

# The dos and don'ts of getting music played on radio

 By [Tim Hill](#)

21 Sep 2012

It is safe to say that one of the most important elements of an artist's or band's career is getting radio airplay. Not only does this create a revenue stream through royalties, but also builds awareness, demand, and also is a sense of validation, thus giving out a certain amount of credibility in the market.

Submitting music to radio is complex in so far as each radio station has a different process and different format. Many artists have been led to believe that if a song is selected for the playlist, it is one person making that call and that the song will go into rotation onto peak drive time within days. In some cases this can happen, but very, very rarely. So how do artists get music to radio and what is the general process involved?

## All about the music

Most importantly, it is all about the music. Great melodies and lyrics backed by equally great production that is in line with current trends, and what is working on a greater scale will give a song a better chance of being added to the playlist. This does not mean that a band must sell itself out and become a commercial hit factory with no soul. There still has to be a certain element of originality that shines through and gives the track that x-factor that the public will buy into.

Presenting music to a music manager or compiler is much like presenting a CV to a prospective employer. First impressions count. A neatly presented CD (with or without artwork) with the correct track information (including composers, publishing information and availability) will make a music compiler's job so much easier. A band will also be perceived to be taking its career seriously if a professional-looking CD, together with a comprehensive biography, is presented and not a scruffy burnt TDK CD with untidy handwriting in marker pen all over it. Whereas some compilers are more than happy to receive submissions digitally (via the likes of email, Dropbox and YouSendIt), most still like a physical copy in their hands.

Understanding a radio station's format is crucial and gives radio pluggers a more targeted approach. The days of a "spray and paint" approach of dropping CDs off to every single station regardless of the genre of music are long gone. Submitting an adult contemporary track to a station that has a young audience where alternative rock is the general theme is not going to work, and vice versa. It is the responsibility of both the producer and artist to make sure that the music is radio friendly in whatever genre it falls under. It is also the responsibility of the radio plugger to understand the format of the stations being submitted to. Music managers and compilers are busy people; they get about 200 tracks (local and international) a week, so give them suitable songs so that their time isn't wasted.

## It can take time

Playlist selection is a process that does take time. On the odd occasion, a song will go onto rotation nearly instantly, but in most cases it can take up to four weeks - sometimes longer - before being put into the system for rotation to begin. In the first instance, the music manager screens a newly submitted song. It is then played in front of a committee of in the region of six people (including DJs, marketing personnel and executive management). Should the track make the playlist, it will go onto slow rotation (which means it will be spun in off-peak hours a couple of times a week). Various research mechanisms track the popularity of the song and if the popularity and demand is high, it will move into medium rotation then onto high rotation, when it will be played every five hours or so. The best-case scenario is that the song makes the charts, which is largely determined by listener votes. It is a tough chore deciding what goes onto a playlist and an equally tough chore to decide what songs to drop off the playlist - there is only so much space where songs are given fair airtime with little risk of being diluted and played once in a while.

Having a song rejected by a radio station can be heart-breaking and cause outbursts of anger. Just because a song is rejected, does not mean it is a bad track. There are many factors that can cause a song to be turned away. English artists in South Africa face a very real challenge in so far as they are competing against every international act in the selection process. This isn't only for radio play, but also for media column inches. It may be a case of the track not being as strong as its international counterparts; therefore it can be resubmitted when the competition is less stiff. It can also be a case of timing. Winter playlists tend to be made up of the slower songs, yet summer play lists comprise more up-tempo material. Timing is as important as quality.

You must keep in mind too, that radio is a commercial entity. The more listeners that tune in, the greater the value proposition of the station, therefore the possibly of a greater revenue stream through advertising. The music managers have to be confident that whatever is on the playlist maintains and grows listenership, and have to avoid placing content (including music) that will cause listeners to channel hop or reduce loyalty.

There are a few dos and don'ts with regards to play listing:

- Do take time in making sure that your music is presented in the best possible way and is of the highest possible quality
- Do get an outside opinion of your music before submitting it to radio. Give it to people who will be realistic and honest and who won't sugar coat things so as not to offend you
- Do your homework - make sure that you know what is trending on radio and what type of music each radio station is playing
- Do be patient - playlisting is not an overnight phenomenon
- Do treat smaller radio stations with the same love and care as major ones - you never know who will move up the radio food chain in years to come - you may need them!
- Don't get disheartened if your music is rejected - try to find out why and see any criticism as constructive
- Don't bug the music managers or try to get your music playlisted through back-door tactics. Undermining a decision will only work against you
- Submit a new single correctly and don't submit it 20 times through 20 different channels
- Do follow the old saying: "Accept what you can't change, and change what you can't accept, and have the wisdom to know the difference." If your music is rejected, find out why and if you can resubmit (you can usually resubmit up to three times). If there is a definite no, accept it and go back to the drawing board. It is not the end of the world!
- Do not offer bribes to get onto the playlist.

To conclude, playlisting is not an exact science, there are processes, which take time. If commercial success and mass radio play is your goal, then focus on making damned good music that the public will like, not what you think they will like. Work with radio stations in giving them what they need - we are all on the same side!

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