

How to Release an Independent Album

By Parker Coté



Introduction

Releasing an independent album is a long, delicate, and intricate process. To have a successful release it's critical that you carefully write and record, mix and master, press your CDs, promote, release your finished masterpiece, and continue to promote even after the release. If all goes well, not only is the process long, delicate, and intricate, but it is also very rewarding. Music is possibly the largest form of entertainment in the world. Many of us go out and buy, or stay in and simply download an album by an artist we like without ever realizing the hard work that goes into creating this beautiful form of entertainment. As an artist I'm currently learning about and working on releasing a project that features my dad and I. We are called That Dan Thing and our debut release is called *The Spotless Mind*. Since this is my first time releasing an album, and I hope to one day release more, I thought it would be beneficial to learn about the ins and outs of the music business sooner rather than later. During my research and time spent in the studio, I learned that there is a lot more to the release of an album than I ever realized. I'm determined to show that while very satisfying, releasing an album is no walk in the park.

Writing and Recording

In order to release a masterpiece you have to create the material. This is the first and most important step in the development of an album; the writing of the songs. There are many ways that artists and/or bands write their music, in short there is no songwriting formula.

One way some recording artists write their songs is by having a single main songwriter who writes all the lyrics, melodies, and chord progressions (usually but not always using a guitar or piano). During this time the whole band works together, playing an instrumental role in the arrangement of the songs by adding bass, drums, keyboard, more guitars, backing vocals, etc. A few examples of this songwriting method is, or was used most of the time by The Shins, Nirvana, The White Stripes, Weezer, The Who, and Creedence Clearwater Revival among others. Solo artists like Neil Young, Elliott Smith, Elvis Costello, Jack White, and Bob Dylan use(d) this method as well. Some solo artists skip the whole band part and write and record all the parts themselves. Paul McCartney, Prince, and sometimes Elliott Smith have used this method.

Another way some bands choose to write their songs is with songwriting teams. Like in the other method, while the songwriting team writes the lyrics, melodies, and chord progressions the entire band is working on the instrumental arrangement for the song. The most famous songwriting team is John Lennon and Paul McCartney of The Beatles (though George Harrison and to a lesser extent Ringo Starr also contributed to the band's songwriting). Some other famous songwriting teams are: Morrissey and Johnny Marr of The Smiths, Jack White and Brendan Benson of The Raconteurs, Freddie Mercury and Brian May of Queen, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards of The

Rolling Stones, Joe Strummer and Mick Jones of The Clash, and Bono and The Edge of U2. Sometimes rather than having a small songwriting team, the entire band will co-write most of the songs. When writing songs together as a band the members will usually get together and jam through each others ideas turning them into songs. Bands like Death Cab For Cutie, Radiohead, and R.E.M. use this method while writing their songs. Pink Floyd was a unique band in that they started with a main songwriter, Syd Barret, then became a full band songwriting team, but by the end, Pink Floyd had a new main songwriter in Roger Waters. Currently in That Dan Thing my dad is the main songwriter, but I'm already starting to collaborate with him even more on some of our newest songs and I co-produced *The Spotless Mind*.

Once you have written at least one song it's time to record your masterpiece. Like the songwriting methods, there is no fixed way to record a song. Some artists record a song from the ground up by starting with a single base track (usually a drum track or guitar track). Once the you have the base track you can record more tracks on top of the base track, usually finishing with the vocals, until you have the finished masterpiece. My dad and I used this method when we recorded *The Spotless Mind*. Another way some artists choose to record their music is by recording a big chunk of their tracks at one time. Sometimes the whole band will play live in the same room to record their tracks and sometimes they will have headphones and be placed in isolated sound booths to prevent the individual instruments from bleeding into each other's individual tracks. After the live tracks are done a band will usually add extra tracks such as lead guitars, strings, and finishing with vocals. One of my dad's other bands, Waxing Pathetic, used to record their live tracks while in isolated sound booths. On a couple of

our songs we recorded our basic tracks live in the studio.

Now that you have written your songs and recorded the vocals and accompanying instruments, it's time to turn your songs into an album. The most important thing about the recording process is to have good performances by all of the musicians. This will make the next complicated step a lot easier.

Mixing and Mastering

Mixing your songs is the next step in releasing an album. Mixing is the process where you look at and listen to the individual tracks in a song and change the volumes and EQ of each track to make the song sound balanced. The goal of mixing is to create an effect that gives the listener the feeling that he/she is right in front of a cohesive live band. Some bands will hire a specialist for mixing. Usually a band that hires a trustworthy specialist will turn the recordings over to the specialist who then works alone with minimal input from the band. The first step for a mixing specialist is to familiarize themselves with the music so that they know where to start with the song. Other bands, such as That Dan Thing, work alongside a mix engineer making some suggestions along the way. Before getting to the point where the band is involved however, there are a lot of things that the mix engineer has to do first. I asked our engineer, Jeff Forrest, to tell me a little bit about what goes into the mixing process.

The first thing that Jeff does is pull up all the drum tracks. His goal is to create a listening experience that you would get while sitting right in front of a drummer. To do this he pans the different parts of the kit to certain speakers. For the bass drum and snare he will put those tracks straight up the middle so that you can hear them in both speakers equally. Then he pans the hi-hat cymbal to the far left so that it stands out in the left speaker. On the drum kit the hi-hat is on the far left side of the rest of the drum kit. Since the ride is on the right side of a drum kit he pans it about 3:00 to the right. In our case we have two tom toms so he pans each one on a different speaker at either 3:00 or 9:00. Then for the crash cymbals he does the same thing he did with the toms. For the bass guitar, Jeff will put it straight up the middle again so that the bass and

drums will make a tight rhythm section. Then he will play around with the sound of the bass and decide if it needs to be thinned or fattened up so that it doesn't get lost in the bass drum and you can easily hear all the notes being played by the bass guitar.

The next step is to bring up the rhythm guitars. In our case there were two rhythm guitar tracks in each song. To give them their own identity and space, we panned one guitar all the way into the left speaker and one all the way into the right speaker. He also used what's called a high pass filter which takes out muddy low end rumbling sounds to make the track sound cleaner. Also Jeff will take out some of the the low-mids on the rhythm guitars to give them and the bass their own space. The next step is to bring up the lead vocals. Once again we used a high pass filter to remove muddy sounds from the lead vocals. Then he pans the lead vocals right up the middle and listens to make sure that they stand out above but blend with the rest of the music. To help the vocals stand out and blend with the music he adds compression which keeps the vocal balanced out, so that it doesn't get too loud or too soft. Also Jeff will usually add an effect such as reverb and/or delay on a lead vocal track to make it sound as if you are singing in a concert hall, bathroom, etc.

Next we bring up the piano and/or keyboard tracks. Just like the rhythm guitars, we used two piano or keyboard tracks on all of our songs but, he panned them 3:00 and 9:00 rather than all the way to the right and all the way to the left. In addition he used a high pass filter on these tracks as well and subtly boosted the high mids so it would cut through the mix better. Next we have guitar and other instrumental solos. For these tracks he again used the high pass filter, boost the high mids, and possibly add a little treble when necessary. Also when mixing solos you treat it like the lead vocal in the

way that you want it to stand out but you also want it to blend with the music and also you pan it straight up the middle just like the lead vocals.

Next we have the backing vocals. As with the lead vocals we add a high pass filter, compression, reverb, and delay. He usually pans the backing vocals 2:00 to the right speaker. This gives the backing vocals their own space so they can properly support the lead vocal without getting in the way. Then comes the lead guitar tracks other than solos. To distinguish these tracks from the other guitars he usually pans them 10:00 to the left and adds a high pass filter too. The final step is to bring up any other percussive instruments including: tambourine, congas, maracas, cowbell, hand claps, xylophones, etc. With these tracks Jeff will add compression and high pass filters. Also he will pan these tracks according to taste. You may have noticed a lot of use of the high pass filters. While none of these instruments by themselves have a lot of muddy low end, when added together they can really muddy up the mix. The high pass filters are used to get rid of all the extraneous noise in each track so that all of the tracks can be heard clearly.

Now that you have your final mixes, it's time to master your album. The better the performances and the better the mixes the less time you need to spend on mastering. In our case we put a lot of time and effort into our performances and mixes so that mastering was a rather simple task. Mastering involves the following: the layout of the album (the order of the songs), balancing different mixes via compression, and boosting the overall levels of the songs. The layout of the album not only includes the order of the songs but, how they flow together. Some songs may just have a silent gap of a couple seconds before the next one starts. Some songs fade into the beginning

of another song. Some songs just start right after the previous one without any gap in between. One idea I thought of to make our album flow better was to have the album flow to a consistent beat. The beginnings of the songs and gaps between the following songs were not random but were timed to the tempo of the previous song creating the effect of a natural heartbeat and the fluctuations that go with that. Compression is now added to the album to balance the volume levels of different songs on the album so that they feel like they belong on the same album. Finally you boost the overall levels to taste to help the album stand out more and sound clearer.

Now with the music completely finished, it's time for the final preparation and the initial promotion of your album's release. This upcoming process is critical in catching the eyes and ears of potential fans, the press/media, and record labels.

Preparation and Promotion

Like I said before, these two steps are extremely important to the overall commercial success of your album. You've spent all this time writing, arranging, recording, mixing, and mastering your album. Now it's time to make sure it finds an audience.

In the preparation stage you will be designing your album artwork, logo (if you don't already have one), and other band merchandise. A good logo goes a long way towards creating strong brand recognition for your band. That being said, a good album cover that incorporates your logo and the music itself will help your album stand out over other artists in the music market. We've chosen our traditional logo as a black and white drawing of a man sitting on a stool while playing a guitar with "That Dan Thing" written on the guitar. That is also the cover of our album. Our secondary logo is a white on black drawing of just the guitar from the other logo. This secondary logo we use for stickers while we will be using both for t-shirts. We suggest using no more than two logos, usually related thematically, because the more logos you have the more confused the consumer will be. Also, your overall packaging makes a statement to the consumers. We chose to go green with our album by using an eco-friendly wallet as the actual packaging. That also sends a message that we care about the environment, and are willing to pay a little more for our CDs, thus cutting into our profit in the name of a clean environment. The only plastic used was shrink wrap to protect the CD and its case from getting ruined. Also, in the retail industry the shrink wrap adds extra security to prevent theft it may even add more CD sales as it looks more official and professional that way.

You will also be working on finding a CD manufacturing business to press your CDs, CD cases, and any other additional parts such as a lyric booklet or mini poster. Make sure you thoroughly research the companies that you are considering. Believe it or not some manufacturers have been known to send blank discs or discs with the music of another artist. Finally when choosing a CD manufacturer make sure that the company replicates the CDs rather than duplicates. They may sound similar but replication is done with higher quality CDs and at a slower recording speed so that the music sounds as true to the recording as possible. It's a subtle but important detail that will help you compete in today's music market.

Finally your CDs have arrived. What do you do next? You've put all this time and effort into getting your masterpiece released, now it's time that you and your band start to build a fan base and ultimately increase overall sales of your album and merchandise (T-shirts, stickers, posters, buttons, etc.) sales. This is where the idea of promotion comes into play.

In today's marketplace, there are a multitude of avenues to help promote your name as an artist and your newly released album. First let's talk about the tried and true traditional methods of promoting your music in the trenches. For an independent artist one of the most effective and important ways to promote your music is through live performances. This is a great way to introduce many people to your music. Through a combination of performance, showmanship, and a little storytelling, you give the audience insight to your songs and thus a connection to you as an artist. Performance not only helps you produce more sales, it also helps you gain recognition through word of mouth. A smart way to increase your album sales at shows is by letting a fan buy

your CD with not only cash, but also a credit or debit card. In this day in age even a cell phone can become a credit card swiper with the right apps and accessories. The goal of a live performance is to keep your current fans interested in you and your music, as well as drawing in new fans to continue increasing your fan base and sales.

To get new people to come to your shows, it helps to have street team promotion. One way to think of this method is a way to promote your promotion. A street team goes to local neighborhoods that surround the venues that you plan on performing at. A street team will also go to radio station events or appearances and introduce themselves to potential new fans. In fact, meeting the people who support and frequently listen to a radio station can be more beneficial than actually getting played on that station (though sending your release and artist profile to those stations is important as well). The reason is that you are building a personal connection to these listeners who in turn will call in to request your music on that station. I recommend giving free samplers, usually two or three songs, to promote your band rather than using only flyers because a CD is a tangible product that lets the potential fan listen to your music while they contemplate arriving at your show. On the CD, you would include vital contact information such as your website, facebook and myspace pages, and other forms of contact information that we'll talk more about later. You may also want to add a flyer to your CD to advertise upcoming shows. These forms of contact information are also an addition to the many materials that will help your street team to generate buzz about your band.

Another way to help promote your shows and your album release is by building a good relationship with the press. You do this by not only sending your CD to numerous

music publications, but by also including a compelling story about your band in the form of an artist profile or band bio. Try to do this in the form of an article so that a publication in need of additional stories can use it almost verbatim, thus giving you free advertising for your album and upcoming shows, as well as a possible review of your album. One way to get your album reviewed is to include a description of your album's theme, if there is one, and two to four sentence descriptions of each of your songs. This helps a reviewer gain additional insight to your music. This also makes it easier for the reviewer to write his/her review. This again is another way to gain free publicity for your album and your band, thus continuing to build the buzz.

When it comes to the press, it pays to think outside the box. Of course you want to expose yourself to the music press, but those publications are inundated by submissions from other bands as well. That's why it's important to have a compelling story to help you stand out from other bands to these publications. Another angle to take is what's known as the stand-out strategy. This is where you look to other non-music related publications that may be interested in your story and the theme of your album. An example of a band who has used this strategy is our band, That Dan Thing. My dad, who was prominent in the music world in the past, experienced several serious health problems that took him out of the spotlight. Over a long period of treatment and recovery, and tremendous and crucial love and support from his family he went on to bounce back and form a new band with me, his son. Even my sister and mom got involved by singing backing vocals. This family angle of the story resonates with family oriented publications that are looking for a good family/human interest story. While these publications may not normally write music reviews or articles, by sending our

story and a copy of our album to these publications, there is a good chance to reach a whole new base of fans who, as a whole, don't follow music publications very much but also enjoy and purchase music. So for our strategy regarding the press, we will combine reaching out to music publications, family magazines and general newspapers both to their entertainment and family sections. It's also important to follow up with these publications to keep them informed of your progress, upcoming shows, special promotions and upcoming releases. Some of the publications will write about you right away and keeping them up to date will encourage them to continue to write about you, which keeps their readers and potential new fans informed and interested in your band. For those who don't write about or review you initially, following up with them will keep them from forgetting about you and possibly finally writing an article about your band and/or reviewing your album.

Using your music and your band to help charitable organizations that you believe in can be an extremely valuable way to help raise money and awareness for both the organization of your choice and your band. There are a couple things you can do as a band to help a charity. One is to perform at a charity sponsored event for free and donate a portion of the proceeds of your merchandise and album sales to the charity of your choice. Although you might not make as much money from this strategy, it helps you build a fan base of people who think a lot like you do and believe in the same causes which will pay off in the long run. In addition you are providing a great service by helping causes that you believe in.

Another form of surprisingly inexpensive promotion is through a series of cable television ads. Half of the ads that you see in an hour-long show are reserved for

national ads and the other half is reserved for local and regional ads controlled by the cable company. These ads reach the cable company's viewers. For as little as \$25-\$50 you can run a 30 second ad. If you have a music video or live footage of your band throw that in your ad along with information about your band such as, your new album, upcoming shows, your website, and even your facebook and myspace pages. These ads are in general less expensive and more effective than print ads. A print ad may be effective in a publication with a feature story or glowing review of your band, but in general it's best to get free exposure from them. Save your money for the television ads. For a new band these strategies are most effective when done locally and regionally. When you think regional you might be thinking Los Angeles, San Diego, and possibly Phoenix or Las Vegas, but another strategy which I call the Big Fish, Small Pond strategy is to build up your base in the small towns as well. Places like El Centro, Indio, Yuma, Hemmet, and even Bakersfield are usually overlooked by many bands. If you make regular visits to those towns, their press and radio stations are more likely to give you free exposure and the fan base in these areas can become very loyal to those who visit their towns. Until you are ready for a national or international tour, these relationships are a lot easier to manage in local and regional settings. When you are finally ready to go national with your music you can apply the same strategies on a national scale.

We've talked about promotion strategies that require you and your band to go out and meet people and play live shows, but there are also many effective strategies that you can perform in the comfort of your own home. Social networking through sites like Facebook, Myspace and Twitter, designing your own website, and working with music

placement services such as Taxi are imperative strategies to expand your audience.

Let's start with social networking. Websites such as Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter are crucial to the development of a local, regional, national, or even international fan base. Facebook, with soon-to-be over one billion users worldwide, can help you reach fans that would never have a chance to hear you otherwise. It's a great way to attract new fans and keep them informed on your progress and upcoming events. You can even sell your merchandise on Facebook. Myspace and Twitter are great sources too. Even though they have fewer users, Myspace and Twitter can help you reach even more people who don't have a facebook account. For these sites you should also include links to websites that have your products for sale, such as iTunes, Amazon, CD Baby, etc. These social networks are also great ways to drive people to your own official website where they can purchase your products as well.

It's very important in this day and age to have your own official website. And when I say your own official site, I'm talking about your own world wide web page such as www.thatdanthing.com, as opposed to a page hosted by AOL, Yahoo, Google, etc. Hopefully your band name isn't already the name of another website because it's important for your web address to be as close to the band name as possible. It's also preferable for it to be a .com site as that is the most common address that people look for when searching the web.

When you or a professional web designer design your site it's important to lay it out in a very user friendly way. You want to make it so that people with the highest speed connections and people that still use a dial-up modem can easily access your site and its content. You want to create a visually engaging homepage with a

streaming song that automatically starts playing when you enter the page. Remember to keep the design simple so that it loads quickly for all users. That means to lay-off the flashy bells and whistles that will take excessive amounts of time to load and will have so much lag. If someone has a dial up modem or other slow internet connections, the visitor will be turned off and leave your site if it takes too long to access it. Your flash-free website should include a band biography page that will have the same compelling bio that the press gets. It should also include a news page and a tour page that can tell the visitor when and where your band is playing a live show and they can read articles and reviews from other publications about your band. The news page will also help the visitor find out information about an upcoming release, new merchandise in your store, and anything else that may be important to share with your fans. This next page along with your bio page are the two most important pages to help build a loyal fan base and sell more merchandise. The song page will include streaming songs from your album and short descriptions of each of the songs. These descriptions will help give the listener additional insight and connection to each of the songs. It's also important to have a link to your store where you can buy the CD after each song. The easier you make it for the consumer to buy your album and other merchandise the more sales you will make. It's also important to have a variety of payment methods so that people will feel more comfortable purchasing your merchandise. One payment method is to mail a check (make sure it clears first) to a specific address. Another way is to have a pay pal account so that people can buy your merch using pay pal. The most popular and effective way to generate sales is to offer secure debit and credit card payment. Finally your website needs to have a page that includes music videos or live performances.

That way people who would never get to see you in concert can learn a little bit more about you. It also keeps people coming back to your site by keeping the content fresh and up to date. Of course photographs should be included throughout your entire website and a page dedicated to lyrics is a nice and important touch too.

Just like the offline press, there is a lot of online press and it is important keep in touch with and maintain relationships with them as well. This will increase your online presence which will help increase your fan base and sales. There are also a lot of online radio stations like Pandora and subscription services like Rhapsody that are important to be a part of as they will help expose your music to more people. Of course when it comes to online distribution you want to be on as many sites that pay you for your music as possible. iTunes, Amazon, Spotify, CD Baby, and countless others will provide this for you. We chose CD Baby to be our online and offline distributor. For a percentage of sales they get us on all of the websites that pay for your music. They also provide catalog sales to over 2,500 regular stores nationwide including Best Buy, Target, and many independent record stores.

Another resource that is available to independent artists are A&R (Artist and Repertoire) companies that help musicians, songwriters and bands get their music heard by people in the music industry. These people include record labels, music publishers, management and film and TV music supervisors. The service that we use is called TAXI. My dad has been with them for about 13 years and the connections he made through TAXI have helped in providing him with a full time career in music. In fact, just recently, the song "The Hamster On The Wheel", the one I learned all the parts to and recorded in the studio for my PLP last year, was just picked up by a music

supervisor in the industry. It's also on the album and should appear in a film and/or TV show sometime in the near future.

As you can see promotion, both online and offline are imperative to having a commercially successful release and sustaining a career in the music business. To thrive and grow as a band you will find that promotion is an ongoing and never ending process.

The Release/Conclusion

Congratulations! Your album is now released so you may be thinking what you need to do next. Get the word out about your band, music, and message. Keep promoting and keep your fans interested in your progress. I hope you learned a little about the grueling but ultimately rewarding process of releasing an independent record. As you can see there is a lot more that doesn't always cross your mind when you are listening to an album. The writing, recording, mixing, mastering, preparation, and promotion requires a lot of an artist or band looking to make it big in the music industry. Through my research I learned that there is so much more that goes into creating an album. My goal was to inform you about the crucial details that if not tended to, can keep you and your music from reaching its full potential. While it may be no walk in the park, if you put everything you have into this process you'll have a much better chance in reaching your potential and sustaining your career in music.