

KJ.60 – 60 JAHRE

KARSTEN JAHNKE KONZERTDIREKTION

›promoting talent since 1962‹



Karsten Jahnke Konzertdirektion – 60th Anniversary

Bringing people together is an art – and it's what Karsten Jahnke has been doing with unmatched passion for more than 60 years. From grassroots clubs to arenas, giant concert halls and open-air venues. But the key to this art lies somewhere less overt. It's about being a good host. "Green tea?" Karsten asks, smiling, and pours a cup. It's this amenable style that creates an open atmosphere the moment you enter his office in Hamburg's St. Pauli district. Right in the heart of the city's music scene, with countless venues just a stone's throw away. As a concert organiser, Karsten Jahnke has visited these venues and brought them to life thousands of times. He likes to dress casually, in his distinctive red pullover. And he's always sporting an inquisitive, slightly mischievous look. What will the evening bring? Will the band blow me away? For a while now he's been had his grandson Ben Mitha at his side, who has taken over the company. A tall guy, his calm air belying an energetic charisma. When the two of them talk about the Karsten Jahnke Konzertdirektion, due to mark its 60th anniversary in 2022, the generation gap is there for all to see. From one corner you have the love of jazz, rock, Irish folk. From the other, a passion for hip-hop, electro, pop. A good 50 years separate the two men. But what they do share is a strong sense of family, coupled with a Hanseatic understanding of business. Is it about earning money? Sure, but not at any price.

"The important thing is that you can look each other in the eye," says Karsten. The walls behind him are covered in posters and photos. From Pat Metheny to Coldplay. A life devoted to live music. If anyone has a truly impressive portfolio to boast about, then it's him. But his company just isn't the sort to blow its own trumpet. It's about getting down to the day-to-day business. About doing things as professionally as the big names do in the industry. But doing it all with an independent spirit. What counts for them is working closely with all the musicians. And that's the way it's always been. One example from the early days was at Insterburg & Co.: Karsten Jahnke was there from 1967 – as organiser, ticket seller, all-round facilitator, and a whole lot more. He was a stock member of the band family. There was a connection, driven by a shared love of culture, comedy and quality. Earnings were split equally between him and the four musicians. "We're all partners, it's always been that way," says Ben: "We don't sign any long term contracts, everything's agreed with a handshake." All based on trust, you could say.

What's definitely clear is that the grandfather's talent for spotting great acts has been passed on to his grandson. Added to the pleasure gained in coming up with new formats in collaboration with the artists, singer-songwriter Johannes Oerding being one example. And Covid putting a halt to venue tours led to the idea of using Stadtpark Open Air at the heart of their hometown as a pandemic-compliant camp-fire location for 15 gigs. In an era where global corporations dominate the live music sector, boasting their stock listings and running operations obsessed with data, Karsten Jahnke Konzertdirektion and its 45 staff have retained the upper hand in how to react quickly. Or in current parlance: they can do 'agile'. The key thing is their ingenuity which, of course, derives from a huge wealth of experience. "The biggest luck I've had is that all my life I've worked with groups whose music I myself like," says Karsten. His grandson laughs, recalling one or two jazz concerts that were definitely driven more by his grandfather's idealism than by sales figures. The interaction between the senior and junior partners here is relaxed and constructive. They represent two generations that stand for immense change in the industry: from do-it-yourself to the digital age.



And the ways that each of them got into the business reflect perfectly how much the live-music business has changed. As an 18-year-old, Karsten Jahnke, an enthusiastic jazz fan back then as now, thought to himself: "Putting on concerts, that could be something." As the co-organiser of a jazz band ball in 1959, he made eleven Deutsche Marks profit. A year later, his first own concert with singer-songwriter Franz Josef Degenhardt saw him hit with a whopping 800 euros loss. So he thought training as an import and export merchant might be better so as to avoid landing up on the financial scrap heap. When he founded his concert agency in 1962, it was an era of trial and error, and one where things were definitely wild. Karsten can reminisce entertainingly about this time and tells some great anecdotes. Like how he had to drag a drunk Joe Cocker onto the stage. Or the adventurous vibe of the open-air stage of Hamburg's Stadtpark venue looked in the mid-1970s – the company's open-air home for decades. And the weather liked to get in on the act too. "I remember when Jamie Cullum started with Singin' in the Rain as it was pouring down – the place went mad," recalls Jahnke. Magical moments that happen of their own accord and are never forgotten.

The seeking out of this special live energy is something that permanently drives Ben Mitha. But when the grandson was getting to know his grandfather's business in the 90s, the productions were already much more complex and the conditions much stricter. Yet, everything still centred around the trademark family flair. "My green living room was and still is the City Park. My mother used to be on the box office, I would run around and play in the bushes." School holidays saw him working in the company, packing tickets, tidying up the stores. And after graduating from high school, he decided: "This is the kind of work for me." But he had a penchant for keeping on top of things. And keeping a close

eye on the numbers. He studied at Hamburg School of Business Administration, did a merchant training at the company at the same time, joining the management in 2014. “The Covid crisis showed once again that this was exactly the right decision, says Jahnke. There’s a sense of pride in his voice at this. And also a great sense of satisfaction that the matter of his successor is settled, that their self-image as a company of music lovers can live on.



Ben has a clear vision of how he wants to take on the challenges of the live industry. “Of course we use data analysis and digital sales structures: but the concert business is, and remains, a people’s business.” He loves long-term collaborations. In that way, he’s got a nice touch of the old school. And what makes this relationship business work is that they listen to people and do so properly. Karsten is convinced: “An artist can tell if you’re being genuine with them. Like if I don’t just come out with “Awesome concert!” but say instead: Your solo in the fourth song, that was amazing.” His grandfather, on the other hand, is a culture lover through and through, explains Ben, smiles and pours some more green tea. He sees himself more as a businessman. “As a company, we work in a very hands-on way. Of course, you do answer the phone at night sometimes.” It’s about connections and investing time and passion – whether backstage or in the middle of the audience. And after the concert, the real conversations often follow – over dinner, over wine. Grandfather and grandson just have that mark of what used to be called decency, now often termed ‘transparency’. “Back then, it wasn’t unusual for a live venue to get smashed up by people from the audience. You can stop that by going straight on stage when something goes wrong and explain the situation,” says Karsten. Like in the Stadtpark for the American Dance Theatre: the troupe started an hour and a half late and then disappeared after 20 minutes. It was Karsten who smoothed things over. These days events like that would be all over social media in real time. This fast-moving pace has quickened the beat. “We have to be incredibly dynamic,” Ben explains, “in order to foresee such developments.”

What spurs grandfather and grandson endlessly on are the really personal moments of happiness. Karsten remembers Herman van Veen's first concert in 1974 at the Schauspielhaus particularly vividly. “Someone called me and said: You have to go to the Netherlands right away, there’s someone performing, you’ve never seen anything like it.” He didn’t understand a word of Dutch, but he immediately

recognised something: “Herman was an excellent singer, super musician, good dancer and a wonderful person.” And it was a case of seen it, felt it, booked him. He advertised the Hamburg performance using handouts, and it was a memorable success. A milestone

for his grandson was also his own very first major production: a tour with dance hall star Sean Paul in 2012. Selling out a 5,000-seat venue for the first time. And organising everything yourself, from the first booking call to getting the whole thing set up. Then the show itself, the crowd, the sweat, the party. “I was standing on the side of the stage and people were cheering loudly – it was unbelievable, a real goosebumps moment”.



Karsten Jahnke Konzertdirektion has brought together entire generations of music fans. Not forgetting the Reeperbahn Festival: Karsten Jahnke showed great foresight in promoting his vision of an international club festival in Hamburg, especially in the difficult early years. But even in the wake of these successes, humility comes before art itself. And before the teamwork behind every production. “In a quiet moment, we allow ourselves a pat on the back. Especially Karsten for his lifetime achievement” says Ben. But he’s not trying to say that without one of the team, the show can’t go on. “We are one cog in a very big machine. Karsten is confident about the future of his company: “There have been a few cautious takeover requests from larger companies every now and then. But I want to stay independent,” he says – and takes another relaxed sip of that tea.

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