

## Where Do You Stand on the Indie vs. Major Label Debate?

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Bob Baker (How to Use the Internet to Become a Celebrity or Expert in Your Field) reveals the pros & cons of indie and major record labels and asks the question, "Which one is right for your music?" here:

"I do exponentially better financially releasing my music myself," Aimee Mann said in a recent article on the CNN web site. "I've sold more records with my rinky-dink system than Geffen ever did with their whole staff."

According to the article, that rinky-dink system consists of Mann, her manager and an assistant, who've done whatever it takes to get her music to the people who want to hear it. She pointed out that on a major label, artists might make 50 cents a record -- and they have to pay back the costs of making that record. "As an indie, you make \$8 a record," Mann said.

Not to mention the psychic toll that being on a major label can take. "Nothing makes anyone happy [when you're on a major label]," Mann recalled. "As an artist, you start to think, 'Maybe I'm not that good.' To go from that to being nominated for awards, getting great reviews and a great response from fans makes you think, 'Hmm. Maybe I've been hanging out with the wrong people.'"

You can read the entire article, which also profiles former major label artist Jonatha Brooke, at <http://www.cnn.com/2001/TECH/internet/05/10/music.net.success.idg/>

When I mentioned this article in a recent issue of my e-mail newsletter, The Buzz Factor (<http://www.thebuzzfactor.com/>), a couple of readers were quick to point out what they considered to be flaws with the article's message.

"Are you kidding?" wrote Butch Berry, who insisted that Mann had the advantage of once being a major label artist. "That's how she got such good management and such a good response to her music, besides having her music in a major movie release."

Berry continued, "Sure, it's better to get more money from your indie CD when you're selling a few thousand. But what if you're a struggling artist with no name recognition and you're only selling 100 CDs a year at \$10? I'd rather sell 300,000 CDs on a major label, never see the royalties from my CDs and make all my money from merchandise sales and touring."

Mike Gormley also believes that the artists quoted in the CNN article "have benefited from the PR and promotional machine of major labels," he said. "They weren't starting at point zero. I support independent artists, but don't let the media lead people to believe there is some sort of gold mine out there for new artists."

Lisa Lauren (<http://www.lisalauren.com>) agreed with Berry and Gormley. She also shared her own label experience.

"Once I started getting airplay with my first independent release (which David Sanborn made a guest appearance on), some labels expressed interest, but still not the majors. Miramar (a medium-sized independent label out of Seattle) picked up the record with an option for a second CD but filed Chapter 11 before releasing it. Even though they left me with huge debt (since my CD had already been recorded and mastered; they never paid me for it) I'd go with another label in a minute if it was a viable offer with some cash up front."

She continued, "With Sanborn again featured on my new CD, I still had no luck getting a label to pick it up, so I'm back to releasing it independently. Though I enjoy doing my own PR and having control over everything, I would gladly give up some control to not have to worry about booking my own gigs, shipping CDs to distributors and draining my own meager finances."

Jen Smith, of Naked Blue (<http://www.nakedblue.com/>) shared a different view: "We have three independent releases out and tour regularly in Pennsylvania, New York and North Carolina. We have national distribution, have had our music in films and TV shows, and have had a couple of songs cut by other artists. We haven't worked day jobs in eight years. We're actually in a position where a major label deal might be a step backward for us financially."

"It's important to remember how small the odds are that an artist will have any success, financial or otherwise, after being signed to a label. Independent artists can control whether or not they will continue to promote their records."

She added, "In the end, I think it depends on each individual's desire. Some artists enjoy the business of music and don't mind starting on a smaller level, working in the trenches and growing gradually. Other people would rather spend more time on creative pursuits and feel the need to break into the business with a larger impact. Independent artists might not be standing on a gold mine, but the potential is there for a satisfying and lucrative career."

Chris Schlarb, of Sounds Are Active (<http://www.soundsareactive.com/>), offered, "Regarding Aimee Mann: Granted, she may have had advantages through her connection with a major label, but I think there are plenty of opportunities out there whether you have been on a major or if you only have recorded masterpieces on a four-track."

"When confronted with constant failure and unrealistic expectations, a lot of artists deem the system to be the problem rather than seeking out innovate ways to sell CDs, get shows, get fans, etc.," he added.

Schlarb's comments are in line with my thoughts on this topic. There is definitely NOT a gold mine out there for EVERY new artist. On the other hand, you shouldn't plan an automatic funeral for every artist that doesn't get a major label deal. Lots of indie artists and bands are making good money and reaching thousands of fans with their music. You don't have to be a household name or an MTV regular to be successful as an independent act. Regional success and/or appealing to niche groups of fans can be profitable and rewarding.

There are also countless musicians who are wallowing in obscurity and self-pity. It's like most pursuits in life. Some people make it; some people don't. There are no guarantees -- even when you have talent and work hard. But by staying positive and using every tool at your disposal, you increase your chances of reaching a higher level of success and having fun while doing it.

Until next time, use whatever resources you have at your disposal to promote yourself.

-Bob