

## **Britt Witt, former head booker at the Hi Hat now at Collide, is determined to not let the current pandemic crush the industry she loves.**

At an age when most music-obsessed kids are just beginning to sneak into shows, Britt Witt was booking them.

It was 2001. Blogger had just launched and Witt, at 13, was an early adopter, posting album reviews and concert write-ups. When out-of-town bands began contacting her, looking for advice on how to book shows in L.A., she decided to help. It never crossed her mind that her youth or lack of experience might be an impediment.

“I have no idea how I was doing it,” she says, “but I somehow knew how to get in touch with the Roxy and the Troubadour.” Soon, she was brokering gigs for various indie bands, most of whom were unaware, until she showed up at the venue, that their booker was barely out of middle school.

From those scrappy beginnings, Witt has risen to become one of the most beloved and influential talent buyers in L.A.’s crowded live music scene, with an especially keen knack for championing homegrown talent. After four years of booking bands at the Hi Hat in Highland Park, Witt recently jumped to a new role that will give her a national platform — project manager and talent buyer for the Collide Agency, which produces concerts and events for brands like Dr. Martens and Stubhub.

Then, the coronavirus pandemic happened. Now, like virtually everyone in her industry, she’s trying her best to adapt to the new reality of canceled and postponed events.

“Any live event planning has been put on pause,” Witt says. “But we’re hopeful to pick things back up as soon as quarantine mandates are lifted.” That includes a multi-city event series in the works with Stubhub and the Mr. Holland’s Opus Foundation to donate instruments to high school music programs; a tour series sponsored by Gran Centenario Tequila; and the sustainability-focused Food Is Life Festival at the Culinary Institute of America in Napa (which was recently postponed).

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She’s also getting creative with online and streaming events. “We’re working on putting together virtual concerts to help give musicians exposure,” Witt says, “and curating local city guides across the world, searching for artists in places like India, Bali, Thailand, China, Mexico, Malaysia and more to share their favorite local spots and give us all a glimpse of their hometowns.”

Witt’s been passionate about music “from birth,” taking voice and piano lessons and reading every column inch of her favorite magazine, *Filter*, to learn the vocabulary and discover new bands. Her mom was a band manager and her father was a TV and film composer who worked with Danny Elfman. From their home in Miracle Mile, she could walk to the El Rey Theatre. “I would try to sneak over there and my parents would be like, ‘No, you can’t go to shows by yourself,’” she says.

After gate-crashing the world of band booking as a teenager, Witt continued learning the ropes of talent buying with the Spaceland-affiliated DoLA, where she worked as a writer, content curator and event promoter alongside revered Echo and Echoplex booker Liz Garo. From there, she followed Garo’s former assistant, Kyle Wilkerson, to the Bootleg Theater, where she worked for six months as the venue’s marketing director.

By 2015, her reputation spoke for itself. That year, when the Hi Hat’s owners — the team behind L & E Oyster Bar, Covell and The Hermosillo — went in search of someone to handle booking at their first music venue, Witt says her name “just kept coming up.” From their first meeting, “the three owners and I just vibed very well,” she says. “We all had the same intentions. They wanted someone who was going to be in-house, DIY and had a lot of contacts.”

Under Witt’s direction, the 350-capacity venue regularly punched above its weight. In major underplays, Rivers Cuomo, The Dillinger Escape Plan and Green Day’s Billie Joe Armstrong have all hit the former pool hall’s intimate stage. But the venue is deservedly best-known as the city’s most reliable incubator of homegrown talent. Most famously, Highland Park native Billie Eilish played her first show there in 2016. No other Hi Hat alumni have reached that level of pop dominance, but the contenders are many: Smoke Season, Swimm, Brasko, Winter, Lauren Ruth Ward. For most L.A. bands, a pre-show huddle in the Hi Hat’s black-curtained backstage area has become a rite of passage.

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**BRITT WITT, TALENT BUYER FOR COLLIDE AGENCY**

“With Britt at the helm, it was kind of the spark that we needed in the local music scene,” says John Seasons, whose band Haunted Summer has played the Hi Hat by his estimate at least 10 times. “We’ve always felt since the Hi Hat opened up, that’s been our hometown hub.”

The Hi Hat opened in February 2016 and in that first year Witt worked seven days a week, booking shows every night except the Fourth of July, Christmas and Super Bowl Sunday. Most nights, she could be spotted at the venue, her blond head darting through the crowd as she greeted friends, checked in on

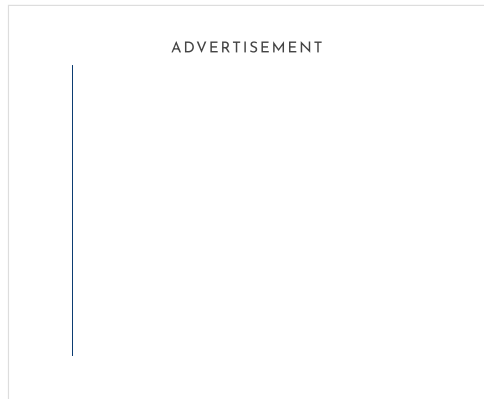
the bands or jumped into the box office to help sell tickets. “Yeah, no time for hobbies,” she says with a laugh.

But after four years of, as she puts it, “grinding myself into the ground,” she was ready to try something different. “I need to grow; I need to move on,” she remembers thinking. “I’ve set Hi Hat up in a state that someone else can take over and continue the legacy that’s been started there.” (In January, the Hi Hat’s owners announced that “someone else” was the venue’s assistant general manager, Elene Perry.)

Even before COVID-19 indefinitely shuttered all L.A. concert venues, Witt parted ways with the Hi Hat at a fraught moment in the city’s live music scene. Live Nation’s recent purchase of Spaceland, along with the opening of newer venues like Zebulon, the Moroccan Lounge and the nearby Lodge Room, made the concert landscape more competitive than ever. Now, it remains to be seen what that landscape will look like once the pandemic has passed.

“It’s been hard to witness the reality of how vulnerable the music and entertainment industries are to crises like this,” Witt says. “We’re all generally living on such thin margins and depending on very specific plans that one small fallen domino can be life-changing. While I like to be positive in thinking that the music industry needed something to shake it out of its current flux, I recognize that this will come with casualties and won’t be easy.”

As Witt navigates the crisis in her new role at Collide, she remains optimistic. “The phrase ‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’ has been a core motivator.”



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