



POP MUSIC; THEY MAKE SOUND WAVES ON LATE-NIGHT TELEVISION TUBE TALENT SCOUTS BRING IN THE BANDS

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It's not only night owls who find themselves in this position - snug beneath the covers or curled up on the couch, basking in the television's blue post-prime-time glow, scanning the rapidly expanding programming universe for something of interest. In many cases, our choice of late-night show depends on who its musical guest is.

An established, currently hot, or intriguing musical act is more likely to earn the commitment. In New York City, where most late-night talk shows are produced, a small network of talent executives spend their waking hours readjusting their grip on the pulse of pop culture.

Each is trying to be the first to present a hot new artist or land an established star, while offering viewers a range of musical genres. Of course, sometimes they're just scrambling to match their crazy schedules with the even crazier lifestyles of the artists.

At the "Late Show With David Letterman," these responsibilities belong to talent executive Sheila Rogers. A former Rolling Stone magazine writer, Rogers decided to take the job based on the show's high-quality musical content. She's now been there 11 years.

"[The Letterman show was] always taking risks and breaking new artists," she says, "so I was excited about that."

Breaking new artists is an essential component of a show's hip quotient. Following music-industry buzz and getting out to see bands in clubs, talent scouts are constantly on the prowl. For these purposes, "Letterman" hired Sheryl Zelikson as music coordinator. Another set of ears paid off with immediate results.

"Sheryl is the one who was first talking about the White Stripes, long before anybody had heard of them," Rogers says. "She's really great at keeping her eye out for new things."

Finding hot acts might seem easy in New York. But Jim Pitt, music producer for "Late Night With Conan O'Brien," lives in Nashville. He spends the majority of his time there, usually visiting New York for a week each month. In a world made smaller by technology, distance isn't an obstacle.

"So much of it is just talking to publicists and people in the business," Pitt says. "Most acts come through here . . . so I go out and see a fair amount of music."

After attending Boston College, where he played in a cover band, Pitt started booking talent at "Saturday Night Live." There he befriended a staff writer named Conan O'Brien.

Pitt recalls early O'Brien test shows that included a then-unknown singer named Sheryl Crow (similarly, Boston's own Gentlemen played early test tapings of "Last Call With Carson Daly"). As a fledgling late-night host, O'Brien didn't have the clout that Letterman had. They were also battling

the now-defunct "Arsenio Hall Show" for hip-hop guests, a battle Pitt concedes Hall won.

"I think that's the only talk show in history that'd really done hip-hop and rap the way it needs to be done, which is making it a big party with the audience as part of it, a lot of call and response," Pitt says. "Our studio audience . . . in the early days we didn't always have a full audience, and they were not rabid fans."

A full house is no longer a problem for "Conan," nor is scheduling high-profile stars. Recently, Pitt has presented Bruce Springsteen, the Dave Matthews Band, and Tony Bennett to his 12:30 a.m. viewers.

Pondering the recent willingness of high-profile artists to do the program, he says: "I think they find when they reach a certain point, they do need as much TV exposure as they can get because radio is such a wasteland."

For Jamie Granet, talent executive for "Last Call With Carson Daly," the willingness of big stars to do the show presented a bit of a quandary. Despite Daly's ubiquity on MTV, where he hosted the popular afternoon show "Total Request Live," many questioned how he would perform in the decidedly un-teen time slot of 1:30 to 2:30 a.m.

"Our audience is a little more collegiate, and that lets us do things like Jack Johnson or Ben Kweller, both who have become bigger names," Granet says. "You kind of wonder if they care about a Peter Gabriel or a James Taylor, but our James Taylor show was one of our highest rated. I guess the audience will cross over or people that are such big James Taylor fans will stay up to watch it."

It helps that each of the late-night hosts is, to a varying extent, a music fan. Daly has an established relationship with many of today's hottest young stars, while O'Brien is, by Pitt's standards, a guitar nut. But it was Letterman who recently went the extra mile for a musician when he invited his longtime friend Warren Zevon on for an entire show.

The program - which included an extended interview with Zevon, who was recently diagnosed as terminally ill, as well as three music segments - revealed a heartfelt mutual admiration between the two men.

Rogers recalls Letterman's role in that show. "Dave said, 'Let's give him a few songs,' " after Zevon had requested one. "Very quickly he decided that Warren should be the whole show. That was Dave's idea. Dave's only concern was that Warren was up for it, and he was."

While a supportive host is a booker's dream, "Saturday Night Live" coproducer Marci Klein has no such luxury, working with a different host for each of the show's 20 episodes. Still, it's the compressed weekly schedule that makes her job most difficult.

"Most other shows have four or five shows a week, so they have more chances to book more bands," she says. "We don't. Our conflict is that we love all these bands. Sometimes there are five bands for one date, and we know we're not going to get all five in for one year."

Nonetheless, "SNL" remains late night television's marquee slot. On that show, one booking coup is mentioned most - for its absolutely perfect timing.

On Jan. 11, 1992, the show's musical guest was a skyrocketing band from Seattle called Nirvana. The band's album "Nevermind" had been declared the No. 1 album in the country that week, dethroning Michael Jackson and, for many in the vast national audience, providing the first exposure to the phenomenon that would become known as grunge.

For Pitt, who was then still at "SNL" and booked Nirvana, the episode holds vivid memories.

"That was a pretty amazing experience," he says. "You always hope you get bands at the moment they're just exploding, and that was the case there. All that fall I just watched the album climb and heard all that buzz, and finally we booked them.

"The whole weekend was kind of crazy, trying to get Kurt [Cobain] onstage for a live show when he wouldn't come out of the bathroom," he recalls. "He almost didn't make it out for one of the songs, but it turned very memorable, actually. It was one of those moments."

