

## The artist: Preparing to be managed

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Early in the career of an artist, there will be a moment when it feels like it is time to step up the pace of meeting goals and go for the “big time.” Some will try to continue to manage themselves, thinking that the 15% commission many managers earn can be saved just by investing a little more time into the business part of being an artist. For artists who seek regional recognition and who record for their own independent label, it is certainly possible to earn a modest income touring and selling their music and merchandise without a manager, although one would be helpful. However, for artists who seek national or international recognition, it is essential to have a manager advocating for them and promoting the growth of their career.

When should an artist seek management? In today’s music business world, artists should get a manager when they are prepared to become commercial artists, especially knowing that many deals being made between artists and labels consist of multiple rights or 360 recording contracts. A new artist with most big labels will be offered a contract that requires that the artist must share income streams—ranging between 5% and 30% depending on the contract—so it’s important that the artist resist the temptation to sign a recording contract without the guidance of a manager and an attorney. Some artists will feel that they may not get another chance to get a major recording contract and will sign a contract that gives away some of their rights, which might result in them making considerably less

money—perhaps nothing—than if they had a manager guiding them in this area. We discuss this more in Chapter 10.

Advocacy by a manager on behalf of an artist is more important today than ever. The International Federation of Phonographic Industry (IFPI) is the counterpart to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). The IFPI reported in 2010 that MySpace featured 2.5 million hip-hop acts, 1.8 million rock acts, 720,000 pop acts, 470,000 punk acts, and 270,000 country acts, as well as millions of acts in other musical categories (IFPI, 2010). To bring these statistics into better focus, in Nashville, Tennessee during a single week in March 2010, the local print media listed 959 different artists appearing at large and small local venues. Each of these artists has a dream, and most are competing for a measure of success in the music business. Without someone to manage their music career professionally, each of the unsigned artists is likely to continue to be a hidden statistic in a data base.

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## BEING COMMERCIAL IS NOT SELLING OUT

Among the first things that incoming-earning artists must really accept is that they have chosen a career in the music business. It is not a career showcasing the art of music—they already have that part of it figured out. They have elected to become part of the music *business*, and considering themselves to be commercial artists in the music business becomes an acknowledgment that songwriting, performing, and recording are going to be done with the objective of earning money. Many young artists struggle with the idea of becoming commercial until they discover that band members do not want to rehearse without the promise of earnings, and it becomes impossible to keep a performing group together. Likewise, managers are not interested in working with an artist unless there is the likelihood that they can earn money from a music group or individual with a commitment to a career in the music business.

Some young performers feel that becoming commercial is “selling out” their artistry for the sake of money. They resist what they perceive the big label marketing machines will do to their music, because they fear they will be pressured into changing artistically into something that is inconsistent with who they are. However, most labels seek artists who are genuine and unique in their own ways, and who have potential for commercial appeal. Labels sign artists because of who they are artistically and because they think that there is a commercial market for their music, and most want to preserve the uniqueness of their artists that makes them special.

Veteran major label marketing executive Mike Kraski acknowledges, however, that some record labels attempt to “sand off rough edges” from the new artists they sign. In these cases, they may go too far by guiding an artist in a direction, creating “something that is not true to the artist” for the sake of creating something more

commercial (Havighurst, 2007). The artist should rely on the strength of his or her manager to insist that the label not homogenize the artist's unique sound.

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## KNOW WHO YOU ARE ARTISTICALLY

As consumers, we want a commercial product quickly defined in terms that we're familiar with. It is the same in the music business. Artists are asked by key gatekeepers what kind of music they perform. Artists must be prepared to describe what they do musically in very few words. And often an artist's style of music is defined by which radio format would use the artist's music in their programming. When a manager, label, or publisher hears an artist describe his or her music as "contemporary acoustic alternative blues with hints of jam band influences but not as heavy as Hendrix," it suggests that the artist is still trying to find a place in the commercial marketplace and that it may be too early for a management, recording, or publishing contract. On the other hand, when an artist says "my music is alternative rock using catchy lyrics with a killer live show that appeals especially to younger audiences," it shows that the artist has defined his or her music, understands audience types, and knows that appealing to a younger listener is attractive to record labels. In other words, the artist understands that the label is seeking a *business* opportunity through the artist, and the artist is ready to deliver it.

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## GET EXPERIENCE

Nothing polishes a performer and builds character as much as live performance does. Performing regularly in smaller clubs in front of friends, family, and fans can help artists develop a show in a relatively safe environment. They can take chances by trying new ideas and music to see what is connecting with audiences and what should be cut from the show. Artists can try out new songs they've written or experiment with new material they are considering including in their show. The only warning here is that friends and family can be very supportive and accommodating when they give feedback on performances, and may be inclined to tell the artist what they think the artist *wants* to hear rather than what the artist *should* hear in order to improve their performance.

Live performing coupled with demo recording and songwriting can season an artist and build confidence. Showing an air of confidence without being cocky is a strength managers seek in artists they sign, and that kind of self-assurance can be developed only by getting as much experience as possible on stage, in the studio, and as a writer.

Experience selling tickets and recorded music can be a strong selling point to prospective managers and eventually to record companies. An artist who consistently sells out small venues and sells 6,000 CDs per year at those performances will always get a conversation with a manager seeking talent to manage.

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## BUILD A NETWORK

A *network* in these terms is a web of supporters with whom artists regularly communicate about their music. An artist's fan base is at the heart of the network. Artists send regular emails to fans to announce new music or new performance dates and locations. They also communicate through their e-teams or street teams promoting themselves and their music, through microblogging services like Twitter, and by keeping their postings to social networking sites current. This continuous communication about the artist—often *by* the artist—keeps fans coming back to online pages and websites, and keeps up the connection with the artist.

Another important part of the network for artists is getting to know those who offer to support their career and to be sponsors when the time comes to push their career to the next level. For example, someone might say something like, "If there is ever anything I can do for you, let me know." That is the cue for the artist to get contact information about the individual, and from that point on that person should be included as a guest at local performances and receive all communications about the activities of the artist. These are the most important fans an artist can develop, because the launch of a career always requires money, and "angels" like these who have offered help can be key to a manager finding funds to develop the artist during those early months of the big commercial push. As a point of reference, other sources of financial support for new artists are savings, family, loans, and sponsorships.

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## BE PROFESSIONAL

When an artist makes the decision to advance his or her career, it is also a decision to adopt the demeanor of industry professionals from that point forward. That does not mean the artist cannot have fun creating music, but it means that every public performance and industry meeting requires the artist to be completely prepared to make the best possible first impression. Assume that the "lucky break" is in the audience every time there is a performance, and be prepared to deliver the best show possible.

Being professional on the Internet is also important. Amateur sites of artists that are found on the Internet social networking websites are a reflection of how mature the artist has become as a part of the music business, and they also become a statement about the artist's professionalism. Potential career supporters will use an Internet social networking site as a reference point about the artist, and the site should look as professional as the artist can afford. That means artists should seek advice from those who design websites for the music business and then invest a little money to be sure that their very public image on the Internet is one that says they are "somebody." And this is also the time to set up a basic but functional artist website using the artist's name and the domain name as the way to learn about the artist. A *domain name* is merely the location of a website on the Internet, and they can be purchased inexpensively from a number of sources such as Yahoo! and GoDaddy.com.

Using new media also requires the touch of a professional. In an age of sloppy and flippant text messages and careless email drafts, it is important to assume that every message an artist sends will be received by a professional who is expecting the artist to share that same level of professionalism. The use of convenient communication methods does not mean the message writer should not respect the ways these tools are used by business people. Always use good grammar, accurate spelling, and appropriate punctuation when using electronic communication.

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## BE PREPARED FOR MANAGEMENT

An artist manager will make a number of evaluations about an artist before deciding to offer management, often beginning with a performance at a public venue or a private showcase followed by a somewhat formal meeting to discuss possible management. Certainly the music and preparedness of the artist will be part of those early assessments, but there will be a time when the manager has a conversation with the artist that explores those things that will help make the final determination whether a management deal is practical. Questions that an artist could expect from a potential manager will resemble those someone encounters in any job interview, but an artist needs to keep in mind that a manager is trying to determine the pros and cons in making a decision to manage or not to manage. From the manager's perspective, this decision represents a huge commitment of time to develop the artist, and he or she is trying to find out how many assets—and how much baggage—a potential client brings to the bargaining table. The questions and answers sound formal, because they are. The answers coupled with the SWOT analysis found in Chapter 12 will contribute to the final decision.

1. What do you want to do with your career as an artist, and not just some formal goal—what do you want for yourself that will make you genuinely fulfilled as a creator of music? (The manager is determining what is actually driving the artist's desire for a career and whether his or her expectations of a career in music are realistic.)
2. How much experience have you had writing songs and recording? How often have you performed live over the last couple of years, and did you enjoy it?
3. How are you organized as an artist? Are your band members considered partners or are they hired as needed depending on what the performance requirements are? (If the artist and musicians are part of an organized group, the manager will consider how much income is realistically possible for the group. Income requirements split five ways for a group can be considerably higher than for a single artist who pays band members as an expense.)
4. What do you think is the key to your becoming successful as an artist in the music business? (This is one way to get the artist's opinion on one of their key strengths, but it also lets the manager know whether the artist's view of themselves includes a vision for commercial career in the music business.)

5. Have you ever had an agreement with someone else to manage your career? If so, have you taken steps to formally terminate it? (The manager wants to know if a former manager will show up some day claiming an entitlement to the artist's worth, and to be sure that if one exists, it is taken care of before a management contract is signed.)
6. Do you have your own publishing company and record label?
7. What is it about being an artist that is most satisfying to you? (Over the course of a career in the music business, it will be important to the manager to continue to motivate an artist, and knowing from the beginning where the joy of a career comes from can help to keep the career moving.)
8. If there was one thing about being an artist that you could avoid, what would it be? (The manager wants to know what part of the artist's career development will require work in order to grow.)
9. How much money do you owe? Who do you owe it to? Have you been filing state and federal tax returns regularly? Do you usually pay your bills on time? (Information about finances can show red flags to the manager that will give an idea of what will be necessary to eliminate the distraction of bill collectors. Likewise, it can also reassure the manager that doing business with a financially responsible artist can usually avoid having to deal with finances as an issue.)
10. The last time you had a conflict with someone—a band member, a venue manager, maybe an audience member—how did you resolve it? (The answer to this question will give the manager insight into the emotional maturity of the artist.)
11. If a fan were to describe you as an artist in two sentences, what would that description be? (This tells the manager whether the artist has a realistic view of his or her self-image.)
12. What training or coaching do you think would make you a better performer or songwriter? (This is a back-door approach to asking a question that most people include in an employment interview to get interviewees to list their weaknesses, but it also gives insight into areas that the artist sees as areas of opportunity to advance his or her career.)
13. What is going on in the music business today that you think will be an advantage to you as an artist in the music business? What do you think will be the biggest threat to your career? (The artist's responses to these questions will let the manager know how much the artist has considered the business environment that he or she plans to become part of, and how he or she plans to take advantage of opportunities.)
14. Tell me what you know about our management company. (The manager will use this as a gauge to find out how much—if any—homework artists have done to learn about someone they are considering to direct their career. An artist who knows about the management company is one who probably understands how important the conversation is. If the artist knows little about a management company, he or she is at a serious disadvantage when negotiating a management contract without an entertainment attorney.)

It is clear from these questions and concerns from a prospective artist manager that the artist must be prepared to demonstrate that he or she is ready for the music business. This book is also designed to give artists insight into the artist manager's role in their career and what they should expect from the manager as they prepare to implement a career plan in partnership with the artist. So questions an artist should ask of a prospective manager include:

1. What artists have you managed and what was your success with them?
2. What artists are you currently managing?
3. What do you think of my career possibilities? How do you think I fit into commercial music?
4. How strong is your network—who do you know who you can help you guide my career?
5. What are your expectations on your earnings from my career? What do you expect to be earning commissions from?
6. What expenses will you pay and what expenses will you expect me to pay?
7. Give me an idea what the first six months will be like working with you. How will you use my time to get my career going?
8. Will you be directing my career or do you have others who work for you who will also be involved? What is their background(s) managing an artist?
9. How involved is your management company in client services like publicity and new media?

This is a list that will help artists begin the conversation from their perspective, and it certainly isn't a complete list of discussion points. Some artists will find some of these questions uncomfortable, but the subject of each question deserves a response that the artist should consider. If the management relationship with the artist is to work, it's important that each of these sensitive topics be explored before a formal contract is considered.

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## **PLAN TO BE PATIENT**

Most new artists to the commercial side of the music business are part of the echo boomer generation, or people who were born after 1982. These are the children of the baby boomers. Among the attributes of the generation is impatience in achieving success (Leung, 2005). A label executive says that some artists ruin their chances of becoming a commercial success in the music business because they expect too much to happen too quickly. An example he provided was an artist signed to a major label who had five different managers within five years. The relationship with the label becomes strained with so many different people trying to direct the career of an artist. The message here to a new artist is to find a manager who shares your vision for your career, then patiently follow their direction, and become the best business partner you can be.

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### References

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