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# Music City's Minister

IEBA Venue Executive of the Year Sally Williams preserves the spirit of the Mother Church of Country music

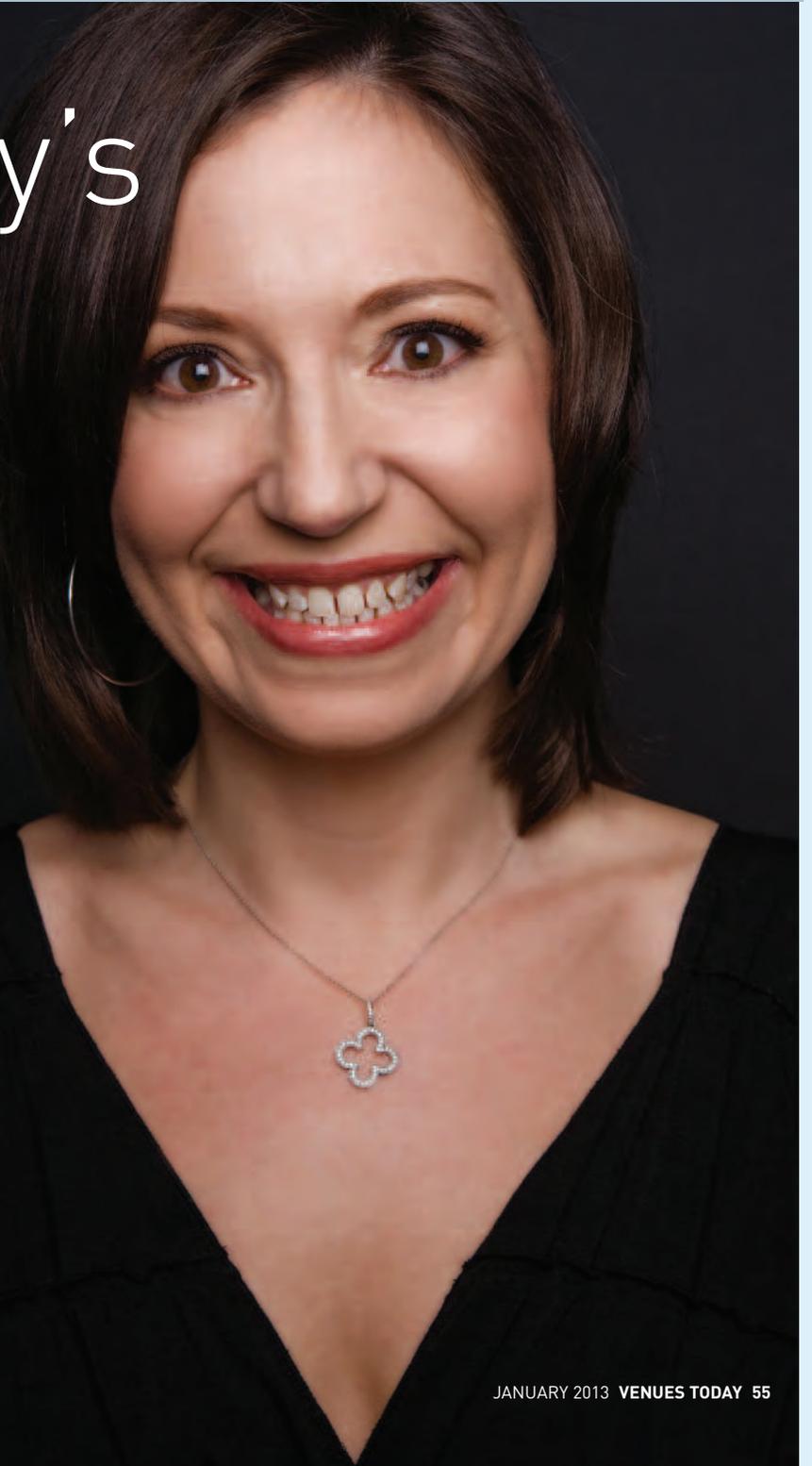
by CHAD SWIATECKI

**R**yman Auditorium General Manager Sally Williams knows why concert industry vets call the legendary Nashville venue “a place that just sells itself.” As one of the most intimate theaters in the business, the Ryman has earned its reputation as the Mother Church of Country Music by allowing acts big and small to create unique memories for crowds.

“There are little Ryman moments, and things that happen here that just don’t happen anywhere else like when Mumford & Sons played and, at the end of their set, they brought Old Crow Medicine Show out, unplugged and sang ‘Wagon Wheel’ a cappella with the crowd,” Williams recalls. “You have 2,300 people there, singing with them and forming that kind of a bond. When an artist takes full advantage of the atmosphere that we have here is when you realize how truly special this place is.”

Coming into the GM job after stints at Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry, Live Nation and the Country Music Association, Williams has proved to be an ideal leader for

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the venue that has been a milestone venue for rising country talent.

Hired in 2008, Williams — a Missouri native and University of Missouri-Columbia graduate who got her start as an agent assistant with William Morris Agency — has recently picked up honors as IEBA Venue Executive of the Year and Academy of Country Music Promoter of the Year.

Williams said the key to the Ryman's recent success is its austere but warm simplicity. Opened in 1892 as a house of worship, it served as the long-time home of the Grand Ole Opry and reopened in 1994 following an extensive renovation that left its historic character - audiences still sit in pews — intact.

"There's no pyro here or anything like that, so if that's your show the Ryman isn't a place that's going to work for you because the focus is on what you're genuinely giving to the audience," she said.

Married to Brad Bissell of Creative Artists Agency, Williams said the couple spends most of their free time going to concerts or traveling to music festivals around the country, though she does stay active in the Nashville business community and enjoys teaching aqua aerobics at the local YMCA.

"With Sally, it's more a thing where the deal is the deal, and you know that going into it," said CAA partner John Huie. "I've known her since she was at the Opry and I could not imagine the Ryman without her because she's

an incredible procurer of talent."

Booking about a dozen acts a year through the Ryman, Huie said offers there are in line with payouts at similar-sized theaters in other parts of the country, with Williams standing firm and playing tough when she has to because of the venue's legacy and prestige.

"Not only does she have one of the best venues in the country going for her but she pays fair market value in her offers," he said. "She just has a great nature about her and even though we'll have conversations where we end up yelling at each other and going back and forth, we end up laughing after we're done because she knows it's all business."

It's quickly clear in talking to colleagues that Williams has carved out a strong position and reputation in the largely male-dominated world of country music. Williams said she's following in the footsteps of trailblazers like former BMI president and CEO Frances Preston, who was a legend in country music circles up until her death last year.

"There have been women doing this kind of work in this city for a long time and there are also some who are competitors but I think we all work extraordinarily together," she said. "I've been fortunate to have had great mentors both male and female and I think it's important to look at the work of the women who have led before me."

Darin Lashinsky, CEO of National

Shows 2 in Nashville, works with Williams and her staff to bring pop and rock acts like Moody Blues, Sound Tribe Sector 9, Umphrey's McGee and Crosby Stills Nash and Young to the Ryman, which he calls "the most important venue I've ever promoted a concert at."

"There's not another theater that you could put in the same category as the Ryman," Lashinsky said. "It's not cheap to do a show there but they've got the best staff that I've ever worked with, from Sally to the facility manager to the marketing manager on down.

And like Huie, Lashinsky said that professionalism is an extension of the woman at the top of it all who combines a shrewd sense of the marketplace with an unusual calm in all her dealings.

"She's beyond being the general manager because she's a promoter and has the promoter gut and instinct for how something will sell, so I talk to her about anything I'm going to do there to hear what she thinks about it," he said. "I've never seen her out of character because she's so even keel and it's a testament to her management qualities that everyone who works with her knows their roles and is trusted fully in their ability to do their job." 

Interviewed for this story: **Sally Williams**, (615) 458-8713; **John Huie**, (615) 383-8787; **Darin Lashinsky**, (615) 777-8597

## LETTER

FROM TIFFANY DAVIS

Executive Director  
International Entertainment Buyers Association



**A**s many in our industry know, I'm relocating to the Boston area and have relinquished my position as executive director of the International Entertainment Buyers Association (IEBA) after serving five rewarding years.

Established in 1970, IEBA had gone from a relatively unknown except by buyers and agents. It had reached a plateau and was ready to climb to new heights. By March of 2008 we moved the office to a high-profile location on Music Row with prominent signage so everyone from songwriters and publishers to radio and record label execs could drive by and ask themselves, "What's an IEBA?" We got the conversation started.

What I found through my discussions with colleagues was that live entertainment was not fully appreciated for the impact it has on artists, fans and the financial bottom line for many in the business.

Heading into October of 2008 the recession was beginning to be felt

by everyone, and over the next two years it became obvious that the live show lives on despite the economy. Did it suffer? Of course it did, but people need the experience that comes from a concert. It stayed healthier than other areas of music, and IEBA grew.

After five years of hard work, IEBA is now indisputably a top leader. Each year over 50 artists from all major talent agencies showcase to over 600 top buyers from across the country. The key to IEBA's success is maintaining an intimate environment where buyers can mingle with agents and actually get deals done. While once only a country music organization, IEBA is now extremely diverse. It has grown fiscally by 285 percent since 2008 and now represents more than \$1 billion in talent buying power through its members. The future of IEBA is very bright, and I'm grateful to have been part of it. Thank you to all IEBA members for your support.

I look forward to my next adventure in this crazy industry, so stay tuned!



Dave Matthews performs at the Mohegan Sun Arena, Uncasville, Conn.

# 'Casino Price' Debunked

Talent buyers and sellers see major changes underway in the casino industry

by LINDA DECKARD

**S**elling entertainment to casino buyers used to be a cash cow for booking agents. The assumption was the act was there to draw gamers and the ticket price was secondary, thus the price of talent was double, sometimes triple the norm.

That is no longer the case, at least not everywhere. While the tide turned as long ago as 2008 when the recession meant the money simply wasn't there, the other reality is that casino talent buyers are more educated about the entertainment industry and casino owners are seeing more return on the dollar from entertainment and food and drink. Entertainment is no longer a loss leader for casinos; it is the business they are in.

A record number of casino talent buyers and bookers gathered to discuss the changing scene during the International Entertainment Buyers Association convention in Nashville in October. Kell Houston, Houston Productions, who co-moderated the panel with Charlie Davis of Paradise Artists Agency, said booking agents are now on board with the new reality. "It's not about driving gaming anymore," Houston said.

Panelist Steve Seiden, Resort Entertainment & Technologies, said his goal when buying casino talent is to serve the regular crowd while cultivating new customers.

Kathie Spehar, Cannery Casino Resorts, noted Las Vegas has 100 casinos, so their goal was to carve a niche. "We went for Baby Boomers and above. It worked for us. Our demographic is real gamers over 45."

"Casinos were a cash cow in the beginning" for booking agents like Guy Richard,

The Agency Group. There was a feeding frenzy and guarantees went up, up and up, he said. "Now, casinos are much more choosy."

Wayne Hurte, Chumash Casino, recalled spending \$5-\$6 million on entertainment six or seven years ago. "We'll spend less than \$2 million in 2013."

Mike Moloney, Mike Moloney Entertainment, encourages the clients he buys for to go for incremental markets and look to the future.

In a followup interview, Houston credited the changes to overall education in the industry, partly through organizations like IEBA. He's even working with some casino buyers, like Clearwater River Casino, Lewiston, Idaho, to book breaking acts, like Florida Georgia Line.

By the time casino marketers heard about Jason Aldean and Eric Church and asked Houston to book them, the price was in the high six figures. On the other hand, they could book an up-and-coming act that was getting radio play for \$10,000-\$25,000, he said.

He's had some luck with casinos in TV markets with acts from reality TV, from America's Got Talent and The Voice contestants, to celebrity cooks and mechanics. The Price is Right is a great casino show, he said.

In another followup interview, Tom Cantone, Mohegan Sun Arena, Uncasville, Conn., said casinos are a backyard draw, especially given the proliferation of venues. Once upon a time, Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods had the market cornered in the Northeast. Now there are 25 casinos in the region.

Coming off a record year, Cantone revealed his strategy has been to become more

of a nongaming attraction. Mohegan Sun is the mall of choice in the Uncasville region. "More than a decade ago, owners dropped the word 'casino' and became entertainment-oriented," Cantone said, citing spas, worldclass restaurants and one-of-a-kind entertainment.

Mohegan Sun has evolved into seeking exclusive bookings – One Direction's rehearsal and U.S. opener, one of four dates in the U.S. for Eric Clapton, rehearsal and show for Bon Jovi, and Coldplay's last stop and one of only two U.S. dates (Barclays Center was the other) before taking a three-year hiatus, an announcement that was made on national television two days before they played Mohegan Sun.

As to the 'casino price,' Cantone said they still try to ask for more, but it's up to your agent to make sure that's the rare exception today.

"So is pricing under better control?," asked Davis of the IEBA panelists. Not yet; not everywhere.

"Our market is very aggressive," said Brad White, CEU Inc. "We used to just buy country and western, but now it's a race for the top tier acts."

"It's a \$27-billion-a-year business," Houston pointed out of 2011 statistics on casinos released by the American Gaming Association. And it's a business that is slowly beginning to understand its clout. 

Interviewed for this story: **Kell Houston**, (702) 254-0268; **Tom Cantone**, (860) 885-4566; **Kathy Spehar**, (702) 507-5746; **Charlie Davis**, (805) 646-8433; **Steve Seiden**, (310) 446-4640; **Guy Richard**, (301) 385-2800; **Wayne Hurte**, (818) 347-0600; **Brad White**, (405) 310-3900; **Mike Moloney**, (702) 228-8300

ARTIST PROFILE  
**FLORIDA GEORGIA LINE**



# Cruise Control

Florida Georgia Line has the looks, the tunes and the dates for breakout success

by **DAVE BROOKS**

**C**ountry Duo Florida Georgia Line seems to be doing everything right in 2013. Embarking on a marquee tour under the guidance of agent Kevin Neal from Buddy Lee Attractions, the pair is hoping to build a career around the success of their platinum-selling debut single "Cruise" from their freshman album, "Here's to the Good Times."

Comprised of Tyler Hubbard of Monroe, Ga., and Brian Kelley from Ormand, Fla., who met while attending Belmont University in Nashville, the pair spent 2012 opening for Jake Owen on his "CMT on Tour: The Summer Never Ends."

On Jan. 17, they'll kick off an extensive arena tour with country newcomer Luke Bryan at the Ford Center in Evansville, Ind., with stops along the East Coast. The group was a standout showcase at this year's IEBA conference in Nashville and will play to their largest audience

to date in April when they perform at the Goldenvoice-backed Stagecoach Festival in Indio, Calif. With Bryan getting them in front of arena audiences and their single "Cruise" in regular rotation, Hubbard said the goal is to get their own headliner tour booked for the fall.

"That would be great," he said. "Get some markets we've been building in the last few years, and try to sell them out. Kind of do what we're doing now with Luke, but hopefully be headlining."

The group said they keep their sanity and level heads by not getting too wrapped up in the numbers, but think their rollicking sound will build a bridge between their country radio fans and Nashville traditionalists.

"It's hard to say statistic-wise, but I hope we have another year that's surreal to us," Kelley said. "We want to keep working hard and take it one day at a time, and build this party on the road."

Despite being relative newcomers to music, the pair is backed by some big names in Nashville. Craig Wiseman from Big Loud Shirt Publishing, who has had his songs recorded by Tim McGraw, Faith Hill, Kenny Chesney and LeAnn Rimes, handles their publishing, while Kevin Zaruk of Chief Music Management manages the band and Republic Nashville, part of Big Loud Mountain, serves as their record label.

"Here's to the Good Times" is the group's first full album following two EPs, and the college buddies are quick to admit they're a bit surprised by how fast they've grown.

"We didn't know we were going to be running a business together, or working together or living together. But it just fell into place and it's real organic, what we feel," Hubbard said.

**FOR MORE INFO:**  
 Learn more at [florigeorgiaonline.com](http://florigeorgiaonline.com)