

MUSIC CONNECTION

TRIBUTE BANDS: FLATTERY THROUGH IMITATION

JANUARY 20, 2020
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Clientele: Queen Nation, The Canyon Clubs

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Hewitt manages top Queen tribute band Queen Nation among others, and books tributes for the Canyon Clubs throughout Southern California. He's been in the industry for 30 years, and says that he has found an effective formula for assembling a successful tribute.

How did you get started?

I used to run a nightclub in the [San Fernando] Valley, when I was in college, called Pelican's Retreat. A nice room with a nice stage and patios. I booked all the rock. There was pay-to-play, but I would actually pay the guys, so they were stoked. This was in the '90s. There were a couple of tributes out there, and I put together a whole month of October and called it Rocktober Tribute Month.

I had Atomic Punks [Van Halen tribute], Sticky Fingers [Rolling Stones], a Doors tribute called Wild Child—so I put that together every Saturday. This was way before it took off, and it was pretty successful because it was new. You could see there was a market if it was done correctly and not cheesy. I put a few together, but the big one that's out of control is Queen Nation. I put those guys together in 2004. That's gone to the next level. They're in the pinnacle.

You can't see Queen, at least in the classic form—does that make a big difference?

I have rules that I came up with. My formula that works for me. You have to pick a tribute to an act that's mega popular. Ultimately not touring together as their core unit. You have to pick these acts and there's a lot of things that change that make them popular—if there's a deceased member, if they get elected into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame—that can help spike that tribute. But that tribute has to be the best at what they do. The Queen Nation guys study film, watch concerts. You've got to love the music. The fans will call you out if you mail it in.

What do you think of accusations that tribute bands pull audiences away from bands playing original material?

I think there are so many different types of music. Tribute bands aren't pulling away from original bands. It's my opinion that everybody's music is, no matter who they are, pulling from different bands. Music is music. If anything, the tributes offer a more affordable and available way for people to see a show that they couldn't have seen. My kids can't see Queen because Freddie's been gone for years. They can't see that show intact. If it's done correctly, it exposes the market. Look at the biopic. That's exposure and people can't ridicule that. It just created more exposure.

Is there competition between tributes?

There is a lot of competition, though it's a lot harder for people to compete with Queen. If you talk to a vocalist or a performer, there's a difference between going up and being Freddie Mercury or one of the other bands. That's a tough one. But there's competition. Worldwide there's four or five acts that are popular. When you get to a high level, just go look at Pollstar. You could be the best band in the world at what you do, but it doesn't mean anything unless you put bodies in the building and create revenue. If you're selling tickets, they're gonna rebook you and that will lead to bigger rooms.

Have you or one of your bands ever received a cease & desist letter?

Each band has their own opinions on how they want to go after some of that stuff. Some see it as a threat, others as a compliment. It just depends on the band. I think a good show done correctly just creates more exposure. •