

Making it Work

You gotta earn those groupies, son

James Turner

Being in an independent band for the past five years has challenged me to attempt what some people might think is the impossible — understanding the music industry. I will concede immediately that I have not had much success. I think it has something to do with trying to assemble a big picture out of the information I've gathered about the functions performed by the industry's separate components. I can understand what a record label does, but things such as when to approach one, and more importantly, how to approach one, remain mysteries. The basic equation that I repeat to myself daily is that when you are making money, everyone in the industry loves you. When you're not, they don't.

As trite as that may sound, I think there's a whole lot of truth to it. A band survives by successfully doing three things: writing songs, recording songs and touring to support those songs through live performances. The key word is "successfully," and this is where things get tricky. Versions of success are exactly that, versions, and everyone's is different. Success to a major recording company is selling as many records as possible. That is its ultimate goal, and it is a goal that disregards variables such as content or artistic merit. The problem is that musicians complain that their "art" goes ignored by a business that has a duty to promote what will sell

and make profits, and they become somewhat jaded by the whole affair. It becomes (like so many things) a gut check: How far are you willing to go to have people listen to your music?

Moist guitarist Mark Makoway recently penned *The Indie Band Bible: The Ultimate Guide to Breaking a Band*, (Vancouver, madrigal press, 2001), which takes a band from its inception and explores the different scenarios that may come up along the road to fame and riches. He carefully explains the different aspects of the industry and how it can work with an act, but also stresses to the artist the importance of doing it yourself first. For Makoway, to do is to understand, and to therefore have more control over what happens to the music that you have worked hard to develop.

Even though Makoway's authority stems from being in a big-budget major-label band, he goes to great pains to explain that it has not always been that way, that his band has had to work for what it earned, and I don't doubt it for a second. The book is also filled with quotes from other Canadian musicians, managers and label representatives who serve to keep the book's real message focused: Stay independent until you are unable to practise your craft without the help of the industry.

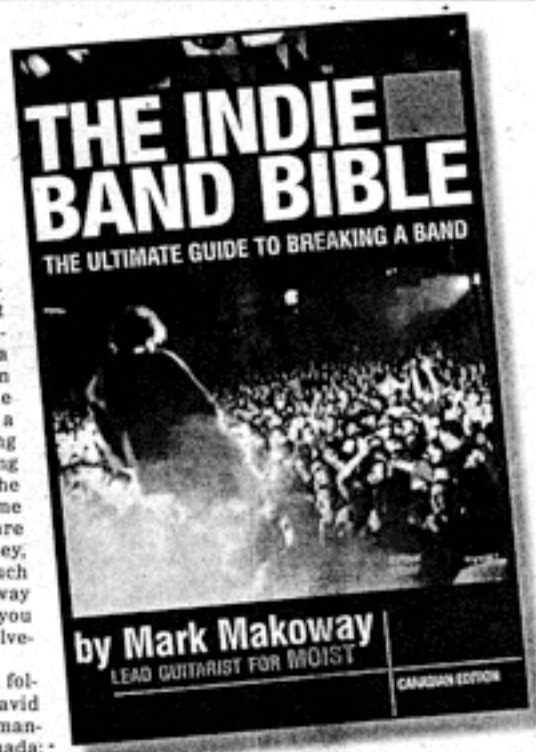
This is true. There is really nothing that can't be done by you directly and probably with more flair and creativity

than a marketing department could offer you (it's also less expensive). An independent act that draws 500 people to its shows, has a national distribution contract with an indie distributor, and a hard-working booking agent has a good thing going (see Winnipeg's The Weakerthans for a prime example). Chances are you'll make more money, and stay in better touch with your own unique way of doing things than you could with outside involvement.

But also consider the following words from David Macmillan, marketing manager of EMI Music Canada:

"One of the things that's always driven me crazy is people in the press that make assumptions by saying that we control bands, that we dictate to bands what to do... Of course we want you to sway our way sometimes, but there is also the voice of experience that you are working with at labels."

I've always thought that there's no single path to "success." As I mentioned earlier, success is different for everyone in a business that is so



diverse and multi-faceted. However, *The Indie Band Bible* demonstrates that there are a number of different things that can be done to help ensure that the endless investment of time, money and energy will enable a band to continue on attracting more interested people to it.

Next week, we'll look at one of a band's most telling tests of strength — the independently booked road trip.