

Profile of Chris Brandt, President of Cazart! Records



You might expect the president of a record label to be a hard nosed, crotchety Simon Cowell type that sits behind an imposing desk, giving out orders and shooting nasty insults. After all, in these days of rampant downloading and plummeting record sales, don't you have to be a cold, hard business man in order to stay afloat? Apparently not. Thirty-two year old Vancouverite Chris Brandt just started his own label called Cazart! and he's actually an amiable, approachable guy. You could say he's more the Randy Jackson type. He may be young but he's been in the biz for a long time and he knows what he's talking about. For the past seven years he has worked as a sales rep. for Universal Music. Other credits include band manager, college radio DJ and promotions rep. for Molson. He is the music editor for Kitsilano's Point Magazine. Sounds like big accomplishments

already. But he's had dreams of starting his own label since his early twenties. After months of planning and with a lot of support from friends, he launched Cazart! on March 11, 2004. Now his weekends no longer exist, but he couldn't be happier. He is lead by passion for music and a drive to help bands succeed, to quit their day jobs at Starbucks and support themselves doing what they love.

All you idol wannabes – listen up! Forget about the airy fairy dreams, the bidding wars and the million dollar record deals. Here Chris dishes the facts, the numbers and the reality behind what it really takes to succeed as a recording artist.

JB: How long has it taken to launch Cazart?

CB: Ten months from planning to execution

JB: And you wanted to do this your whole life?

CB: Yeah. For years, any time someone asked me the question "If you could do anything, what would it be?" I've always said "I want to own my own record label". Last May I was out with a friend of mine and she said "Why don't you?" No-one ever asks the second part of the question.

JB: So you had lots of people that were already in place who could help you.

CB: Absolutely, yeah. One of my closest friends, Theresa Travato is the best publicist in the city. I've got fantastic graphics people, a Rolling Stones photographer is a friend of mine, I know a lot of artists, recommendations for lawyers, people who are into fashion, art and design. The engineer who mastered the album is a friend.

JB: How do you decide which artists to sign?

CB: It's gotta' blow me away. That's pretty much it. Someone who is passionate or gives me passion about their art.

JB: Gives you goose bumps?

- CB:** Yeah. And that's why I kept it (his debut compilation CD 'You Need This') genre wide. There's a rapper on there, there's a lullaby, there's some singer/songwriters, an alternative country, pop, rock. Most people don't like just one kind of music, so I wanted this album to reflect that. Now from a business side of it, I've got to find someone that I think has potential to actually get some radio play. It's going to be very difficult for an independent label and artist.
- JB:** So it's not strictly about your personal taste. You have to think about what would sell.
- CB:** Well, I've actually got three or four bands that I'm looking at that I could lock up today. But I want the first one to be the flag ship, even if they're a band that down the road are the lowest selling band I have. I want the first one to be something I'm proud of and who represents me.
- JB:** So you want to build a reputation for yourself.
- CB:** Absolutely. First and foremost. And that's the compilation, building the relationships, making a splash and showing that you're someone who's looking at all genres.
- JB:** Are you dealing a lot with egos?
- CB:** I think people in Vancouver have a different idea about things. They don't want to make money. And they're really concerned about selling out. You've got to play the game. Gene Simmons made a great comment in a speech I saw. He said "You know if you're going to be an artist – that's one thing. But it's the music *business*. It's not the artist – give-everything-away-for-free. The minute you sell one ticket or one CD – you're in commerce".
- JB:** That's interesting.
- CB:** An artist who I've been a fan of for a long time sent me a CD a couple of weeks ago and I thought, people who are already fans of yours are really going to like it, but you're not going to get any new fans. 'Cause it's got a slow song, then a fast song, then a slow song. You need to put your biggest guns in front of the record. The only way someone's going to buy it is if they *love* the first ten seconds of the first song, the first twenty seconds of the second song and the first thirty seconds of the third song - a minute of total listening of the first three songs.
- JB:** How is Toronto different to Vancouver?
- CB:** Vancouver's music scene is totally geographically disadvantaged. In Toronto, you can go on tour for two weeks, and every night hit a town the size of Kingston. Here you play Vancouver, maybe you stop in Kelowna, then you're driving to Calgary and like your fourth tour date is two provinces over. So it's a lot more difficult to build a following and there's only a couple of bars left that have live music.
- JB:** Sonar used to be The Town Pump
- CB:** That was one of the biggest venues. When the Town Pump switched to Sonar they started playing canned music instead of live music, and someone went to them and said "Are you ever going to go back to live bands?" And they said "You know what, we're making more money off the canned music, so there's no incentive to go back."
- JB:** That's pretty sad
- CB:** That's very sad. So all these places like the Starfish Room, they closed down. People just don't support and part of the problem I think is because shows go on so late here. The bar wants people to stay in there all night and so they put the bands on at like twelve or one in the morning to keep people drinking till then.

- JB:** You've learned the sales aspect from working at Universal for seven years.
- CB:** Yeah, I understand parts of the game that a lot of people don't. There's a difference between distributing and selling. A distributor makes it available, but the selling is where I come in. When I go into the stores, if there's no buzz on it, I'm going to go "OK, moving on". But if I know the band, am a fan of them, I'll do a hard core selling job of them.
- JB:** So you're not quitting your day job.
- CB:** No. If the label takes off - if it gets to the stage where its sustainable on its own – yeah!!
- JB:** Can you manage doing everything else by yourself at the moment?
- CB:** At this stage it's totally overwhelming, but I mean, I'm not selling shoes. I do this 24/7. My weekends don't exist. This weekend is the first weekend I've had of doing nothing in ten months. But there's nothing else I'd rather be doing.
- JB:** Do you enjoy schmoozing?
- CB:** For me, that's easy. Building a relationship, building a rapport. I have a complete background in that. I worked for Molson before, I've done indie radio, band management, I'm the music editor for a magazine. So I'm kind of hitting things from every side already.
- JB:** So this is a natural evolution for you.
- CB:** It was total synchronicity. It was kind of when my friend said "Why don't you do it?" That was on like a Saturday night, and two days later I asked the GM of Maple, "Would you distribute?" And he thought about it, and then he goes "Yeah, let's do it". So within forty-eight hours I had national distribution. Some labels work for years to get that.
- JB:** Were you surprised?
- CB:** I was humbled by the different levels of support and how quickly people wanted to be part of it.
- JB:** Are you're looking at long term development of the artists?
- CB:** Absolutely. I want this to be a career for them. I want the label to be sustainable on it's own. And that may mean that I have to sign a pop-y hit-laden artist. I mean I want to stay with bands that are credible. But at the same time you've gotta make money.
- JB:** Do you look at image and youth?
- CB:** Everything – you have to. But the biggest thing after talent is attitude. Do they know what it takes – are they willing to do it. And again, I'm not looking at million dollar sellers. The magical kind of bar seems to be 5,000 units. Large labels now need bands that have the potential to sell 100,000 on their first record because they can only afford to sign a couple a year. And it's not good or bad, its just the way the business is now. The major labels are publicly traded companies that have quarterly fiscals and if they don't hit those numbers, people are losing their jobs and stockholders are getting pissed off. I can get by on a few bands that are selling 5-10,000 copies.

- JB:** What about paying for touring?
- CB:** At this point I'm not spending a lot of money on tour support and things like that. That's why I need a band that is willing to work hard and build their credibility. This isn't a smart business decision – this is a passionate one and they've gotta believe in themselves. 'Cause if you were good enough for someone to invest a million dollars into ya – someone would have done it. So let's have realistic goals and try and sell 5,000 copies.
- JB:** Do you have creative input?
- CB:** We'll they're the artist – not me. But I do listen to the album and say – you really need to clean this up and I think this will make a difference. The problem in Vancouver is that radio really sucks ass. No-one wants to break a song anymore. So unfortunately you have to cater your sound to what the radio stations that are playing. If they're only playing bands that are like Blink182, or Celine Dion, you've got a choice. You can go out and tour and try and sell records off the stage or you can make yourself sound like one of those two.
- JB:** And once they've got that established, start doing more of what they want to do?
- CB:** Exactly. An A/R I know said "If I'm gonna invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in you, I need three potential radio singles to keep you on the radio for six months. After those three songs you can have Whales farting – it doesn't matter. But I need three singles." It's funny, I hear people say that there's only one good song on the album – well usually that is the one the record label told them to tweak and that's probably the one that least exemplifies the band.
- JB:** What about paying for studio time?
- CB:** At this point I'm not focusing on putting someone into the studio. I'm looking to distribute – they'll bring me the finished product and I'll help take care of the rest -marketing, sales, all that kind of stuff. It becomes more of a fatherly role than it does 'I'm gonna go do it for you'.
- JB:** So it's all about collaboration.
- CB:** Yeah. And you've got to be logical. People who aren't logical drive me nuts. I hear the story time and again where the band will play a big festival like CMW in Toronto or something and there'll be some big wigs in the audience and the band goes home and says "OK we're just gonna wait for the bidding war to start". Doesn't work that way (laughs). If you don't get a call in the next 24 hours – you're not getting one! There is no bidding war!
- JB:** Do you think that musicians are getting smarter in the business sense these days?
- CB:** The smart ones are getting smarter. Guys like Nickleback they're really smart. They did their own radio tracking, called every station in the country, every single week, spent a lot of time on the phones and worked really hard and really smart. But they're the exception to the rule.
- JB:** Don't you feel pessimistic starting a label now when there's so much downloading?
- CB:** The industry is getting slaughtered. But that's all the more reason why this needs to be done. The labels aren't making enough money. Dwight Yoakam doesn't have a record deal. He's still gonna sell a substantial number of records but he's not gonna sell enough for a major label to continue working with him. So it's needed more than ever before for someone to help these bands.

JB: So what does the future hold for Cazart?

CB: For me, long term goal is obviously I'd like to make money. But the first step is I want to be credible. I'd love to keep my job now. Second step, do well enough for the label to be sustainable on its own. Third would be to grow enough to get the opportunity to get bought out or get invested in by someone. Someone like Clive Davis come in and buy half of it for a few million, 'cause he likes a couple of artists on the roster. Pretty cool business plan. Someone come in and buy me out for 2 million dollars – fine! I'd bank 90% of it and take 10% and start again!

'You Need This' is available in records stores everywhere or online at www.cazartrecords.com