

Producer Career

Introduction

I am routinely approached by producers for advice on how to make it in the music business. The following is a brief summary of my typical advice.

The Lists

Major record companies tend to hire big name producers. For example, if an artist sounds like Linkin Park, the label will likely want to speak to Don Gilmour, Brendan O'Brien, Ross Robinson or maybe GGGarth Richardson. These are big name producers that have produced similar sounding records. They are known entities that have proven that they can "do the job". Their names also add to the marketing and promotion of the records. Radio stations and other music industry tastemakers (i.e. retailers, critics, and hardcore fans) recognize these names when they are checking out music and these names give legitimacy to an artist; especially if they are the new artist in need of all the attention they can get.

The same holds true for other genres of music. If you have a pop/ballad singer like Céline Dion you are probably talking to David Foster. If you have an R&B singer like Whitney Houston you are probably talking to Babyface or Jermaine Dupri. So how do you get on those lists?

Development

Many producers made their impact by developing a new artist and then grew with that artist as the artist achieved success.

The producers that worked with Nelly Furtado on her first record, *Whoa, Nelly!* were better known as members of the Philosopher Kings when they started working with Nelly. They worked with Nelly and developed demo recordings that were shopped to the record labels. The labels liked the demos so much that Track and Field Productions (Gerald Eaton and Brian West) went on to co-produce (with Nelly) Nelly's first album for Dreamworks. They received a Grammy nomination and a Juno win in the process and haven't looked back since. They were attached to the project as developing producers and were able to hang on when it came time to choose the producer for the major label debut.

Gavin Brown is a similar example. Gavin produced the demo recordings, which lead to major label recording deals for Billy Talent (Atlantic) and Three Days Grace (Jive). When it came time to choose a producer for the major label debut the artist and label decided, "Why fix it if it ain't broken?" and Gavin went on to complete both major label debut albums for

each of the aforementioned acts.

This development approach will obviously involve working for very cheap at first (if not for free). You may get "screwed" by an artist or two along the way but it is part of the process. In my experience, if you are bringing the goods and the relationship with the artist is strong you will be able to hang onto the producer role when the artist secures that elusive record deal.

Clearly, you must have keen ability to find and nurture world-class talent under this approach.

There are dozens of other examples (i.e. Greig Nori/Sum 41 and Jay & James/Fefe Dobson) that confirm my belief that this is one of the best ways to get your producer career off the ground.

Engineers/Mixers

The development method described above is not the only way to get into the studio with a major label recording act. Some producers start out as engineers or mixers and gain the trust of an artist and get a shot at working with a high profile artist at some point.

Musicianship/Songwriting/Arranging

Many of the most successful producers also are accomplished musician and/or songwriters – especially in the R&B and pop genres. You will notice Babyface, Jermaine Dupri and David Foster also write most of the material they produce. These producer/writers have built a double-edged attack that makes them extremely sought after.

In the rock genre, artists tend to write most of their own material but this seems to be opening up a little over recent years. In addition, many of these groups also need arrangement ideas or at least some kind of constructive criticism of their songs. At a minimum, a trained musical ear will make you a better producer in any setting.

If you want to increase your chances of producing records for a living you should develop your songwriting or, at least, your arrangements skills. It will make you a more attractive commodity. This is a muscle you need to start exercising. Buy instructive books; start writing your own songs; actively participate in the discourse surrounding your artist's material.

Management

There are many great producer management companies. Most are based in Los Angeles and New York, however,

Vancouver and Toronto both have producer management companies as well.

In my experience, most of these management companies are an invaluable resource once you start appearing on the "The Lists" referred to above. They assist in finding the work; negotiating your fees; arranging studio times; coordinate travel; collect your money; and, generally deal with a lot of details which allows you to focus on your work: producing records.

Many of the most reputable management companies will not be interested in taking you on until you have developed a profile on your own. As I mentioned above, a beginner producer needs to make his/her mark by developing a relatively unknown artist or graduate from another studio position before they can expect to start showing up on "The Lists". Before that, you are not going to be very attractive to one of the established producer management companies.

Conclusion

The road to a producer career, like an artist's career, is full of struggles and hard work. I hope that some of these thoughts point you in the right direction.

Chris Taylor is a lawyer with the law firm of Sanderson Taylor where he represents Avril Lavigne, Nelly Furtado, Sum 41, and Sam Roberts among others. Find him on the Web at www.sandersontaylor.com.



by Chris Taylor, B.A., LL.B.