



By John McGlasson - GJD Contributor

I WAS LUCKY ENOUGH THIS SUMMER to work with two marketing interns from Illinois State University, David Sowa and Bob Thieman. Both are highly motivated and were more than helpful, I'll hire them both if I can swing it! I had them each give me 20 written questions at the end of their internships, but David, being the over-achiever he is, sent 26! Here they are, with my answers, I hope there's some helpful and/or interesting info for anyone trying to negotiate this crazy, expensive hobby we call the music biz. Thanks for reading! And as always feel free to ask me any questions you don't see touched on here!

1) How much does it cost to record and mix a full length album?

JM: That depends a lot on the level you're at - buy a Mac and the software's already there. But you can spend all the money you want on the gear, it takes years to learn how to produce a great album, minutes to learn how to use the software. VonFrickle produces their own albums, it takes hundreds of hours for them, so if you added it up at studio rates it'd be \$25k or more per album. Backyard Tire Fire's last two albums we paid for were around \$7k each, done in all-analog to "tape, nothing digital at all.

Bigger labels are using bigger producers and spending \$20-100k up to record an album, but more people are doing them the way we do now, because the returns never justify the spending after promo. I'd put vonFrickle's or Backyard Tire Fire's albums up against any albums at any price sonically, artistically, in any way. It doesn't have to cost a fortune, it has everything to do with the producer, and we know some great ones. Former Wilco member/producer Jay Bennett is producing the next Backyard Tire Fire album this fall for release next summer, and we're about to finalize things with King Crimson producer Ronan Chris Murphy to produce the new vonFrickle album next Spring, for release next fall.

Of course the price goes up, but the boost from making albums at that level is priceless, and you sell more albums with the press and bigger shows that suddenly get easier to come by. It's the dream of every small label to attract great producers and then have your biggest band either take off under your care or go to a bigger label who'll spend twice what you could spend on a new release, in turn promoting your back-catalog at no cost to you.

2) What is typical for manufacturing costs of CD's and DVD's?

JM: Depending on quantity and packaging, around \$1.40e for 1000 copies. They go down a lot if you order 5k or more to around .90e

3) How did you find BTF's manager?

JM: He found us, he works for Jambase and saw BTF at a show in Chicago, talked to the band, then to me, we worked out a plan, and the rest is history.

4) Does BTF's manager handle all booking?

JM: He did at first, because Ed from BTF used to. Geoff hated it at first, but ended up being very good at it. Now they're booked by one of the biggest agencies in the world, the Agency Group.

5) How much does a manager get paid? Does the label pay the manager? Is it commission based?

JM: Not sure exactly, but I think Geoff gets 10% of every show and every cd sold. Geoff works for the band, not for the label, we don't pay him anything, our interests, while often similar, are more often different. They're going to a new label and I don't even know who, I'm out of the loop since their contract's up in Feb '08 and they don't owe us another album. We'll always be associated because I own either some or all of 4 titles, unless a big label buys those titles from us. I believe in BTF to the degree that I don't think a label would pay what those titles are worth to me over the next 25 years.

6) How did you get the label started? Loan? Outside investment?

JM: I produced my first album, BTF's first album with us, and Isaiah Sharkey's albums at about the same time, pressed them, and started selling them on our site, using my unemployment checks. I'd just pay the producers every couple weeks what I could, they were very much part of the team, they wanted these albums made and the label to come to fruition, so they worked with me, but it was tough, I lived very cheap for a long time! Producing a cd under a label's name makes it official, though there are name copyright and tax issues to found any business. The investor didn't get involved until we'd already been selling BTF cds around the world.

7) Do you see illegal file sharing ever being stopped, more so than it is now at least?

JM: It's going to become so cheap and easy to do it legally that stealing it will become like stealing hubcaps, anyone could do it, but only the lowest of the lowlifes actually will. The big labels will continue to prosecute people, and I like it, it saves us the trouble and makes them more of the bad guy than they already are.

8) Is the digital world enough to keep up?

JM: Not now, but we have to assume it will be at some point. Not even close right now though. It's 40-1 illegal to legal downloads, so it's the difference between me getting \$2k checks or \$80k checks, it's that huge. Our stuff is out there, but it's not paid for.

9) **What exactly about an artist makes you want to sign him to the label? Someone you think can be "big"? Someone whose music you personally enjoy? Someone you think can make money for you?**

JM: All of the above, but not all for every or any one band...I never thought BTF would have such huge appeal, I'd never try to sell "pop", I wouldn't know where to start. I knew BTF would pay for itself. I knew I could make vonFrickle huge, but that's not why we do it, the label is solely my way of releasing music I like, period. Including, and especially, my own. Good business sense would tell me as bad as things are in the industry I should pick up the next teen screamo band that'll sell, but I'd rather quit than sell music I hate just to make money.

10) **When vonFrickle or Backyard Tire Fire sells a CD at a show, who gets the money?**

JM: We split it 50/50, though in most cases we get 100% until original manufacturing, production and promotional costs are recovered, or recouped as we say. Most labels give the band 20% per cd sold and always recoup everything spent on the band, from advertising, booking expenses, promo, everything, so the band never gets a dime. I did it 50/50 to be fair, and we don't recoup a lot of expenses that most labels do, so it's hurting us in the short term, if I'd have screwed the bands like most labels do the label would be doing better, but I wouldn't be friends with the artists the way I am.

11) **How long do you think it will take for the vonFrickle live DVD to pay for itself?**

JM: If you do the math, we'd have to sell around 1000 copies at \$15e to recoup the production and manufacturing. We expect to sell a lot more than that the way things are going, and I might package it with the new album with the big producer for \$15.00, meaning I could sell 3000 of them at \$15.00e by itself or sell possibly 20-50k of them packaged with the new album. You've got to be willing to give something away to make fans, of the band and the label. We've given away over 2000 cds since we started the label.

12) **Are merch sales, such as clothing, done by you or the band? Is it all done independently?**

JM: I didn't do this with any of our bands now, but we will be with future bands. Labels will have to be involved with everything in the future to survive, and the truth is the bands wouldn't be there selling the stuff if the label didn't book and promote the show at that point.

13) **How did Backyard Tire Fire get the tours with Clutch? The styles are quite different.**

JM: I think The Agency Group is crossing Clutch into BTF's genre more than the other way around. I was surprised when I first heard about the pairing, but it's worked out really well, BTF did \$3400 in cd sales in May with Clutch, if they can do similar in Aug. on this 28-date tour they could do over \$9k.

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