



ON THE ROAD AGAIN: As ports open back up and touring tilts into full force, freight in the live entertainment business is back and better than ever.

Photo by Glyn Kirk / AFP / Getty Images

Three years ago, those out on the road with tons of artists' touring equipment realized they needed to go home. Venues were quickly shutting their doors. The general population was running to the grocery store, loading up on toilet paper as they covered their mouths with whatever fabrics they could find.

Their current job was done, and who knew when it would come back. But driving trucks and transporting freight isn't exclusive to the music industry. Older vets may have retired, but some of the younger guys could easily transition to general freight. And, depending on what companies they worked for, they didn't even need to change jobs.

"We could pivot going to more general freight during the pandemic," Michael Lassers, owner of Round the Clock Logistics Landstar Agency, tells *Pollstar*. "It wasn't until August, September 2021 that concerts started to come back and venues opened up. Prior to that, we were just taking whatever freight came our way and handling some of our existing customers outside of concert touring."

In the time since, live music has returned in full force. Last year, the first full calendar year live music could really take place since everyone's worlds turned upside down, the industry's Top 100 Tours grossed \$6.28 billion—the most ever. And those driving the freight around are so loaded

up with work that new jobs can't be accepted until 2024.

While previous years saw January as a month with fewer tours than the rest, last year the month was booked through. This year it all wound down a bit more, but still more are out on the road than ever.

"It was just sheer madness," Rock-It Global's VP of Entertainment, Steve Maples, tells *Pollstar*. "We're bracing for the same thing again this year. It's wonderful, but it can get exhausting."

Quite a few fleets sold off their trucks during the peak of lockdowns. Now that everyone is back out, a shortage of both drivers and trucks has made getting back into the groove of things more challenging. Costs also soared, with new trailers running up to twice as much as they did before. And drivers are also rising in cost after companies advertised higher wages to entice younger drivers to join aboard.

"Landstar's a unique model," Lassers says. "We have 11,000 trucks, which is bigger than all the other entertainment trucking companies combined. We work primarily with around 500 tour drivers that have been working this industry for a while. Because we have such a big driver pool, we can take pretty much anything that comes our way across North America."

"There's not much we can't handle."

For Rock-It Global, the touring onslaught has been a welcome change of pace from the years they were stuck sitting at home.

"I have a team of eight dispatching and doing operations

and all of us, including me, were just puddles of goo by the time the end of November rolled around last year," Maples says. "We're all hiring more so we have personnel to deal with it, and we're racing out to vendors and each other to see how we can make this work."

Scheduling tours is no different than before, minus the fact that everything is booked further in advance. At the Production Live! conference at the Beverly Hilton in Los Angeles, panelists laughed about how they can now see further into the future.

"We're in a business that figures this kind of stuff out as we go along," Maples says. "And we'll continue to do it. I don't see a dramatic reduction in costs for any modality over in 2023 because of the demand. Maybe by 2024 it'll settle down a bit."

The most positive shift over the last few years has been the cooperation between competitors. Maples shares how, while the comradery is largely out of necessity, it's nice to be a part of. No longer are various workers stabbing one another in the back as they fight over scraps. Instead, they work together and cooperate to ensure everything runs smoothly.

"As far as how we're going to deal with it, this is how rock and roll works," he says. "I've worked in this business since 1974 and whatever it is, you figure it out. You get on with it, then you move on."

That ethos continues to permeate the field, and while things are still being worked out, they're back in the swing of things. ★



KEEP TRUCKIN' ALONG

FREIGHT GETS ITS GROOVE BACK

By ARIEL KING