

Unsigned Artists - Success without a Record Label

By Lathum N

Unsigned artists have a greater chance of success today than ever before. On one hand, composing and performing songs without the shadow of a struggling record label hanging overhead leaves musicians free to express themselves instinctively from the soul. On the other, it requires a lot of work behind the scenes, but can offer greater rewards in return.

Brooklyn-based band Clap Your Hands Say Yeah broke through in 2005 as a result of the commotion started online among a community of blogs and music sites, such as Pitchfork Media. As a result, their self-financed, self-released and self-titled debut album has sold more than 200,000 copies. Band bassist Tyler Sargent explained to Paste magazine (12/6/06) why the band has remained unsigned, despite their success:

"Because there are so many new avenues opening up these days...if you have good songs and the right relationships you can just totally bypass this whole label system. Which is just great for independent music...and this way, we get 80 percent, or at least a larger chunk of (our earnings). And it just makes more sense."

The truth is, the major label end of the music industry is in "turmoil," as noted by CBS Evening News (5/28/07), as "CD sales plummeted 20 percent the first three months of this year." In the same piece, Wilco's lead singer Jeff Tweedy stated that "Technology has evened the playing field. If the artist can gain more power over the situation--over the economics of the situation--why wouldn't they take it?"

While the Internet has become the most vital and effective marketing tool, taking music to the streets has become the bread and butter for many acts. On a smaller scale, Heath & Jed have made a living off of the CD sales and tips they've received playing the streets and subways of New York City. In their Gothamist tour diary (8/14/06), they revealed: "We've sold over 10,000 CD's this year. One fan at a time...We came and we conquered and we made some money to live another day as musicians, doing what we love."

Sony's Connect music site did a feature on unsigned Fullerton, CA band Cold War Kids who "have risen to the top of the hipster rock heap through their relentless touring." In the related interview, lead singer Nathan Willett talked about the process of peddling their homemade EPs during their non-stop tours: "Basically (the EPs) were available at our shows at best, and we ran out of them a lot, and it was kind of a bummer because we couldn't put the effort into being at home and getting more made. But it was cool because we had a limited amount of them and people seemed to want them, and we were surprised that people wanted them as much as they did."

There are no rules to follow when it comes to unsigned bands promoting their music. From utilizing their fan base to promote local live shows, new releases and merchandise, to reaching new fans outside via online communities like Facebook and social music sites such as Echoboost, the extra effort will only aid them along the way. As long as they have quality songs, the talent to perform them live and a dedicated work ethic to spread the music, nothing can stand in their way.

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