

# A Day in the Life: Team Merch at Red Rocks!

Benom Plumb  
University of the Pacific

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## Abstract

From concert seasons 2016 through 2019, Professor Benom Plumb conducted field research in concert merchandise sales at Red Rocks Amphitheatre in Morrison, Colorado. During that time, Plumb was Assistant Professor – Clinical Track in The University of Colorado Denver’s music business program. As a member of the merchandise venue staff contracted by Aramark Corp., Professor Plumb worked in the trenches handling concert merchandise for artists including Billie Eilish, Halsey, Twenty One Pilots, Nine Inch Nails, Queens of the Stone Age, Florence and The Machine, Kacey Musgraves, Tom Petty, Chance The Rapper, Widespread Panic, Diana Ross, Tenacious D, Illenium, Ben Harper, Modest Mouse, One Republic, Jason Isbell, Greta Van Fleet, Imagine Dragons, The 1975, Joe Bonamassa, Avett Bros, LCD Soundsystem, Eric Church, Old Crow Medicine Show, Paramore, 311, Atmosphere, Prophets of Rage, Tom Morello, and many others.

Providing a glimpse into the pre-pandemic concert merch business, “A Day In The Life: Team Merch At Red Rocks!” is a fun, humorous and educational field guide for students wanting to enter the touring and concert merchandise areas of the music business. The paper is presented as taught to Music Industry Studies majors at The University of the Pacific in Plumb’s course “Follow The Money,” a revenue streams and quantitative analysis of the music business. The presentation covers areas including show merchandise advancing, concert and merch terminology, merch inventory items, proper concert merchandise buying etiquette for fans, financial merch sales forecasting, standard merch vending protocols, and completing concert merchandise settlements separate from concert promoter ticket sale settlements.

Keywords: music merchandising, concert merchandise, merch, Red Rocks, music business education

## Preamble

This research is a glimpse into the pre-pandemic concert merchandise business at Red Rocks Amphitheatre in Morrison, Colorado, U.S.A. It serves not only as a historical record of a vital revenue stream of the music industry—but also as a Red Rocks field guide for students wanting to enter the touring and live concert sector of the music business, as well as touring teams and patrons visiting Red Rocks.

The Red Rocks merchandise field guide is based on the author’s own “10 Rules of Merch” which covers essential venue knowledge and preparation, merchandise sales arrangements, commissions, financial sales forecasting, concert and merchandise terminology, merchandise product analysis, buying etiquette for concert goers, vending protocols and procedures, and concert merchandise financial settlements.

## Explicit Content Warning

Some concert merchandise examples provided in the research may be considered offensive to certain audiences.

## Research Limitations

The research is limited in scope to retail “venue-sales” of artist concert merchandise sold at Red Rocks Amphitheatre. The research presented herein does not include income/expense analysis from the artist and touring team perspective. All of the research and information is based on years of direct clinical field research at Red Rocks by the author, which primarily served to inform the author’s teaching.

## Introduction

Through the entire 2016–2019 concert seasons at Red Rocks Amphitheatre, the author was a full-time Clinical Track professor also known as a “Professor of Practice.” This research project was a rewarding way to become immersed in the live concert and touring industry, as well as the Denver music scene and music industry community. Music Business majors benefited first and foremost from this research, especially when the data was fresh after a concert. In fact, students and alumni became part of the research as ticketed concert fans, production managers, artist managers, and even performers! Some students were also hired on the Red Rocks merchandise team after graduating.

## Recognition and Thanks

The research presented in this paper would not be possible without the assistance and guidance of Kevin Sarg, Red Rocks Merchandise Manager from 2015 through 2019. The information herein is true and factual derived from the author's direct fieldwork. This information is further verified, complete, and accurate from in-person, unpublished interviews with Kevin Sarg from concert seasons 2016 through 2019 at Red Rocks Amphitheatre. The author recognizes and gives a special thanks to Kevin Sarg for his gracious time and expertise to ensure this research is complete, accurate, and furthermore, discreet in regards to protecting any artist's confidential and sensitive information.<sup>1</sup>

## Notable Former Student Mentions

The author would also like to recognize and thank former students for their contributions to the research. The first notable student mention is Maddie Casey, who referred the author for this research opportunity at Red Rocks in 2016. Maddie's work with the author in the concert merchandise business and her referral for this research opportunity made all of this possible.

Finally, the author would like to recognize the achievements of former student, Donnie Miller, aka Decadon. Decadon performed at Red Rocks on October 4, 2019 as an opening act for an EDM concert. The author was fortunate enough to work for Decadon at this show, selling his merchandise to concert goers.<sup>2</sup> It's not every day a professor gets to work merchandise sales for a former student performing at a world-class Amphitheatre. This was indeed, one of the highlights of the fieldwork.

## Back in Time: Merch Highlights of Notable Red Rocks Concerts

Though the author did not work every concert at Red Rocks during the years 2016–2019, there were many concerts that were excellent for sampling merchandise data, trends, and patterns. Among the many concerts where the research data was collected and analyzed (though not an exhaustive list) are:

Nine Inch Nails, Queens of the Stone Age, Florence and The Machine, Kacey Musgraves, Miranda Lambert, Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers, Weezer, Yo-Yo Ma, Diana Ross, Tenacious D, Illenium, Big Gigantic, Ben Harper, Leon Bridges, OneRepublic, Jason Isbell, Lyle Lovett, Gov't Mule, Flight of the Concords, Steve Miller Band, Greta Van Fleet, Widespread Panic, Brit Floyd, Imagine Dragons, Joe Bonamassa, Avett Brothers, NeedtoBreathe, LCD Soundsystem, Old Crow Medicine Show, Parmore, 311, Atmosphere, Tech-9, and many others.

Beginning in 2019 and going back in time to the 2016 season, the following are some highlights of notable concert merchandise examples within the sample set:

Billie Eilish<sup>3</sup> – June 5, 2019

Hottest selling merchandise items:

- \$75 Hoodies
- \$60 Long Sleeve Tees
- \$40 Tour Tees
- \$30 “Money” bucket hat

Halsey<sup>4</sup> – July 30, 2018

Hottest selling merchandise item:

- \$35 Tour Tees

Notable low selling/unpopular merchandise item:

- \$100 Yellow Jean Jackets

Chance The Rapper<sup>5</sup> – May 2 & 3, 2017

Hottest selling merchandise item:

- \$40 Tour Tees

Prophets of Rage<sup>6</sup> – September 7, 2016

Hottest selling merchandise item:

- \$30 Tour Tees

Notable low selling/unpopular merchandise item:

- \$25 “Make America Rage Again” Red Trump Parody Hat

Eric Church<sup>7</sup> – August 9 & 10, 2016

Hottest selling merchandise items:

- \$35 Tour Tees
- \$5 Foam Middle Fingers that read, “Eric F\*\*\*\*\* Church”

Notable merchandise items unavailable:

- No Eric Church “Boot Store” due to selling space limitations.

Twenty One Pilots<sup>8</sup> – July 12 & 13, 2016

Hottest selling merchandise items:

- \$30 Tie-Dye Tees
- \$100 Ukulele

Modest Mouse<sup>9</sup> – June 29, 2016

Hottest selling merchandise items:

- \$30 “Bison” Tee
- Multiple Vinyl Records at \$25 and \$30 (The Modest Mouse “Record Store”)

## The 10 Rules of Merch: #1 – Know Your Venue

It is critical that every artist, touring team, and merch-buying fan understand the layout of the venue and that venue's special characteristics and history. This is especially true for a famous outdoor mountain amphitheatre such as Red Rocks.

## Capacity and History

Red Rocks has an official capacity of approximately 9,500 (9,545 to be exact).<sup>10</sup> However, a typical “sell-out” crowd might be approximately 9,000 (depending on the specifics of ticketing set by the concert promoter).<sup>11</sup> For example, sometimes concert promoters will not count every available seat toward the sell-out number, due to things like production requirements and/or “kills” (seats that are unavailable for ticketed seating).<sup>12</sup>

The venue is owned, operated, and managed by the City of Denver Arts & Venues<sup>13</sup> and is open year-round as a park to the public with various trails surrounding the venue grounds across over 730 acres.<sup>14</sup> Though officially dedicated in 1941, the site where Red Rocks Amphitheatre resides has been sacred to Native Americans for ages—in particular the Ute tribe, and others.<sup>15</sup> In fact, some artists would begin the concert evening with a ceremonial blessing by local tribes as a sign of respect and reverence for the ancient and holy Native American site.<sup>16</sup>

The venue has virtual acoustic perfection between the three main rocks that border the seating and stage: “Stage Rock” (directly behind the stage), “Creation Rock” (stage right) and “Ship Rock” (stage left).<sup>17</sup> See Figure 1.

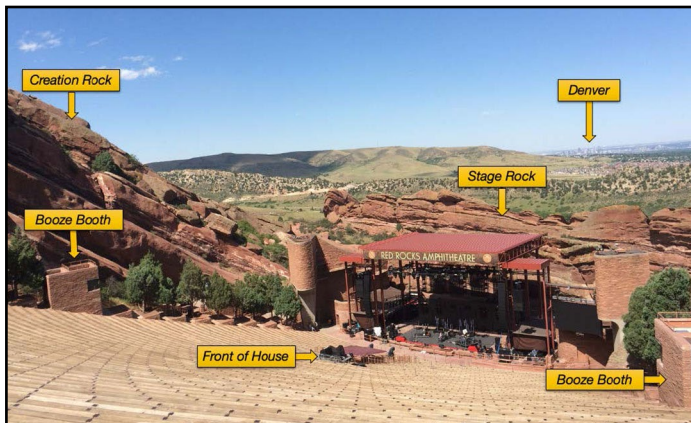


Figure 1. “Sound Check at Red Rocks” Photo Credit: Author, 2016. Note “Booze Booths” do not sell concert merchandise.

As of the writing of this paper (June 2021), COVID restrictions have been lifted and Red Rocks reopened at full capacity on June 21, 2021.<sup>18</sup>

## Venue Location, Management, and Staffing

Red Rocks is located within the City of Morrison<sup>19</sup> (Jefferson County, Colorado) and The City of Morrison does benefit from the sales tax generated at Red Rocks (4.5% in the 2019 concert season).<sup>20</sup> However, Jefferson County has authority over curfew and noise levels.<sup>21</sup> For example, artists may be fined in the thousands or tens of thousands of dollars for performing past curfew and exceeding noise limitations (curfew is typically around midnight).<sup>22</sup> One

example is the EDM artist Bassnectar who was effectively banned from the venue after a show in 2014 for causing excessive noise and later in 2016, causing some Denver-area residents to mistake the EDM concert for an earthquake.<sup>23</sup>

## A “Neutral” Venue: Concerts, Concessions, and Merch Sales Outsourced

Because the City of Denver maintains the venue and surrounding area as a park, the city must rent out the venue to the primary concert promoters AEG Live and Live Nation.<sup>24</sup> This arrangement makes Red Rocks a “neutral venue”. Neutral venue is important concert business terminology because it denotes separate ownership from both major concert promoters. This requires both major promoters to share the concert calendar and holding dates for future artist shows (known as “holds”). The food, beverage, and merchandise vending has been contracted and outsourced by the City of Denver to Aramark Corporation.<sup>25</sup> Aramark then staffs the merchandise and concession operations for all shows while under contract with the city.

## Fly Dates

AEG and Live Nation have holds on the concert calendar for years in advance.<sup>26</sup> Instead of the concert date being directly on an artist’s tour route, sometimes artists must fly into Denver from across the country to perform at Red Rocks in between concert dates elsewhere in the United States. This is referred to as a “fly date”<sup>27</sup> and it makes booking a Red Rocks date for the artist’s booking agent a jigsaw puzzle inside of a Rubik’s Cube. The fly date typically requires the artist have a small “skeleton touring team” (usually consisting of just the artist and their tour management). This means shipping in all of the concert merchandise to the venue via FedEx or UPS.

The touring team and management may coordinate remotely with the Red Rocks merch staff for inventory counts and the final settlement. Sometimes when working an artist’s fly date our team rarely interacted with the artist’s touring team except by email and phone. Otherwise, if the concert is not a fly date the tour caravan parks the semi-trucks at the trucking docks near the bottom of the mountain just outside the venue, and the merchandise is shuttled backstage for load-in and setup.

## Banned Concert Merchandise

### No Glass, No Stickers, No Face Masks

A few things that make Red Rocks unique in regards to this area of research is the fact that artists performing at Red Rocks are not permitted to sell certain merchandise items. In particular, the merchandise manager will notify all touring teams that Red Rocks is a “No Glass” and “No Stickers” venue.<sup>28</sup>

The reason these items are not permitted is quite simple. For “No Glass,” inebriated concert goers in the past have



thrown glass bottles at the artist on stage or broken glass endangering the other patrons around them.<sup>29</sup> In regards to “No Stickers,” this is also because inebriated concert goers have in the past, stuck the stickers onto the rocks that are a protected geologic site of interest.<sup>30</sup> The layers of red sandstone at Red Rocks are ancient ocean floors, beaches, and other sediments from millions of years ago which have remained a major site of geologic interest to scientists and tourists alike.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is notable to mention that before 2020, all face masks were banned from the venue due to “security” reasons surrounding face identification.<sup>32</sup> As of this writing in June 2021, the face mask requirements have been lifted but the venue now recommends face masks be worn for safety in crowded areas.<sup>33</sup> An example of this banned item pre-2020 was the Alison Wonderland EDM show on August 10, 2019.<sup>34</sup> The author worked this concert and for unknown reasons, the venue relaxed the face mask restriction and allowed the artist to sell a black face mask that had the phrase “F\*\*\* ME UP” on the front (Figure 2).



Figure 2. An omen of things to come from an EDM concert in 2019. Photo credit: Kenny McClean, “EDM, Don’t Ever Change”.

Surprisingly, many fans purchased this five-dollar item even though the world had not yet heard of the COVID-19 virus.

### Weather and Altitude

As some may be aware, the weather in Colorado can be unpredictable and this is especially true in the mountain environment of Red Rocks. It’s important for anyone visiting and working at the venue to pack rain gear, water, and layers to be ready for any change in the weather. It often rains at

the venue due to powerful storms (sometimes not predicted in the local forecast) that roll in over the foothills and Mount Morrison to the immediate west of the venue.<sup>35</sup> The bottom areas of the venue have experienced flash flooding in the past, so beware during heavy rainstorms. Red Rocks also sits approximately 6,400 feet above sea level<sup>36</sup> and it is a hike virtually anywhere in the venue. Some people visiting the venue get altitude sickness and require constant hydration, oxygen, and a slower adjustment to the altitude.

However, due to this unpredictable weather at Red Rocks, there is such a thing as good merch in bad weather. Hoodies, windbreakers, rain jackets and long-sleeved shirts can sell like gangbusters with an ill-prepared audience. Many touring teams that know the venue well, gamble on these merchandise items hoping for some inclement weather (but not a concert cancellation). The tour will order the Red Rocks concert inventory weeks or months in advance anticipating it may rain or get cold the night of their concert.<sup>37</sup>

### Location of Merchandise Booths:

#### Clam Shell and Plaza Merch

As previously mentioned in the Figure 1 caption, there is a difference between the booths that sell alcohol, food, and the artist’s concert merchandise. At Red Rocks there are two primary locations to purchase concert merchandise—the South Gate “Clam Shell” and the Top/North Gate “Plaza Merch”<sup>38</sup> (Figure 3). What’s important to mention about these locations is the distance and elevation change between them, in addition to the percentage of sales occurring at both locations. The Clam Shell at the South Gate is located at the bottom southernmost point of the venue, nearest the majority of parking lots. This south location accounts for about 2/3<sup>rds</sup> to 3/4<sup>ths</sup> of the general admission tickets that enter and exit the venue, and therefore generally accounts for about the same 2/3<sup>rds</sup> to 3/4<sup>ths</sup> of all the concert merchandise sales.<sup>39</sup>

The Plaza Merch booth near the North or Top Gate is located at the very top plaza of the venue and requires many stairs to reach from inside the Amphitheatre. Only about a quarter to a third of the patrons who enter and exit Red Rocks come through the North or Top Gate, and therefore, this booth may handle less in merchandise sales.<sup>40</sup> During most shows, the Plaza Merch booth will close down when the headlining act goes on in order to consolidate the unsold merch with the merchandise at the Clam Shell. This allows for more inventory during the final walkout at the end of the night, as well as a faster count out of the remaining unsold inventory.

It is important to note that separate counts were not made between Clam Shell and Plaza Merch. All inventory counted in was completed at one time, in one location—then split 25% up to 50% of different merch items (depending on the

show) to be sold at the Plaza Merch booth. This split of inventory is then added back into the Clam Shell inventory for final count out at the end of the night.<sup>41</sup>

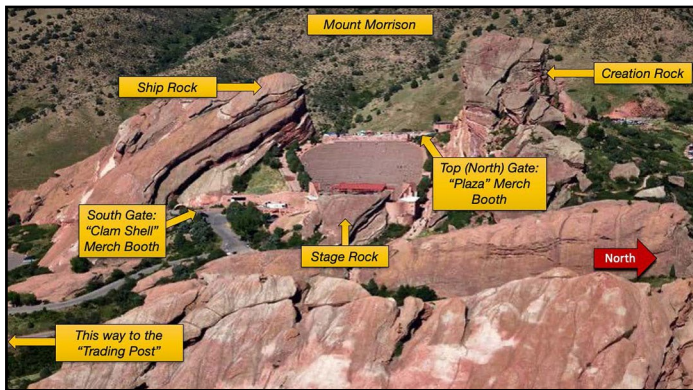


Figure 3. Aerial view of the Red Rocks Amphitheatre. Photo credit: Carol M. Highsmith. U.S. Library of Congress. Edited by the author. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017885537/>.

## The 10 Rules of Merch: #2 – Know Your Deal A Venue Sales Merch Arrangement<sup>42</sup>

Red Rocks is a venue-based or “venue sales” team. This means the merchandise staff does not tour with the artist but works “for the house” (the venue) on behalf of the artist. The artist team does not staff merchandise operations or handle the financial transactions the night of the concert. These rights are “surrendered” with the merch by the artist while on the venue premises. In exchange for servicing the merchandise operations for the artist, the venue takes a commission of the night’s sales.

### Advancing the Show<sup>43</sup>

The venue merchandise manager overseeing all operations, staffing, and settlement usually receives information regarding each concert from the artist’s representative weeks, days, or sometimes hours in advance—sometimes not at all. It all depends on the artist and how lazy or diligent their team is. This vital information provides the venue with day-of-show contacts, artist representatives, the artist’s “per head” dollar figure in projected sales (past sales analytics comparable to the venue capacity), inventory items and amounts of each, pricing, how many boxes are being trucked or flown in, shipping information via UPS or FedEx, and anything else necessary day-of-show to run merch operations smoothly. All of this is known as “advancing the show” to the merchandise venue staff.<sup>44</sup>

The show advancing usually consists of emails back and forth or a few phone calls between the venue merchandise manager and the artist representatives. The artist representatives could be the tour manager, the tour merchandise manager, a merchandising company representative, the personal manager, a friend of the artist, or in some instances—the

artist themselves. If it is the artist, this is for opening acts, never the main headliner.

### The Per Head Merch Figure<sup>48</sup>

In the most professional and helpful advance information, the artist representative will provide the venue with a “per head” dollar amount they anticipate for sales. This per head number is the average dollar amount each ticket holder is expected to spend on merchandise at the concert. For this number to be accurate, it requires the artist team to conduct a detailed financial analysis of past merch sales at comparable-sized venues. This figure will typically also reveal crowd buying habits. It is stated as a basic division and averaging mathematical equation:

$$\text{Gross Merch Sales} \div \text{Attendance} = \text{Merch Per Head } \$ \text{ Figure}$$

This can also be stated as a simple multiplication equation:

$$\text{Merch Per Head } \$ \text{ Figure} \times \text{Attendance} = \text{Gross Merch Sales}$$

This per head number is necessary for the venue’s management to plan staffing and sales forecasting so the venue-based team can adequately handle the workload for the concert. Before 2020, most one-night sellout shows would average eight to twelve dollars per head, while others broke records of up to twenty-five dollars!

A per head comparison of a typical Red Rocks show versus a record-breaking Red Rocks show during the 2016-2019 seasons would look something like this:

#### Typical Red Rocks Show

$$\begin{aligned} & \$9 \text{ per head} \times 9,000 \text{ attendance} \\ & = \$81,000 \text{ in Gross Merch Sales} \end{aligned}$$

#### Record-Breaking Red Rocks Show

$$\begin{aligned} & \$25 \text{ per head} \times 9,000 \text{ attendance} \\ & = \$225,000 \text{ in Gross Merch Sales} \end{aligned}$$

To staff a show, the venue-based merchandise team could typically handle approximately ten to twenty thousand dollars in transactions per staff member, depending on experience level. In the record-breaking example above, our team staffed that show with fourteen vendors and four merch booths instead of the usual two. Two extra merch booths were added, one near the stage and one in the parking lot before the venue opened.

## The 10 Rules of Merch: #3 – Don’t Inflate the Per Head<sup>45</sup>

It is important to note however that many artist representatives inaccurately estimate the per head number or just calculate it incorrectly. The most common reasons for an inaccurate per head figure might be one or a combination of the following reasons:

1. The artist’s team is inexperienced and on an emotional high due to being booked at Red Rocks,

- so they “shoot for the moon”.
2. The artist team has a big ego and quotes the per head based on pride and “buzz”—not factual financial data.
  3. The artist representative used the sellout capacity of previous venues—not the attendance number of the artist’s shows.
  4. The artist representative calculated the per head figure from old tour data, not current tour data.
  5. The artist representative calculated the per head figure from incomparable venue sizes or has never played Red Rocks before.

In these situations, the artist representative will typically require the venue staff to count in more inventory than is needed for the evening. This is proven when the unsold inventory numbers at the end of the night are fairly close to the same inventory numbers counted in before the show began.

There have been concerts where our team boxed and shipped out about as many boxes as were shipped in. This requires laborious extra work on the part of the venue staff to box and ship the unsold merch for very low commissions.

#### **The 10 Rules of Merch: #4 – Know Your Commission**

##### **Revenue Splits: Soft Merch vs. Hard Merch<sup>46</sup>**

The general merchandise revenue split as of the 2019 concert season, was 75/25 in the artist’s favor for “soft” merchandise, and 90/10 in the artist’s favor for “hard” merchandise. Soft merch is understood to be clothing and apparel, along with other accessories, concert posters, and trinkets. Hard merch is understood to be any media, vinyl records, CDs, and tapes (yes, we sold CDs, tapes, and DVDs at some shows). Some artists receive more favorable terms depending on their leverage in negotiations with the concert promoters, but in general, commissions were never higher than twenty-five percent for soft merchandise and ten percent for hard merchandise.

#### **The 10 Rules of Merch: #5 – Know Your Product, Know Your Audience**

Red Rocks fans have come to expect special and scarce merchandise items—the Colorado live concert equivalent to the current NFT (non-fungible token) frenzy. In particular, fans want Red Rocks event posters and Red Rocks event T-shirts for that particular evening virtually more than anything else. For example, Widespread Panic is considered the “poster crowd” and fans will ask for the poster by graphic artist name.

When the author was selling event posters at Widespread Panic shows, the fans might ask for the “Lucchesi” to indi-

cate the poster designed by J.T. Lucchesi, or for the “Sperry” to indicate the event poster designed by Chuck Sperry. It is interesting to note that some fans would become irritated and upset if the merchandise vendor didn’t understand what was meant by the barking out of a one-word order of just “Lucchesi!” or “Sperry!”.

Also, it’s important to realize that some fans are very astute to concert merchandise product lines and manufacturers. It was not uncommon to receive questions from savvy merch fans like, “Is that concert T-shirt a Bella Canvas or Gilden?” “Is it 100% cotton?” or “Is it poly-blend?”. In addition to this, Red Rocks fans appreciated vinyl records and certain crowds were excited to purchase vinyl at the show. Generally, CDs and tapes did not sell well, even with a Baby Boomer crowd. It is wise for merchandise vendors working on behalf of a new touring artist every night to be a quick study on the product line before selling. It also makes the job easier once you understand the culture, behavior, and buying habits of each artist’s crowd.

Each crowd is unique and has its own culture. For example, most metal shows had very kind and merch-buying savvy crowds. The metal fans were particularly polite, waiting patiently in line and were very decisive about their orders, allowing for more pleasant interactions and higher volumes of sales than when working with an unruly and indecisive crowd. On the contrary, EDM and country crowds were among the most rude and chaotic of fans to sell merch to. It wasn’t uncommon at some EDM or country shows for a fight to break out somewhere in the venue, either near or within earshot of a merch booth. During one Global Dance Festival concert at Red Rocks, a fight broke out at the merch booth and the police had to use pepper spray to disrupt the melee, causing the merchandise vendors to abandon their post in the process!<sup>47</sup> The EDM shows in Colorado also made it very easy to sell hoodies and long-sleeved shirts when the weather got cold. Many of the young EDM fans were hardly clothed and were happy to spend sixty dollars or more on a hoodie to keep warm.

#### **The 10 Rules of Merch: #6 – Know Merch Buying Etiquette**

##### **Important Tips for Concert Goers**

It is clear from this field research that some concert goers are more experienced and well-versed in buying merchandise than others. Here are some helpful tips for future concert goers, wherever they may be attending a show:

- The venue-based staff cannot make more merch, that is not within their power or resources. All merch is provided by the artist on the day of the show. Please do not ask the vendors to “just make more” or to “check the back”. If they had more of a sold-out



item, they would sell it!

- The venue-based staff cannot hold the purchased merch for patrons. It is the buyer's responsibility to keep up with their own purchases.
- Waiting one's turn and not cutting in line still applies in adulthood at concerts.
- Vendors can, and do, refuse service if deemed necessary. Especially in instances of threatening or extremely rude behavior.
- All sales are final. Swapping or trading merch items for something of equal or higher value and paying the difference is always allowed, but refunds are rare (if allowed by the artist team at all).<sup>48</sup>
- Depending on experience level, merchandise vendors cannot compute more than one or two orders at once. Please be patient and allow the vendor to accurately complete and calculate each order.
- Having some self-awareness is important in the merch buying process. How fans buy concert merchandise often reflects on their character, personality, and relationship dynamics.
- Saying "please" and "thank you," waiting patiently, paying in cash, and tipping always gives concert fans the "Gold Star" in merch buying etiquette. Take a cue from those Metalheads!

### Do Not Ask These Frequently Asked Questions

For the less-experienced concert goer, it's important to mention questions not to ask when buying concert merchandise. The following is a list of frequently-asked, inexperienced questions from fans and the likely answer from a tired and overworked merchandise vendor:

Q: Will it shrink?

A: That depends on how you do your laundry.

Q: What size am I?

A: I don't know, what size do you normally wear?

Q: Can I get that one?

A: Which one? The shirts on the board are numbered, please give me a number.

Q: Can you give me a discount?

A: No, the artist sets the price. If I give you a discount it comes out of my pay.

Q: Why don't you sell food and booze at the merch booth!?

A: Because that is a recipe for chaos and disaster.

### The 10 Rules of Merch: #7 – Know Your Vendor's Work Day

The venue-based merch crew is typically one of the first to arrive before the show and one of the last to leave the venue after the show is over. A typical clock-in time is between 12:30pm and 2:30pm, with clocking out between

1:00am and 2:00am. The job is for night owls only. If someone has worked long shifts in bartending or in high-paced sales, they will fit right in with the Red Rocks merch staff. The worker must be prepared for heavy lifting and good old fashioned grunt work, as there are numerous boxes of merchandise.

At Red Rocks, it's also a good idea to pretend one is camping out—pack plenty of water, food, layers, and rain gear. The merchandise vendor will be on their feet all day and night, so be prepared for long hours (and some muscle aches and pains). Finally, to bring goodwill and camaraderie to the Red Rocks team, it is always a good idea to bring snacks for the entire merch crew and to swap shows when a co-worker needs a night off.

### The 10 Rules of Merch: #8 – Know Your Math and Dozens<sup>49</sup>

As mentioned in Merch Rule #7, the job is fast-paced, high-volume sales. It requires quick and accurate money math. Every vendor should keep a calculator at hand to double check every sale so that the settlement amount doesn't come up short at the end of the night (more on shortages later). Prices are in increments of five dollars and it's very possible to sell an item for the wrong price when there is a hectic crowd. Slowing down and counting accurately is the key to success.

During the count in before the show and the count out after the show, one should know how to count by dozens quickly up to at least 120. For inventory counts, the merch team organizes the counts by style and size in stacks of dozens up to ten dozen high.

After the inventory numbers are confirmed, the shirts are then organized into plastic bins by style and size. The merchandise staff will then organize and pin one of each item to Styrofoam boards and display for fans to see. Each board will contain a number for each item and its price on yellow laminated cards. The headlining artist receives priority for space, sometimes referred to as "real estate", on the merch board. See the Weezer example in Figure 4.

Most merchandise from the U.S. will arrive in dozens but

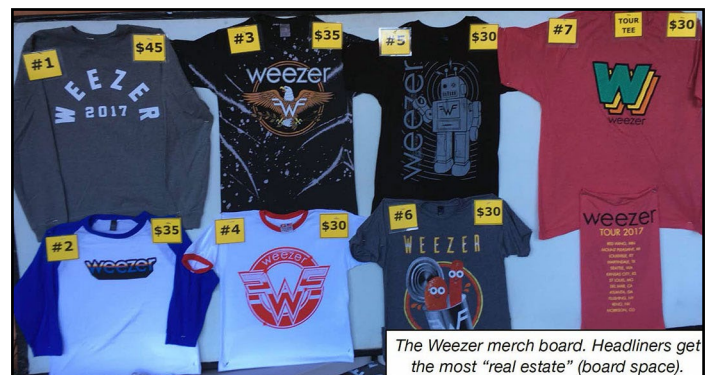


Figure 4. Merch board.

if the merchandise is arriving from a European-based artist or merchandise manufacturer, that Euro inventory will typically arrive in tens instead of twelves. Large items like hoodies and jackets are counted in sixes due to their thickness and to gravity pulling down the tall stacks.

## The 10 Rules of Merch: #9 – Know Your Merch Settlement<sup>50</sup>

After all of the fans leave the venue in what the venue staff refer to as “the walkout” (when the house lights go up and fans exit the venue), unsold merchandise is orga-

Consigned Inventory Control Sheet		Date:		Pre-2020 Alpha Artist	
Name of Consignor Organization:		Artist Merchandising Inc.			
Name of Consignor Representative:		Artist Rep			
Name of Venue Representative:		Venue Merch Manager			
ITEM	QTY REC'D	END COUNT	QTY. SOLD	SELLING PRICE	RETAIL SALES
Tee#1 - SM	233	95	138	\$35	\$4,830
MED	335	168	167	\$35	\$5,845
LG	195	86	109	\$35	\$3,815
XL	67	24	43	\$35	\$1,505
2XL	72	58	14	\$35	\$490
Longsleeve #1 - SM	72	0	72	\$50	\$3,600
MED	60	0	60	\$50	\$3,000
LG	60	0	60	\$50	\$3,000
XL	27	0	27	\$50	\$1,350
2XL	22	6	16	\$50	\$800
Longsleeve #2 - SM	212	135	77	\$50	\$3,850
MED	306	121	185	\$50	\$9,250
LG	110	69	41	\$50	\$2,050
XL	96	41	55	\$50	\$2,750
2XL	51	26	25	\$50	\$1,250
Cool Hoodie 1 - SM	144	1	143	\$65	\$9,295
MED	216	0	216	\$65	\$14,040
LG	144	0	144	\$65	\$9,360
XL	96	0	96	\$65	\$6,240
2XL	0	0	0	\$65	\$0
Tour Tee #1 - SM	312	93	219	\$35	\$7,665
MED	288	38	250	\$35	\$8,750
LG	216	52	164	\$35	\$5,740
XL	121	55	66	\$35	\$2,310
2XL	0	0	0	\$35	\$0
Cool Hoodie 2 - SM	105	0	105	\$65	\$6,825
MED	118	0	118	\$65	\$7,670
LG	102	0	102	\$65	\$6,630
XL	83	6	77	\$65	\$5,005
2XL	8	0	8	\$65	\$520
Tour Tee #2 - SM	53	22	31	\$35	\$1,085
MED	64	12	52	\$35	\$1,820
LG	26	0	26	\$35	\$910
XL	16	2	14	\$35	\$490
2XL	35	26	9	\$35	\$315
Cool Hoodie 3	146	0	146	\$65	\$9,490
MED	204	0	204	\$65	\$13,260
LG	178	1	177	\$65	\$11,505
XL	102	0	102	\$65	\$6,630
2XL	23	0	23	\$65	\$1,495
Cool Unisex Shorts - SM	18	15	3	\$50	\$150
MED	20	14	6	\$50	\$300
LG	12	7	5	\$50	\$250
XL	28	23	5	\$50	\$250
2XL	1	1	0	\$50	\$0
Pin set	0	0	0	\$30	\$0
Concert Poster	257	121	136	\$25	\$3,400
Pop Socket	178	102	76	\$15	\$1,140
Bandana	121	76	45	\$10	\$450
Beanie	432	0	432	\$25	\$10,800
Tote Bag	101	80	21	\$15	\$315
Hat - SM	135	108	27	\$30	\$810
MED	137	94	43	\$30	\$1,290
LG	55	36	19	\$30	\$570
XL	69	61	8	\$30	\$240
0	0	0	0	\$0	\$0
<b>MAIL CHECK TO:</b>					
Artist Merchandising Inc.					
PO Box 00000					
Los Angeles, CA 00000					
GROSS SALES: \$204,400.00					
LESS SALES TAX: \$8,801.91					
NET SALES: \$195,598.09					
LESS: Security \$1,380.00					
LESS: Credit Card Fees \$7,711.15					
LESS: Tent Expense					
SUBTOTAL: \$186,506.94					
SPLIT %					
25 VENUE SHARE: \$46,626.73					
75 CONSIGNOR SHARE: \$139,880.20					
LESS: Cash pay out					
\$139,880.20					

Figure 5. Sample soft merchandise settlement spreadsheet.



nized and counted the same way as counted in. One team member who writes legibly will take down the remaining numbers for input onto the settlement's Excel spreadsheet and relay these numbers to the merchandise manager. The venue's merchandise manager then compares the amount on the spreadsheet to the total amount collected in cash and credit card receipts. If there is a shortage, as mentioned in Merch Rule #8, that shortage is deducted from the venue's commissioned share—not from the artist share of merchandise revenue.

Once the final numbers are conferred with the artist representative and any partial cash payouts are paid, two merch team members will load the boxed unsold merchandise onto the artist's tour buses or trucks, or prepare those boxes

for shipping with UPS or FedEx. The venue merchandise manager then completes payroll for the staff from a small portion of the venue's overall commission, which is prorated across all workers into an hourly dollar figure. The venue's merch staff is typically paid one to two weeks after the show is worked.

When all of this is completed, the merch staff can clock out and go home, again, typically in the early morning hours after midnight. The Excel document shown in Figure 5 is a sample of a soft merchandise settlement spreadsheet based on the 75/25 revenue split for a hypothetical artist we'll call "Alpha Artist". Figure 6 provides an example of an Excel sheet showing concert merchandise sales with a per-head calculation.

### Calculating Red Rocks Concert Merchandise Sales via Excel (with Per-Head Example)

Consigned Inventory Control Sheet		Date: _____		Pre-2020 Alpha Artist	
Sample "Alpha Artist" Soft Merch Settlement Spreadsheet		Artist Merchandising Inc.		Artist Rep _____	
		Venue Merch Manager _____			
ITEM	QTY REC'D	END COUNT	QTY. SOLD	SELLING PRICE	RETAIL SALES
Tee#1 - SM	233	95	138	\$35	\$4,830
MED	335	168	167	\$35	\$5,845
LG	195	86	109	\$35	\$3,815
XL	67	24	43	\$35	\$1,505
2XL	72	58	14	\$35	\$490
Longsleeve #1 - SM	72	0	72	\$50	\$3,600
MED	60	0	60	\$50	\$3,000
LG	60	0	60	\$50	\$3,000
XL	27	0	27	\$50	\$1,350
2XL	22	6	16	\$50	\$800
Longsleeve #2 - SM	212	135	77	\$50	\$3,850
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MED	216	0	216	\$65	\$14,040
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XL	96	0	96	\$65	\$6,240
2XL	0	0	0	\$65	\$0
Tour Tee #1 - SM	312	93	219	\$35	\$7,665
MED	288	38	250	\$35	\$8,750
LG	216	52	164	\$35	\$5,740
XL	121	55	66	\$35	\$2,310
2XL	0	0	0	\$35	\$0
					<b>SUM</b>

### Bottom of Spreadsheet

MAIL CHECK TO:			
Artist Merchandising Inc.		GROSS SALES:	
PO Box 00000		\$204,400.00	
Los Angeles, CA 00000		LESS SALES TAX:	
		\$8,801.91	
		NET SALES:	
		\$195,598.09	
		LESS: Security	
		\$1,380.00	
		LESS: Credit Card Fees	
		\$7,711.15	
		LESS: Tent Expense	
		SUBTOTAL:	
		\$186,506.94	
SPLIT %		VENUE SHARE:	
25		\$46,626.73	
75		CONSIGNOR SHARE:	
		\$139,880.20	
		LESS: Cash pay out	
		\$139,880.20	
<p><b>\$204,400 / 9,000 attendance = \$22.71 "per head". Close to the record breaker, but not quite.</b></p>			

Figure 6. Merchandise sales with per head calculation.

## The 10 Rules of Merch: #10 – Have Fun! You Work in Live Music!

### Conclusion

Working within the live concert business is always full of adventure, excitement, and hands-on education. This author's primary expertise is in music publishing, music licensing, royalties, and copyright. Having the opportunity to study a new area of the music business through direct field research has been a very productive and fruitful endeavor professionally, as well as supporting and enhancing the education and professional opportunities for students.

The concluding evidence from this research is that concert merchandise is essential to the live music economy and furthermore plays an even larger role at a world-famous outdoor amphitheatre. Red Rocks is unlike any other outdoor music venue in the world and touring artists will undoubtedly earn lucrative revenue from concert merchandise there, if the right planning and merchandise products are available to the Red Rocks fans. A touring artist most certainly can't go wrong with selling limited inventory of their own special Red Rocks event shirts and event posters.

Though there can be frustrations and complications in any business, the hard work of providing fans with that meaningful memento of their concert experiences can be incredibly satisfying. Especially after experiencing the isolation and sadness of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is this author's belief that live concert merchandise will continue to be a major source of income for artists, as well as local venue economies. As we come out of the COVID pandemic restrictions, it is clear that fans want to attend concerts again. Concert merchandise is forever and indelibly tied to a fan's magical musical memory.

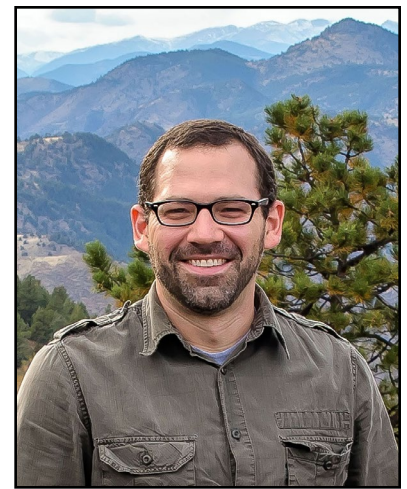
Finally, it is this author's ambition and hope to continue this merchandise research into the post-pandemic music industry economy and to one day use this paper as a basis for a book about concert merchandise that will incorporate research from the perspectives of sociology and perhaps even the psychology of concert fans.

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**Benom Plumb** has music and the music business in his genes as a great-nephew to the acclaimed A&R man, composer, arranger, and conductor, Neely Plumb ("Purple People Eater," "The Sound of Music," Jefferson Airplane, Etta James). Educator, songwriter, producer, and artist, Benom Plumb has been a professional in the music industry since 2006.

Plumb earned his BM at the University of Texas, Arlington, and his MM in Music Business at the Frost School of Music, University of Miami. Before joining University of the Pacific, Professor Plumb was Assistant Professor of Music Industry Studies at The University of Colorado, Denver. He has published articles about current music industry news for Denver-based music royalty marketplace, "Royalty Exchange," some of which have been cited in peer reviewed journals such as Yeshiva University's *Cardozo Arts & Entertainment Law Journal*. Plumb's article, *An Insider Weighs in on Bluewater's Spotify Lawsuit* received national attention when it was cited and shared to national audiences by David Israelite, President of the National Music Publishers Association.

From 2007 to 2012, Plumb was Vice President of Licensing at Bluewater Music in Nashville. Before that, he worked as an independent licensing consultant and working drummer. During his time at Bluewater Music, Plumb coordinated all television/film licensing efforts, signing new talent, pitching songs, finding publishing royalties, negotiating various business deals, and representing the company throughout the world at industry events.

His rock band "Professor Plumb" (formed in 2017) released two studio albums, *The Majic Twelve* (2018) and *20/20* (2020). Both albums contained original rock compositions written and produced by Plumb, who is a multi-instrumentalist on nearly every track. In April of 2020, Plumb debuted his solo electronic music project *The Jolly Backbeat* which combines various electronic and live instrumentalizations with pop/electronica influences.



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