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BACKSTAGE PASS - Songwriters Original Showcase at Act II seeks to find 'the next big thing'

By: Lisa Lotito - Student Intern
07/18/2007

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The open stage. The emptiness waiting for someone to fill the space, to take the lead, to make it big. It's what every aspiring artist dreams of.

Welcome to the Songwriters Original Showcase at Act II Playhouse. True to Nashville style, four performers who have already "made it" will leave a slot for the public to demo their songs to the powerful publishers in the audience waiting to find "the next big thing." Despite the irresistible lure of discovery, this is not a cattle call. Please, save the talent shows and karaoke for the basement. But professional songwriters, those committed to the task, those brave enough and confident enough to perform alongside the likes of Craig Bickhardt, Ray Adkins, Lisa Biales, Debra Lee, Lyra Project and Rick Denzien, come on up.

Songwriters have until Sept. 7, the date of the showcase, to prepare something professional, something they really want to "get out there to the next level," said Denzien, founder of Slot-1 Studios and one of the artists sponsoring the event.

"This is the opportunity and the venue for publishers and people who actually write songs to meet up," Denzien, a award winning artist, said. There is no age limit; the publishers are simply looking for a solid song.

As a producer and artist, Denzien knows the intricacies of the industry and how to promote songs. "It's like Coke and Pepsi," Denzien said. "You might say what's the difference? They're both soda. But anyone who's tasted the two knows they're different. Artists are the same way. There are different brands of artists. The biggest problem today is that the majority of songwriters who want to be artists don't know how to eliminate songs that don't match them as an artist. They might write songs for blues, pop and rock, but all of those don't fit into one identity.

"This leads to the collapse of an industry. On MySpace, artists who want to be discovered don't know how to cluster songs and say 'This is my brand.'" This is where Denzien comes in: "Part of my job is to figure out what the artist is all about as quickly as possible, to pull songs out that match in commercial sensibility and artistry. If it doesn't match the songwriter artist, then we find an artist who already has a brand, an identity, and connect that artist with the song."

When Denzien says "find an artist," he really means any artist. "It's all about relationships. I've been lucky to know a lot of people in the industry. It's really only a phone call away. I don't have unlimited contacts, but I have enough. I could make one call to reach Toby Keith about a good song."

And the publishers in the audience are big - the man who signed Don McLean, whose hit "American Pie" continued to become a sensation with the "American Pie" movies (1, 2, 3 and yes, 4), will be attending the showcase.

Denzien knows "the bigwigs" because he entered the industry from a different angle. "I started playing with tape recorders when I was seven, eight years old - you know, tapping into phone lines, listening in on my sister and her friends in her bedroom."

Denzien gained engineering savvy as he continued to write songs, play and record (or make cuts) in various studios, where his experiences fated him to open Slot-1 Studios.

"I've been to many studios and I've had every bad thing imaginable happen to me," Denzien said. "It's an artist's worst nightmare to lose his only master recording of a good session, and it has happened to Denzien twice. "Artists use their last dime to put the production together and go through great pains to get the money," Denzien said. But Slot-1 Studios "has never lost anybody's production for any reason."

Slot-1 has been a haven for many artists from the notorious land of studios. Once a month, twenty to thirty local artists and songwriters bring demo-ready songs to an audition-only workshop. "The person whose name is drawn from a hat has their song recorded exactly as they want it that night and they go home with that song. We're all musicians in the room, even though someone might have played the bass once, or someone kind of sings. But we demo the arrangement the same night." As a producer, Denzien then reviews the entire song, chopping out extraneous parts and mixing others. "Sometimes it's just one little idea, but it might inspire that person, me or all of us."

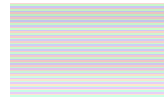
The workshop aims to help artists understand the process of making a record. "Songwriters need to be ready to have a producer tear their song apart," Denzien said. After a songwriter has recorded the demo and connected through a publisher with a manager or artist, the artist then records the demo himself or herself. Yet even though that artist might have cut the song, there's no guarantee the song will squeeze onto the final CD.

"There's definitely politics involved," Denzien said. "Garth Brooks probably cuts 30 songs. But his manager might owe someone a favor, or part of the deal in hooking the producer might be that the producer wants his song on the record. And the artist might be a songwriter too. After all of the

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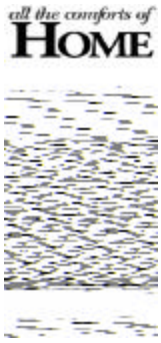
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inside deals, there's space for about six deals from the outside world.

"When it all filters out, you're really lucky to be on the CD," Denzien said. "Because if one song on the CD sells one million or two million, every song on the CD sells one million or two million. And I'm a songwriter, I make nine cents and some change per song."

The 9.1-cents-per-song rule, the statutory rate for mechanical royalties, was determined in the early 1900s. The rate seems utterly inadequate with today's inflation and the crippling addition of iTunes. Apple, the computer company now dictating the record industry, gains 40 percent from each song sold. "If you're big enough, you might be able to get Apple to take a thirty percent share," Denzien said. From the remaining 60 cents, according to iTunes prices, the artist takes 10 percent, or six cents.

That six cents needs to cover the twenty thousand required to cut a record on "a conservative budget," in addition to thousands for advertisement. "The 'partying' music industry of the '60s and '70s is no longer. Songwriters and artists are struggling to keep their heads above water."

Denzien then provided another concrete analogy: "When you walk into a store, there is limited shelf space - say six feet high and twenty feet long - for shampoo. Every manufacturer is competing for that shelf space - Pantene, L'Oreal, Fructis. It would cost for me millions to manufacture a shampoo - the bottle, the whole identity - from scratch. Think of how much money those companies spend in advertising to get me, as a white male, to know their products," Denzien joked.

Why the steep price? Somebody must "get booted" from the shelf in order to make room for the new product. A fixed price exists on that shelf space. If the artist pays the number to get on the shelf and is lucky enough to get established and, therefore, recognized by the public, the income begins to self-perpetuate.

"A plane's fuel emission is the greatest when lifting off - the thing weighs over six hundred tons. Everybody knows that when you throw a rock up in the air, it comes down, so a plane is putting out some serious juice. It's cruising after liftoff - the fuel still costs money, but it's nothing compared to getting started," Denzien said.

Success does indeed breed success in the music industry, but that old cliché now faces the challenge pirating poses. Denzien knew songwriters and artists who used to make a living on mechanical royalties but now have seen a sharp decline in their income by as much as 75 percent. Yet the general population doesn't realize that illegally downloading music from big artists hurts local artists as well. The cash flow of big artists allows the labels to support smaller artists. "If the money from the big artists doesn't come in, the labels can't discover, develop or invest in independent artists," Denzien said.

Downloading MP3s also detracts from the consumer's listening experience. "Because of pirating, nobody will be able to afford good music. When making an MP3, you literally rip the music out of regular music," Denzien said. An MP3 file is compressed from a full-blown audio file - from about 50 MB to 1.3 MB. "What happens to the music? It's gone. It's nowhere near the quality of the CD," Denzien said.

A song on a CD has a resolution of 44,100 samples per second. In order to compress the song into an MP3 format, one must either reduce the amount of samples per second or the amount of kb/sec, the streaming rate. Consolidators, the distributors of compressed files to companies like iTunes and Napster, have the option of decreasing the samples per second from 44,100 to 16,000. They can also drop the streaming rate from 320 kb/sec to as low as 56 kb/sec. "It's like doing the mambo with your sound files - how low can you go," Denzien laughed.

"The idea of mastering a CD," the final process in producing a CD, "is to sweeten up the sound," Denzien said. The master engineer balances the frequency and range as well as the relative loudness and softness of each sound present. Although these adjustments in the "high-end" are outside of the normal hearing range, "it makes everything sound sweeter and nicer. When you take a commercial CD and compress it into an MP3, you physically chop off the high-end. People sacrifice quality for convenience. Although the public can't tell," Denzien continued, "engineers can."

Which is exactly why iTunes, which sells each song in MP3 format, can boast the "2000 song" slogan for the Nano.

The pre-broadband era gave birth to the proliferation of MP3s. Artists needed a way to sample their music to publishers quickly. The format was never intended to be sold as music, but the ersatz quickly replaced the original.

Songwriters and artists like Denzien and others form alliances to combat the declining industry with the timeless hope of creating good music. The Nashville Songwriters Association International meets in this area, as well as Philadelphia Area Songwriters Alliance. The groups meet to hone their craft and to petition Washington whenever songwriters' rights are in jeopardy.

"There's a lot of outlets out there for people to learn the business and the industry. "Songwriters - write really good songs. Protect them. Respect yourself. Talk to your fans," Denzien said. "Come to the showcase. Hear some of the songs being written right now."

This is the moment to take the stage.

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