



## Promotional Tours

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### Introduction

In the gamut of record-company marketing tactics, perhaps none is more routinely misunderstood than the promotional tour. Quite often, in a meeting to discuss the launch of a new album or single, someone will proffer the following suggestion: "Let's do a promo tour to get this track started!" A variety of scenarios can happen next, some infinitely more positive than others. Having cut my teeth in the biggest and oldest promotion department in the business, I have planned and participated in many a promo tour for a wide array of artists. Some have been very successful, and others have been considerably less so, but there remains a consistent theme through out all of them: If the song or project being worked, is not a bona fide "hit" from the outset, a promotional tour will not change that important fact, regardless of the amount of leg work or money a label puts into it.

### What is a Promotional Tour?

Put simply, a promotional tour is the process of taking an artist across the country to push their music to [radio stations](#). While this might sound obvious, it actually reveals one of the many strange facets of the music business: the absolute necessity of promoting product to the industry prior to promoting it to the consumer. Why is this required? Well, think about it for a moment. How do you first hear new songs? If you are anything like the rest of the country, you probably hear them on the radio before all else.



The fact is, an overwhelming majority of record buyers are incredibly passive consumers. If they hear a song on the radio and like it, they will probably end up buying it. For the most part, people do not go out of their way to discover new music. When you consider that what people do not hear they probably do not buy, you begin to understand the labels' desperate struggle to get songs played on the radio. For unlike other product-oriented businesses, the record industry is reliant on an entirely separate industry to get its product onto the radar of consumers. Thus, the record industry is forced to spend millions of dollars a year pushing songs to radio in effort to get them actually played over the air.

Although promotional tours can involve other sections of the music industry, like press or retail, generally, they are focused on radio -- the logic being that if you can get radio behind a project, press and retail will most likely follow. Generally, I have found this to be the case. While there have certainly been instances of bands that have been lucky enough to get lots of airplay yet little press and retail support, they would be exceptions and not the rule.

A promotional tour can take on many different guises. They can be as simple as bringing one or two band members to radio stations to have them play acoustically for programming departments, or they can involve lavish performances and parties at clubs at night. Which will be more successful depends on a variety of factors, including: the reason for the tour, the genre of artist, their individual work ethic, the project budget, and ultimately, the quality of the music itself.

### Why Organize a Promotional Tour?

Ostensibly, it would seem that there is only one reason to organize a promo tour: airplay. Then again, because radio airplay is basically the endgame of any music marketing plan, the above question invites further discussion. I have been involved in several promo tours in which almost everyone involved, (excluding the artist and manager) recognized that the project in question had a snowball's chance in hell of getting on the radio. So why do it? Why spend money and time taking such an artist to radio stations to push for a song everyone just knows is not going to make it? Answering this question involves a basic explanation of record-company politics, and I'll let you in on a little secret: Labels often end up pushing acts they don't think are going to sell. There are many reasons certain acts get pushed and sent on promo tours. Here are just a few:

- **The artist is represented by an important manager or lawyer.**

Sometimes labels will get stuck with an esoteric or worse -- a mediocre -- record from a band no one was really excited about signing because the higher-ups at the label trusted or wished to please a certain powerful representative. You may shake your head in disbelief, but it's true. Even though the music may be weak, due to the manager's stature the label is forced to do something to promote the album. Enter the promo tour!

- **The artist is important.**

One of the first promo tours I organized at Columbia was for an esoteric side project from one of music's most accomplished contemporary solo jazz artists. The album crossed many different genres of music and had no obvious singles. In short, the record had no real shot at radio. Regardless, due to the artist's stature, the label was obligated to extend an effort, or risk offending this artist, who had delivered many critically acclaimed jazz records to Columbia.

- **The label wants to create an impression of priority for radio.**

Radio stations receive almost 100 songs each week. Since song familiarity is so important to ratings success, there simply isn't enough time in a broadcast week for radio to spin more than 30-35 new songs at a time. Since everyone in the business knows that stations receive infinitely more music than they could ever play, radio programmers get called all day long by dozens of people who want them to do things for them. Promotion reps, managers, agents, retailers, listeners and sometimes even artists themselves call radio stations to lobby for their songs. In any given phone call, a different promo guy will tell a programmer, "This song is a real priority for my label, so I really think you should give it a shot." Well, guess what? During any given week, a radio station only has about one to two slots to put on new music, so they rarely believe record reps when they work this tired angle. Many songs sound the same, many bands look the same, and more often than not, the majority of songs delivered to radio are stiffs anyway. Therefore, if a rep is to actually bring their artist in to a radio station as part of what looks like an expensive national promo tour, the station is way more inclined to put a face to the band and separate it from the huge piles of music they receive each week. This brings us to our next point.

- **Radio personnel are more likely to play records they believe have money behind them.**

I wish it were the case that the best songs made it on the radio. Unfortunately, any industry professional knows this is just not the case. When radio stations give a song a shot, they want to know that the label will instantly start pumping money into the marketplace. They want to see cooperative advertising, they want the band to play the market, and they want price and positioning at retail. This kind of push costs lots of money, and every experienced programmer knows this. They also know that once record companies get started spending money on a project, they will usually not stop until they have gotten the respective song a chance on radio. Thus, when a station first finds out that a project is getting the benefit of a national promotion tour, they will be way more inclined to believe a rep's pitch that the requisite amount of marketing dollars will be put into the market.

- **The record company has a long-term plan for the artist and wants radio to actually feel like it is part of the artist development process.**

I saved this reason for last, because sometimes it actually happens, and I wanted anyone reading this article to leave this section with a feeling of hope. If you are very lucky as an artist (not to mention very talented), you may become a true label priority. This means your label has so much faith in your ability to sell records and become a star that they are willing to give you the benefit of at least a year or two of hard work and are planning to spend lots of money on your record. A promo tour for an artist of this exalted stature takes on a different tone, because the immediate purpose may not necessarily be to get airplay. Rather, the label feels that, in addition to great songs, the artist has a great personality (or great looks) and wants programmers to get to know the act, get to like the act, and reach the conclusion that they want to help them on their own before promotion reps start pressuring them for airplay.

Two present examples of such an artist would be Mandy Moore and Jessica Simpson. Whether these two artists have great songs is a matter of opinion, but whether they are attractive is not. The respective promotion staff at Epic and Columbia Records smartly realized that Mandy and Jessica would appeal to male programmers across the country. While both of their first singles were being worked, the two artists were taken to virtually every significant pop radio station in America for a visit. As it turned out, neither artist had a massive hit with their first track, but both of them enjoyed follow-up single success, and both acts were effectively "broken" on their debut LPs. Exactly how much of their sales success can be linked to their promotional tours -- or their telegenic good looks that made them video staples on MTV -- is anybody's guess, but I personally believe it made a great impact on radio and established the

two young women as artists and not just teen singers.

### **Two Types of Promotional Tours**

As I mentioned earlier in this article, there are different means of setting up promo tours. Although you might think that bringing the artist to radio would prove to be the most effective kind of tour, sometimes this is not the case. Here are two examples of tours I have organized -- one with the artist, and one without -- and what happened:

- **The Catherine Wheel – A tour with the artist accompanying**

At the end of last winter, Columbia Records signed a great British band called The Catherine Wheel. The band had already put out a number of albums on Mercury Records, but had yet to actually break in this country. Although the Wheel has a history at modern rock radio, it had been several years since their last album, and the consensus at Columbia was that this band could benefit from a national promo tour to “re-introduce” their music to rock and modern rock radio stations. In addition, Rob Dickinson, (the Wheel’s charismatic front man), has a winning personality, and his manager felt it would be very beneficial for him to accompany me on the trip. Everyone at my label was very excited to be working with this band, and I was given the green light to plan what became a fairly costly tour.

As I was based in New York City and had a West Coast counterpart in Los Angeles, I routed the tour from Providence to Miami, and then had my partner start the second week in Texas and go west from there. In one week, I took Rob to rock and alternative stations in Providence, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, DC, Baltimore, West Palm Beach and Miami. This amounted to over 10 stations in just four days, and we traveled by train, plane and automobile. Every day we visited at least two stations, where we played the Wheel’s single for the Program and Music Director and talked about the project and our plans for it. During the shorter distances, as we drove from market to market, Rob would do telephone interviews with various stations we were unable to visit. At night I generally scheduled some kind of informal meeting with station staff, usually at a local restaurant or bar.

Was this trip fun? Most definitely. Was it successful? Well, that’s another story. The fact is, Rob does have an amazing work ethic and a terrific personality. He was completely willing to wake up every morning at 7 a.m. to get to our meetings, and effectively charmed every radio person he met. I explained to radio personnel that this project was a major priority for Columbia Records, and that my company was willing to back that statement with money and a true marketing commitment for stations that were willing to get behind the record. Pretty much every programmer we saw told us what a great record we had and that they were looking forward to hearing more. Programmers who were not visited on the promo tour were flown into New York City for a special showcase and party. In short, we had virtually all the setup an artist could ask for. Yet, when it came time to “cash-in” on our efforts and get the song on the air, many of the stations we had visited disappointed us. Although “Sparks” did make it onto a few radio stations, it hit a wall in the 30s on the chart and died almost as quickly as it started.

So what happened? Where did we go wrong? Could anything have been done differently to get us a better result? The answer is: not likely. Although “Sparks” was a great song, it was being worked in the wrong climate. Over the past two years, as modern rock radio stations became much more “active” sounding (adopting new hip-hop/rock hybrid bands like Limp Bizkit, Korn and Kid Rock as their core artists), they also began to turn their backs on British bands. Several months earlier, the formerly successful Blur had delivered a quirky, esoteric album with virtually no radio single. The new Oasis record had just dropped, and even a multi-platinum national act of their stature was suffering from a paucity of airplay and soft album sales. If radio was now loathe to play British artists who enjoyed massive hits in the past, how was a lesser known artist like The Catherine Wheel going to get a fair shot?

After a great deal of thought, it is now my opinion that bringing an artist on a national promo tour is a risky gambit. Unless the artist is there to perform his music live in front of station staff, I think it is probably a mistake to bring him. The fact is, radio staff will simply not be honest to their promotion rep when his or her artist is standing there staring them in the face. Good radio programmers are experts at lying to record promoters and keeping them off balance. With this in mind, I have developed a pretty good bullshit detector to know when a programmer is not going to add my record. Yet this was the first time I had ever brought an artist to a station that was not already playing the artist’s record. I wasn’t sure how they would all react, but I know I was unprepared for the programmers’ false exuberance. I don’t think any of the programmers meant to give Rob false hope, but that was the unfortunate aftermath of

our tour. I realize now that if the purpose of the promo tour is to get an honest read from radio about your artist's chances for airplay on a specific single, do not have them come with you. You will not get the honest feedback from radio you need, and you will look like an idiot when the record stiffs.

If you aren't on tour, then you as an artist should try to be as up as possible on the feedback from the promotional tour, so that you can go into every market well informed. That way, you will at least know who to thank and who needs convincing.

- **Our Lady Peace – A tour without the artist**

In the summer of 1999, one of my favorite bands on Columbia Records delivered their third album, "Happiness Is Not A Fish You Can Catch," to the label. "Naveed," their debut record, had broken the ice at radio, and "Clumsy," their follow-up, went gold plus, selling around 800,000 units. "Happiness" sounded like an album loaded with hits, and the label had high hopes that this would be the album that launched the band into the stratosphere. My partner on the East Coast, the venerable Tim Virgin, and I came up with a great idea to set the record up at radio. The first single was entitled "1 Man Army," and we both thought it sounded like a hit. We decided to hit the road as a "2-Man Army" and travel across the country in a Winnebago camper to visit as many radio stations as we could in two weeks. The trades were really into the idea, and Virtually Alternative agreed to give us a special two-page section with all of our photos and the journal I kept of the trip. We found a brand-new camper for rent just outside of Milwaukee, and figuring that this was close enough to Chicago, we planned to start the tour there.

The camper we rented was just about the coolest car I have ever seen. It was brand new, had an incredible sound system, a TV, a VCR, a microwave and gas cooking range, a refrigerator, a bathroom and shower, lots of storage space, and slept two people very comfortably. It was a terrific automobile. We created huge signs for either side of the car reading, "Our Lady Peace--'One Man Army,'" and the street date. We loaded the refrigerator up with beer, the freezer with ice cream, and the cupboard with cheap snacks, and began our two-week journey. Over the course of two weeks we took the camper from Chicago all the way to Charleston, South Carolina, and stopped at over 30 radio stations. At every stop we invited programmers on our bus, plied them with beer and ice cream, and played "1 Man Army" at top volume. Everywhere we went the stations were really excited to see us. They all loved the bus, and the idea that we were so passionate about getting this track on the radio, we were willing to live out of a car for two weeks while traveling the country.

The track was very well received by radio, and as we drove away from some meetings, we would even hear them playing it on the air just minutes after we left. Radio is a small, close-knit community, and the news of what we were doing spread quickly. By the time our trip was over, the song was probably one of the best setup records of the fall, and it exploded onto the radio in its first add week, going on the air at over 40 stations! Although mediocre research (the bane of so many records) eventually prevented this song from going all the way, it got to number 13 on the modern rock chart before losing momentum. The excitement that our promo tour created for the track was undoubtedly responsible for the song's fast rise up the charts.

### **Conclusion**

Promo tours can be a tricky bit of business. An inherent logistical nightmare, they are very tough to plan. Unless you have lots of experience traveling the country, you need to accept the fact that you cannot go everywhere you want to; you will get stuck in situations you did not anticipate; and the results of the tour may not meet you or your label's expectations. If nothing else, the two examples I have given will provide the reader an insight into how a major label might go about organizing a promo tour, and what the outcome may be. Understand that both of the tours I went on were very expensive, and far beyond what many less successful labels can or would be willing to spend. Further, as I mentioned in the first paragraph of this article, you can visit every station in the country and it will not make your song a hit if it is not one already. Nevertheless, if planned properly and budgeted judiciously, the promotional tour can be a very effective means of marketing a special or high-priority record to radio.