



*By John McGlasson - GJD*

In part four of this four-part series, we'll look at album/artist/tour promotion.

I've wasted more money in this area than any other, by a long-shot. With the old-world music business died the old-world way of doing things, but there are many traps you can fall into believing that if you don't follow the old path you can't make things happen. I've met some really smart people in this business who've had a lot of success in the past, but how much of their advice applies to the modern music biz? I've found not much.

The Circle of Events that used to sell music reliably is now completely broken. The music press has little power to sell music, the record stores are gone, full-album sales are in the toilet, and it'd take a lot of single-track sales to make up for it. Show attendance is down across the board, and show CD sales with it. From the outside, most analysts would declare the music business dead. How long does an industry lose money overall before it's official?

One thing hasn't changed, you've still got to take it to the people, you've got to tour, but if you're playing music for a living, chances are great that you've had to completely change your focus. You're probably doing a lot more work than you thought you'd do, even if you're lucky enough to have management. If you're not in contact with you're fans, you lose them, so all your free time is spent answering emails, and probably writing a blog, if not maintaining your own website. And if you don't have a booking agent, you're doing more work then ever for less than ever, often from a van. So when do you write new music, much less record it? You find a way because you're a pro.

Maybe the only good thing about the recent industry shifts is the fact that many of the people who were only in the music business to make money have found other, more lucrative things to do.

Bloggers are doing far more for up-and-coming bands today than are the big music press, because they have something the big press doesn't; credibility. Most music fans don't believe in magazine music reviewers anymore because of all the crap they've rammed down our throats for years in exchange for ad revenues. People are far more likely now to find a blogger who shares their tastes and get advice on what to listen to from them. Backyard Tire Fire has a friendship with bloggers across the US, and it's amazing how these people love to be included in the overall plan. They love the band, and they have no conflict of interest in promoting them. There are no advertising issues, in fact most bloggers are self-funded. They're not going to work to promote a band they don't love.

The bloggers can get people to your site, but from there, you've got to have some of your music readily available for free download. Not streaming, not clips, but full-songs for download, that the listener owns. People really take offense to artists who won't offer up a sample that they can then pass around to their friends. They can get it for free anyway, so offer it to them as a gift, it shows that you believe in your material. If you want to make them purchase a track to

hear you for the first time, 1) it shows you don't believe in it, and that their pennies today are all you expect to get once they hear you, and 2) they won't buy a track to hear you for the first time. Give something away, you're trying to build a long-term fanbase.

About the only place the media does have power is in the live music area, and you need this relationship to have successful tours. So whether it's you or someone whom you can get to do it for you, you've got to build friendships with people within local and regional music scenes who you can keep aware of tour plans and who'll promote your shows. Send them your CD with a personal letter, invite them to a show, and from there either they'll love it or they won't. There's not much you can do beyond that. If there's not something different or special about you or your band, chances are you won't be touring long. The public has had enough of play-it-safe, sound-alike artists, and the numbers show it. But if you're doing something new and unique, you'll pack them in like it's 1975, and the press will help you do it. The unique bands that are the only ones who can do what they do are thriving, many for decades. Gwar, in their 3rd decade, still sells out everywhere they go because there's only one Gwar.

If I had the money back that I've spent on big promoters for little or no results, I'd be in the black right now. For an up-and-coming, or even a semi-well known artist, you're better off spending your time on Myspace and Facebook, it's free, and you'll get more results than you'll ever get from an expensive publicist. What if you do get some articles in magazines? If the people have never heard of you before then through grass-roots channels, it appears manufactured, artificial, and bought. Even if you do get some attention, it'll be from the more gullible, more fickle music fans who take advice on what to listen to from magazines, and don't dig much deeper for new music than that. The last thing you want is a bunch of media hype that you have to live up to, becoming a media darling is the kiss of death in the modern music biz.

The single most valuable thing you own as far as promotion is your email list. Building this while you're touring is essential to maintaining a fanbase, and reaching them when you need to. I don't downplay the importance of having a solid Myspace and Facebook presence, it's become a major way for touring bands to keep their fans coming to the shows, but the direct, opt-in email list is the only truly reliable way to keep in touch with your fans.

Forget the paid publicists, the radio promoters, and the show promoters. The results they do get are of little value to you in the current climate, and don't come close to justifying the cost of hiring them. They're not doing anything for you that you and your friends/fans can't do yourself for free, other than the printing and postage expenses. And chances are if you hire big promoters, you'll be paying for the printing, stuffing and mailing your own envelopes anyway, they generally don't do it. And while their big fees are based on their power of their names, their names have no power anymore. There was a time that a famous publicist could attach their name to crap and be able to sell it, but those days are, for the most part, over. If an artist is great, people will notice.

Spend your money making the best albums you can, use the Net's level playing field to your advantage, and tour tour tour! Let the music do the talking, and if it's great, the public will do the rest. Thanks for reading!