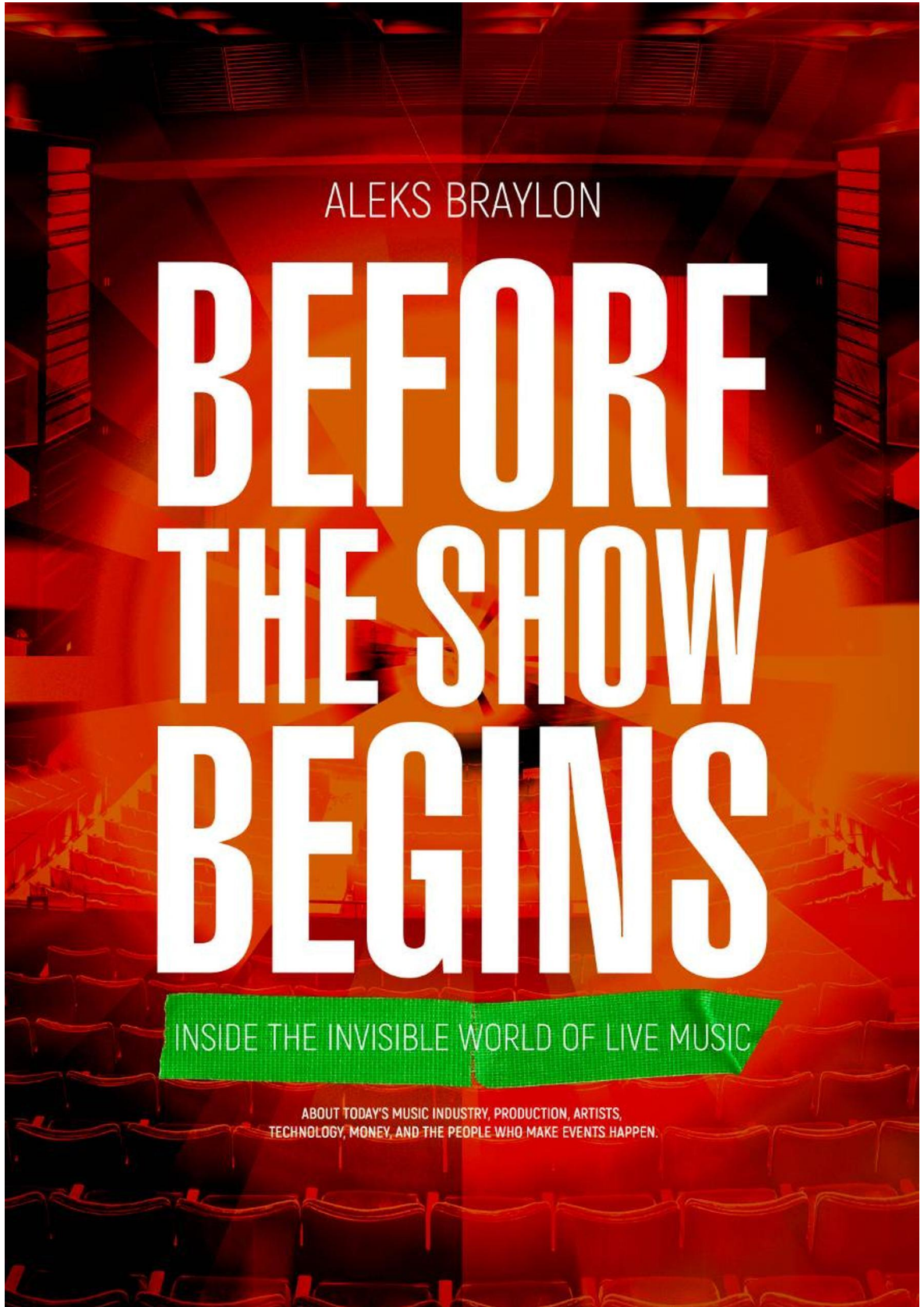




ALEKS BRAYLON

BEFORE THE SHOW BEGINS

INSIDE THE INVISIBLE WORLD OF LIVE MUSIC

ABOUT TODAY'S MUSIC INDUSTRY, PRODUCTION, ARTISTS,
TECHNOLOGY, MONEY, AND THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE EVENTS HAPPEN.

Aleks Braylon

Before The Show Begins

«АВТОР»

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Braylon A.

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What happens before the lights go down and the first Go cue is called? Before the Show Begins explores the unseen side of today's live music industry: concert production, touring, artists, promoters, technical crews, ticketing, rights, finance, safety, and technology. Drawing on real-world professional situations, international case studies, and his own experience in live events, Aleks Braylon takes readers behind the scenes of the industry. Why is a good rider more than just a list of equipment? How can a single mistake during preparation turn into a crisis at the venue? Why doesn't a sold-out show always mean a profit? What happens when a system fails? And in the age of streaming and artificial intelligence, why do people still buy tickets and come to concerts? This is not a book about technology itself. It is about the people, decisions, and systems that make a few hours of live performance possible in the first place.

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Aleks Braylon

Before The Show Begins

About This Book

This book grew out of a simple professional habit: after every difficult show, I mentally go back to the beginning and ask myself where the outcome was really decided. Almost never is the answer found in the moment the audience saw. It is usually earlier - in an email someone read carefully or carelessly; in the decision not to save money on redundancy; in a conversation with the artist; in two extra hours of load-in; in the person who said no at exactly the right time.

I did not want to write a textbook on concert production. Textbooks age quickly: consoles change, protocols change, platforms change, ticketing models change, and even what we mean by an artist changes. I am more interested in the logic of the profession - why some teams move through problems almost invisibly while others turn a small issue into a crisis; why one calm person can sometimes be more useful than another truck of equipment; why production begins not with technology, but with responsibility.

There will be sound, lighting, video, touring, economics, streaming, and artificial intelligence in these pages. But they will appear where they appear in real work: inside people, decisions, mistakes, negotiations, and specific events. I separate documented stories from the global industry from composite scenes, and the sources are collected at the end of the book. When I say 'I have seen this,' I am not trying to claim someone else's story as my own. I mean the professional experience of this environment: situations that repeat themselves at venues again and again, changing names, cities, and budgets while barely changing their human mechanics.

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PROLOGUE

A Few Seconds Before the Call: 'Go'

The room is already dark. Not completely - emergency and work lights leave the space half-awake - but the audience understands that something is about to happen. Conversation grows denser. Phone screens glow in the stands. Someone finishes a bottle of water, someone checks a camera, someone looks at the empty stage for the hundredth time, as if the artist might appear sooner simply because they are watching more carefully. Backstage, it feels entirely different. There is no waiting in the romantic sense. There is a countdown.

Five minutes to show is not five minutes. It is a short production cycle in which dozens of things have to be confirmed. Stage ready. Artist ready. Playback ready. RF stable. House lights standing by. Video parked on the first frame. Lighting console in its opening state. FOH has signal. Monitors have signal. Comms are working. Security knows the launch moment. Doors are already open and the audience is inside - from here on, the only clock that matters is show time. Nobody tells long stories over comms. The closer you get to the first cue, the shorter the language becomes.

'Stand by intro.'

'Standing by.'

Those two phrases can represent the work of hundreds of people, weeks of preparation, and a budget the average audience member will never see. Yet at launch, all of it compresses into one point.

'Go.'

The blackout triggers a scream before the first person even appears onstage. Sometimes the audience reacts not to the artist, but to the promise of the artist. That is part of the strange power of a live event: it begins in the mind before it begins physically.

That moment is usually treated as the start of the show. In reality, the show began much earlier. It began with an email sent months ago. With the agent's first call. With negotiations over a date. With a tentative venue hold. With a budget. With a decision about whether the project could be brought to this city at all. Then came the contract. Then the technical rider. Then hospitality. Then flights, freight, visas, insurance, local crew, hotel, ground transport, customs, rehearsals, content delivery, the stage plan, rigging plot, power plan, RF coordination, and the master schedule.

And sometimes it began even earlier - with a song one person wrote in a room without knowing that, years later, thousands of people would sing it together.

The audience sees the final two hours. The industry lives in everything that happened before them - and everything that happens after. In a few hours the stage will become a collection of components again. The LED wall will come apart into cabinets. Fixtures will go back into cases. Cables will be coiled. Stands folded. Backline loaded. The lights will go out on the tour bus. The venue will be left with tape marks and the debris of thousands of people. By morning, the room may be turning into a conference, a wedding, a sporting event, or the load-in for another concert. Concert production creates worlds that are designed from the beginning to disappear.

Perhaps that is why this work teaches you so well to distinguish what matters from what merely looks good. What looks good is what remains in the photograph. What matters is everything that made the photograph possible.

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PART I. BEFORE THE DOORS OPEN

Chapter 1. The Venue and the Rider: Where an Idea First Meets Reality

The most useful thing an empty venue does is strip away our illusions. On a render, everything is usually beautiful: lines are clean, the screen hangs perfectly, fixtures point exactly where they should, and for some reason nobody is ever standing in an aisle. In real life, the first things you find are a door ten centimeters narrower than the case, a ceiling beam in precisely the wrong place, and a venue representative who calmly says, 'You can't rig from that.' That is where the real profession begins.

I stopped thinking of this as a fight against circumstances a long time ago. A venue does not owe our presentation anything. It existed before us and will exist after us. Our job is to finish the conversation between the idea and reality so that, by evening, nobody can see how many compromises were required in the morning. Sometimes it feels like architecture. Sometimes diplomacy. Sometimes a multimillion-dollar game of Tetris. An empty room is one of the most honest spaces in the entertainment business. There is no applause yet, no expectation, no status attached to the artist, no magic of light. None of the social energy that will later make an ordinary black riser feel like the center of the world. There are only architecture, physics, and constraints.

A first site walk very quickly becomes a conversation about specifics: ceiling height and point loads, power, evacuation routes, truck access, door widths, stage access, noise restrictions, and curfews. Then your eye moves to the FOH position, whether delay lines are possible, which seats may have to be killed, where the LED can go, and where the fire lanes run. And near the end, almost inevitably, you discover that the only suitable room for the technical racks is locked and the key belongs to someone nobody has seen all morning. This is where the presentation ends and production begins.

In a visualization, a stage can float in mid-air. In a real building, it has to be supported by something. In a promo film, a lighting fixture can be placed anywhere. At the venue, that exact point may contain a sprinkler, ductwork, a ladder, a VIP route, or a structure you are forbidden to rig from. Good production begins with respect for reality. That sounds obvious until you see how many projects are built in the opposite order: first someone invents the effect, then the team tries to negotiate with the laws of physics. Professional logic works the other way. It does not kill creativity; it gives creativity a form it can survive in. Almost anything can be done if you understand early enough what needs to be done, why it matters, and what it will cost.

A site visit is not a walk through the future venue. It is the moment when the idea first meets infrastructure. An experienced person reads a room differently from an audience member. The audience sees a stage. The engineer sees signal paths. The rigger sees load. The lighting designer sees angles. The video engineer sees sightlines and viewing distances. The production manager sees time. Security sees human flow. The promoter sees sellable seats. The venue manager sees what must not be damaged. And all of them are right at the same time. That is the first difficulty of concert production: there is no single reality. There are several systems laid on top of one another.

The creative system says, 'We need a bigger screen.' The building says the weight cannot be flown here. Finance reminds everyone that a ground-support structure is not in the budget. Operations needs load-in completed by four. Safety quietly closes an access route that somebody has already used in a beautiful render. The job of a strong production team is not to choose a winner. It is to build a solution in which every system remains functional. Professionalism rarely looks like heroism.

When I was starting out, I thought the strongest specialist was the one who could rescue a problem faster than anyone else once it had already happened. Over the years, my view has almost reversed. The most expensive professional luxury is arranging things so that nobody needs rescuing. Heroism looks excellent in a story and rather poor in a production schedule. Heroics begin where the plan has already failed. Real mastery often looks boring: arrive early, measure, ask, check the paperwork, get the load table, verify power, photograph access, open old drawings, call someone who has worked in the building before, and discover the problem three weeks before the event. None of that is spectacular. It is also exactly how shows are saved.

The Stage as a Temporary State

During a large event, a venue develops something close to its own form of government. There is territory. There are access zones. Department heads. Hierarchy. A language. Temporary rules for movement, safety, and decision-making. Some people can enter a certain door and others cannot. Some objects cannot be moved without permission. Hundreds of actions answer to one schedule. For one day, a temporary state appears and exists until the last case leaves the building. And the larger the event, the less important the equipment becomes compared with the structure of authority - who is allowed to make which decision. You can buy the best systems in the world and still lose because nobody knows who approves a change. You can have a merely adequate equipment package and deliver an extraordinarily difficult show if responsibility is clear.

An empty room makes this especially visible. Before anyone comes in, the truth is obvious: a show is not a collection of things. It is a set of relationships between people, space, time, and technology. At night, the audience sees the picture. In the morning, production sees the system.

A Rider Is Not a Shopping List

Technical riders are often read too literally. If the document names a console, find that console. If it specifies a microphone, order that microphone. If it asks for eight monitor mixes, provide eight. If it includes a stage plot, reproduce the plot. That approach works until the first situation that does not fit the template. A good rider is not an inventory list. It describes the conditions under which the artist's team believes the show can be reproduced predictably. The distinction matters.

I used to read riders almost like a procurement sheet: there is a line item, so that line item must be closed. Eventually I realized that the more important question is what problem that line is trying to prevent. Once you understand that, the negotiation stops being an argument over brands and becomes a conversation about outcome. Sometimes, admittedly, you learn this lesson standing next to an open road case and a very unhappy member of the touring crew - an excellent, if expensive, form of education. If you understand the purpose behind a requirement, you can discuss an equivalent professionally. If all you see is the model name, every deviation becomes an argument.

Suppose a touring engineer asks for a particular console family. The reason may have nothing to do with that model sounding objectively superior. They may have a show file, scenes, plug-ins, a familiar automation workflow, and a short soundcheck. Replacing it with a 'console of equivalent class' may look reasonable on paper while creating a production risk: the engineer now has to rebuild a workflow on show day. Or the artist may request a specific wireless system. That may be about the capsule, familiarity, coordination parameters, or compatibility with a touring rack. You cannot know until you ask the right question. A strong advance starts with a simple question: 'What is this requirement actually protecting?' Not because every line should become a negotiation. Because you need to understand the architecture of risk.

Hard Requirements and Preferences

Most riders contain requirements of very different kinds. Some are genuinely hard requirements: safety, input count, required power, physical stage dimensions, frequency compatibility, protocols, timecode, specific playback elements, or show-control components. Others are preferences. Some are historical residue: a document copied from tour to tour long after the show itself changed. Some are insurance. Some are simply a way of making sure the local provider does

not arrive with an underpowered system. An experienced technical manager should be able to tell the difference - but not unilaterally. The key principle is approval.

If the exact requested item is not available, the question is not, 'Can we give you something similar?' It is: 'We propose this equivalent. Here are the specifications. Here is how it covers your requirement. Please confirm.' A large part of professional culture fits inside that short procedure. Bad production hides a substitution and hopes nobody notices. Average production asks permission without understanding what it is proposing. Good production proposes a solution and explains why it is equivalent in the context of that particular show.

The Rider as a Test of Understanding: The Brown M&M's Story

Some stories in the concert business are so good that the retelling gradually strips away their original meaning. Van Halen's brown M&M's are one of them. For decades, the clause was repeated as proof of rock-star excess: as if stages, amplifiers, and limousines were not enough, the band demanded that someone sort candy by hand.

The truth is more useful than the joke. David Lee Roth, and later Alex Van Halen, explained that the odd request served as a quick indicator of how carefully the promoter had read the rider. The document contained serious technical and safety requirements. If the promoter missed a bright, easy-to-check detail about candy, the touring team had reason to wonder whether the same person had skimmed the sections on power, staging, or load limits.⁹⁰

The lesson, obviously, is not that every artist now needs a color-coded confectionery audit. I would almost argue the opposite: if you have to hide a trap in the rider to test a partner, trust is already imperfect. But I understand the logic. A document does not matter because it exists. What matters is whether the process can detect that the document was not understood.

I have heard the phrase 'We received the rider' more times than I can count, and it is usually true. The file did arrive by email. Sometimes somebody even downloaded it. But between received and understood, between understood and confirmed, between confirmed and delivered, there is an entire profession. It becomes especially funny when ten people at the venue confidently say, 'Yes, yes, that was in the rider,' and every one of them means a different file. Moments like that teach you that a PDF is not a management system. It is simply a very calm witness to the fact that, at some point, somebody wrote something down.

A rider is not an English-language exam and not a competition in page count. It is an agreement about the future reality of the show. If the artist's manager, the promoter, the venue, and the supplier can read the same line four different ways, the problem already exists. It simply has not been plugged into power yet.⁹⁰

The Rider as a Negotiation of Trust

There is another function of the rider that is rarely stated directly. It tests how much the touring team can trust the local side. When a touring party sends a document, they do not know who will be standing in a venue in another country. The paperwork becomes a proxy for experience. The less trust there is, the more detailed the language tends to become. A good advance changes the relationship before the artist even arrives. Replies are fast. Deviations are declared honestly. Drawings make sense. The patch is confirmed. An RF plan exists. The contact sheet is current. If something is unavailable, everyone knows in advance. By the time the touring team arrives, they already know that the people on the other side of the email read more than equipment model numbers. In live events, trust is usually built before people meet in person. And it can be destroyed before then too.

One email saying 'everything will be fine' instead of answering a concrete question can tell you more about a production company than ten pages of corporate presentation.

Chapter 2. Advance: The Show That Is Built Long Before the Stage

In this profession, almost every next problem begins with a previous decision. The closer we get to doors, the less room there is for theory and the more clearly the quality of preparation becomes visible.

Advance: The Show Is Built in Emails and Spreadsheets

The audience carries a natural illusion: concerts are built at the venue. At the venue, they are assembled. They are built earlier. Advance is one of the most undervalued phases of concert production because there is nothing particularly photogenic about it for Instagram. It consists of emails, documents, calls, spreadsheets, file versions, clarifications, and questions that sometimes seem excessive. But every clarification made during advance potentially removes one problem from show day.

When I advance a show, I usually begin with questions that seem almost too mundane for 'big production': when trucks are allowed in, whether there is a loading dock for stage freight, who will open the right gate, where empty cases can be parked temporarily, and when the venue can actually receive the crew. These details rarely make it into a render, but they are remarkably good at consuming hours.

Then comes the technical layer: available power connections, FOH position, multicore run length, who is responsible for rigging, trim height, intercom, video-content format, RF restrictions, crew working hours, backline storage, and whether the PA can be run at working level. Alongside that are hotels, transport, catering, and crew pickup. In a good advance, none of these fights for the title of 'most important.' They simply have to converge on the same day. Not all of those questions are technical. That is one reason production management became a profession in its own right. Shows fail at the interfaces.

The sound system may be ready while the stage crew is late. Video may be ready while the content arrived in the wrong format. The artist may be ready while transport is stuck. The venue may be ready while access was never cleared by the promoter. Rigging may be complete while power distribution cannot be energized before inspection. Every team optimizes its own area. Somebody has to optimize the whole.

Every industry has jokes that resemble its paperwork a little too closely. In production, one of them is a file called final, sitting next to final_2, followed by final_really_final - and an hour later somebody appears with a USB stick and says, 'This one is definitely the final version.' It is funny right up until two departments load different show files. Ridiculous filenames are only the symptom. The real task is change control. Stage plans, input lists, crew rosters, playback, and video content inevitably change. Every change needs a visible trail: which version is current, who approved it, who was informed, and what else it affects.

If the artist adds a song, that is not only a musical decision. It may require another instrument, a lyric prompt, additional video, new lighting programming, a backline change, and a few more minutes in a schedule that was already full. A small creative decision can cast a very long operational shadow. Good production therefore does not answer the creative team with an automatic no. But an unconditional yes can be equally dangerous. The most professional answer is often: 'Yes. Here is what it will require, and here is what it will affect.'

There is a phrase that now switches on an internal calculator in my head: 'It's a small change.' It remains small only until you start naming the departments it touches.

U2 360°: When a Creative Idea Becomes a Transportation System

Large tours reach a point where the artistic idea stops being an image and becomes a physical problem. U2 360° is one of the clearest examples. Production director Jake Berry and his team were given a concept in which the stage itself was part of the idea: the audience would surround the performance, and the structure had to work as a repeatable system in stadiums across different countries.

Jake Berry Productions described the scale in unusually concrete terms: a steel structure about 164 feet high and roughly 120 trucks to move it. The number itself is not the point. The point is that after a certain scale, you can no longer think of a tour as 'a concert traveling from city to city.' It becomes a distributed logistics operation with a strict sequence, dependencies, time buffers, and a very high cost for every mistake.

A project like that changes the way you read an advance. A loading-dock dimension entered incorrectly is no longer a minor inconvenience. An unconfirmed allowable load can change the engineering scheme. A venue labor curfew can affect crew shifts or even routing. A border crossing stops being administrative background: if one critical component does not clear customs on time and there is no equivalent replacement, the entire show can stop.

Large tours often use leapfrog systems: multiple sets of selected elements move ahead of the route so that one stadium is still being struck while the next one has already begun to build. Even when a particular tour is organized differently, the principle applies at every scale: the speed of show day depends on how much work you successfully moved out of show day in advance. Berry's own career is just as instructive. He started as a drum tech and went on to lead production for some of the world's largest tours. That path breaks the popular illusion that a production manager is primarily a spreadsheet person. A good production director understands the spreadsheet precisely because he knows the physical cost of a road case, a cable, a riser, a truck load, and the sentence, 'It'll take ten minutes.'

Scale does not cancel the basics; it makes them merciless. The larger the show, the less room there is for verbal assumptions. Advance becomes the architecture of the future day, and the production director becomes the person who translates creative ambition into a sequence of operations that can actually be performed.^{1, 2}

Chapter 3. Load-In Day: Weight, Time, and the Artist's Trust

Load-In and Build: Theory Turns into Weight

There is a moment when an idea becomes physical. The truck doors open. And everything that existed yesterday in Vectorworks, CAD, Excel, PDFs, and email begins to move on wheels. Load-in reveals the quality of preparation very quickly. If road cases arrive in the wrong order, the one you need is buried behind twenty others. If the stage has to be ready before the next rigging phase but its components are in the last truck, the entire schedule moves. If no forklift was booked, a heavy structure stops being a line in an equipment list and becomes a very real problem. Concert production has a deep affection for specifics. Weight is specific. Time is specific. Cable length is specific. Headcount is specific. However many creative words appear in the presentation, load-in day translates everything into physical quantities. **The critical path.**

A strong production team identifies the critical path in advance: the chain of activities where a delay in one step moves the entire event. If LED programming can continue in parallel with other work, that is one kind of task. If the stage cannot be built until rigging is complete, and the sound system cannot be installed until the stage is ready, that is a critical dependency. An experienced production manager does not ask every five minutes, 'Is everyone working?' They ask, 'What is blocking the next step right now?' That is the fundamental difference between managing activity and managing outcome. You can have a hundred busy people and still be late. You can have a smaller crew, sequence the work correctly, and stay on schedule.

Show Day Consumes Optimism Very Quickly

One of the most dangerous currencies in this business is unjustified optimism. A single day can accumulate an impressive collection of promises: 'We'll do it quickly,' 'We'll sort it out on site,' 'The file is small, it'll upload,' 'We should have enough cable,' 'The artist usually doesn't do a full soundcheck.' Each sentence sounds harmless on its own. The trouble begins when they all prove true at the same time - just in the opposite direction. Each phrase feels harmless until several of them land on the same day. Show day burns through time buffers faster than a schedule suggests. A time buffer is a resilience resource, not wasted minutes. If everything goes perfectly, it converts into calm.

I used to see empty space in a schedule as unfinished planning. Now I react the other way around: if a complex show day has no gaps at all, I start looking for where we have already spent tomorrow's contingency. I usually find it. And if I do not, it means nobody built that buffer into the schedule in the first place.

Soundcheck: Technical Procedure, Psychological Contract

Soundcheck is not only about sound. Of course we check gain structure, system tuning, microphones, instruments, monitor mixes, playback, scenes, mutes, comms, RF, and transitions. But something else is happening at the same time: the artist is forming an opinion of the system to which they are about to entrust the evening. The first few minutes matter disproportionately. If the singer asks for more vocal in the monitor and gets it immediately, trust grows. If every change requires a long explanation, the artist begins managing the technology personally. If the monitor engineer hears a problem before the musician has found the words for it, the stage starts to feel safe. If FOH explains a limitation calmly instead of arguing, the conversation becomes productive. The stage is a more vulnerable place for an artist than it looks from the audience. The crowd sees confidence, but technically the performer depends on dozens of invisible systems.

They have to trust their voice to a microphone and an RF environment configured by people they may have met only that day. Hear themselves through a system built by somebody else. Walk onto a stage where every bright source can make the audience harder to see. Rely on playback that

must start on the correct fraction of a second. Know that if something fails, somebody else will notice first. My definition of an ideal soundcheck is simple: when it is over, the artist stops thinking about the technical system and goes back to thinking about music.

The Artist's Time Is More Expensive Than the System's Time

There is a professional mistake technical people make very easily: assuming the artist should wait while engineers complete the perfect process. Sometimes they should - status does not repeal safety or physics. But most of the time, production's job is to prepare as much as possible before the artist appears. A line check is not a box-ticking exercise. Virtual soundcheck is not there because the feature looks clever. Pre-programming is not about making a beautiful file. All of these exist to close as many questions as possible before the artist steps onto the stage. Those tools buy the most expensive resource on show day: the time of people who cannot be substituted.

Fifty technicians can wait for a process. The headliner sometimes physically cannot: interviews, guest meetings, rehearsal, wardrobe, rest, medical treatment, press obligations, transport. Professional production does not demand that the whole world adapt to the equipment. It makes the system ready for the real world.

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PART II. THE ARTIST AS A SYSTEM

Chapter 4. The Artist as a System: Person, Rights, Team, and Responsibility

When the conversation moves from the stage to the music business, technology suddenly stops being the main subject. An artist has a catalog, rights, a team, contracts, data, an audience, and money that moves far less visibly than a signal through a cable. The longer I worked around artists, the clearer it became that a career is a system too. It fails for many of the same reasons as a badly designed show: no clear owner of a decision, dependence on a single point of failure, information arriving too late, and too much faith that somehow it will all work out.

The Artist Is a Person, Intellectual Property, and a Company

The romantic version of the music business is simple: someone writes a song, people hear it, and if the song is good, success follows. Reality is more complicated. A modern artist exists in several capacities at once: writer or performer, brand, rights holder, employer, contracting party, media outlet, and sometimes a company around which dozens of people work. A song also exists in several economic realities. There is the composition as a work and there is a specific sound recording. There are songwriting and publishing rights, master rights, public-performance rights, mechanical and neighboring rights, synchronization licensing, territories, terms, participant shares, and agreements with collecting societies.

To the listener, it is one song. To the industry, it is several layers of ownership. That is why the phrase 'the song made a million dollars' tells you almost nothing about how much the artist actually received. To understand the real economics, you have to ask less romantic questions. Who owns the master? Who wrote the composition, and in what shares? Is the advance recoupable? How is the label deal structured? Who is the publisher? What commissions are paid to management and agency? Which costs has the artist already funded personally? I have long thought of an artist's career as a portfolio. A strong modern artist rarely depends on one revenue stream, and that is not greed. It is ordinary system resilience.

Recorded music can generate royalties. Live shows can generate guarantees and a share of box office. Publishing rights generate income from the use of compositions. Merch creates margin on physical products. Brand partnerships monetize access to an audience and an image. Sync licenses music for film, advertising, and games. Private events can produce high fees for a limited number of appearances. Fan clubs and subscriptions create direct ways to monetize the relationship with the most committed part of the audience. The proportions vary radically from artist to artist. That leads to a simple conclusion: there is no useful way to talk about 'the music business' as one universal model. For one artist, the recording is the primary product and touring supports the release. For another, the recording is marketing for the live business. For a third, touring barely matters while publishing generates meaningful income. A fourth builds a world around personality and earns more from brands than from music.

A fifth may have a very strong touring business in one region and comparatively modest global streaming numbers. Success cannot be measured by one number.

Beyoncé and Homecoming: Artist Development as a Private Operating System

Beyoncé has long been interesting to the industry for reasons beyond performance. Her model shows what happens at the highest level when the artist stops being merely 'the client of a team' and becomes the center of a complex production organization.

Homecoming, the film built around her 2018 Coachella performance, is valuable precisely because it documents months of preparation rather than only the final two hours. Public material around the project describes a long rehearsal process, Beyoncé's return to performance condition after pregnancy, work with a large musical and dance ensemble, and the deliberate construction of the show around HBCU aesthetics. This was not a collection of effects added after the set list was finished. The concept shaped arrangements, choreography, costumes, stage language, and even the way the performance would later be documented.

An important management lesson is embedded in the structure of Parkwood Entertainment itself. When an artist has an in-house management and production infrastructure, there are fewer accidental translators between a creative idea and its commercial execution. That does not mean one person does everything. Quite the opposite: the system becomes larger. But authority over the essential creative decisions remains organized around a clear center.

Homecoming also demonstrates another modern function of concert production: archiving. A major show no longer exists only in the memory of the people who attended. Rehearsal footage, multitrack audio, isolated camera recordings, photographs, documentary rights, and social content become a separate layer of value. A production that fails to think about capture in advance can destroy a future product before anyone has even conceived of it.

Beyoncé did not simply perform at a festival and later release a film. She turned the rehearsal process, cultural research, show direction, and the performance itself into one narrative asset. For the modern music business, that is an important shift: a single event can live several commercial lives - ticket value, media impact, increased streaming, a film, renewed interest in the catalog, brand value, and long-term cultural capital. At the top level, artist development has long since stopped meaning simply finding good material and a stylist. It requires a system capable of translating one idea into music, stage, film, content, and business without losing identity.^{5, 6}

Who Works Around an Artist

When an audience sees one name on a poster, it is natural to assume that name is the business. A large career is actually a network of specializations. The manager usually sits closest to the artist's overall strategy. The job is not merely to 'handle things,' but to connect decisions: music, team, brand, deals, schedule, conflicts of interest, and long-term direction. The booking agent works with the live market: where the artist can play, who the promoter is, the fee, territories, available windows, and how the route should be built. The promoter takes local or tour-level risk, organizes the event, sells tickets, and coordinates the venue and production. Depending on the deal, the label finances and develops the recorded side of the business: recording, marketing, distribution, promotion, analytics, and international reach. The music publisher administers and monetizes composition rights and helps with registration, licensing, and collection.

The business manager and accounting team protect financial discipline: taxes, cash flow, payroll, payments, and reporting. Around the artist sits a network of specialists. A lawyer turns verbal expectations into rights and obligations. A tour manager turns a route into a functioning daily system. A production manager turns a creative brief into a tour that can physically exist. A technical director joins disciplines and decisions. In the end, the entire team has to do something that sounds simple in words: turn documents into reality.

Why Roles Cannot Be Combined Forever

At the beginning, artists often do everything themselves. That is normal. They answer booking emails, post short videos, upload a release, argue with the designer, book a ticket, and perform that evening. The problem begins when the business grows and the structure does not. There is a limit to how many decisions one person can make well. Growing the team is not a status symbol. It is the transfer of responsibility to places where specialization creates more value than owner control. But the team should not become bureaucracy for its own sake. Every new person should either improve

the quality of decisions or release a critical resource for the artist - time, attention, creativity, or health. Otherwise the industry can easily become an organization that exists mostly to sustain itself.

Chapter 5. From Stream to Fan: The New Economy of Attention

A music career has another peculiar feature: numbers can look more convincing than people. But people are the ones who ultimately buy the ticket, make the decision, sign the contract, and return for the next release.

Streaming Changed the Map of Access, Not Music Itself

Streaming is often discussed only in terms of the payout per stream. That is too narrow. Its biggest change was not a particular rate. It changed the geography and speed of access to music. In 2025, the global recorded-music market reached \$31.7 billion. Streaming accounted for 69.6 percent of revenue, and the number of paid streaming subscription users reached 837 million. Streaming is no longer just one distribution channel among others. For much of the world, it is the basic infrastructure through which music is consumed. But infrastructure changes behavior on both sides. The listener no longer decides whether a particular album is worth purchasing. The decision is what to hear inside access that has already been paid for. Streaming radically lowered the cost of experimentation for the listener. Trying an unknown artist costs almost nothing, and switching away twenty seconds later costs nothing too.

Discovering new music became easier. Holding attention became harder. **Global by default.** Spotify has reported that, within two years of debut, more than half of a typical artist's royalties can come from outside their home country; in 2025, artists generating more than \$500,000 in royalties on the platform represented 75 countries. Those are platform figures and should be read as such, not as a complete artist financial statement. But the direction is clear: a local launch no longer implies a local audience. In the old model, an international career required physical infrastructure: a label, distribution, radio, pressing, and local partners. Today a song can become international before the artist's team is ready to operate internationally. That creates a new kind of problem.

An audience can suddenly appear in a country where the artist has no agent. Content begins spreading in a language and cultural context that the team never considered in the original plan. Then a promoter sees the data and makes an offer. Suddenly, digital demand has to be converted into physical reality: a venue, tickets, visas, tax structure, freight, and local production. Streaming removed some geographic barriers for music. The physical world of touring remained physical. You cannot stream a truck. You cannot download a stage. You cannot teleport a crew. Connecting digital data with live-production competence is therefore becoming one of the defining skills of the modern industry.

“A record shop is not just a record shop. It is an arbiter of taste itself.” — Richard Branson¹⁰³

Before the Algorithm, There Was a Person Standing by a Record Shelf

In Richard Branson's recollections, the early Virgin stores are interesting for more than retail. The team's selection of records gradually became part of the store's reputation. People were not simply coming in to buy a record; they were coming to a place where someone had already done the work of choosing — narrowing an overwhelming musical universe into something worth exploring.¹⁰³ It was, in effect, a human recommendation system long before 'algorithm' became part of music-marketing vocabulary. Across different eras, that role was shared by record-store staff, radio presenters, music journalists, A&R executives, club DJs, programmers, and playlist editors. They did more than distribute music. They told listeners what might be worth giving a chance.

Today the same function is scaled by software. A recommendation system can compare the behavior of millions of people in seconds and introduce an unknown artist to someone in another country. That is an extraordinary advantage. But the machine has its own logic: it optimizes not for an abstract idea of 'good music,' but for measurable behavior - continued listening, return, saves, engagement. I do not romanticize the old gatekeepers. Human curation could be biased, closed,

dependent on relationships, market politics, or simply the taste of one person. Algorithms removed some of those barriers. But the curator did not disappear. The curator changed form - and ownership.

That leaves an artist with an uncomfortable but useful question: who controls the moment of recommendation now? If the entire relationship with the audience exists inside one platform, the artist is not merely renting distribution. They are partly renting the mechanism through which people discover them in the first place. That is why direct channels - a fan database, email, owned commerce, fan clubs, and concert history - remain important even in a world of excellent recommendations. An algorithm can introduce you. A career begins when the person returns not because the system served another track, but because they remember your name.

Audience and Fans Are Not the Same Thing

A million views sounds impressive. For a business, the next question matters more: what are those people prepared to do? A relationship begins where the action requires effort. Will the person listen to another song, follow, save the release, buy a ticket, travel two hours to a concert, buy merch, bring a friend, and return next year? Each step asks a little more, and for that reason says more about the relationship than an accidental view ever can. Attention and fandom are close to one another, but they are not synonyms. An algorithm can give an artist an enormous amount of attention very quickly. Attention that never becomes a relationship can disappear just as quickly. Fandom requires repetition. A person has to do more than encounter a song. The artist has to enter their identity, memory, or social world.

A live concert remains one of the strongest mechanisms for creating that bond because it turns individual attention into a collective experience. Streaming creates frequent but usually individual interactions. A concert creates a rare but intense collective event. In the room, a person sees not only the artist. They see other people for whom that artist matters too. Fandom becomes physically visible.

The Most Valuable Metric May Not Exist on a Dashboard

The digital industry loves what can be measured. Streams. Saves. Completion rates. Followers. Watch time. Conversion. Geography. Age. Discovery source. Those data are useful. Sometimes they enable decisions that once had to be made almost blind. But there is a danger in managing only what is easy to measure. Some things still fit badly on a dashboard: how many people will remember this night in five years, how many became fans after one show, how many felt part of a community for the first time, how many decided to make music themselves after seeing a concert. Those consequences rarely appear in the next morning's report. But they are what build a long culture around an artist.

The attention economy is brutal. A modern artist competes not only with other musicians, but with television, games, sport, messaging, podcasts, restaurants, travel, and an endless feed of short-form video. Scarcity did not disappear; it moved. Content itself was once scarce. Today attention is scarce. Tomorrow, trust in the origin of content may become even rarer. **Content around the music.** Artists now carry an obligation that barely existed at this scale before: constantly explaining their own existence between releases. Short videos, backstage material, live clips, interviews, stories, studio content, and fan communication create a continuous layer of presence. For some artists it is natural. For others, it feels like a second job competing with the first. The industry's answer is sometimes too simple: 'You need more content.' Quantity is not the same as connection.

If every artist publishes more every day, total noise grows faster than individual visibility. A coherent brand story and a recognizable artistic world therefore matter more than raw frequency of posting. Who is this artist? What world do they create? What should a viewer feel after ten seconds with the sound off? What could not be mistaken for somebody else? Concert production exposes that question especially harshly. A bigger stage magnifies uncertainty as readily as it magnifies strength. If an artist has no visual language, hundreds of square meters of LED will not solve the problem. They will merely make the emptiness larger.

Chapter 6. Independence, Rights, and the Price of Controlling Your Own Career

DID YOU KNOW? In 1977, Virgin signed the Sex Pistols after the band's relationships with previous labels had collapsed. According to Richard Branson's account, the deal included £15,000 for UK rights and another £50,000 for worldwide distribution. More important than the numbers was what Virgin was really buying: not only a record, but a new position for its own brand.¹⁰³

The Independent Path No Longer Means Being Alone

The word independent is often misunderstood in the music business. It does not mean the artist has to do everything personally. It means ownership and control are structured differently from the traditional model, while services can be assembled piece by piece. Digital distribution made it possible to release music globally without owning a warehouse, a disc factory, or a physical distribution network. Social platforms created a direct channel to audiences. Analytics made demand more visible. Remote work lowered some production barriers. As a result, there are far more models between 'signed to a major label' and 'working alone in a bedroom.' An artist can own the masters and work with a distributor. They can license rights for a limited term or territory. They can hire a marketing team for a specific release. They can work with a booking agent only in selected markets. They can outsource publishing administration while retaining ownership of the rights themselves.

They can have a manager, PR team, and touring team while remaining formally independent. Platform data suggest this path is no longer marginal. Spotify reported that in 2025 more than a third of artists generating at least \$10,000 in royalties on the platform were DIY artists or had begun as DIY. That does not mean independent artists now find it easy to earn money. Quite the opposite: the supply of music is enormous. What changed is the accessibility of the infrastructure required to enter the market.

Freedom Increases the Number of Decisions

Every degree of independence has a price. If nobody else is taking a share of control, somebody inside the team still has to exercise that control. Independence quickly turns creative freedom into a long queue of decisions. Who chooses the release date, maintains metadata, and checks rights splits? Who builds the content plan, negotiates sync, develops the live strategy, and funds marketing? And, eventually, who makes the unpleasant decision when the money runs out? A major partner is often expensive not because it has one secret button nobody else can press. It is expensive because it combines capital, relationships, infrastructure, experience, and scale. An independent model can be more efficient if the artist understands what has to be assembled in place of that infrastructure. Freedom without a system can become little more than overload.

Not Signing Is Also a Decision You Have to Earn

Music culture makes it easy to romanticize independence and demonize large companies. The professional question is more pragmatic: which partner increases the probability of the desired result, and at what cost? A good deal can accelerate a career. A bad one can restrict it for years. A strong independent team can preserve more economic value and control. A weak one can spend years unable to move beyond its existing circle. There is no morally correct deal structure. There are structures that fit or fail to fit a particular stage of a career.

It took me time to stop treating the word independent as a personality assessment. Independence sounds romantic until release Friday arrives and somebody still has to check rights, metadata, payments, advertising, and contracts. Freedom in this industry rarely means the absence of a system. Usually it means you have to build the system yourself. This is one of the principles that repeats across the industry: there is no best system outside of context. Just as there is no single best mixing console for every show, there is no single correct business model for every artist.

Sex Pistols and Virgin: Risk Can Reposition a Brand

By the mid-1970s Virgin was already a significant music company, but it had a problem familiar to many successful brands: the market understood it too well. In Branson's recollections, Virgin was closely associated with hippie culture and progressive music. That association made money - and became a limitation at the same time. The new punk scene could easily have decided that Virgin was simply not one of them.¹⁰³

The Sex Pistols were almost the perfect way to destroy that perception, and almost the perfect way to acquire a new headache. By the time of the deal, the band already carried scandal, broken relationships with previous labels, and a management operation that had no intention of becoming a comfortable corporate partner. From the perspective of calm operating business, the proposition looked questionable. From the perspective of positioning, it was almost surgical.

The most interesting part came later. The original band did not last long, but the effect of the deal outlived the project itself. In Branson's account, Virgin began to be perceived differently within the new music scene after the Sex Pistols; punk and new-wave artists turned toward the company, later including XTC and The Human League, while the publishing arm secured additional deals.¹⁰³ It is a useful example of why every music decision cannot be judged only by the direct P&L of one release. Sometimes a project produces catalog profit. Sometimes it opens a territory. Sometimes it creates relationships. Sometimes it changes the market's answer to the question, 'Who are you, exactly?' Strategic effects exist even when they fit poorly into a single budget line.

There is a dangerous conclusion to avoid here: bold risk is not automatically good management. Risk is useful when you understand what you are buying with it - audience, capability, reputation, a new market, or speed. 'We just believe in it' is a beautiful sentence for an artist and a weak one for a financial model. I have increasingly come to separate two things: a project that failed its initial financial hypothesis, and a project that turned out to be useless. They are not the same. Sometimes a disappointing number creates the next important opportunity. Sometimes a beautiful story is invented afterward simply to avoid admitting a mistake. Professional judgment lies in telling the difference.

Music as Rights: The Invisible Part of a Career

It is remarkable how dependent a creative industry is on documents the audience will never see. A split sheet does not receive applause. Metadata does not appear on the LED wall. Registering a work does not make the backstage video. Years later, however, those are the things that may decide who gets paid. In music, value is often created today and monetized for years. A song may find a second life in a television series. An old catalog may return because of a short video. A track can unexpectedly take off in a territory where the artist has never performed. Another performer may record the composition. New forms of use appear that did not exist when the work was created. If the rights were documented badly, popularity increases conflict along with income. **Master and composition.**

The composition is the song as a work: music and lyrics. The master is one specific recorded version of that song. One composition can have dozens of masters. Every master, in turn, rests on the underlying composition. Most of the complex world of music rights grows from that simple distinction. When a track is used in advertising, rights may be required both for the master and the composition. When another band performs the song, the original master may be irrelevant while composition rights still matter. When a specific recording is streamed, the economics are distributed across several legal layers. For the artist, this matters as more than legal theory. Control determines future freedom, so rights need to be understood as a practical tool. Can the recording be licensed or reissued? Who makes the decision and receives the income, in which territory, and for how long? Who owns the data? Which costs are still recoupable from future revenue? These questions become especially important when a song begins to outlive the release cycle that created it.

The music industry loves to talk about hits. A catalog is more than a collection of hits. It is an asset whose life can extend far beyond the public career of the performer. As events become part of

global infrastructure, rights, contracts, and procedures matter more and more because they allow an idea to survive across markets without losing its meaning.

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PART III. LIVE SHOW AS A BUSINESS

Chapter 7. Who Risks the Money: Promoters, Tickets, and Event Economics

From the outside, the promoter business can look almost absurdly simple: buy the artist, sell the tickets, keep the difference. If it really worked like that, the industry would be far calmer. In reality, the promoter buys risk before the audience buys a ticket. Risk has an unpleasant habit: it is nearly invisible in a presentation and becomes extremely talkative once the on-sale begins.

A Promoter Does Not Buy a Concert. A Promoter Buys Risk

When an artist receives an offer, attention naturally goes to the fee. For the promoter, that is only one line in the event model. Around it quickly grow venue rental, production, local crew, security, marketing, ticketing infrastructure, insurance, flights, accommodation, ground transport, hospitality, permits, taxes, medical provision, barriers, cleaning, catering, and dozens of costs that vary by country and format. The promoter assumes in advance the risk that demand will become revenue before costs become loss. An artist may receive a guarantee regardless of how sales perform; the promoter often lives inside the gap between the amount promised to the artist and audience behavior that has not yet been proven.

Concert deals use different settlement structures: a fixed guarantee, a percentage of an agreed base, a share of profit, or combinations of these. Large public companies describe the same mechanics in financial filings. Behind the dry formulas, however, sits a very human conflict of interests. The artist wants the highest and most secure payment possible. The promoter wants to cap downside while preserving a return for taking the risk. The venue wants occupancy and infrastructure revenue. The ticketing platform earns on transactions. The production team needs enough budget to fulfill the rider. And the audience wants a fair price and the feeling that it has been treated honestly.

If every side optimizes only for itself, the event becomes fragile. Good concert business does not begin when everyone likes the same number. It begins when the economics can carry the interests of all participants at the same time.

A Sold-Out Show Is Not Always a Profitable Show

From the technical side, it is easy to look at a concert and think the money 'went into the stage.' Then you see the full budget and realize the stage is one line among dozens - sometimes the most visible, rarely the only dangerous one. Money has a particular talent for disappearing into things nobody photographs: extra labor calls, transport, taxes, idle time, routing changes, and decisions made a month earlier with far too much optimism. This is one of the most useful lessons for anyone meeting live-event economics for the first time. A full room is a strong signal of demand. A sellout by itself does not guarantee a positive financial result.

If ticket prices are too low relative to total cost, a sellout may simply mean every available seat was sold for a loss. If the guarantee is too high, production becomes more expensive, marketing exceeds forecast, currency moves against the project, or the venue has a complicated cost structure, a beautiful video of a packed room still tells you nothing about the result. The reverse is also true: a show can fall short of a sellout and remain commercially successful. A professional promoter watches more than occupancy. They look at average paid ticket price, sales pace, ancillary revenue, final settlement, and the cost of running the event. A show is an emotional product. Its economics require cold mathematics.

The Black Keys: When Arena Booking Runs Ahead of Real Demand

One of the most expensive touring mistakes begins not onstage, but in Excel: the team gets the room size wrong. In 2024, The Black Keys announced a North American tour of arenas and amphitheaters and later canceled the dates. Patrick Carney subsequently said that management had booked venues the band should not have been playing and that the group changed its management team. The story attracted many interpretations, but the operational meaning is simple: artist recognition and real ticket demand are not the same thing.

Booking has a psychological trap. Moving into the next venue category looks like proof of growth: club, theater, arena, stadium. But capacity is not a medal for achievement. It is inventory that still has to be sold. Every empty seat damages the economics and changes the way the show is perceived. Five thousand people in a five-thousand-capacity room create an event. The same five thousand people in a fifteen-thousand-capacity arena can visually and emotionally tell the market the opposite story.

Good agents and promoters therefore look beyond monthly streaming audience, chart position, and total followers. They examine demand by city, sales history, presale velocity, mailing-list geography, comparable artists, price sensitivity, seasonality, competing events, and whether the new music has actually reactivated the existing fan base. Sometimes moving to a smaller venue is a stronger decision than cutting price. A more intimate room restores scarcity, improves atmosphere, and gives the next growth cycle a healthier foundation. Cancellation, however, remains expensive: deposits have been paid, marketing launched, the team has spent time planning, suppliers have held dates, and trust with fans and venues has already been put at risk.

The right scale is part of the artistic product itself. Booking that tries to prove status instead of measuring demand can make a successful artist look like an unsuccessful event.^{10, 11}

Ticket Price Is a Message to the Market

A ticket is not merely a way to collect money at the door. It is also a demand filter, a positioning tool, a way of managing limited capacity, and a promise of value. Before the audience sees the stage, the price already tells them what kind of event the organizer believes this is. A price that is too low can produce an instant sellout while leaving the project without enough margin. A price that is too high can slow sales, increase marketing spend, and leave the room visibly empty. In both cases, the error begins long before show night. It begins in the hypothesis about how many people in this market, at this moment, are willing to pay.

That is why ticket price is one of the most honest meetings between art and mathematics. You can discuss an artist's prestige forever, but at the moment someone clicks Buy, the market answers with money.

Why There Is No Single 'Correct' Ticket Price

People like to compare a ticket price with last year or with another artist, as though two hours of music had an objective universal value. In reality, price is formed by demand, capacity, market positioning, routing, cost base, seat quality, package content, and buyer behavior. The same artist can have very different economics in different cities. In one market, demand exceeds supply several times over. In another, the name is well known but purchase intent is weaker. In a third, much of the audience may be expatriate, and travel and holiday calendars can materially change sales. In a fourth, religious, cultural, or seasonal factors change the viable event window. Price is not only a number. It is a hypothesis about human behavior.

Premium, VIP, and the Desire to Be Closer

Concerts have long sold more than admission to a room. A better view, a separate entrance, a lounge, early entry, a meet-and-greet, exclusive merch, or a hospitality package turns a basic ticket into a ladder of different experience levels. For venues and promoters, those products matter because they can increase revenue inside a fixed capacity. For the fan, they purchase not square footage, but a degree of proximity to the event. Product honesty matters especially here. A VIP ticket that is simply

more expensive without providing a genuinely different experience destroys trust very quickly. A premium experience should be felt before, during, and after the show.

Ticketing: Infrastructure People Notice When It Fails

Ticketing looks simple until you have to sell thousands of seats across different sections and price levels, multiple presale waves, sponsor and artist allocations, accessible seating, technical kills, and VIP holds - while the venue configuration may still change after sales have already started. In 2025, according to Live Nation reporting, Ticketmaster distributed 646 million tickets through its systems, including fee-bearing tickets and other transactions. That scale explains why ticketing stopped being an electronic box office a long time ago. It is infrastructure for access to events and an enormous database of demand.

A Hold Is an Invisible Ticket

A 'ten-thousand-capacity venue' almost never means ten thousand tickets for sale. Some seats disappear behind scenic structures, FOH, cameras, or delay towers. Some are held for the artist, sponsors, venue, and guests. Some sections are not opened until the actual geometry of the stage becomes clear. The difference sounds like accounting until the on-sale begins. A large FOH position may cost dozens of seats, a delay tower hundreds, a wide stage an entire section. Conversely, a late design change can sometimes release seats back into inventory. A creative decision can literally change the financial capacity of the room.

That is why I dislike treating 'technical holds' as something secondary. Every killed seat is a small demonstration that production and economics exist on the same drawing. A huge screen may make the show stronger while reducing potential revenue. The better question is whether the screen creates enough value to justify its entire financial footprint, not simply whether the screen itself is expensive.

Sales Data as a Production Signal

Ticketing data are not useful only to marketing. Sales pace can affect decisions to open additional sections, change the configuration, add a performance, scale back infrastructure or, in the worst cases, move the event. For production, that means the seating plan and drawing can remain fluid surprisingly late. In the ideal world, everything is approved first and tickets go on sale afterward. In the real world, commercial and technical systems develop in parallel. The job of management is not to be surprised by change, but to keep change under control.

Taylor Swift, Oasis, and the Moment Ticketing Becomes Part of the Show's Reputation

Ticketing is especially interesting because the audience does not experience it as an outside service. It becomes part of the relationship with the artist. If a presale crashes, the queue feels opaque, or the price changes unexpectedly, frustration is rarely directed at software alone. It transfers to the whole project.

In November 2022, the presale for The Eras Tour became one of the best-known ticketing failures of recent years. Millions of users encountered queues and technical problems, and the general public on-sale was canceled. The issue reached a U.S. Senate hearing. Arguments over cause continued - Ticketmaster pointed to extraordinary demand and bot traffic, while lawmakers questioned system resilience and market structure. For production thinking, however, another lesson matters more: the capacity of a digital entrance needs to be designed as seriously as the capacity of the physical entrance to a venue.

A few years later, the UK's Competition and Markets Authority examined ticket sales for the Oasis reunion tour. In 2025, Ticketmaster committed to greater transparency: clearer advance information about tiered pricing, clearer price ranges and queue changes, and avoiding labels such as platinum where a buyer might mistake the label for a genuinely separate premium product. These cases show two different kinds of failure. One is infrastructure overload; the other is a breakdown in expectations. In both, the customer feels a loss of control at exactly the moment their desire to buy is strongest.

Ticketing is the first mass point of contact between the audience and the tour. Nine months later, the show itself may be technically flawless, but part of the audience will already have formed an opinion about it on the first day of sales.^{12, 13, 14}

Chapter 8. Touring: A Logistics Company with Music Inside

The economics of live events are an excellent cure for abstraction. Every beautiful phrase eventually turns into a budget line, a labor hour, a sold section, or an obligation to the artist.

A Tour Is a Logistics Company with Music Inside

World tours are often described as travel. From inside, they feel more like systems for moving large numbers of people and equipment through a sequence of deadlines. Routing decides more than it appears to. Two cities may look close on a map. Between them there may be a border, a ferry, truck restrictions, poor flight connections, customs requirements, or simply too few hours for an overnight move. One bad routing decision can erase savings that took weeks to find elsewhere in the production budget.

What Travels with the Artist and What Waits Locally

One of the central questions in touring is what should travel with the tour and what makes more sense to source locally. The more equipment travels, the greater the consistency and control - but freight volume, crew size, and customs complexity rise with it. The more equipment is sourced locally, the lighter the logistics - but the greater the differences between markets and the heavier the advance workload.

The decision is rarely ideological. You have to identify what is critical to the show's identity, what is difficult to reproduce locally, which elements contain unique programming, and what can sensibly be rented in each city. Then you compare equipment availability, freight cost, and whether multiple leapfrog packages make sense. Routing is not built around distance alone. People are also systems with limited capacity: sleep debt accumulates, an artist's voice has physiological limits, crews make more mistakes after consecutive heavy load-outs, and equipment requires service. Driver hours are limited by both law and human physiology. A day without a show is therefore not always lost revenue. Sometimes it is an investment in making sure the next five shows actually happen. A weak touring model optimizes each day in isolation. A strong one optimizes the route.

Bad Bunny and Metallica: Two Models in Which Routing Changes the Design of the Show

A touring show has to repeat, but it cannot assume the world will repeat with it. Bad Bunny's World's Hottest Tour used a system that flew the artist above the audience. TAIT described how it had to be reconfigured for the geometry of each stadium. On paper, the effect is identical: the performer travels over the crowd. In reality, every roof, rigging scheme, and available point set creates a new engineering problem. Touring design becomes the art of preserving the impression while changing the mechanism.

Metallica took a different route with the M72 tour. The No Repeat Weekend concept was built around two different set lists in the same city, different support acts, and two nights sold as one larger product. That changes more than marketing. It changes the rhythm of production, content management, rehearsals, backline planning, and crew expectations. The same stadium becomes the venue for two connected but distinct shows.

Both models show why creative direction and routing cannot be separated. If an effect requires architecture that exists only in some venues, it needs either a fallback or enough importance to dictate the route. If the business model depends on two nights in one city, production should benefit from reusing an already-built infrastructure while still giving the fan a strong enough reason to buy a second ticket.

Mature touring design asks questions before the designer falls in love with the render. What is immutable - what must the audience receive in every city? What may change? Where can technology be substituted without losing meaning? Which elements make economic sense only over a run of dates? What absolutely has to travel, and what is better sourced locally? Touring production designs

a range of acceptable versions of the same experience. An exact copy of the stage almost never exists anyway. A strong tour remains recognizable in every city even when, technically, no two nights are completely identical.^{15, 16}

Chapter 9. Different Live Formats: Festivals, Private Events, and the Production Company

DID YOU KNOW? Sensation's white dress code was not invented as an ordinary marketing device. It grew out of the memory of Duncan Stutterheim's late brother and eventually became one of the most recognizable visual systems in electronic music culture.¹⁰⁵

A Festival and a Headline Concert Are Different Products

On a poster, a headline concert and a festival set can look almost identical: artist name, date, stage time. For a production team, they are different genres of work. A headline show is built around one artist. The stage, running order, video, lighting, audience journey, and much of the technical environment can be subordinated to that one project. A festival works in the opposite direction: one stage has to become home to several touring teams in the same day, each with its own rider, workflow, and a remarkably persuasive sense that its show is the most important one on the site.

The clearest example is changeover. For the audience, music is simply playing between artists. Onstage, the previous backline is already rolling away while the next one comes in along pre-marked lanes. The patch changes. Playback and wireless systems are checked. The FOH engineer loads a file. Monitors switch to a different configuration. Video receives new content. Lighting prepares the next show. All of this may happen in a window shorter than it takes an ordinary person to find parking near the festival.

Festival production is the art of standardization without making the event feel standardized. The better the common infrastructure, the more freedom different artists can have inside it. A good festival does not force everyone to look the same; it provides enough predictability for each act to become itself quickly. People who can speak briefly and precisely are especially valuable here. 'We need five more minutes' at a festival never means only five minutes for one team. It means five minutes of the next artist, security labor, broadcast timing, venue restrictions, and sometimes a municipal curfew. In a dense schedule, minutes have owners.

"Every year has to be better than the last." — Lisca Stutterheim¹⁰⁵

From Rave to Global Festival: How a Party Became an Industry

It is easy to think of the modern festival as a mature format that has always existed: multiple stages, branded zones, apps, camping, VIP, sponsors, streaming, dozens of vendors, and hundreds of pages of operational documentation. Electronic festivals did not grow out of a PowerPoint deck. They grew out of clubs, warehouses, local scenes, and people first trying to understand why one night could suddenly change the behavior of an entire city.

That is why I am interested not only in how enormous the stage became, but in the moment when a party was first forced to become a system. That is where the profession is born: when enthusiasm is no longer enough and the atmosphere has to survive scale.

Before the Festival, There Was a Night: Haçienda as a Laboratory

In Electrochoc, Laurent Garnier begins one of his key stories in Manchester in 1987, at the Haçienda. He describes a night when Mike Pickering played a house record and the room's reaction showed that more than musical taste was changing. The social code of the space was changing. People moved differently, listened differently, and understood the DJ differently.¹⁰¹ Stories like this matter because a large industry almost always appears after a small cultural shift, not before it. First there is a room, sound, a few hundred people, and the feeling that 'we found something that belongs to us.' Then come queues, press, money, competitors, licenses, and eventually someone with a spreadsheet asking where the emergency exit is.

In that sense, the club was a research laboratory. It formed not only the music, but the future logic of the festival: the DJ as central figure, the visual environment, collective identity in the

audience, the long dramatic structure of a night, and the value of simply being present in one particular place.

When Rave Had to Learn to Function as Infrastructure

The next step is visible in British rave culture in the early 1990s. In Garnier's account, a Mind Body Soul party drew around seven thousand people; later, the promoter Universe obtained licenses for events of up to twenty-five thousand and Tribal Gathering emerged - already a hybrid between rave and full festival.¹⁰¹ That is a qualitative change. With hundreds of people, some problems can still be solved by relationships and improvisation. With tens of thousands, improvisation does not disappear, but it can no longer be the primary operating model. You need site permission, transport, medical provision, security, sanitation, food, power, redundancy, and a clear interface with authorities.

In France, the same era sometimes looked literally like a game of cat and mouse with police: organizers held backup locations, passed new addresses to attendees by mobile phone, and learned to move an event almost in real time. The romance of the underground sounds wonderful until you become responsible for thousands of people. The larger the scene became, the more strongly the culture needed legal and engineering infrastructure.¹⁰¹

Commercial success produced its own reverse effect. Garnier writes that as multi-thousand-person raves grew, people entered the market whose main interest was quick cash: rent a warehouse, print flyers, book a few names, collect the money. It is a cycle that repeats in every fast-growing industry. A subculture creates value. The market notices. Then the competition becomes who can scale that value without destroying trust.¹⁰¹

Sensation: One Color, One Arena, One Dramatic Language

Sensation began in Amsterdam in 2000 with a very specific idea from Duncan Stutterheim: looking at Ajax's football stadium, he imagined turning it not into a venue with a DJ inside, but into a complete world for a single night. In a 2012 interview, he emphasized that from the beginning the team invested heavily in transforming the space itself — decor, staging, and the technical environment.¹⁰⁵

After his brother's death, white became part of the memory and later the mandatory visual code. The decision became more powerful than ordinary branding because the audience physically wore the brand. A person did not simply buy a ticket to Sensation; they became part of the image. This is where one of event design's most important ideas appears: the strongest visual concept does not have to be located onstage. Sometimes the primary scenographic material is tens of thousands of people. A white audience turned any wide shot of the arena into a recognizable image long before vertical video and TikTok.

Sensation was later exported as a complete show format. According to Access All Areas, the project ultimately produced 177 editions in 37 countries. That is more than touring. For a system like that to repeat across markets, it must carry not only scenery and content but venue standards, logistics, staging, timing, brand rules, and a mechanism for local adaptation.¹⁰⁵ Stutterheim once described the formula as roughly half and half: technology and show on one side, the people creating the party on the other. I like the incompleteness of that formula. You can copy the structure, lighting, and timecode perfectly; you cannot upload atmosphere to a server. Production can create the conditions. The audience always writes the last part of the product.¹⁰⁵

Years later, working on Sensation Wicked Wonderland in Moscow, I saw the same idea from the other side - from inside a large touring machine. From the room, it feels as if the theme of the night was born there. Backstage, you understand how much engineering is required for the same world to arrive in a different city, inside a different building, and still remain itself.

Tomorrowland: The Festival as a World, Not a Poster

Tomorrowland's history begins almost comically small compared with what it became. Michiel Beers has recalled that in 1997 his brother Manu organized a party for roughly five hundred scouts.

Later the brothers promoted a Wednesday club night that drew around fifteen hundred people. After that came the company.¹⁰⁶

The first Tomorrowland in Belgium's De Schorre park took place in 2005 as a one-day festival of roughly ten thousand. By 2024, according to Access All Areas, the Belgian edition stretched across two weekends, more than eight hundred artists on sixteen stages, and around four hundred thousand attendees from two hundred countries. The comparison is useful not as a cult of scale, but as a reminder that legendary infrastructures also once had a first event.¹⁰⁶

Tomorrowland's particular achievement was turning the festival into a world of its own. The annual theme establishes a visual language, the Mainstage becomes an architectural symbol, and the aftermovie extends the life of the event beyond the final set. Around that core grew radio, education, artist services, fashion, and other businesses. The festival stopped being only a date on a calendar and became a media and experience brand.¹⁰⁶ For production, that changes the meaning of the main stage. It is no longer simply the place where the DJ booth stands. It carries the story of the brand. That is why the 2025 Mainstage fire was operationally devastating in two ways at once: the team lost not only a physical structure, but the central visual symbol of that edition. We will return to the incident in the chapter on safety.

DID YOU KNOW? Before Tomorrowland, the Beers brothers began with a scout party for about 500 people and a midweek club night that drew around 1,500. Sometimes a global festival company begins not with an investment memorandum, but with the question, 'What if we throw another party?'¹⁰⁶

Soundstorm: A Festival as Infrastructure for a New Market

Soundstorm is interesting for a different reason. It did not emerge from the gradual expansion of a European club scene over several decades. It appeared as part of the rapid construction of a new entertainment infrastructure in Saudi Arabia. The first edition in 2019 already operated at enormous scale.

According to MDLBEAST, the first Soundstorm recorded more than 400,000 visits, 80 artists, and six stages; the company also reported 16,000 direct and indirect jobs and an economic contribution of about \$118.5 million. Those are organizer figures, not an independent audit, so I do not use them to stage a contest over who is bigger. They support a more important point: from the beginning, the festival was conceived as economic and cultural infrastructure, not merely as a large concert.¹⁰⁷

A large event generates demand around itself. It needs technicians, security, transport, catering, temporary structures, hotels, local artists, agencies, training, ticketing solutions, rights, media, and people capable of managing all of it at once. If the market can retain those capabilities between events, the festival stops being an imported spectacle and begins to grow its own ecosystem. For the Gulf, that is an especially important distinction. You can fly the world's biggest artist in for one night. It is much harder to make sure that ten years later the region has enough of its own production managers, engineers, writers, promoters, venues, and companies capable of creating an international product themselves.

What a Major Festival Really Sells

The lineup remains critical, but a mature festival sells more than the sum of its artists. It sells a temporary city with its own identity, rules, and memory. It has architecture, a human journey through space, rituals, visual language, belonging, and the promise that this world will appear again next year. The audience will remember the fire, the headliner, a favorite track, and the person they met at three in the morning. The organizer has to remember something else: toilets, roads, queues, water, crew shifts, radio frequencies, contracts, permits, medical posts, fuel reserve, transport after closing, and how many minutes it takes to move people safely off the site.

There is no contradiction. The less the audience notices the urban mechanics of a festival, the better those mechanics are probably working. And the more the festival wants to look like fantasy, the more realistic the person calculating its infrastructure must be. The history of major festivals is therefore not, for me, a history of stage size. It is the moment a cultural idea learns to survive its own success. That is when a party becomes an industry.

Stormzy and Lady Gaga: What 'We Don't Have Much Time' Means at a Professional Level

A short preparation period does not make a project small. It makes the cost of error and coordination higher. On one Stormzy project, TAIT described a stage created in roughly three weeks. One way to work inside a window like that is not to invent every component from zero, but to use existing equipment and configurable systems wherever doing so does not damage the creative idea. The opening, for example, used a suspended performance platform - a 'magic carpet.' For the audience it was a few spectacular seconds. For the crew it meant engineering, rigging, rehearsal, approvals, and safety that cannot be waived simply because the schedule is short.

Lady Gaga's team faced a different kind of time pressure before Coachella 2025. Choreographer and co-creative director Parris Goebel said full work on the show began late, preparation took less than two months, and before the first weekend the team had effectively completed only one full dress rehearsal. The show itself remained highly layered: choreography, complex costumes, lighting, video, scenery, and camera blocking.

The difference between professional acceleration and chaos is that the first compresses decision cycles while the second simply skips them. If there is no time for five iterations, authority has to be clearer. If three full rehearsals are impossible, checks must be broken into modules. If a creative decision changes late, the team has to understand the tail of consequences: new choreography can require a different lighting cue, a different camera angle, fresh stage marks, a changed RF route, and another safety review. Short preparation demands more standards, not fewer. Consistent filenames, clear versioning, an approval chain, disciplined meetings, and a change log become tools for preserving creative freedom inside limited time.

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