



GUEST EDITORIAL

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ATTACK OF THE SONGSHARKS

I WAS RECENTLY A FINALIST IN A NATIONAL competition for unsigned bands. Shortly after the finalist announcements were made, I received a couple of solicitations in the mail from what purported to be Hollywood-based record companies searching for new talent. "You've been referred to me by one of my many sources as being interested in songwriting," began one of the missives. "No doubt you'd like a hit record." As a matter of fact I would, but one of his many sources should have pointed out that I wasn't actually a songwriter — not by any reasonable definition, anyway. The form letter continued: "Who can predict a hit? I can't and nobody else can either. One thing I know is, a song will never become a hit if it's stuffed in a desk drawer or your hip pocket. It has to be recorded and heard by the Music Industry and the public."

The other letter I received took a less melodramatic tack, but it too admonished that hit songs are not created by writers who leave their work in the top desk drawer. I was advised to send in those closeted masterpieces that might catapult me to fame as the next Kenny Rogers, Dolly Parton, or Paul McCartney (their Roster of Immortals, not mine). "If we decide to sign a commercial recording contract with you we will send your records to radio stations and record stores and you will be paid a *royalty* for each record sold." That sounded pretty good to me, especially the *royalty* part; an appeal to greed always works. "Send us your song today," they said. "Our staff will review your material and you will receive our decision promptly." Although it wasn't made abundantly clear how this racket operated, I couldn't resist such a genial invitation. Besides, what would it cost me besides the price of a cassette and postage?

Being a composer whose aesthetic is closer to that of John Zorn than Michael Bolton, I was clearly out of my league. But in a couple of days I cranked out an unexceptional pop tune featuring my own wretched vocals supported by mediocre sequenced instrumental tracks. I knew it was a piece of neo-hippie, pseudo-psychedelic crap, but that only reinforced my heated

fantasies of stardom. With trembling anticipation, I headed for the post office.

When they said they would review submissions promptly, they weren't kidding. It took only about a week and a half to receive replies from both firms; interestingly, the letters arrived on the same day. Having relistened to the tape during the period between sending the demos

and receiving the replies, I realized just how awful it was. It was actually embarrassing. So I was surprised to find contracts for the song waiting in my mailbox. "We have a spot available in our latest cassette album," the letters said. (I was starting to feel lucky.) "This album will carry a suggested retail price of \$8.98 and it will be shipped to record stores and radio station disc jockeys across the country. If your song is accepted for this album, you will receive a complimentary copy at the time of release and royalties derived from the sales of these albums." So far, so good.

Then came the kicker: "Your total cost for the test session is \$380.00. I have made arrangements with the bookkeeping department so that you may forward \$38.00 with the contract and \$38.00 per month for nine months (with no finance charges), if that is more convenient."

Well, thanks a whole bunch. It's truly a mark of compassion to consider some sucker's convenience when milking him for a small fortune, all in return for a complimentary cassette and a load of vague promises. The boilerplate contracts stipulated that if they decided not to use my song in their cassette albums, I would be fully refunded. This was apparently intended to reassure me that I'd be indemnified against losing my investment, but realistically, which would be worse: having my song rejected (not likely if they were going to have to pay me back) and getting nowhere in my nascent songwriting career, or having my song accepted, losing the money, and still getting nowhere?

As I reviewed the materials I had received from these unscrupulous dits, the picture of an intended victim began to emerge. Those exhortations to "get those songs out of your top desk drawers" are clearly not aimed at serious songwriters, who already know that success depends on exposure. The mark in this con is

the weekend pop star who'd like to see his or her name embossed on a cassette shell. It's merely a vanity enterprise. There's nothing illegal about it, but is it unethical? It is, when the original solicitations state nothing at all about the cost to the songwriter, and coyly drop the names of successful artists while implying that success is entirely a dice throw. They attempt to seduce you into believing that your masterpiece has passed some grueling artistic review and that for a price you will get your well-deserved shot at immortality. But what exactly do you get for \$380? You get a performance and recording of your song over which you have no control, and promises that a distant and unaccountable entity will promote it. They promise to distribute the cassette album to record stores and disburse royalties from sales, but who in their right mind would *buy* such a thing? Would you?

Consider this sampling of testimonials that was included with one of the contracts: "You did a good job on my song, it sounds like a million bucks." "When I heard my song I felt very happy and got goose pimples." "It makes me real proud to see my father's name on an album." "Received album with my song. . . . It's more beautiful than I ever imagined." "The song is beautiful and marvelous. My daughter had a big smile when her daddy said it was about her. I had to thank you in a letter because it made my day. God Bless."

That's all very touching, except that nowhere is there any mention of compensation. No big breaks. No success stories. No *royalties*. If these companies are running vanity operations, they shouldn't represent themselves as anything else. The whole thing stinks, from their phony "press releases" to all the other cheezy "Hollywood" trappings: One of the record companies makes a point of tacking a superfluous "Corner Hollywood and Vine" to its return address, even though a street name and number is plainly listed.

So what did I learn about the music biz from this brief and superficial encounter? As the estimable Al Kooper put it, "It's the most unjust, slimy rathole that's ever been put on the face of the Earth." To which I might add, it's a shark pit too. **E**

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