

Getting your lucky break too early - getting an unfair label deal

(by Johnny Dwinell of Daredevil Productions)

Kelly and I are at a private party and we end up in a conversation over beers and cigars about artist development and the damage that happens when artists and/or songwriters get their lucky break too early. What if you get the opportunity of a lifetime to take a big step towards your dream and you're not developed enough, ill prepared, or worse, still searching only for fame?

What if the record label or publishing company says “yes”? Are you ready? Do you know where you’re going artistically? Are you prepared to fight for your vision or will you be lost in the crowd with your hat in your hand? Do you understand the hustle of the business and how to operate intelligently within it so you can capitalize on the coming momentum?

The NFL has classes which all rookies are required to take to deal with this instantaneous rise in the player's brand awareness and cash flow, but they certainly DON'T offer this in the music business. In fact, they would prefer you don't know; more money for the powers that be.

But a musician can't just stick his toes in the water; you have to be ALL IN. To make a living, you have to be a student of the game. If you don't know your business, you're being lazy. Trust me, THEY will know your business because they're professionals and you will suffer for your lack of knowledge one way or the other.

One of conversations we had was centered on the discussions we have every week with beginning songwriters. Often beginners are understandably apprehensive about spending too much on their dream so, in lieu of a proper/professionally acceptable demo recording, they go “shopping” for the best deal (i.e. the cheapest demo price).

I hear it all the time, “I just want to stick my toes in the water to see if anyone cares. I want to see if anyone is interested before I spend more money.” Just like any other industry there are people here in Nashville that cater to that market; and just like any other industry, you get what you pay for. Now, many songwriters are just doing it for posterity to get their music recorded which means the only person they need to impress is themselves so this is a pragmatic approach; this makes sense.

However, the songwriters with serious professional aspirations have to impress the professionals, so they are screwing themselves with a crappy demo recording. Paying for a \$350/song demo in Nashville (of which \$100 will go to the pro singer) will get a guy that is going to play all the instruments on that recording and he's going to cut it in his basement, and MIX it in his basement: it's the only way he can afford to charge that low price. Next, that songwriter will shop the song to song pluggers. These song pluggers are true professionals so they will instantly be aware that the writer cut corners on this demo (because of the sonic nature of the recording) which immediately makes the writer look unprofessional; 99% will not pay attention to the song and will pass because that's a red flag that the songwriter isn't ready yet.

But let's say that for some reason the song plugger really listens to an amazing song and says YES. What do you think will happen next? They will tell the songwriter, "I LOVE this song, man, but I can't sell this recording of it; so go back and re-record it."

You see, this "dip your toes in the water" approach has only two outcomes for an aspiring professional songwriter. Most likely they get a "NO" and alienate the very people they need to bring their product to market because they look unprofessional; you never get a second chance to make a first impression. And if they hear a "YES" and by the grace of God, the plugger is willing to overlook their naiveté, the songwriter has added \$350 of needless extra cost to his first product in a start up business (which could be put towards another song demo to build the catalogue).

Everybody has a dream, but if you're not somewhat prepared, a "yes" could be the beginning of the end. To me, "making it" is defined as making a living doing what you LOVE to do. There are different levels of "making it" based on volume and revenue generated; but if it's based on making a living doing what you love to do, it's a solid foundation.

So what about fame? I get why people seek fame but I can tell you that fame is a herculean pain-in-the-ass. Fame is where everybody is in your business or is talking about your business like they know you when they *don't* have business with you and they *don't* know you. You only get to find this out when you get a little taste.

Eleanor Roosevelt said "Big minds talk about ideas, medium minds talk about events, and small minds talk about people". So the search or need to be famous is an exercise for small brains. Those who only seek fame are somewhat delusional. If you want to be iconic, you have to put in the work. If you want your songs to be timeless, you have to put in the work.

Fame as a byproduct of supreme artistry is a result of great minds, vision, and hard work; it's no accident. We all have an image of some famous entertainer that we feel doesn't have enough talent and we're baffled by her fame; she is famous because she was *prepared*, *took it more seriously*, and *worked harder* than you do.

Real success in the music industry is about tons of preparation and experience over years of time. Real success rarely happens overnight and when it does, especially in the new music business, it's "here today, gone later today" and is usually disastrous to the artist. **So the slow growth will last longer and be worth more in the end... unless you just want to be famous.**

So, What if the Record Label Says YES?

If you get a major label to say "YES" these days it's because you have generated some kind of attention, a brand, and a following on a reality show or vocal talent show (where the label feels they have a guaranteed market of sorts) OR you have created real momentum on your own through touring, twitter, Facebook, trackable record sales, sold out concerts, etc., and maybe you've managed to fund a Kickstarter campaign with at least 1,000 backers or \$100,000 in funds. Let's dissect the latter first.

In this scenario you will have turned down several label offers already and the conversation starts with you saying something like this, “What are you guys going to do that I haven’t already done for myself that warrants me giving you massive percentages of my revenue from record sales, merchandise, publishing, ticket sales, etc?” This is called leverage at the negotiating table. Believe me, when you are seasoned with momentum you come to the table with a “heavy hammer” and **you will be protective of your small profitable business!!** Your eyes will be open to the many ways a label can screw up your future and all the hard work from your past that got you to this very negotiating table.

Now let’s dissect the artist who gets a deal after skyrocketing to fame on a TV show or from some other massively publicized anomaly. This artist doesn’t have a heavy hammer at all. If you win next year’s American Idol, who cares? It’s the 13th season and there are more winners now in obscurity than there are current, relevant artists.

Yeah, yeah, you get to feel like a Rockstar for a hot second and you hang out with all the big names and feel like you’re somebody, but then what? You are literally here and gone. It’s easy to spot the artists on American Idol that have a true understanding of who they are and the ones that don’t (i.e. the developed artists as opposed to the undeveloped artists).

The more hard work you do on your own and the more traction you get as an artist on your own, the less likely you are to sign a major record deal because it just won’t make sense; you’re already making money! However, if you do choose to sign, your deal will be far more advantageous to you, the artist, than anyone getting a deal off of American Idol.

Your music is everything, right? Don’t cut corners. You need to pay your dues. You need to be mentored. You need to be developed. The Universe is always as it should be.

Created in 2011, Daredevil Productions is the joint vision of veteran Nashville Engineer/Producer/Performer Kelly Schoenfeld and veteran Los Angeles Artist/Producer/Businessman Johnny Dwinell. DDP is a full service music production team housed in Ragtop Recording studios on Nashville’s world famous Music Row. We offer a broad selection of music services including music production from song demos to major label records, artist development, song arrangements, music programming, song promotion, and artist guidance. Whether you are a platinum recording artist or if this is the first step on musical journey, Daredevil Productions can guide you all the way.

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