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How Far Is Too Far?

Compelling and edgy personalities are rewarded for attracting listeners, but sometimes they go too far. What happens then?

R&R's Dana Hall talks to those in the know in this week's CHR/Rhythmic column, on Page 30.



Season's Greetings

Hallmark targets musical Valentine's Day

Martina McBride's new album has no single, no targeted radio play and no new video. Nevertheless, the release is expected to sell roughly 500,000 units and to reach that number in only about three weeks. This seemingly farfetched scenario has been orchestrated by retail, gift and greeting card company Hallmark, which commissioned the Valentine's Day themed album, *My Heart*, from McBride.

The Valentine's campaign is an extension of the strategy Hallmark employed on another exclusive and wildly successful holiday project, James Taylor's *A Christmas Album*. That release evolved out of the company's previous forays into music.

"They'd had Vince Gill and Amy Grant, Tony Bennett, Olivia Newton John — a lot of name people," says entertainment consultant Teri Brown of T.B.A. Network. "But it wasn't exclusive product, which is very important to us now. And they only did half an album. The other half was the London Symphony."

Hallmark Manager/Integrated Marketing Ann Herrick says the idea grew from simply making music available into creating a big presence for a single title. "In the past we didn't really do a large marketing effort," she says. "Music was offered as a premium to our extensive database of consumers — a free cassette, a \$3 CD. After doing extensive research we went to Teri, who identified James Taylor and facilitated that project."

A Whole New Level

Brown, who had helped Hallmark put together a Steven Curtis Chapman release last year, says the Taylor release took the concept to a new level. "Music switched divisions within Hallmark, giving it a much broader scope," she says. "They did some research and asked me to come forward with ideas for artists who might be able to do a 2004 Christmas album."

Taylor was one of the top-researching artists with Hallmark customers, and his holiday release sold an amazing 1 million copies. "After James Taylor we immediately went after Martina, who registered very high with their consumers," says Brown. "I approached RCA and management on the same day and let them work through how they wanted to handle it."

While letting another company release an exclusive title from your artist might seem questionable, the unique nature of the arrangement with Hallmark makes it work. "We're not a record label," Herrick says. "It's a means of distribution, and the artists we work with like the exclusivity they get in a network of over 4,200 stores during a seasonal time frame when we have consumers searching us out as a destination to help them celebrate."

"Music is a natural brand extension of the greeting cards, party supplies and gift products we stock, and we offer extensive marketing."

"The Hallmark consumer isn't necessarily the person going to Tower Records," Brown says. "These releases can broaden the base of the artist. It's not like Target or Wal-Mart, with racks of CDs. They're *the* featured album."

Herrick says, "We're focusing on one SKU and pushing a huge marketing effort into it. At the front of store, at the cash register, customers are seeing one artist. For Martina, this is the first time we've had an original CD from an artist with extensive marketing behind it for Valentine's Day."



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Favorite Cuts

The eight-cut collection mixes familiar material like "In My Daughter's Eyes" and the Jim Brickman collaboration "Valentine" with album tracks like "Born to Give My Love to You" and "When You Are Old" and new recordings like "At Last" and "Together Again."

On the back of the disc insert McBride explains the selections, stating, "It is exciting for me to get to share some of my favorite cuts with you that were not necessarily sin-

gles, as well as a couple of new songs that I've always wanted to record."

Like the Christmas release, *My Heart* will sell for \$10.95, or \$6.95 with the purchase of three greeting cards. But the nature of the holiday has forced Hallmark to change some of its marketing tactics.

"It's different," Herrick says. "The Valentine's time period is a much shorter window — from Jan. 24 to Feb. 14 — so our media plans are based on that time frame." Direct mail, print and television are prime components, as is radio.

"Not only have we made an extensive ad buy on AC and Country stations, we're working closely with RCA on radio promotions," Herrick says.

"We're going to 205 rated markets with a paid buy, and in certain markets we're offering a promotion that allows winners to go to the Houston Rodeo to see Martina live. In other markets we're offering autographed guitars.

"We've produced a TV spot focused on the Martina CD and have done a network TV time buy. A certain percentage will run in primetime, some in daytime. We've also done an extensive buy on CMT and the Hallmark Channel."

Going Gold

If all goes as planned,

McBride will get to add another gold album to her collection after only three weeks. And Hallmark is already looking at making the Valentine's concept an annual event like the Christmas CD.

"We're feeling like Martina will be a success for us, so we're looking at Valentine's Day 2006, and we may look at extending the concept to other time periods in both 2005 and 2006," says Herrick.

If so, those artists lucky enough to be the focus of Hallmark's efforts may find another reason, and season, to be jolly.