A note of explanation: In the interest of preserving the integrity of their operations, the martial artists featured in this article elected not to offer detailed examples of their strategies and techniques. It’s a choice frequently made by those who are responsible for the safety of others to prevent potential aggressors from knowing how they plan to keep the peace.

Anyone who’s ever attended a large concert—whether it’s inside an arena or outdoors—knows that the potential for disruption and injury is ever present. The bigger the audience and the more energetic the act, the more opportunity there is for normally passive people to get caught up in waves of emotion and be mobilized by the herd mentality. What starts out as an expression of adulation can quickly morph into a deadly stampede.

You don’t have to tell that to the lead singer of Tool. The brainchild of Maynard James Keenan and his musical co-horts, Tool has a huge following—in fact, they even have a name for themselves: The Tool Army. The fans exhibit a broad spectrum of tastes, behaviors and philosophies that the music industry loosely labels “progressive rock.” Tool’s deeply introspective, often dark material and percussion-heavy music creates a dense atmosphere at its events. At the center of it is Keenan, shaven-headed, intense and acutely aware of everything that goes on around him. Concerns about personal safety have caused him to involve himself in every detail of his shows.

Maintaining crowd control is a delicate balance of awareness that relies on a number of factors, including the application of physical and mental techniques Keenan has learned over the years. To tap into some of those lessons, Black Belt spoke with him and his head of security, Todd Fox.

Layers of Awareness and Control

Fame of the sort enjoyed by Keenan and his band brings many forms of attention, some of them wholly unwanted and potentially dangerous. That’s why in 2001, Keenan brought Fox on board.

“During a tour, I provide personal security,” Fox says. “When Maynard’s outside a comfort zone—when he’s outside his dressing room, when he’s interacting or moving from point A to point B—he might have exposure or attention that he doesn’t want. I offer protection at each of those points.”

“He understands all the exposure and crowd-control issues,” Keenan says, “but he also knows how to control the instigating Tasmanian devil without anyone getting hurt, including himself. A lot of security guards say that they know karate and then get their ass kicked by some drunken kid.”

Security personnel at concerts strive to adopt a ready-for-anything attitude. Fox says that’s part of his method for avoiding conflict, which is comparable to those of the traditional martial arts.

“Mine is different in application, not theory,” he says. “Many martial arts theories are similar to security; some are exactly the same. Understanding the threat is the first part of the equation. I practice several martial arts and was a professional mixed-martial arts fighter. These things can help, provided that I understand their place or role in the overall security/safety structure. The actual fighting is the last line of defense in a multilayered system. Many people think that security
is walking around with a celebrity. In martial arts terms, it’s never being present for the fight.” Although that’s a wise approach to preserving safety, sometimes Keenan has to be in a location where danger is unavoidable. In such situations, how does Fox defuse negative energy, especially when his client’s chief talent involves stirring up buried emotions that might inspire people to express themselves violently?

“It’s a vulnerability assessment,” Fox says. “We factor in our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, then build security matrices around it. Maynard knows that the band brings in a wide demographic. You have a large base of intellectual kids who are there for something other than violence, but you’ve got that 10 percent that are coming in and getting riled up, especially with a general-admission floor configuration. On some of the heavier songs, once that starts, everybody’s affected by that 10 percent.”

**Arena Jiu-Jitsu**

Knowing the range of danger he regularly faces, Keenan chose Brazilian jiu-jitsu as his base art. “He sees jiu-jitsu as something he can use as a smaller guy against a larger opponent,” Fox says. “It’s very difficult to fight a larger opponent with a striking skill like muay Thai.”

In jiu-jitsu competition, fighters frequently end up on their backs, but that’s arguably the last place you want to find yourself in a standing-room-only concert. That’s why Fox treats the grappling art as a last resort for situations in which prevention isn’t possible.

“I recommend avoiding confrontation,” he says. “Understand body positioning and posturing. Learn to talk your way out of a conflict.”

If that doesn’t solve the problem, more immediate action is required, he says. “Recruit support. Understand your immediate potential assets and hazards, such as weapons, targets and exits.” Should efforts at prevention and avoidance fail, Fox says, jiu-jitsu is the best minimum-force martial art. Strikes are undoubtedly effective, but they might not work on a person who’s using drugs or alcohol. Furthermore, kicking and punching can inflict serious bodily injury, giving a concertgoer ample ammo for a civil lawsuit.

“If I use a rear-naked choke properly,” Fox says, “my opponent’s pulse drops, he falls asleep and can be laid down safely with no cuts, bruises or injuries. If he’s under the influence of a chemical stimulant, he may not feel a strike, but a choke will still make him pass out.”

**Magnify the Power of One**

Verbal de-escalation and other one-on-one strategies are essential self-defense tools, but how do you apply that to a large audience? “The best way for security [personnel] to deal with the patrons is to establish a bond with them,” Fox says. “Simply speaking with them is a good start. Body language is the next step: Don’t cross your arms. Don’t scowl or frown. Avoid hands-on contact. We ‘ask’ the patron to help us. If you get ‘buy in,’ or acknowledgment, the crowd will start to police themselves.”

In regard to known troublemakers, security personnel usually attempt to identify,
Maynard James Keenan isn’t a newcomer to the ground game. The former cross-country runner hails from a grappling background—his father was Michigan’s high-school wrestling coach of the year for two years. Naturally, Keenan was expected to participate on the varsity level, and he did, but he couldn’t stomach the competitive aspects.

“I gave it a shot, but I’m not physically aggressive by nature,” he says. “I don’t have that mean streak. I was more social. I ended up talking to the other team and hanging out with them after the match.”

His time on the mat built up a solid physical base, one that served him well when he joined the Army. It was around that time when he watched Royce Gracie win the first Ultimate Fighting Championship. The images of a normal-size man defeating bigger and stronger fighters were permanently logged in his mind.

After completing his tour of duty and earning enough money to attend art school, Keenan moved to Los Angeles and found out that he was living within reach of a jiu-jitsu legend.

“When I realized that Rickson Gracie was right down the street from me, I made the trek and got my blue belt under him,” he says. “I was in town for a solid two years while I was writing a record, and I could go in there and train constantly.”

Once touring began, Keenan couldn’t maintain his workout routine. He wound up piecing together a regimen that included practicing the techniques he’d learned, working out with Todd Fox and following the advice his father and Rickson Gracie had frequently doled out: Keep it simple, stupid.

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—E.P.
The opponent grabs Maynard James Keenan’s right shoulder (1). Keenan traps the hand and swings his right arm over the man’s arm (2). He follows up with a kick to the back of the knee (3), which collapses the assailant and permits his escape (4).

Face Your Fame

When Tool performs in front of thousands or tens of thousands, the situation requires what Fox calls a “total security structure and strategy.” Does constant training and preparation give the musician a sense of calm or stability in such circumstances?

“I think that the process of rehearsal and discipline and drilling those things over and over perhaps gives me a false sense of security, but at the same time, I think that confidence emanates out and keeps things from escalating,” Keenan says.

“There are a lot of variables for him,” Fox says. “When we’re touring, we have layers of security. Obviously, the more layers there are, the more effective it becomes. Because both of us are military guys and martial artists, we’ve honed those skills and continue to sharpen them. That’s our biggest asset for not drawing any negative attention or negative energy.”

About the author:
Edward Pollard is Black Belt’s managing editor.