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The Etiquette of Pitching Songs

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Bluegrass is an industry that enjoys the benefits of being a genre of folk and roots music. Part of the rewards of being a part of the bluegrass community is that it is relatively personable in nature, without the formality and commercialism of some other genres of music. On the other hand, this means there are few established protocols for some of the business aspects of the music.

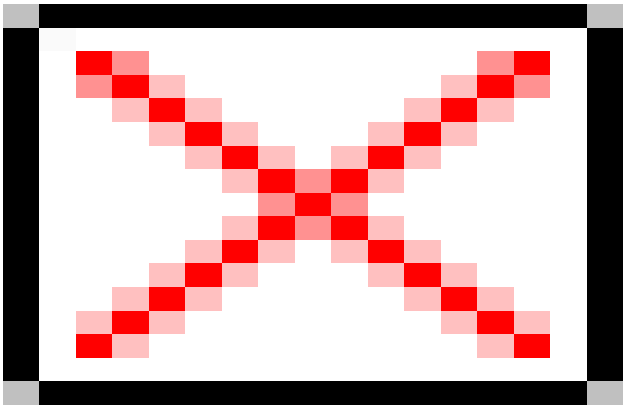
For new writers or writers new to the genre, a primary concern is simply, ?What are the best ways to pitch a song and follow up with artists?? When an artist has a song on ?hold,? what does this mean? How do I avoid miscommunication with artists I wish to work with regarding recording my songs? When do I share publishing on a song with an artist in order to have the song recorded? How do I follow up with record labels when my song has been recorded and significant time has lapsed, but I have not received mechanical royalties? When I co-write, what are appropriate expectations on who pitches the song, or who should be the first-named songwriter? When should royalties be split in some way other than 50:50?

The idea for this series of articles grew out of questions that have arisen at meetings and workshops at IBMA?s World of Bluegrass among songwriters. While there are no hard and fast rules for many of these guidelines, the following pointers are suggestions that have been derived from IBMA songwriter discussions and other songwriter forums.

Pitching and Placing Songs
There are no unequivocal ?right? ways to pitch a song. At the same time, there are certain basic guidelines that may increase your chances of an artist hearing and recording your songs.

Packaging: Put yourself in the artist?s shoes. You want them to perceive your songs in a way that suggests a professional approach. Artists are very busy people, and many of them are being handed an increasing number of original songs. Even a short time ago, this was not customary except with some highly visible artists. Take the time to do the things that make your demo or songwriter CD appealing. Some of these things include having an easily readable cover with easy access to follow-up information.

Bluegrass songwriters gather at World of Bluegrass 2005 to share songs and talk about new IBMA programs for writers. Front, L-R: Serge Bernard, Louisa Branscomb, Janet McGarry; Row 2, L-R: Mark Simos, Hazel Dickens, Lisa Aschmann, Connie Leigh; Back, L-R: J.R. Cook



Network as much as possible and get to know bluegrass artists. Take the time at festivals, World of Bluegrass and other venues to form relationships that are not just based on a ?pitch.? While this is difficult in some genres, it is still possible in bluegrass. It is not unusual for unknown or new songwriters to have songs recorded by successful artists

Know yourself as a songwriter. Get as much feedback on your songs as possible so that you know your strengths and weaknesses?and also how others hear your particular style. This way you can narrow down your material to your best songs and pitch to artists who will be the best match for your style. All feedback is good feedback! Attending open mic?s, songwriter circles and IBMA events where songs are shared are excellent ways to get feedback.

Know your artists? recording tastes. Get to know what specific artists sound like, how much they write their own material, and whether they are interested in new songs. Listen to their recordings, if possible, to familiarize yourself with the artist?s style, and to discern whether your writing is a good match for that artist. Make a point to listen to recent recordings.

When possible, pitch to the need. Let?s say you just happen to have a demo with 10 songs on it in your pocket. If an artist mentions needing a fast tune, you can take your demo and mark the tunes you suggest. This saves time and increases the chances he or she will listen carefully to your songs.

There are stages to pitching. The first is making contact. Secondly, you may want to know if the artist has heard, or likes, your song. When you make contact, ask the artist if you may give them a follow up email or call in a month or so to get their feedback on your material. Remember, even if your song is not what they are looking for at the moment, artists are a great source of feedback on your material.

The third stage of pitching is called the ?hold.? This means an artist has asked to hold your song for recording and he or she is asking that you not pitch the song to others. At this point, the ball is in your court. You may choose to allow a hold, and if so, you may wish to set a time limit such as three months, depending on their recording plans, so that your song is not ?off the market? for a prolonged length of time. The artist does not have a formal or legal obligation to record a song on hold. However, you can set the terms for the hold, or take the position that you will continue to pitch the song but you will give a courtesy call to the artist if someone else shows an interest in the song. Whatever your position, it is helpful to be clear to the artist and to follow through with the position you choose.

Make an effort to view your emotionally-inspired material from a professional perspective. Songs are very personal creations because they come from the writer?s personal thoughts and feelings. Though it is tempting to take it personally when an artist does not choose your song, it is more helpful to leave the ?personal? at the front door of the recording studio where you did your demo! After that point, a focus on the business of songwriting is the best mode of operation.

View pitching as an ongoing learning process, rather than a series of ?successes? or ?failures.? Each time an artist takes the time to listen to a song, view this as a gift of his ir her time and thoughts, regardless of the outcome. All songwriters have encountered the same up?s and down?s that you will. Considering all feedback?event the bumps in the road?as

simply part of the learning process will help you grow as a songwriter and advocate of your songs. Look for future articles about songwriting in this publication and in the ?White Paper? section of ibma.org. More to come on: Working with Record Labels (Independent Artists as well as Established Labels), and Co-writing.

Tags:

songwriting [1]
pitching songs [2]
Louisa Branscomb [3]

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