

TICKET PROBE

Payola Promotions Scalping

Scalpers and media promotions eat up a major slice of prime concert seating. The method of ticket distribution has long been questioned for its fairness, and for the paying public, the best available seat is not always the best seat.

By CAROLINE CHIA

The biggest complaint concert-goers have is the lack of good seating available when tickets go on sale. However after scalpers and people involved in concert sales and promotions grab their share of tickets, there simply aren't very many prime seats left over.

Since most concerts in Toronto are promoted by Concert Productions International (CPI) and sold through Best Available Seating Service (BASS), it is these two companies that receive the brunt of buyer complaints.

Public outcry became so great over the summer that the *Toronto Star* established a Ticket Trauma column to deal with individual complaints.

In most cases, however, nothing can be done. Over the past ten years, concert sales and promotions have mushroomed into a massive, computerized industry with multi-media links. But alongside the industry's growth there has arisen a firmly entrenched network of black market ticketing, payola and profiteering.

Concert promotion is big business. Millions of dollars and hundreds of people are involved. Once a venue has been booked the performing artist(s) then deals with the concert promoters and together they choose what they call a "presenting media."

The presenting media is usually a radio station with a Top 40 pop music format like CHUM or CFTR. The concert promoters use the radio station as a sponsor for the show, while the radio station uses ticket contests and giveaways in order to attract a larger audience.

In addition to the radio stations, musical acts often use newspapers, magazines and major corporations as sponsors by giving away complimentary tickets which are distributed in contests.

Record companies also act as a sponsor with record giveaways as the major form of promotion. Even record stores, where many BASS outlets are located—help boost concert ticket sales by reducing the cost of the group's latest album.

After the promoters, presenting media and the act grab their slice of the ticket pie, there are very few prime seats left for public sale. Carol Gibson, Customer Support Manager for BASS, says that BASS gets distribution rights only after everyone involved in promoting the concert has taken their share.

Needless to say, the staff at the 34 BASS outlets will also buy up some prime tickets for themselves or friends before the tickets finally make their way into the hands of the general public.

Just what percentage of tickets is swallowed up by promotion is not clear. "BASS won't release any figures," says the *Star's* Greg Quill.

Michael Cohl, President of CPI, says that roughly 90 percent of a venue's tickets will go on public sale, of which 70 percent are "good" seats. Cohl did not define what constitutes a "good" seat.

Although the promotion business takes a large chunk of prime seats, the scalpers take an even bigger share. Scalpers have various sources of obtaining good tickets for all CPI concerts, according to one scalper named Sam (not his real name).

Firstly, most scalpers are members of *Cheap Thrills*, a CPI subscription service that is offered to the general public on a yearly basis. *Cheap Thrills* members pay an annual membership fee and have first crack at good seats which are distributed via BASS outlets. Most subscribers buy the tickets for personal use only, yet the club has turned into a gold mine for scalpers.

A second and more valuable ticket source for scalpers are the people who work at the ticket outlets. Payola, it seems, is the best way for scalpers to secure large blocks of prime seating. According to Sam, the scalper performs some favors—usually involving drugs—for the person working in the ticket agency, and in return gets a shot at quality tickets.

Carol Gibson says that BASS tries to monitor all of their outlets and on occasion drops into a certain outlet to supervise the ticketing process. But the problem is complicated by the fact that BASS outlets are not staffed by BASS personnel. BASS outlets are mostly located in stores such as Music World and A & A's and are staffed by store personnel. However, BASS does retain the option of closing down the outlet.

Like the promotion industry, scalping is also big business. Sam says that the scalping racket in Toronto is monopolized by "about 30 main figures." The big scalpers never work the streets, but use teams of scalpers who work closely together, all charging the same price. The main scalper therefore remains unknown. He simply obtains tickets and distributes them to the street scalpers, then takes a cut of the profits.

"The big scalpers," says Sam, "are the ones who have box

office connections, usually coming somewhere from the main offices of CPI."

The police are restricted in their efforts to crack down on scalping. Metro's 52 Division often uses undercover officers, but before the officers can impose a fine they must be approached to buy a ticket at a price above cost. The fine is a mere \$25.00, which is hardly a deterrent to a highly organized black market business allegedly grossing thousands of dollars a week.

CPI Publicity Director Liz Braun says that, due to public pressure, Cohl would not sell tickets to known scalpers at the CNE outlet for the recent Jacksons concert. However such actions can do little in curtailing the illicit scalping market.

It was after they automated that BASS began receiving more customer complaints, and scalping became more of a problem. Before the computer system was installed all "good" seats were evenly distributed among BASS outlets. After computerization, many more tickets could be sold in shorter amounts of time, and some outlets could sell tickets faster, resulting in an uneven distribution of prime seats.

Polycom, a computer company, recently bought BASS from CPI. According to Quill, the new owners are planning to upgrade the telephone sequence to allow for a larger volume of calls. Thus, BASS outlets could process more ticket-buying calls more quickly. Previously, lines were getting tied up and people weren't getting through.

Polycom plan to introduce "on-line credit card authorization," allowing immediate confirmation of the desired seats. Previously, all credit cards would have to be confirmed first before the ticket was sold.

Some fear the new telephone system will be more easily exploited by scalpers using multi-line telephones and different credit cards. Others are more hopeful that BASS's new management and technology will give the public a better choice of seats.

"It's a personal choice for people to line up for tickets," says Braun. "Nobody has forced them to do that, and when they're disappointed with the tickets they wind up with, they come crying to use with their complaints. That's just not fair."

Unless the situation improves, public frustration and anger will only worsen.



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