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Chapter 16

Songs for Sale: Understanding the
Ancient Art of Song Plugging

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Songs for Sale: Understanding the Ancient Art of Song Plugging

It's very easy for a Creative Director to be so caught up in getting the music right, he or she never quite gets around to the second phase of the job. You're hanging out in the studio, checking out the new demos, putting together collaborations, listening to work tapes . . . it's all very . . . well, creative. Who has time to be sending out CDs or cold-calling artist managers? That sort of thing just feels like . . . like being a . . . a salesman or something.

The Facts of Life as a Creative Director

- You will not be successful sitting around listening to your catalog. You'll be successful by getting other people to sit around and listen to your catalog.
- Those who send out the most songs win.
- Every element in your day will conspire to prevent you from sending out songs.

News flash: You are a salesman. Get used to it. If there is one frustration that most writers have with their Creative Directors, and quite frankly, that most *companies* have with their Creative Directors, it is that nobody seems to want to sell songs. Everyone likes to listen to music, sign new music, or critique music, but no one seems to want to be bothered with actually sending the stuff out. The truth is that selling songs is the only part of music publishing that actually generates income. The whole company is

reliant on someone going out and getting a song on a record, in a movie, or in an advertisement—and no one wants to do it. This is a jumbo-sized problem.

And you, Creative Director, are the solution. Getting the music right may be your first task, but getting the music out is your primary one. You must have the discipline to set aside a portion of your time everyday to devote to this particular part of your job. If you do it well, you will build a profitable enterprise and bring your writer fame and fortune in the bargain. If you don't, your publishing venture is kaput. How's that for a pep talk?

Beyond survival, there's one more important benefit to mastering the art of song plugging. If you succeed in building a track record of placing songs, you will likely find yourself well positioned for an executive position in the larger publishing industry, if at some point that's of interest to you. As I mentioned, there is a severe shortage of dedicated song pluggers in the music publishing industry—every company needs them and no one can find enough of them. Contact any major music publisher, tell them you are willing to focus solely on pitching songs, and offer a resume that gives some indication that you are effective at that task; I can almost assure you, someone will be interested in meeting with you. There's a certain job security in understanding the ancient art.

Of course, the first step in getting the music out is deciding just who to get it out to. Finding opportunities for songs is a bit like detective work. You check your sources, follow the leads, do your homework, round up the suspects, and try to figure out who's really running the game “behind the scenes.” Three basic questions should give you a pretty substantial list of names to follow up on:

Who's Looking?

It's always easier to sell something if you can find someone who needs it. The point of determining “who's looking” is to focus your efforts on a buyer at the right moment.

Tip Sheets

One of the easiest ways of finding out who's looking for songs, and what they're looking for, is to check out those tip sheets that should be laying around your office. *New on the Charts* and *SongLink International* exist precisely for this purpose, and are updated regularly as some projects close and other new ones begin. This should be your first stop when in search of potential buyers.

But it's really just the tip of the iceberg. Most of the projects currently in development are never listed on a tip sheet, for any number of reasons. Many A&R types are skeptical of the quality of the material that a tip sheet listing brings in; others are hesitant to acknowledge publicly that an artist is having trouble writing the songs for a project. The dedicated Creative Director must dig deeper. Underneath that pile of tip sheets in your office, there should be some industry trade magazines. Let's move on to those.

Trade Magazines

While the major trade magazines will not necessarily publish precise information about who's looking for songs, they will provide you with a comprehensive overview of what's happening in the industry. This knowledge, combined with a little reading between the lines, should yield you a fair amount of names to add to your target list of customers. Here's what you're looking for:

1. Any mention of new signings, new projects in development, or artists switching record labels.
2. Information about newly created labels, production companies, or management firms.
3. Notices of executives moving into new positions or new companies.
4. Chart listings of artists who have a first single currently released, but no album out. If the single is doing well, you can be sure that the label is working on an album.
5. References to movies or television shows currently in development.
6. Information about new trends or upcoming companies in music-related businesses such as video games, advertising, or youth marketing.

Depending on the particular market that you are targeting, certain trade magazines will be more useful than others. If your primary focus is the record industry, *Billboard* should give you a good comprehensive overview. *The Hollywood Reporter* offers a helpful listing of almost all the current movies and television shows in production. Or if you are particularly focused on placing your songs in advertising, you may want to start picking up copies of *Ad Age*, or *Adweek*, which can provide the inside track on that complex world. Even Web sites can sometimes give you information as to what projects a company has in development. Leave no stone unturned . . .

Telephone Inquiries

And then there's the line of direct inquiry. If you want to know something, it's never a bad strategy to simply ask. Most major music publishers make up their own "tip sheet" or "who's looking" list several times a year—there's really not much to it. Each Creative Director gets on the phone, calls the various record labels, producers, and management companies, and asks what they're working on. Like I said before, this business isn't exactly rocket science.

Dig into that pile of paper on your desk. Under the tip sheets and next to the trade magazines, find your industry directories. You'll need to narrow down which companies are relevant for the sort of music you do, and try to identify one or two A&R contacts within the correct department. Then start dialing for dollars . . .

Obviously, the optimal result of each call is a direct conversation with the A&R person, which should get you a list of projects currently in need of material and a quick description of what each act is looking for. Without question, any time that you can have a dialogue with the person actually in charge of the project, you will not only get a clearer picture of what's needed, but also have a chance to establish that most valuable of all industry commodities, a relationship.

But unless you have something of a name in the industry, or someone else's name to drop, you will likely have a tough time making it past the wall of protection that shields most song buyers from the hundreds of sellers. Not to worry. In this information-gathering stage, it's not essential to have a one-on-one discussion with the name in the directory. In fact, when most major publishers put together their tip sheets, much of the information is gathered from A&R coordinators, assistants, and receptionists who have been briefed by their bosses as to what projects are in development. Here's how the conversation should go:

1. Identify yourself as the Creative Director of the publishing company. *Do not* indicate in any way that you are also a songwriter. This will set off a four-alarm weasel alert, and will probably end your phone call abruptly. You are from a publishing company, nothing more.
2. If there's an inquiry, or if you feel it is truly necessary (and only if), offer some description of your company, mentioning any noteworthy activity, success, or business partners. This is the time to drop that name if you've got one on you.
3. Explain that your company is in the process of updating their list of projects currently seeking material, and ask if you can speak to the A&R

person, manager, or music supervisor who is the object of your call. If the call is put through, then proceed again from Step 1. If the receptionist or assistant offers to provide the information, then proceed by inquiring as to what the company is working on at the moment.

4. Make sure you get the following information:

- Name of artist or band
- Type of material being sought
- The appropriate A&R contact person
- The current status of the project, and any deadline information

If possible, try to find out:

- What producers or other writers are involved in the project?
- If the artist is involved in the writing, is he or she open to collaborations?
- Is the company looking for finished songs or just tracks for others to write to?
- Who's managing the act?

5. If, in your previous research, you've learned about projects that haven't been mentioned in the conversation, inquire about those. You'll earn extra points for having done your homework.

Then get off the phone. Unless you sincerely believe that the person on the other end is enjoying the conversation, or that you are developing an actual "relationship," there is no reason that this call should last longer than five minutes. In many cases it will be shorter than that—there may be few projects that the company is involved with, or the A&R person may simply offer to send you a prepared list of projects. Take whatever information you can get and move on. The point is not to see how long you can spend on the phone with some harried assistant, quizzing them on details that they either don't know or don't want to give you. Keep your phone calls brief and to the point. You've got a lot of companies to call.

Word of Mouth

And now I'm going to shock you with a startlingly generous suggestion, coming from a weasel like myself. Once you've begun to compile a useful list of projects seeking songs, call a few of the other songwriters and publishers in your musical community (you are part of a community, right?), and share some of the information you've gathered.

Huh? Share? After all your hard work finding out who needs songs, I'm

telling you to give it away to other people? Your competitors?

Well, I'm not sure you should give it away, exactly. And I'm not telling you to share *all* of it. But throwing a little inside information into a conversation never hurts. Because it gets people talking. Before you know it, your Creative cronies, not to be outdone, are offering up a few of the projects they've heard about. Suddenly you are part of the proverbial grapevine, through which all essential information flows. Having a spot on that grapevine is far more valuable than any inside scoop you're giving away.

One final tip regarding the “who's looking?” method of song plugging:

This particular approach relies more than anything else on a quick response. A notice in a tip sheet is probably more than a month old by the time it reaches print and then finds its way to you. The same is probably true of anything you read in an industry trade magazine. A phone conversation with an A&R person is at best a snapshot of a single moment in a project's evolution—a song could show up tomorrow that changes the whole focus of the album.

If you are going to have success pitching songs to people that are looking, you are going to have to do it fast. Get the tip, enter it into a list on your computer, or write it on a whiteboard on your wall, then immediately start looking at your catalog for an appropriate pitch. If you don't have anything that works, see if your writers can come up with something that same week. As soon as you've got something to send, get the CD out of your office and into the hands of the A&R person. Correction to my Facts of Life item: Those who get the most songs out *fastest* win.

Who's the Song Right For?

This is the flip side to the first approach. The problem with the “who's looking” list is that inevitably there are many artists who are looking for something that you don't have. Likewise, there are a lot of songs gathering dust on your shelf, waiting for the right artist to show up one day on the tip sheet. You need a secondary plan of attack. By asking “who's the song right for?” you can take a more proactive approach to exploiting all, or at least the best, songs in your catalog.

So here we go—three easy steps to finding Mr. or Ms. Right for your song . . .

Know Your Audience

You must start with an understanding of the market in which your song will be pitched. I don't mean just having a general impression. I'm talking about having a real, in-depth knowledge of that particular world of music—who the top