

Ten Worst Song Demo Mistakes

(by Johnny Dwinell of Daredevil Productions)

This week Kelly and I got the call to produce new record for an artist on a NY label. It was a rush project as they wanted it “in the can” by the first week of December in time to ship for Christmas. Mostly the songs were already chosen. However, at the last minute the label decided they wanted to add two more songs to the project.

We put out the word amongst the writing community here that we needed songs quickly as we were planning on cutting in under a week. Usually this song request process manifests itself in the form of a “Tip Sheet” of some sort. The tip sheet will dictate the kind of songs styles and lyrics styles that are needed for any particular project like “Up-tempo party songs” or “Mid-tempo island country grooves”. The tip sheet will also tell the reader who the artist is, along with a few other do’s and don’ts about song submissions for that particular artist, etc. Since we didn’t have time for a tip sheet, we personally called or texted every writer we knew with specifics on the artist, kind of songs, melodic ranges, and lyric content needed.

After roughly 48 hours, we received just over 250 songs. Kelly and I sat down this past Saturday to dig into the task of listening. After hearing the first two songs, I knew what my next blog was going to be about. I want to share the experience that we had going through all these songs to give you a perspective from the producer side as we try to do our job. I thought this might help you on your future pitches!

The intent here is to reveal what goes through our producer mind as we have to trudge through so many songs to cut the list from 250 to 15 or so which we then present to the artist who chooses the final list of songs that will be cut on the record. FYI, this is not the most fun part of our job, this part is busy work that we would just assume get out of the way as quickly as possible; every job has this component in some fashion or another.

We are very familiar with the artist brand and voice; we better be, right? We understand the vocal range, we understand the kind of songs the artist gravitates towards. So much so that we literally predicted the very two songs we thought would make the record out of the 18 we presented.

Here are the 10 worst song demo mistakes songwriters make when their cutting and pitching demos.

1. **Long Intros SUCK** – all we are thinking about during the vetting process is the melody, lyric, and vibe of the song; and isn’t that what you are selling? For the life of me I cannot understand why ANYONE would have a song demo with a 45 second intro; it seems like a lifetime when you have 250 to listen to. Think about it, what’s the purpose of a long intro on a SONG DEMO? You are trying to sell the SONG not blow people away with your producing skills, so why make us wait? This is such an annoyance; we had probably 8 songs like this, each of which turned us off immediately - and to some extent, we had a poor opinion of the song before we even heard the first verse.

2. Crappy/Cheap Production – We did come across a (very) few songs with horrible production; cheap demos. I will tell you honestly that you have to compete and compete intelligently in the marketplace.

3. Wrong Song – READ the tip sheet or LISTEN to the instructions on what the project is requiring. If the producer asks for Up-tempo party songs, don't send ballads. If the tip sheet has an artist with a limited vocal range, don't send huge songs, no matter how good they are. Don't use an opportunity to pitch a certain song as a vehicle to send the producers every song you have; we don't care. We are only looking for the songs we need for THIS project so we can get on with producing it.

4. Vague/Missing Email Subject Lines – As a writer you definitely want to put the name of the artist pitch into the subject line so your song doesn't get lost in all the traffic. How else would one find a song amongst so many emails but the subject line? That's called common sense.

5. You Didn't Research The Artist Before Sending Songs – In the case of this particular artist, his songs have a very positive message; they are on the bright side as opposed to darker themes. We came across a couple songs about heavy drinking, sex, and adultery that just wouldn't be right for his brand; clearly, the writers that sent those have no clue about the artist, and simply wasted our time. This doesn't make a good impression on us about your songwriting, no matter how good the song is.

6. You Chose The Wrong Singer – On your demo, it is so important to choose a pro singer; NOT someone who is your friend or who is half price. Suitable vocal ranges are very important as it is really hard to hear a big, high, soaring melody an octave lower. Those demos with poor or inappropriate singers (with respect to the artist) are ignored immediately. I strongly suggest if your song would work down in a low octave as well as a high soaring vocal performance, demo it twice; or at least cut a second vocal so you have something that clearly represents both vocal ranges.

7. Your Lyrics Aren't Strong Enough – We listened to some GOOD songs with average lyrics up through the first chorus. However, the GREAT songs with KILLER lyrics kept our attention through the second chorus...because we just couldn't wait to hear what the writer was going to say next; simple artistic curiosity kept us inside that song.

8. You Don't Honour The Purpose Of The Recording – What is a song demo supposed to do for the writer, EXACTLY? It is supposed to sell the SONG. Specifically the lyric, melody, and vibe of the song; anything more than that production wise and you are doing yourself a disservice and frankly wasting money on your demo.

9. You Over-Produced Your Demo – I guess we ALL have to learn “less is more” by doing it. Writers with very little studio experience tend to artistically get caught somewhere between a song demo and an epic album track. Stick to the song demo side. DO NOT OVERPRODUCE your song demo! Put BGV's only where they are obvious to lift the chorus. DO NOT put Ooh's and Ahh's and fill in some holes with BGV's because your taste may not be the taste of the person you are pitching to.

Don't add too many guitar tracks or color instruments. Keep it as clean and sparse as possible. You really want to leave room for the producer to do their job and take the song to another level; remember, this should be a solid blueprint for a song, not a production idea for a record.

Another good reason not to overproduce is that tastes and trends change constantly. We heard a few older demos (like more than 10 or 15 years) with production that was cool and in style 10 or 15 years ago but not cool now, so the production choices personally took me out of the song for a second or two. If they were never there, the demo would certainly be more "durable" over time.

10. Bad Vocal Tuning – Hire a pro singer. It really is the way to go if you are trying to compete with the big boys.

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