

Solo Gigging in Copenhagen

There is still plenty of work for a troubadour if you're willing to travel

BY DENNIS SELFRIDGE

The temptation and romance of gigging "overseas" has set many a player to daydreaming about success in Europe. Quite a few legends persist: a more attentive and appreciative audience, bigger earning potential, and the fact that doing it just sounds cool. We've all watched TV shows and read articles about American entertainers who've moved over there and never come back. Myriad opportunities exist for bands and musicians of all types. In the States, I've played in everything from a five-piece backing band to a touring duo and traveled as part of a four-act, singer-songwriter troupe called "The Philly Acoustic Take-Out Tour." Through some of those channels, I had the opportunity last winter to play in Copenhagen, Denmark for a month. I knew some people who'd gigged there and enjoyed the experience, and they helped me get started.

Tom Dycus makes his living playing and



booking this particular circuit. Originally from Washington, D.C., he's responsible for booking solo and duo acts into six Copenhagen clubs owned by one group of investors. I caught a small break by being

allowed to deal directly with Tom for his commission; other musicians I know have needed an additional, stateside contact, and wound up paying two people to get over to Denmark. (It's not like the extra commission is going to break you, though. The more people you know, the more potential gig leads down the road. Just do what it takes if you want to go!)

When Tom called, he insisted on seeing a song list, so I faxed one over and we discussed it and then worked out other details. He liked my CD (all original songs) and a couple of colleagues put in a good word about me, but Tom was very careful and specific about what was expected. "You can promise me you'll do covers," he warned, "but I have had guys come over here and get themselves fired for not being cooperative. These club owners are adamant about their patrons' feedback! These people want to sing along and enjoy themselves and if you're not flexi-



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ble, they'll pay you for the gigs you've done and tell you to go home."

I did appreciate his candor and I accepted the challenge and decided to go for a month. Included in my compensation package was a place to stay and one meal daily (including off days). A month is usually the minimum commitment for your first trip over, and since you don't get all of your travel expenses paid, it also makes it more worthwhile, profit-wise. There is a small bonus paid to players who go directly from the States; it doesn't cover your whole flight, but it helps. Depending on what time of the year you go, your ticket can cost between \$500 and \$1,200 (from New York), so shop around for the best airfares. Once you've gotten your feet wet you can

AN INTERVIEW WITH TOM DYCUS

Booking Agent and Troubadour in Copenhagen, Denmark



What type of material are you looking for?

In a nutshell, we're looking for really familiar songs. Big, big hits are popular in these pubs. As opposed to the States, where people go out as couples and small groups and tend to keep to themselves, these folks like to meet strangers and are looking to sing along and dance to the music being played. Every Scandinavian and Dane under the age of 40 speaks English very well as a second language but in their day-to-day lives, they may go a week or two without speaking it. Consequently they respond to songs with a repetitive hook; "Knocking on Heaven's Door," "No Woman No Cry," "Leaving on a Jet Plane" and "American Pie" work a whole lot better than, say, for instance, Don Henley's "In a New York Minute." These people aren't going to want to hear "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" or anything lyrically complicated.

How should musicians submit material to you?

Submit all material to the Olde English Pub. These days I'm looking for some good piano/keyboard players with backing tracks, as well as guitar players. The guys over here are what I'd call "working class musicians." They do it for money and take pride in the fact that they have a job to do and do it well. This isn't about blowing an audience away but more about going into the trenches and just flat-out entertaining people.

What is the best way to follow up? Should they call you?

I'd actually prefer not. Everything that is submitted is listened to. I hire duos as well as solos and if I'm interested, I'll contact you. Make sure you send a phone number, fax number or both along in your package and you'll hear from me if I want to hire you. A song list is a good idea, also.

How far in advance do you book?

We tend to book three to four months in advance. Short notice is really not an option for someone not already here. I have seven guitar

players and one piano player booked at a time.

Everyone gets a night off a week but there's music happening seven nights a week in these pubs, so I also use a "floater" musician to fill in on the regular's night off.

Any tips or suggestions for players in general?

Travel light. You'll need a mic, your guitar or keyboard and patch cables to plug both into the PA systems. We even provide an effects unit for your soundboard, so basically that's all you need. A lot of first-timers bring way too much stuff with them and find out the hard way. Some players think that these people don't care about anything but the song you're playing and talent doesn't really matter. They're wrong. If you can't play very well, these folks can tell. They listen to a lot of music and are more attuned to chops than they're given credit for.

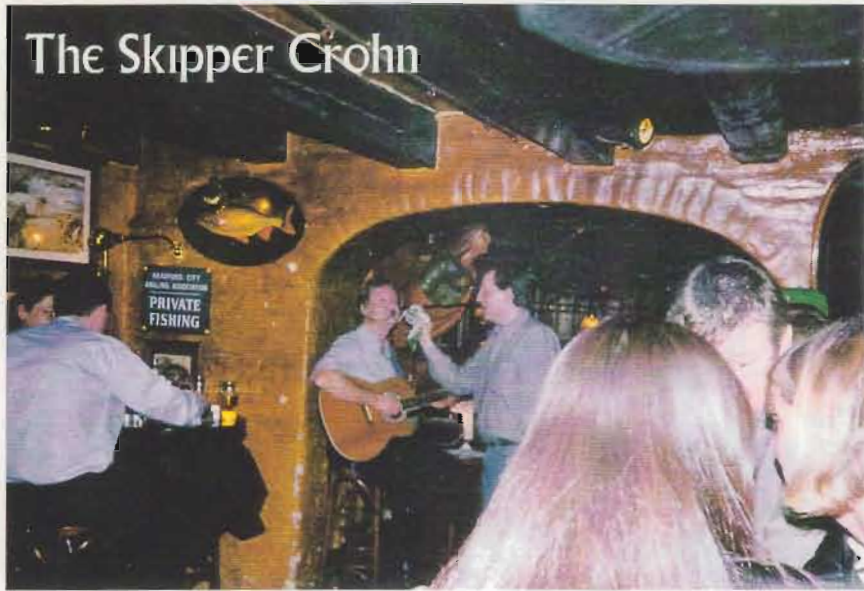
Any final words?

An additional benefit to this scene is the friendships and camaraderie that form among the musicians. You'll meet players from England, Australia, Ireland and the U.S. and some of these guys stay in touch and end up visiting each other in their homelands. All of these clubs are located in about one square mile in the center of Copenhagen and I don't think you can find that concentration of troubadour clubs even in Greenwich Village. I really want to stress that my musicians are professionals. Some of them write songs and all that but when they're on, they concentrate on the job they have to do.

Tom Dycus runs his booking operation out of the Olde English Pub and that is where you'll find him during his office hours. Keep in mind that Denmark is seven hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time so if you want to catch him at 2 p.m. his time, do the math from your respective time zone. Submit tapes, CDs and material to: Tom Dycus, c/o Olde English Pub, Vesterbrogade 2B 1620, Kobenhavn V, Denmark. Tel: 011-45-33321921.

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The Skipper Crohn



arrange to split months with people and just do a two-week stint instead; you can also make some contacts and find work in different areas of Denmark and other countries as well. American music old and new is quite popular over there. (I was amused when one Danish fellow complimented me on my command of the English language. I thanked him but felt a little silly, being praised for my command of the only language I know.) The month had its ups and downs, but overall it was a really enriching experience and I got to plant "seeds" of my own music over there.

A Day in the Life...

My plane touched down at 7:35 a.m. on the first of the month. One quick phone call and a bus ride later, I was in the heart of town in front of the club I was to play. Once I was finally moved into my room (a bed, a shower and a refrigerator) in a five-bedroom flat up above Vesterbrogade, I started to meet some other players. I napped for two hours and made my first appearance at 6:30 that evening.

You work six nights a week for the entire month. A number of players with various styles have carved out their own little niches here, but it helps to know some standards. In Scandinavia, CCR still rules along with the Beatles, the Stones, and a lot of '50s and '60s tunes. I got a kick out of playing particular songs when things were in a lull and seeing people suddenly pay attention. For example, "Mrs. Robinson" was a guaranteed winner. I'd save that song and, if I was losing the audience, I'd pull that out and—presto! I was

back in business.

All of the clubs have in-house PA systems wired throughout all the rooms, so people can hear you even when they can't see you. The speakers are mounted up high on the walls and the sound is generally good. You have to be your own sound engineer and some of the speaker placement is questionable, but overall it's a good situation. Most players don't even bother with monitors because there's always at least one cabinet facing down at you from a neighboring wall. Even when the clubs are packed, acoustic guitars and vocals come through loud and clear. The between-set music plays through the same system and there are two sound

boards—one that you control and one behind the bar. Cooperation is a good idea. If you are consistently too loud, management can cut back on your power and rob you of much-needed headroom. I didn't encounter any problems but again, knowing giggers, I'm sure some people have. Be cool!

The Clubs

Contact info is not provided for individual clubs as all of these are booked by the same agent. His contact info is provided in the sidebar on page 68.

The Olde English Pub. This place serves as the home base for all of the performers. Laundry facilities are in the basement and you can get yourself some free coffee at the bar. Most of the folks on the circuit hang out here. This is a good place to play. The staff is made up of British men and women and a number of tourists come in during the day just to take pictures of all the vintage furniture and artifacts that cover the walls.

Rosie Magee's. Created with a feel of the Southwestern U.S., Rosie's serves Mexican and Texan cuisine in an atmosphere that reminds me of Disney's Frontierland. This is primarily a casual restaurant with lots of booths and tables, but there are a few bars within requesting distance. This place has some of the best food and feeds most of the musicians and staff.

The Baron and Baroness. This place is modeled to look like a big ship. Piano players are featured at the Baron largely because of the fine dining atmosphere and the fact that



GARY SWIFT (L) AND TOM DYCUS AT THE SKIPPER CROHN.

AUDO JONES (L) AND JOHN HENNESSY ON TOUR.

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DENNIS CHICCINO AND DOC STRONG.

they have a grand piano that is tuned regularly. The guy I saw had sequenced backing tracks and did a real nice job with them.

The Scottish Pub. Actually attached to Rosie Magee's, The Pub opens onto another street around the corner and meets Rosie's through a huge dining room the two clubs share. What's amazing is you can't hear performers in the other venue at all—that's how big this room is. The Scottish Pub features more up-tempo solos and duos and gets a huge walk-in crowd off of Hans Christian

Andersen Boulevard, one of the main drags in Copenhagen, also called the "walking street." Another American, Powderhorn, is flexing his muscles as a solo performer for the first time over here; he caps his show with an acoustic Elvis set in full costume.

The Skipper Crohn. Farthest away from the center of town, down by the canal in Newhaven, sits the Skipper Crohn. Down below the street, a *la* "Cheers," this is one of Copenhagen's sailor-type bars. The women get a little rougher looking, but it doesn't

have as many tourists and I noticed the crowd was a little older and more laid-back.

Strekker's. My club for the month, this was a Danish meat-market/nightclub/bar. It's connected to a three-story mall and the only theme I could really spot was that we had all-female bartenders and they all seemed to be young, beautiful Scandinavian girls in Spandex.

Each club had one night a week (Saturdays, at Strekker's) where the musician played early and was followed by "Discoteque." A deejay would set up next to you during your last set; the moment you were done, he'd switch on the strobe lights and everybody would "disco." It was a bizarre experience and I confess I didn't hang around much—instead, I took the chance to check out other clubs.

A Few Pointers

I would characterize the first and third weeks as the toughest. During the first week, you're reeling from culture shock, jet lag and the realization that you've got to stick this out for a month to get paid. (That's how it works for everyone in Denmark—payday is once a month. Hint: bring some cash, traveler's checks and a credit card. I brought one credit card that also doubled as a phone card.) By the third week, your throat is starting to get tired from four sets a night for 18 of the last 20, and you still have six more gigs to go. On top of that, I spent my nights off wandering

Original Music

Part of my mission in Copenhagen was to sell and circulate my CDs. I found my way to **KODA**, the Danish Performing Rights Society, and they really helped me out. If you perform originals, it's a nice place to visit and they can give you forms to fill out to actually collect royalties for certain shows. Here's the address for the KODA office I visited:

KODA, Medlemsservice, Grabrodretov 16, 2, 1154 Kobenhavn K. Tel: 011-45-39683800

Down the road, **The Danish Music Information Center** couldn't have been kinder and printed me a list of all the radio stations and record labels in the entire country. The underground and college-type stations are the best to target (similar to the good ol' U.S.A.), but it's a little harder to figure out programming because the commercial stations are even more overloaded everything, and I mean *everything!* You'll hear Whitney Houston followed by Metallica, a disco tune and then Peter, Paul & Mary. I'm not kidding. It's really funny to listen to, but I wouldn't waste time or product hoping to be heard by the big stations. Record labels abound in the city but try and do your homework just as you would at home. (Ask in

English what types of music they're interested in first—somebody speaks it everywhere.)

Most of the major labels have offices where they'll actually let you in the door and talk to you. I had my days to do legwork and my nights to try and slip in my own tunes and hawk a few discs in the process. I talked to other players with CDs about selling over there. I could put up my little display and I had 150 copies of my bestselling title with me. If you bring CDs with you, try and carry as many as possible in your luggage. If you mail or ship them separately you may have to pay duty taxes based on the assumption that you'll sell them all, and we know that you're gonna be giving away a bunch. I decided to price my CDs a little more reasonably to try and help accomplish my goal of no extra weight on the way home. Round numbers in the Danish Krone work out to 50K (about \$8) or 100K (\$16), so I opted for the 50.

That turned out to be a wise move 'cause I had a few bonanza nights. A group of students and their professors came in on holiday for a few nights and the students wouldn't have been able to afford 100K. Also, some people may grab two discs if your price is modest but still profitable. The cash from sales was awesome and necessary as it kept me in spending money. It's expensive over there. (See above—you don't get paid until the end of the month.)

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around and often ended up sitting in with other players—a socially cool thing to do, but not very restful for your pipes.

Outside of the club action, a lot of local bars exist along the walking street. This street is obviously best explored on foot and winds all the way through the city for miles. You can do the shops by day and the restaurants and clubs at night. Here I met Jacob, a native Dane who played really well and did some awesome versions of American tunes. He'd come up to my gig and invite me down to his late-night gig at a club down the walking street. His place would often turn into a jam/round robin-type thing and I hung out there way too late a few times.

Restaurants and Groceries

Like I said earlier, the club you work in will provide one meal a day but you have to sample some other foods or else spend your time in Burger King or McDonald's. Groceries are cheap, healthy and interesting alternatives. Just walking through the stores is a trip. In one grocery store, I was through the checkout line before I realized I had to buy a bag if I wanted one. A nice Danish guy explained the situation to me in English, but the check-out girl didn't say diddley—she was just going on to the next customer while I stood there unaware that it was B.Y.O.B. (Bring Your Own Bag). I'd like to say I didn't make that mistake again, but among my souvenirs is a lovely plastic bag collection. Here's my musician's restaurant and grocery tour (with bag requirements).

Fast Food, Bag Provided

7-11. Yes, they're everywhere, and worth a gander. It's late, you want something you recognize and nobody expects to hear English in them anyway. These 7-11s have pizza! OK, it's Danish pizza, but it's not bad.

McDonald's and Burger King. Don't make it a habit, but believe it or not the food tastes pretty much like it does state-side and if you're homesick, it's a fix. Read the menu boards—that's the fun part!

The Polske hot dog stands. Rule! These were a real treat. Foot-long wieners in sleeve buns with anything you want on it. The first time I was asked, "Mit mayonnaise?" I said, "Huh?" But try it—it ain't Hellmann's.

Grocery Stores: Bag Varies

Netto. This is the premier B.Y.O.B. store. Good, healthy food at prices for the bud-


get-conscious. Some of the meats and packages look weird and interesting but pictures help a lot. I accidentally bought buttermilk once and had never had it before. Not likely to have it again, but at least I had a new experience (bleah!). The bread is delicious and you can get it from mass-produced white to really thick, grainy dark loaves. Meats, fish, veggies!

Irma. Across the street from my flat was another mall that included an Irma. This was slightly more expensive than Netto but had some more choice foods and I went there to splurge when I sold some CDs. You'll be given a clear plastic bag unless you pay 1K (less than \$0.25) for a nice big one with a picture on it. Both stores were within walking distance and by the end of the month I'd explored them both thoroughly.

Down Time

I had some time to play tourist myself and managed to come home with a few new songs, a bunch of cool pictures, new friends, no CDs, and the aforementioned bag collection.

There are a number of places of interest to explore in your free time. I went to the tourist information center across from the Bus/Train Station and got hooked up with a map and a few brochures. There was plenty to see and do. Tivoli, an amusement park, was closed during the month I was there (winter) but I heard many good things about it from players and the locals. I checked out everything from museums to Hans Christian Andersen and European history, went up to Helsingor to see Hamlet's castle, and enjoyed just walking around the city. Overall, my month in Denmark was fun, exhilarating, frustrating, rewarding work, and profitable.

Troubadours have existed for centuries and will always have a place to work. It's the economy and efficiency of the solo act. From ski lodges and beach bars in the U.S. to foreign opportunities like the Copenhagen connection, there are people making music everywhere. If you have a realistic outlook, a good sense of humor and that inexplicable drive to just play somewhere, you've got a lot of company. One of the friends I'd mentioned earlier summed it up best one night over dinner: "We may not be rock stars, but my guitar has gotten me to Denmark, Germany and even had me skiing the Alps in Austria!" 



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Celestion - Clearcom - Connectronics - Countryman - Denon
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