

# Interview | Karen Rappaport McHugh



Meet the one and only Karen Rappaport McHugh, the superwoman who has single-handedly created your favorite music festival concepts, including the family area for the AEG/Goldenvoice produced Stagecoach Festival, the largest country music festival and the Vintage Market at Coachella. She is the owner of Muddy Girl Productions, a marketing and events company focused on creating ancillary entertainment for music festivals. She has provided her expertise to other festivals including Kaaboo Festival in San Diego and to artists, including Ziggy Marley, who are seeking to appeal to a family demographic. Prior to forming her company, she was the Marketing Director for Storyopolis, a company founded by Paul Allen. She also held positions at Rogers & Cowan, Ogilvy & Mather NY among others and for clients ranging from consumer products to celebrities to entertainment industry entities. As a Board Trustee for the Los Angeles Chapter of the Recording Academy, she created the first children's music series for The Grammy Museum and launched the annual family concert for Grammy-nominated children's artists, which continues today.

We were fortunate to receive the opportunity of interviewing this empowering woman. Learn about her unwavering love for music and the journey of which she endured to finally land her dream job.

### **What attracted you to the world of working in live music?**

If you had asked a young woman whose first concert was David Cassidy at the Houston Rodeo, which was followed up with a junk food musical diet of bands including Styx, Bread and Journey, if she could imagine herself working in festival production and surrounded by the best music in the world — the answer would be NO. The road to working in the entertainment business is a winding path of survival and learning to hyphenate the many visions of yourself. No one in this town is doing just one thing. I started out as an assistant to a publicist working in the music department for Rogers & Cowan, still one of the top agencies in the world of celebrity PR. Most women at that time started as “assistants” or glorified secretaries while the young men started out in a pool of talent seekers called RC2000. This was 1985 when the year 2000 seemed like eons away. If you worked very hard or slept with the boss, you moved ahead. I'll let you guess which route was quicker. I worked very hard and languished

for more than a year before deciding to leave. Returning to work in live music didn't happen until years later after graduate school, gigs in the corporate PR world and working for myself. I formed Muddy Girl Productions in 2003 to be a creative force in film-tv-music. Like I said, everyone is a hyphenate and I also wanted to be a writer. I sold a film and TV project to Disney, created a family music series for the Grammy Museum, started advising independent musicians on marketing strategy and worked for some independent record companies. I was a consulting queen! One day, I had the opportunity to pitch the folks at Goldenvoice – who were starting Stagecoach Festival – on some ideas. Now, 11 years later, I'm still working with them and other festivals as an independent contractor. I think it's important to note that along the way I raised three children and managed to stay married to someone who is also in the biz. I believe that women CAN have it all – just maybe not all at the same time. Working and raising children required me to balance each very carefully so I could devote time to both in the way I wanted.

### **As far as the day to day, how much does that change for you when an event like Stagecoach or Coachella occurs?**

Working for any music festival takes months of preparation and it's truly like building a temporary city. Booking talent, selling tickets and marketing an experience is just one small part of ensuring a successful festival.

Clearly, the folks at Fyre Festival weren't quite up to speed on that idea. Festival producers have to be concerned with ingress and egress, patron safety, diversity of experience, movement between stages, internal production needs, stage, lighting and technical production, and on and on and on. The festivals I work with are among the best in the business and I've been a dedicated student to watch and model how they work tirelessly to provide the best experience for artists and audience.

My role at Stagecoach Festival started out very small – producing the family area and making it a great place to be with your kids. Since 2006, more festivals have added family areas and you consistently see families taking their kids with them now. I recently spoke at SXSW Music Festival about this topic

and believe its a growing trend. More and more festivals are adding family zones. As I watched how the festival was evolving, I pitched other ideas and they were each received really well so I started producing those also. I created a country dance hall, a vintage trailer park, a cooking stage and most recently the Vintage Market. This was first an idea they asked me to handle for Desert Trip but then it worked out so well it was decided that the market should appear for Coachella and Stagecoach also. Vintage is making a huge comeback — but its funny that young women and men get excited by 80s attire which is everything I threw out years ago! The one focus I have for any project I create is to produce an experience that is intensely curated to allow people to become fully engaged.

I spend most of my pre-festival time searching for talent, vendors, entertainers and putting together a schedule that will complement the main stages at the festival. For other festivals, I also work on projects that are tangential to the main music events. My special skill is creating Ancillary Entertainment so everything that's EXTRA to a festival. Sometimes these can be sponsor activations but my goal is experiential entertainment not just branded marketing.

Part of being successful on-site is having a great team — I work with amazing people (many of them women) who want the same things. We work tirelessly on-site to build all of the elements needed for a great space. I'm great at finding good people. In addition, I'm really intent on paying it forward. I had great female mentors along the path and I want to share my skills with those young people coming up now — in particular women.

**We'd love to hear about one unforgettable festival moment – whether it took place during the planning stages or at the event.**

I have two recent unforgettable moments — one happened at Desert Trip last year when I was standing next to Paul McCartney on his way to his suite to watch Neil Young. It's not often you get up close and personal with a Beatle.

The other was this year at Stagecoach Festival working with Nikki Lane who brought her entire store – High Class Hillbilly – from Nashville to participate in

the Vintage Market. She's bringing back real star power and classic country sass. Although she's considered "Outlaw Country" since her vibe is not the country pop that's on the radio now, I find her to be one of the most refreshing voices in music today — not just country music.

### **Did you die and go to job heaven?**

That's an easy answer — YES! I was always the youngest voice in the room when I moved here from Texas. Now, I'm among the oldest but working in and around music festivals is the best way to stay young and vibrant.

Even my kids think I'm cool! My husband and I are both very fortunate to work in a business doing things we love. I'm not solving the world's problems, but helping to entertain and bring happiness to people makes me happy also.

I'm also still working at being a writer and hope to finish a short story collection later this year. It's actually a series of feminist reflections based on stories from my life. Hopefully that will entertain people too.

### **The Vintage Market at Coachella this year is awesome! Where do you find inspiration when creating festival pop-ups?**

I'm a voracious reader and trend watcher. My file cabinet is filled with ideas about things and now, with Pinterest and Instagram, I can save my ideas to reflect back on even easier. Sometimes I'll look around a festival simply as a patron and think that there's an element missing so I'll approach the producers and suggest it. I've found that you can't wait around for people to offer you a job — sometimes you have to create the position for yourself.

### **What do you want festival-goers to take away from the areas you produce?**

Music festivals are not only about the music anymore — they are cultural happenings and experiences that have their own hyphens. Some are music-food, others are music-art and some are a combination of all of those

things. The environment plays a huge role and the best festivals in both the US, the UK and internationally utilize their surroundings for best effect.. I view my role within a festival to help create some of those experiences — not as a corporate activation but as something hopefully immersive. If you came to something our team helped create and walked away with a WOW moment, then it was successful.

**I can only imagine how many amazing bands and artists you've seen live. Whose performance stands out the most and why?**

I've seen many incredible performances at festivals, award shows and at other events. Sometimes you hear a new artist's voice and you're blown away. That happened to me several years ago when I heard LP. She's coming back to Los Angeles at the El Rey on June 12 and I can't wait to see her again live — a true original voice. Pink's performance at the Grammy Awards a few years ago was epic and something so daring that it stands out. And, I'm a huge fan of Ingrid Michaelson, who just announced that she's starring in a TV show. Her performance at the Hollywood Bowl cemented her charismatic musical and comedy chops. I guess it's no small thing that most of my moments are female singers. Gosh — I also have to add Melissa Etheridge's performance with Joss Stone at the Grammys when they channeled Janis Joplin. Janis is a Texan, after all!

**Do you have any advice for female entrepreneurs hoping to work in your field.**

When I was starting out it was about finding the perfect job. Very few women I knew thought about becoming an entrepreneur or business owner. Everyone wanted the security of a job with benefits. Today, nothing is truly secure so I meet more young women who are starting businesses and making success happen on their own terms. I'm consistently impressed by these leaders. The most successful ones will be smart enough to "know what they don't know" and seek out people who are savvy in areas they aren't. My advice is always the same — Find a mentor. Support other women – no cat fighting or back-stabbing. Always be a student and be a willing teacher. Reach out for

support and always be willing to lend a hand. The music business is changing every day and so is festival production. For women wanting to work in music festivals, I'd say first think about the kind of life you want to be leading 10 years from now — then look at the positions that can give you that experience.

### What's your interpretation of a Raw Femme?

Like me — a muddy girl – I think a Raw Femme is someone who feels her art and creativity intensely and allows her female energy to flow freely. I love that Raw Femme is celebrating females and calling attention to “raw” talent! There seems to be an ever building groundswell of women supporting women and – from someone whose a bit older than your readers – I think this third wave feminism is fantastic. It's what we've been championing and waiting for for and thank goodness it's finally here.

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Cherise

May 11, 2017 at 6:10 am

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Fantastic! Karen truly is a role model and champion to the women who are lucky enough to work with her. There is so much to learn from her and no hurdle she won't tackle with creativity and that is bound for success. I really appreciate the dedication that she brings to all that she does. She is amazing!