

## **How Much Does It Cost To Make A Hit Song?**

by ZOE CHACE on June 30, 2011

Getting a song on the pop charts takes big money. Def Jam started paying for Rihanna's recent single, "Man Down," more than a year ago. In March of 2010, the label held a writing camp in L.A. to create the songs for Rihanna's album, *Loud*.

At a writing camp, a record label hires the best music writers in the country and drops them into the nicest recording studios in town for about two weeks. It's a temporary version of the old music-industry hit factories, where writers and producers cranked out pop songs. "It's like an all-star game," says Ray Daniels, who was at the writing camp for Rihanna.

Daniels manages a songwriting team of two brothers, Timothy and Theron Thomas, who work under the name Rock City. "You got all the best people, you're gonna make the best records," he says.

Here's who shows up at a writing camp: songwriters with no music, and producers toting music tracks with no words.

The Thomas brothers knew producer Shama "Sham" Joseph, but they had never heard his Caribbean-flavored track that became "Man Down." According to Daniels, the brothers listened to the track and said, "Let's give Rihanna a one-drop! Like, a response to 'I shot the sheriff!'" They wrote the lyrics to "Man Down" in about 12 minutes, Daniels says.

To get that twelve minutes of inspiration from a top songwriting team is expensive — even before you take into account the fee for the songwriters. At a typical writing camp, the label might rent out 10 studios, at a total cost of about \$25,000 a day, Daniels says.

The writing camp for Rihanna's album "had to cost at least 200 grand," Daniels says. "It was at least forty guys out there. I was shocked at how much money they were spending! But, guess what? They got the whole album out of that one camp."

A writing camp is like a reality show, where top chefs who have never met are forced to cook together. At the end, Rihanna shows up like the celebrity judge and picks her favorites.

Her new album has 11 songs on it. So figure that the writing camp cost about \$18,000 per song. The songwriter and the producer each got a fee for their services. Rock City got \$15,000 for *Man Down*, and the producer got around \$20,000, according to Daniels. That's about \$53,000 spent on the song so far— before Rihanna even steps into the studio with her vocal producer.

The vocal producer's job is to make sure Rihanna sings the song right. Makeba Riddick didn't produce Rihanna's vocals on "Man Down," but she's one of the industry's top producers, and has worked with the singer on many songs, including the two number one hits in 2010: "Rude Boy" and "Love the Way You Lie."

When Riddick works with a singer, she'll say, "I need you to belt this out, I need you to scream this, as if you're on one end of the block and you're trying to talk to somebody three blocks away." Or maybe: "Sing with your lips a little more closed, a little more pursed together, so we can get that low, melancholy sound."

Not only that, the vocal producer has to deal with the artist's rider. The rider is whatever the artist needs to get them in the mood to get into the booth and sing. "They'll have strobe lights, incense burning, doves flying around the studio," she says. (Yes, Riddick has had doves circling her head while she's working). Rihanna is "very focused" Riddick says. So no doves. Riddick's fee starts at \$10,000 to \$15,000 per song, she says.

The last step is mixing and mastering the song, which costs another \$10,000 to \$15,000, according to Daniels.

So, our rough tally to create one pop song comes to: The cost of the writing camp, plus fees for the songwriter, producer, vocal producer and the mix comes to \$78,000.

But it's not a hit until everybody hears it. How much does that cost? About \$1 million, according to Daniels, Riddick and other industry insiders. "The reason it costs so much," Daniels says, "is because I need everything to click at once. You want them to turn on the radio and hear Rihanna, turn on BET and see Rihanna, walk down the street and see a poster of Rihanna, look on Billboard, the iTunes chart, I want you to see Rihanna first. All of that costs." That's what a hit song is: It's everywhere you look. To get it there, the label pays.

Every song is different. Some songs have a momentum all their own, some songs just break out out of the blue. But the record industry depends on hits for sales. Having hits is the business plan. The majority of songs that are hits — that chart high, that sell big, that blast out of cars in the summertime— cost a million bucks to get them heard and played and bought.

Daniels breaks down the expenses roughly into thirds: a third for marketing, a third to fly the artist everywhere, and a third for radio. "Marketing and radio are totally different," he says. "Marketing is street teams, commercials and ads."

Radio is? "Radio you're talking about . . ." he pauses. "Treating the radio guys nice." 'Treating the radio guys nice' is a very fuzzy cost. It can mean taking the program directors of major market stations to nice dinners. It can mean flying your artist in to do a free show at a station in order to generate more spots on a radio playlist.

Former program director Paul Porter, who co-founded the media watchdog group Industry Ears, says it's not that record labels pay outright for a song. They pay to establish relationships so that when they are pushing a record, they will come first.

Porter says shortly after he started working as a programmer for BET about 10 years ago, he received \$40,000.00 in hundred-dollar bills in a Fed-Ex envelope. Current

program directors told me this isn't happening anymore. They say their playlists are made through market research on what their listeners want to hear.

In any case, to return to our approximate tally: After \$78,000 to make the song, and another \$1 million to roll it out, Rihanna's "Man Down" gets added to radio playlists across the country, gets a banner ad on iTunes ... and may still not be a hit.

As it happens, "Man Down" has not sold that well, and radio play has been minimal. But Def Jam makes up the shortfall by releasing other singles. And only then— if the label recoups what it spent on the album — will Rihanna herself get paid.

**COST SUMMARY (ROUGH CALCULATIONS)**

Writing camp (per song)	\$18,000
Songwriter	\$15,000
Producer	\$20,000
Vocal producer	\$15,000
Mix/Master	\$10,000
Song roll out	\$1,000,000
TOTAL	\$1,078,000

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