

FROM DEMO TO HIT SINGLE – HOW THE PROCESS WORKS

A lot of you have asked for sound clips of "Home to You" and wanted to know the stages it went through in getting recorded. So we thought we'd use "Home to You" as an example of the typical stages a song may go through from the writer's room to the radio.

The Work Tape - After a song is written, the professional songwriter(s) make what is known as a "work tape" to play for their publisher(s). This is usually a rough recording, often done on a 4-track recorder with just guitar/vocal or piano/vocal. The publisher(s) will listen to the work tape and decide whether or not the song warrants a demo. Generally speaking, unless you have an established relationship with a publisher, A&R person or producer, it is better to play a fully produced demo rather than a work tape.

The Demo - If the publisher decides that a song is marketable or pitchable, a demo session is scheduled. Often the demo session occurs several months after the song is written since the publisher will usually wait until there are at least 4-5 songs that can be scheduled on the "session". This helps to keep the costs down. Some publishers have in-house studios and simply hire in the players and singers. Other publishers go to a studio. The typical demo generally consists of the following instruments: bass, drums, keyboards, guitars. Often in country demos, a pedal steel or fiddle is added for effect.

Occasionally, a stripped down demo is done for ballads. The general cost of a demo in Nashville runs anywhere from \$300-\$800 per song. If you are a songwriter not currently working with a publisher, try to get professional feedback on your song BEFORE investing in a demo. Also, make sure you get a copy of just the instrumental tracks once the demo is done in addition to the instrument/vocal version. This will help save a lot of time and effort in the studio in case you rewrite the lyric and want to re-demo the song.

Pitching The Song - Once the demo is completed, the songplugger at the publishing company hits the streets with the song hoping to get it recorded by an artist. They generally look at the pitch/tip sheets they have of who's looking for material and who's going to be recording in the near future. They then try to schedule meetings with someone connected to the project. These meetings may be with any number of people connected to the artist, including: the producer, someone in A&R at the record label, the artist's manager, or even the artist themselves. Hopefully, at one of these meetings, someone will like the song well enough to put it on "hold" (see below). Some songs go on hold right away while other songs, take months or years. Many never make it to the hold stage.

Example: "Home To You" was pitched to the head of A&R at Atlantic Records sometime in November. He liked the song and said that he would send it to John Michael Montgomery who was on the road at the time. This is what he did with any songs he thought John Michael might be interested in recording. He did not however ask for a "hold" of the song. We didn't get overly excited at this stage, since there was still a long way to go.

The Hold - A hold can be very confusing. Generally speaking, a hold is simply a verbal agreement that the publisher grants to someone connected to the artist's project. The general understanding is that the publisher agrees not to pitch the song to anyone else. This gives the person who put the song on hold time to determine whether or not the artist is interested in recording this song. No money is exchanged but rather, it is a good faith agreement.

Some songs are on hold for a few days, some for several months. Often the publisher will request a time limit on the hold so the song is not tied up in limbo for a long period of time. Depending on how closely connected the person who put the song on hold is to the project, people often speak of "soft" holds (maybe an A&R person) versus a "strong" hold (the artist's producer or the artist). Sometimes hundreds of songs are put on hold for an album that ultimately will end up with only 10 songs on it. Other times only a handful of songs are put on hold. Most professional songwriters are pleased but not overly excited when their songs go on hold since, unfortunately, they often don't get recorded.

Example: During the first week of December, John Michael Montgomery called the publishing company and requested a hold on "Home To You". He said he was going in to the studio the following week and was going to record 3-4 songs. He wasn't sure whether he would record "Home To You", but he was definitely considering it. We all started getting a little excited at this point since this was a strong hold, but we weren't buying champagne just yet.

The Cut - Once the artist records the song, it still has to make the album. It is not unusual for an artist to cut 15 songs and only put 10 on their album. The album is also usually recorded in several stages over several months with 3-4 songs recorded at each session. Eventually, it is decided what songs will actually make the album.

Example: John Michael Montgomery recorded "Home To You" during the second week of December. There was still to be one more recording session for the album in January. They would ultimately end up with 14 songs, 10 of which would make the album. At this point, everyone was VERY excited that he recorded the song and we were keeping our fingers crossed it would make the album. We eventually found out it made the album in late February when "Home To You" was among four songs John Michael previewed at a concert at the Houston Astrodome.

The Single - Often the record company releases the first single before the album comes out. This is to try to build up demand for the album so sales will be high the first week of its release. The album release date is often a month *after* the first single comes out.

Example: When the first single, "Hello L-O-V-E" was released in early April, the new album was still untitled. Eventually, we learned that the album release date was scheduled for late May and would be titled, "Home To You". And on June 16th, John Michael Montgomery announced at Fan Fair that "Home To You" was the second single.

The SONGPOWER Index - Before the official radio "add" date, the new single is reviewed and ranked in the SongPower index by several radio programmers across the country. While a high ranking in the SongPower index does not guarantee chart success, it is statistically more probable. A song will usually appear in the SongPower index for two weeks along with the other new singles due to hit radio.

Example: "Home To You" was ranked second in the SongPower index for new singles the week it was reviewed. Interestingly enough, the song which came in first in the SongPower index, "I'll Go Crazy" ultimately failed to break top 10 and the song that scored third "Start Over Georgia" failed to break the top 40. Still, industry professionals give a lot of weight to the SongPower index ranking.

The Music Video - The ultimate goal of the single for the record label is to sell albums. Record labels and artists, unlike the songwriter, do not make any money from radio airplay. With that in mind, the record label's goal is to increase exposure for the song on both radio and TV to try to convince consumers to buy the album. One of the tools used to generate such exposure is the music video.

Example: The "Home To You" video was shot at a truckstop in southern Tennessee and eventually became the #1 video on CMT in addition to becoming one of the top music videos for 1999.

The Charts - There are basically three music industry charts (Billboard, R&R and Gavin) that professionals watch to determine how well a single is doing. All three charts monitor various radio stations across the country that report every week how many "spins" a song is receiving. The more spins a song receives, the higher up the charts the song moves. Since a songwriter will receive money based on airplay, the ultimate goal is to move slowly all the way up the charts, generating as much airplay as possible.

Depending on the artist and the competition at the time, it can take a song as long as 26 weeks or more to "peak" at its highest chart position. While a song is rising up the charts, it is said to have a "bullet." Once a song has peaked, it is said to have lost its bullet, meaning that it is now moving downward on the charts and receiving less radio airplay.

Example: "Home To You" took 23 weeks to "peak" at #2 on all music industry charts. It actually held the #1 spot briefly on a Friday morning, but the charts do not officially close for the week until Monday morning and by that time it had slipped back to #2. Artist appeal, record company clout and luck all factor in to a song's "peak" chart position.

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