory triggers after you've caught up on your sleep back home.

• MANAGING YOUR EXHIBIT HALL TABLE

Your greatest investment in time and energy (other than getting up for breakfast and the morning peer group meetings) should be at your table in the Exhibit Hall. This is the point where you have the greatest potential to meet the greatest number of conference attendees. Every moment that you're not showcasing, you should be at your booth. Artists who need to showcase or attend workshops can bring a "booth sitter," for a nominal fee, but having a human being at the table at all times is critical to your investment.

Getting people to stop at your booth can be a challenge. Many artists are outgoing behind a microphone, but shy when it comes to self-promotion. Just remember: You're a quality act and you should be proud to represent yourself! Pull your shoulders back, look people in the eye, and be proud of who you are. If you have a banner, bring it and place it on the back wall (if conference site allows) behind the table, or drape it on the front of the table. If you have a table, try to bring a half-height display that will raise your photo and name closer to eye level for those passing by. This photo will be that SAME photo that was on your pre-conference flyer, the one that will be on your business cards, and the same one that will be on your demo CD and every other piece of literature about you. Remember: Recognition, Recognition, Recognition.

• TIPS ON BOOTH MANAGEMENT

1. Never sit down unless the hall is empty and no one is around. Otherwise, wear comfortable shoes and be prepared to stand up. It's much more difficult to walk past someone who's standing up.
2. Look at people as they approach and be prepared to say "Hello," "Hi" or some similar greeting.
3. Don't be afraid to ask people who approach your booth who they represent. If they say they're from a folklore society or similar folk group, ask them right up front if they're in charge of talent booking. If they aren't, be cordial, but don't offer up your demo CD or press kit (more later).
4. If the individual is someone on your target marketing list, be very clear in your language. Use language that "closes." For example, don't use open expressions such as "I'm playing a showcase at midnight tonight." Close the expression with something like "I'm playing a showcase at midnight tonight; I hope you can find the time to come hear me."
5. If a venue has expressed enough interest to come back to your booth after hearing you, or to approach you in the hall after a showcase, be sure to use "closure" language again. Don't say, for example, "It would really be nice to play your venue sometime." The venue person will likely agree with you: yes, it would be nice. You should always use closure language in marketing.

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The preferred way to say it would be: "I would really like to play your venue. How would I go about getting your consideration?" Be direct and be professional. Avoid the use of vague time-frames such as "some day."

6. The first rule of marketing is "Don't initiate a discussion by talking about yourself or what you are selling. Get people to talk about themselves (and their venues).
7. Ask questions that do NOT require a yes or no answer. Good questions include: "What type of music are you looking for?" "How does one apply to be considered for your venue?" "What is the process?"
8. Listen! The ratio of books on Speech and Public Speaking to books on "The Art of Listening" is over 100 to 1 in the US. We have one mouth and two ears. That should indicate that we were born to listen at least twice as much as we talk.
9. Be upbeat! Be interesting! Never be negative about anything, the food, the hotel, NOTHING! Until you get to the privacy of your own room.
10. Have a snack on your table. Individually-wrapped hard candy and/or something in a wrapper is perfect. Here's an opportunity for you to be creative in attracting people to your booth. Hershey Kisses are tempting to everyone and are reasonably priced. NEVER, NEVER, NEVER put out nuts, fruit slices, or open packages of M&Ms. Those types of snacks are breeding grounds for germs from people's hands.
11. NEVER bring reading material that will absorb your attention. I've walked by many a booth where the artist was so engrossed in the latest copy of a magazine that he/she never looked up.
12. Try not to chat with others who have booths when there are guests in the area -- being locked in conversation may cost both of you the opportunity to contact visitors. Appreciate that, although many of the exhibitors are friends who enjoy your company, they have paid for the table in order to conduct and promote business.
13. While in the Exhibit Hall, don't block access to anyone's table. There are places to hang out and have conversations without getting in someone's way.
14. Ask for a card from every person to whom you give your promo pack. Have a pen handy at all times and as soon as the person walks away, jot some notes on the back of the card about the person (height, hair color/length, glasses, etc.) so you can recall them later. These cards will eventually become part of your post-conference activities (see below).
15. Ask before taking anything from an exhibitor's table unless "free, take one" is readily apparent. If you take something from a vendor or other artist, you should feel obligated to hear their spiel.
16. Finally, leave the Exhibit Hall promptly at closing time so the hall can be cleaned and secured until the next session. Do NOT leave anything of value such as your computer in the hall overnight.

• **EXHIBIT HALL ETIQUETTE**

ALL AUDIO/VISUAL devices must have headphones! NO EXCEPTIONS! NO JAMMING IN THE EXHIBIT HALL. This is not a performance area, nor a "mini showcase". It is for conducting business. The front table of your booth or your table top should have two CD players WITH HEADPHONES for visitors to listen to your music. In case of difficulty with electrical connections or cords, make sure you

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have plenty of batteries for your players. On the front of the table, display photos of yourself on stage and in front of “intimate” audiences such as at house concerts and children’s presentations. That way, venues can see that you perform for a variety of audiences. Also, put out two or three of your promo packs with the words “for Booth Use Only” written on them with red felt tip. You’ll still lose a few of these kits if you have to step away from your booth, so have two or three back-up copies ready to replace them. Keep your promo packs and demo CDs out of sight, but handy, so that you can give one to each viable prospect. Conserve Your CDs. With recent advances in home CD reproduction, the costs associated with providing a CD to booth visitors have reduced dramatically. Venue professionals don’t need one of your production CDs with all the artwork. When you make home CD reproductions of your demos, take the time to put each one of them in a CD player/Walkman and press “Play”. I’ve received numerous home-burned CD demos that are either blank or not retrievable on any of my CD players. It’s your career. Take the time to be sure they work. Make sure that your demo CDs contain that same recognizable photo of you featured prominently on the cover. People you meet and give your CD to will have their memory triggered by that photo when they get back home and unpack all the CDs they’ve collected. The vast majority of venue people attending a FAR-West conference are professional and only take CDs from an artist if they have a genuine interest in their music or if there’s a reasonable chance the artist might play their venue. There are many others however, who may simply be from a local folk club or folklore society and have absolutely nothing to do with booking for the venue they “represent.” I’ve watched some of these people go from table to table collecting “free” CDs for their personal collections. It’s very unprofessional, but it happens. Before handing out one of your promo packs or sellable CDs, feel free to ask the visitor what his/her role is with the venue.

• **SHOWCASING TIPS**

First, and most importantly, play your heart out at every showcase, no matter how many people are in the room. The history of conference showcasing is replete with stories of artists playing to a room with only one or two people in it, playing their very best, and then having that one person book them at major festival. In contrast, Liz Rouse (of Rouse House Concerts of Austin) tells the story of going to a late-night showcase specifically to see an artist who had contacted her. The artist didn’t recognize her, put on a lack-luster performance, and made private jokes with her friends in the front row throughout the showcase. You can guess the outcome.

Plan your showcases well. Know the length of your set and always end on time or slightly early. Don’t force the host to shut you down. Don’t infringe on the next artist’s time with your inability to control your set.

Don’t be offended if people come and go during your performance. Showcases are the one time that it’s acceptable to leave between songs or even during songs. Most venue representatives are trying to hear as many new artists as they can, and to do so, may have to listen to more than one artist each half-hour. The fact that they came and listened at all should be considered a compliment to you. At the conclusion of your showcase, immediately collect your instrument, tuner, cables, etc. and quickly clear the way for the next artist. Step into the hallway to meet people who may want to visit with you. In the hallway, step a few feet away from the doorway to allow others to enter and leave. Be sure your conversation doesn’t interfere with the next artist’s showcase.

• **GENERAL TIPS**

Always be “on” and never let your guard down outside your room. When you’re in the elevator, standing in line to eat, or in one of the seminars, act professionally. Never gossip. Look for opportunities to meet the venue contacts on your target list and expect to meet people at all times or when you least expect it. The old guy in the elevator wearing the fire department shirt may just book three venues in Los Angeles. Don’t be loud or boisterous in the hallways outside a showcase room where your sound could disturb others or interfere with someone’s showcase. If you don’t respect the music of others, you may offend a possible venue contact. When you attend one of the sponsored

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luncheons, don't sit with your friends. You and your friends should spread out and sit at random tables. It's a difficult thing to do when you haven't seen so many wonderful friends for a year, but get to know new people. Push your boundaries. Make new friends and possibly meet new venues that can help your career.

Conserve Your Energy. GO TO BED at night by 2:30 am and get up at 8:30 am. Every day there are workshops and panels. Many are for artists (insurance, travel, CD production, financing, food on the road, etc.) but others are for venue types -- how to host concerts, how to run a non-profit, etc. You may think those topics are of no interest to you, but GUESS WHAT? EVERYONE YOU WANT TO SELL YOUR MUSIC TO IS IN THOSE MEETINGS! So, get your butt out of bed and get to those meetings, meet people, hand out demos, and work! A secondary benefit of attending these peer group meetings is you can listen to what the venues' problems are. Their problems may surprise you or enlighten you on your approach to getting booked. New venues will sometimes express how difficult it is to find artists, at which point you will be wanting to scream, "Here I am. Take me!" Restrain yourself.

Manage your sleep as you'd manage anything else. Take naps when you can. A short nap in the middle of the afternoon can recharge your batteries for the long evening ahead. Perfect napping times are in the late afternoon, right after dinner, or when you start babbling like a brook and making no sense, even to yourself. You'll understand what I mean about that after your first conference. A good nap and a freshly-washed face can put you on top of your game and get you ready for the long night ahead.

• PLAN FOR NEXT YEAR'S CONFERENCE:

While you are at the current year's conference, try to visit every single showcase room. Observe how it's managed. Take notes. Are they rigorously on time? Are they professional or running a slumber party for their friends? Is the music they showcase similar to what you do? Would you want to be associated with the artists they are showcasing? The latter can be a good thing when you are not well-known but others in the showcase are. Venue representatives may come early to a known artist's showcase and catch a bit of yours. They may simply "hang out" in this showcase room when they have some down time because they know that the host ALWAYS has a great line up. For the showcases that really have their act together, find out who the host is and introduce yourself. Find out how you can be considered for next year and what their schedule is and when they would like one of your demo CDs to consider. It is not inappropriate to ask what their cost generally runs per artist, realizing that the hotel room is a variable each year.

AFTER THE BALL IS OVER - WHEN YOU GET HOME

Surprise! The work isn't over when the conference ends. When you get home, it's time to FOLLOW-UP, or a great deal of your effort will be wasted and your momentum will be lost. As a venue person, I probably get 50 pieces of pre-conference mail. After a conference, I will likely only receive one and never more than two notes thanking me for stopping by a booth or attending a showcase or asking if there's potential to play my venues. Every single venue person you meet should get a note from you reminding them who you were and asking them if they would care for a more detailed promo pack to supplement the demo CD you gave them at FAR-West. Good notes on the back of their business cards will assist you in personalizing and tailoring your follow-up note to the venue. Be sure to include an insert THAT HAS YOUR PICTURE ON IT!! It doesn't have to be an extensive promo piece, but it should be something that reminds them of who you are.

Without follow-up action to "close" the deal or the relationship, your efforts may be for naught. Don't assume the world will beat a path to your door. If you don't contact the venue and express your interest, that person may interpret your lack of follow-up as a lack of interest or they may simply assume you aren't planning to be in their area in the near future.

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NEVER, EVER leave your level of interest open to assumption. If you do, your target will assume that someone else wants the work more than you do! If you don't get a reply from your contact, wait about a month and drop them another note or email. In it, ask if they would mind you calling in the near future to discuss their requirements and to see if your work is compatible with their venue.

If they fail to reply to your second note, don't despair. Wait about six months and drop them another note. The "third time's a charm" rule works when you're making contacts. Don't assume that the venue representative is a "conflict avoider" who'd rather ignore you than hurt your feelings. Keep a positive mental attitude and assume that they've simply been too busy to reply. Trust me, this is more likely the case.

Even after your third attempt, still DON'T WRITE OFF THE NON-RESPONDERS! Keep all your notes and look for these individuals at the next festival or conference meeting. When you again meet them, be as genuinely nice to them as you were the first time you met. Your openness will be welcomed. Always remember, your primary objective is to build relationships. Your secondary objective is to book gigs. If you build the relationship, the gigs will follow.

Have a wonderful time at FAR-West! Remember, it's a whole conference full of people who love music, no matter what their part of the process may be. There's something to learn at every turn, inspiring music to hear and great possibilities for making a better world.

For more information please visit: <http://www.far-west.org>