

Of Course You Should Host a Guerilla Showcase Room

Guest blogger Michael Gaither, Sept. 2010 (Edited for 2015 by Mark Kaufman)

Last year was my first FAR-West conference. As the big weekend approached, I couldn't help but notice that the FAR-West mailer was inundated daily with requests from well-meaning folk looking for a guerilla showcase room to play. (Confidentially – this is just us reading this, right? – I also tossed my name out on the list.) I did get one showcase out of it.

But then I thought of something better: Since FAR-West is a gathering of the tribes, why not book my own room and ensure a place for both myself and other tribes-type folk to play? So I did. I had a blast. I played. And I met a lot of wonderful people.

If you're the fence about hosting a room, do it. You'll have fun. You'll meet a lot more artists. And you'll get more out of FAR-West (whether it's your first conference...or your seventh.) In no particular order, here are a few things I learned along the way last year:

How long are showcases?

The evening showcases run from 10:30 pm to 2:00 am. Break the night up into half-hour segments. Plan 20-minute sets, so there's time to move players around and setup/tear down afterwards.

What do I charge?

Everyone's favorite answer: "It depends." Easiest way is to take your showcase room charge (\$170/night this year), divide the number of players into it, and come up with something reasonable. Also ask yourself if you want to charge so much that the showcases cover the cost of the room or just help you pay for some of it. (Consider eating a bit of the cost as a goodwill effort towards your fellow musicians.)

Also, encourage payment before the conference (check, PayPal) so you're not dealing with the awkwardness of "please pay me" after someone plays in your room.

Can I get help with my showcase room?

Yes. Last year, I split a showcase room with Maggie McKaig and Greg Kitchell. With three of us in charge, it gave us flexibility to break away during sets to check out other showcases (or play in other rooms). This approach is highly recommended.

Can I be loose with scheduling? We ARE musicians after all.

Two words: ABSOLUTELY NOT. Remember you're hosting this room, there are people playing, AND there are people waiting to play. For example: If someone is scheduled for 10:45, but you let the previous performer run until 10:50, the presenter who arrives at 10:45 to see the artist might not stick around. Basically, keep things on time.

Do I book single performers or in-the-rounds?

Again, it's up to you. We did a mix last year. And we ended up scheduling singles for half an hour and in-the-rounds for 40 minutes. Tricky math (again, we're musicians), but it worked.

Isn't it a ridiculous amount of work?

It can be. But it doesn't have to be. The trick is to come arrive at FAR-West with your showcase room scheduled and (hopefully) all the slots paid for. When 10:30 pm rolls around on your nights, you play host, show off a bunch of great musicians, and also get a chance to show off your own music wares, as well.

Can I play, too?

It's your room. Book it any way you like. In our case last year, we each took one evening slot and divided the rest amongst the other performers whom we booked.

Can I sleep in my showcase room?

You can, and it'll alleviate some of your conference costs. But it'll be noisy. Earplugs are cheap.

Should I decorate the room? Can I move the furniture? Do I print up t-shirts?

It's fun to spruce up your room, but keep in mind that anything you move **MUST BE MOVED BACK**. Simple things like tie-dye tapestries, battery-operated candles, or twinkly holiday lights are easy to set up.

Consider making a big schedule that you can tape outside your showcase room door. (Note you **must** use blue "painters" tape).

How loud can we play?

There are 30 showcase rooms this year, and, volume bleeds from room to room. The whole idea of these showcases is that they are unamplified – with the exception of instruments like keyboard and bass. In any case, keep the sound low and reasonable. And if you book a large group in your room, remember that they might drown out the pensive folksinger across the hall.

Consider making a sign that says "Music Inside – Come On It!" to post outside and shutting the door. (I also recommend this if YOUR room has a quiet performer, but there's a banjo quintet next door.)

How do I get people to play in my room?

When people know you have a room, they'll ask. List your room availability on the conference website.

Okay, I'm convinced? How do I sign up for a room?

For complete details on getting your very own guerilla showcase room, see the "Private Guerilla Showcases Hosting" information on the FAR-West website.

And if you haven't gone to FAR-West before (or even if you have) you, should definitely download a copy of "Guide to FAR-West".