

What are A&R People Looking For? (Appendix 1)

By David Hooper (email via <http://www.indiebiz.com/>)

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I recently sat down with my database and contacted several A&R people for an article I was writing. I only had one main question, "What is it that gets your attention?"

The responses were so good that I decided to publish every one of them in their entirety. What you see here is exactly what I got back either via email or heard via phone.

Please note that literally hundreds of interviews took place and this appendix is one of many available. Visit <http://www.indiebiz.com/> for the latest downloads from this series as well as other series on what publishers, film supervisors, and music attorneys are looking for.

I think you'll find many of the results from my interviews surprising...and in a good way!

A&R staff are often labeled as people who are only looking for sales figures and have real interest in the actual product. Is that true? Take a look at the verbatim comments below and judge for yourself!

Virgin Records has established itself as a creative haven for artists through its reputation for developing and nurturing interesting, cutting-edge talent. When looking at potential signings, we not only consider the taste of the current market, but also whether or not an artist will develop successfully once the marketplace has evolved beyond current trends. While the current marketplace certainly dictates a high premium on image, we like to balance that with a real artistry and taste, and develop "career artists" as opposed to cashing in on the current trends. - Ray Cooper, Co-President, Virgin Records America

Basically I listen to the songs looking for something compelling, hooky, lyrically touching or universally appealing. Obviously having the raw talent to convey those special elements of the song is a MAJOR plus. With the tremendous cost per artist (i.e.: advance, recording budget, marketing, tour support, video commitment, indie promotion and in some cases marketing etc...) of doing business these days has major labels looking to maximize their chance of success which is why things are so "research" driven these days. An artist creating a story (sales, radio play, sold out local

shows etc...) is much more likely to attract the serious attention of a major label in this climate though true talent and apparent "hit" songs still count for a lot. - **Leigh Lust, Director of A&R, Elektra Entertainment**

I think these days there are so many people out there trying to get the attention of various decision makers in the music industry. The waters are very muddy at this point and sometimes it's hard to figure out which way to throw my attention. Everyone has something to pitch--how much of it is really worthwhile to MCA Nashville and myself in the end? Anyone who's serious should either come recommended through someone I respect, or have a really good angle that's going to make me stand and take notice. Of course, incredible artistry and songs will rise to the top--that hasn't stopped happening. - **Shane Barrett, Manager of A&R, MCA Nashville**

First off I have to become aware of the band. That could be through my own homework of reading record and live reviews, scanning radio play lists for their support of an unsigned band or a tip off from people I know and respect such as musicians, journalists, producers, friends in other labels, lawyers, managers, road crew etc etc. More often than not it will be a combination of both - I'll read something about a band and their name will stick in my mind and chances are if I don't follow it up then and there someone will mention them to me or I will read about them again somewhere else - very Celestine Prophecy!

Upon listening to a tape for the first time I listen for something to draw me in - a great song or a unique voice, if I like it I will immediately track down the band to ask if they have any live dates coming up. Upon seeing them live for the first time again I need them to draw me in with their presence - my definition of a truly great performance is that the band should want to inspire you to start a band or join the very band you are watching.

I truly don't expect the band to be polished - just to find the raw talent in the band and their songwriting is enough. - **Veronica Gretton, Director of A&R, Radioactive Records**

When auditioning an artist for potential signing I look for one thing basically: ORIGINALITY. Whether it's on a tape, CD, or 'live' performance - an original musical "voice" (meaning instrument as well) is the key essential.

Compositional skills, live appeal, etc. are obviously important as well. There's no substitute for real musical talent. All the rest is marketing bullshit and hype. - **Bruce Lundvall, President, Blue Note/Capital Records**

I don't need fancy packaging or elaborate demos. I listen for hits. - **Shante Paige, Director of A&R, Motown/Universal**

*What gets my attention is what I call “professional heart.” What I mean is, when an artist cares enough about his/her/their image and music that they know how to package their persona/look/performance/product in an **authentic** and **comprehensive** way (no matter what the style is) without too much or too little hype, I naturally get drawn in. Exuding confidence is at the core zen of this concept and yet there is no need to OVERsell. Personally, when I go through the multitudes of submissions at Songs.com, I'll get really excited when I find an artist's FABULOUS website or STUNNING press kit and I'll get really bummed and kind of a low level of angry when their music is half baked. I feel gypped. Spend the production money on the MUSIC!!! I get a lot more excited about coming across **great** music that needs better packaging. By the same token, but the flip side of the coin, a blank cover with just a name is better than a bad home photo (unless the concept of the album is bad home photos and its not yours). I'm sorry to say, but I've gotten to the point where I won't even listen to a sound clip from a website that looks like a complete mess, or the photo choice is atrocious. I've wasted enough time venturing into sloppy sites where I gave the artist the benefit of the doubt only to be burned to trust my judgment. Also, WRITE CLEARLY AND PUT CONTACT INFO ON EVERY PIECE OF MATERIAL YOU PRODUCE!!! I can't help you if I can't reach you.*

And another pet peeve: In a press kit, CONDENSE and EDIT your press cuttings! Save your effort and money! We don't need 25 full length copied articles from the same hometown newspaper! We don't even need 25 full length articles of the most glowing articles from Rolling Stone! Excerpts and cut outs are fine. And for god's sake DO NOT send the original copy of an award you've received! And NEVER I mean NEVER make up an award or say that you've won something you haven't. Embellish and focus on praise you've received but don't lie. People know.

*And another thing, the worst thing you can do is harbor resentment at someone who says no. There are going to be a ton of “nos.” Frankly I'm baffled by how some of the music that is revered in today's world gets the acclaim it does, but always remember that art is 100% subjective. If YOU like it, it's good and chances are **somewhere** there is a whole group of people who will love it, and it may take a while to find them...Do not send out something to represent you that you yourself don't like however because that will just eat at you.* - **Mia Adams, Artist Development, Songs.com**

We always consider if there is something else we have on our label that may be similar to the artist we are considering. We also look for artists and production companies that have the hunger to push for BDS spins or sales in their home town (backyard). - **Tina M. Davis, Senior Vice President, Def Jam**

We are looking for great talent, charisma, vocal ability, songs and an intense ambition to succeed.

Nothing grabs my attention more than a stand out song coupled with a great distinctive voice. - **David Massey, Executive VP, Sony Music**

The main thing that I look for, is something fresh (not a clone of someone else). I look for "real" artistry....nothing contrived. I also, dig artists who are self contained, and are clever lyricists. In the Gospel market, it is critically important that outside of raw talent, that the artist truly has a ministry, and communicates this ministry with conviction and integrity. Your live concert presentation is also critically important in Gospel music. Image also has become increasingly important in Gospel music, so this area is also something that aspiring artists should pay attention to. The artist does not have to be a beauty queen/king, but should have a fresh sense of style.

I believe in the old adage, that "real" artists cannot be created by a record company, either you just "have it" or you don't. - **Tara Griggs-Magee, Vice-President, Verity Records**

I am looking for magic. First and foremost is the music great. Does the band/singer have their shit together. Are they in debt up to there ears. Do they really really want it. If they are selling cd's that's great. it doesn't always meant that the music is great. I have to really like the people in the band and want to work with them. and vice versa. also do i think i can really help them. everyone who works at aware has a total say in who we sign as well. also is it something we will be able to do well with at Columbia records. we want to succeed with every band we work with. - **Gregg Latterman, President, Aware Records**

The one thing I always tell people when I'm asked or on panels, and it sounds, flip, but it's 1000% true is: be amazing. If you are truly amazing we will find you. There is no way, U2, REM, Smashing Pumpkins, Josh Rouse, etc., etc. would not get signed. If you are doing something that stands out you will get noticed - it doesn't matter if you're in NYC or in Bosnia. The net

(pun intended) is spread so wide at this point that you can really be anywhere and get noticed.

Once you're noticed, what closes the deal for me is if you have a good infrastructure and if I'm not starting from scratch. It's very hard to take a band from zero sales to 20k-50k. Ideally, the artist/band has a constituency and fan base and has maybe self released a few records so they understand the business side a little. Basically, the more you bring to a label, the less the label can take from you.

Last thing: take the damn shrink-wrap off the CDs before you submit them!!! - **George Howard, A&R Manager, Rykodisc**

I simply like to release music that I like. In a demo, I don't care about sound quality or popularity/image of the musicians. I don't need pictures or bios--- just a tape or CD. I give a listen to any music submitted to me. - **Greg Ginn, President, SST Records**

Cutting Records is always looking for sales, image, songs, raw talent. More importantly we are looking a sound that is compatible to today's feel (but a touch of new sound) and making the artist with more unique than any other acts currently in the market. - **Aldo Marin, Vice-President, Cutting Records, Inc.**

Nothing gets my attention faster than proven success. Many bands/artists show up with no experience at all. They are waiting for a record company to come along and make them famous. REAL artists/bands aren't waiting on anyone. They're out there making noise. That's what makes me take a second look. - **Dean Diehl, Reunion/Provident Music Group**

What it takes to get my attention... I like artists who have a vision and who are unique. I look for musicians who are doing things that are somehow provocative or outside the mainstream. I look for artists who know who they are and know who their audience is. I like artists who don't care about what everybody else is doing and make the music that they feel. The ability to stand out in the marketplace is important to me. Currently I work with Queens of the Stone Age, Monster Magnet, Patty Griffin and Eleven. I think all of my artists have the above qualities and I'd like to find more who are just as important and captivating.

What it takes to succeed in today's marketplace... I suppose that's something I grapple with everyday. It's all about connecting with the

consumer on some level. Whether it's through a great song, a great record, a great video, a great live show. It helps if you have all of those things, but I'm not sure what the sure fire equation is, otherwise I would be a lot more successful! I don't think musicians should take into account the marketplace, I think they should make music that is real to them. Otherwise it's all formula and phony. - **Debbie Southwood-Smith, A&R, Interscope/Universal Music**

First and foremost, I look for at least one standout quality that will separate an artist from the crowd. If this quality does not exist, the chances are that the artist will not “cut through the clutter” and will get lost in the vast numbers of new artists constantly being presented to the public every day. I apply the same criteria to all genres of music. Launching a new artist, if done correctly, is a very expensive undertaking for a record company and everything must be looked into in the evaluation process, instead of later in a Marketing meeting , to give your artist an edge over the competition. - **Steve Lunt, VP A&R, Jive Records**

David Hooper is the founder of the music business resource, IndieBiz.com (<http://www.indiebiz.com/>), and Kathode Ray Music (<http://www.kathoderaymusic.com/>), an artist development organization specializing in promotion and marketing of independent musicians and bands. He is known for combining traditional music business knowledge with the guerrilla marketing necessary for independent bands to compete. He has worked in the past with Lords of Acid, Marcy Playground, and bush. Current clients include Confederate Fagg and Dresscode.

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SEE NEXT PAGE FOR DEMO SUBMISSION INFORMATION!

**KATHODE RAY MUSIC
DEMO SUBMISSION FORM**

NAME OF ARTIST/BAND:

ARTIST/BAND CONTACT:

DAYTIME PHONE NUMBER:

EVENING PHONE NUMBER:

EMAIL ADDRESS:

WEB URL:

NUMBER OF UNITS SOLD:

SHORT TERM MUSICAL GOALS:

LONG TERM MUSICAL GOALS:

TYPE OF ASSISTANCE NEEDED:

MAIL THIS FORM WITH CD/CASSETTE (NO SHRINKWRAP!) TO:

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