



Robert Spencer for The New York Times

Having invited the audience onstage, Bella Vox of the Los Angeles band Thornbird performed "Sweet Home Alabama" for college students.

Trying to Become a Big Act on Campus

By DAN MORRELL

MARLBOROUGH, Mass. — Like many musicians, Bella Vox is also a salesman, and a good one. Onstage in front of about 1,100 college students on a recent Friday night at the Best Western Royal Plaza Trade Center here, Mr. Vox — the lead guitarist and vocalist for the Los Angeles-based band Thornbird — pilots the trio through its pitch: straightforward rock 'n' roll perfect for an attention-deficient 18-to-22-year-old crowd.

Thornbird opens the set with a metal version of Britney Spears's "Baby One More Time" and closes with Lynyrd Skynyrd's

Booking Opportunity For Crowd Pleasers

"Sweet Home Alabama," sandwiching accessible pop rock originals in between. Mr. Vox skips through the audience during songs, throws the guitar behind his head for a solo, and eventually invites the crowd gathered at the foot of the stage to join in the spotlight. These customers, many dressed in matching shirts proclaiming allegiance to their respective colleges, dance wildly about the stage, unconcerned with rock clichés.

By the end of the night, Thornbird has about a dozen potential college bookings lined up across the Northeast, a number that will swell to well more than 30 in just two days. For a band without the backing of major label money or any record sales to speak of, these shows represent a livelihood and, maybe, the path to the next level.

The captive and lucrative audiences for their wares are attendees of a National Association for Campus Activities (NACA) regional conference, former proving grounds for the likes of Jimmy Buffett, Simon and Garfunkel and Jon Stewart.

"I remember going to one of these conven-

Continued on Page 14

Trying to Become a Big Act on Campus at a Market for Crowd Pleasers

Continued From First Arts Page

tions in the 1970's, and Earth, Wind & Fire and Tony Orlando and Dawn were there, and Billy Joel was doing a small showcase," said Dennis Haskins, the actor best known for playing the character of Mr. Belding in the 1980's sitcom "Saved by the Bell," on his way into the Trade Center in Marlborough.

Mr. Haskins, who has offered his mixture of "Saved by the Bell" trivia and motivational leadership talks to campus buyers at association conferences for the last three years, was a student buyer himself as a student at the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga. He said the explosion of media since then explained why more national music acts are not taking the stage at association conventions. "Now those big-name acts don't have to use this medium to get exposure anymore," he said.

The association is still the king of the campus market, though. The group claims among its members about 1,000 of the more than 4,000 two- and four-year institutions of higher education across the country. The largest collegiate booking organization in the country, the association has a virtual monopoly on the college activities scene.

Entertainers pay the association several hundred dollars in membership and application fees for the chance to perform for a crew of excitable college students who have thousands of dollars of campus activities funds to spend. In turn, colleges and universities pay several hundred dollars to gain this firsthand access to a wide range of entertainment options, available at a reduced cost. The price break is a result of the cooperative buying method that the nonprofit association has employed since its inception in the early 1960's: Thornbird usually charges \$2,000 a gig, but if three schools in close proximity can match up their schedules and put together a string of three shows during a five-day period, the price drops to \$1,300. Another hundred drops off if five schools can plan a seven-day swing.

Not every act gets to take the stage. A 10-member committee of student volunteers and professional staff members at association headquarters in Columbia, S.C., decides which entertainers are worthy of a 20-minute full-stage set in addition to the convention booth granted to every accepted magician, musician or lecturer. This collection of more than 130 booths is set up in a room next to



Above, Fitz Harris, left, and Jason Liles of Pie Boys Flat; top right, Rory Raven, who calls himself a mentalist; and lower right, Patrick Simmons of Thornbird. All were trying to attract students who seek acts to sign for their campuses at a conference of the National Association for Campus Activities in Marlborough, Mass.



Photographs by Robert Spencer for The New York Times

the stage.

In its booth, Thornbird attempts to lure the hungry by baking chocolate chip cookies in an oversize toaster oven, the smell of which competes with the scent of doughnuts cooking

Musicians, magicians and lecturers pay for a booking opportunity.

at a nearby booth. The band contends for campus activities funds against entertainment ranging from Thomas Bresadola, billed as "The Master of Hypnosis," to an interactive video game called "Dance Dance Revolution Extreme." Nearby, the comedi-

an Jim Breuer, a former association headliner, plugs his new Sirius satellite radio show by handing out T-shirts and lanyards as a goateed man in a purple zoot suit zips up the aisle on a motorized toilet.

The association is an investment for these independent artists. "It cost us about \$4,000 to attend three NACA conferences," said Fitz Harris of Pie Boys Flat, a Queens-based, reggae-influenced band, but it has booked 12 shows as a result of the conferences the band has attended this year. "And so far we've doubled our money in bookings."

The money may be there, but not every association show will guarantee a new flock of fans, said Shawn Radley, manager for the singer Howie Day. Mr. Day played the association circuit from 1998 to 2001 and did not always end up performing for

rapt audiences on campus. "Half of the time, you're playing in a cafeteria — where the kid cares more about the slice of pizza in front of him than who's playing," Mr. Radley said from his office in Boston.

What will help you break through, said Lance Hughes, president of the OnCampus Booking talent agency, is using the income from association shows to supplement the necessary \$50-a-night opening gigs for larger artists in areas where a performer does not have a fan base. "In order to build markets, you need to play clubs," he said. "With college shows, you get the students for two years and then they're gone."

Mr. Day used the association as a meal ticket while he pursued club tours. Mr. Radley said money from the association's bookings also helped Mr. Day record his debut al-

bum, "Australia," in 2000, which was later picked up by Epic Records when he signed with them a year later.

For all of the college students that these bands attract at association conferences, none of the artists seem to be interested in charting on college radio. "NACA and college radio are completely separate entities," Mr. Radley said. Pat Simmons, drummer for Thornbird, attributed this disconnect to the two very different markets on campuses. "The student activities kids are not the ones with their finger on the pulse," he said, noting that the college radio crowd generally consists of the band-of-the-week, hipster aesthete types. "The campus activities kids are looking for something that is visually stimulating and can move a crowd."

Nikki Salzman, Jill Edinburg and

Olga Shapiro, student buyers from Brandeis University, were searching among the booths for just such a band for their spring concert. "I really liked the way they interacted with the crowd," Ms. Salzman said of Thornbird. The band's offstage charm also went a long way with the women. "They're really nice guys, too," Ms. Edinburg said after a brief encounter with the trio at their booth.

With college shows scheduled well into the spring, Thornbird is content with its position. As Mr. Vox accepted handshakes and compliments outside the Royal Trade Plaza after Thornbird's showcase performance, two college-age women passed by, enthusiastically informing him that his band rocked. He smiled with his tongue out, flashing devil horns with both of his hands. "We just keep on rowing, man."