

DO YOU REALLY NEED A RECORD DEAL?



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Like a sharp stick in your eye, like having an impacted wisdom tooth pulled, like your drummer quitting right before the tour, like anything else that is a real pain in the butt..... So do you really need a record deal? The short answer is no.

Another aspect to the question of “needing a deal” is

the strong possibility that record labels may very well be on a path to obsolescence. But are they really? The labels are making the lion's share of income and revenue from streaming. Streaming revenue is fueled by the current consumer trend to "access" rather than "own" music. Labels sit at the head of a rather lucrative food chain where streaming has become the main course. Labels are providing content and middling deals that supply music to sites like Spotify and Pandora. The artists live on the bottom of that food chain earning the crumbs that drop from the mouths of the labels; barely enough to buy guitar strings or breakfast at a diner after a gig. And then there are the "360" deals; labels are earning more than ever from their artists and the songs that are written and produced. Sales may be going down but revenues are growing for labels; from streaming, advertising, site subscriptions and other ancillary income streams that are new to the mix.

Ultimately, recording companies may shoot themselves in the foot, history has shown that they do have a propensity for that sort of thing, but for the purpose of this discussion let's just say that they will survive and remain the "gate keepers" to all the things that artists need to become superstars. So if you don't want to be a superstar and would be quite content making a decent

living from your musical career or if you are just starting out and just beginning to develop a following, there are a few things for you to consider as an alternative to a deal.

It's time to toss away the "dream" and face the truth. A record contract is not going to change your life unless your life has already gone into a high gear career transformation prior to the signing. Today, most labels have a very steep criterion for signing new artists. If you are lucky, or is it unlucky enough to get signed as an unknown artist, odds are real good that you will probably remain unknown. Without having reached a considerably high level of career development, on your own, labels are not remotely interested. Labels do not develop talent or careers anymore; they know what they are willing to invest prior to making a signing commitment. This is how they roll; it is the way that they function and survive. It is not a flaw in their character. It is not underhanded or heartless. It is just what they do and why they are in business. Labels do not spend unlimited amounts of dollars on artists that no one knows about. They don't "break" artists they exploit the ones who are on the brink of breaking or have already broken. They will not write a check for tour support, advances, advertising, promotion and other necessities unless they are pretty damn sure that

they will at least recoup. It's math not A & R. They do not arrange for a feature slot on the next Bruno Mars single or a tour with Macklemore and Ryan Lewis or for your videos to be played in heavy rotation on MTV, if no one knows who the hell you are. In the long run, it's up to you and it's your job to lay the foundation, do the heavy lifting and figure out how to build your career. So wake up!

If you don't have a core audience, if you don't have thousands of thousands of Facebook likes, if your YouTube videos have not been viewed by millions, if you can't sell out a small to mid-size venue, if you don't have any sales or advertising revenue to speak of; digital downloads income from streaming sites, if your swag doesn't sell and you don't get tons and tons of email from fans, it's not time to go label shopping. It is way too early. It's time to get to work!

You don't need a recording contract you need to become a recording artist. Commit to getting out there on your own steam, with friends and family helping you, with an investor and real believers at your side. You have to act as if..... each time you put a song on Soundcloud, upload to CD Baby or Amazon.com. For the time being, you are all things; the record company, the artist developer, the manager, the sales and publicity maven and you must promote, develop,

exploit and market yourself as if your creative life depends on it because it does. If you don't know the ropes, find someone who does. They are out there. You just have to look. You just have to ask. Its R&D time so get busy and find out what you need to do to make a living doing what you love to do. You will be learning while you are doing. Eventually you will be earning while you are learning. There are coaches you can talk to, people who will charge you a couple of hundred dollars to give you the info you need to get started. Go back to them when you need more but you have to move this dream along or give it up by default.

You don't need a record deal, not yet. Go on the Internet, there are "how to" articles, videos, e-books, interviews and information that is free for the asking. You can find a "suit," somebody who loves the business end of the music industry as much as you love the creative end and team up with them to cover all bases. I don't mean a fast talking wannabe who knows nothing about music or running a company but a college student or entrepreneur, majoring in marketing or business, who aspires to own a music company some day and cannot stop thinking about a "better way" to do things. This is how new eras are born, how new companies grow; from ideas hatched in a smelly dorm rooms to plans to increase market share that are

hatched in boardrooms. It's grassroots. It's basic and it's hard as hell but what are the alternatives. **YOU DON'T NEED A RECORD DEAL. YOU NEED A CAREER.**

It's too expensive. I can't concentrate on creating. All I get is rejected.... Whining and whimpering is not very attractive and you are dead wrong, it is totally doable Recording, worldwide distribution, video shoots and grassroots marketing efforts are affordable thanks to the very technology that some say has massacred the economic future of the entire industry. You can do it all for literally what it would cost to buy a tricked out Hyundai or you can tighten your belt some more and do it for even less.

If you self-release and promote you career and music are you acting like a record company? Yes, but the motivation and goals are quite different, especially if you are handling just your music and career exclusively. Is it a huge commitment? Of course it is but there are tons of perks; maintaining your own level of integrity, creative control, earning while you are learning, understanding the business side of the process, keeping a bigger piece of the profit pie and you call all the shots. Control is a beautiful thing.

Anyone who is serious about a career is making a huge commitment to a specific plan of action but take heart,

there is hope because a solo flight is not the only way for you to fly.

There is a new type of label model that is bubbling to the surface; small, music and artist oriented and passionate about the process. The deals are fair and the structure is just enough to make your life just a little bit easier. These guys take care of a lot of the administrative stuff; licensing, publicity, contracts and the likes but they don't interfere with the artist or the creative process. They share the same dream. If you hit, they hit and can play with the big guys. It is a mutually beneficial relationship and neither party is exploiting the other. They like to keep their rosters small and get their hands dirty but they still have a decent database and can help with a lot of the networking nightmares an artist going it alone has to deal with. Micro labels are searchable on the internet and they are easy to get on the phone to hook up a meeting via SKYPE or in person. If you have music that you feel people want to buy they will listen and they will deal.

But for now let's get back to you handling the heavy lifting on your own. Here are a few things to take into consideration before you get going. Be honest when answering the following questions. They are not rhetorical. They require thought and serious

consideration because your happiness hangs on the commitment you make to this journey.

Why do you want to do this? What is the true motivation? Do you love it enough to work long and hard to get it? Think; does your music have commercial appeal? Are there people who are willing to buy it and tell their friends about it? Have you ever read a recording contract? If not, go on line, go to the library and read one. It will tell you a lot about the business, the intricacies and what you need to know. Do you understand the basics of music publishing? Again, hit the Internet, go to the library (I think they still exist) and do the homework. You can be creative AND business savvy. It's kind of hot when you really think about it... an artist that is taking the initiative and developing his or her own creative identity. Get into the legal stuff but just enough to keep your music and copyrights safe and protected. Think about accounting needs; keep great records, scan or store all receipts and figure out how much you are spending and how much you will have to sell in order to breakeven and move on to the profitable side of your career.

Remember, if the record industry, as we know it today, stays intact they will continue to be the only way in to the inner sanctum of real stardom; the best agents, the most powerful managers, the global reach, the top

concert promoters, more press than you can handle, your own perfume fragrance (ugh, enough already!) or designer headphones, press coverage for days, heavy rotation on traditional radio stations, the front page of iTunes, major venues, corporate endorsements and more. A major record deal will plug you into the deep pockets, leverage its contacts to your advantage, fast track and short cut you to the A list. It is, for now the only way to super-stardom.

For now, the idea is to make your music and your persona as an artist more attractive, more valuable and more viable. The idea is to level the playing field through self-release and promotion and to develop bargaining power of your own. In the long run, you will cut a better deal. You will retain more of your rights. You will have some say in your art, your career and your future. If you build it they will come, they will court, they will bend and you will be ready for them. But don't get all starry eyed and impatient.

Unless your career is smoking hot, signing on the dotted line right now, in the early stage of career growth, is not going to unlock those doors Do you need a record deal? Yes, but not yet.

By Camille M. Barbone

Camille is a music industry professional with over 20 years of experience. She has worked for major labels

such as Sony and Universal, Warner Chappell and other major publishers, owned two state of the art recording studios, developed and managed high profile artists such as Madonna, produced major concerts and provided music for major motion pictures such as *Scream*, Steven Spielberg Productions and Cinepix Films. She has conducted numerous seminars, panels and workshops at SXSW, the New Music Seminar and other industry conferences. She has been featured in many books and has appeared on many news and talk shows. Camille consults via her company, Camille Barbone Coaching and Consulting a business that provides guidance and structure to those aspiring to successful careers in the Entertainment Industry. Contact Camille at camille@camillebarbone.com.