



October

What Makes a Good Demo

How to approach and make best use of print and radio media.

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While their eagerness to conquer Planet Rock is understandable, one of the most common mistakes new bands make is to send demos out too early.

The old adage about only having one chance to make a first impression is definitely true in the music industry. Contrary to popular opinion, journalists, DJs and record company A&R people do listen to the vast majority of music that's sent to them and remember the bad bands they encounter just as keenly as the good ones.

Explaining how he operates, a London-based A&R veteran told me recently: "I mark all the demos I receive out of '10', log 'em in a book and ignore the '6' or less bands for a year because I figure that's how long it'll take them to revamp their sound. I give second chances, but not third ones." Usually when Hotpress receives demos it's from acts who are looking for coverage of their gigs, which means they're playing reasonably regularly and have a set-full of material.

You may think that all dozen of your hits-in-the-making deserve to be heard, but a demo being a calling-card stick to three songs – if the people you're sending CDs to want to hear more, they'll ask.

I like to hear songs that are most representative of a band first, and then something, which suggests that there's a bit of diversity to their songwriting. Unless the re-working is radical, don't include covers.

Also, never apologise for poor sound quality or "track two needing a bit more work" – if you think your demo has shortcomings, why are you sending it out?

A print-quality photo and concise, well-written biography are essential, but don't worry about foldout digi-pack sleeves or other trappings, which are not only expensive, but hint at style over substance.

The same goes for the recording of your demo. If you've enough money to book into Grouse Lodge for a month with Garret 'Jackknife' Lee, great, but remember that no amount of 48-track wizardry can disguise a bad song or a band overwhelmed by the technology that's suddenly at their disposal.

Some of the best demos I've received this year have been recorded in budget or home studios where, not having to cough up a hundred quid an hour, bands are able to lavish as much time on the songs as they need.

Demo dispatched to all the people in your media contacts book, it's perfectly okay to follow up with a phone call or email, but don't stalk or get despondent when the response isn't immediate.

The music industry works slowly sometimes but, in my experience, quality always outs.