

Can you reach the airwaves as an indie Christian Musician?

Absolutely! As Christians we are unique, and as artists we have different doors open to us than most secular artists. You can spread His Word on the radio with effort. Even a demo (decently done) can reach the radio with college stations or "Indie" Christian radio shows which buy time on different stations. But it won't be easy with the secular labels owning many of the Christian labels; many doors are very difficult to get through. A radio promoter will even have a hard time getting Indie music into the larger Christian label-fed radio stations due to restrictions from their secular owners. But we are jumping ahead of ourselves..... First off some background and a few tips:

Independent music means: music that is not on an established, nationally distributed label. Independent releases which get air play are few and far between (but it does happen!). Here is what larger stations look for:

CDs! Most stations do not use cassettes on the air. The quality of music from cassettes is noticeably worse on the air (normally okay to send a cassette for initial evaluation!).

Original material. Many independent releases received contain songs that stations already play the original version of.

Message. The song should have a clear, relevant message for today's Christian. It can be vertical (God focused) or horizontal (relationship focused) but it must do it in a Christian context. The message should be cohesive with the style of music being used.

Production Values. This is one of the most difficult areas for independent artists. Most of the music played comes from the major Christian labels. When stations play an independent artist, it should sound just as good. High quality independent projects are possible, but it's not easy. Less can be more. A simple piano, acoustic guitar and voice done well will sound better than a full band with back up singers done poorly. Along those lines, the voices and musicians should be pleasant and on key. With digital technology now more affordable Indies can fully produce

sound recordings too, just don't overdo it unless you know how to make 50 plus tracks sound great from it's eventual two channels.

Distribution. If stations begin playing a song and it connects with the listeners, they will want to buy it. You need to have the means of getting your music into their hands. That might mean being ready to ship a quantity to a Christian Bookstore or being able to fill orders directly.

O.K., you can get airplay on radio stations, but it takes lots of work, i.e....

- 1) A very well produced project with sharp graphics.
- 2) Time-consuming research to see which stations play your style of Christian Music.
- 3) A contact, either the program director, station manager, or DJ preferably. Email is easiest but frustrating as you may have to write several times, and you may be told it was "passed on to the DJ" but that doesn't really tell you what you want to know, like "What song was played?", "Is it in regular rotation?" or "Was it even played?" Telephone contact is probably the best way to get the job done, but you have to be careful not to call too quickly or too often. Many larger stations do not like to deal with Indie artists because no one wants to have to tell an artist that their music is just not good enough. A nice generic answer is often, "Your music does not fit the style we currently are playing here." Also if you send out 50 CDs, do you have the money to call 50 stations? You might want to consider a reasonably priced radio promoter to do the work for you (but you will need to meet their quality requirements too as they do not want to promote artists who will not get airplay). They can inform you if you are on light, medium or heavy rotation, but you should be prepared to follow-up with more radio submissions (more \$) because airplay rotations generally last about 8 weeks and once you get the momentum going it's an easier sale to inform new potential stations you are currently being played by other stations. At first I'd suggest 10 submissions through the radio promoter to test the waters and see if your product is a popular one with the program directors.

4) Sadly it's easier to get a crossover track played on a secular radio station than Christian music on Christian radio stations (heavy sigh). It may be wise to have at least one crossover track that can be taken two ways, like a love song to the Lord and your wife. But is this a compromise? Do you want to purposely leave the word Lord out of a song just to get played on the radio? Good questions and ones that each individual will have to grapple with. Sometimes we are led to write a song for our parents or family loved ones due to pure feeling or sometimes even personal tragedies, and there is no harm in this type of music as long as your lyrics are Spirit-led from His love. From experience, I'd suggest picking the right secular station to get your CD to; with a good crossover track on your project you may get played. Many times the CD will be passed on to Christian shows that may also be airing on those stations.

5) **College stations.** The doors are wide open for your music in the colleges and there are major benefits for you and your music if you are reported to CMJ (College Music Journal) - New Music Report and make their charts. These charts are used as a gauge by many radio stations to see what styles are preferred by the younger listening audiences. Many radio stations (non-college) will play your music without hesitation if they see you are reported on CMJ. Your chances of airplay are better at the college level and bottom line, you are aiding His Kingdom with every rotation of your music!

6) **Compilation projects for radio submissions.** There are many comps being created to assist in radio play but you need to ensure you are not taken advantage of in the process. First off look to see if the comp producers are doing it as a business or as a ministry. There is a big difference, trust me. Costs vary quite a bit. Professional sounding and looking comps can be accomplished at \$200 a slot (15 songs or so). Note that different comps have different purposes. Not all of them are targeted toward radio play.

Secondly, how is the compilation going to be distributed? If it doesn't get out there to be heard, then your investment was not a wise one. Additionally look to see if you are getting CDs (the product) from the comp producers because you can quickly make back your investment by selling the CDs at \$5 or so in concert. Unless the comp

distribution can be proven to be phenomenal, we would not suggest you pay any more than \$250 for a comp whose purpose is radio play. This isn't a fixed amount as prices would need to be higher for some compilations that may have fewer tracks in hopes the DJs would be more apt to play the disc all the way through.

If it's done as a ministry the comp producers need to be held accountable for the monies to everyone involved in the compilation. Don't be afraid to ask, where and how the \$ is going because you do not want someone making a nice living on the backs of all ready financially challenged Christian Indies. Additionally, you need to ensure that the production of the other songs (on the comp with you) are also very high quality tracks (a selective comp). There is nothing that will sink you as quickly as having a really bad track ahead of yours (because of first-come, first-served type song orders). A couple of poorly done songs and the DJ will just toss the disc into the round file, without your song even being heard. Indies are already at a disadvantage in many radio station's eyes with presumptions that the music is of a lower standard. If your production standards are high then you may want to lean toward selective (Christian) compilations.

A selective comp allows each artist the ability to pick the track with the most potential for radio play. Instead of a DJ wading through half a dozen of your great-for-listening-but-not-for-radio tracks before getting to that radio song, he gets a comp full of radio ready tracks. Additionally, ensure you join a compilation with similar genre's as too much variety confuses the listeners. Few can stand to listen to a soothing CCM song then have a jam session kick in next track. The iron sharpening iron concept, with everyone's best radio tracks together is the best route to go.

7) Motives. First and foremost, pray, pray, pray. Then ask yourself some questions like, "Does the Lord want our music ministry to go past a local level?" or "Am I doing this for me or to spread His word?" Yes, everyone likes to have their music played on the radio! But the content within your music should strive for the excellence He commands us to give Him, He deserves all praise. We need to ensure our focus is on the Father, not fame. We all know that fortune doesn't enter into the Indie equation!