

Ian Copeland: King of the Low-Budget Tours

By JEFFREY PEISCH

■ Two-and-a-half years ago Ian Copeland, then working for the Paragon agency in Macon, Georgia, brought a handful of little-known British bands to the U.S. and sent them on low-budget tours with no support from their labels. These bands—the Police, Squeeze, Buzzcocks—are now high record company priorities and sell out 2000-seat venues. Copeland's method of touring proved so successful that he now handles 35 acts in the same fashion. His philosophy is that the "road should pay for the road" and that a tour should not be dependent on label support. This practice came at a time when labels were drastically cutting tour support—indeed the budget slashes were one of the reasons for Copeland to seek his alternative method—and gave several bands exposure that they might not have received. Equally important, a new network of dance-rock clubs has risen throughout the country that feature bands booked by Copeland and others who have used his methods. Last fall, after the demise of Paragon, Copeland moved to New York and started Frontier Booking International. Working with John Huie, VP of the agency, Copeland has become a major force in the industry. In the following dialogue Copeland discusses his early tours, his enthusiasm for the music he works with, and the problems he faces as his bands grow.



Ian Copeland

Record World: You weren't raised in the U.S. were you?

Ian Copeland: I was born in Damascus, Syria and I grew up all over the place. My father helped form the CIA and worked in the foreign service. We went from one embassy to another: three years in Egypt, six years in Beirut; every time there was a revolution we would go home to England, our home base. I guess I grew up mostly in Beirut. There was no TV and the only radio was the BBC world service, so all I ever heard was top-20. I got involved with the local rock scene in Beirut and was in a band until I got my finger cut off. I couldn't play so my brother (Stewart) joined the band as drummer.

RW: You worked for the Paragon agency in Georgia before starting your own company.

Copeland: I moved here three years ago after working with my brother (Miles Copeland) in England. He was managing and I was working as an agent. I was hired by Paragon to expand the agency beyond its southern rock format. I used my connections in England and brought in Frankie Miller; his first tour was a turning point for my policy on booking; it taught me a lot. Whenever I'd book an act that was basically a record company project, the label pulled all the strings because it was their money we were spending. We put Miller on tour, supporting one band or another, occasionally headlining, but the record company was only interested in how many people he played to. The bigger date we put him on as a support act, the happier the record company was. With Frankie Miller's second tour, the places where I was getting interest were not the places where he had opened up on a big bill the first time, but were the places where he had headlined at a small club on a Monday night in between the big dates with Charlie Daniels. At the small places, I could bring Miller back in, get a decent guarantee, and I'd know exactly what the band was worth because I knew what they drew the last time. If they played to 10,000 people on a Charlie Daniels gig how would I know how many of those people came to see the band; I'd have no way of knowing, so the next time they'd be in the market, they're still an unknown. That helped me decide how to go about touring with the other bands I was to bring here.

RW: You didn't consciously sit down and think up your alternative method for touring though. You didn't have a choice. A&M didn't give you any money for the initial tours by Police and

Squeeze.

Copeland: Yes, we (Miles and I) did think it out. There was no band in America that I wanted to put Squeeze on a tour with. In fact, later, when we tried, after I'd done it my way once, and the record company was interested and wanted to do it their way, we did put them on tour with the Tubes, and it was just as I had feared it would be—it was the wrong audience. So I did try it their way. I'm not just trying to do things my way and saying the hell with their way. I've tried it both ways and it works better my way. The only bands that were on tour then—that had space for a support act—were boring old fart rock bands, and the Police and Squeeze just didn't fit.

RW: A&M didn't give you support with the first Squeeze tour, but with the Tubes they gave you support?

Copeland: Yes, because that was the way they had always done it in the past. They were playing to more people, therefore, theoretically, they should sell more albums.

RW: During the first tours of Squeeze, Ultravox, the Police and others, there were very few clubs where these band could play.

Copeland: There was CBGB in New York, the Rat in Boston, the Hot Club in Philadelphia, the Edge in Toronto, and whatever would scramble in between. L.A. was happening but there was nothing in between. As soon as you had to fly to L.A. then it was a big cost. Our first few tours—Ultravox, Chelsea, Squeeze—we just did the east coast. Initially, a lot of people did me favors in places where there was no real interest in my bands.

RW: What happened when you approached traditional clubs for dates?

“ I feel that what I'm doing now is going to affect the majority of Americans over the next ten years. ”

Copeland: While I was doing all this, my main job, what paid my wages, was booking Sea Level, Heartsfield and the others for Paragon. So I was dealing with Allan Pepper, Ron Delsener and Bill Graham, but they weren't interested, mainly because the bands that I was pushing were not ready for their interests. They weren't big enough. Some of the time I'd offer the traditional rock clubs a Sea Level date if they'd take a Squeeze date. I tried them because I dealt with them anyway. It turned out that the people that I was dealing with for Sea Level were not the people that I would deal with for the newer bands, so I went and found the people that were into the new music and made them instrumental.

RW: Specifically, how did you make the contacts, and how did these clubs arise.

Copeland: The people that were interested in the groups I had, if they had tried to call Jeff Franklin, Frank Barsalona or other top agents, they wouldn't have gotten anywhere. Those agencies were used to dealing only with the top promoter and would work down from there. A lot of the people I worked with who liked new wave, went to the trouble of finding me. I'd set up dates in the major cities that had scenes going, and then I'd call up a promoter in an in between city, say in New Haven, and he'd say 'I never heard of Squeeze, I'll put them on a date with UFO.' I'd say no, the band is totally different music. He'd say 'what do you mean, it's all rock and roll.' I'd say that's where you're wrong, it's a totally different music. It's like chalk and cheese and you can't put the two together. So the promoter would pass. I'd talk to Bleeker Bob (record store owner in Greenwich Village) and he'd give me the name of a hip record store in New Haven. I'd call him. One guy would lead to another. If I did a date in Detroit, a guy in East Lansing might want to know where the guy in Detroit got his bands. He'd say to call Ian, because he knew I'd take anyone's calls. Sometimes I'd get a contact through a radio station, sometimes the station would promote a date.

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RW: A great accomplishment of the last few years is the establishing of a network of clubs where bands can play their own material. What you did with your bands—doing self-sufficient tours by van—is not really new, that's the way copy bands have done it for years. What you did was to bring this type of touring to a different level.

Copeland: It was new for English bands to do this. What was unusual about what I was doing—bringing an act over from England—was that the record company didn't have to go into a relationship with the band, knowing up front that there was going to be a \$50,000 tour support loss, in addition to the radio ads. We brought bands in where the record company said up front there would be no support. We brought in bands that had no label. I had to arrange the equipment, book the tour, call radio stations, all the stuff a label would normally do. With the Police, our intention was not so much to break the band as much as it was to initiate the record company (A&M) to what we were doing. And even though the Police are bigger now we still don't take support.

We make the road pay for the road, and what A&M does to sell an album is what they should do to sell it. We don't ask them to be promoters. In the past an agent's job has come to mean: he calls the promoter and arranges for the promoter to book the hall, print the tickets and help the record company promote the date. The record companies have been the promoter. It's their money that the agent and promoter have been spending. To me a promoter should be exactly that: he, and not the record company, should promote the date. The record company should sell the record, and of course the date helps to sell records. For ten years, the label has been forced into this position of being promoter. The more money a label spends, the more control it has over an artist and over the whole project, down to deciding which tracks will be singles, which tracks will and won't be on albums and which producer will be used. If it's all a record company's money, it becomes a record company's show. They control everything. Then you ask yourself, "Where did the act go?" "Where did the promoter go who's supposed to be promoting." We sell a date to a promoter. He'll promote it, and what the record company does additionally is their business. And I work in conjunction with them. I don't ignore them, but I certainly don't call up a promoter and say, "The label is buying spots and tickets, give me the date."

RW: What you've said reminds me of John Lydon's (of Public Image Limited) great quote: "The artist doesn't work for the record company, the record company works for the artist."

Copeland: Right.

RW: Now that some of your bands are more popular, you've done dates with people that have shunned you in the past—Ron Delsener, Pepper and Snadowsky at the Bottom Line. Is this selling out?

Copeland: I've dealt with Delsener for years while I was at Paragon, and it's true that he didn't care about the Buzzcocks or Police, because he's a businessman, he's a promoter who has a job and a company and a staff to pay. He's not the only one in the U.S. who wasn't interested. No one was—labels, clubs, promoters. Ron Delsener isn't exactly living on the street to the point that he's as hip as some people. Sure he's jumping on the bandwagon, but so is everybody. Whenever possible, I try to take the club promoter that first helped me and build him up. Just as my bands are going to be the top bands in five years, so are those promoters. But there are certain places, New York among them, where a workable alternative, on the required level, hasn't developed.

RW: One of the reasons that you have rejected the traditional showcase clubs is their seating policy, that is in contrast to the dance atmosphere that your bands thrive in. What's more important to you, having a suitable venue or working with people that believe in what you're doing?

Copeland: Both. I want everything I do to have some kind of feeling of the new generation. I believe that the generation of today wants their own heroes, their own bands, their own scene, trends, hairdos, shoes—they deserve it. They're going to demand it and I try to cater to that. I try to find new venues, rather than just change the old ones.

RW: If a big, conservative corporation, say ITT, built the perfect dance-rock venue in New York, where all the facilities were the best, would you not use it because ITT is part of the old generation?

Copeland: No. I'm not here to change the world and break down the establishment, I'm here to provide bands with the best possible situation for them to develop. If ITT has the best facility for my music, I'll be the first person to use it.

RW: You have a sense of mission about the music you book. It's obviously very important to you.

Copeland: Yes, it's very important. I don't want to take on a band that isn't new and unique simply because it will make the agency some money. I don't want to see my bands develop the bad habits that have been rampant in the industry for ten years—the limos, etc. I don't want this attitude. There is a sense of mission, and that's what gets me off, that's the whole trip. And it's the same with the bands: they're not trying to break themselves as much as they're trying to break a new form of music. I feel that what I'm doing now is going to affect the majority of Americans over the next ten years. What I've done in the last two years is going to have a major effect on the kids of America for several years, and that's more than just breaking an act.

RW: Do you really think the term new wave still means something?

Copeland: Oh yeah. It doesn't tell you what a band sounds like, it tells you what it doesn't sound like. It doesn't mean it sounds like the Sex Pistols or the Police. It does tell you the band is exciting and unique. It tells you that it isn't a copy of the Eagles or Led Zeppelin, that it isn't a boring old fart band.

RW: You only book bands that have some sort of new wave tag?

Copeland: Yes.

RW: If the Eagles came up to you and asked . . .

Copeland: Pass.

RW: Why?

Copeland: They bore me.

RW: None of the bands that you book bore you?

Copeland: Absolutely not, each one is unique, and does something special for me.

RW: What happens if a new band approaches you that isn't traditional, but you don't like anyway?

Copeland: Pass. I passed on the Knack. People think I'm crazy but I don't regret it. They called me up, begging to be put on a Police show in San Francisco. I flew out there and saw them. I sat and came to the conclusion that they were going to be big. I didn't know they were going to happen overnight but I knew they were going to be big because they had a formula going for them. They were at the right place at the right time, had good management and had a label that was going to spend a fortune. I had to pass because I would have to cringe everytime I talked about them. If I was telling you how proud I was that all my bands were new and unique, how could I say that if I represented the Knack, who are a copy band. They stand for everything I am not.

RW: What happens when your groups get more popular?

Copeland: One of the newest phenomenon, that you mentioned, is the dance hall, which is a step in between the club and auditorium. We're discovering these throughout the country.

RW: But if, as you said, your bands become the biggest bands in the country in five years, what happens when they play Madison Square Garden, where everyone can't dance? Will the bands be able to keep their spontaneity?

Copeland: This is obviously something we've got to protect ourselves against. The Police would love to play Hurrah rather than Madison Square Garden. However, there are that many more people that wouldn't be able to see the band. It's an unfortunate fact of life. The only way to play to all your fans is to play in a big room. I don't know how we're going to get around it. What we'll try to do is break it up. Play Belmont Raceway one day, and then play CBGB unannounced. Or instead of one night at the Palladium, we'll play six dates in various clubs—but a band can only work so many days. This summer I'm experimenting with a package. The Police, Specials, Buzzcocks, Squeeze, Wazmo Nariz and some others will play the Holiday Bowl, which holds 16,000 people.

RW: Do you dissuade your groups from using limousines?

Copeland: It's certainly not under my control to decide if my groups use limousines or not. If they want to spend their money that way, fine. If they called me up for a tour and demanded that every promoter supply a limousine, then I would be in a dilemma. I'd tell them that I could get better money without it, that it's against my policy. But, on the other hand, if they insist on it, and it's a tour I want to do, then I'm not going to stop it, if they can pay. I personally am totally against it, and fortunately most of the bands I work with are too, but I don't decide. I don't tell them how to spend their money, but I advise them how unnecessary it is. Limos take people away from the crowd that is their lifeblood. How can a band write about the street if they haven't seen the street in years?