

## Double Standards in the Industry

**I**n the year of 1996, I was elected President of the Black Promoters Association (BPA). This association was formed and established to bring equality and fairness for African American Promoters, in the concert promotion industry.

It was a typical sunny July morning; I woke up in my suburban Atlanta home and laid there in bed thinking. Something was weighing heavily on my mind. Business had been slow, very slow. I couldn't help but think about my future and the future of other black concert promoters. It might have been a sunny morning, but our future was looking dim to say the least. And I knew exactly why our situation had gotten so dim. It appeared to me that the major booking agencies in this country such as Creative Artists Agency (CAA), The William Morris Agency and The Howard Rose Agency (among others) were trying to make black concert promoters extinct!

I got up that morning, got dressed, and as I drove to my office on I-285, I was truly convinced that something sinister was being done to us by these agencies. I was scrambling to find work, and the other black concert promoters were also scrambling to find work, but no one was talking about it. Like any other day, I began calling the other black concert promoters. But this time I wasn't just talking about concerts, I was asking them if they were aware of what was going on. I had a lot of respect for these guys, but they couldn't see it. I saw a scary pattern that was only happening to black concert promoters. Once I realized what was happening, I started looking at the industry very carefully. I detected that the black concert promoters were not being allowed to profit in the industry.

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What was very noticeable was that white concert promoters that had started with us during the same time period were all flourishing. Virtually all of them had become financially sound. I couldn't help but ask myself some questions. "What is causing the disparity?" "Are they better men than we are?" Every time I asked, the answer that would always return was "No." Being a black man in America I couldn't help but ask the next question. "Are they treated differently by the powers that control the entertainment industry?" The powers being, CAA, The William Morris Agency, The Howard Rose Agency, and other booking agencies. The answer that always returned was "Yes."

Like most of my colleagues, I had dedicated my entire adult life to the entertainment industry as a concert promoter. From the age of twenty-four up to the present, all I'd ever done was live, think, eat, and sleep the concert promotion business. For that entire length of time, I had witnessed the civil rights of blacks and minorities being totally violated.

I remember one time during the 90's I asked a booking agency for a date on Madonna in any city I could get her. I knew she would sell every ticket available no matter what city. They laughed. They told me she was working for the same concert promoters that she had always worked for.

There were two sets of rules -- one set of rules for white concert promoters and one set of rules for us, the black concert promoters. From the time I came into this business in 1975, I immediately saw something sinister. Black concert promoters couldn't promote white artists, but white concert promoters could promote any artist, black or white. This policy was in effect then, and believe it or not, even with a Black President in The White House it is still in effect now. The white concert promoters were flourishing because the talent and booking agencies would take the black artists from the black concert

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promoters once they reached what is called “crossover” status. The white concert promoters were doing all the white shows and the most profitable black shows too. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to know that something was wrong with this equation. I have often said that when the powers of this industry are behind closed doors, they must say we are a group of stupid people, because we allow them to do to us what they would never allow anyone to do to them.

For instance, in the early 70’s Lionel Richie and The Commodores first started together out of Tuskegee, Alabama. Before white concert promoters knew what a Commodore was, black concert promoters were the ones that promoted and nurtured them. We promoted them nationally and helped to launch their successful careers. After leaving The Commodores, Lionel Richie became a “crossover artist” and also became a client of The Howard Rose Agency. He then was taken away from black concert promoters and given to white concert promoters to reap the benefits of his successful career. No white artist in history has ever been taken away from white concert promoters and the white community and then given to black concert promoters and the black community to enjoy or reap the profits of their success.

Let’s take Barbara Streisand for example, a white Jewish entertainer. If she decided that she was going to betray her own race of people, tour for black concert promoters, and allow the black community to profit from her success, she wouldn’t only be “blackballed”, we would probably find her in a ditch somewhere soon after this decision was made. But she would never commit to such a betrayal. Black entertainers seem to think its okay to do this, even though they never see this type of betrayal by any other race of people but their own. I have said many times that until this industry decides to do business

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without regard to one's race or religion, black people as a whole must wake up and stop this exploitation.

I will always have love and the highest level of respect and admiration for the legendary singing group The Isley Brothers. This group has been in existence for a half a century. During this time they have sold millions and millions of records, but have never received the recognition that they should have. That is because they have always refused to allow themselves to be owned, controlled, or manipulated by the powers of the entertainment industry. We should all applaud The Isley Brothers.

By the early 90's, black concert promoters were getting only a few black shows. I have always felt that the injustice in this business comes from the dominance, control, and conspiracy orchestrated mainly by CAA and The William Morris Agency. I strongly believe that these companies discriminate and violate the civil rights of many Americans as they see fit, simply because of their race.

Most people don't realize that the concert promotion industry remains one of the few long-standing segregated industries in our nation. Unlike other industries where the various parts of that industry form a well-integrated structure, the booking agency industry does not. This is the only industry where "the Jim Crow law" still exists. I have always noticed that blacks and minorities working at CAA and The William Morris Agency are grossly under represented at the professional and managerial levels. They are rarely equitably employed and never given positions of power or authority. These agencies may have a black person in the mailroom or a black agent, but that agent can only book black artists. I have never known of a black agent that booked white artists at CAA, The William Morris Agency or The Howard Rose Agency. Blacks are not put

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in these positions for obvious reasons by these agencies. Black concert promoters aren't given the opportunity by these agencies to enter into any type of contractual agreement to promote concerts featuring white artists. This has been the status quo for African Americans and minorities in the concert promotion industry for decades, *no exceptions made!* During my days in school, I was taught that in pursuing your goals in life you were able to go as far as your work ethic and dreams would allow. This is not true if you are an African American in the concert promotion industry.

By the 90's, while other aspects of American life had moved past this type of racist behavior, the entertainment industry had not. In this great country of ours, you have the right to choose your business, but as a business owner you do not have a right to choose the color of people you do business with. CAA, The William Morris Agency, The Howard Rose Agency, and other booking agencies have always ignored this fact. They still operate by the discriminatory and segregationist policies of the past. These types of injustices and civil rights violations have continued to fester in recent years.

Racism of this type has become more sophisticated, but it is no different than what I saw growing up in the South. No other industry in America so openly operates on such a racial level as this one. Let's take the real estate business. Years ago, when black people wanted to purchase a home and the realtor only showed them houses in black neighborhoods, the federal government intervened and called it "redlining." But that's exactly what the booking agencies did then and still do now. If I or any black concert promoter called CAA, The William Morris Agency, or any of the top booking agencies and asked for an artist for any given date, the booking agent would go down his or her black artist roster and read every name that was available

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for that date. What they won't do is go down the white artist roster and give us the availability of the white artists that are also available for that date. This is also "redlining." To put it simply, this is also discrimination.

My friends listen to me and listen to me carefully; do not be deceived. I have seen unusually deceptive tactics used by CAA and The William Morris Agency. They will go to great lengths to hide and camouflage their racism and discrimination. But make no mistake about it and do not be fooled. Racism is woven and embedded in the practices and policies of these agencies.

In my opinion, having evaluated what I have observed over the past thirty-five years, it's my belief that these booking agencies and white concert promoters also operate an illegal conspiracy in the concert promotion industry of America. Each major market in the United States is controlled essentially by one primary promoter. That promoter has always been of the white race. Simply stated by Alex Cooley, a white concert promoter located in Atlanta, "What we have is a 'good ole boys' network."

These agencies have never allowed a black person to be a part of this exclusive "good ole boys" conspiracy network. Blacks are never trusted to that degree by these agencies. These white concert promoters and their identities are well known among all the major booking agencies. When a white artist or a high profile black artist is represented by CAA, The William Morris Agency, or The Howard Rose Agency and wants to go on a national tour or stage a concert, there is no competitive bidding process. These agents book these dates and tours with the dominant concert promoter in that market. The relationships between these booking agencies and the dominant concert promoter in each region are virtually unbreakable.

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This industry is dominated, controlled, and monopolized by a handful of giant booking agencies, namely CAA and The William Morris Agency. I have never seen any sensitivity or interest in fairness for black concert promoters or the black business communities come from these agencies. They have always operated virtually free of federal regulations, government intervention, or public pressure. These powerful booking agencies believe that because this type of racism in the music industry has existed for so many years, it should still be okay for it to continue to exist now. I think they believe that as long as they can keep it hidden, it's fine to discriminate and to ignore the current civil rights laws of this country. I can't help but ask myself why our government refuses to look this way or to assign the justice department to oversee this corruption filled industry.

These agencies have kept their corrupt practices silent through their intimidation. This corruption and conspiracy has been maintained by fear. There is always the fear of one losing any prospect of a future in the entertainment industry, so most people think it's best to keep silent. These agencies also make annual contributions to civil rights organizations such as The Urban League, NAACP, and The Martin Luther King Center. This is done to camouflage their discrimination and to keep them off the civil rights organization hit list. By receiving sizeable donations, I believe these organizations are most likely to ignore the wrongdoings of these talent and booking agencies.

Now that the situation was very clear to me, I had to do something. Later that year in the fall of 1996, I called for a meeting to be held in Atlanta. About ten of us from all over the country met to discuss the problems we were all facing as black concert promoters. About three or four of them had already gone out of business and were no longer promoting. It was a

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serious time for us. We were desperate. I didn't know what to do or say at that time, but I did know one thing, something had to be done and done fast if we were going to survive. Some black concert promoters had lost their homes, their families, and their businesses. I understood because one of the most painful situations I have had to experience over the years was the laying off of my own employees who were like family to me. This lay-off happened solely because we were being denied equal opportunity by the top booking agencies in America, namely CAA, The William Morris Agency, and The Howard Rose Agency. We weren't allowed to promote certain concerts solely because of our race.

At that very same meeting, I was elected as president of the Black Promoters Association (BPA). This organization was started to promote the interests of black promoters, to open the industry to free competition, and to eliminate racial discrimination. We all felt that this organization was very much needed at that time. The powerful booking agencies hated this organization because it showed togetherness on our part and gave us strength. They wanted to make sure that we always stayed divided. These agencies never wanted black concert promoters to be friends or to show any type of camaraderie. The way they did this was by keeping us at odds with one another. How it's done is by selling a black concert promoter out of Washington, D.C., a show in Atlanta where another black concert promoter lived and worked, and then giving the Atlanta promoter a show in Detroit where another black concert promoter lived and worked. This caused resentment among each other. For years we all knew they were playing us against each other, but the industry kept us so financially strained that it was hard to turn these shows down. White concert promoters were given a monopoly in their markets. They owned the unspoken right to that territory – no if, ands, or buts about it. The industry



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didn't allow any intervention between the white concert promoters. It was very clever what they were doing.

These agencies operate like in the days of organized crime when the mob controlled garbage collection and construction, among other industries. They did not need nor did they solicit competition; they were able to raise prices as they saw fit. Competition is never welcomed in an industry that is being controlled by an entity or totally dominated by a syndicate of people.

Our meeting had been a long time coming. Before it was over, I stood before everyone and gave my solemn promise to do everything within my power to better our situation. I told them that I would work diligently to fight the injustice and discrimination that we all had faced for so many years. We decided that we were going to stand up and collectively fight this corruption, collusion, and racial discrimination together.

About this same time, in the fall of 1996, we learned that recording star Toni Braxton was planning to tour with the highly successful artist, Kenny G. I had joined with Al Haymon to promote Toni Braxton the previous year on a tour with Frankie Beverly. Now she had become a huge success and was now being booked by The William Morris Agency. As always, she was being taken away from us, as other black artists had been in the past, after reaching star status, and given to the white concert promoters. I felt that the black concert promoters should have received the same opportunity to be involved again as white concert promoters were given when they had previously promoted an artist. This was the norm in the industry with white concert promoters. I knew there would be a problem. The headline artist, Kenny G, a White artist who was booked by CAA, was also on the bill. Therefore, neither Haymon nor I received a call concerning the tour. CAA was the agency in charge of booking the tour.

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I decided to call CAA and inquire why black concert promoters were excluded from participation. The person that was head of the music department, Rob Light, and the responsible agent, Mike Piranian, advised me that all of the dates had been sold. I asked why we were not called or given the opportunity to participate as white concert promoters had been given. They refused to answer. They spoke to me like I was being a pest. During that conversation the agent, Mike Piranian, made a remark to me that I will never forget. He said in an angry tone, "I am sick of you guys!" I wondered what guys he was referring to and why he would say that. Was it because we were trying to make a living? Was it because we wanted to be treated fairly? Or was it because of the color of our skin?

I later placed a call to Toni Braxton's management. This is when I first met her manager, the infamous Randy Phillips. After I got to know him and he got to know me, he shot straight with me as much as he could. I seriously voiced my concerns about what was happening to the black concert promoters. I informed him that I had been involved with promoting her previous tour. I explained to him that we have decided that the only recourse that we had was to picket and boycott the shows. He quietly listened and when I finished he said he would look into it and contact me later. I received a call a few days later from the responsible agent, Mike Piranian, advising me in a disgusted tone of voice, that he had received a call from Ms. Braxton's manager. He informed me that the dates were priced at \$225,000 to \$275,000 per show and if we wanted to be involved I needed to send in a fifty percent deposit.

After doing the math, I saw that the shows would have to sell out to make a minimal profit. The risk was too great. I thought this may have been one of the old tricks that they have always used in the past to deter black concert promoter participation,

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but I wasn't sure. By this time, I wasn't feeling very good about the situation. I asked why we would have to send in a deposit when the shows were already on sale. He had no choice but to agree. They allowed me and the other black concert promoters to participate as a one-third partner in ten shows of the forty date tour. We were also allowed to choose the dates that we wanted to participate in. I didn't feel having involvement in only ten dates was fair, but something was better than nothing. And at the time, we needed something.

From October through December of 1996, I personally attended all ten shows that we were allowed to participate in. I also conducted settlement on our behalf. The look on the face of each white concert promoter as I arrived told me that they resented me being there. That was okay because I felt strongly that we had a right to be there. Some treated me with respect, such as Jules Belkin of Belkin Productions in Ohio and Irv Zuckerman of Contemporary Productions in St. Louis. Others tried to cheat me out of the one-third portion that we were due, like Rick Franks of Cellar Door in Detroit. How they would do this is by pretending that the profits were less than they were. The way this is done is by falsely inflating the show's expenses.

What I learned and observed during the course of these shows sickened me to the highest degree. I was never the same again. The artist payment guarantee per show was not \$225,000 to \$275,000 as was told to the black concert promoters. It was only \$150,000 to \$175,000 per show for the white concert promoters. I also learned that none of the white concert promoters had been required to pay a 50% deposit of \$137,500 per show, as we were required to do. The deposit for them varied from zero to 10%, (\$17,500) of the guarantee. We had been bamboozled and tricked for decades by CAA and The William Morris Agency; I became sick to my stomach knowing what they had done to us for so many years.

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From 1997 to 1998, I wrote letter after letter to CAA, The William Morris Agency, and The Howard Rose Agency as president of the Black Promoters Association. I pleaded for a meeting of some sort so that we could discuss the problems we were enduring and had been enduring for the past decades. My letters all went unanswered. I knew then that they had no intentions of working this or anything out with us.