Jeff Theimer - Music Mastermind

An ‘Okie from Muskogee’ jumps the corporate ship, follows his heart and makes a big difference

My room is cold and quiet. I sink into the couch that occupies half of the floor space, the green leather cold on my skin. I flinch at the advancement of such a startling gesture and remind myself it will warm up soon. My phone says it’s 1:30. Alright, it’s time. *Blrinnnng . . . Blrinnnng . . . Blrinn -*

“Hello?”.

 “Hi, Jeff! It’s Mitchell, just calling abou -”

“Hey Mitchell! Can you give me ten minutes?”

“Yea, no problem.”

“Thanks buddy, talk to ya soon.”

*Click*.

Quiet.

Nothing left to do but rustle around this uncomfortable ocean of emerald and wait.

I remind myself the importance of this interview. Jeff Theimer is doing some really amazing stuff. He’s had a career which aligns with my own interests on community building and, like me, he has kept music at the core of all his work. He’s managed marketing teams in L.A. radio, made it out (mostly) in the black after years as an independent promoter and developed his own festival, New Noise, Santa Barbara.

I am so excited to pick his brain, if only I had a clue where that brain of his is right now . . . In the weeks I’ve spent trying to corral him for an interview, we have chatted briefly on the phone, over email and I began to feel so comfortable talking to this warm, excited dude that I almost texted him like I might a close friend.

That is Jeff’s ultimate paradox, though: he is ever-elusive yet constantly engaged and excited. This perfectly compliments his professional life; event producers are the ones behind the scenes, the ones making the calls, buying the talent, selling the event and more. Without them, the show would not go on. Hell, there wouldn’t be a show in the first place.

2:04.

I guess I’ll try again.

*Blringgggg, Blriinggg -*

“Hey Mitchell.”

“Hey, Jeff.”

“Hey, sorry, one second.”

It sounds like he is in the car.

But hey, here we are, at least. Ear-to-ear isn’t so bad, and the crackling of our telephone connections warms with Jeff’s voice as we start to talking.

As his car winds up and down highway 154, our conversation similarly twists and turns from the past to the present, the future and back again.

Although he spent a chunk of his youth in California, living at various times in the Bay Area and Santa Barbara, Jeff’s an Okie at heart. His family still lives yonder eastward and he visits when he can. Though he asserts Oklahoma is “not as rad as Santa Barbara”, a small-town sense of humility bedrocks his spirit.

Similarly, Jeff knows community and consistently demonstrates how much he values relationships with passionate people with whom he shares similar values. In the thick of his career, he collaborates with Eddie Numbskull, the dude who booked Theimer’s punk band in Santa Barbara when he was thirteen. Throw a couple of decades in between and the two are still pals, co-promoting events together. For Jeff, working with individuals who can match his level of passion and engagement is the richness that makes up the marrow of his work. In an email exchange, Jeff praised others (not surprisingly avoiding self-reverence) for having “fun connecting with other like-minded community members”. He also recently wrote to me saying this work “keeps me young and allows me to work with people . . . I genuinely like and believe in”. Good for you, Jeff. We all need that special something, after all.

But what Jeff does is much more than self-enriching. Despite his fervent claims against his work being a positive force - his exact words were “I would never say that ‘following my passion has made a positive impact on SB’ though. I think if something is your passion, then inherently it's a wee bit selfish right?” - Jeff has found a way to channel his passions for music and production into projects that add color and culture to Santa Barbara. Currently, a significant amount of his work is with non-profits like Notes for Notes, a group that integrates music production and performance into Boys and Girls clubs around the nation, the Community Environmental Council - produced for Santa Barbara Earth Day, and others. Jeff collaborates with these organizations because he believes in their missions to develop community and culture in Santa Barbara. By doing what he does best, Jeff is adding more color to this town than the red from the roofs and blue from the sea.

As we talk, Jeff continues to weave through the San Ynez mountains. His car takes him to a friend’s birthday party past Lake Cachuma, but his story takes him down to Los Angeles at the turn of the century. A post-grad from UCSB, Jeff searched for ways to get involved in the music industry and found radio. This was perfect for him, as he so characteristically put it, because he “could be involved in helping produce these bands, or events but not actually have to play because I suck”. He snagged a great job at KROCK, an alternative radio station (which was booming) in Los Angeles and quickly learned what it meant to be a professional in the music industry. Cutting his teeth in corporate L.A. radio was certainly a valuable experience, and Jeff only saw himself moving higher up the corporate ladder. But at twenty-five - or six or something - Jeff woke up and realized he could soon be “making a-hundred K a year but be totally bummed out”, or leave the cold, corporate high-rise office (I’m not actually sure it’s like that, but I imagine lots of sharp angles and blank faces) and jump into the excitement of independent promotion. The Ipod had just came out, for Pete’s sake! These were happenin’ times indeed.

 Jeff came back to Santa Barbara and tried to do, well, something. He told me his ambition was hazy but he wanted to “try to pull something off out of nowhere”. Seems iffy, I know, but Jeff was not alone. He had the support of friends and mentors like Moss Jacobs (talent buyer for the Santa Barbara bowl), Eddie Numbskull (longtime friend and independent promoter), Matt Kettmann (of the Santa Barbara Independent) and others. Jeff credits Numbskull and Jacobs with helping him develop as a talent buyer, an aspect of his work that has been key to turning his interests into projects that have made a positive impact in Santa Barbara. In 2009, Jeff and his partners launched the first annual New Noise Festival, Santa Barbara. At its conception, the event offered discussion panels about the music industry, new technology, event promotion and other essentials for up-and-coming bands as well as eclectic performances at venues all over town. Think of it like ‘being a band 101’ during the day with sweet parties happening every night. Over the years, the New Noise ‘Block Party’ became the focal point of the festival. This daytime extravaganza hosted bands,beer, food and other local vendors throughout the weekend, keeping community togetherness in mind.

 But Jeff, what’s the point of all this? Well, “In the 90's when I grew up here, there was a vibrant music scene. Our basic goal was to try and help foster that spirit again . . . When I came back to SB from LA, this definitely was a passion of mine--- to try and add to the culture of SB”. New Noise has been one of the ways Jeff has married his spirit and enthusiasm for music with community development and cultural enrichment in the town he loves. And he has not stopped there. As the years have passed, Jeff has been drawn more and more to working with local organizations to put on events he feels will keep Santa Barbara’s culture growing and changing. He still has a hand in New Noise, as well as other personal ventures, and is actively making sure Santa Barbara keeps rocking.

 non-profit organization that designs, equips, and staffs after-school recording studios inside Boys & Girls Clubs offering youth the opportunity to explore, create, and record music for FREE non-profit organization that designs, equips, and staffs after-school recording studios inside Boys & Girls Clubs offering youth the opportunity to explore, create, and record music for FREE