

Demo Production and Distribution - A Producer Perspective

By T. McGuire

Here is a checklist that will maximize your chances of getting heard and respect the listener's time.

1. Never send more than three songs unless specifically requested. Demo listeners like watching the "in" pile diminish and the "out" pile grow as quickly as possible. If the listener has a limited time to listen, which is usually the case, the tendency is to listen to a CD they know they can complete. So if you send a demo with ten songs on it and someone else's demo has one song, you can bet that the "out" pile will grow quickly with one-song demos. There's also the psychology that implies, "I've sent you the song you need!" This is particularly true in pitching songs to producers for a specific artist.

Along those same lines, most people resent getting CDs with 20 songs and a letter that says, "I know you'll like at least one of these, so just pick out what you want." They want you to do that and send them three songs or less. Songs you totally believe in. If you're not far enough along to be able to decide, you're not ready. When sending CDs with more than three songs, highlight three you want the listener to focus on first, and include the numbers of the cuts in your cover letter and lyric sheets (so they have a reference while the CD is on their player and they can't see the label). If they like those, they'll listen to the others.

2. Place your best and most commercial song first. If you have a strong up-tempo song, it's a good bet to start with that. If they don't like the first one, it may be the only shot you get.

3. Never send your original master CD. You may never see it again and it's not fair to saddle its recipient with responsibility for it.

4. If your CD contains more than the first four you want heard, clearly mark on the CD and printed insert which ones you want them to hear.

5. Send a lyric sheet neatly typed or printed. Letterhead is impressive. It says "This is my business and I take it seriously." Some don't like to look at lyrics while they listen, but most do. It's a time saver to be able to see it all at once and to see the structure of the song graphically laid out on the page. Lead sheets (with melody and lyric together) are not sent out with demos. They're good to have at the point where a producer wants to record your song and you wanted to be sure he/she has the correct melody, but since the current copyright law permits CDs to be sent for copyright registration, their importance has diminished.

Lead sheets are bulky to mail, it's too difficult to follow the lyric and visualize the song's form, and many industry pros don't read music anyway. It also pegs you as a songwriter over 50 who has no understanding of submitting demos since this practice went out of style about 25 years ago. Separate the sections of the songs with a space when you type out your lyric sheet. Label each one (verse, chorus, bridge, etc.) at the upper left side of the section. Do not type your lyrics in prose fashion. Lay them out

with the rhymes at the ends of the lines so the structure and rhyme schemes of the song can be seen immediately.

6. Make sure there's a copyright notice (© 2003 I.B. Cool, All Rights Reserved) on the bottom of the lyric sheet and on the CD label. Technically, this isn't necessary but it alerts everyone that your song is protected, whether it's registered or not.

7. Cover letters should be short and to the point. Let the music speak for itself and avoid hype. A professional presentation will do more to impress someone than "I know these are hit songs because they're better than anything I've ever heard on the radio," or "I just know that we can both make a lot of money if you'll publish these songs." Avoid the temptation to tell your life story, and don't explain how you have a terminal disease, you're the sole support of your 10 children and if these songs don't get recorded they'll all be homeless or worse. In fact, don't plead, apologize or show any hint of desperation. It only gives the message that you have no confidence in the ability of the songs to stand on their own.

Here's what should be in your cover letter:

- a) It should be addressed to a specific person in the company.
 - b) It should state your purpose in sending the demo. Are you looking for a publisher, a producer, a record deal for you as an artist? Do you want the listener to pay special attention to your production, your singing, your band, or just the song? Is it targeted for a specific artist?
 - c) List any significant professional credits that apply to the purpose of your submission. If you want your song published, list other published or recorded songs, contests won, etc. If you're a performer submitting an artist demo, resist the temptation to grab at weak credits: "I played at the same club that (famous star) played." Tell them what drives you, what inspires you. Keep it short. List real sales figure. Don't lie.
 - d) Include any casting ideas you might have if you're pitching to other artists.
 - e) Ask for feedback if you want it. Odds are you won't get it but give it a shot.
 - f) List the songs enclosed and writers' names in the order they appear on the tape/CD. (Lyric sheets should also be enclosed in the same order the songs appear on the demo.)
 - g) Thank them for their time and attention.
 - h) Include your address, phone number, Web site URL and e-mail address (if you have one).
8. Send a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE) if you want your CD back. There are two schools of thought about this. On the pro SASE side, if you don't want to lose all those CDs, you can't expect to get them back without it. There's another school of thought, though, that if you say you want it back, you are assuming they won't like it.

There's no guarantee that you'll get them back, even if you do send a SASE, in which case you're gambling even more money, and worse could happen than your CD sitting around a producer's office.

9. Your name, address and phone number should be on every lyric sheet. It seems like such a common sense request. In fact it would be embarrassing to even suggest that you might forget to do it if I didn't see it happen constantly. The problem on this end is that, between listening sessions at the office, the car, and home, it's so easy to separate the CD from the box or lyric sheet. Once they've gone to the trouble to find your hit song, not finding you is a fate they don't deserve.

10. Be sure you have adequate postage. Use a special envelope with an insulated lining. Put your CD in a jewel box because, hopefully, the recipients can stack it on a shelf and read the label on the edge if they decide to keep it.

The main thing to remember is to make your demo submission as easy as possible to deal with.

Using the Internet:

Your Demo as Audio File

An increasingly popular strategy is sending your demo as an audio file. It's rare these days that a record company, producer or manager doesn't have a high-speed Internet access line. Obviously, many of the above suggestions don't apply to sound files.

Giant Records A&R Executive, Craig Coburn says (footnote: Music Connection Magazine Vol. XXV #1 01/01/01): "In the future, I would love to see people soliciting the record labels -- whether it's artists, managers or lawyers - using the Internet. I'd like them to send me a letter asking me to check out their web site rather than sending me the music.

We're not getting that many electronic submissions yet and I'd like to. When I'm talking to people, I encourage them to send mp3s. The quality of mp3 is not exactly up to the quality of a CD, but it's absolutely close enough for an A&R person to hear the music and to know if it's something that excites us or not."

The most popular formats are mp3 and RealAudio. The fidelity is not quite CD quality but still adequate to show them what you do. There are a couple of different procedures for this:

Send an E-mail with the audio file attached. Follow the suggestions listed above for cover letter. Include phone number(s). Also include your Web site address so they can click it and go directly to it. When they get to your site, they'll hopefully find additional bio material, photos and lyrics. Just send them an e-mail intriguing enough to get them to go to your site and hear your music there.

Indie marketing guru Tim Sweeney suggests that because of the limited amount of time someone may want to spend at any site, it's important to help them decide quickly which of your songs may be of most interest to them. You can help by

providing a short description which includes information on the style, what it's about, why the song was written and how it was recorded.

Your demo will introduce you to the eyes and ears of many music industry professionals. Take this introduction very seriously. It's your job interview. It should look good, have something important to say, and say it well. There are a lot of other applicants for the job. The pros are looking for the best. Be it!

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