



Waiting for Febo to open, in Amsterdam while recording at IJland studio, 2021 (Tom Beer)

DISCOVER EFFORTLESS TOURING

York indie quartet Bull was formed in 2011 and has played over 100 shows abroad. Lead singer Tom Beer knows everything about touring on a budget, slowly attracting bigger crowds, and the advantage of a booking agent. If there is one thing you could learn from him it's that there's always a way to find shows in any country. →



*'We bought all the
bus fares in advance
with money made from
busking'*



Texas, 2018 (John Pearson)

Top:

Austrian Alps, day off tour with The Districts, filming music video in the snow, 2022 (Tom Beer)

Next down:

Taken in Paris by kind stranger, 2022

Next Down:

Still from upcoming music video, Paris on the Seine 2022

Next Down:

Dan in Amsterdam early morning guitar Jesus, 2019 (Tom Beer)

Bottom:

Paris, busking trip with Emma and Mo, 2017 (kind stranger)

How many tours outside the UK have you done?

'Something like six or seven. We have been to The Netherlands many more times as we decided to do all our recording in Amsterdam. We've played in Hungary, Denmark, France, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, Czech Republic, Ireland, and the USA.'

Were any of these tours ever profitable?

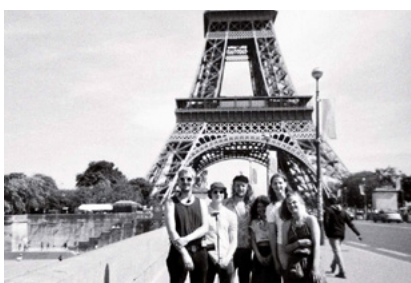
'Hard to say, a little bit but not even remotely close to any kind of minimum wage. On our very first tour we made enough money to eat like kings though. We were treated extremely well in Amsterdam, Paris, and Prague, and everywhere else we made enough busking to have a jolly old time! And we sold lots of CDs. So, I'd say we at least broke even. Most bus fares place to place were €10 - €15 per person...'

What was this first European tour like?

'This first European tour we went on we were about 20 years old; I think. We did the tour on the Megabus (now Flixbus) and brought with us two small cheap busking amps and mini drum kit which we attached to a set of upright wheels. I had an acoustic and an electric guitar in one case. We also had batteries for the amps and leads, et cetera. This meant we could play venues with backline and also busk in the street for money. Or fame.'

How long did this tour last?

'We ended up staying there for seven weeks and played lots of gigs, open mics, and busking. We bought all the bus fares in advance with money made from any paying gigs at home plus busking. We never took money from the band - or very rarely. In the UK we'd



get plain fuck all, like £50 was a good night, but with busking we could sometimes make a lot, like £1000 in one session. All money would go into the pot, mostly to spend on recording our first album and then on the bus and train fares for our "tours".'

Apart from the busking, how did you get shows?

'We emailed many, many people and managed to book about six proper shows. So that was major DIY touring. Not profitable but self-sufficient. And very fun! At least when you're twenty and don't have any other responsibilities.'

Did you do any more tours like this after that first one?

'Yeah, we changed lineup and to celebrate we got the bus to France. We went busking and did some band bonding. Next, we booked plane tickets to Hamburg. £2 Ryan Air flights or something obscene. Top tip: to save money flying with instruments, we put them all on aforementioned upright wheels and wrapped them in plastic so they could go as one item. We emailed lots of places but couldn't get any gigs in Hamburg. We got the bus to Berlin; there we had a little more luck: walking around with our "skiffle band" portable setup we managed to play three or four gigs in the corner of bars. They paid us a little bit and gave us beers. As a result, we chance met the bands Canshaker Pi and Spiral Stairs of Pavement.'

That sounds like a challenging tour...

'This tour wasn't profitable, BUT it's a good example of how taking a chance and embracing an adventurous spirit can lead to great things.'



We Squash protest against deforestation, impromptu street performance in Amsterdam, 2019 (Sam ten Thij)

Because of our meeting with Canshaker Pi we would start to play proper paid shows in the Netherlands. And through Spiral Stairs we met producer Remko Schouten who we have since recorded two albums with.'

Did you ever tour outside of Europe?

'Yes, the next tour we went on was in the USA. Through lots of DIY and family help we managed to organise this tour. And it would have been profitable if our bus hadn't died.

A friend of Spiral Stairs runs a label in Austin and offered us two shows during the SXSW festival. Unofficial side party stuff, I'm talking at a kebab restaurant called Kebabalicious and another at a brewery.

We managed to get Norwegian Air flights for £180 each return and we hit the button. I then emailed venues between Boston and Austin and back to Pittsburgh in a loop and we played something like 30 shows in six weeks. Our bassist Kai's sister is American and without her there's no way we could have done it. We gave her about two grand which went towards an ex-school bus she bought to drive us in.

We were making about \$200-\$400 a night and people were being super generous, stuff like the local bands would insist we take their part of the fee. We also manufactured loads of merch out there which sold really well. When the school bus died, we spent all our money trying to fix it.'

You did all this without a booking agent, when did that change?

'After the USA tour, we did the Dutch tour, then we signed to EMI. We were given the advance for our album: £20,000 which covered our recording costs and bought us a van. Getting our own van was a big BIG change and meant we

'Because of our meeting with Canshaker Pi we would start to play proper paid shows in the Netherlands'

If you want to know why I'm waving at Left of the Dial, go to YouTube and search for Bull - Disco Living



would start travelling with backline. The van cost about £5,000 maybe £6,000 including all taxes and insurance.

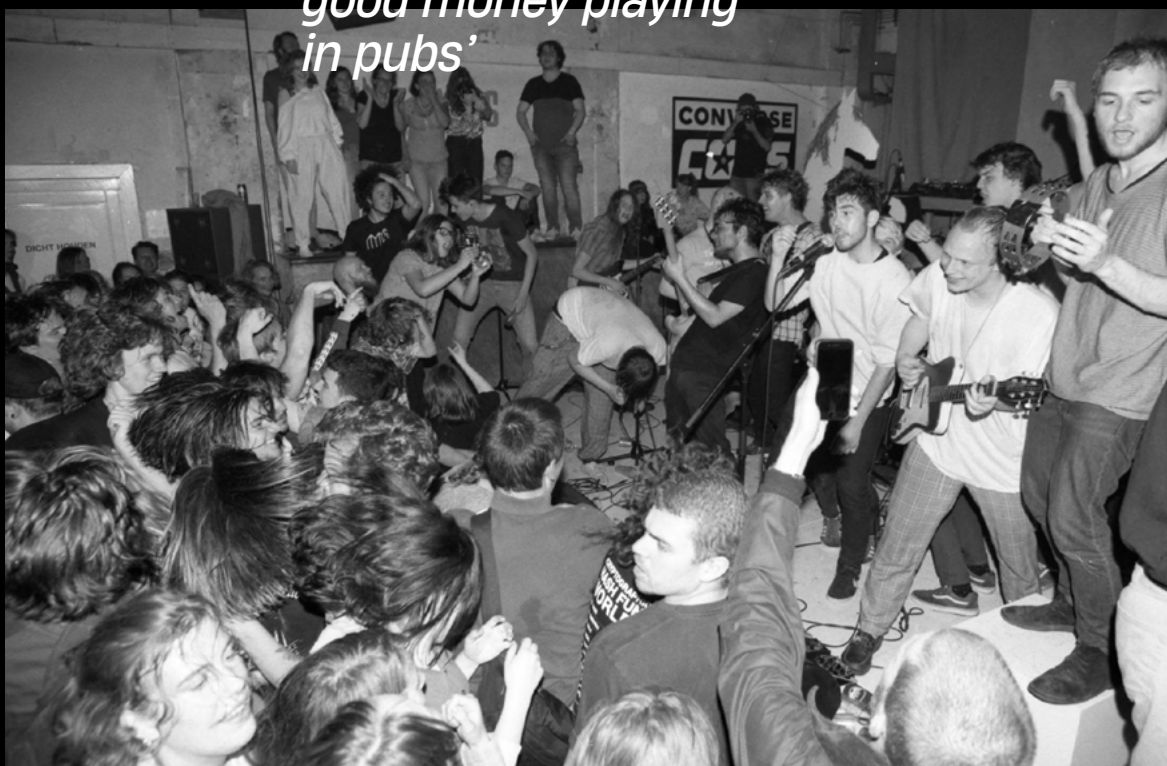
Then, after being a band already for eight or nine years or something, we got a booking agent for the first time. and it all became much easier. And probably more profitable. There are still times when it's good for the band to approach a venue. For example, our show at Paradiso on our album tour I sort of booked because I believed it would work. But generally booking agent tours are much easier and smoother.

So, our tours have been somewhat profitable since then. Unless you count our most recent break-even support tour where you receive something like €100-€150 a night. For tours of this nature, you may get to play to more people, but only break even (if that) and that's if you're selling lots of merch and have your own van.'

What's the difference between touring in the UK and touring the rest of Europe?

'European standards are generally much higher than the UK. Even at a big show in the UK you'll just get a cynical buyout most of the time. In mainland Europe we found people would take really good care of us, even at smaller shows. And the bigger venues are amazing and often have in house kitchens with fantastic fresh food and sometimes even offer accommodation. Such as Vera, Rotown, Paradiso, really almost all in the Netherlands, but also many we've found in France and Belgium. Less so in Germany from our experience, but still nice snack food. A huge difference for us - as beer fans - is in the UK we might get two beer tokens for two warm bottles of Carlsberg Export, if you're lucky. In Europe, there's generally a feeling of cultural hospitality and if the beer runs →

*'You can make
good money playing
in pubs'*



Skatecafe, Canshaker Pi Fest.
Canshaker Pi, Bull and more play a
chaotic version of Jals, 2019
(Bibian Bingen for Vice NL)

out the venue manager is usually happy to provide a bit more. I know it seems small, but it's a sign that artists are far more appreciated there.'

How did Brexit affect touring for you? After 2020 bands were worried they'd all need a carnet to enter and leave the EU. Did you get one?

'We originally paid for a carnet. This was expensive like £600. We did the listing of things we had in the van and filled out some forms and then a company raised the carnet for us. Which

was nearly rejected meaning we had to wait hours and hours in trucker purgatory, and we nearly missed our Paradiso show. Since then, we've not bothered. Those rules aren't for small touring bands, no one gives a shit. They're for lorries moving 5,000kg of olives or something. We're not making any money, we're not hurting anyone, we get waved through.'

Do you have any other advice for UK bands planning their first European tour?

'I guess depends how well known you are. If you were like us, very young and very not well known just work any connection you got! And do it on the bus! Although Flixbus are being dicks making people pay extra for carrying musical instruments, bastards....

Best piece of advice I ever got was to follow up on your emails. People are busy, keep reminding them, check in, be friendly, polite, and helpful but persistent! Find places to play looking at other bands tour posters. Smaller the better. Don't pay for accommodation but if you do: Air B&B off the motorway. Always take everything from the rider to eat the next day. Busk. Get a sign with the band's Instagram and shit. But more than that it's a real-life connection, person to person experiences game, so have fun, meet nice people, and do great things!'

And some specific advice for European bands who want to play the UK?

'You can make good money playing in pubs. Often much, much better than "proper" music venues. If they say online, they have "live music" and you have a van and can travel with the works, so to speak, then you can make some good cash this way. Especially when you also do some covers. Tell them you'll play for three to four hours, and you want £600-£1,000. They just might do it.

If you want to play music venues: cold emails and keep following up.

And if you're a more serious band that people have heard of, go the smart way. Play cool venues that other cool bands are playing. Get funding from your government if you can. Play small, but credible venues first as you release music. Places like The Adelphi (Hull), Ramsgate Music Hall (Ramsgate), Trades Club (Hebden Bridge), Hug and Pint (Glasgow), or Windmill Brixton (London), copy tours of other bands!

Or take the DIY route, if you dig, there are amazing little venues and nights in smaller towns all around the UK, they will earn you die-hard fans! These people will travel to the bigger cities to see you if you can get a booking agent organised tour once you've released an album or something.

Oh, and eat cheap at Wetherspoons (beer and burger £6). Morrisons supermarket cafe breakfast is good to get petrol and sit down breakfast for about £5. There are many ways to do it. But don't listen to me I have no idea!' 🐼



2020 (Esme Mai)