

## All the things I do when I release an album

What do I do when I release a record? I often hear that question, both from musicians and from family and friends. I've decided to write it down. So for those who really want to know, read on.

After I have written and recorded a number of songs, or had them recorded, and mixed them down or had them mixed down, a master must be made. I sometimes do that myself, but if I have already done everything myself, up to that point, it's good to have someone else listen to my tracks and do the final fine-tuning. There is a good chance that I am so deeply involved in the details of my own music and sound that I no longer hear the big picture properly. Someone who specialises in mastering, which is mainly about balancing volumes and frequencies, can do a lot of good for the sound of the entire album and make all the tracks sound together as a whole.

It depends on how I want to release the record, on what kind of sound carrier, but in addition to digital I usually opt for CD and LP and sometimes for the good old cassette. The advantage of releasing a cassette, which of course looks nice and some people swear by the warm tape sound, is that I can have them made in a small edition, so I can bring a physical release into the world for relatively little money. But there's one more thing I should mention about mastering: it can be different for CD and LP. Especially when making electronic music, I have to take into account that I cannot bounce everything between 20 and 20,000 Hz (the range for digital audio and approximately the range of the human ear) straight on vinyl. An LP pressing goes through a number of analog steps and in short, I have to be careful with the bass which needs 'skimming' in the eq-ing and has to be mono. There can in any case be no 'phasing' because then the needle will jump out of the groove. The highs must also be treated with care from 16 kHz up. Look up the details if you want to know more, but I can tell you that the often claimed 'warmer' sound of LPs has something to do with this. So the bottom line is that I almost always need a separate master for LP production, which then also has to be supplied as A side and B side.

For CD pressing, the factory needs a special type of file: a DDP file. I have installed a program on my computer that allows me to create such a file. It is important that the master audio tracks have a 16 bit sample rate and are bounced at 44.1 kHz as ".WAV" files. I also need the same audio quality for digital distribution, to get the tracks on download and streaming services. To have a cassette duplicated, I also need these types of .WAV files, but just like with the LP, I am expected to supply a complete A and B side in which I have also taken into account the correct pauses between the songs.

The DDP file that I have to deliver to the CD pressing plant contains not just the tracks in the correct order; when loading the tracks, I also immediately determine the pauses between the songs, type in the correct titles (which can then appear on the screen of the CD player), indicate who owns the music, or which label puts it out, and I give each track a unique *ISRC code*. I can come up with that code myself, but there are some regulations attached to it. It's fairly easy to find online what exactly should be 'in' the code, such as letters that refer to the country where you live, the name of the label and the year of issue. Internationally, machines can recognise the code when playing the CD and if a track is played on a radio station, that information is immediately linked to the correct owner of the music. The same codes have to be provided to the download and streaming platforms for your digital distribution. The code is like a car license plate for a song.

Good, then I have all the audio in the pipeline to pressing plants and online platforms, but then they won't do anything yet. They also want to be sure that I have all the rights to have that specific music duplicated and for that I have to go to, in my case, BUMA/STEMRA, a private collecting society for composers and music publishers (like PRS in the UK and SACEM in France). Even if you are not affiliated with this kind of organisation, you

will have to deal with them. I am only a member of BUMA, through which I receive money when my music is played or played on radio, TV or on stages. The STEMRA pays musicians whose music is pressed onto sound carriers (a digital file for streaming or downloading is a 'sound carrier' too). In my case, I'm the one releasing it, so I don't need them. And yet I need a note from STEMRA stating that I am not affiliated with them and that I own all the rights to my own music. The CD, LP and cassette factories want to see that kind of proof before they start pressing my music. So I go to the BUMA/STEMRA online portal and enter the artist name, rights holder, titles, duration, etc. and half an hour later I receive a 'license' by email. Suppose I have covered another artist, for example Jacques Brel or Norma Tanega, then I will also receive an additional bill from STEMRA and I will have to pay for the fact that I (partly) recorded, release and sell someone else's music.

And even then I can't sit back and wait for the doorbell to ring and the boxes of LPs, CDs and cassettes to be delivered to my doorstep. I also want a cover, a sleeve, for the release and a nice 'image' or 'album artwork' for the digital release. I almost always have the printing of the covers done by the pressing plants. They work with printing companies or have their own printing company in the factory that can supply different types of covers. I have special posters and inserts done by a friendly printing company, in riso print or screen printing, but LP and (digi-pack) CD covers are difficult to put together by hand. So I design a front and a back and an insert or booklet with texts, photos, drawings and other information, or I let someone else do that. The pressing companies send special templates with specifications so that I can deliver everything in the correct format for the printing company. For the LP I also have to make 'labels', which are those pieces of paper that are on both sides of the record 'inside' around the hole. It may be useful to put 'A side' and 'B side' on it, for example. You can also have some things printed on the cassette tape and on the CD. You can of course also get started with stamps and stickers yourself, which can be very nice and can also be cheaper. And the release needs a catalog number. I release my music on my own Makkum Records label so the catalog number of my first release became MR1. Factories and pressing plants find these numbers useful as a reference to the album and fans and collectors find it very useful to check if they didn't miss out on a release. You don't necessarily have to come up with a new complicated 'label name'; The Ex's releases have been appearing on Ex Records already for 45 years.

Once the audio and artwork have been sent to the factory, and they have indicated that everything has been received in good order, I can sit back for a while. CDs, LPs and cassettes are not ready the next day. Pressing LPs currently takes up to three months and cassettes and CDs often need up to six weeks to mature. After about four weeks, a package is delivered from the LP pressing plant: the test pressing. The factory sends me a sample record to check whether everything sounds nice and good enough. Maybe I hear ticking or scratching or I might think the record is too soft or too loud and overdriven, then I can indicate that something needs to change. In most cases I have to submit a different master. Adjusting the machines is no easy task and I have to take into account that it will also take a while longer before the LPs are ready in case I want a new test pressing.

In the meantime, I'll get started on the digital release. My music ends up on iTunes, YouTube and Spotify amongst others via the digital distribution platform CDbaby. I have to 'upload' the tracks online and also add the artwork, titles, rights holder and ISRC codes. And I must provide a barcode; the ancient barcode that so beautifully disfigures your LP, CD and cassette artwork. This is also needed for the digital distro. Because I sell a 'product', in this case a digital album, people would like to attach a unique code to it. You can buy those barcodes. That doesn't cost a lot of money, but in the past I didn't feel like doing it at all and just ripped one off a jar of peanut butter and used it. That went well for quite a while; In record and CD stores they generally do not sell peanut butter and they

can therefore easily enter my album under that peanut butter code into their computer system. But then bol.com (Dutch version of [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)) came along and they sell everything; So I suddenly received special orders and certain customers of bol.com simply received twenty Zea CDs instead of twenty jars of peanut butter. That caused some hassle, so I gave in and bought 'unique' codes.

Weeks can go by when I'm busy with other things such as performing and not thinking about the new record, but then suddenly there's a message saying a package is on its way or come and pick up your order. With trembling fingers I open a box and fish out my new album, my new LP, CD or cassette. And it's not just one copy, no, there are hundreds. That always gives a very special feeling; I have made, played and recorded music and had it pressed onto a sound carrier and made or had beautiful artwork made for it and now I suddenly have it in my hands. I like to share that with everyone immediately; so I take a picture and send it around: "Tadaa! My new album!"

And then? Then a lot still needs to be done. I can't just sit around and wait for the whole world to come and pick up a copy. That's not how it works, at least not for me. Months earlier I already came up with a 'release date'. In any case, the online download and streaming services want that, but for me it is also useful to have a date on which my new album will officially be released. I will be doing performances around that date, one of which will be an 'official' release party. That helps to generate some attention for my new album, because hundreds of new albums are released in the world every week and they all want to be sold. So I shout "pay attention, pay attention to my record." But should I also start commercial advertising?

During those weeks when I was waiting for my music, I started doing something else, namely writing a 'press-sheet', also called 'one-sheet'. That is an A4 sheet of paper containing all the information about the new record, such as: artist, title, catalog number, label, release date, distributor, type of sound carrier, etc., plus a fairly concise description of the music. One can also add a picture of the cover, tour dates and a photo, but the idea is that it all fits on a single 'sheet'. I send this along with a copy of the LP, CD or cassette to journalists (people who review music in magazines, newspapers and on blogs, etc.), to DJs (people who could play my music on the radio or in clubs), to programmers (people who could book me for a show or festival) and to producers (of media programs for which I could be invited to perform or for an interview). I also include a short biography of 'Zea' separately, so that people know about other things I have made and done. I sometimes ask someone else to write the one-sheet. Someone else's perspective can help to get the story across. It is essential that it somehow becomes clear that the music I have made is important, that it had to be made, by me, and that now is the time to share it with the world. There is a story behind every song, there is an origin of every track and therefore of the entire record. People want to know those stories, not just music freaks and journalists (the latter category falls within the former), but everyone. Of course music speaks for itself, but still, there is always a cause. And why that title? And why the cover? And why do certain guest artists participate? And why did I record it in a hut on the moor? And why did it have to be mastered in New York? By whom again?

The one-sheet must be put in the mail together with a sound carrier, although many of the above-mentioned recipients are also happy with a digital 'promo link'. And that is very useful; I upload my album and put it behind a private link on Soundcloud, with the information about the record underneath. And I create a folder on Google drive with photos and the bio and the one-sheet and the entire album in MP3 and in WAV format. I can send those links around to journalists and bookers and so on. Did I mention that I often have

new photos taken of myself especially for the release? There are magazines and newspapers and venues that would much rather print a face (even mine) than the cover of an album, that's why. And how to get all the (email) addresses of all those people to whom I want to send something? I ask around and check the colophons of magazines and newspapers and websites or ask people personally when I meet them. Or I have it done by someone who does 'promotion'. There are people who have made it their job to 'promote' music, they have a huge address file and can estimate who would want to do what with my music. I work with such a person based in Berlin and he sends my releases to media throughout Europe. That's how my music gets played on the national radio in Italy and reviewed in a music magazine in Spain. I always contact the Dutch journalists myself, because I know almost all of them personally and I like to tell them the happy news about my new record myself.

Arranging performances, making a tour poster, a special poster for the release party, event pages and all kinds of announcements on social media, a newsletter via email; the ways in which someone can showcase an album as a 'product' are quite endless. It all started with my own website, where I keep track of all releases and performances and also post photos, for example, but I admit that I reach more people via Facebook and Instagram.

And then there's the video. Moving images can work great with music and people like it. I like it too. With every album I release, there is always a video and usually more than one. I personally think it's cool to make a 'clip' for one of my songs, but I often meet people who are very good at it and who ask me if they can make a video for me. Or I ask them. And then I can, for example, release that song as a special, as a 'single', a month before the entire album is released. So I don't necessarily have to 'advertise' my new record, like Oral-B does for its toothbrushes, but I can do all kinds of things to get attention for it so that people will listen to the record and buy a copy it when it is released.

But where do they buy it? Yes, that needs some work too. It should be 'in stores' before the release day, of course. But that's not really how it works these days. There are no longer that many record stores in the Netherlands and the stores that do exist mainly buy records 'that sell'. Yeah, haha, that's a tough one, you think my music 'sells'? Well, eventually it does, but not in big chunks and there's are no lines outside the stores everywhere on the release date. But it's anyway useful when stores can order my album as soon as a customer asks for it. And that goes through a distributor.

Imagine a large warehouse on an industrial estate, filled with LPs and CDs, tens of thousands of them. They are arranged alphabetically on gigantic shelves. There are a few packing tables and a number of desks with computers that receive orders from record stores. I'm bringing a number of boxes with my new album to that warehouse. A store somewhere in the Netherlands can therefore purchase my LP or CD or cassette for a distribution price (which is approximately half of the final sales price) and that order goes through a central system, a database on which all stores and all distributors are connected. The retailer can see at a glance where he can order the disc, for how much money and how quickly it can be delivered. Easy enough. There's a good chance that that store will also order some other releases from that distributor. This can then be posted together and that will save on shipping costs. So a few weeks before the release I bring some boxes to that warehouse so that they can also let their customers, i.e. the stores, know that a new Zea record is coming.

But what about my own favourite record store? I want to be sure that my album is at least for sale there and preferably even in the shop window. Well, that's not difficult to arrange at

all; most stores are willing to take a stack on 'consignment'. This means that I take them there myself, they try to sell them and I only get money for them when they are sold. This way the store is not taking a risk and I can have one of my records in the window, one in the Z box, one in the 'new' box and one in the listening post. Bookstores actually all do it this way and that is why they can easily build a whole tower of a new book at the entrance, because they can simply return the unsold copies to the distributor.

Since my album is in a large database through the distributor, online stores can also offer my release. Without me even asking for it, the album is suddenly available on [bol.com](http://bol.com) and Amazon and others. Perhaps useful for some who like to purchase both their music and their peanut butter from the same web shop, but I prefer that if people want to order my record online, they do so directly from me. And that is why I have a website with an online shop. In any case, I earn more from it, but because I have a label with many more releases, people can immediately see the other music that I release as well and people often decide to order something more. Well, such a website with web shop itself is not cheap, unless you are very handy and can build it all yourself or you have a friend who likes to help out. Then it will still cost you a domain name, web space, sales licenses, connection to online payment systems and so on. So if you can't cough up all that money right away, there is a very good alternative, namely Bandcamp. Through this site I can offer tracks for download, at a price that I can determine myself, and I can offer CDs, LPs, cassettes, t-shirts and so on. It's a really useful site and I earn a lot more there than on streaming sites and the like. There are plenty of bands that don't have a website, but use their Bandcamp site as their 'own' site, and that works fine. Oh yes, and the site is free to join, but Bandcamp does take 15% of every sale.

Ok, so the record is ready to be sold everywhere, both physically and digitally, and journalists and DJs have a copy to review and play and there is a folder with photos and an up-to-date bio and a press sheet and a poster for the release party and an announcement and a video and a website and then I'm actually done.

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