

What are you going to do now?

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Part 1: You've never had it so good.

Think about why you want to release a record. Really think about it. I'm talking to you, local bands, young bands, bands just starting out with stars in your eyes and dreams of fame in your hearts. Maybe you've got a bit of a 'following' in your home town, a couple of thousand 'friends' on Myspace or Facebook. Perhaps the local press are calling you the 'next big thing'. Perhaps you've pooled your resources and have decided that it's time to head to the nearest studio, lay down your 10 best songs, then get 1000 CDs pressed up. Yeah! DIY! That'll show 'The Man'!

Think about why you're doing it though. Be prepared to admit a few things....we'll come back this.

You've never had it so good, seriously. The proliferation of relatively affordable yet high powered computers, combined with the ubiquity of high speed broadband connections, has put bands in an unprecedented position. You now have the power to write, record, duplicate and distribute your music with the computer you're probably reading this on. Once you had to go to a studio, spend hours recording as the clock added expense by the minute, send your mastered tapes/DATs/CDs to a pressing plant, spend even more money on getting 1000 discs manufactured, then try to flog those slowly dust gathering boxes to friends and family, taking the financial hit on the chin.

Gary Marshall, former frontman of Glasgow indie strummers Kasino, puts it very well -

“In a previous version of the band we did what we thought proper bands did. We spent silly money on studio time. We spent a fortune on CD pressing. And we ended up throwing most of the CDs in a skip. The whole thing cost us three and a half grand, and it was just daft - although we were right in one respect: proper bands lose a bloody fortune and never get it back.”

It was the way things were done before mp3s blew the whole thing out of the water, if you wanted to go down the DIY route, you pressed your own discs, and tried to flog them yourself.....even ending up £3500 in the red is better than owing a record label £20,000 and being contracted to them for the next five years. Now you can spend that money on better things, things that will enable you to record as often as you like.

The 'self released' route for bands was, and still is, both right and wrong. Right insomuch that you've got control over what you're doing and potentially stand to lose less money than if you signed a poorly negotiated record deal, wrong in that it's just slavishly copying what you *think* bands should do. After all, if your favourite act releases CDs surely you should as well? Doesn't that make you a 'proper' band? Or is it a little bit like a child dressing up as an adult and thinking he can sneak into an 18 rated movie?

Nothing beats the thrill of holding a properly produced record when you're a young band, you stroke the vinyl or CD, you read and reread the sleeve notes (even though you wrote

them), you look at the disc with YOUR name on the label....hell, you even look at yourself in the mirror holding the record to convince yourself it's real. This is it, you think, this is The Big Time. You've got a record out, you're a *proper* band now!

But times have changed, and the record industry, once so cutting edge, has failed to change with them, Gary Marshall again -

“you have to be clinically insane to...[self release a CD]..now. Knock something up in Garageband or Acid in the morning, get it on MySpace in the afternoon and you'll reach more people than you'll ever manage with proper CDs and the odd bit of radio play”

He's right of course. Think about this; why are you wanting to release a record? If it's to reach as many people as possible with your music then you should consider the following rough figures. Say local Norwich act Waltzer's Elbow decide they've got enough of a fan base to commit their musical genius to disc. Here's how the costs break down -

Studio time - £500 (imagine they've done it in a cheap studio, and quickly)
Duplication of discs - £600 for a thousand

So far Waltzer's Elbow have spent £1100, that's not too bad though, £1.10 per disc? Even selling them for a fiver will return a healthy profit! Yes! The band now gets excited, with their 500% return on this release they'll easily be able to fund the next one, release a friend's band AND have enough money to keep them in booze and strings for at least a year! Only it doesn't work like that, they sell 150 copies after sending out over 100 to reviewers, friends and family blanch at the cost and ask for freebies, the couple of thousand friends on Myspace buy 10 copies in total, and the band are flogging them at gigs for a quid before the year is out in a desperate attempt to clear their drummers garage of boxes. The dreams of a follow up drift away, the record label they intended to set up doesn't happen, and they're still selling their *début* 3 years later, long after they've become thoroughly sick of the songs.

End result? Waltzer's Elbow are down £500, have boxes of unsold records, and now hate their first ever release.

Now take Daventry outfit, Elemental Wrench. Like most people they've got access to a computer, so they decide to record their magnum opus at home. They take a bit longer than Waltzer's Elbow, but then they're not watching the clock, they've got time to get it right. The recording process takes weeks but it's fun for them, they're relaxed, can change things as they go along, and add songs on a whim. After a few months they've got a finished product, and decide that they want people to hear it more than they want to make money off it. So their most web savvy member converts the whole thing into a zip file, uploads it to the bands web page, slaps on a 'Donate' Paypal button and emails their Myspace friends to tell them that the record is now available, and is free (though a donation would be nice, but not essential). What's that cost them? Well, assume that they had the computers they used anyway, alongside a website -

Recording costs – nil
Duplication – nil, for an unlimited amount of copies.

They're under no illusion that they'll make any money, but by the end of the first year of the record being available they've had well over 5000 downloads, and kind souls have

donated £50. Despite having no 'physical' product, Elemental Wrench are £50 in the black.....it's not a lot, but it's certainly better than being £500 worse off.

Not only does it cost you more to press your work up 'professionally' but you're actually going to reach *fewer* people.

There's a third option, one that kind of sits between the two. That's self releasing CDRs. It's a good method to use if you want product to sell at gigs, as most of the public couldn't care less (or tell the difference) if a disc is burned or duplicated. Best thing is you can burn small amounts and only 'repress' if they sell out. It's better to have 20 discs in a box, than 20 boxes of discs. Needless to say, it's also very much cheaper (100 CDRs can cost less than £10). It works, and it's sensible.

So we come back to that initial question: Why are you wanting to release a *proper* record?

The ugly truth, the truth that you probably don't want to admit to is that it's to feed your ego. That's right, you're doing it to make yourself feel important and successful. You've seen U2, Razorlight, Klaxons, Gallows, etc, with their CDs, you want to feel like you're part of that world, even if it means buying your way in. Admit that to yourself, and you'll save a whole load of money.

Still, you're in a fantastic position, you can record and release your work to a potential audience of millions without spending much at all! Bands 20 years ago would have killed for that opportunity. You may not get signed (and even if you do, you're unlikely to make any money, something like 90% of signed bands fail to recoup their costs), and you'll almost certainly have to maintain a 'day job', but you'll not be losing money, and you'll feel good that your music is being enjoyed by people across the globe. Most importantly, making music will be fun for you.

Part 2: You've never had it so bad.

Mp3s have destroyed the music industry as we know it. Gary Marshall,

"It's very scary for bands at the moment, because the whole industry is going through serious changes. U2 wouldn't get signed today. Neither would Radiohead. Last time I looked, they were both doing all right - and more to the point, neither U2 nor Radiohead need to sell CDs any more. They'll make their cash from gigs, from limited edition disc boxes, that kind of thing. And that's the way it's going. CDs are dying, selling MP3s doesn't really work"

It's all very well for already established bands, like U2 and Radiohead, but what about those just starting out?

The major problem with mp3s is that they've created a generation of music lovers who don't feel they need to pay for music. I know, cos for every legal download I pay for, I grab at least three or four other records for nothing off Soulseek or Bittorrent. It's not just me -

"I download music. I download a lot of music. I don't purchase music often, so I completely and totally understand when kids come up to me at shows and look me straight in the eye and tell me they're not going to buy my record tonight because they've already, or are going to go home and, download it. There just isn't any

reason to show animosity towards this new-ish way of communicating; to me, this feels like a natural way of weeding out assholes and the people that aren't smart enough to make interesting work.”

That's Jona from the US band YACHT writing on his excellent teamyacht.com blog. Jona is in a different position to us in the UK though, he lives in a country where it's possible to tour pretty much constantly and live on door receipts. This is what musicians like Adrian Orange (Thanksgiving), Luke Fischbeck (Lucky Dragons), and countless other low overhead US artists do. They record cheaply and just keep on touring. Adrian Orange was literally homeless when I put him on in Scotland a few years ago, as was Phil Elverum of The Microphones (later Mount Eerie) a year or so before him. By relying on the kindness of genuine music fans to put them up after they've played their shows, many of these artists are able to continually tour, and make enough of a living from it to survive.

David Byrne, former Talking Head and all round renaissance man puts it like this

“Live performances used to be seen as essentially a way to publicize a new release — a means to an end, not an end in itself. Bands would go into debt in order to tour, anticipating that they'd recover their losses later through increased record sales. This, to be blunt, is all wrong. It's backward. Performing is a thing in itself, a distinct skill, different from making recordings. And for those who can do it, it's a way to make a living.” (http://www.wired.com/entertainment/music/magazine/16-01/ff_byrne)

That's all well and good if you live in a country where you can sustain a lifestyle spent entirely on the road...but in the UK? After a month you'd have played everywhere with a venue worth visiting and after a year would be getting a severe case of deja vu as you took to the stage in Plymouth for the umpteenth time to an increasingly dwindling audience. The UK just can't sustain that kind of lifestyle, and factor in our incredibly steep petrol prices (about 3 times what they pay in the US), combined with a frankly criminally over priced public transport network, and you've got another sure route to ruin....and that's even if promoters paid you more than a pittance to turn up, which they mostly don't. Add a music press more interested in 'Cool lists' than uncovering and promoting genuinely exciting new music and you're pretty much screwed.

Don't think it's just UK acts that are suffering though, despite what I've said above about the US, things become increasingly and rapidly more difficult when you start trying to tour with a whole band. Adam Kline of the band Golden Shoulders -

“I work a full-time job. I try to tour once or twice a year, which is about as much as I can afford to. This past year was our best year yet in terms of selling digital music files through the usual outlets, so that was nice, but I'm far from a time when I can live off of my songs.”

Mp3s aren't helping, where once a band could roll into town with a case full of CDs and at least make enough money to eat the next day, that's a situation that's long gone, as Adam says

“I have encountered folks at shows who approach the merch table and then tell me that they already have all the songs on their computers through friends or LimeWire and then I politely frown at them. I'm mostly offended by the sort of clueless mindset of people who think that file swapping isn't affecting their favorite bands.

Recording, releasing, and promoting a record costs money. Touring costs money. If money isn't being recouped, it becomes quite sensible to just play music with friends at home and leave it at that....The end result of this is that the next Beatles or Radiohead won't ever be heard by anyone because they'll never make it out of the garage. Labels will stop looking for bands, and all music will be local."

Bleak times indeed for bands. The large bands, the U2s, Rolling Stones, Metallicas, of this world can afford to have their music stolen, the smaller bands operate on much tighter overheads, with as little as one CD sale making the difference between whether they eat that day or not.

So you've got to work out what you want, you've got to work out whether you think you can make a go of making a living out of music, see if you can be that one band in 1000 that bucks the trend and 'makes it', and you've got to do it in an unprecedented period of hardship for new artists. Or you've got to drop the dreams and decide you're doing it because you love it, because you're driven to create.

So how do you make any money at all? Mostly you don't, and being in a band becomes about minimising your losses. If you are going to try and sell physical product you need to start thinking about what adds value to it, value that can't be transferred digitally. My solution is to go for short run lathe cut 7"s and 12", hand printed/drawn t-shirts (without a band name on, you get wider appeal that way), anything that can't be downloaded and slapped on an iPod. Present people with something special and limited and they're more likely to buy it, there's nothing like scarcity to drive demand (a good example of this is the record label I used to run, Twenty Bees, there were twenty releases in total, each in a pressing of only 20 7" singles with sleeves made by the artists, the Mount Eerie 7" was recently sold, by one subscriber to the series, on eBay for \$300US). Short runs sell out fast, and you recoup very very quickly on them.

As for selling mp3s, sure, you can pay a company like Emubands £50 to get your album up on iTunes, Emusic etc, but even all the publicity in the world won't help you sell any records, just ask UK journalist Rhodri Marsden; most watched video in the world on Youtube for a week with his song 'The Rules You Make' by The Schema (250,000 views), widespread coverage on various blogs and messageboards.....58 copies sold on iTunes (read more here - <http://www.theschema.co.uk/>)

So decide, do you want to enjoy doing music, or do you want to struggle and bankrupt yourself in the process? I'd suggest you start thinking of music as a cottage industry, treat your records like visual artists treat their paintings or photographs, make a virtue out of things being limited, maintain a steady level of work, record new songs all the time, and release them regularly via any means available to you....and stop hoping you'll one day be living in a mansion, cos it isn't going to happen.

Better to be happy and poor, than miserable and even poorer.

Further reading – I was going to quote from Lyle Christine's 'The Reason You're a Sh*t Mouthed C*nt' but I think it's so good it should be read in full at <http://caveataudiens.blogspot.com/2008/02/reason-youre-shit-mouthed-cunt.html>

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