

Achieving Success In Bass Internationally: Breaking Into The Foreign Market

by Vinnie Santino

A small local business can usually service customers within a five mile radius. This puts a financial cap on the amount of money they can make because once they reach their peak customer base, that's it. In the past, the only way to increase your customer base and revenue stream was to open a second location.

With the introduction of the internet, these businesses suddenly enjoyed the ability to broaden their customer base to include the entire world. The cap was eliminated and the sky became the limit.

Musicians have also been able to increase their income with the internet. Artists can now reach fans all over the world and sell songs and albums to the entire globe if they wish. But what about the working musician?

As a working musician, I want to be able to increase my income by making my services available to as many customers as I possibly can. Like any small business, if I limit my reach to a local customer base, I will cap out in the same way a small business does. Plus, if there is competition in my area, my revenue can be cut in half exponentially based on the number of qualified musicians who also play my instrument.

So in order to make the money I want, I need to be able to offer my services to the entire globe. Well as I quickly found out, that's easier said than done. I ran into an overwhelming number of obstacles including contacts, language barriers, travel issues, visas and probably the most difficult; credibility.

So to get some guidance, I turned to an experienced working musician successfully doing exactly this. Maria Jose Estivariz has been booking jobs playing professional bass internationally for years. She began her international performing credits by first setting her sights on London, England followed by Italy, Brazil, France, India and Greece. She is a celebrated bass player with international acclaim and recognition. Her style, range and world market exposure are incredibly broad. She knows no boundaries of countries or continents.

Mari Jose also achieved international recognition through her work as lead bassist for Amelia Ray playing events such as The Blues Festival in Ponferrada and several tours across Slovakia. Her work in Spain is extensive and impressive. Most notably with La Bossa Mayor and performing at top venues including Segundo Jazz, Pata Negra, La Canela, and Clamores.

I was fortunate to interview Mari Jose and get some tips on how to get gigs in other countries. I hope you find her advice as helpful as I did.

Vinnie: What is the best way to make initial contact?

Mari Jose: Music Unions are a great place to start. You can be placed on a list for a subscription fee. They accept all sorts of players. I also look for ads in Time Out and classified. One technique that has worked for me was to visit a particular country and take some music classes. This allowed me to make connections and get introductions. In London for example, I ended up working in six different bands for one single class. Also, look for jam sessions. Once you begin working in one country, the referrals add up. Then just repeat this in each country you wish to work in.

Vinnie: How do you overcome the language barrier?



Mari Jose: Take a few lessons before traveling to that country and get some basic words and phrases down. Especially related to what you are looking to do. For example, know how to say, “bass player wanted” and “paid session”.

Vinnie: What about travel arrangements and places to stay?

Mari Jose: If you have the money, simply do the regular thing. Book a flight and get a hotel in the area where you wish to look for work. If you are like most musicians, you are on a tight budget. In this case, I recommend finding “bed and breakfast” type places or youth hostels. Another great thing to do is use on line connections such as FaceBook. Find musicians that are traveling to your city and offer them a free stay in your home in exchange for you staying with them when you’re in their country. Most musicians jump at this opportunity. This is also another great way to meet and network with musicians in a foreign country.

Vinnie: What’s the best way for me to get started?

Mari Jose: Search Facebook and the internet in general for bands that play a style of music that you can play well. Friend them, email them, message them, etc. Be honest about your intentions. Share some video or recordings of yourself and provide positive feedback on their media. Basically, make friends. You can use Google Translate to help with the language barrier. I still recommend taking classes to learn the language. Google Translate will be fine over the internet but not in person.

Vinnie: So I’ve made some on-line musician friends from other countries. Do I have to wait until I let them stay at my place before I ask to stay at their place?

Mari Jose: Not necessarily. Once you decide to visit, ask as many of these new friends if they can help you out. You’d be surprised at how many say “yes”. Remember, we are all musicians and most of us are just cool like that.

Vinnie: What should I do when they say “yes”?

Mari Jose: Don’t ask for paid work for your first visit. Just get out there and get acclimated. Go see bands, visit music stores, check out record stores. Introduce yourself to as many people as you can. Definitely have a business card to hand out. Make sure it’s in THEIR language. Friend them on Facebook too.

Vinnie: Any major pitfalls that I should be aware of?

Mari Jose: Do not take a first trip anywhere with the intention of working. Simply go as a visitor on vacation. However, instead of sight-seeing, hitting the beach or souvenir shopping, get to work meeting people and finding other musicians to play with. Maybe you’ll find a jam you can sit in on. Once you have actually paid work, the promoter will take care of all the necessary visa work for you to enter the country and work legally. Do not work illegally. If you get caught, you may find yourself banned from entering the country for several years. So just don’t do it.

Vinnie: Anything else?

Mari Jose: Yes. Don’t go for one small gig. Aim high. If you’re good you should be able to get on some nice festival gigs that pay well. Also, small tours are nice. You may get lower pay than a festival, but you’ll have steady work for a while.

Vinnie: Is this the same for all countries?

Mari Jose: Each country is different and has it’s own set of rules. Start with one and add more as you can afford to. It’s a great way to make a living and see the world. If it’s slow in one country, you now have others available to you.

Vinnie: Thanks for you time. This was a huge help!

Mari Jose: You’re welcome and good luck.

*Vinnie Santino is a multi-instrumentalist, composer and producer living in Los Angeles, CA.