

PART V

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## Modern Metal Genres

## Personal Take V – Arne Jamelle

### *Metal Labels and the Shift towards Digital*

Perhaps the most important job a record label has nowadays is showing artists why they would need a record label, to begin with. In that regard, metal labels, in catering to a narrowly defined audience and working in more or less clear-cut structures, do have an advantage compared to their competitors in most other genres. At its core, metal as a genre is still very much album driven, as opposed to putting out a vast number of standalone digital singles like pop or rap artists would, and thus its loyal fans still show a strong affinity towards the physical product. Digital singles have gained significance for metal bands as well, but for most, they are just promotional assets leading up to an album release.

For a standard album release that contains a variety of physical formats (at least CD and LP) in addition to the full digital treatment, it's very advisable to have a team of experts looking after the various aspects of financing, product management, layout, production, physical and digital distribution and sales, as well as marketing and promotion. This all depends on the individual band's ambitions, of course. Most bigger labels offer all of these services under one roof, and you don't have to hire third-party companies to take care of the aspects you're lacking expertise in. To be honest, with a little effort, a lot of the aforementioned can be handled in a do-it-yourself-fashion by devoted and well-organised artists, but it's both time-consuming, virtually a full-time job in its own right, and potentially quite expensive to outsource occasional jobs that could pop up along the way. The costs involved in kicking off a proper album campaign have led to many bands seeking labels for the sole purpose of using them as credit banks to cover their studio costs and for contractually agreed additional advances for negotiable assets such as separate budgets for videos, album artwork and band photos.

While digital streaming is vastly on the rise for metal, in some territories faster developing than others, buying and listening to CDs and LPs is still being considered the 'normal' way of consuming music for fans of the genre because the purchase of an album or band merchandise is believed to be the gold standard of showing support for an artist. The fixation on a physical product within metal circles could be ascribed to a strong sentiment of nostalgia that has always played a huge part in the musical socialisation of the first generations of metal fans, who grew up with the early waves of proper heavy metal in the 1980s and 1990s and still represent a majority in the scene as a whole. In Germany, one of the biggest markets for metal worldwide, even CDs are still a thing, and some experts already

predict a major resurgence of the CD due to the current shortage of raw materials that has led to a ridiculous price increase for vinyl.

In terms of marketing and public relations for metal bands, from a label's perspective, there have been significant changes over the last decade. While you would spend at least 80 per cent of your campaign budget for advertisements in printed press and other analogue formats about ten years ago, today it is the other way around. Most of the money is being spent online nowadays for a much wider potential reach, customisable targeting options on various platforms, more creative ideas to be implemented, as well as for transparency and subsequent evaluation. The shift towards digital has also led to much longer campaigns because you're not only trying to get as many people as possible to buy an album during pre-order or in the first week of release; you also try to build and keep up the momentum of the digital product as a steady source of income. While a decade ago, you would basically spend all of your marketing budget during the two months leading up to an album release for the biggest possible impact and visibility within a relatively short timeframe, modern campaigns can easily stretch out over six months, including several singles, music videos, teasers or other audio-visual assets serving as constant reminders on social media platforms.

In this professional respect, the shift in metal has happened significantly slower than in other popular musical genres, which can partly be attributed to a degree of gatekeeping deeply rooted in the scene's self-conception. Many of the older metal fans have an inexplicable aversion to anything modern and will react allergically to what they perceive as intrusions from outside of their scene, while on the other hand embracing scene integrity and cherishing everything that reminds them of their musical upbringing. Yet again, nostalgia seems to be a huge factor for metal fans, who would trust their favourite magazine writer more than a random person on the internet or a sponsored post that is showing up in their social media feed. This is one of the reasons why some of the established and well-known printed metal magazines still have a decent number of dedicated readers while at the same time maintaining social media accounts with decent interaction, or even video formats and podcasts, transitioning their role as trusted opinion leaders and tastemakers into the world wide web, and thus retaining their relevance as valuable media partners and marketing vehicles, both online and offline. The metal scene seems to be so obsessed with its many dinosaurs and artefacts that even the recording industry is unlikely to be turned upside down or steer in a completely different direction. And maybe that's not a bad thing at all.

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