

# Chamber *Music* America

## *Talking Business*

Luis Bonilla, Trombonist/Composer  
Mariah Wilkins, Mariah Wilkins Artist Management

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**SUMMARY:** The session focused on helping artists take the initiative in managing their careers—whether they choose to self-manage, are looking for a first manager, or are making a change.

### I. Presenters' Background

#### A. Mariah Wilkins

##### 1. Education

- a.) Bachelor's and master's degrees in French literature
- b.) Studied the saxophone and had a love for jazz

##### 2. Originally employed as an academic at various colleges and universities

##### 3. Transition to Jazz Artist Management

- a.) Wilkins often attended jazz performances given on the college campuses where she worked and was familiar with many of the performers.
- b.) While working in Washington, D.C., she was asked to manage Celtic Jazz and began learning how to be an artist manager.

##### 4. Artist management is something that can only be learned through experience, says Wilkins. "Dealing with personalities is what managing is about;" management skills require "all our work and social skills."

##### 5. Eventually founded Mariah Wilkins Artist Management

## B. Luis Bonilla

### 1. Early Life

a.) Bonilla grew up in Los Angeles and had an interest in music from an early age. He took “Beginning Brass” in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade and found he had a talent for the trombone.

b.) A consistent band director helped him hone his talent.

### 2. Higher Education and Career

a.) Studied at Cal State Los Angeles, earning a B.A. degree.

b.) Received a M.A. degree in Jazz Performance and Composition from the Manhattan School of Music.

c.) Supported himself as a session musician, and as a sideman with some of the top performers of his time.

d.) Moved on to become a bandleader and has recorded albums of his own.

## II. Bonilla and Wilkinson Partnership

### A. How they met

1. Bonilla and Wilkinson met after she had begun working as an artist manager and when he was a graduate student at Manhattan School of Music.

2. Wilkinson not only thought Bonilla was a wonderful player, but also that his passion about his music seemed to be infectious to others.

3. Bonilla found Wilkinson to be dedicated and to have sufficient experience in the music industry.

### B. Making the partnership decision

1. Bonilla had originally planned to manage his own career.

2. Several years after his first meeting with Wilkinson, he made a recording with one of her former artists; and from what he learned, decided that he could benefit from a management partnership with Wilkinson.

3. Wilkinson was convinced that Bonilla was a great artist, and that he could prosper under her management.

4. Wilkinson likes to get to know an artist personally before deciding to take on a managerial job.

## III. Requirements and benefits of Self-Management

A. Because Bonilla is a very organized by nature, the task of self-management was somewhat easier for him than it might be for individuals without this trait.

B. Setting goals and following a consistent daily routine are absolute necessities for self-managers, he maintains.

1. When self-managing, Bonilla forced himself to make three calls a day seeking bookings and performances.
  2. He developed a thick skin and learned not to take no for an answer.
- C. Bonilla also notes that there are numerous advantages for artists who can market themselves, such as:
1. More individual income
  2. Higher CD sales
  3. A higher profile in the marketplace
- D. He adds that the Internet has made self-marketing much easier than in the past because there is much more access to opportunity through communities and informational websites. If an artist is interested in representing himself/herself, the Internet can be a wonderful tool.

#### IV. Requirements and Benefits of Professional Management

- A. A manager comes with a database of contacts.
1. Wilkinson notes that she sends out hundreds of emails each day, hoping to extend her network of contacts.
  2. Maintains her database via constant communication with her contacts.
- B. Sends out hundreds of CDs to presenters and critics alike, in order to keep her artist name fresh.
- C. Her artists also must do their share of follow-up in order to keep contacts interested in their work.

#### V. Use of CDs vs. Internet Samples

- A. Managers still use CDs as a promotional tool.
1. Many presenters still prefer to see the promotional materials in physical form.
  2. International presenters often request CDs instead of Internet samples when they are booking their seasons.
- B. Both CDs and Internet samples are important; presenters often request both, so it is necessary to have both at the ready.

#### VI. Deciding When Outside Management Is Right

- A. Musicians should think of themselves as a small business and plan for the time when they will need management.
1. Having hired management is not in itself a sign of success. Self-managed artists may also have highly successful careers.
  2. Don't get ahead of yourself. Have a clear, realistic plan for your career, and from there decide when—and whether--hiring management is essential.
- B. Networking

1. Networking is the most important factor in managing a career, whether or not the artist is self-managed.
2. Keep abreast of what your peers are doing, where their gigs are, and what type of programming they are performing.

#### VII. Tips for Self-Management

- A. The best investment you can make is in yourself: The more gigs you book, the more money you will make; it is as simple as that.
- B. Self-managing involves having your own writer, tools, a standard contract, and knowing exactly what else you need. The artist is potentially the best marketer, as he knows exactly what he/she needs and what he/she can present.

#### VIII. The Cost of Hiring a Manager

- A. Managers typically receive 15 percent of the payments for artists' gigs.
- B. Booking agents usually receive 10 percent.
- C. These fees vary, depending on the artist, style of music, and the contract.
  1. Typically a manager who also books gigs receives 20 percent.
  2. Younger artists may have to pay up to 35 percent to have a professional develop their careers, while also booking and managing.
  3. Some managers have a flat monthly fee.

#### IX. Final Words of Advice

- A. Whether or not you are self-managed, be sure to keep up with the latest trends and make sure the other members of your group are doing the same thing.
- B. Decide on your level of involvement in the managing process, and hire a manager according to that.

***To hear the complete session, please download the audio recording that this summary accompanies.***