

HOW GOOD DOES A DEMO HAVE TO BE?

How good does a demo have to be to impress a music publisher?

If every publisher was also a musician, then I would say not to worry about the demo, because a musician would recognise a good song no matter how badly performed it was. However, a lot of publishers start life as lawyers, accountants, managers or whatever - anything except musicians, and despite what they tell you, a good demo **does** impress them. They do not have the necessary imagination in many cases to work out what your song might sound like if it had been properly recorded in the first place. Smaller publishers also like well-made demos, because they can use a good demo to promote the song to labels or performers without having to re-record the material, saving both money and time.

Sometimes you hear about demos which are good enough to use as masters. Should I go that far?

It all depends on what type of song it is, and who it is destined for. Obviously, if you are hoping to have the song released by the latest heart-throb, there is no point in recording it to master standard. All you need is a good demo. On the other hand, if you have a local band or singer whose version of your song is really great, and if you can make a master-quality recording of the song using that act, then you can think in terms of not just selling the song to a publisher, but of selling the entire package of recording, song and act, to a major label.

Nowadays, most new product makes its way onto the market in this fashion. To a great extent, the days of the songwriter sending in a rough demo to the publisher, who then makes a better version, and sends it on to a label, who in turn persuades a star to record it, are gone. Nowadays, the package deal is more common...the writer writes a song, finds a band, records the band, and furnishes the label with a finished product.

In other words, songwriters nowadays are basically record producers?

Not all of them by any means - there are plenty of "pure songwriters" about, but of course, with more acts writing their own material, outlets for the pure songwriter are reduced, so more and more writers are thinking in terms of the entire product - from the song to the record - and not just the song itself.

In reality, a lot of this comes about by chance. A writer decides to make a demo in a local studio, and instead of paying musicians, seeks out a local band, and offers them a chance to work in a studio free of charge, recording his song as a demo. If the recording works out better than expected, then the writer thinks in terms of selling the entire package as a master - if not, then he thinks only in terms of selling the song, while the band use the tape to try and get themselves a deal. If either succeeds, then both may be lucky. The publisher who likes the song may also be able to place the act - while if a label likes the act, they may also take the song.

Of course, if a writer produces a master, he is dealing with a record label, and by-passing the music publisher?

Usually that is so, and of course the writer will then think of trying to keep the publishing himself, or keeping at least some of it. On the other hand, I know quite a few writers who produced a master, and instead of going to a label with it, went to a publisher, and used the publisher's expertise and skill to get them a record release on the master.

Most publishers we interview say that if the song is good - they will recognise the quality in spite of the lack of sophistication of the demo. However, nowadays, many demos are of a high standard, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to have yourself taken seriously if you promote a very basic demo. Having said that, remember that the demo is not everything. A strong demo will not sell a weak song no matter how much you spend, and frequently, the excuse of a "poor demo" is used to by publishers to turn down songs that are in themselves weak anyway.

No matter what they tell you - the song is more important than the demo. I mean a Michelangelo is still a Michelangelo, even if the frame is not top notch. But still, a nice frame helps, particularly when nobody tells you in advance that you are looking at a masterpiece. At one stage, I used to ask the publisher how elaborate a demo he wanted, and usually, the reply would be to keep it simple. I soon discovered that when I sent in the simple demo, they all told me it should have been a bit more elaborate, so nowadays, I do not bother to ask. I do the best demo I can do, and send that in. It saves time, and avoids me getting irritated!

I had worked in a publishing house so I knew from experience that you got about sixty seconds to make your point. They'd put on the demo, play about a minute of it, and if they didn't like it by then, they'd take it off. So you had to get to the point quickly if you were not well known - if you were well known, they probably listened to all the song, thinking that you must know what you were doing but if you were an unknown, they already presumed you did not know what you were doing, so you were lucky to get sixty seconds of their time. I always put everything into the first sixty seconds.

I do the best demo I can do, and send that in. A good demo is what music publishers prefer.

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