

## Tom Windish

### The Windish Agency

**T**om Windish has always been entrepreneurial. Even his high school lawn-mowing venture took off in a big way. “By the time I graduated, I was



mowing 50 lawns a week and had three employees,” Windish said.

After seven years at The Billions Corporation, Windish started his own company in his apartment. In April, The Windish Agency bought a four-story building in Chicago where it now occupies two floors.

“We were kind of stuffed after only six months in the building, so we expanded upstairs,” Windish said.

The income stream comes from cool indie and electronic acts, like Cut Copy, Adult., Dizzee Rascal, Girl Talk, Fever Ray, M83, The Presets, Hot Chip, Justice, Miiike Snow and its newest buzz band, Dirty Projectors. They’re just a few names on a roster of about 200 clients.

Windish grew up near Albany, N.Y., and got immersed in the concert business while attending SUNY Binghamton. He played in a band – one consisting of him and his younger sister – but it was college that set him on his future career path. Windish, who spent his junior year of high school as a congressional page, soon took over a college concert program when a friend dropped out of school. It was the end of his freshman year and The Feelies were coming to the ballroom.

“He showed me the contract and the hospitality we had to provide, gave me a phone number for the sound company, gave me the check, and showed me Pollstar and its Agency Directory,” Windish said. “Over the next few months I started calling people about the following semester.”

The college traditionally booked one big free show per year. Windish had by then become head of campus concerts and chose instead to book more shows of affordable bands and charge a little bit to get in.

“I ended up booking a ton of bands in that time,” he said. “I did Sonic Youth, Cypress Hill, Dinosaur Jr., Yo La Tengo. I dealt with Twin Towers agency a lot. I also dealt with William Morris quite a bit.”

He eventually got an internship at William Morris’ New York office working alongside many people who now dot the agency landscape, like Jon Podell, Cara Lewis, Steve Martin, Jonathan Levine, Nick Caris and Ken Fermaglich.

“I worked at the Knitting Factory also,” he said. The NYC venue started its own label, Knitting Factory Records, and owner Michael Dorf needed someone to book its bands. Dorf tapped Windish, who worked to find live gigs for the artists. Coupled with that, Dorf gave Windish permission to book his own bands on the side.

“It was back in the days when booking was done with paper, pencil and an actual calendar,” Windish said. “The bands that I was personally handling, their calendars were full and the Knitting Factory’s band calendars were kind of empty. And Michael, naturally, didn’t really like that and I didn’t work at Knitting Factory Records too much longer.”

Next up was his own agency, Bug Booking, that included clients

Smog, New Radiant Storm King, Ass Ponys and a band called Hum.

“I brought them to my college; they opened for The Poster Children,” he said. “I paid them \$100. I remember when I called to be their agent, they said, ‘Oh yeah, we remember you. You were the only person who gave us a case of beer on that tour. Of course we’ll work with you.’”

Hum went on to have success after the song “Stars” hit the radio. Eventually Windish went to Chicago to see Hum play a gig. He was already familiar with the Windy City but something started to click.

“It had lots of musicians and lots of small music businesses, like Touch & Go Records, Drag City Records and Thrill Jockey,” he said. “It was a community that was very embracing of people trying to create their own music businesses. I didn’t feel like that in New York. New York was just intense.”

He ended up living for \$100 a month above the Lounge Ax nightclub, all the while maintaining Bug Booking and checking out a ton of bands. One of the people he got to know was Billions Corp.’s David Viccelli, which led to seven years with that company before Windish went his own way.

#### What got you to form The Windish Agency?

I was really excited about running my own company again and having people work exclusively for the art-

ists I represented. The Windish Agency was about 50 artists and one employee. I remember thinking I shouldn’t get an office just in case things didn’t work out. I soon realized I was going to grow out of space pretty quickly. Eventually I had two people working for me out of my apartment, then we got an office and it continued to grow.

We started adding artists to the roster. Now there’s about 200 bands and DJs, plus six other agents. All of the agents have their own clients, and some work with me on specific artists.

#### How long have you had your current staff?

Derek Becker is the most recent agent to join. He owned and operated Satellite Booking for six years but joined us about five months ago. Before that we added Steve Goodgold and he’s been here for about a year. He works out of New York. Sam Hunt was the first agent I hired. He actually started as an assistant. Then there’s Brad Owen, Amy Davidman and Carter Adams.

#### Why do you think The Windish Agency was nominated for Boutique Booking Agency of the Year for 2008?

I hope it’s because promoters like dealing with us, how we operate, our level of professionalism, and of course, they like our clients. Plus, our website is set up to be

very informative to promoters.

We spend a lot of time putting a lot of information up about what our artists sound like, what they're all about, what people are saying about them, a video of them. Our website is set up to be extremely promoter-friendly.

One of my main goals when I started the agency was to book our artists in different venues and unique places. That could be a museum or a performing arts center, a college or some kind of corporate party. We do a lot of research and are always reaching out to "non-traditional" promoters and have seen a lot of success dealing with those types of places.

The general public's awareness of underground artists has changed so much over the years, so when we go to a performing arts center in northern California and we ask them about bringing in Dirty Projectors, there's a pretty decent chance they've heard of them. At least it's easy for them to figure out what the band sounds like, what the show looks like, what the press is saying, and most likely find some peers who are familiar with and excited about the group.

### In the same vein, what attracted the clients to you?

I think the diversity and strength of our roster goes a long way in that regard, as does our attitude. Our administrative services, such as contracts, itineraries, accounting and ticket counts, are very thorough as well.

### What kind of strategy does The Windish Agency have for building an artist?

A lot has to do with what the artist is available for, willing to do and, I suppose, how much it costs them to be on the road. We work with a lot of international artists and it's not cost-effective for them to do a four-week tour of the U.S. They may just want to come over here and play New York City and Los Angeles, and play for people in the music business and the press so they can come back.

We want our artists to tour as much as they possibly can and play in front of as many different types of people as possible. We want them to play all the normal venues and circuits like Mercury Lounge, Bowery Ballroom, Metro, El Rey, Showbox, that sort of thing, but I also want to expose them to other audiences at unique events.

That could be the South Street Seaport or Millennium Park in Chicago at its free concert series. The Getty Museum in L.A. books a lot of bands. I want our artists to play to the unconverted. Certainly, supporting other tours is something we always try to do, and we do a lot of internal packaging as well as with other agencies.

It's not always economically feasible for bands to do that kind of

thing these days, especially for bands to go out and support someone for \$250 or \$500 a night when they're coming from Europe. And if it doesn't make sense, we want to come up with alternative strategies.

Fundamentally, we want to develop successful long-term touring careers for our clients.

### How has the business changed since your earlier days?

When I began booking, I was on the phone constantly. I called my first agency Bug Booking because I thought I was annoying the clubs by calling them so often. I had to call over and over again to get the dates. Nobody used e-mail back then.

I learned about bands in fanzines, not on the Internet. I bought cassettes and vinyl. It took a lot longer for the word to spread about new independent bands.

These days I think agencies are fulfilling a lot of roles that used to be handled by record labels or managers. Part of that is handling immigration and visas, and helping with taxation and tour accounting – stuff that booking agencies traditionally had nothing to do with. We often help our clients find tour managers, tour personnel, sound equipment, lighting equipment, that kind of thing.

I don't know if agencies will end up promoting tours the way a label does, but it's possible.

### Agencies are becoming the managers?

Well, I think agencies can help managers with their roles. We definitely are contributing with services like visas and accounting. A lot of the bands we work with have a small business structure backing them up – a small label or a label with fewer resources than they used to have. We try to contribute what we have learned when we see a gap.

### For those bands without managers, do you play the traditional management role?

I wouldn't go that far, but we have paid for tour buses or tour vehicles, advanced money for plane tickets and rented backline for a tour or South by Southwest. We're very involved with getting clients shows at SXSW and CMJ. Ten years ago, labels had a lot more to do with it than they do now. I wouldn't go so far as to say we get the bands up in the morning. And I'm not saying managers and record labels are not important. It's just that agencies are providing a lot more services than they used to.

### Several big agencies have marketing departments. Does The Windish Agency have anything similar?

We don't do marketing. We do analyze promoters' efforts more than we did when we started. Besides just sending the record companies the contact information for each promoter, we'll introduce them to each other, make sure they're talking and keep track of that to make sure everybody's doing as much as they can to promote the shows.

We'll make sure the venues have received posters from the label. We'll make sure the shows are listed on the promoter and artist websites. We'll help to get radio stations and local blogs involved in local promotion.

We encourage communication so that every show is promoted as much as possible. When I started Windish, we didn't do that.

I don't think many other agencies did, either, and I don't know how many do today. I hear about all these "services" big agencies are providing. I'm not sure if what we're doing is that different than what the big agencies are doing.

### What's the calls-in versus calls-out ratio?

I've had relationships with a lot of promoters for a really long time now. They call us, we call them, we ask them if they want to hold certain dates or book certain bands.



**TOM STANDS BY** as Sam Hunt throws up the "Big Double-ya" for the Windish Agency at the *Bonnaroo Music Festival* in Manchester, Tenn., in 2007.



**TOM AND STAFF** snap one for the interview. Seen with Tom are (L-R) agents Brad Owen, Carter Adams, Sam Hunt, Derek Becker, and Amy Davidman, and CFO Billy Shand.

A lot of people contact us to book artists for one-offs. We sometimes contact thousands of people about booking our clients when they're available or during their touring time periods.

We probably reach out more now than when we first started simply because we know more people. We spend a lot of energy trying to find more people who put on events, whether that's researching *Pollstar* for a street festival in Eugene, Ore., or traveling to new places and meeting new people, that sort of thing.

A lot of our artists are more popular now than when we started. That should mean that the artist would be "easier" to book. Instead of calling fewer promoters about tour dates as the bands get bigger, I want to use that as an opportunity to expand our network of promoters.

When we determine a touring time period, we'll contact a lot of

different types of promoters about it. That means the largest promoters like Live Nation, the local independent promoter, as well as more unique places like Walt Disney Concert Hall or the Chicago Cultural Center.

We'll call them before we know the time periods to let people know there is going to be a new record sometime next year and think about doing something with them: "Go to our Web site and look at them, listen to them. We'll send you a download of the record so when we actually come up with a time period, you can let us know if you're interested in trying something so that we can do some nontraditional places."

#### Has the economy affected you?

For Windish, the business has been great. Our clients are getting more popular. It's a really exciting time for the musicians we're repre-

senting. It's so much easier for potential fans to hear about them.

It seems that artist development is happening so quickly. It used to be we'd hear about a band and it would take years of going out in a van, converting fans one at a time. Nowadays when I hear about a band, tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands may have already heard about them.

When we started booking Black Kids, they already had 1 million people visit their MySpace page. That's remarkable. They didn't even have an agent at the time. The first shows we booked were at the Bowery Ballroom, selling them out, whereas years ago the first time a band would go to a market was often to a much smaller place for a much smaller crowd.

**So it may help, in these times, that your artists are not at the arena level?**

It's a really good time for independent musicians. It's a lot easier for them to make a record; they don't need as many partners to back them financially. It's a lot easier for them to get the music distributed and to get fans. Consequently, it's good for us.

#### So what's the latest buzz band?

Dirty Projectors. They're having an amazing time right now.

Yeasayer are going to put out a new record early next year; I think they're going to do very well.

The xx did their first dates in August. I think we booked them six shows in New York and Brooklyn and almost all the shows sold out. They played to about 1,800 people the week the record came out. They sold about 15,000 album downloads in four or five weeks. They're touring with Friendly Fires in November, who have also done really well for us this year. The xx are coming back in April, doing much larger rooms.

A new artist named Speech DeBelle, who just won the Mercury Prize, is really exciting. There's a DJ named Rusko who's doing extremely well for us. Z-Trip's doing really well. Little Boots did a sold-out tour just before her record was released here. Crystal Castles are going to put out a new record. They do outstanding business in a lot of different places.

It's funny because for a long time, ever since the Bug Booking days, I booked a lot of artists that most promoters hadn't heard of when I first called them. One of the first electronic artists I booked was called u-ziq and I remember having to spell it for just about everybody. And there was another group called Autechre. Again, I had to spell it out for just about everybody.

At the time I booked the show with them, or at least held the date, the promoters didn't really know what I was talking about a lot of the time. But by the time the show happened, attitudes turned. There were often glowing reviews and



**TOM AND C3 PRESENTS' Huston Powell** join in the 2008 Decker Challenge, an annual event put on by the Austin Runners Club in Texas.

people were buying tickets. Somehow the word got around. We always had a lot of bands like that. Thankfully a lot of them have gotten more popular and we don't have to spell the band names for promoters as often.

There's a band I'm really excited about right now called Cold Cave. Again, I'm calling promoters about it and they don't have any idea what I'm talking about, and when they ask local writers, a lot of them also don't really know yet. But I think by the couple months that pass between holding and confirming the date and it actually happening, a lot of things are going to change.

**If these acts are so foreign to promoters and local writers, how is it you find them?**

We have never taken on something that came in unsolicited. A lot of it is through relationships we have with the people we work with all

around the world. Then it's just reading blogs and the Internet, listening to things people are talking about.

**How many times do you sign acts without meeting them in person, or seeing them live?**

We pick up a great number of bands before we see them live. We trust certain people who tell me an artist is great live, especially if it's paired with a bunch of great live videos online. Of course we talk with the artist beforehand and see if we think we can work together.

I realize a lot of agents would be completely mystified with the idea of signing someone before seeing

a live performance. I'm not sure how realistic that is anymore. Our clients come from all over the world and when we hear about them, we need to make a decision quickly.

**Have you seen clients live, for the first time, when they came through Chicago on a tour you booked?**

Yes. More often I'll go to a place like New York when we have a lot of artists there at the same time. I also see a lot of new artists at conferences like South By Southwest.

**Although you say there are clients that break immediately, there are others like Matt & Kim who still have the more traditional, organic career arc.**

They have gotten to where they are at, partially, by just touring a lot. And now that they're involved with Cornerstone [music and lifestyle agency] and getting radio

play, they've definitely jumped up a couple of levels in the past few months.

I'm not saying that bands don't need to tour anymore. Bands can get popular quickly because of the Internet, but the quality of the music and the live show needs to be there if they plan to stick around. Our goal is to help achieve great, long-term careers for our clients; we're not trying to create one successful tour.

**If an agent wanted to destroy their clients' careers, what would be some ways of going about doing that?**

Charge promoters too much money. Charge too much for tickets. Not promote the shows.

We actually spend a lot of time looking at our bands' MySpace pages and Web sites, and promoter Web sites to make sure the shows are being promoted there. And we find problems about 30 percent or 40 percent of the time, which is pretty remarkable for me, considering it's such a simple way to do it well.

**So it's your job to handle their MySpace pages?**

No, we never do update the band's MySpace pages. But we spend quite a lot of time analyzing that stuff, making sure it's up to date with itineraries.

**Another thing to do wrong would likely be booking the band into the wrong-sized room?**

Definitely. They need to connect with the right promoters, especially when they're new, to make sure they're connecting with the right audience.

I think there's a big difference playing one venue or another in terms of what type of people go there, especially for the small places. I think some promoters might deny that but certain venues

have certain aesthetics, vibes and audiences.

For example, if you're an indie rock band, you'll probably want to play the small indie rock venue for the first time, not the heavy rock club down the block. That should go without saying, but we try to do the right places.

**Have you had a positive outlook on the year this whole time?**

I think so. Our business has been really good for the past five years or so. We haven't had too many bumps in the road. It kind of seemed that if we kept doing things the way we were doing them, hopefully it was going to keep going in the same direction it had been. And if it doesn't, we'll adjust. I spoke to some promoters and agents, asked how things were going for them, and it seems a lot of things on our level continue to do really well. A lot of our shows are selling out and the artists are playing to more people than ever before.

**Will The Windish Agency continue to expand?**

If you had asked me five years ago where I wanted to be in five years, I wouldn't have dreamed we would have as many clients or as many people working here as we do.

One of my goals is to open up an office in New York in the next year. I have two people out there now and they're both working from home, which is going well, but I'd like to have the people in New York working together every day and hopefully bring a few more people in.

I imagine we'll add more agents, more support staff. There's a lot of great bands out there and when we hear them we want to be able to book them. And we want to be able to book them at the same level of service that we do now. If that means more agents or more administrators then that's what we'll do. ✨