



*By John McGlasson - GJD Contributor*

I've strayed a bit from my original mission of being an "industry insider" for guitarists since the slow summer period began, but it's time to get back to it with so much happening that could really affect the direction of music sales.

It doesn't look good for indie labels right now, since the major labels' massive suit-and-tie clad groups of brilliant thinkers have determined that the solution to all our problems is to...give it away. They're not alone, artists who do mega-millions in touring see the futility of releasing the CD into retail distribution, with sales figures that only prove to disappoint and reflect negatively on the artist rather than the industry. Indies are working hard to equate stealing music to stealing hubcaps, we've made it so cheap that why steal it without looking like a bum? But major-label activities make it more clear everyday that music is free for the taking.

You may have seen the press release that announced Bruce Springsteen's new tour schedule, and the announcement that you can download the new single for free on iTunes. Prince made a deal with a UK newspaper to give away a couple million of his CD in a special Sunday edition of the paper. (Though, this greatly angered his label and UK retailers, who then refused to carry the CD. The label soon released a sphincter-clenched show of support for Prince's radical decision to give away the product.) I believe the Eagles will be giving away a single as well. Bon Jovi gave a CD with each ticket purchase, then counted those figures as retail scans, something Soundscan allowed to cries of foul, since it boosted Bon Jovi to #1, for a minute anyway. These people can afford to give it away, we can't.

We go halfway: We allow streaming of complete albums on band's websites, we allow free downloads on Myspace, (not that it matters with the new software that converts any myspace mp3 to a download). At our level, the more we give away the more word of mouth we get, but if it never results in CD sales there's no point. We've been stuck in this purgatory for over a year now. With the press, exposure, word of mouth, and budgets I've had, most industry people that I know agree that we'd have sold 500-1000 times as many CDs as we've sold were we doing it in the 80's or 90's, even 5 years ago.

So what's next? Bands are still signing with big labels, even prog band Porcupine Tree signed with Atlantic/Wea, why? Prog bands don't have big CD sales by comparison to what major labels are used to, but they do have something major pop acts don't; massive followings that go to shows. Pop acts are having a really hard time selling out shows, but show attendance is way up for indie bands.

Major labels are now dependent upon an aspect of the biz they saw as mere advertising in the old-world; touring. They're getting in on the ticket sales, the merchandising, the whole bit. Not completely new, but it was never such a big part of business models for big labels til now. (unless you consider Sub-Pop and other mega-indies to be majors, which is very debatable)

We don't have a hand in touring or merchandising with Backyard Tire Fire, yet we spend thousands on tour promo, because the only light we see at the end of the tunnel is from show sales of CDs. With all the fees mediocre-selling titles incur in retail distribution, we never get paid for our retail sales by our distributor, as the good performers are brought down by the weak, it's all cross-colateralized, and we get nothing, though we do get paid for our digital sales monthly now. (I think distributors realized that many labels were going to go under if they didn't at least get paid for their digital sales, so the two were separated for most labels).

So what does this mean for guitarists? As I've written, I get A LOT of CDs from around the world from instrumental guitarists who want me to release their stuff. It's heartbreaking that I can't have the label I envisioned. I wanted to emulate the Shrapnel Records glory days, with a catalog full of monstrous guitarists, and be a source for that for guitarists and fans of their music worldwide. But the ugly, harsh truth is, it's a dead genre, even some of the better-known touring artists in the genre draw crowds of 20-50 people in the largest markets. What's going on here?

I know for my entertainment dollar, I'm a lot more likely to leave the house to see a band that has a great vibe and rhythm section than to go see the greatest guitarist wank off with a sub-par, economically-driven rhythm section (lots of artists these days tour with bands they can pay less than the people who played on the album, which makes for a far lesser experience than you may have thought you were paying for).

The future is the past; touring with a great band, making great albums that excite people, communicating directly with the people, and selling them CDs at the show. There will never be another Surfin' With the Alien, A Via Musicom, or Passion and Warfare. There may be another Physical Graffiti or Fair Warning, but the band that makes that happen will be fronted by a very talented, very unselfish guitarist who's happy to be part of a great band with equal or better musicians and not the center of attention. I'm always looking! I think we all are.

[John McGlasson](#) *This email address is being protected from spam bots, you need Javascript enabled to view it* *This email address is being protected from spam bots, you need Javascript enabled to view it*

*This email address is being protected from spam bots, you need Javascript enabled to view it*

*is a life-long guitarist, producer, and founder of*

[o.i.e. Records, Ltd](#)

*., a musician-oriented independent record label based in central Illinois.*