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# SONGWRITER'S MARKET®

**WHERE & HOW TO  
MARKET YOUR SONGS**

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to give you a break is not a guarantee of success. When talented Joni Mitchell met Shay, she was an unknown. He may have helped her, but it was Mitchell who crafted her music, made connections, put herself out there and worked hard. You cannot lean on any one person and expect him or her to make it happen for you.

You can, however, build on the association. Shay's friend, singer/songwriter Susan Werner, describes it this way: "From the first time I met Gene and played for him in 1990, I could sense what many songwriters know: that Gene listens as an individual, of course, but also as a member of the larger community. He listens with an ear to whether the song speaks for just the writer, or whether the song speaks to and for many others. So knowing Gene, and playing for Gene, makes you want to write the best songs you possibly can. He's actually pulling for you, and pulling for the song, which is a wonderful feeling. I'm pretty sure I speak for many when I say that Gene has inspired several generations of songwriters to write great, big, broad, kind songs, and that we're all the richer for it."

Today Shay's two shows are both commercial free and listener supported, and licensing does not restrict what he can play. He finds content from numerous places, but the songwriters themselves (or their representatives) submit the bulk of fresh discoveries. Of the 15 to 20 CDs that come to him each week, one might have a hit, and it's his job to dig through the pile and find it for his listeners.

"People who do shows like myself, we're not paid huge amounts of money and we don't do it on a full-time basis where we have a staff to sit around and pre-listen for us and say hey, of the 500 that came in this past month, here are four of the best. We have to do it. We have to listen, and quite often we don't have the time." He must start by ruling out the ones he doesn't like.

### **CATCH THEIR ATTENTION**

"My main criticism with most contemporary songs is that the melodies are not very strong. They don't have anything memorable or the words are clichés," says Shay. He disregards lyricists who take the easy way out. "They're not using words in an imaginative, creative way. Too many use common phrases like ' 'cause I love you so much my heart is in my throat.' Where have we heard that before?"

The music must be captivating from the very beginning. Shay likes a song that is "a little off the wall, but just enough to make you sit up and take notice and say, 'Hey this guy is pretty clever.' The idea, of course, is not to draw the attention to the writer as being clever; the idea is get a song that sticks in your brain."

To do that you need to write things in a way that relates to your audience. Current events and comical situations often work. Tom Paxton once wrote "Thank You, Republic Airlines" in 1985 about the airline breaking his guitar. Many traveling musicians found it very funny so they bought the album.

People will often hand a CD to Shay and say, "Tell me what you think about it." He cringes at these requests. "I don't want to have to be put in that position. If it

sucks, I'm not going to tell you that, and I don't want to lie to you."

### THE SELECTION PROCESS

"It's rare for me to have to sit down and listen to an album all the way through." Sadly for aspiring musicians, he will not listen to half of the CDs he receives. He starts with a spot check of the song titles. A weak list contains "songs that are all sort of lovey dovey like 'I miss you so much,' 'When are you coming home Harry?', 'Why did you leave me?'"

If there is an unusual title, "I'll go in for the cuts that sound interesting. I usually go for the first two cuts just because that's where artists usually put their best two songs. But not always." Shay prefers track five ("The Babysitter's Here") on Dar Williams' 1995 album, *The Honesty Room* because it was funny and he thought it was a great novelty song.

Most often, though, he listens to the first cut and maybe 30 seconds of the second. By the third, "if nothing grabs me, I just put it in the reject pile. I won't throw it away; I'll hold it for six months. Sometimes one that was rejected became popular, and I'll realize that I have that album." Right now, there are about 800 to 1,000 CDs on that rejection shelf, and Shay's genuine voice turns solemn as he says, "It's a cruel business. I think of these guys and gals—they spent a lot of money, putting this album together and taking the picture for the cover, and beautiful artwork and all that."

People like Shay hold an encyclopedia of music within their heads. He will know if, as you claim, your song is unique. He acts as both a gatekeeper, guarding his listener from the ordinary, and a door opener, exposing songs that make people laugh, cry, contemplate, hum, or sway to the rhythm.

### PUT YOURSELF OUT THERE

In addition to titles, Shay scours the cover for something to indicate the artist invested him or herself into the success of the project.

He looks to see if it was produced by someone he has heard of; if it was recorded in a familiar studio; if the songwriter collaborated with another musician whose name he recognizes; or if there is a local connection somehow. He looks for hard work.

While we are talking, Shay notices that the CD in front of him is by Kristin Andreassen who was the John Lennon Song Contest Grand Prize '07 winner for the song "Crayola Doesn't Make a Color for Your Eyes." Contest-winning and the like is evidence that the artist is serious and has something special.

Networking is another great way for a performer to make connections. Through the years, Shay has participated in events staged by the Northeast Regional Folk Alliance ([www.nerfa.org](http://www.nerfa.org)), Broadcast Music Inc ([www.bmi.com](http://www.bmi.com)) as well as many, many festivals; in fact he is preparing to leave for the Woody Guthrie Festival in Oklahoma as we speak. "If the artist can afford it, it's a good idea to get to those

things, to sing in front of DJs and in front of record producers and other singers. After a while, somebody becomes a friend of yours and they lead you to other gigs, not only booking and clubs in their area but they also can help you with your songwriting.”

### WORD GETS AROUND

In order to stay at the top of his game, Shay listens to as much as he can. Besides submitted demos, he’s always listening to satellite radio and other folk shows because they provide insight into audience interest.

And he’s not the only DJ staying in touch. Shay explains how a group of about 150 to 250 disc jockeys from licensed broadcast folk radio stations all around the country e-mail their playlists to Richard Gillman of KBCS in Bellevue, Washington, who has created an automated counting program. Each month, Richard creates an airplay tally, and then lists the top 70 albums and the top three songs from those albums on [www.folkradio.org](http://www.folkradio.org). “Most of those shows are folk shows on college stations or public radio stations. Most are done by volunteers. The DJs all seem to like the same artists.

“It’s a great gauge for me to see if I’m picking the right cuts.” If he sees a top listing that he is not playing, he can retrieve the CD from his rejection shelf and give it a second chance. “Sometimes three years later I discover a song on an album that is every bit as good as the one I am playing, or even better, and how it passed me buy I don’t know, but I find that out by listening, for instance, to satellite radio.”

So an artist who is discovered in Philadelphia today may burst onto the scene in Minneapolis tomorrow because of this communication. Catch the attention of *your* local radio personality who is playing the tunes in your genre, and the buzz will start from there.

Shay also notes, “It behooves a singer/songwriter to go onto these playlists from time to time and see if their own album is on there and see where it’s going.”

### FIND YOUR OWN CONNECTION

Shay is still launching careers and spinning tunes on air and online. He has watched the business grow and change. He remembers a day when more performers bought songs, and more journeyman songwriters connected with buyers through publishing companies. People like recording artist Kathy Mattea still buy songs from writers, but he notes that Neil Diamond and James Taylor pioneered the now-common practice of performing their own songs, narrowing the opportunities for the non-performing songwriter.

Meanwhile, Shay has watched diversity increase and technology costs decrease, leveling the playing field and opening the competitive doors. He is watching as the middleman is being cut out, and he sees artists now selling their own album directly at a price that exceeds the cost of duplication.

Can a songwriter truly make money in the music industry today? “If they have a

hit on their hands. If not, if they have good quality songs,” says Shay.

Leonard Cohen once said in an interview that he wrote and reworked almost 85 verses to a song for which he needed six. Work hard to create a strong melody, be clever with your words and build the right connections. Then, the audience will buy your recordings, cheer at your concerts, and camp out at festivals to see you perform. Then you will know they like your song.