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BEYOND THE MUSIC:

AN ARTIST'S ROAD TO RELEASE

Abstract

True artists are able to show who they are and what they stand for in every aspect of their process — not just when they are writing songs. In 2019, artists must do so much more than create music in order for it to be ready for release. This paper provides the necessary steps an artist must take to release their music on a semi-professional or professional level. Discussed topics include copyright law and how to file a claim for a work, definitions of image and brand and the best way an artist can communicate it to the world, and the importance of social media skills. I provide a Release Awareness Plan that artists can use as a roadmap to create engaging, targeted social media content that builds up listener's hype for a release. This plan can be followed as given, but the greatest benefit comes from personal refinements made from trial and error. Finally, this paper explains distribution deals and aggregators that artists can use to upload music to streaming platforms like Apple Music and Spotify.

Keywords: Music, Songwriting, Musicians, Artists, Image, Branding, Promotion, Digital Release, Social Media

In 2019, creating the music just might be one of the easiest parts in the process of releasing a song. Although it may seem that all an artist must do is start and finish their songs, there is much more to what makes a track and the artist behind it to be release ready. The era we live in requires artists to take on much more responsibility beyond their creations. For an independent musician, the process of releasing music to the public involves more than the writing, recording, mixing and mastering of a song. The song must also be copyrighted, artist image and brand must be established, release awareness campaigns should be planned, and a distribution plan chosen.

As a recording artist myself, this has been my experience so far with releasing music independently. Everything that I have learned has been the result of vigorous trial and error combined with detailed research. Although independent artists can do any of this in whichever way they like according to their identity and demand of their fans, and can prioritize certain non-musical release factors over others, my research and data show that this process is one of the clearest and most streamlined frameworks to follow to be ready to release music and have it be taken seriously by fans and fellow musicians.

The first thing to do after a song is finished is to register it for copyright. A copyright is a formal acknowledgement by the Library of Congress that a “tangible medium of expression” exists, and that it belongs to the claimant(s) (U.S. Copyright Office). That is to say, ideas for songs are not protected, but the “way in which they are expressed may be,” because that is very personal to the creator (U.S. Copyright Office). Copyrighting a song will not make or break its performance in the market when it is released, but failing to copyright music before it is released leaves it unprotected against infringement. This means that if another musician steals the music

or lyrics, or if it is used elsewhere without permission, the original creator will have a hard time being able to prove it is their original work in court to be compensated for the theft. If the same infringement were to happen after the work was copyrighted, the claimant would have a much stronger chance of winning a copyright infringement suit in court, because there is a time-date stamp of when the U.S. government received the work. Copyrighting one song with the United States costs \$35, and a compilation of songs costs \$55. Superficially, this may seem expensive, but it is worth the investment when it is put into perspective. Protecting a song for \$35 will save the creator(s) hundreds, thousands, and potentially millions of dollars if someone else were to steal the work and sell it under their own name. Many musicians still know about what is called the “poor man’s copyright” (U.S. Copyright Office). This concept is defined as burning a song to a CD, then the writer mails it to him or herself and never opens it. It is perceived as being a form of free copyright because it is a time-date stamped tangible form of expression, however the U.S. Copyright Office clearly states that “There is no provision in the copyright law regarding any such type of protection, and it is not a substitute for registration” (U.S. Copyright Office). The only way to fully protect a song is to file a claim through them (U.S. Copyright Office).

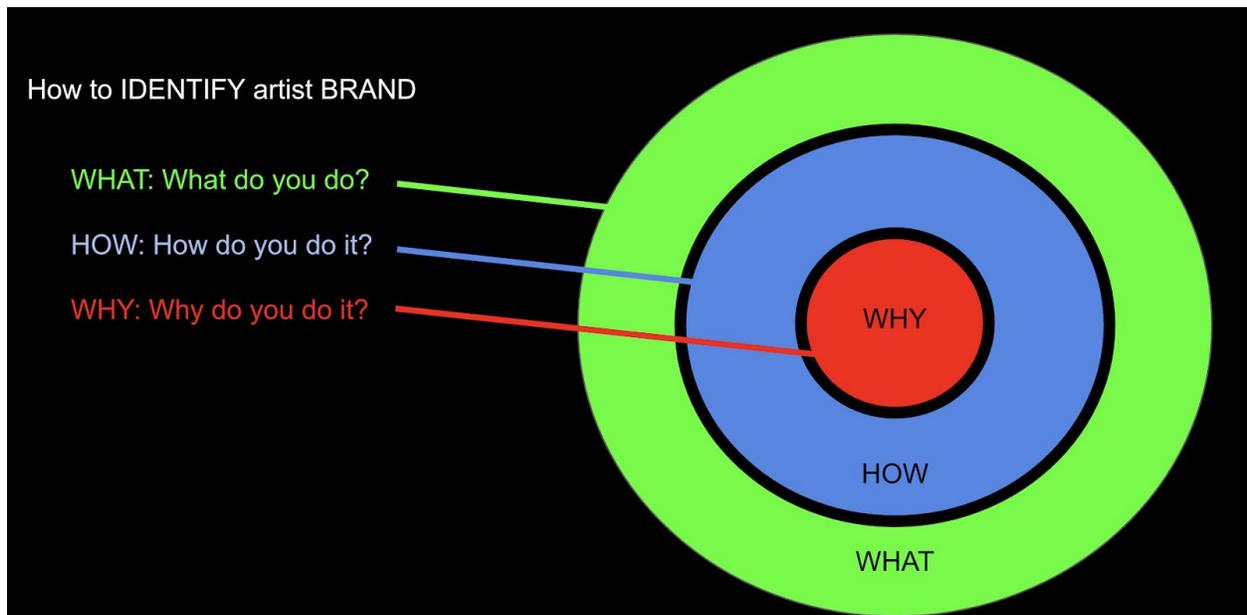
The process for copyrighting a piece of work is very simple, but also very meticulous. It is important to be careful when assembling the details as to who wrote each part of a song, especially if there was more than one person involved. The U.S. Copyright Office has a website, www.copyright.gov, where all creators can file a claim. To help anyone inexperienced with the process, the website even has articles that describe the different types of copyrights to file for, so that one can be sure they are filing the correct claim. For most cases, a singer-songwriter or band will file for a Sound Recording Copyright (U.S. Copyright Office). Works of the Performing

Arts are typically reserved for works that are typically meant to be performed in front of an audience, such as screenplays or scripts, however they can include music and lyrics in the form of karaoke or musicals (U.S. Copyright Office). Taking the time to copyright a work before it is released is a means of intellectual and financial insurance for a musician (U.S. Copyright Office).

IMAGE/BRANDING:

After a work is copyrighted, it is time for the musician to truly become an artist. Musician is defined as “a composer, conductor, or performer of music” (Merriam-Webster). Of course, an artist must be a musician in some respect of the word, but they also provide a face for the sound, which gives more depth and context to the art and music they create. Image is what makes it easy to relate to an artist on a personal level. Once a musician is able to define their image or brand, they become an artist. Image, or brand, can be defined as the “ideas, feelings, notions, or concepts that encapsulate that artist,” or “the commitment to a tone, look, or feel” (Golding, Marigliano, Fairchild, 2018) (Seymour, 2014). In other words, it is the physical and verbal manifestation of the artist’s personality, intention, or values, and the differentiating characteristics that sets one artist apart from the rest. The reputation and perceptions attached to an artist weigh heavily on their image as well. When we see artists such as Prince, Kendrick Lamar, Sia, or Lady Gaga we will experience some sort of feeling, recall certain memories, or even think certain thoughts that only they evoke. This is because they have such a strong image and brand that shines through so much in their actions, and it communicates directly to us as people. In turn, so many people find them memorable and iconic. When the image and brand of an artist comes across clearly in their presentation and actions, it communicates directly to each

individual who follows what they do. To understand how an artist can find their own image, and to illustrate the magnitude of its importance, I will use Simon Sinek's "Golden Circle" (Sinek, 2010).



The golden circle is a framework for effective communication. Each layer of the circle is a question that an artist must answer about themselves, their brand, and their product. Every artist knows WHAT they do. They create music. Some artists know HOW they do it-- meaning their process, or differentiating characteristics. Very few artists understand WHY they do it. Sinek emphasizes that WHY is not "to make a profit," because "that is always a result" (Sinek, 2018). Instead, WHY asks WHY they exist, and WHY people should care. All remarkable, "inspired" artists "think, act, and communicate from the inside [of the circle] out" (Sinek, 2010) Allow me to use Beyoncé as an example to give this framework a context.

If Beyoncé communicated like most amateur artists -- from the outside of the circle to the inside-- she might say something like this:

“I am a singer. In my music, I embrace my blackness and womanhood, tell personal stories of my own downfalls and successes, and show the success that I earned by unapologetically being myself and working hard,”

It sounds like an average one sentence biography, but it feels foggy and a bit superficial. This sentence started with WHAT and went to HOW. If we switch the order of information, and start from WHY, then HOW, and finally WHAT, the results are much more remarkable. This is how Beyoncé actually communicates:

“In everything I do, I aim to empower black people and women to live the best life they possibly can, see their own beauty within, and to find success in being themselves rather than changing for the world. I empower black people and women by embracing my own blackness and womanhood, telling personal stories about my own downfalls and successes, and showing the success I earned by unapologetically being myself and working hard. I am a singer.”

Just by reversing the order of the information and communicating from the inside out, Beyoncé's message comes across clearer, and seems to speak more directly to one person at a time. It is much more remarkable because the very first thing we learned from the second example statement is her core value and duty as an artist. This is why so many people will listen to her music. In addition, they will also attend her shows, buy her merchandise, and even watch the movies and documentaries she is involved in. It is not because she is the only person qualified to create these types of art. It is not because what she creates is the only of its kind. It is because the people who support her identify with her core values. This example and concept proves that "people don't buy WHAT you do, they buy WHY you do it" (Sinek, 2010). The goal in business is not to market to people who need what you're selling, but instead to focus on the people who believe what you believe in. Artists will make little progress marketing themselves to anyone who enjoys music. They need to focus on the people who appreciate and resonate with their values.

When looking at the Golden Circle, image falls in the HOW category. Recall that both image and HOW are defined as the differentiating characteristics (Sinek, 2010) (Golding, Marigliano, Fairchild, 2018). HOW is the physical and verbal manifestations of WHY, just like how image and brand are the physical and verbal manifestations of personality, intentions, and values. The crucial take-away from this is that having a firm grip on WHY one is an artist helps them to clearly inform HOW they can express this to the world. For example, in her physical appearance she embraces her blackness by wearing cornrows -- a traditionally black hairstyle -- on her album cover for *Lemonade* (Knowles, 2016). Lyrics like "Who run the world? Girls." clearly show her embracing her womanhood (Knowles, Taylor, 2014). Aesthetic decisions, such

as not wearing heavy amounts of make-up, or dressing in outfits that radiate power and royalty show the beauty and success of her being herself.

Specifically for a release, artists will heavily incorporate their image in their cover art. It is imperative that the cover art is designed with intention and purpose for many reasons. Primarily, it is a potential fan's first impression of the artist before they actually get to know them. Until a music video is made, the cover art is the only visible, tangible experience of that new song. In a world that is so busy, where people are so competitive for attention, it is important for cover art to grab eyes. However, it is more important for the cover to grab the eyes of the people the music is meant for. Knowing the WHY, the intention behind every artistic decision, an artist can accurately create visuals that communicate to their target audience - people who believe what they believe. Once an artist knows their WHY and HOW, the next step is to increase brand awareness. One must be consistent and omnipresent. In 2019, the most effective way to accomplish these qualities is by using social media. (Sinek, 2010)

It is a simple fact of life now. Awareness of the masses is on the internet. In the last ten years, the total number of social media users has jumped from 97 million to 2.77 billion (European Commission, 2018). If an artist wishes to be successful and known in the current time, they must be active on social media. It is for the better too, because social media allows one person to expand their reach to every corner of the world and not have to rely solely on the support of their hometown or tri-state area. This can be especially difficult for certain artists that do not fit snugly in the mainstream interest of their area. No matter what an artist's WHY or HOW are in 2019, they have the opportunity to find their target audience and form organic relationships in every continent, country, and city (Sinek, 2010). As of January 2019, Facebook

has 2.3 billion monthly active users, YouTube clocks in at 1.3 billion, and Instagram has 1 billion (Lua, 2019). Being active on these sites, and many more, and interacting with people already in target market communities turns strangers into potential fans or collaborators. The amount of relationships that one can form on social media in a given time is only limited to their ability to navigate the app and its users and the amount of time they are willing to dedicate to organically getting to know the people that make up the target community.

Alongside the massive numbers that show the potential for reach, different social media sites offer diversified forms of content. On the internet, information is consumed through text, photo and video. Certain social media apps focus on one or two, over the other(s), and because of this, each site has its own dedicated users who might prefer that site's style of spreading information over the others. It also means that artists can spread the same information over different forms of media. For example, YouTube features medium to long-form videos, Instagram and Facebook prefers short videos, images, and memes while also still offering text. Twitter, on the other hand, is a text-oriented site, that is very popular with photo, and some short-form video. Tik Tok is perfect for short-form vertical videos of dancing, singing, or even comedy. Snapchat also features short-form vertical video. Diversified content means artists do not have to think about each piece of content as a new idea or concept. One big idea can just be adapted to best fit the way an app features its text, photo, or video. Each site communicates in a different way, therefore each site has unique communities that prefer that method of communication.

Being an active member of target communities online and forming new bonds in as many places as possible is crucial for building a reputation on the internet. Of course while an artist

does this, they must also view and use social media as a tool to increase awareness by posting content centered around the release of their music. Over the years, through trial and error I have designed my own release awareness plan for singles and albums that involves pushing different types of content over time with the goal of bringing all eyes to one release in the near future. This guide can be applied to all social media sites and all media types because the strategy focuses on the message behind the content itself, not how it is expressed. Outlined below is the 4 week strategy that I use for my music. Each week offers a different aspect of the process to share to build up hype around the song, along with some ideas for posts within each aspect.

4 WEEK RELEASE AWARENESS PLAN

- WEEK 1: Document process of writing/brainstorming
 - Notebook pages
 - Chord progressions
 - Chorus ideas
 - Pre-existing content that inspired the song (books, poems, photos, videos, movies)
- WEEK 2: Studio video blogs
 - Recording Process
 - Story behind the song
 - First look at making the demos
- WEEK 3: Final product snippet(s)
 - Share lyrics/lyric video
 - Cover art with audio
 - Dancing to a part of song
- WEEK 4: Officially release the song
 - *Hard sale - actively ask people to go listen*
 - Memes
 - Karaoke versions/remixes
 - Lipsyncing videos,
 - Dancing
 - Fan testimonials/fan reposts
 - Thank everyone for listening

Rather than aimlessly posting vague snippets, releasing the song without an awareness campaign, or spamming people's private messages asking them to listen, the Release Awareness Plan (RAP) ensures that each post for each week functions as a puzzle piece to a bigger picture. The RAP grabs the attention of fans because it is centered more around organic awareness and speaking to the fan as a person, instead of hard sales or advertisements that speak to the fan as a consumer. Showing the real-time progress, personal creative process, and a little bit of who the artist is behind-the-scenes gives fans a feeling of inclusivity and intimacy. Intimacy builds trust, and trust will lead to streams and sales. Recall that the Golden Circle shows that "people don't buy WHAT you do, they buy WHY you do it" (Sinek, 2010). This plan is not meant for artists to compel people to stream their music through relentless self advertisement. With this plan, artists can treat the release like a story with a beginning, middle, and end instead of a simple build up for a product release. An artist's image surfaces in the way they document and express the ideas for each piece of content. Originality and clear brand communication in the application of the RAP will attract more fans with similar thought processes and interests.

The RAP is stretched over four weeks for two major reasons. Firstly, it is a great amount of time to create the song while building up excitement for the release. If the artist does not put enough time into building up hype, then it is more likely that the release will feel rushed or sloppy. Inversely, dragging out the teasers and previews of a song might lead to boredom, or even erode trust that fans have in the artist. Both extremes result in the release feeling less remarkable and evoking a lukewarm response from listeners. The second reason is a bit more complex. When using social media to create awareness for a brand and product, every post must be treated as an experiment that creates data. Monitoring the analytics and responses for a post

deepens the understanding of what a fan wants and needs, and where the general market’s interests lie. Four weeks is an adequate amount of time to see how a song and its campaign performed. Also, one week is an adequate amount of time to see how an individual post within one of the RAP categories performed. The more stimulating and genuine the content is, the more meaningful it will be. Spacing out a release over a four week time, with varying types of posts allows the artist to gather a lot of data. This can be used for creating more targeted, purposeful, and impactful content in the future. Below is an example of my own instagram analytics in a spreadsheet:

POST:	CAPTION	VISUAL TYPE	VEWS/LIKES	IMPRESSIONS	COMMENTS	SHARES	SAVES	
Altma.Cibhs Teaser	Watch Bait	Day countdown/Kato	218/108		803	15	1	0
Performance Video Otherside	Song title/thank you	upper body/outfit/moveme	461/188		1,426	28	7	2
Group Photo	Funny/Confident	Full body		173	1,209	31	1	0
Photo	Question/Show Advert	Covering face, night time,		99	1,208	10	2	1
Altma.Cibhs	Drop date/CTA	Day countdown, music vid	262/148		960	21	11	2
Artsy Photo	Thank you fan love	Balcony shadow		89	1,010	6	0	0
Photo	Motivation	Outfit, looking in camera v		183	1,063	15	0	1
Photo	Lyrics (The Clubhouse)	Candid, looking away, city		219	1,397	26	0	0
Discomfort	Cold Showers/ Discomfort	Video Meme (red)	336/97		1,077	19	7	3
The Clubhouse/Fan Love	Question/hard sale	Track list/ fan love		121	1,409	20	0	2
Altma Teaser 1	Birthday drop date/CTA	Day countdown, music vid	394/177		1,277	56	3	1
Fan Love	Thank you	Make up selfie		161	1,468	7	1	0
Singing Video	Question/CTA	Upper body/outfit/sunset	384/160		1,231	39	1	4
Nipsey Huzzle Tribute	Emotional	Video Meme	360/97		1,104	10	3	8
Lyrics Scan	See Post	Notebook page		117	1,185	20	0	0
Meme	Funny	Batman Singing, Purple	270/110		1,027	11	10	6
Fan Art	Thank you fan love	Irene's Painting		209	1,251	26	2	0
In the stu	Question	Portrait Mode, B&W&Purp		170	1,438	29	0	0
Not The One	Funny	YouTube Thumbball		123	1,201	14	3	2
Not The One Carousel	Hard Ad for song	Heavily edited Close up		166	1,387	8	0	0
In the stu	Question	Sit/sunglasses/gear behind		186	1,231	23	1	1
Me & Wisdum Taxi	Inspirational/Team	Stylish, movement, Blurry,		171	1,367	19	0	2

Personal notes of the caption and visual type of each post are included. The parameters that I record after that are units that I, and most people use to measure the success of a post. This spreadsheet becomes a tool for reference when it comes time to make a new post, or start a whole new campaign to build awareness. For example, if I want a lot of people to share my post, I should make another meme similar to the “Batman singing” video. If I want to stimulate discussion in the comments, posting professionally edited trailers and teaser videos with big

news attached like the “Altma Teaser 1” music video announcement for my song “Altma.Clbhs,” might be best. Collecting data is what makes the RAP work again and again over time. Each post is an attempt at creating content that engages the audience, effectively communicating that something bigger is on the way, in a way that feels organic and defines or elevates artist image. If the artist knows what posts within each weekly category were most successful at these factors, they will know what to post, or not post, the next time they start their release awareness campaign. The RAP is meant to be adapted and changed as the taste of the artist and their fans change. Building habits of effective, targeted communication, across all forms of media, in an engaging way is the recipe for a proper release and positive growth trajectory.

While increasing awareness for the release, the time will come that an artist actually uploads their song to a place it can be streamed once the release date comes. Sites like SoundCloud and BandCamp offer a free space to upload and listen to music, but there are more people listening on streaming platforms such as Apple Music and Spotify by far. As of April 2019, Spotify is “expected to have 222 to 228 million users” by 2020, while SoundCloud currently only has 175 million (Porter, 2019) (McIntyre, 2018). Another advantage to uploading music onto a streaming platform is that every time someone listens, the artist is paid. The one catch to streaming platforms is that artists can not personally or directly upload content to these platforms like they can with SoundCloud or Bandcamp. It requires more planning, time, and resources. The only way to make music available on streaming platforms is to submit the music, cover art, and artist info to an aggregator. Aggregators are companies that “collect the information about a particular good, make the providers their partners, and sell their services under its own brand” (Pahwa, 2018). All aggregators provide the same service, but their own

brand and company values create the subtle differences in exactly how they carry out their service. Two very popular aggregators for music streaming are CD Baby and Distrokid. CD Baby and Distrokid help “distribute music to partners like iTunes and Spotify” (CD Baby, 2015). Every streaming aggregator will collect information such as artist names, other credited musicians and producers, cover art, and song titles. They all collect publishing royalties for the artist as well (CD Baby, 2015). CD Baby’s brand aims to make itself a trustworthy company for artists, so a unique trait they have is that they will include ASCAP or BMI publishing, and YouTube monetization into the price of submitting music (CD Baby, 2015). Their customer service is always available for email or call, very transparent, and kind. Since they take so much extra care in helping the artist, their services are on the more expensive side. Submitting one song through CD Baby to all streaming partners permanently costs \$9.95, and albums cost \$49.99 (CD Baby, 2015). Distrokid focuses on maximizing freedom and speed for singer-songwriters. This is reflected most clearly in their pricing. A distribution deal with Distrokid to all streaming partners starts at one annual payment of \$20 for unlimited single and album submissions. The trade offs to this massive difference in price is that customer service is a bit harder to reach since they are only available via email, and that uploads are not permanent. Any work is subject to removal if payments are late or neglected. Distrokid does offer similar benefits like YouTube monetization but for an extra cost per single or album (DistroKid, 2019). It is truly up to the artist to decide what matters most to them alongside the upload of the song. Among all aggregators, major factors to consider besides price itself is the value that is included within the price. Factors like number of streaming partners included, quality of customer service,

access to song analytics, publishing, and peripheral opportunities for monetization on sites like YouTube are important for consideration.

True artists are able to show who they are and what they stand for in every aspect of their process — not just when they are writing songs. Assuming that the artist already created a great piece of music, they also need to make sure that their work is copyrighted to ensure that they are protected from infringement. Image and brand must be clearly expressed to make the artist more relatable and memorable for fans. Social media presence is necessary for maximum brand and content visibility. Carefully planning and creating targeted content to increase awareness of the release is another imperative step. Finally, the artist should choose a distribution deal with one of the many aggregators that are partners with major streaming platforms. Just like the process of creating music, the process of releasing music can hold a clear structure. Within a song there is a verse, pre-chorus, chorus, and bridge. In a release strategy there is copyright, image and branding, a campaign to increase awareness of the release, and distribution of the final product. The techniques discussed in this paper are a great starting point for a successful music release. Once an artist is able to experience trial and error with these techniques, then they will be able to make unique and personal adjustments to this framework. Refining their release process based on their intentions, values, and the response from their fans will bring new growth and exposure with every new song they release.

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