

INDEPENDENT'S DAY
DO-IT-YOURSELF CDs

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In 1998, along with Bill Chambers, I established Reckless Records. Bill and I had made an album of traditional country duets ("Looking Back To See") and we knew that no Australian record label, at that time, would be interested in releasing an album of hard-core country music. So we decided to create our own label. It was a reckless venture, but many years and several album releases later, we're proud to be an active part of the burgeoning Roots music scene in Australia. (By the way, that first album has sold over 5000 units, won Best Independent Album of the Year 1999 and scored a story in the U.S. trade magazine, Billboard.)

One of the most common questions we're asked is "I am...." Or "My friend/daughter/son is a really great artist/singer/songwriter. How do they make it? What's the next step?"

If there were one answer to this question the road to success would be easy. A simple answer is, "A lot of hard work, a lot of money and a unique talent."

What follows is a basic outline of what I suggest might help an artist take the next step early in their career. But before I start imparting the pearls, here's a thought from Kasey Chambers' dad...

"The only worthwhile reason to be an artist is if you have something you want to share and you have an audience that wants to listen. If something else drives your career, like money or fame, you might as well drive a truck. Being independent means depending on no-one but your own ability."

BILL CHAMBERS

Not everyone is cut out to work independently, but it's where most artists start. Sure, we all want to earn heaps of money and have it easy, but don't wait for fame and fortune to come knocking at your door. Go out and make it happen. While you're waiting to be discovered, other artists are getting ahead. The more you learn about the industry the better equipped you'll be to make decisions when the time comes to negotiate with a manager, agent or record label. Whatever level you're at, always try to work with people who really dig your music.

Ok, so you're doing it for the love of music, right? Good, because you'll be working 22 hours a day to be able to spend 2 hours performing music.

Define your goals, your definitions of success, and aim for that, with patience.

Record a CD

- The best thing to do once you feel committed to a career in music is to make a recording. Once you are ready, invest in your career. A Cd lets people know who you are and how you sound. It's your introduction to the music industry and to potential music buyers.
- You don't have to spend a fortune. It's common to initially record a 4 song EP. It's a good introduction to working in the studio, and to the process of releasing recorded product.
- Record great songs that showcase who you are, whether you wrote them or not.
- Work with a producer who understands what you want, or produce it yourself. Don't let a producer railroad you into recording a song or style that you're not comfortable with; but trust their experience too. Sometimes you can have your heart set on a song that just isn't working in the studio. If you love it but you can't sing it, let it go. One dud song brings down the quality of the whole recording.
- Don't cut corners in the recording studio. Aim for radio airplay, which means you want your track to sit amongst world-class recordings and not sound of inferior quality. Make sure it's all in tune and in time. These basic concepts are often overlooked. Recording is unforgiving and you'll be living with it for the rest of your life. Make it the best it can be.
- Remember time is money in the studio. If you don't have your own band, there are many talented and experienced session players who work quickly and really know how to get the best from a song. They're available for hire and will usually work within an independent artist's budget. The quality they bring to your music is invaluable.
- Spend time on mixing the recording. It's a vital part of the process.
- Have the recording Mastered. It's like adding icing to a cake. It's a final polish that makes all the difference to how your music will sound on the radio or stereo.
- If you've recorded songs written by someone other than yourself you should check with the songwriter or their publisher regarding royalty payments. These are calculated on how many CDs you manufacture.
- You may want to register your own songs with a songwriter's society, who will collect airplay royalties and live performance royalties on your behalf.

Manufacturing a CD

- Once you have the Production Master in your hand you will need completed artwork before going to the CD manufacturer. By now you've spent a fair bit of money on the recording so it might seem financially attractive to have Uncle John take some happy snaps of you in the backyard. Wrong! It's so sad when a good quality production is let down by a CD cover with low res scans of amateur photos. Take a look at the Cds in a record store because that's your competition. You want your

- cover to stand out from the rest. You want it to reflect your music too. The combination of a creative graphic artist working with good photos is bound to make for great CD artwork. Initially, we do judge CDs by their covers.
- If you want to sell your CD in stores add a bar-code (which can be purchased for less than \$100 from a CD manufacturer), and create a catalogue number. This should appear on the CD spine and the actual CD. Australia uses different barcodes to those used in the USA.

Promoting Your CD

- Are you prepared to put as much energy into the promotion of your CD as you did into the creation of it? Are you prepared to give away free CDs? If the answer is “yes” you’re already ahead. Other people (ie, record labels) will be more interested in investing their time and money in an artist who already has a vibe and a happening career, rather than someone who is waiting for someone else to make it happen. The equation is simple: what you put in to your career, you’ll get back.
- Buy the Music Industry Directory (and whichever publications are designed for your genre), and create your own database of radio and media contacts. Print out labels of all your contacts when you’re ready to mail out your CD.
- Buy the CD envelopes in bulk and ask at the post office, the cheapest way to send CDs. If you’re sending out 300 CDs, it will make a difference.
- Read music magazines and source their reviewers contact details. Send them a CD. It’s important for the media to know of you and your product. It’s rare that they will go out and buy it!
- Radio airplay and reviews in newspapers, magazines and on Internet sites is all free publicity, so make sure you send them a CD.
- Write up a great press release. Get someone else to help you, as it can be difficult to write objectively about yourself and your own music. In the press release try to pin point what it is about you that is unique. Many journalists will take verbatim what you have written in your press release and reprint it in their reviews or story, so use the adjectives that best describe your music.
- Collate your reviews and quotes and add them to your press release. It’s great to know what other people think of you (Mum doesn’t count!).
- The reason for airplay is to get CD sales. Make sure your press release has all your contact details on it so that radio stations know where listeners can purchase your CD as they often ring the station to enquire.
- You also need airplay in order to create an awareness of you and raise your profile, which will in turn affect your viability as a touring artist.
- If you don’t have heaps of money to promote your CD, trust in the quality of your music to reach people. No amount of money can make people love your music. Sure, hyped up publicity campaigns create the *‘Emperor’s new clothes’* effect for a while, but it’s not enduring unless the music is great.

- It's been said, *"You have to spend big to make it big"*. But if you don't have lots of money to spend on promotion, spend what you have wisely. Trial and error comes into effect here! Remember, you're spending money in order to eventually make money, and you'll learn quickly which publications are worthwhile advertising in. An ad in a magazine will sometimes get you a story in the same publication.
- If you can afford to, hire a publicist. He/she will get you publicity by setting up interviews with radio, print media and TV, which is especially worthwhile if you are touring.
- Identify your audience and target them. For example, call a radio station to find out to whom your Cd package should be addressed. There's no point sending your Death Metal Cd to the Jazz presenter.
- If you haven't already, create a website. The Internet is a level playing field for all businesses. Promote your site by including it in all your ads and correspondence, tell people at your gigs about it, add it to search engines and link it to other sites.
- Reply to a member of the media if they contact you. They're people doing a job, and if they've taken the trouble to contact you, out of all the hundreds of artists they could be contacting, it means they're interested and what to know more about you. They need what we do in order to do what they do. Remember, if not for songwriters, musicians and singers there'd be no music industry.
- Cultivate your fan base. These are the people who ultimately make or break your career. Without an audience, you might as well go home! These are the people who part with their hard-earned dollars to hear you play and buy your music. Don't ever take them for granted. So let them know when and where you are playing. Have a printed gig-guide handy for when people enquire. Create a database of fans' contact details and keep them up-to-date with your gigs and news. There are many successful independent artists who work outside of the music industry machine. They don't win awards or get stories in magazines, but they tour a lot and earn good money because they have many fans.
- Seize the opportune moments as they occur. Someone else will if you don't.
- Most importantly, get out and play live.

Selling Cds

- Contact Cd stores who specialise in your genre of music and let them know about your product. Some may ask for a free sample. To ensure the free sample is not sold by the store, punch a hole in the bar-code, or write "Sample" on the CD so it cannot be sold.
- The larger franchise stores won't normally deal with independent artists, but most others will, especially if there is a demand. Sometimes the store will advise the customer to deal with you direct.

- If a store places an order, send an invoice with the order. Don't be afraid to chase up payment. Most stores will pay promptly, or when the stock is sold. Some need reminding, and there's nothing like a personal visit (with a sledgehammer up your jumper) to ensure on-the-spot payment.
- In Australia you can register your Cd with Platterlog, (printed catalogue) and AMROC (on-line catalogue). Music stores access these databases when sourcing a CD if they don't hold it in stock.
- Approach distributors about them taking your stock. Remember a distributor is not a record label. They won't spend a lot on advertising or promoting your CD, if at all. A distributor buys Cds from you at an agreed upon wholesale rate and sells them to music stores, usually on consignment. Through a distributor you are more likely to get your CD into the larger franchise stores.
- You may want to register yourself and the recorded songs with the PPCA (in Australia), who will collect royalties for recorded performances. You may also choose to register your recorded work with BDS Nielsen (USA) and Sound Exchange (USA) who also track plays.
- There are more and more online music sales outlets, so investigate these. CD Baby is an efficient and reliable online outlet, as are Village Music and Miles of Music. IRIS Distribution is a wholesaler of digital downloads, catering to many online stores, including iTunes and Napster (to name a few).
- Apply at your bank for the facility to accept credit cards (and apply for permission to take phone orders). Add a shopping cart to your website.

And another thing...

- The CD you've made is yours. You've paid for it. You own it. Don't sign the rights to your music or your songs over to anyone unless they believe in your music as much as you do, and can do for you what you can't achieve alone.
- The unique 'something special' that you have to offer the world is the basis of your career. Whether it's your writing, singing, musicianship or entertainment skills, constantly refining your craft makes for a strong career foundation. Sometimes it will seem like the only thing you can be sure of.
- The artist's journey is a roller-coaster ride, whether it's riding the highs of public acceptance or the lows of rejection or inactivity. The creative process is uncertain and unpredictable. It's not black and white. It's affected by the state of our internal world and our external world. Love of music, a strong faith in one's self and belief in one's abilities are what will get you through the down times. Self-doubt can be your worst enemy. Belief in yourself and your music is what will carry you through.

- Becoming famous is expensive. If you don't have access to unlimited funds, be satisfied with what you are achieving within the limits of your resources.
- Find someone in your life that is really honest with you. We don't get better by being told we're great. Listen to and consider the constructive criticism you get, as much as the positive feedback. Your ego will survive and maybe you'll improve!

"Once you think you've arrived, you haven't". BILL CHAMBERS

I'm sure every artist has a different story to tell, but these are some of the things I have learnt, working as a self-sufficient artist and operating a record label. There's no denying it's a hard road, but there's no sweeter success than that achieved by one's own efforts.

If you have faith and patience you can make a long-term commitment to your career. There'll be times when you'll want to quit, but you'll get to a point when quitting is not an option; when it's impossible not to do it.