

MAKING MUSIC

HINTS TO (MAYBE) GET A RECORD DEAL

In the corner of Wildside Records label boss Murray Cammick's home office is a cardboard box filled with unsolicited demos, sent by dozens of unsigned bands from all over New Zealand. It's almost guaranteed, the same tapes will be in other cardboard boxes in the offices of numerous other local record companies, both major and independent. The owners of the tapes have at least three things in common: each band no doubt believes the quality of their music makes them the most deserving of a record deal; the chance of their tape ever being listened to is extremely minimal ("It's a waste of time people sending me demos," says Cammick); and each has chosen what is probably the least successful way of gaining the attention of a record label.

Paul Ellis, General Manager of A&R/Publishing at Sony Music (NZ), receives several tapes a week. However, the label adds just one or two local acts a year to their roster, and therefore would never sign an artist solely on the strength of a demo. Ellis advises young bands to play regularly to create some awareness, prior to approaching a label.

"What bands seem to fail to recognise is, this is a business, you can't just knock on a record company door and say: 'Hi, we're Joe 90 and we really want a deal.' You need some sort of profile for any label, major or independent, to take you seriously. When people come to me or send me tapes, they're trying to run without learning to walk, if they haven't already got a live following, or haven't carved some sort of name for themselves."

A record company operating in the commercial marketplace, whether a small independent like Wildside or a corporate giant such as Sony, lives by the bottom line — they must sell records to survive. In order for a label to show interest in signing a local band, the label must believe the act has sales potential, and has, by their own hand, made some progress in estab-

lishing a market for themselves, to which the label can sell records. As Cammick notes: "Once you've got an audience, you've got something that is of value to a record company."

James Southgate, Managing Director of Warner Music (NZ), cites the example set by Supergroove, who were touring nationally well before they sparked any label interest.

"Supergroove recognised a band has to be playing live and building a following, so they went out there and secured an audience. Bands have got to be very active in their careers, that's a big part of it today, and if they can build a following, obviously any label is going to be far more interested if they've got a fan base out there."

Of course Supergroove went on to release the quadruple-platinum selling album *Traction* on BMG Records, and toured extensively in the UK and Europe. More recently, Auckland trio Nothing At All! were snapped up by Festival Records, who released the band's self-titled debut last December. Nothing At All! actively sought an audience for their music when they formed in 1991, by producing independent cassettes, achieving student radio airplay, undertaking several nationwide tours, and playing constantly in the Auckland region. As a result they've been rewarded with a large and loyal group of fans and a record deal.

In New Zealand, the major record companies essentially only exist to distribute and promote albums by overseas acts, they neither require nor depend on local artists to work. Therefore the direct deals offered to Nothing At All! and Auckland solo singer/songwriter Bic Runga, whom Ellis signed to Sony late last year, can only be applauded and encouraged. Realistically though, a rock 'n' roll band like Nothing At All! is always going to be an oddity on the roster of a New Zealand major label, who much prefer to record mainstream artists

and family favourites, whose appeal lies within the massive Top 40 market, where the most potential for profit lies. Southgate, whose Warner label is home to Jan Hellriegel, the Exponents, and Annie Crummer, explains what is basically the situation for all local majors.

"A&R in New Zealand is probably one of the toughest in the world to make work. To record local bands and put their records out here, the basic costs are just as much as in Australia, or in the UK, or America, but all we're getting to is 3.3 million people. With local A&R we're obviously looking for people who have long term career prospects, who can also make it worthwhile for us. The bottom line is it's got to be saleable, this is a business, and we've got to believe that we can create good awareness, good airplay, and good sales."

It's pretty much a given, then, that the majority of young New Zealand bands who will make a name for themselves domestically (and possibly internationally), will do so from the base of an independent label. At various stages over the past four years, groups like Shihad, Head Like A Hole, Loves Ugly Children, Eye TV, Dead Flowers, Pumpkinhead, Garageland and King Loser have increased their profiles in leaps and bounds with the assistance of the Flying Nun, Wildside, and Pagan labels.

Although the three indie promoters vastly different styles of music, each shares common themes in what they look for in a potential addition to their rosters.

"Obviously there's the music," says Pagan's Trevor Reekie, "then there's their own sense of determination and motivation, and then it comes down to personality, is this a band that can work with us?"

Those thoughts are almost mirrored by Flying Nun's New Zealand General Manager, Lesley Paris.

"We look for people who are decent human beings, and who have a good attitude to what they are doing, and most importantly, we look for people who know how to write songs."

To that end, Cammick follows a theory belonging to Ahmet Ertegun, co-founder of the legendary Atlantic Records: 'Nobody buys a record because they have been hyped into buying it. People buy a record when they hear something they want to hear again.' Cammick is a big fan of melody, and would rather listen to a band play a pop song than a precise one.

"You've got to be able to say: 'Hey, this is a great song.' You can't sell records by saying: 'Hey, these guys are great players.'"

The Wildside label in particular, has a reputation for signing bands with dynamic and fiercely energetic live shows. If a band can deliver the goods on stage, that's another plus to the label's MD.

"I'd probably have a bias towards bands that perform well live. So, the first thing I'd want to hear about is that this band is out there, performing live and getting a crowd. The bands I've signed from Wellington and Christchurch, I've seen most of those first time in Auckland, and if you want to sell records throughout New

Zealand, you've got to have bands that are prepared to tour. My feeling is, if someone can't get a crowd of 500 somewhere in the country, why would I bother making a record?, because you've got to sell a lot more than 500 to make any impact."

While Paris doesn't insist prospective Nun bands be great travellers, they should at least have acquired a live following in their own backyard.

"It helps if they've got their own little market that we can sell records to. All of the bands we have signed have had an audience, even if it's just in their own city."

Reekie: "The live thing is one of the biggest determining factors a band can have going for them. The bigger the crowd they're pulling, the more interest they're going to glean, from the majors through to the indies."

Another factor that can turn the head of a record company boss is the 'word of mouth' introduction. The liner notes of the Dance Exponents 'best of' album *Once Bitten, Twice Bitten* detail how the band were signed to Mushroom Records in 1981, after Christchurch venue promoter Jim Wilson phoned Mike Chunn, then Managing Director at the label, and told him to fly down from Auckland to check out this hot new band. Little has changed over a decade later. Both Pumpkinhead and Wildside's latest, signing Muckhole, first came to Cammick's attention through recommendations ("You can virtually say if you haven't heard people saying there's a good band out there, probably there isn't one."), and Dunedin band High Dependency Unit signed with Flying Nun last year, after Paris was pestered to see them live.

"This pushy woman called Natasha who works for us repeatedly demanded we see them. We did, and we liked what they do. We have our 'A&R agents' out there at all times at gigs, and we take notice if a lot of people are raving about a band, and we'll go and see them... but it still comes down to the fact we have to like them."

Within the larger market, those bands locally that do find a label who likes them will possess one gift that can't be learned, and that is the ability to write good, well crafted, memorable songs. Ultimately, says Cammick, without able songwriting, a band will rarely get past square one.

"Bands have got to make sure they've got a songwriter in the band, and they can write songs, and that they can get on stage and get a positive response out of their audience. Basically, if you're good as a band, your audience will grow. There are minority or cult forms of music that don't ever have a significant audience, so, you can't always judge your creative worth by the size of your audience; but if you're working in, basically, an area of music that could appeal to the mainstream, and if it doesn't appeal to the people that are coming to see you, you've got a problem."

In closing he adds: "I think there's a truism that if you're any good, [a label] will come looking for you."

That last statement may sound harsh, but it screams the truth, as the music business is not a sentimental one. Indeed, Reekie says bands, on occasion, need to question why they're making music in the first place.

"If getting approached by a label is the thing that's motivating the music, then they shouldn't be bothered with it. It's the music that's got to motivate the band. The most realistic advice you can give to any young band is, believe in yourself and keep doing it, and going at it as hard as you can. It's basically a situation of, don't give up if you really believe in it."

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