

## **Record Labels Saving, Artists Should Be Slaving!**

**By Christopher Chandler**

Not long ago, there was a time when record labels placed high emphasis on developing the careers of their recording artists. Up until the late 1980s most record labels had a special department dedicated to Artist Development. This area of the label's job was to support their acts creative side, while developing a following for them. When sales of records increased with each release, the label stood by their acts, believing that the more the public heard their music, the bigger their popularity might grow, and the greater their popularity, the more records they would sell. By the 1990's Artist Development changed to Product Development. Accompanying this shift was the idea that in order for Record Labels to sustain themselves, the commitment would have to change from nurturing the growth of an artist and their music, to high-pressure sales development tactics and strategies.

An example of "old school" Artist Development would be the case of Elvis Presley. Over a twenty-year period RCA records turned Mr. Presley into a multi-faceted entertainer. The King of Rock N' Roll began his career performing rockabilly, an uptempo fusion of country, rhythm, and blues with a strong backbeat. Throughout his career Elvis added other genres to his repertoire including gospel, blues, ballads and pop. Eventually, The King moved onto motion pictures, starring in thirty-three movies during the 1960's. RCA records never let go of Elvis even when he faltered. The controversial king made some career damaging decisions including taking a hiatus from music to join the military for two years. Furthermore, Elvis' Hollywood years could have taken away from his musical talent and appeal. Despite these detrimental decisions, RCA stuck by their artist and pushed his career, which is the epitome of Artist Development. Nowadays, artists are expected to produce flawless hits, or else they suffer the consequences of funding cuts and being demoted to a subsidiary label.

Overall, it seems that the trend of label created artists, where you only needed a young age, some musical talent, a model face and likable personality are waning. Twenty years ago an artist would have more than three chances to score a major "hit", nowadays with Product development on the forefront there is only one. Major labels need to recoup costs by chasing after established bands that they know will produce a profit. Long ago are the days of gambling one million dollars on someone with a pretty smile and a little talent. Today is the day where artists must prove themselves before being accepted into that major label club.

Last summer, I was given the opportunity to work at MTV Networks (Viacom) Music & Media Licensing Department. Throughout my four-month tenure as personal assistant to the director of music strategy, one word crossed my mind on a daily basis, **frugality**. Everything from complimentary lunches, merchandise, event tickets, and even "unnecessary" air-conditioning was cut from our office. Furthermore, MTV made it clear that employee cutbacks would take place in the near future. By early September, Tom Freston (CEO-Viacom) was ousted from his post, along with a few other mid to low-level employees.

Budget cuts are not only limited to Viacom! Since the age of illegal file sharing and plummeting CD sales, record labels have also followed the path of budgetary prudence. Labels are scared, and consolidating at an unprecedented rate. Some examples of this include, the

Sony/BMG merger, the European private equity firm Terra Firma buying out EMI, and Universal Music Group (UMG) acquiring the London-based Sanctuary Group. Usually these types of buyouts/mergers result in a domino effect of budgetary strain. Eventually the artists will witness new revenue models, fewer record deals, and most importantly development cutbacks. Supposedly there are less than one hundred legitimate major label A&R representatives left in America. Furthermore, these scouts are not looking to develop an artist, but rather are searching for an established act they could market.

If you require an example of self-establishment, take a close look at the California pop-ska band No Doubt. This fascinating act formed in high school around 1986. On March 12, 1987 after several raucous party performances, No Doubt play their first "official" gig at Fender's Ballroom in Long Beach, California; the band was second on a bill of 14 with The Untouchables headlining. Throughout the rest of 1987 and 1988, part of the then-underground-ska-scene, No Doubt built a huge following of loyal "rude boys" and "rude girls" after numerous gigs opening for The Untouchables and Fishbone, as well as their own all-ages shows. A three-song and a five-song demo were sold at the shows. In the summer of 1989, No Doubt played their first out-of-state show in Arizona to about a hundred people. During 1990, the band quickly evolved into a solid five-piece unit, expanding their sound to include the styles of each member. With shows opening for the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Ziggy Marley and Mano Negra, their fan base broadened to the college crowd. Finally, in August 1991 No Doubt signed a "big" recording contract with Interscope Records.

Another great self-establishment model would be the Dave Matthews Band. Formed in 1991, the band's mix of rock, jazz, folk, and world music allowed them great local recognition in Virginia and eventual success when touring around the U.S. mostly at clubs and colleges. After building up a large underground fan base and touring with the Grateful Dead, they released an independent LP in November of 1993. This album along with their touring success led them to sign a favorable contract with RCA records in the fall of 1994.

Remember, an established band approached by a salivating major record label will always have the greater bargaining power. Young and talented artists will always need the large labels for that "next-step" which encompasses a million dollar advertising budget. Today the big labels are not looking to bring a fledgling artist through the ranks of entertainment stardom. Instead, they want to find an artist who already has proven potential. Stockholder driven companies such as Warner have chosen to work on less riskier schemes. This inevitably means that the established talent with regional fame will garner more attention than the garage band down the street.

**A few ways you could establish your band and be more attractive to major labels:**

- *Remember, anytime you are promoting your band, you're promoting your name. Make sure the name is yours. Conduct your own research regarding the usage of the band name. If you have the money, hire an attorney to conduct a trademark search on your behalf. This trademark issue is essential. Don't forget, or else all the work you have done or are doing now to promote your act will be wasted.*

- *As with all business' there should be a band partnership agreement. This document will set the rules for royalty splits, song writing credits, designating a band spokesperson, what to do if your band has an even number of members and you are split on a decision etc.*
- *Never leave a rehearsal without knowing when the next one is. Make sure to rehearse often, because this can tighten the musical and social bond of the group, the more the better!*
- *Record your own demo/EP. Nothing fancy, just include some of your best work.*
- *Create band merchandise such as t-shirts, hats etc. that can be sold at your live performances. This merchandise will go a long way to promote your band further and establish a revenue base for further development. You do not have to spend hundreds of dollars. There are simple iron-on transfer kits that allow you to make T-shirts extremely inexpensively on your own.*
- *Build a website and get connected to online communities/social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Last.FM, Buzznet, Craig's List, and Mog. Sooner or later you will also want to establish yourself on iTunes. Seeing as CD sales are slumping and the majority of album sales are being sold digitally, you would be best to go digital.*
- *Develop your own electronic press kit (EPK) – biographical & contact information, high resolution press photos, music clips (with accompanying lyrics), stage plot, performance requirements, tour dates, press reviews, interviews, promotional videos, and a "Recommended If You Like" list (RIYL): a listing of artists of similar styles or genres. An EPK can be distributed through one of the following media: CD, DVD, The Internet, and video.*
- *Develop your own tangible press kit – biography/history of the band, booking information, demo CD, business cards, color photos, equipment list, and a catchy envelope.*
- *Create a mailing list to collect both mailing and emailing addresses. With this directory, you will be able to market to your dedicated fan base and continue a fruitful relationship. Everytime you gig make sure to get names for the list from anyone who is interested. Use your mailing list everytime you gig. Make an effort to send at least one physical flyer through mail and email two weeks before the gig and again one week before.*
- *If possible, book gigs with bands that have a larger following than you. It will open the possibility to attract new fans and use the concept of fan sharing between the two acts. Other bands should be looked upon as friends and not competition.*
- *Launch a tour and become well known around your state/region. Try to join in on large events such as festivals or benefit concerts.*
- *Create local buzz around your hometown, with gigs, band reviews, newspaper advertisements, radio and press interviews.*
- *Be conscious of your band image. Image consistency is crucial in keeping diehard fans for the rest of your career.*