

Pro Bono

Client: Doc Saxtrum

Book: *A.K.A. DOC*

Publisher: Cadence Jazz Books

ISBN: 1-881993-36-1

Doc Saxtrum is a New Orleans musician who literally sings for his supper, playing tunes for tourists on the street outside the Café du Monde—the must-sit coffee circus across from Jackson Square in the broken heart of the French Quarter. It took a few years, but Doc now reliably plays “My One And Only Love” every time I pass (it’s my wedding song—16 years and counting). I reliably deposit two bucks in his horn case—enough for a bet at the Fair Grounds Race Track, one of Doc’s favorite hangouts.

Last year, I was surprised to see a biography of James May (a.k.a. Doc Saxtrum) for sale at the Louisiana Music Factory. If you come to New Orleans for the Book Publishing Management Seminar April 18 and 19, I highly recommend you take advantage of the best-kept secret in the Crescent City. The Louisiana Music Factory—just a few blocks from the Seminar hotel—offers in-store appearances by local musicians every Saturday. Here’s the secret part: the beer is free. Free beer, great music, and the best selection of local CDs in The Big Easy. But I digress.

I mentioned to Doc that I had seen his book and intended to buy it and review it for Amazon.com. Within days, Doc delivered a review copy of the book, the companion CD, and another CD he made. Now I was on the hook. It took a few months, but I finally reviewed the book and both CDs, and put together a *pro bono* online publicity campaign. Then I hit a virtual wall.



The book was not available for sale at Amazon.com or Barnes & Noble Online. If they don’t list the book, there’s nothing to attach the review to. I sent a copy of my review

to Cadence Jazz Books, publisher of *A.K.A. DOC*, and told them I’d love to post the review to Amazon and B&N if they ever get the book listed at those giant retail outlets.

My history with Cadence goes back a decade, when I used to review CDs for their jazz catalog. Cadence specializes in the wholesale distribution of obscure jazz recordings, mostly gleaned from independent labels and artists’ pressings from Europe, Africa, Asia, and the U.S. I got a reply from Cadence that basically said they could care less about the lack of listings at online bookstores. Of course, Doc Saxtrum doesn’t feel the same way. But Cadence did give me permission to distribute an excerpt from the book.

With Cadence as the only online retail outlet for the book, my staff set about seeding discussion groups with postings offering the excerpt and review. Postings went to 10 Usenet newsgroups, 10 Internet mailing lists, and five America Online forums, and resulted in about 30 requests for the excerpt and review. We also formatted the review and excerpt as a “Feature Article” web page, and solicited placements at 20 web sites. All these discussion groups and web sites were devoted to New Orleans culture and/or music—the prime target audience for the book.

I haven’t contacted Cadence to see if sales spiked. I’m guessing five sales in a day would be cause for notice. There isn’t a prayer that sales increases will cover the price I normally charge for this work. Unless, of course, a posting catches the eye of a movie producer who decides the story would make a good screenplay. Which it would. *A.K.A. DOC* is full of gritty, colorful details of street life in New Orleans: the cops, the addicts, the clowns, the tourists, the musicians, the elegance, and the decadence. It’s the kind of writing I most like: so pure and unpolished it would give a libel attorney ulcers.



I bring up this vignette

mostly to illustrate the complexity of the world of book publishing. Cadence is sitting on a gem of a book, and oth-

ers like it. At \$15, including the companion CD, it should fly off bookstore shelves. But, alas, they have little or no book trade distribution or marketing. People don’t buy a book they never heard of. Somehow, Cadence needs to find the money and will to market these books properly; otherwise, why publish?

This story strengthens my misgivings about publishing on the cheap using e-books and P.O.D. I don’t think you should publish a book for the trade unless you have a marketing budget of \$10,000. Otherwise, you have little chance of making the target audience aware that the book exists and will be unable to seed inventory where that audience is most likely to buy it. If you’re going to spend ten grand marketing, you have virtually no chance of recouping your investment from e-book sales alone. If you use P.O.D., your production costs more than double, and more than likely you will not have display copies distributed widely enough to capitalize on the investment in marketing—the books won’t be on shelves when the promotional bang hits, and you’ll lose sales. You’re better off printing 5000 copies via offset and getting them to retail outlets favored by your target audience *before* the marketing message kicks in.

You can save money by making sure branding is always part of the marketing message. Branding lets the promotion of any title help the sell-through of all titles. Patron Saint Productions was set up to help companies promote books more effectively and efficiently, but there is little we can do for a publisher who has not made a realistic financial commitment to the publishing process.

Cadence is in a specialty market, and can probably sell enough copies of *A.K.A. DOC* through its magazine and through music stores to cover production costs. Of course, the author will earn little or no return (neither will bookstores, record stores, or even Cadence). I wish they had a reasonable promotional budget, because I love jazz books, and I’d love to show Cadence how powerful that passion can be when tethered to book marketing smarts.