

Spring 4-30-2017

An Exploration of Recording and the Music Business

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Repository Citation

Nalow, Erika, "An Exploration of Recording and the Music Business" (2017). *Honors Projects*. 258.
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HNRS 4990

Honors Project Conclusion

An Exploration of Recording and the Music Business

The following questions were initially proposed during the planning of my Honors Project. I have chosen to organize the final project results around these questions and how they were specifically answered through conducting my creative project.

- “Can an independent artist record, mix, produce, promote, and distribute their own original work successfully?”
 - To answer this part of the research thoroughly, I will give a detailed recitation of the planning and execution of this project. This project began with me writing an original song entitled “Upside Down.” After composing it, I went to my project advisor, Mark Bunce, and reserved a day in the Kuhlin Center recording studio on BGSU’s campus to record the song. I then arranged additional music for the song- writing parts for trombone, trumpet, alto saxophone, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, bass, drums, piano, and vocals. I then reached out to musicians in the College of Music at BGSU and asked them to play on the recording of the song. I organized two rehearsals with the full ensemble prior to recording day, which was February 18th. Before recording day I also developed a recording schedule, which involved writing out the tracking order and microphone list for each instrument. On the day of February 18th, I arrived at the studio at 9:00 a.m to set up microphones and place them in the room appropriately to record. Throughout the day, I had to rearrange microphones to fit each instrument. Due to limited microphones and my involvement on various tracks of the song, we weren’t able to record all instruments at once. Therefore, having the musicians come at various times was a more efficient use of the day. Throughout the day, if I wasn’t recording a track, I was sitting at the console running ProTools and setting up new tracks, and running the session for the musicians who were tracking. By the end of the day, all tracks were recorded. Later on, I scheduled three separate sessions to mix the tracks with Mark Bunce. The mixing process was a bit more tedious than the tracking process, and often involved listening to one single track for a half hour at a time in order to get it sounding as best as it possibly could. After three separate mixing sessions, the track was to the point that I was happy with and the recording process was officially done. I then set up three different meetings with Terry Tompkins to discuss the marketing portion of the project and to talk through different marketing strategies and potential revenue streams that I could look into managing alone, as an independent artist. So, through the execution of this project I was able to answer the above research question.

- “What are the implications on an artist’s career if they take on each of the major roles involved in recording their own work?” (i.e. Would their art suffer? Would their audience base be less inclusive?)
 - Having the artist adopt each of these roles comes with various positive and negative effects. For example, it can cause the actual song itself to come together differently. In a live studio setting where the artist is simply responsible for recording, it is possible to have an entire band play together simultaneously when recording a song. However, with an artist managing many different roles and playing many different instruments, it becomes literally impossible to have a completely live recording process; I couldn’t sing and play guitar and play saxophone all at once. One could argue that this could produce complications if I were to ever tour while performing that song. (However, this is a more solvable problem- one could hire band members to cover those parts live if budgets allowed). Additionally, having an artist manage the engineering and tracking roles on the day of the recording is a bit of a whirlwind. From conducting my honors project, I found myself pulled in multiple directions on recording day; if I wasn’t in the live room recording a track, I was in the tracking room manning the console and setting up parts in ProTools. I was also serving as producer, so as the various musicians throughout the day were coming in to record, I had to greet them, make sure they understood the process, and knew how they were to track. I was also the arranger for the music so I had to be ready and available to answer any questions they had about how to specifically perform the music. Because of this, one might argue that the artist’s true connection to the music wouldn’t be as strong, since their focus would be divided. I however, found the experience to be extremely valuable because I learned about all the difficult and detailed work that is associated with tracking even one song in a studio. This process certainly gave perspective as to how difficult and time consuming it must be to record an entire album, and also gave insight into why all of the various roles in a studio developed (i.e. session musician, producer, arranger, engineer, engineer assistant, client service manager, etc.) In regards to mixing and producing, having an artist serve in these roles can be rewarding in that the artist has full creative control of the end product of their music. However, some may argue that the artist wouldn’t function as well in these roles because they are too emotionally invested in their own work; they might say that the mixer or producer would have an objective opinion that could provide valuable insight into creating the best final version of the song.
- “What types of recording techniques could be employed by an independent artist in order to be more cost effective and perhaps render themselves more unique and marketable?”
 - Tracking each instrument separately rather than together allows for microphones to be used more cost effectively. For example, for this recording, I started with a scratch track of acoustic guitar and vocals. This track was not one that was used in the final version of the song, but instead, served as the basis for which each instrument was individually layered. So, after the scratch track was completed,

the drums were able to record the final version while listening along to the scratch track. Since miking a drum kit involves 10+ microphones, having the scratch track allowed the drums to play along without having to use additional microphones for a guitarist or vocalist to track simultaneously. This ultimately saves money because if you wanted to use the same microphone for both the drums and the guitar/vocals, you wouldn't have to have two versions of that microphone purchased in order to make that happen. This scenario was applied to all instruments that recorded throughout the day. They were each recorded independently, which ultimately led to better use of resources.

- “What mixing techniques can an independent artist employ to make their work have a professional sound without having the resources of a professional budget?”
 - In researching this question, I searched for recording techniques that would create the illusion of a full sound while working with limited musicians and resources. To facilitate this, I often used multiple microphones on each instrument. For example, I used both a C414 over the ride cymbal and an overhead mic for the drum set, which created a full sound. Additionally, I recorded the vocals with a chorus technique. This technique involved recording an additional, nearly identical vocal track on the recording, and utilizing both tracks in the final mix in order to create a fuller, more prominent vocal sound. I also utilized a similar technique when recording the horn section background hits. Each of the horn players (the trumpet, saxophone, and trombone) recorded their entire part two separate times. Therefore, I had six total horn tracks instead of three and was able to pan the tracks to both the left and right speakers in order to create the illusion of having a much fuller horn section than what I actually worked with. Another aspect of recording that allowed me to have a professional sound with a small budget was that I recorded many of the tracks myself- such as the saxophone, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, and vocals. In mixing this track, I used multiple effects in order to make the track sound full. For example, I used reverb on the vocals, electric guitar, piano, and acoustic guitar track. Additionally, I used light compression on almost every track. Overall, from my research in this project, I feel that having an artist go through the tracking process themselves could be extremely valuable to their career. Even if an artist only goes through the process once, it would still allow them to be more competent in a studio situation and to know what sounds they like and dislike. Having these well-informed opinions helps the artist to be more educated and to not be taken advantage of in a recording process.

The final two research questions my project intended to answer are listed below. Since they are a bit more involved, I will list the questions here, and each subject pertaining to answering them collectively will be listed below:

- “In the saturated artist market of today- where streaming, recording and, fan-based research are mostly accessible to the public- are there ways for an artist to make themselves more marketable?”

- “If so, what marketing techniques are most relevant to an artist wishing to promote their music and themselves as a brand?”

Publicity Connections for an Independent Artist

1) Blogs and Podcasts

- a. Blogs and podcasts in the area of the artist’s hometown (in this instance: anywhere the artist has lived, gone to school, or was born constitutes a hometown) can be a valuable resource in organically developing a fan base for a beginning artist. If the blogs are local, it can be easier for an artist to reach out to these blogs directly with a press release to see if they could set up a promotion for their music on the blog’s site. The artist could also start their own blog as a way to promote their music and lifestyle brand. For the purposes of this project, I have accumulated a list of local blogs in Ohio as the artist’s (my) hometown:
 - i. Cellar Door, Cleveland
 - ii. The Zender Agenda, Cleveland
 - iii. The Applaud Squad
 - iv. Loud in Cleveland (podcast), Cleveland
 - v. The Millennialology Podcast, Cleveland
 - vi. CincyMusic.com, Cincinnati
 - vii. Creative City Podcast, Cincinnati
 - viii. Rethink Pop Music, Columbus
 - ix. Alt Ohio
 - x. Columbus Underground, Columbus

2) Local Radio Promotion

- a. Local Radio promotions and interviews can be a resourceful way for artists to grow a fan base (depending on their genre and its demographic preferences). For independent artists, it is important to reach out to local radio primarily because larger radio stations are often affiliated with a national broadcasting cooperation. This essentially means that those stations are much less likely to take time to schedule interviews with a small, independent artist. For this project I have compiled a list of local radio stations in the artist’s hometown, similar to the blog/podcast list.
 - i. Cleveland
 1. WJCU 88.7
 2. WKSU 89.7
 3. WCSB 89.3 FM
 4. WCPN 90.3
 5. WDOK 102.0
 - ii. Cincinnati
 1. WYSO 91.3
 2. WNKU 89.7
 3. WVXU 91.7
 4. WGTZ 92.9

5. WRRM 98.5
6. WLHS 89.9
- iii. Columbus
 1. WOSU 89.7
 2. WCBE 90.5
 3. WQIO 93.7
 4. WSNY 94.7
 5. WOBN 97.5
 6. WOSA 101.1
 7. WTOH 98.9
 8. WCRX 102.1

3) Social Media Marketing

- a. In today's world of technology, marketing through social media has become a key part of any business' branding and advertising. The accessibility and low overhead costs associated with social media can make it a valuable resource to independent artists looking to grow their brand and fan base. Through my research I have learned that an efficient way to establish a brand through social media is to follow what is known as the 70/20/10 rule. This essentially means that 70% of what you post throughout the week should be brand development/promotion/recognition related. 20% of weekly posts should be sharing or promoting other affiliated business' brands. And only 10% of posts should be self-promotion.

- i. Facebook

1. Facebook allows for the 'boosting' of posts on an artist's musician page. For an independent artist, setting aside \$20-50 a month for Facebook promotion could be a valuable way to promote their upcoming shows, especially if they are performing in a market that is new to them.

- ii. Instagram

1. Instagram as a platform tends to be more personal and allows the artist to create their own image or story through the pictures they post. However, Instagram typically has a high percentage of fan engagement due to its smaller comparative outreach; the age demographic of Instagram users is much younger and more interactive than the broad scope that Facebook reaches. Instagram can be a great platform through which to promote the 70% of posts about the artist's brand.

- iii. Twitter

1. Twitter can be more direct than either of the above platforms for marketing. Twitter is used various ways by businesses; some use it to advertise specific events (such as concerts) while others use it to share their thoughts or experiences throughout the day. For an independent artist, Twitter could be a good platform through which

fans could get to know the artist more personally, if they use it as a platform to give insight into their daily thoughts or experiences.

Costs associated with the Marketing of a Recording:

1) PROs

- a. Joining a performing rights association (PRO) can be a way for an independent artist to gain revenue. They can report public performances of their music to these associations and then get paid for the use of those works publicly. For example, if an artist puts their music on Spotify, they can collect performance royalties on the amount of plays they receive. ASCAP and BMI are the two PROs that are accessible to any independent artist to join, for a fee. It would then be the artist's responsibility to report all performances accurately.
 - i. ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Actors, Performers)
 1. \$50 joining fee
 2. Can join as an artist and publisher (*note: independent artists for the purposes of this project should register as their own publisher)
 - ii. BMI
 1. \$150 to join as an independent publisher

2) Streaming Services

- a. In today's music industry, CD sales are practically nonexistent. The modern way of selling recorded music is through streaming services online, such as Pandora, Spotify, Tidal, and Apple Music. While there have been struggles within the industry in adjusting to the monetization of music in this new format, the advancements in technology have been helpful to independent artists in that they are able to place their own music on these streaming services themselves, without needing the help of a major label. In order to go through this process, an artist must go through one of the few main service providers. These service providers place your recorded music on all streaming platforms for a small fee. The prices are as follows:
 - i. CD Baby:
 1. Basic fee for a single is \$9.95 and for an album is \$49
 2. There are no annual fees but CD Baby keeps 9% of everything you earn from the streaming platforms
 - ii. Tune Core
 1. Album is \$30 flat rate and a single is \$9.99. However, there are annual fees involved. For an album, you pay \$50 for every year after the first year, and for a single you pay \$9.99 annually.
 - iii. YouTube
 1. Creating a playlist on Youtube is another small way an artist can bring in income. Creating a playlist of their EP is simply another way to create revenue through streaming, and registering for a channel on Youtube could lead to getting a small amount of extra income from Youtube.

3) Copyrights

- a. For an independent artist, the concept of copyright can be a bit convoluted. According to law, at the time you compose or create a work, that work is yours- you have complete ownership. Therefore, registering a copyright seems unnecessary. However, to many in the industry, copyright is a type of ‘insurance’ for your song; it ensures ownership legally so that if anyone were to take claim of ownership for your work, you would have documented proof to base a lawsuit on. Additionally, the exploitation of the six essential rights inherent in copyright law are a way of monetizing music within the industry. The publishing industry needs copyright law in order to function. For an independent artist, copyrighting would be a good idea simply to protect their work when posting online.
 - i. USA Copyright Office
 1. \$35 per work
 2. \$55 to register a collection of works
 3. All works must be either written down (in sheet music with melodies and lyrics) or as a sound recording.

4) Trademarking

- a. Artists have the option of trademarking their name, song titles, or anything affiliated with what the artist has collectively deemed their brand. However, trademarking as an independent artist is not necessarily a priority, unless they have the capital to invest in the trademark when just starting out.
 - i. US Trademark Office
 1. \$225-400 depending on the type of trademark one is applying for

5) Sound Exchange

- a. Registering for Sound Exchange is another valuable income potential for independent artists. Sound Exchange is an organization that collects and distributes digital performance royalties to featured artists and copyright holders. Sound Exchange essentially collects the royalties for the actual sound recording of your music, as opposed to the composition royalties, which are collected by a PRO.
 - i. It is free to register with Sound Exchange. They pay the Artist share 45%, the master recording owner 50% (which in this case would likely be the independent artist), and 5% would go to any session musicians on the master recording. Sound Exchange collects performance royalties for Sirius XM and Pandora.

Possible Revenue Streams for an Independent Artist: Sample Projections

1) Live Performances/Touring

- a. Touring and performing live can be an extremely valuable revenue stream for an independent artists.
 - i. An independent artist of my own variety would most likely be performing a style of touring known as Weekend Warrior. This involves only

traveling to towns within an 150 mile radius of my hometown to perform, and performing 2-3 shows per weekend.

- ii. The average amount of money made from performing at a venue without ticket sales is \$100.
- iii. The average amount of money earned from small venues (200-400 capacity) that sells tickets at the door at approximately \$5/ticket is \$900 (considering the show will not sell out for an independent artist).
- iv. Performing one of each of these types of shows per weekend for 6 weeks (a typical tour length) could bring in as much as \$6,000 (excluding expenses of gas/food/lodging, etc.)

2) Merchandise

- a. Selling merchandise at the tour date shows (with shows averaging about 180 people for ticketed shows and 50 people for non-ticketed) could result in revenue of approximately \$1,380. This is estimated by the average merchandise purchased per person for singer-songwriters, which is \$3.50/person. This is also gross income, and doesn't take into consideration the production cost of making the merchandise.

3) Recorded Music

- a. Utilizing the avenues explored previously (streaming, copyrighting, PROs) can result in an artist gaining revenue from the sale of downloads and streaming of their music.
- b. The artist earns the following amounts from recorded music sales through CD Baby (a digital music aggregator):
 - i. Digital Download is \$0.90 cents
 - 1. Selling 1,000 downloads would result in \$900 of revenue for the artist.
 - ii. Digital Album is approximately \$9.09
 - iii. Physical CD sale: \$10 per album (not including cost of production)
- c. Each streaming service that would be utilized through CD baby pays the following per stream of the song:
 - i. Spotify: 0.004 cents
 - ii. Tidal: 0.007 cents
 - iii. Pandora: 0.0022 cents
 - iv. Rhapsody: 0.0017 cents
 - v. YouTube: 0.0003 cents
 - 1. Gaining 1,000 plays on each of these services for one song would generate approximately \$15.20. With this low income, it is much more beneficial to an artist to make money from selling physical recorded music products at a show on their tour.
- d. Mechanical royalties received per stream by the songwriter is approximately 0.001 cents per stream.

1. Reporting 5000 streams (1,000 from each of the services listed above) and 1000 download sales would only result in the earning of \$6 for the artist from mechanical royalty sales.

Following these marketing techniques and promotion avenues would allow an independent artist to make themselves more commercially viable when building their career alone. As an artist, knowing which revenue streams are available to you and how branding and strategic marketing can be used to advance those revenue streams can be an invaluable resource.

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