

TRYING TO GET A RECORD DEAL by Andrea Thorn

This is probably the worst time, ever, for bands to try and secure themselves a record deal. God knows it was hard enough ten years ago in the days before global merging of major record companies, Pop Idol, Fame Academy and the World Wide Web. That proper bands are being signed at all, these days, is a minor miracle. But they are still being signed. Which provides a hopeful ray of light.

Sending demos to record companies, however tedious, is still a necessary evil. Assuming your band wants a record deal of course. There are plenty of other options for an ambitious band these days, and it isn't always necessary to tie up your future with an independent or major label. But that's a different story. If you want to get the attention of A&R staff, and present yourselves and your music in the best possible light, there are a number of tried and tested ground rules to observe, as pertinent today as they've always been.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

In other words, do some background research. This will save you time and money in the long run. The 'saturation bombing' method of demo submission is fine if you, or your parents, happen to be minted, but - for most of us - resources are limited and we don't want to be chucking money down the drain, do we? So carefully target the record companies you'll be sending your package to.

Criteria here could be that you happen to like existing bands on their roster (if you're not sure who your favourite acts are signed to, have a closer look at their CD sleeves), or perhaps because they have a strong label identity with which you can identify and feel might suit your music. This usually applies to independent labels rather than majors who tend, by necessity, to have an 'across the board' type policy.

It's also worth remembering here that indies - even 'faux indies' who operate under the umbrella of a major - have less money to spend on new acts (so don't expect a huge advance) but historically have a much closer working relationship with the acts they sign. Due to an intimate knowledge of their market, they're also much better at breaking new acts (hence the common practice of independent acts finding themselves snapped up by majors as soon as they begin to establish themselves). And if you think your music has a lot in common with a popular band, there's not much point sending your demo to the label that band is signed to. They've got the originals on their roster, why would they want a soundalike?

Once you know who you're targeting your demo at, it's a simple matter to find their address and telephone number - via the phone book or Yellow Pages if they're local to you, or via internet websites and resources like Generator and the White Book (in larger libraries) if they're not. Most importantly, make sure your package is addressed to a current member of the A&R team.

There are few things as sloppy as envelopes marked 'The A&R department' and few things more likely to get a tape sent straight to the bottom of the list, whereas it takes only a few minutes to phone your record company of choice and ask the switchboard for a list of current A&R personnel.

Beware that staff turnover in these departments is rapid, so a name you may have researched a month ago, or found on the net, could well be redundant by now. While you're on the line, take time to find out each A&R person's position in the corporate pecking order. This is particularly relevant in larger companies where addressing your package to the 'Head of A&R' will be a total waste of effort. His/her time will be taken up with business far more important than listening to demos. You'd be better off approaching the junior managers or A&R scouts, whose primary role is to source new bands and then refer them upwards.

PREPARING THE PACKAGE

Less is more, as they say. All A&R personnel are interested in is what you look like, what you sound like, and a potted history of the band. This translates to a tape, CD or possibly white label if you're a dance act (three tracks, no more), a photograph (nothing fancy - a straightforward head and shoulders shot will do. If you attract interest, the company will pay for proper PR shots to be taken) and a brief biog (one page max) outlining who's who in the band and what you've accomplished to date.

If you've had reviews in the music press then include copies, but only if they've come from recognised sources. It might seem a good idea to enclose that gushing article from the junior reporter at the Zetland Advertiser, but it won't necessarily impress the A&R man at the other end. On the other hand, if you've had radio play from national stations or popular locals, then plug this for all it's worth. If you can prove that somebody in a commercially critical position has already taken interest in your music, it's that much easier to persuade the A&R man to have an early listen to your material.

Record companies, ever smaller ones, are quite literally awash with demos (anything up to a few hundred a week at the majors). When the postman delivers the morning flood of tapes into the A&R department, they'll very often be 'filed' into a big box and listened to as and when somebody has time (though many companies devote a specific amount of time every week to this task). So how do you make your package stand out amongst so many? Well, it's not strictly necessary to send everything out in uniform brown jiffy bags. Try dressing it up a bit by wrapping it in brightly coloured paper, kitchen foil or pictures of Robbie. Anything to give it a bit of identity and attract the randomly groping hand of A&R in your direction.

The inclusion of novelties and 'bribes' is something that should be undertaken only with extreme caution. In my days as Demo Reviewer at Making Music magazine, I was open to the concept of bribes, since it made the job more fun. However, I was a journalist and not an A&R scout. If you decide to go down this route, try and make your 'enhancement' practical, relevant to your band's name and, most importantly, non-perishable.

Demo packages can sit inside hot offices for a very long time and I lost count of the number of rancid chocolate bars, mouldy cakes and rotting potatoes I unpacked. Similarly the number of condoms - it may seem like a novel, profoundly rock and roll item to send, but bear in mind everybody and his dog has already thought of it. In my experience, the most beneficial items to send (and receive) are beverages, preferably alcoholic (spirit miniatures were popular), and well protected to escape the ravages of the British postal system.

THE DEMO

Your music is your ultimate weapon. It's what defines you as a band, and also what keeps the A&R industry employed. If they've got their wits about them, they'll be looking for music which is groundbreaking and individual, but which they can also see as appealing to a specific market or markets.

Breaking new bands costs a lot of money - US labels can barely afford to do it anymore, so they break their bands in the UK, then 'import' them back when they've got an audience - and record companies will think twice about investing in a new band if they can't identify an existing market into which to try and sell it. It's not nice to be pigeonholed, but pigeonholing is the name of the game.

Being eclectic in your style is to be applauded of course, but may ultimately prove too risky to sign. However, if you can show evidence of an established following in your local area, this will be considered a big point in your favour since you've already done a lot of the company's legwork for it.

When compiling your demo tape or CD, put your strongest track on first. It may sound obvious but most demos get precisely 20 seconds of the A&R person's ear. If they've not found something to interest them in that timeframe, it's onto the next tape. If you're not sure which of your tracks is the best (because they're all potential number ones, right?), poll a few friends and relatives.

Equally obviously, put the second strongest track in the number two position, and don't fall into the common trap of shoving a ballad on, just to prove you're versatile enough to do it. It won't help you unless it's genuinely fantastic.

If you've burned your own CDs, take some time to make sure they play properly on hi-fi equipment (bearing in mind older CD players can't handle CD-ROM), and never use re-writeable CDs (CD-RWs) since they only play properly on other computers. If your format happens to be audio cassette, make sure it's rewound to the start of the tape. A&R people need only the smallest excuse to not listen, and this is a heinous crime of laziness in anybody's eyes.

If an A&R man hears two strong tracks, he'll go onto a third and then think about going to see you live. If you've enclosed a gig list with your package all well and good, except it's probably out of date by this time, in which case the A&R man will try and contact you directly. For this reason, it's essential the contact details you've supplied belong to a band member (or associate) who's always available during office hours. With the popularity of mobile phone technology, there's really no excuse for not being contactable at all times.

Nominate one member as the designated contact and make sure you write his/her details on the biog and the tape/CD (cover/jewel case as well as the tape/CD itself since these two items can become separated). Put an email address on too, and a website if you've got one since this should (in theory) contain an up-to-date gig list.

If you've been contacted by a local record company, then be prepared for an in-gig visit from your local A&R man (you won't necessarily know he's there but, if you do know, there's no harm in buttering him up with a few sherries). If, however, you've got the attention of a London-based A&R department (and let's face it, that's where the majority of record labels are located), the chances are they'll want you to book a few gigs in the capital. There's no room for regional snobbery here. If they won't come to you, then it's in your interests to go to them.

Camden is a popular north London A&R haunt precisely because of the close proximity of numerous music venues, meaning scouts can check out five or six bands in an evening. Clubs like the Bull & Gate are pretty amenable to booking out of town bands and it's always worth making contact with unsigned London-based bands (a veritable piece of piddle in these days of internet technology) to see if you can play on the same bill as them. In return, you might offer them a North East gig share

THE FOLLOW-UP

Once you've fired off all your packages, it's only natural to anticipate a quick response. As you've already gathered, the wheels of A&R do not turn quickly. The number one rule here is: Don't Hassle. Nothing is more irritating than a band who phone up every day to see if their tape has been listened to. Once you've irritated an A&R person, you've essentially blown it.

Wait at least a week before you make contact (try and speak to the person you addressed your package to), then politely ask if your tape has been heard. If it hasn't, wait another week and try again. It may take time, but everything gets listened to eventually. If you're good enough, you'll get that elusive call. If you're not, make sure you enclose an SAE with your package - at least you'll get your stuff back then.

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