

Advice for songwriters on how to break into the business

Have Songs, Will Travel

By Chris Taylor, B.A., LL.B.

I am approached on a regular basis by aspiring songwriters seeking to start or accelerate their songwriting careers. Here is a summary of the advice I usually give to the aspiring songwriter.

Place it, they will come

A good manager, attorney or music publisher can assist you in your quest to build a career as a songwriter. However, most of these individuals will not be interested in assisting you immediately if you have not already made some significant steps on your own. The most significant 'step' is securing song placement with major label recording artists.

Many writers are focussed on securing a music publisher's interest. Music publishers will occasionally work with young, inexperienced writers – however, you will increase your worth and attractiveness significantly if you show an ability to make their job easy. Music publishers work at helping songwriters secure song placement with major label recording artists but, in my experience, it is often the songwriter that must bear the largest responsibility to secure cuts with recording artists. Do you have what it takes to do this?

Most songwriters should not expect to secure song placement with major label recording artists right out of the gate. You should be prepared to start with smaller steps to get to that ultimate goal. Some of these smaller steps are outlined below.

Genre focus/Artist focus

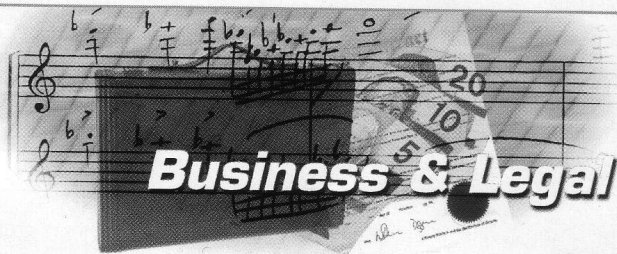
Many rock/alternative recording artists are self-contained groups. For example, The Tea Party and Pearl Jam write all of their own material and do not typically use outside writers. Seek out those artists who regularly use material from outside writers. Occasionally rock/alternative groups will use outside writers but songwriters often find more luck in the pop, R&B and country genres. If you look at the writer credit information on these types of albums you will notice that many outside writers are regularly used.

Production

Songwriters who also produce are more apt to find themselves in co-writing scenarios. Artists are often looking to find a co-writer and producer as opposed to just one or the other. If you are weak as a producer, refine



Entertainment lawyer Chris Taylor explains the basics of copyright to a full house at the S.A.C.-presented Music Publishing 101 (part of Long & McQuade Music's annual March University series). Taylor practices with the law firm of Sanders Taylor and works with Avril Lavigne, Sum 41, Nelly Furtado, Sarah Harmer and songwriter/producers, Gerald Eaton, Justin Gray and Doc, among others. www.sandersontaylor.com



that talent. If you are a producer with minimal writing skills, focus on improving your songwriting. Glen Ballard, Babyface, Timbaland, Desmond Child are all successful producer/writers that provide 'one stop shopping' for artists looking for production and writing skills under one roof.

One producer/writer I work with, Justin Gray, attracts a wide variety of work because of his combination of writing and producing skills. The two skills work hand-in-hand.

Artist development

You will find it difficult to get your music to Celine Dion or Deborah Cox. Many successful writers get a foot in the door by successfully developing an unknown artist. Go out to clubs, talent shows, and keep your ear to the ground. There are many talented, undeveloped artists who are looking for a producer/writer to help develop their artistry and they are finding it difficult to get to Glen Ballard or Babyface.

The songwriter/production team of Track and Field (Gerald Eaton and Brian West) increased their profile significantly following their work with a formerly undeveloped writer/artist named Nelly Furtado.

Networking

Once you have finalized master recordings that demonstrate your abilities you should be prepared to 'pound the pavement' and 'press the flesh,' to start meeting record company representatives, artist managers, artists, publishing company representatives, other writers, other producers and music attorneys. Subscribe to this magazine; contact the Songwriter's Association of Canada (1-800-215-4814); and attend various music industry seminars and conferences such as New Music West (Vancouver), Canadian Music Week (Toronto) or North By Northeast (Toronto). No one will 'discover' you if you stay at home. Publishers can also be very helpful with comments and contacts.

Follow-up in a professional manner

Your music should do the talking but a little politicking never hurt. Be polite when approaching industry types, and follow up with them at a reasonable juncture. Persistence and perseverance are admirable qualities, but if people are not calling you back, or if you are getting negative feedback about your songs, you probably have to go back to the drawing board and work on new material.

Conclusions

This country offers many opportunities for the aspiring songwriter and this country has produced some of the world's best. Even the best songwriters endured a difficult road to get to where they are. Take it one step at a time. ☺