

Record Labels 101

When & how to approach a record label

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Many young artists hope to be “discovered” by a record label and whisked away to stardom, but this path to success is increasingly rare in the modern world. Labels often want to see some track record of success before they’ll consider signing a new act. Even an artist like BENEÉ who was signed at a very young age had cover songs on Soundcloud before getting a manager and then put out a couple of breakthrough singles before signing with a label.

What’s more, it’s not even clear that music labels are necessary for some artists early in their careers. So before we look at how to make contact with a label, it’s worth looking at the reasons why they might (or might not) be useful to your music career.



Is a label necessary?

There are three basic things that labels may bring to the table: financial support, industry knowledge, and contacts. When it comes to financial support, labels sometimes provide an 'advance' on earnings which can be used to record music and promote it when it is released (an advance is like a loan from a label 'in advance' of your earnings). Once an artist's music begins to generate income, they need to repay this advance before making any income from their releases. Therefore it's an advantage for an artist to cover their own costs as much as possible, since the money provided by labels is a loan not a free lunch.

In New Zealand, there is also NZ On Air funding which can provide some of this initial funding, since they support recording a single and making a music video (or other visual content to accompany a song). For any emerging act, a first step could be to look up NZ On Air's funding requirements and look toward fulfilling them.

Where labels really come into their own is with their knowledge and experience in the music industry. For a pop act, getting on a major label can give them a far better chance of getting on the radio, appearing on popular streaming playlists, and being covered in the media. For a more underground act, an indie label may have connections in the local and international scenes which will help their music to be heard by relevant tastemakers and thereby get the word out (and onto important playlists etc).

A label can bring a lot to the table, but before signing to a label you need to be confident that the deal will achieve more than you could do just by yourself. Does the label have similar artists in whose footsteps you'd like to follow? What part did the label play in their success? In a small country like New Zealand, it may be possible to get your music to the right people without even needing a label involved (perhaps through working with your digital aggregator or hiring a publicist directly), so don't rush into a deal before you know the playing field.

How to approach a label

Firstly you need to choose a label to approach. Some emerging artists think they should use a scattergun approach and send messages to every label they can find an email address for, but receiving generic correspondence will immediately put off the people receiving these emails. It is far better to research which labels your favourite artists work with and then go from there. Alternatively you could look through labels that are members of Independent Music New Zealand (IMNZ) or the list at muzic.net.nz, then research which ones that work in the appropriate genre.

These days, it is extremely difficult to get a record label's attention just by emailing them a demo, since recording music is now so cheap that they are inundated with them. It is far better if an act is able to



create a buzz which reaches the label organically. Having a good song is crucial, but not sufficient by itself to get a label interested (and there's no guarantee anyone will even hear it if you just blindly email it in).

An act will find it easier to get a label's attention if they already have one or two successful songs or have gained a good-sized live audience, since it proves that they are willing to put in hard work to achieve success. Put yourself in the label's shoes - would you sign an act with no track record who just emailed in a home-recorded demo?

It also helps if you can make a personal connection with someone at the label or one of their artists, since it will make your emails stand out from the crowd. Better yet, if you have a mutual friend/artist in common with some at the label then consider having them make the first approach on your behalf (or at least put in a good word). Even the smallest foot in the door can be the difference between being heard and staying in the inbox.

If you only have the option of writing a 'cold call' email then do some research to find out who the specific person is that you need to contact. The best email would

begin by being addressed to this person and have specific details about why you approached them, e.g., 'I love the rapper X who you work with and think it was cool how she came out with those short tracks on Instagram. I feel like my music would go across well to a similar audience because...'

Also, ask yourself what else you might say that makes them want to hear your music:

- Do you have an interesting story behind how your band came about?
- Have you worked with other well-known musicians or played live with them?
- Does your music have a unique aspect that will draw listeners in?
- Have you supplied professional looking photos/imagery which strongly represent you as an artist?

Unfortunately too many emerging acts are in a rush to get signed and can come across seeming unprepared. Think of the time and money you've spent learning to make music, playing shows, and/or recording your songs - put the same effort into finding a label. Get yourself in the best position possible before trying to approach a label, then do your research and get prepared before making contact. Good luck in making your pitch!

