

Not Your Average Joe

Who said 'a challenge is an opportunity in disguise'? It wasn't Joe Malabello, the little big man behind the big big man of Australian blues, Ian Moss; but perhaps it should have been.

For even in the midst of the mayhem that is the entertainment game, not much fazes Mossy's manager; an ex-musician himself, Joe's better acquainted than most with the trials of the professional music game. But it was disappointment that the profession still tolerated slipshod managerial practices, and the conviction that the business of music should - and could - be better managed, that inspired him to start changing things himself. 'When I was talking to bands I wanted to tour on a national basis, it occurred to me that what I had experienced as a musician twenty years ago was still happening,' he says. 'That is, you could turn up at a venue to find your show or accommodation hadn't been booked, or the fee was incorrect - and I'd have thought we would have learned that lesson by now. So one of my agendas as a manager was to do what was needed to try to make things better.'

But how did he tackle that? 'I always give the integrity of the band and the integrity of the venue my priority,' Joe explains. 'Next come the logistics of a tour, followed by the financial package. I've always sought to ensure the bands are paid what they're worth, and the venues make money as well; that way, the arrangement won't be short-lived.'

Perhaps Joe's strengths in negotiation stem from the deep-seated interest in the world of work that saw him undertake an Honours degree in Labour Studies and Political Science. 'While doing the degree I couldn't fathom where I would exercise it in my working life,' he says, 'but I found that as soon as I was representing someone else, I remembered things I'd learned during my degree, and somehow it all fell into place. It's become priceless.'

Like the time he arrived at a venue to find a rickety stage accessible only by a narrow, unrailed staircase, and burned power points hanging from exposed wires. Joe insisted the show be halted until the safety issues had been addressed, while the venue manager maintained that 'other bands have played here before and it's never been a problem.' After four-and-a-half hours of argument Joe got his way; the area was secured, and the show went ahead without a hitch. And today, the two men enjoy an excellent working relationship; Joe has staged a number of shows at the venue since, all without problem or incident.

His talent for resolution of differences is enviable. 'I welcome the opportunity to negotiate with people, acknowledging that while I appreciate their suggestions, I also need to know they are listening to what I have to say. I don't really come out of a day frustrated by hardships,' he says. 'If I get frustrated, it has more to do with the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing. That is, dealing with production companies and travel arrangements, and trying to put everything into a logical sequence is both a necessary evil and a challenge, but one that I welcome.'

Indeed, Joe's sobriquet - The Smokin' Pony – relates to neither machismo nor High Country ancestry, but to the notion of 'being small, but strong.' It's an evocative term that sums up the essence of the man himself; as does a favoured quote: 'One must experience confusion before one can gain clarity.' The mantra of a visionary, if ever there was one.

But despite his learning and obvious intelligence, Joe isn't averse to getting his hands dirty. 'A journalist once mentioned they were surprised to see me crawling around the stage, or lifting equipment, or driving; their idea of a manager is someone who's there to take advantage of the perks. But I never want to stand on the sidelines just watching. If I'm not hands on, I'm lost.'

So does the ex-guitarist and vocalist with The Rhythms still get his hands on a guitar sometimes? 'Yes - as much as I can,' says Joe. 'When you'[re there as a manager and] see the band members having a great time on stage, it makes you itch to get up there and play.' And how does he scratch that itch? 'I still play in public with friends,' he says. During a tour I'll ring them and say "I'm due back on this date; can we get together do a show?" and that gives me something to look forward to.'

That, and his own bed. After years on the road, Joe still has difficulty sleeping in a different bed every night. And despite 'a second wind that just keeps kicking in', he says a good night's sleep while on the road just doesn't happen. 'People say: "you've got a great job; you see so much"; but often all I see of a place is the road in, the venue, the motel room and the road out. Which is really sad, because some of the places are really beautiful, and I wish I had more time to spend there.'

So much so, that when he has time off, Joe visits venues he takes his acts to 'to be there as a customer, because I think it's unbalanced to enjoy their venue only when you are taking money from them. It's important to me to reciprocate by returning money to them, although I find they still want to extend their hospitality. That's a beautiful thing to experience, because you know you must be doing something right with them, and it's something I'm very proud of.'

Not what you might expect of a person who moves within professional rock music circles. But when you learn that the Adelaide bar Joe and his friends play at between his tours is named the *Grace Emily*, in honour of the hotel's cleaner, it somehow makes perfect sense.