



Lighters down, checkbooks up

A growing number of musicians are looking to fans, not record labels, to help fund their albums and tours. And giving has its perks.

By James Reed, Globe Staff | April 12, 2009

Ellis Paul, a veteran singer-songwriter who first made his name in New England's folk clubs in the 1990s, found himself in a disconcerting position last year. He had decided not to renew his contract with Rounder Records, his longtime label, but wanted to make a new album.

With no immediate ideas for funding, Paul took a novel approach: He enlisted his fans, posting a letter on his website asking for donations. Since July they've surprised him by contributing more than \$90,000 through a Framingham-based online service called Nimbit, along with checks sent in the mail.

"When you're only selling 20,000 or 30,000 records, you don't really need a label," he says. "We figured we could do this in-house, but we just needed the money, and where was the money going to come from?"

In a growing trend reminiscent of the old-fashioned ways of artists and patrons, musicians around the country - including local singers Mieka Pauley, Mark Erelli, Kris Delmhorst, and former Throwing Muses singer-guitarist Kristin Hersh - are depending on their fans for unprecedented financial support. And it's not just limited to American artists. In France, singer-songwriter Grégoire channeled fan funding through the website MyMajorCompany.com and released "Toi + Moi," which peaked at No. 2 spot on the French album charts.

Even as the economy deflates and the record industry continues its downward spiral, indie artists are finding that their supporters are eager to help. In a sense, the fans are replacing - or at least augmenting - the traditional role of a label, which previously would have financed the album with a monetary advance and then taken care of the promotion and distribution.

Piano-playing songwriter Seth Glier, who lives in Western Massachusetts, is only 20 but has already built a fan base that supported him on a recent monthlong tour. Through online efforts, Glier raised \$2,500, which came in handy as he and a bandmate zigzagged across the Northeast and had to pay for gas, tolls, and the occasional hotel room.

The initial goal was to raise \$500, which Glier accomplished within two hours and then kept going. Glier admits it takes a certain caliber of artist to ask fans outright for money. "It was an idea I had a couple of years ago, but I have a really hard time asking for help," he says. "When I was able to unclench my fist, it was great to realize how many people were there for me."

The fans aren't technically just giving money to these artists: They're buying services.

To fund "The Day After Everything Changed," his new album out in the fall, Paul allowed fans to buy different tiers of sponsorship, ranging from \$100 (the "Antje Duvekot Level," named after the local singer-songwriter) up to \$10,000 ("the Woody Guthrie Level").

The higher the contribution, the greater the goods. For \$100, you got an advance copy of the album with a bonus disc of demos and outtakes, along with tickets to one of Paul's shows. For the top-level contributions,

of which Paul received a few, fans got several perks - everything from a one-year membership to Club Passim to a signed acoustic guitar to a credit as an executive producer of the album.

One \$10,000 contributor, a Boston-based fan who wished to remain anonymous ("People are losing their jobs and homes right now. I don't think it feels sensitive," she explains), says she and her husband couldn't pass up the opportunity to have him write a song for them, one of the perks at their donation level. They even visited Paul in the studio.

"We left feeling that our donation - as well as everybody else's - is in very good hands," she says. "In this day and age, to pull out your pocketbook, it's got to be something pretty compelling."

Karen Zundel, a librarian in Pennsylvania who's been a devoted Ellis Paul fan for 12 years, says she even saved up for her contribution because it held more importance than your typical splurge. "The arts are what sustain us and bring individuals and communities together and help us to connect with our innermost beings," Zundel says. "A new car won't do that. When you buy a new car or a new outfit, you get that little thrill that lasts very temporarily, and then it's gone. But I think art really sustains me. It lasts."

But the way that art gets to the consumer is changing. Dave Kusek, vice president of Berklee College of Music who co-authored the book "The Future of Music: Manifesto for the Digital Music Revolution," says the role of record labels is declining.

"I personally think unless you need massive radio airplay, there's very little reason for record labels to engage with artists anymore," he says. "It's a relic of the past in that artists today can find other ways to get to the market, to get money, to distribute their product in a way where they have a lot more control."

Kusek acknowledges there are pitfalls to blazing a new trail with fan funding, though. "I do think there's some risk if you don't deliver," he says. "Essentially, you are relying on people's trust in you. They're effectively loaning you money in the hopes that they'll get something in return. So if you don't come through, you're running the risk of alienating your fans and eliminating those relationships."

Jill Sobule, who rose to fame in the mid-1990s with the ubiquitous hit "I Kissed a Girl" (long before Katy Perry swiped the topic), recorded "California Years," set for release on Tuesday, with the help of \$80,000 from fans after establishing a website, www.jillsnextrecord.com, specifically for the project.

"I know some people say that's a lot to record a record," she says, "but it's also for everything a big label is supposed to do: publicists, marketing, promotions, distribution. I've pretty much used all of it."

Like Paul, Sobule offered various services at different price points. For \$10,000 one lucky contributor got to sing on a new song. Sobule says she vetted the idea with her fans first. "That's really important: You leave out the middleman and go directly to the fans and talk to them," she says.

The one thing she hadn't counted on was the level of freedom fan funding brought her, both financially and creatively. "In the old model, you'd have to sell 150,000 albums for people to think you were successful," she says, "and now you don't have to."

"It definitely is humbling," she says of asking fans for money. "I feel like I better do the job for my fans. I better bow down to them more than a record label. They're the ones in control now, in a way."

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