



James Mays

Music Festival Production Director

JOB DESCRIPTION:

- ▶ SET UP ARTIST PERFORMANCES
- ▶ HIRE AND TRAIN FESTIVAL STAFF
- ▶ CREATE SCHEDULES AND OVERSEE STAFF

One of the most popular ways for new artists to get their music heard by fans, media, managers, and record companies is at showcase festivals. Events like Austin, Texas's South by Southwest (SXSW), New York's College Music Journal (CMJ) festival, the Miami Music Festival, and others attract thousands of performers, all hoping to promote their music.

Putting one of these music festivals together is no easy task. It involves booking artists in various venues around town, creating a schedule, making sure the performers have the equipment they need, hiring crews to work with the musicians, promoting the event to draw fans to the shows, and much more. According to James Mays—who served as production director for the Miami Music Festival in November 2010—running a music festival involves a combination of planning and creative problem solving.

"You need to be good at envisioning how you want things to function, where you want people to be, when they need to be there—and knowing how they're going to get where they need to go," he explains. "I sum it up like this: Plan. Create a backup plan. Execute both plans."

Mays comes from a musical background—his mother was a music teacher—and has toured, performed, and written music professionally since 1987. "That's how I paid for my business degree from the University of Texas," he explains. "I guess I've always had a love for both music and organizational structure. Producing shows comes naturally for me because I get to use most of my strengths in one job. It takes a love for

process, entertainment, and an ability to train people to get the best result."

Mays' first experience producing music festivals was working as an assistant production manager at SXSW five years ago. "I was surprised by how much fun I had and how quickly I was able to solve problems. Since then, I've noticed that you can prevent many problems with proper planning—and the ones that you don't anticipate can be resolved if you have sharp people working with you."

Today, Mays uses his combination of artistic and logistical skills on several projects. Especially active working with young people, he created SXSW Underage, The Kids Are Alright Fest, and the Band Aid School of Music and was a producer of NAMM's SchoolJam USA (see page 7). "Over the years, it's become more important to me that the people involved in the festivals enjoy themselves," he says. "The biggest challenge is dealing with stubborn people who think they deserve special treatment. On the other hand, working with people who show up to help with an attitude of gratitude is the best part of producing a festival. I'm always amazed by successful bands who are so easy to work with and so accommodating."

Part of what makes festival production so interesting is the sheer variety of tasks Mays has to tackle. "One day might include figuring out how festival staff will communicate with hundreds of artists and creating a team of volunteers. Another day I might be personally interviewing 46 stage managers to make sure they know what to do in the trenches and selling a sponsorship deal that is beneficial to both the festival and the company who wants to market its products."

While the work can be hard and the hours long, Mays feels that music festivals can be a great way to meet other musicians and learn about the business.

"Just get involved," he says. "Volunteer for a festival. It's a great way to see how things work. Or produce your own events. Don't worry about failing. My biggest successes have come after big setbacks." **T**