

# SO, YOU WANT TO RECORD YOUR OWN ALBUM?

BY SRULY MEYER

Many times you hear people say "I wish I had known these things before I released my album." This led me to think that some people out there, who may be considering recording an album, would benefit from some basic suggestions. Here are just some of the things I've noticed over the last 5 years.

Leading up to Chanukah we released a tremendous amount of new CD's and DVD's. Chanukah is one of the busiest Judaica seasons. Every season there are lots of new albums, many from new artists, and I know that this may surprise many of you, but most new artists are met with little or no success.

The Jewish Music market is a very small industry, with many consumers buying from different genres of music. That means that the genre to album to consumer ratio is smaller than you might think. "Eitan Katz" fans aren't just buying Eitan Katz CD's. They might also buy Avraham Fried or Yaakov Shwekey, and then Uncle Moishy or Yeshiva Boys Choir for the kids and Chanale for their wives.

Overall, this Chanukah season we have around 15 new CD's on the market (not including another 10 or so albums from last season.) We also have 8 new DVD's. Of those 33 items, some will just not be successful.

Aside from the music albums you have to compete with, there are non music products also being released. Such as Dancing DVD's, Jewish Film's, Cooking DVD's, etc.

Before you start preparing your album, it's important to know why something will fail. An album can do poorly for many reasons, a few of which are out of your hands. But some are well within one's control.

**The #1 reason an album fails is because nobody knows who you are.**

**The #2 reason an album fails is because nobody knew your album was in stores.**

These are two very important things.

A person may want to record his own album for a variety of reasons. He (or She!) may have a very beautiful voice, and those closest to him may have strongly suggested he make an album. But what's important to keep in mind is that while your friends may think you have a great voice, they aren't going to be the one's pouring \$60,000 to \$100,000 into your album, and sometimes it's even more than that.



If you want the album to sound truly magnificent you have to spend real money. I know technology has come a long way and it's easy to do it in your friend's basement. But to make a good album you need all the right ingredients. Sometimes you have to shop at a few different stores to get everything you need to prepare a proper gourmet meal. A lot of money and time gets spent, and many people don't realize how large an undertaking it is until they are well into the middle of it.

There is someone in the industry who often councils potential new artists, and here is how that first conversation usually begins.

"Why do you want to release a CD?" Regardless of their answer, this insider will tell them, "Don't do it. It's not worth it. Go home and invest the money in some real estate." It's good advice, because many people have tried, and most have failed.

As beautiful a voice as you might have, even if you borrow the money or find the investors, there is a strong chance that it won't do well. This might not be what you want to hear, but it's the truth. You might go through 2 or 3 years of hard work, putting as much as \$100,000 into an album which may or may not include the high cost of advertising, marketing and duplicating. And after all that you'll need to be prepared that 3 months after the CD comes out you might hear those three dreaded words - **"It's Not Moving ..."**

For those of you still around at this point, those of you still determined to make an album, we'll dive a little deeper. Let's get back to those 2 important reasons an album doesn't sell.

You may be asking, "How do I get people to know who I am?"

That's a very good question. If people have never heard of you there is a strong chance they will not buy your CD. Like I said before, each season the market is packed with new albums. Most of them feature proven artists and consumers can buy these without worrying that they might be let down.

So what to do?

Here is the best advice anyone can give you.

### **GET AN AGENT OR A MANAGER.**

It doesn't have to be as official or expensive as it sounds, but it's important to be able to respect the person you ask to fill this position. They don't always have to see things like you do, in fact it's better if they don't. You want a partner to help you see things from different perspectives. But once you find/hire this person, you have to trust them.

A lot of people will give you advice. You'll hear a lot of opinions and suggestions, but like the old adage, too many cooks spoil the stew.

This Agent/Manager will be charged with calling concert promoters, Jewish orchestras, advertising outlets and getting the word out that you're available and getting people familiar with your name.

These people will contact the Jewish magazines (like this one), the Jewish music websites, blogs, message boards and radio stations. They should help you create a working website, with live links and music samples from demos you've recorded in a studio. They will make sure videos of you singing at concerts and weddings are up on YouTube and Yideoz and are passed around from one eager Jewish music fan to another.

Ideally this should be done at least 1 year before you release your album. Every single successful new artist had fans calling and asking for their albums months before they hit the shelves.



After all that you'll need to prepare yourself that 3 months after the CD comes out you might hear those three dreaded words -

**"It's Not Moving ..."**

Dovid Gabay, Shloimer Gertner, Ohad are all some recent examples of this. When the buzz hits the fans, they call the stores and the stores call us. Many times the fans call or email us directly. This is how the stores and the distributors gauge potential success.

People were asking us for Dovid Gabay's album literally 6 months before we got it into stores.

If you go back a bit further, a little more than 5 years ago, Blue Fringe released their debut album with overwhelming success, B"H.

For months before people were calling us non stop, asking when this album was due out in stores. The people behind the scenes were doing a great job getting the word out. Blue Fringe performed dozens of times all over the Jewish camp scene that summer. People were talking about it, word got around and by the time the kids got back from camp they were running to the stores hoping to find the album.

This also goes to show the importance of doing shows. The more you sing, be it at weddings, concerts or camps, the more people will hear you. The more people hear you, the more they will request you for their own simcha's and events.

People have to know who you are or they can't get excited about your album. Don't allow your inner circle to blind you to the reality of the larger picture. I'm sure everyone in your Shul who knows you're making an album is excited. I'm sure all the guys who work with you at your office and the offices you work with are excited about your album.



But the strangers you've never met, the ones in L.A, Miami, Montreal, Monsey, Lakewood, Detroit, Tsfat, Chicago, Miami, Five Towns, Queens, Brooklyn, Paris, Yerushalayim, Toronto, Pittsburgh, Brazil or even Mexico, they don't know who you are and so they aren't excited about your album. Your inner circle is not who you are selling this CD to. It's all those other people in all the cities mentioned before. Your friends and family mean well, but it's important to be realistic.

I always tell people, your friends and family aren't going to buy the album when it comes out. Those are the people you'll be giving free copies to. It's the people who don't know you personally who will determine the success or failure of the album.

And then, when people do know who you are, they need to know that your album is going to be in stores more than 2 days before it's out. Too many times we're forced to turn down albums because people call us at the last minute. The reason we take ads, produce the podcast, put information up on the Sameach Podcast website, put up video and audio samplers is so that people know **BEFORE** the season hits that your album is going to be in stores.

The key is to get it into stores before the season begins. Remember that Chanukah is only 8 days long. Once it's over, the season dies down considerably. The same goes for Purim. If you want your album in stores "for Purim" have it done at least 2 months before Purim so that by the time people come into the stores during the season, word of mouth has hopefully helped sales and people know your name when they go into the stores to buy their Groggers and Megilas Esthers.

Don't rush your album out so that you "make the season." It's not important to get it out by a certain date. When it's ready, it will be ready. Better to have it 100 percent done and sit on it for two months until the next season then rush yourself to finish it so that you get it into the stores in time for Chanukah.

In order to make sure your CD gets into stores early, you need to contact a distributor a few months before the season starts. If you want it to be in stores by Chanukah, contact the distributor by at least September. Make sure your cover and album description are on Jewish music related websites at least 4-6 weeks before the album hits stores, this way people will be familiar with what the album looks like so that when they go into the stores they will recognize it.

Whoever is telling you not to contact the distributor till the last minute is wrong. (Incidentally, whoever *is* actually doing that, please stop.) We need to plan ahead; distributors want to be able to have their upcoming releases planned and ready to go at least 4 weeks before the season starts. We need to put together the order forms and album details to send out to the hundreds of Judaica stores as early as possible. The advertisements that go into newspapers and magazines are prepared in advance of the season. If you call us at the last second you will not have benefited from any of those things.

Here is another suggestion, and this is something that is still not done by many in the industry. Get a single from your album out to the radio stations. Today there are many Jewish radio stations both in the traditional form (Nachum Segal) and on the

internet (ShmaisRadio.com, OlamRadio.com.) There are many more than you think. Go online and research it, or you can email me and I will help you collect a list of them. E-mail them one of the songs from your album and ask them to play it at least 4 weeks before the album is out.

Of course if you want to do this, make sure your album is actually completed and you won't disappoint your fans by constantly pushing back your release date. Consumers want to know in advance what is coming out, but they want to know that when you say it's coming out, it actually does. There is nothing more disappointing and frustrating to a fan of Jewish music than to keep hearing that the release date has been pushed back.

I know there is a lot more to say on this topic and I plan on elaborating on this topic in a future issue. For now let me just repeat the most important points.

People have to know who you are before your CD comes out. Once they know who you are, they also need to know that your CD is out. Advertise, promote, get the word out. I know you sound great, I know you spent a lot of money and everyone you know loves the CD, but let the rest of us know it too. Then, and most importantly, you must make sure you pick a good time to release it. Make sure you contact a distributor early on, reserve a spot, and have your album mastered, printed, duplicated, packaged and ready to be in stores before the season begins.

Let me just close by saying that it's not impossible to release a successful album. You just need to have the right ingredients and they need to be added at the right times. I know a lot of this may sound discouraging, but I think it's important for people to know just a little of what they have to do in order to create a successful album. After everything is said and done there are still no easy answers. You can do everything right and have a great album and it still might not sell. The part you can't control is Mazel. But before you can count on Mazel you also have to help yourself and these suggestions are just a starting point, something to consider before you take on this huge task.

I hope this information helps anyone currently working on an album or thinking about starting to work on one.

*Sruly Meyer is the in-house graphic designer for Sameach Music. He also maintains the Sameach Music Podcast website and cohosts the Sameach Music Podcast with Dov Katz of the Neshoma Orchesra. You can download their Free Jewish Music Podcast (show) at SameachMusicPodcast.com. You can reach Sruly at SameachMusic@gmail.com. His personal website is DesignsBySruly.com, where you can see his most recent designs and read his blog.*

