



# Opening at the Crystal



*"Do it for the love of it, from your heart."  
-from Fred Cole's "Indie Rock List of Do's & Don'ts"*

## **So Many Bands, So Little Time**

We receive calls every week from bands offering to play a support spot on a Crystal Ballroom bill. While an opening gig in a room this size seems like a great opportunity, there are many considerations that bands should make before they volunteer their talents. We make a point of hosting a variety of new local talent, and have found that an opening set works best for both artist and house if the band has done some initial development of its audience. This article describes the elements involved in playing support on a Crystal Ballroom bill, but it also applies to many other rooms of our capacity throughout the show-biz realm. By our way of thinking, an opener is not a "time-filler" but rather a relevant and important part of every show; we hope that what follows will be helpful in making your act a part of our productions.

## **Movin' on Up**

The first important question a band needs to ask before vying for an opening spot is what its expectations are. Often bands hope to receive a lot of exposure by playing in front of a popular band. Quite honestly, however, the actual results can be disappointing. The huge majority of Crystal shows begin at 9pm, which is a little early for those who are coming solely to see the headliner. Many times we have witnessed newer bands playing in front of a small handful of people, most of them hanging out in the rear of the ballroom waiting for "things to get going." In these instances the band feels like they didn't get an honest shot at exposure, the crowd is indifferent to the act, and the Crystal staff feels bad. These are situations to avoid! Obviously, therefore, a band needs to have a certain "X-factor" of Portland crowd development before we can crank them up at the Crystal. To have a basic core of enthusiastic fans that come early to catch your set strengthens the whole event. Energy in the room starts churning right off the bat, early-comers for the headliner see that the opener has its own cool thing going, and the band has a lot more fun. So the best strategy for an under-exposed band is to simply keep doing what it's doing, which is playing gigs. One of our own smaller music venues may suit a developing band, or some of the other fine clubs in town might be better. Wherever it is, the best success comes from finding a niche, cultivating it, playing your heart out and having a good time.

## **Know Your Neighbor**

When you've found yourself attracting an optimal draw, the time is ripe for bringing your act to the Ballroom. You've also probably found yourself chumming up with other acts over time, some of which may be playing the Ballroom regularly. This is where the

strong Portland music community comes in to play. Part of our routine when booking local bands as headliners is to ask them what openers they'd like to stage with them. We feel that part of what makes a great show is a musical consistency and a feeling of good will between all bands involved, and this booking technique helps ensure that. Also, if the headliner knows your act, their audience probably knows you too and will make an effort to come down early to catch you. Everybody wins! Getting a support spot with a fellow-band that plays here is a great way to go. If you have these connections, put them to use and remember to help somebody else down the line when you're the latest Big Band In Portland.

### **Playing with Musicians that Ride Around on Big Busses**

The opening spot for a national touring act is usually reserved for bands that have already played a strong spot on a previous Crystal billing. Even this is rare, as quite often a band will be touring with their own support act, or have an opener already decided by their agency. In that situation we're at the whim of the artist. But when we can play a role in picking, we typically opt for bands that will 1) get the most out of the opportunity, 2) complement the show's personality, and 3) bolster the show's attendance with some of their own fans.

### **One Gig at a Time**

The bottom line is actually quite simple. With some exceptions, it rarely does a band any good to play rooms that are much bigger than their existing draws. A strategy of consistent playing in houses that suit your audience will, if all goes well, lead naturally to rooms the size of the Crystal. Rather than leaping blindly into the "big gigs," following the logical progression of your successes will help you focus on what's really important - playing hard, playing honest, and letting the music do the work. While the roads to success don't all lead through the Crystal Ballroom, we're eager to play whatever part we can to help the local music scene thrive. We're looking forward to meeting you when our roads cross.