



The concepts discussed in this article are a part of the comprehensive analysis of songwriting presented in the complete book "Songcrafters' Coloring Book: The Essential Guide to Effective and Successful Songwriting" , by Bill Pere. For additional information or to order a copy, visit <http://www.songcrafterscoloringbook.com>

(More on this topic in the complete Songcrafters' Coloring Book)

SONGCRAFTERS' COLORING BOOK

Untangling the Maze of Conferences by Bill Pere

I've had the privilege of presenting and mentoring at many conferences across the U.S. over the years -- not just music events, but business, technology and educator events as well. I often find first-time attendees asking some common questions: "Do I belong here? Is this the right place for me? How do I get the most from this?"

To help you decide what events to attend, it is important to understand what the name of the event tells you. Any event where a bunch of people get together or "convene" for a purpose is called a "Convention". There are three main types of conventions, and it is important to know the distinctions.

When people come together with the primary purpose of learning and sharing knowledge, it is a "Conference" in the true sense of the word. Folks are there to *confer*. Workshops, panels, mentoring, and critiquing are front and center. Education is the event driver. This would be the case at events like the Independent Music Conference or the Singer-Songwriter Cape May Conference, which are geared mostly toward education, with performance as a secondary activity. The music professionals who come are there not to 'discover' artists, but to share their knowledge and mentor attendees who seek to develop their skills and careers.

When people are gathering with the primary purpose of performing, you have a "Festival". Think of the Newport Jazz Festival, the Kerrville Folk Festival, The Monterey Pop Festival, Falcon Ridge Folk Festival, or the Podunk Bluegrass Festival. These are clearly labeled as to what they are, and attendees know what to expect. Performance rules, and any workshops or panels are ancillary activities. The industry professionals there are frequently venue operators, booking agents or artist development folks, and even the educational workshops are slanted toward aspects of performance.

When people congregate around a theme of business, products, and commerce, it is an "Exposition", or "Expo". Vendors and their goods and services are the main attraction. Think of the Eastern States Expo (The Big "E"), the New England Music Exposition (NEME), or the NAMM Expo (National Association of Music Merchants). What we often call the World's Fair is actually called the Universal Expo, or the Great Exhibition. Industry folks there are usually people with products and services to sell to the attendees.

This is not to say that any event of one type won't have parts of the other two as well. Most of them do. It's a matter of which of the three elements -- education, performance, or commerce -- is most prevalent and prominent.

If you attend an event expecting a healthy dose of education and instead see everybody hawking goods or promoting performances and guerilla showcases, you'll be disappointed.

Similarly, if you are expecting a weekend of performances and find mostly panels or vendors, you'll feel you're in the wrong place.

So you need to do two things –

First, make sure you know what YOUR primary purpose is in attending a convention. Do you want PRIMARILY to learn, to perform, or to find products/services? No single one precludes the others, but there is usually going to be a primary motivation.

If you list networking as one of your key purposes, that's going to occur at any type of convention. The question is whether you want to network primarily with industry pros who are willing to help and mentor you, or with other performers and venue coordinators, or with providers of goods/services.

Second, you need to make sure that the event you are thinking of attending is accurately named, so that you get what you sign up for. Do your internet research to find out. Contact others who have attended. Don't assume the name is correct.

Of the three types of conventions, the ones that create the most confusion are the conferences. Many conferences start out as truly educational endeavors, and then evolve over the years to become more performance oriented, with the educational components taking a lesser role. Always check out a conference agenda to make sure there is a full schedule of panels and workshops, and that the focus is still on education.

Size matters – but not necessarily in the way you think. Some of the best quality time with industry pros and the most valuable networking can be found at the smaller scale events. When you look at massive events like SXSW with 20,000+ people there, you're just a drop of water in an endless sea. If you're at an event of 200 people, you're much more likely to get individual attention from whichever mentors and professionals you want to meet. Don't hesitate to ask event organizers what the typical size is of the event, if you can't find out from the website.

Finally, check out an event's longevity. If it's been around for many years, it must be doing something right. For a long-running event, you can easily find others who have attended who will give you some feedback. However, just because an event is new doesn't mean it won't be valuable. Check the track record of the event organizer, and the backgrounds of the presenters.

When you decide on the right event for you, make the most of it. If you ask anyone there to listen to your songs,, do so with the expectation of constructive feedback, not just a pat on the back, and always have lyric sheets with you. Lyric sheets make you look professional and show that you respect the other person's time. Make your package look professional with all your contact info on each piece. It's a shame to see so many expensively produced CDs thrust into my hands that have unreadable fonts, no track times listed, no contact info, no titles on the disc, shrink wrap not removed, misspelled words, and sadly, artists who do not want to have those things constructively pointed out to them.

The biggest successes I've seen at conferences come not to those who attend primarily to perform, but to those whose primary purpose is to learn and to network. Specifically, many of the bands and individuals who are at conferences just for the performance aspect are absent during the day at all the workshops, panels, and mentoring stations. Attendees who do frequent the learning and networking programs establish relationships with people who can offer them career-advancing opportunities later on. I know this to be true, as I have been involved first-hand with many mutually beneficial business opportunities with folks whom I have met through my conference workshops and mentoring. And I've had little useful follow-up interactions from those who were there only to perform or to be "discovered". The real benefits from a conference come from the follow-up interactions after the event is over.

Think of it this way: At a conference, where the focus is on learning, the performance-only crowd sends a signal that they are there because *they* are the ones with something to offer and they don't need any professional or peer advice. The learners/networkers send a signal that the music pros and fellow-artists there have something of value to offer them. Which do you think will lead to more fruitful long-term relationships down the road in a relationship-driven business like music ?

For more: www.songcrafterscoloringbook.com

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Bill Pere was named one of the "Top 50 Innovators, Groundbreakers and Guiding Lights of the Music Industry" by Music Connection Magazine. With more than 30 years in the music business working with top industry pros as a songwriter, performer, recording artist and educator, Bill is well known for his superbly crafted lyrics, with lasting impact. Bill has released 16 CDs, and is President of the Connecticut Songwriters Association. He is an Official Connecticut State Troubadour, and is the Founder and Executive Director of the LUNCH Ensemble (www.lunchensemble.com). Twice named Connecticut Songwriter of the Year, Bill is a qualified MBTI practitioner, trained by the Association for Psychological Type. He is a member of CMEA and MENC, and as Director of the Connecticut Songwriting Academy, he helps develop young talent in songwriting, performing, and learning about the music business. Bill's song analyses and critiques are among the best in the industry. Bill has a graduate degree in Molecular Biology, an ARC Science teaching certification, and he has received two awards for Outstanding contribution to Music Education.

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