



By John McGlasson - GJD Contributor

In part three of this four-part series, we'll look at album manufacturing.

When I first signed a bunch of artists, I planned a single release date for almost all of them. I'd recently had an investor put up the cash I'd need, so, assuming things would be the way they'd always been in the music biz up to that point, I decided to press a lot of each title so I could get a cheaper price per CD, under the (previously) safe assumption that I wasn't pressing more than I could sell over a year or two. Then the physical retail end of the CD business tanked.

Now I have thousands of CDs I'm not likely ever to sell, and thousands more stuck in the retail distribution trap that I may or may not ever be paid for. Yes, I got them for .84 each, but that means nothing when I have a mountain of them taking up my storeroom and in warehouse limbo across the US, which can be returned to our former distributor anytime and subtracted from what they owe us. I'd be better off having pressed half as many at the normal rate of around \$1.45e for a jewel case with 2-panel insert and having sold out, or nearly sold out of them.

Thankfully, we sold enough of the titles to cover all the expenses, but look at all the plastic I have to dispose of. I'm no greenie by any stretch, I'm guilty of killing many plants, flowers, and possibly even the accidental bunny on quads, dirtbikes, and snowmobiles. But this is a waste of materials, pure and simple. Buy what you know you can sell. If you realistically can only sell 100-250-500 of your album over a year, you're so much better off doing one of the overpriced short-runs most manufacturers offer. If you're paying \$5.00 for a professionally pressed, packaged and shipped-to-you CD, and selling it for \$10.00, it's still worth doing by any business standard, and pressing it the next time will be cheaper if there are no changes to the artwork. And since retail CD sales are dead, you don't have to mess with that at all.

On the other hand, our early titles by Backyard Tire Fire were all pressed in this massive run, and while I have lots of them, they're always selling. BTF is touring the US constantly, so in the long run, I did the right thing. But to press as many of some more obscure titles as I did just didn't make sense. Much of this has to do with genre, and gauging your following realistically.

I remember one night in Nashville in 2004 I saw the G3 tour with Vai, Satriani, and Malmsteen, and during the Satriani set I stood by the merchandise table shared by all three artists to try to measure sales. I noticed that while there was a steady flow of lookers, and the usual t-shirt buyers, I saw very few CDs being sold, even after the show.

When Backyard Tire Fire toured with Clutch last year for two months of sold-out shows, our CD sales at the shows were astounding. This year, BTF is headlining nationally and doing great, but show CD sales are way, way down compared to the Clutch tour, even when the band does shows with Reverend Horton Heat and other legends. I can only attribute this to the fact that during last year's tour with Clutch, the band was winning over a receptive audience that had

never heard them before night after night. Being sold-out shows, the crowd showed up early to get the best spots, so they're right there for the opening band to sink or swim, and thankfully BTF did a great job. The people then turned around and bought the CD, told their friends, we got press, BTF moved to a much bigger label, and things are rolling. But now the people showing up to the shows already have the band's music through other means, they're already fans. The bigger a band gets, the fewer CDs they sell at shows, losing those sales to the traditional retail purchase, online physical CD purchase, or download, either legal or illegal, all of which are far less profitable than the show sale, although you could argue that legal downloads are pure profit since there's no product to manufacture and ship.

Vinyl

For whatever reason, well-produced music pressed to vinyl sounds amazing. There's much to be said about music that's never, ever converted to 1's and 0's. Audiophiles spend \$10,000.00 on speaker cables, not speakers, but gold speaker cables, to get the most out of their vinyl recordings, the medium is that strong a reproduction of the original. But the average person is now so used to listening on either earbuds or crappy computer speakers that they've lost touch with sound quality altogether, and kids under a certain age seem to know or care little about it. But for people like me who grew up with massive, high-wattage stereos with speakers that were more like high-end PA cabinets, what's happening today doesn't cut it. I recently dragged out my old Kenwood 80w per-channel component stereo system, and I can't believe I let myself slip away from true sound quality for so long. Even my Genelec studio monitors don't have the warmth of music that passes through these systems, even on CD. So I really think there's a sonic generation gap that has those of us over 30 longing for the sound quality we took for granted as kids, and that the music industry seems to have lost concern for completely, considering we all know the final product, no matter how well we produce it, is going to be heard, by most listeners, through really, really crappy speakers, and I don't see much of an uproar for a new, higher-quality digital medium for music, innovation in that area seems reserved only for new ways to sell and deliver music. Seriously, people under a certain age are listening to music almost exclusively on their telephones. Ugh.

There's a massive resurgence of popularity for vinyl records, turntable sales are way up, and some indie record stores like Newbury Comics have stopped CD sales almost completely and packed their stores with vinyl, both old and new. But this doesn't mean you should be pressing your album onto vinyl, in fact, if you don't go through certain steps to make your album vinyl-friendly, it's not going to sound good to you or the public, especially if you're a participant in the Volume Wars as mentioned in my last column. You either need to do special mastering for vinyl, or master it that way in the first place.

If you don't have a fairly sizeable following who'd be interested in vinyl, it's not cost-effective to press your album to vinyl. It's still largely considered to be a novelty item, since obviously it's as non-portable as could be, and though there are USB turntables that allow you to convert your vinyl albums to mp3's, that totally defeats the purpose of the vinyl listening experience. Backyard Tire Fire is doing great with vinyl because they're right in the middle of the 30-something indie rock/alt-country fanbase who've got money and are nostalgic about the albums they remember growing up. New releases on vinyl, in the right genre, can be

enormously profitable.

What's new?

Many artists and labels have started putting their albums on USB keys printed with their name and selling them at shows and mail-order, which only works if there's other content in addition to the album, like artwork, bios, live shots and video, studio "making of" info and content, the possibilities are endless. If you really want to do something fan-friendly, put your entire catalog on there, with all the stuff mentioned above, and sell it for \$10.00 or less. More for less; like it or not, it's the only thing the fans respond to these days. Before the Digital Revolution, fans would obsess over a handful of bands for years, sometimes for life, but the public is exposed to such a massive, constant flow of new artists now that you really can only hope to be a small part of someone's massive catalog of music.

Next time, we'll look at promotional costs and where you can sharpen your focus to save money and get results. Thanks for reading!