

# Presenting your Music for Review

By Jim Kelly





You've written your songs. You've rehearsed and fine-tuned the material. You've recorded your music. Now you need to send it out to see what the world makes of it.

But when it comes to submitting your music to get it reviewed, there's a right way and a wrong way of going about it.

I spent three years spotlighting unsigned, independent artists for a nationally distributed music magazine. Every few months a large box would thud onto my doorstep, bulging with dozens of CDs, press kits and bios from every corner of Canada. My job was to go through all of these submissions and pick three to showcase.

So before you send your stuff to a reviewer, here are some things to consider. This advice is geared primarily to those who are just starting out. But even if you've been around the block, there may be some good ideas here for you, too.

These tips apply mostly to physical submissions – CDs and press kits. But the same principles can be applied to your music's digital presence.

## Making Contact

Whether it's a magazine or a newspaper, a music website or a radio station, make sure they are open to accepting submissions and that they deal in your genre. No use sending your death metal CD to a magazine that deals in Americana or pop.

If possible, identify the most appropriate reviewer. Do some research and pick your target. It's time well spent. If it's a writer who you know appreciates your kind of music, based on what they've liked in the past, you improve your odds of avoiding the trash bin.

## It's About Time

What it comes down to is time. When I was doing this, I also had a full-time day job. But even reviewers who do it 9-to-5 – music writers at daily newspapers or magazines, for instance – are busy people with other tasks to do, stories to file and deadlines to meet. No music reviewer has time to listen to your entire CD – at least not initially. There are just too many submissions and not enough hours in the day. Shortcuts are necessary.

My tactic was to listen to the first 30 seconds or so of the first song on the CD; just long enough to get a taste of it – a verse, a chorus – then move on to the next song. If, after the third song, I liked what I heard, I'd toss it on to the tentative "Yes" pile to be revisited later.

But if, after listening to the first 30 seconds of the first three songs, I wasn't impressed, I'd hit the eject button, chuck it on to the "No" pile, and move on. So, 30 seconds of each for the first three songs – you have about 90 seconds of music to make an impression. You need to make the most of that time. Especially if you're a new band/artist, you need to make sure your best songs get heard. That's job #1.

## Be Up Front

Obviously, the easiest way to ensure that is to put your best stuff right up front. But you'd be surprised how many submissions don't do that.

Never mind trying to create another Pet Sounds or The Dark Side of the Moon or Yankee Hotel Foxtrot. If you submit a CD, make sure you put your strongest three or four songs right at the beginning.

What's that you say? Despite the fact that the art of making albums in the iTunes era is dead as disco, you've created your opus – a cohesive artistic statement on a shiny disc with a song-to-song running order that follows your grand vision in terms of themes and pacing? Well, first of all, good for you! You're bucking the prevailing trend.

But here's the problem with submitting your opus for review: if your strongest songs happen to be tracks 5, 7, 8 and 12, no reviewer is going to hear these songs because they're buried deep within the grand artistic statement that is your CD.

So, here's what you do: Call out those three or four tracks. Put a sticker on the CD case or include a note somewhere that says something like: "Highlight tracks: 5, 7, 8 and 12." The reviewer can then zero in on your sweetest offerings like a bee to honey.

And to that end, it also helps if you number all of the songs in the track listings. Again, make it easy for the reviewer to find your best songs.

Now, a few words about the other elements of your press kit.

## Photos

Yes, it's all about the music, but let's face it: image matters. Just like a job interview, your first impression can make a difference. Get a professional with a real camera to take some quality publicity photos of you. Just say no to clichéd band poses against a brick wall. And fellas, please keep your shirts on (unless you're in a nudist polka-punk band where it's part of your shtick.)

## Your Bio

Likewise, don't write your own bio. Just don't. You're too close to it. There are writers who can do a good job for you for a reasonable fee. Probably some of your local music scribes also write press bios for bands and labels on the side. It's money well spent. Reach out. Keep it brief. One page at the most.

Whether you're sending out physical CDs and press kits or going the digital and download route, it matters how you present yourself and that you make the reviewer's job as easy as possible to hear your best songs and to quickly grasp what you're all about.

When it comes to making tracks, put your best foot forward.

