

## **Problem Solving for Songwriters (why do publishers/artists reject my songs?)**

*Tim Whitsett has been in the music business for more than 30 years. In the 1960's, he was an independent songwriter, record producer, and recording artist, in his native United States. Between 1970 and 1976, he was President of the East/Memphis Music Corporation, the publishing division of Stax Records Inc.*

*During 1976 and 1977, he was the General Manager of Chrysalis Music in London, and from 1977 to 1981, he was the co-owner of Whitsett Churchill Music, also in London. In 1981, he was Division Manager for Chappell Music in London before setting up two publications, UK Songplugger and UK Chart Facts, which he owned and published until he sold them in 1986.*

*That year, he returned to the USA and nowadays is a respected music publisher, acting also as a consultant to the Music Industry. There are few people more qualified to advise songwriters than Tim Whitsett.*

"My problem is getting someone to record my songs." That's a common refrain struggling songwriters sing. You have to get your material recorded if you want to reach an audience beyond your immediate circle of family and friends - and achieve critical acclaim and monetary reward. So how do you solve the problem of getting those songs cut?

First, recognise that the real problem is not having your songs turned down. Rejection is the symptom of some other, underlying problem (or problems) which must be solved before you can succeed. You will have to subject yourself to a rigid analysis of everything you do as a songwriter to discover the real reasons you haven't had any "luck" with your work. And when you know the real reasons, the remedies will most likely be self-evident - you will see what to do, step by step.

How and what do you analyse? Start with the process of marketing a song. In a nutshell, marketing is a matching process. You have to match the right product with the right customer at the right time. When your song is rejected, you have failed to match it properly somewhere along the line. So review the marketing, or matching process, each step of the way, then break down each of those steps into sub-steps for further analysis until you uncover the root problem(s).

There are four basic things a songwriter has to do.

- (1) Create the Product - write the song
- (2) Work up a Model – produce a demo
- (3) Identify the Market – select the best contacts
- (4) Market the Product – get the song cut.

All of these steps are vitally important but no matter how competent you are at steps two through four, you won't succeed unless step one - the product - is good. This is also perhaps the most subjective part of the marketing process.

Only the person you submit the song to can decide whether it is right for him. He makes his decision by gut feeling based on his own commercial and aesthetic instincts. Debate won't sway his opinion. But remember: it is only an opinion, not the final judgement on your song. If you have gotten the product right, you will find someone who recognises it if you persevere and have targeted the right market. So make sure your product is good, first of all.

The song can be broken down into these basic components:

- ❑ The Idea
- ❑ The Lyrics
- ❑ The Melody
- ❑ The Structure & Style

If the song is well constructed but the person you submit it to doesn't like it, he will be hard put to articulate the reason why, since his reasoning is based on a "feel." If the song is not well constructed, he can say "bad lyrics, boring melody," or whatever.

If you have gotten specific criticism in your feedback on rejected songs, you have a starting point for correction. If the lyrics caused the most adverse reaction, break them down into their components:

- ❑ choice of words used to convey the story
- ❑ rhyme scheme
- ❑ flow of the story from setting the scene to getting to the point
- ❑ cadence of the syllables matching the melody and beat
- ❑ other aspects.

If you can't seem to correct the problem here, then your answer is going to be teaming up with a good lyricist. At least you now know how to solve the problem, even if you require outside help.

If the melody is the problem, break it down into sections - verses and hooks. Is one of these sections too repetitious, does it fit the mood of the lyric and story, does it fit the other sections, is it memorable, is the range singable, does it build? After you have done all you can, as objectively as you can, and you still seem stuck, you'll know the remedy is to collaborate with a talented composer.

If you've not gotten specific feedback on why your work is rejected then perhaps you've fallen into the category of writing well constructed songs that somehow lack the magic sparkle that excites the listener. Try to get feedback. Ask for it. Get friends to be honest with you. Better yet, ask enemies.

Again, maybe a co-writer will provide a synergistic effect which will lift the song off the ground. You have to be as ruthless as you can when you analyse your own song. And it's hard to be dispassionate when analysing the attributes of your own baby.

**Sometimes the product is good but the working model doesn't demonstrate it in an attractive manner.** Many A&R men and producers claim they can hear a great song even if it's just whistled. Don't believe it. Your chances will always be improved by an imaginative, well produced demo which features good production ideas. Try to imagine the old Ben E. King number "Stand By Me" without the distinctive bass line ... or Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction" without the guitar line. Creative instrumental arrangements helped make those songs hits.

The components of the demo are

- ❑ Recording
- ❑ Vocal
- ❑ Instrumentation
- ❑ Arrangement

Pick your demos apart. If you discover failings, you discover at the same time what to do about them. Poor vocal? Find a decent singer who will interpret the song as it deserves. Poor arrangement? Call in some creative help ... get better musicians with improvising skills. Poor recording? You'll have to get access to better equipment or a decent studio.

The more your demo sounds like a hit record, the better chance you have of convincing someone that the song will make a hit record. The point is this: you work hard creating the song; don't slack up on its presentation. Be professional in every respect - if you want to be a professional.

In **analysing the market**, you have to take stock of your contacts and how you have used them. Contacts are one of your most important assets. Contacts constitute your market. No matter how good your songs are, you must know where and how to present them before you can succeed.

Who is your song for? What other artists do you feel this song would be perfect for? Even if your product is great, it will be rejected if you mismatch it in the market place. If you hear of an artist or producer who is looking for material, don't dash off your latest opus until you have informed yourself about the exact kind of songs needed. A great song for someone in the Barbra Streisand mould isn't necessarily a great song for an act in the Kool & The Gang vein. Be sure that the song you submit to someone is, indeed, "made for them." If you don't think it is, why should they? You waste your time and everybody else's by shooting in the dark.

If you are weak in the area of contacts, you will have to start building them. Know who's producing whom. Know what their preferences are. Know your market. Build a card file of contacts, including each artist they look after and the specific styles that each of those artists have. Cross-index the file by (1) Contact; (2) Artist; (3) Style.

Then, when you have a country/rock/ballad with pop-crossover potential, you can use your index to find the most likely candidates for your song, narrowing the market down into segments that best fit the product. Make it a goal to add two new contacts to your database weekly. Where do you find them? Read trade magazines religiously to keep track of executive and address changes at record and publishing companies. Associate with people who do have contacts; swap names and addresses of contacts with other songwriters. Study the Music Week and Billboard annual directories. Ring up record companies and ask who in the A&R Department looks after the particular artist you are interested in. Be a Sherlock Holmes in tracking down prospects for your product.

Does all this sound like a lot of work? It is, but it will be fun work if you're serious about succeeding. Besides, you will only strive to keep up with those artists and producers with whom you feel an affinity. If you hate Heavy Metal, you won't be writing any of it and won't need to keep up with the people on that side of the business. Choose your niche and be as knowledgeable of it as humanly possible.

After you've analysed and done your best to perfect your product, demo, and market, you're faced with the marketing exercise itself - **plugging the product via the demo into the marketplace**. This involves:

- ☐ Packaging
- ☐ Timing
- ☐ Promotion
- ☐ Closing

Determine how you carry out each of these steps; they are all vital elements of the matching process.

What attracts you to a new product on the shelf? What makes it stand out from similar products, makes it seem interesting, makes you want to try it? **Packaging**. Attractive packaging won't insure that you'll like the product or that you will even buy it after you have looked it over. But it will give that product an opportunity to sell itself to you.

Has packaging been a negative factor in getting your material listened to seriously? Were your cassettes accompanied by a neatly typed letter on a printed letterhead or was your submission crudely wrapped along with a hand-written note on ruled notepaper? Did you spend all that time writing a hit song, all that money on a good demo, and then not take the trouble and small expense to have some modest letterheads and labels printed?

Producers, A&R men, and managers get dozens of cassettes every week. Most of these, they know, will be rubbish. But they hope not. They sincerely want to find a gem amongst the dross. They'll be pre-disposed to listen first to those cassettes they recognise as coming from pros. Don't let yourself down now. If you want to be given the same consideration as a pro, act like one, look like one, be one.

You zip off a ballad to Sammy Superstar. Later you find out he finished his album last week. He's not cutting again until next year. And, when he does go back into the studio, it will be to record an album of strictly uptempo songs ... a radical departure from his last few records. You have got your **timing** wrong. You had the right song ... last week! It's not right now.

Timing fits in with knowing your market... plugging into your contacts for essential information. Not only do you have to know WHO and WHERE to send songs, you also have to know WHEN. Before you shoot that song over to Sammy Superstar, you call up your contact and find out if now is the time. If it isn't, rethink your market for that song. Who else will it be perfect for? Try them. Even if the product is great, rejection results if the timing is wrong.

**Promotion** is your sales effort, which is what you do when you submit a song for consideration. In reality, successful promotion is almost automatic if you've gotten all the preliminary steps right: excellent product, good demo, market correctly targeted, proper timing, and attractive packaging. All that remains is making sure that the person who makes the decision regarding your song gives it a fair listen. And this will happen if you've gotten your contact right and found out how and when he wants to review your material.

The ideal way to pitch material varies from person to person and situation to situation. It's often a plus if you are able to play your songs to someone in a relaxed, convivial atmosphere or right in the studio when the pressure is on to find a song to complete a session. Most of the time, however, it's not going to be possible to present your material in person. (Many producers will only listen if they're alone anyway). You will have to accommodate the whims of the person you are submitting your song to. If you try to force them to do it your way, you are going to encounter built-in sales resistance before you've even gotten to display your wares.

If you have to make your submission by post, enclose a brief, literate letter, typed or neatly written on your printed notepaper, which tells the recipient these essentials: (1) the title(s); (2) for whom the material is to be considered; (3) how to contact you for further information; and (4) thank them for taking time to review it. Be professional; don't waste their time with explanations

of how old you are, how the demo would be better with a bassoon on it, etc. (If you have to make excuses for it, don't send it).

The **closing** is wrapping up the sale, clinching the deal. Salesmen have pat methods of closing. When they sense a prospect is interested but hasn't yet decided to buy, salesmen will say something like "what colour would you like this in?," or "would you like us to deliver?" They do this to get the customer to commit - to a colour, to delivery, to something - without coming right out and saying: "will you buy this product?" This sort of closing might not fit the songwriting business, but neither can you use hard-sell and expect to be welcomed back when you have another song to plug. Don't start ringing up daily, asking if your tape was received, what was thought about it, and so forth. Pros don't do that. They are too busy working on new projects. If your song is going to be recorded, you will be contacted. If not, you may or may not get it back with a rejection letter.

Some producers are courteous in this respect, others are too busy and understaffed, or simply too arrogant, to bother. If your follow-up sales efforts have included bugging some one with daily calls, you might consider that as a negative factor, one that will make that person less likely to listen to your next cassette with enthusiasm.

Remember that no amount of super-selling will overcome weaknesses in the steps you've taken previous to the sales effort or promotion. You're only ready for the promotion and sales effort when you've done all you can to get the preliminary steps right. Use promotion and closing to solidify your contact so that when you plug your next song it will be easier because

- ❑ you know more about the preferences and whims of your contact (learn from each sales effort) and
- ❑ your contact begins to know and respect you as a professional, whether or not he liked your material for this particular project.

You may think your songs will magically get recorded if and when you can find a publisher who likes your material enough to do all the mundane marketing chores for you. A publisher will free your time so that you can concentrate on the creative aspects of the trade and not have to involve yourself in the time consuming process of finding producers and A&R personnel who may be looking for your type of material. But to get a publisher interested in your work, you'll have to go through essentially the same process we've been discussing here.

On the one hand, you have to sell the producer or A&R man on the notion that your song will make a hit record for his artist. On the other hand, you have to convince the publisher that your work will translate into hit records so that he can likewise convince his contacts in the record business that your work is hit material. Either way, you have to market yourself and your work, and, to do this successfully, you have to be able to analyse and understand the root cause(s) of why you may have had difficulty selling your work to date.

As you have seen, analysis isn't hard to do at all, and it is the only way to accurately pinpoint any real problems you may be having so that you can cure the disease and not the symptom.

Everything we've discussed here is an on-going process. The various steps may get easier with experience, but they can never be skipped.

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