

CAREER TIPS

What does it take to establish and run an artist management agency?

ENCATC spoke with Maaïke Wuyts, founder and general manager of Aubergine Artist Management, a company that supports musicians, especially jazz musicians. Learn how the company has developed and grown over the years!



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ENCATC: What is the story behind Aubergine Artist Management and why did you want to start this Brussels based agency?

Maaïke Wuyts: I founded Aubergine Artist Management because I was getting a lot of offers to work as a freelance manager/producer for musicians and festivals. Somehow I wanted to construct something that on the long term could grow into a valuable company offering support within the musical field and where I could have a real team around to support me. It also became clear quite fast that especially in the subgenre of jazz there was a lack of support for creating artists. Within the pop/rock and also within performing arts, companies as mine – who

offer tailored services to artists – already existed. Brussels is a real jazz metropolis with many different clubs and venues promoting jazz and it's very central in Europe, so it's easy to tour from there.

Being independent and having a flexible work schedule was also very appealing to me. Although, at that time I was not aware of the huge responsibilities being your own boss can bring with it. So the flexible work schedule wasn't always to my advantage. Especially in the beginning it meant doing much longer hours than my peers; and they also had an employer or a team covering them when they would be sick or wanted to have holidays.

ENCATC: How has Aubergine grown over the years to establish itself where you are working with some of Belgium's most talented artists?

Maaïke Wuyts: It all started with Fabrizio Cassol asking me to start managing his band Aka Moon and then inviting me along on some of his other projects as his production assistant. So from the start I was actually working with one of the most respected Belgian composers and jazz bands. Word spread quickly and I guess almost every Belgian jazz leader has contacted me at some point to start working for them. Of course I wasn't able to work for all of them. Especially since being a music manager in a subgenre like jazz isn't a very commercial lucrative business. It's a whole lot of work for very low income. So you take a lot of risks. The only way I could really grow from a one-person organization into a more established company was applying for state funding. After project funding in 2009, I finally got a structural fund in 2010. That allowed me to 'employ myself' on full time base – because Aubergine is a VZW (non profit organisation) – and also to have a part-time assistant work with me. This gave the base and motivation to professionalize more and by 2013 I got more state funding, generated more income and could have 2 full time employees.

ENCATC: In today's fast-paced world and developments in technology and cultural consumption habits, how do you stay innovative for production, promotion, and tour support provided to artists?

Maaïke Wuyts: There are a lot of different software programs to 'make life easier' for the production and tour manager. However, we tried several of them and somehow it doesn't really work for us. We have so much 'tailoring' to do, that there's always something in these systemized models that doesn't fully work. It's very time-consuming to transfer all your data to these software packages whereas it doesn't really fit your daily practice. And then, once you start, a few years later some other model comes up looking more promising and you have to restart from zero. So recently we just decided not to go for another promising program, but to stick with our excel-database and basic mail-program.

Maybe one day we'll find 'the program' that really simplifies our work. But for now we keep it simple. On a level of promoting our musicians we did evolve into making audiovisual EPK's (Electronic Press Kits), which is quite an investment. In a video between 2 and 5 minutes we want to capture the atmosphere of

an artist and his or her new project. It tells promoters, the press and the public so much more than a plain text with some web links to the music.

Also, social media has become such an important promotion tool. So yes, digital evolution does have an impact on us... but it increased our actual workload and promotion costs instead of decreasing it!

ENCATC: What have been some recent innovative projects you have worked on that you are most proud of?

Maaïke Wuyts: Every new album or project we support I'm proud of. It isn't always necessarily 'innovative'. But it's always fresh. I'm proud of the way my team now deals with the communication and I'm proud of the audio-visual EPK's we're producing since last year, because that's very valuable for the promotion of each project.

Another thing I value a lot is our sense of collaboration. We have developed a strategy to present several of our bands together, trying to promote 'Belgian Jazz Abroad'. We have constructed several valuable partnerships with foreign organizations and also Belgian embassies and delegations abroad to support our artists in the development of their international career. And not without success!





ENCATC: Can you give us some background into your educational and professional experience that has led to where you are as General Manager today?

Maaïke Wuyts: I have studied Art History - with specialization in Performing Arts - at the University of Ghent. I did some internships at Theaterfestival and a theatre company called Martha Tentatief and I soon realized that I liked working behind the scenes a lot, but I didn't have sufficient knowledge for that. So I extended my studies with a master in Cultural Management at the Faculty of Economics in Antwerp University.

After these studies I combined two half time jobs: one as an artistic coordinator in an art centre (Nona) in Mechelen and one as general coordinator of a young video and multi-media art collective called Vidiots in Ghent. Working within the art centre gave me a context of colleagues who had more experience and assisted me in many issues. At the same time, I could apply these new experiences in a very independent way in my job at Vidiots. So from the very start in my career I had a 360° perspective on how to run projects and an organization. Of course it took some time to become really good in all the sub disciplines and along the way you really discover which are your strengths and weaknesses.

ENCATC: What skills or personal attributes do you think you have that help you run your business?

Maaïke Wuyts: Perseverance and flexibility are keywords for me. Perseverance because nothing comes easily and you can't let one disappointment get in the way of your motivation. Flexibility, because you sometimes can't 'solve' a problem or something doesn't go as planned or hoped for and then you have to be able to adapt your plan. Also intuition is an asset. In the beginning I didn't always dare to follow my intuition and let others convince me with their arguments. I doubted my intuition and followed the arguments of others and that's when things can go wrong. Because often people are just trying to convince you of something for their own personal benefit and not always for the greater good of the project!

ENCATC: What had you wished you had known before you started your business?

Maaïke Wuyts: That being an employer is the hardest part of running your business. The selection of good employees is very important and its better you don't do it on your own. Especially in a very small organization as mine, everybody has to be like a pillar. The small team is the foundation of the whole company. With all the collaborations we have with

the different artists and partners, there are a lot of responsibilities to carry. If you can't rely on the support of your co-workers/employees to take on their responsibilities, it can become really heavy. So you definitely need a solid team.

ENCATC: What have been the most difficult challenges you have encountered? How have you been able to overcome them?

Maike Wuyts: Like mentioned just above, being an employer finding the right co-workers has been one of my biggest challenges.

Also the constant changes in the funding system of the Flemish Government is a big challenge. Especially because about 60% of our income is generated by this funding.

Since I started 10 years ago the way to ask for funding (paper versus digital), the criteria and the way of their 'judging your file' has changed several times. So you always have to re-invent things and it's always a lot of work. Besides our structural funding we handle all the different project funding files for the artists and projects we work for so on a yearly base handle around 20 funding files (application and reports!) and that's a lot of paperwork and very time-consuming. But also very important in order to make artistic dreams happen.

ENCATC: How did you go about getting start-up funds and how did you use them to get your business up and running?

Maike Wuyts: I explicitly started a non-profit organisation (VZW) because I knew that was the only way to get funding from the Flemish Government under the cultural funding system. Besides that there were no start up funds. The only extra effort I did was investing a private (personal) funding to keep my cash flow under control. With the cultural subsidies you need to make your 100% turn-over in one year, but you get only 90% of funding in that year and get the next 10% only by the end of the following year. So you always lack an important sum of money, because you can't make profit to cover the deficit.

ENCATC: What advice would you give to students or early career professionals looking to start their own business or project?

Maike Wuyts: Follow your heart and your intuition, but be realistic. Always make a good budget and follow up on it regularly. Take calculated risks. Dare

to ask questions to the 'more experienced'. Use your position as a 'junior' and don't be afraid that you'll lose your credibility. 'Seniors' like to give advice, it makes them feel valuable. A good mentor is worth a lot.

ENCATC: What keeps you motivated and going?

Maike Wuyts: There were times in my life I was questioning the amount of time and energy I put into my work. Working in the arts sometimes feels like serving big egos. And you also often feel that despite all the efforts of some venues, the 'art-consumer' remains a highly educated wealthy individual. At times I was tempted to stop working in this field and direct my energy into humanitarian aid. Because at least I would do something 'meaningful' for the world.

But then again I have served so many projects, witnessing that music really brings people together, not only on the stage but also in the experience. And people working in the cultural field all have the intention of uplifting this world through their creations and productions. And that's something that keeps me motivated! Because in the end I just want this world to be a more friendly and beautiful place.

ENCATC thanks Aubergine Artist Management for also supplying ENCATC with photos for the layout production of this interview.

About Aubergine Artist Management



Aubergine Artist Management is a Brussels based agency that offers management, production, promotion, administrative and tour support to some of Belgium's most talented artists.

The focus is on jazz and beyond, ranging from improvised music, urban sounds, world music, contemporary music, post rock, noise, funk and hip hop.



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www.aubergineartistmanagement.com/
en/about-4.html](http://www.aubergineartistmanagement.com/en/about-4.html)