



**C**ircle Talent Agency, while independent, is anything but small with some 40 staff and more than 200 artists on its roster, and has the kind of agility and hands-on approach that is hard for the major agencies to match.

"I've made the promise to my artists that 'I will advance you money out of my own pocket' if needed, because we don't have the red tape of a bureaucratic system saying 'no,'" Circle Talent Agency partner Steve Gordon told Pollstar.

In the '90s, Circle Talent founder Kevin Gimble was throwing weekly drum and bass parties in Philly, when a DJ called Dieselboy approached him for help in booking a tour.

"I said sure I'll give it a shot," Gimble told Pollstar. After a successful three-week tour, Dieselboy told some friends about the promoter-turned-agent. Soon enough Gimble had 75 artists all to himself doing every step of the booking process on his own.

Dieselboy was also the link that brought together Gimble and Gordon, who was promoting dance shows in Baltimore where he gained valuable knowledge about the hard-ticket business.

Together they're self-described as a yin-and-yang type duo with Gordon the scrappy bulldog and Gimble

the "whisperer," who may have to cool things down at times.

Circle Talent has amassed a cutting-edge roster that includes major names in the electronic space like Marshmello, Carnage, and Excision, with roughly 30 national tours rolling out in 2018.

Also on the roster is the recently signed Kaskadee, who headlines large theatres and even arenas. The company has also grown with acquisitions including Kenmore and Ten In One agencies. Gordon stresses that the company is always hiring agents and signing artists.

Some Circle Talent Agency highlights: 12,000 contracts in 2016, 15,000 contracts in 2017, and 78 acts on the Electric Daisy Carnival Vegas in 2016, which is 35 percent of all acts booked for the fest – the largest of any agency. In 2017, the EDC Vegas total was 67 Circle artists, good for 33 percent of all acts booked and again largest of any agency.

The agency also co-founded Global Dub Festival at Red Rocks in Denver in 2012, which has sold out every year since. Circle has an in-house media and digital marketing company and in 2017 Circle clients hold residencies throughout Vegas at Hakkasan and Wynn proper-

ties, Marquee, Hard Rock, Daylight, and Drai's – booking 250-plus club nights throughout the year.

### Let's hear more about the formation of Circle Talent.

**Kevin** The agency started in '98, it was almost by accident. There was a DJ that's still on the roster now called Dieselboy. He was on a competing agency. He was domestic and wanted to do a tour of North America with two other acts from England that didn't have representation and weren't on his current roster.

He and I were working together; I was a promoter first for years. We were throwing a weekly drum and bass event, which was a very niche kind of electronic music. It's very fast, it's not your average electronica / EDM world.

And the short story is his agent didn't want to book the tour because the other two acts from England weren't on the roster and he didn't feel like messing around with visas for the guys. So he told Dieselboy he was free to book this thing on his own.

And Dieselboy, who knew I had a lot of contacts just from being a promoter in this industry and in that particular style of electronic music, asked me, 'Hey, Kev, you want to try to book a tour?' I'd never done anything like this before, I didn't have an agency, like I was saying. I was just a promoter for nearly six years at the time. I said sure, I'll give it a shot.

And I ended up booking the tour for these guys. We did a three-week run and did 13 dates and the tour was a success. And those two guys from England, they went back, told a couple other guys in the drum and bass world, "Hey there's this guy named Kevin who booked a great tour for us. If you want to tour in America you should hit him up."

Then a couple more guys hit me up, a few more guys hit me up and almost by accident I was an agent.

Fast forward from '98 to around 2005, I now had 75 artists on my roster – almost all of them were from the UK and overseas. And they all specialized in this drum and bass section of electronic music. And I was the drum and bass tour guy for North America.

### So how did Steve get involved?

**Kevin** At the time Steve was a promoter and was booking a lot of my guys in the Baltimore area. Dieselboy and I were still friends and he was still on a competing agency. He said, "Hey Kev, you know that promoter Steve Gordon you book a lot of shows with? He's a good friend of mine, he hit me up saying he wants to be an agent. We have this tour concept, maybe you should give him a call."

I knew Steve, I liked Steve. We weren't partners or anything but he was a good promoter. I gave him a call. He came out, he was in Baltimore, I was in Philly. He came up and was like, "Look, I want to be an agent, I have some great ideas." I said, "Well, I don't have any money to pay you, but feel free. Here's some clients to book." He asked if he was free to sign his own talent, and I said of course.

And there you go. I had my first employee. And it was very Wild West and it was very loose. But that's how we had it.

Steve went on to basically start booking the first-ever dubstep tours. He specialized in the growth of dubstep while I kept on with my drum and bass thing. And after a few years of that, with Steve absolutely crushing and killing it, and literally doing more business than I was, we had a conversation and the short of it is we partnered up.

### Let's talk about growth, be it through new hires, mergers or acquisitions.

**Steve** It started with JJ (Cassiere). We brought JJ over from The Agency Group and he kind of launched our live division.



**THE INAUGURAL LOST LANDS FESTIVAL** was presented by Excision and curated by Circle Talent Agency, with a lineup that also included Zeds Dead, 12th Planet, Cookie Monsta, Destroid, Ephwurd and many others Sept. 29 to Oct. 1.

And we brought over this guy, Leo Corson, and we brought over his artists. He specialized in hard style, the harder-edged dance music. And then we brought over Dan Rozenblum, who brought about 40 bands. Then we brought Matt (Pike) over, who brought another 30 acts or so. And that put us in a pretty good place to have a live division.

We have acquired multiple agencies to grow the strength of the company. It's not all about purchasing agents and agencies. We have had great success building agents and staff like Ben Hogan, who has been with us for roughly seven years. He has, with our advice and mentorship, grown into a senior agent who commands a strong roster.

In 2011, The Collective management approached me and wanted to meet. I went and met with Michael Green and wound up doing a partnership with them. We all moved to L.A.; it was about six of us at the time. And we partnered in with them, and it didn't work out for various reasons, and we went back on our own within one year, it was the end of 2012 I think.

We opened up a new office, continued to hire and now we have 40-plus employees at any

time and a two-floor, 6,000-square-foot space.

#### What makes Circle so attractive?

**Steve** One of the reasons we are very successful is because we have a strong partnership. When you meet us, I wouldn't say we're polar opposites. Kevin's always called us "yin and yang." I'm a scrappy bulldog covered in tattoos. Kevin's got a polo shirt on right now, and I look like I'm fresh out of Burning Man. So, you know, we have two different approaches.

**Kevin** They call him the pit bull and they'll throw me in, the "promoter and artists whisperer."

**Steve** Partnerships are a lot of why I feel like agencies can succeed or fail. And it really comes down to your team, but when you present such a good partnership to your staff they see the partners that we are and look up to it.

With the artists, it is literally a partnership. And the ones who understand that, they get the most out of their agents at the end of the day. You can look at this way: We can either be like employed by the artist, "OK we're going to do your booking and be robotic," or "OK you're having a problem with like, anything you can think of." We've

gone out and gotten our artists on nationally televised awards shows because we had the connection. That's not in the typical agency's wheelhouse, but we go out and get it done.

We have the ability to go above and beyond for our clients because we have no red tape. Whether that's advancing money for a tour that they need, out of our own personal pockets. Not the agency money, but Kevin and I saying, "Hey this band needs \$130,000. Let's like write them a check for 60 grand and get them moving." Or it's this act needs better visuals. Let's use our visual guy, and we have these connections and can have your website handled, and your social media, and can handle your tour marketing, and we can do all these things – some of which are in the wheelhouse of an agency and some of which are not.

We made a promise to ourselves that as we grow, even if we have 100 employees, we're still going to make those same promises to the artists. Because why not? There's no rules! There's no rule saying I can't loan artists money.

We want to be a part of the team, not just your agent. That's it: "Circle Talent Agency wants to be a part of your team, and not just your agent."

#### Experience goes a long way.

**Steve** Kevin and I both have a foundation in live music just from personal interest. I came up as a talent buyer, I kind of licensed the Seth Hurwitz name. Dating back to my promoter days, Seth Hurwitz and Dave Geller had a partnership with my venue in Baltimore, Sonar. They let me for a period of time use the I.M.P. reputation to book shows as a promoter.

And because of that, I got the background in hard-ticket music. So early on, I was one of the first people to understand how back-end deals work while moving into the dance music space, because no one was really doing hard-

ticket touring. So I kind of introduced that into the TLA in Philadelphia and Best Buy Theatre in NYC. Those were kind of the first big hard-ticket dubstep events to happen in these bigger rooms. People said I was insane for trying to do Excision at Best Buy Theater in NYC but it sold out in advance and we were off to the races.

**Kevin** When Steve was talking about, in 2008 or '09, with him specializing in dubstep, it was a younger crowd, a younger demo, the nightclubs, the bottle service clubs, the Vegas clubs, they weren't really servicing this kind of music. It was very similar to drum and bass, it was very niche, very young, and wasn't very mainstream. So almost by default, Steve had to use his hard-ticket knowledge and back-end deal knowledge and create hard-ticket touring for electronic music.

He was really one of the first ones to do it at the time. And it's why acts like Excision, Datsik and Flux Pavilion are major, true hard-ticket touring acts, worth a lot of tickets – more so than a lot of the bigger EDM names.

#### But with clients like Gorguts, Insane Clown Posse, and Black Dahlia Murder, you clearly aren't limited to dance or electronic artists.

**Kevin** One of the main reasons we clicked with JJ originally and then with Dan, and with Pike, the metal, the pop-punk, that sort of thing was very comparable to drum and bass and dubstep, where they're kind of the outcasts of each of their industries. So you have drum and bass and dubstep, very young, somewhat male-oriented genre, not very mainstream. You could almost say they're identical to hardcore punk and metal.

**Steve** We're taking what we know from the music industry and just expanding the agency. Agenting is agenting. If you need to book a Justin Bieber show at the Staples Center it's



**KEVIN WITH CIRCLE TALENT CLIENT CRIZZLY** and his team during the Global Dub Festival at Red Rocks.

kind of the same thing as booking a three-night run at the Palladium. You go get your ticket rebate deals, get the most from the bar that you can, and get a 90-100 percent split and any bonuses you can on top of the deal.

### And you've expanded among the electronic genres as well.

**Kevin** When we moved out to L.A. when we had the Collective merger / partnership, Steve and I made a conscious decision to expand outside of just drum and bass and dubstep. We knew if we were going to grow and become a major agency, not just a boutique or specialist agency, we needed to expand.

That was one of the first acquisitions we did. We had an agent who was at a competing agency. She had a bunch of house acts and trance acts and we brought her in. Then came the Ten in One merger where we brought Morgan Page and a bunch of other house acts. Before, 100 percent of our roster was drum and bass and dubstep, all of a sudden that's down to maybe 70 percent. And we're in more conversations with more open-minded managers that want to give us some of their house acts and 4/4 acts because they see that we're not just a one-trick shot.

That led to Morgan staying there, we also were fortunate to pick up Paul van Dyk a couple years ago. He chose to come to Circle. So, every little one of those just helps create a bigger picture. We are a well-rounded agency.

### What advantages do you enjoy that majors may not be able to deliver?

**Steve** I think it's the personalized touch. We don't really look at ourselves as a boutique agency, we look at ourselves as a major agency. At this point, we are operating on a really high level, we're competing against the four major agencies for clients, and you know, in dance music we consider ourselves the best. We believe the way we are doing things is really working. Many other boutique agencies have failed to grow at a similar rate to Circle. We are growing at a dramatic rate year after year and have not slowed down in any way.

I think there's still a lot to learn, but I do believe it's our direct-to-artist relationships and our hands-on approach, both by using our expertise and also training staff very closely to use the same level of approach that both Kevin and myself use.

**Kevin** We know what it takes. I think there's something to be said that we're owner-operators. Forget about the level of business or the numbers or metrics differentiating a boutique or a major, the reality is that where it is somewhat more boutique is that we are owner-operators. And if something needs to get done for any of our clients or agency-wide, there's no board of directors, there's nothing we need to go through to get something done as a value add to our clients or our staff's clients. I think that's why a lot of artists prefer that touch.

### Kaskade is certainly a big get.

**Steve** After him meeting with all of the different agents, we meshed really well. Kevin and I are both guys who have been directly in dance music for a combined 30 years. Because of that, we just have an understanding, like any of the old rock guys that have been in this forever, they know more than everyone, they know the players, they know what it means to the fans, and they understand the industry. And that's what we connected on.

When Ryan (Raddon, Kaskade's real name) came into our room, he's an old school raver, he's been in this since the early '90s, and we just bonded instantly. He knew that we knew what we were talking about. He was excited about our creativity and hands-on approach and it got all of our wheels turning right away.

### What are your agent and support staff workloads like?

**Steve** The reality is we have a big team of support staff, very large. We have 20 support staff for 15 agents. I personally have a five-person staff, Kevin has a two-person team, and we share some stuff in between. Kevin and I don't have giant rosters. We have a very defined group of artists we work on, and then it trickles out from there. It's a very defined plan.

At one point in time Kevin agented 75 drum and bass clients on his own, and made the contracts, and got the deposits, so when you look at the volume of that versus what we're doing now, it's almost like, "This is easy!" (laughs)

**Kevin** I started this thing from a very grassroots mentality. I was seven years in this thing with 75 clients from all around the world without even an assistant. But look, I think it lends itself as to why we have a very low turnover rate and a very strong staff.

Starting from the top, we've proven you can do every aspect of the booking, confirming the shows, booking the flights, creating itineraries, advancing the shows and settling the shows on your own. It was a lot of hard work in the early stage of my career (laughing).

It can be done – it shouldn't be done, let me make that clear (laughing). When some of these guys are complaining about too much work, it's almost the same as when your grandparents talk about walking 3 miles in the snow to get to school, it's a similar mentality. You need to be well-rounded and figure out how to do every aspect of the booking to be a good booking agent.

The way we have our system broken down, no one's ever truly busting at the seams with too many clients, or else you'll lose clients.

### What's changed in the booking agency landscape since Circle Talent has come into its own as a major player?

**Steve** What's happening now is a lot of the up and coming acts really want the senior agent out of the gate. And there are fewer artists willing to sign with developing agents. So the structure of how to grow staff has changed.

**Kevin** It's a situation where a junior agent, whether he's on an independent agency or a true boutique agency, he may have

time to A&R and find this baby act and nurture it and build it up to the point where now the act and the act's manager wants to be on a larger agency. That's the story, that happens all the time, and then that act will want to jump onto one of the big four. Where I see the problem is, say we find one of those baby acts or a baby act comes to us first before being on another agency. How do we navigate the problem of him wanting to be with a senior guy versus maybe the guy he should be with?

The very simple answer is, generally speaking, we work with the manager and find a way to keep everyone happy.

**Steve** We're not downplaying that, either. That is the secret to the success of any agency — how do you keep every client happy at all levels?

### How do you go about finding acts to sign?

**Steve** I run the A&R division here. I would say I'm the head of signing, or something of that nature. I think a lot of times it's just a gut instinct. My whole team runs a weekly A&R meeting, they collect stuff from all over the industry that they get, recommendations, referrals, SoundCloud, Spotify, blogs, whatever they can find. If they're feeling it, they put it on there. They go with their hunches and the reality is the senior agents, the guys who have been here for a long time, they help to whittle that list down. And it comes down to an even smaller list that's presented to me, and then I dig in. If somebody feels really strongly about something they send it to me, and then I'm always A&R'ing myself as well.

**Kevin** There are times where if Steve doesn't fully believe in something, but that agent really makes a strong case and they're passionate for it, most of the time we're going to go for it. Steve's history in this as a DJ, a promoter, a buyer and

an agent, there's a level of expertise there.

**Steve** A lot of times it really is that cut and dry. You look at these artists and you can kind of tell. You can hear something and say OK, we'll give this one a shot, but when I know, I know. When Marshmello came out, when Carnage came around, when these big ones came there was no hesitating. We just knew when we heard it.

### It would appear rumors of a dubstep bubble bursting have been highly exaggerated?

**Steve** We never viewed the industry as a bubble, we just viewed it as the industry.

There are ebbs and flows in business and we looked at it over the last 10 years. And we saw the whole industry say dubstep is dead three years ago, and now it's bigger than any other genre in dance music and it's selling tons of hard tickets.

**Kevin** Across the entire electronic industry, maybe "dubstep" isn't quite as en vogue of a term now, but bass music is playing on every major stage across the festivals and not just second stages, with Yellow Claw and Carnage and Marshmello leading the charge.

Electronic music is now finally the music industry. I think Steve and I are fortunate to come from the truly early days in the electronic and early rave scene in the '90s when it was truly underground and it wasn't part of the industry. And we watched when the majors first tried to get involved back then, and they waked away and thought it was dead. And it just kept growing and growing and growing. As people like Steve sort of pushed these acts on the hard-ticket touring, they started generating real fanbases and real ticket buying.

And now it's just part of the music industries. You have pop acts that are now electronic acts, and that's not going anywhere. Just like with the rock industry



**STEVE WITH CIRCLE TALENT CLIENTS** Datsik and Excision at the new Lost Lands Festival in Ohio, which sold 25,000 three-day tickets Sept. 29 to Oct. 1.

or the alternative industry. You're always going to have different levels. You're going to have the major pop players and you're going to have slightly more niche. But the electronic music scene is exactly there now.

### Tell us about the Lost Lands Festival in Columbus, Ohio.

**Steve** This year, the agency and Excision conceptualized a festival in which it sold 25,000 three-day tickets in Columbus, Ohio, the Lost Lands Festival. With three days camping, we built the 12th-largest city in Ohio that weekend: 22,000 camping, no deaths, four medical transports.

This is something Excision and I have worked on for many years and really it was about timing. We felt with the market wanting this sort of event, it was time to strike. I made some calls to my production contacts and the next thing you know we were announcing the show and setting up the on-sale.

**Kevin** It was Excision's festival but we worked with him to create a team and assist him in developing the festival, from booking the talent to helping with the infrastructure of the

event. We took his vision and brought the team together to make it come to life. We worked with a team that we have worked on some other properties with, and so we knew they had the professionalism and organization to execute this at a major level.

### How about your negotiation style? How do you go about making deals, and why does it work?

**Steve** I'm doing what the client needs. That's point blank. We're working for the client, but we have strong relationships with our promoters. Kevin and I have put in endless hours of face time with the promoters, with the top promoters in the industry, the people who are doing the bulk of the business, and we have great relationships. So when we call, they answer. And that's it.

Nine times out of 10 we are grinding the promoter. That's just the business. Because, the client tells us jump we say how high! That's literally it. Client says we need half a million, all right we need to get the client \$600,000 because he said half a million, we need to impress the client. *Ryan Borba* ★