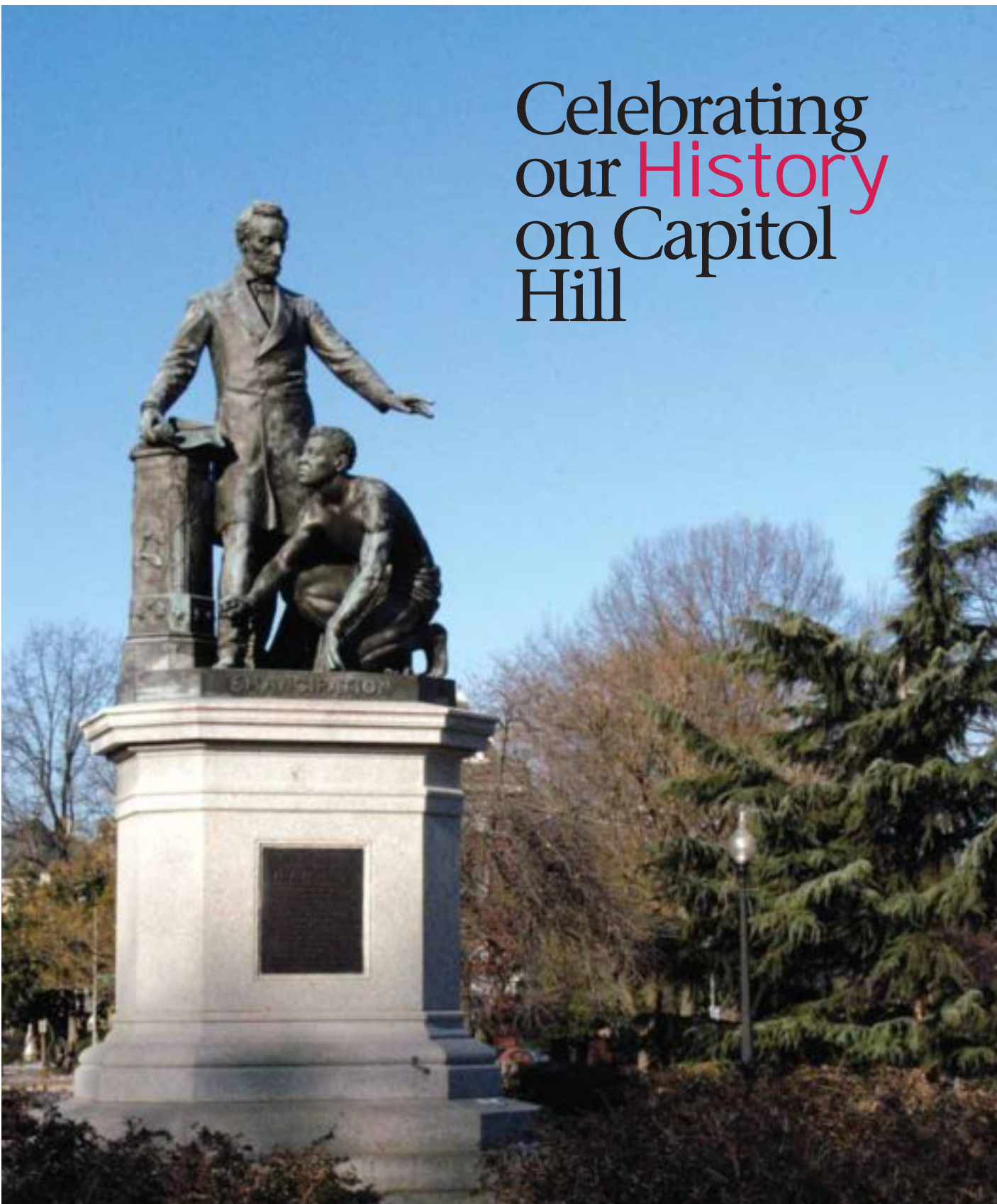


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## **This Month**

- 12 Valentine's Day for One
- 14 Buss? Hug? Or Not...  
Greeting Confusion
- 16 A Black Perspective on  
Change
- 18 A Trip to Jackson Ward
- 21 Preparing Kids to Read
- 24 Learning, Hockey-style
- 26 JO Oliver's Creative  
Path
- 27 PJ Paparelli Talks of  
Dreams
- 30 DC Music Scene, Pt. 2
- 34 Winter Projects Pt. 2
- 36 You and Your Rice  
Cooker
- 38 Pocket Parks
- 39 Taxi! Taxi!
- 40 Snowbound Adventure
- 40 Space Invaders
- 40 Traveling Solo

## **Departments**

VoiceMail .....	3
City Desk .....	4
News OnSite .....	8
Business Snapshots .....	10
Ask Judith .....	44
Designing for Hearth and Home .....	46
Barracks Row .....	47
Computer Corner .....	48
Health & Fitness .....	50
Ask the Vet .....	52
Urban Gardener .....	54
BID Talk .....	55
Capital Kids .....	56
Kids' Sports .....	57
Community Calendar .....	58
Horoscope .....	60
Classifieds .....	60
Business Services .....	61

Vol. 6 No. 11 February 2005

## Artists Share Advice on DC Music

Perspectives on How to  
Break Into the Local Scene  
and Recording

BY KATIE MCLEOD



Lianna, driven to advance her music career, was searching for a place that would make it possible for her to do just that. She drove to Washington, DC, watched a live performance and simply knew her next move.

"I had an overwhelming sense of peace," Lianna, who performs by that name, explains, describing how when she came to DC to visit a friend and check out the area's local music scene she just knew she was meant to play in the nation's capital.

Lianna moved to DC in the fall of 2002 to pursue her music career some time after finishing law school in North Carolina, her home state where she is a licensed attorney.

Like many local musicians, Lianna's story is one of passion, drive and hard work; one that is still in the making, but that looks ahead to a future filled with music, in one form or another.

Whether it's playing at bars and clubs, open mics, the annual Cherry Blossom Festival or recording a CD, DC's musicians are in love with the notes, rhythms, sounds, energy and adrenaline that composes their lives. And they are driven to keep playing.

Solo artists and bands playing orig-

inal music or cover songs all share the desire and the need to perform. And it's up to the musicians—depending on their varying dreams and ambitions—to learn how to break into the local scene, making contacts, getting gigs, and even recording.

### A 'Learning Curve'

"We have a lot of fun playing music," Lianna says about playing with her band, which she describes as acoustic pop/rock with three-part harmonies. "It's a business all on its own," she adds, noting time spent marketing her music, networking and lining up gigs.

Beyond working 40 hours per week as an office manager for a law firm in Fairfax, Va., Lianna works 45 plus hours per week on music: rehearsing, writing her own songs and lyrics, performing, doing promotions and making contacts, she says.

Lianna performs as a solo singer/songwriter as well as with her band. She released her first CD, *Walk in My Shoes*, in 1998, so she had knowledge of CD production prior to her DC move. But, she explains, as

she is about to release another CD on March 13, she realizes that she's gained a great deal of knowledge about her sound, the process and the language involved in the industry. "It's such a learning curve," she says. Lianna also cut a demo CD, titled *Beautiful Life*, in Sweden in 2002. (To find out the location of Lianna's upcoming CD release party, please visit her website: [www.LiannaOnline.com](http://www.LiannaOnline.com)).

Lianna just signed with a booking agency in Charlotte, NC. She will be touring the college market nationally, playing with her band in coordination with her solo tour dates and locations.

Lianna also stresses the huge sacrifices she's made as a partnership with her husband, who lives in their North Carolina home. They commute to spend time together when they can. That way, Lianna can focus on her music in the DC area, a city that is accessible to North Carolina, yet offers the kinds of opportunities she wants for her music career, she says.

"I've never felt as complete as anything as I do when I'm playing live," Lianna says quite passionately. "Nothing else fulfills me to the depths that music does."

### Making it Happen

Regardless, whether artists are DC-area natives, or moved from outside the region, they must start somewhere.

Greg Gonzalez has been playing music since age 15. Gonzalez, now 33, is one of two guitar players for the cover band, "Dr. Fu" ([www.drifu.com](http://www.drifu.com)). The band plays hard rock covers, Gonzalez says, explaining that DC is home to various cover bands, original bands and kind of "hybrids"—a mix of both original and cover.

Gonzalez first moved to the area from Boston, Mass., two years ago to

work as an attorney. The band's bass player and guitar player are his best friends from growing up in Buffalo, NY. They played in high school band together.

"It's more than a hobby," Gonzalez says of his music.

Gonzalez played in an original band in the mid-'90s before playing in Dr. Fu. He finds it's easier for his band now to get gigs because, in his experience, bars will hire cover bands more frequently since they tend to draw bigger crowds and therefore more business, he says. However, some bars will only hire original bands and artists, he notes.

Describing the DC music scene as "pretty welcoming," Gonzalez tells how he started playing in DC. "My goal was just to play music with my friends," he says, adding that "nobody in the band wants to make the band a full-time thing." He explains that he and his fellow band members all have other full-time jobs and families.

Gonzalez works to book gigs through word-of-mouth, by posting advertisements on a local music forum ([www.arlingtonmusicscene.com](http://www.arlingtonmusicscene.com)) and by some communiqué in the *Washington City Paper*, he says. Gonzalez also checks out advertisements on craigslist at times (<http://washingtondc.craigslist.org/>).

"I try to be helpful, myself, with stuff," Gonzalez notes, describing a time when he auditioned singers for Dr. Fu and sent the names of those he turned down to other bands he knew in search of singers.

"It's quite a bit of time," Gonzalez says of playing with the band. "We've had to become judicious about the use of our time. It kind of takes the rock 'n' roll aspect out of it."

When first starting out, Gonzalez advises to find a goal and then achieve it. "One of the problems I've had in bands before was a lack of direction," he says. "That would be very problematic. The earlier you can define all that stuff the better."

He suggests looking carefully at advertisements, pointing out that some are very specific. Surveying the area is also important, Gonzalez adds. "Find out if someone is looking to do the same thing you are," he says, referring to when an artist is looking to get into playing with other musicians.

"Check out websites," he adds. "People in the area are very friendly."

Gonzalez explains that everyone in the band is responsible for promoting. It's important to get friends to go to gigs, put up flyers and link the bands website to other sites online, he says. The band also has T-shirts made to sell and passes out a calendar of upcoming scheduled shows at gigs.

"Where I'm at in my life I'm pretty



From left: Seth Brown, Lianna, Arch Alcantara and Dave Mehring.

successful," Gonzalez says, explaining how he's happy with the way he's incorporated his music into his career and family life. "I'm having fun."

Patrick Lacy, bass player for the band, "Astramental," is a native of Northern Virginia, born in Fairfax.

"I began playing bass solely for fun in my college days," Lacy says in an email, "as friends and I wanted to start a band and we figured the best way to do it would be to buy instruments and learn what to do with them.."

Lacy also contributes lyrics and general day-to-day managerial-type services for the band, such as locating drummers for auditions, typing up lyric sheets, talking to booking agents and to club owners, he says. As for getting into the DC scene, Lacy says there's only one way to do that: "Throw yourself to the wolves."

Lacy explains that Astramental is not "out there" yet, but that he played previously around Northern Virginia and DC in a band called, "Plaid." "We just plugged away and played wherever and whenever we could. There are careful, well-planned 1-2-3 steps one can take, but often it's better to just dive in," he says.

Lacy explains the steps he will take to promote his current band.

"Astramental will be gigging very soon," he says. "We're just waiting on the perfect drummer to appear. Once the drummer is in place, though, we will continue with what we've been doing: contacting and talking to other local musicians and bands, keeping up with local music forums and resources like [www.arlingtonmusicscene.com](http://www.arlingtonmusicscene.com), contacting club owners and booking agents about shows, and generally taking any additional steps to get our name known and our music to people who want to listen to it."

Astramental's current lineup is comprised of an acoustic guitar, electric guitar and bass, along with vocals, Lacy says, also mentioning his current search for a drummer. He points out that an acoustic guitar is also used when the situation calls for it. Lacy describes the band's music as "alternacoustidelic."

"The DC scene is very competitive," he says, "and with the sheer influx of local artists these days, the market is definitely saturated. There has always been demand for local music, I believe, but many of the venues focus more on drink/food revenue than on promoting local music,

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so the goals of the band and the club owner are often at odds. That is, a club owner needs to make money, everyone understands that. But so many places are just about the bottom-line that there is no true promotion of local music ... no 'scene,' if you will."

Lacy also describes the problem of the "Catch-22":

"This happens when a new band wants to get a show, but they don't have experience playing live (as a band, not individually)," he says. "When you show a club owner your promo kit or whatever band 'resume' you have, and there are no live shows listed, you are stuck. But if you can't get a live show, you can't get that experience for the band resume, right?"

Network, network, network is the advice that Lacy would give an artist new to the scene. "That's what it all comes down to (unfortunately): who you know," he says.

Lacy plans to get a demo "out there" with his band, play live shows, advertise those shows, pass out stickers, T-shirts and "the like," and generally get the band's name and music out wherever they can, he says.

"I also believe that the greatest

promotional tool available to any band is the Internet," he says, adding that his band will have an official website very soon. "I believe that any band that does not utilize a web presence is shooting itself in the foot."

Lianna, who needed to first look into the cost of living and investigate the job market before moving to the DC area for her music career, got "more and more involved" in the scene over time. "It's important to have a support group," she says. She taught music in the DC public school system for a time and delved into the Arlington music scene.

"You have to get in the game. If you stay in your bedroom writing songs, it's not really going to help you. You have to do that," Lianna explains, "but not just that."

### Recording and Costs

When artists decide they want to record a CD, Lianna suggests finding a great studio and a producer. Some studios have affiliated producers, she notes. A good way to find a quality studio is by asking other local musicians for recommendations and by checking out advertisements, she says.

The cost of producing a CD "varies

hugely," Lianna says. Her first record, when everything was outsourced, cost about \$6,000, she says. "Big artists cost \$100,000," she says, "real-ly the skies the limit. I think the total for this upcoming record was about \$2,800. It varies depending on what you do. For whatever your recording needs are, there's a studio out there that can meet your needs."

Lacy describes the recording process as "at times extremely exhilarating and at other times extremely tedious and cumbersome."

"Recording music is not the boozin', hootin'-n-hollerin' rock-n-roll party that many people think it is, he says. "... in the real world, recording can be tough."

Lacy says finding a suitable and cost-effective recording studio and engineer is crucial.

"The problems, at the start, are figuring out who's good and who's not-so-good, who's going to give you a good deal and who might be ripping you off, and what you'll be getting for your money (some studios go the whole nine yards, others provide a bare-bones package)," he explains.

And as far as locating these studios go, Lacy again advises to network, network, network. "If you base your

decision on what you read on a studio's website, you might be in for trouble," he warns.

Prior to entering the studio, Lacy suggests: "Know your material inside-out, backwards, front-wards, upside-down, and side-to-side. You will be paying for an engineer to record you, and if you are not 100 percent prepared, you are wasting money and time and energy. And, it's a professional courtesy in your relationship with the studio."

As for the time commitment, Lacy says it all depends on the situation and the artist. "If you learn your songs to the point you feel you are ready to record, it could take a day, or a month, or a year ... maybe more."

Costs depend on what level of quality you're looking for and how much time you want to invest, Lacy says. "So, recording a professional, marketable CD can cost just about any amount, depending on what type of product you want, who's handling the recording and production, and what you plan on doing with it, he says. "That is, will you be giving the CD to friends and family, or will you be 'shopping' it around?"

Lacy suspects that most bands pay for recording out of their own pock-

## Studio Recording Steps For Budding Artists

**Lianna** offers the following as an introductory look into the process of recording a CD in the studio. Other options, such as recording a live performance, are not discussed.

**1.** Think about the vision for presenting your music. Do you want to have a solo acoustic record with just voice and guitar? Or maybe you would prefer to have a fully produced sound with bass, drums, electric guitars and harmony vocals, etc. These are questions to answer before you go any further.

**2.** One you have the vision down, consider the production. Hiring a producer is a good next step. The producer is responsible for the overall sound of the record and works with the artist to bring the vision to fruition. A song in its most naked form is melody and lyrics. Consider it the skeleton and the producer one who adds the muscle and additional tissue. Some artists feel competent to produce themselves, especially if they want a solo acoustic record or if they are a band. I would recommend working with a producer for the first record if you want more than a solo acoustic presentation because the producer's expertise and knowledge can be invaluable. Producers can also recommend studio musicians for solo artists who want a fully produced record. When looking for a producer be sure to ask around. [ArlingtonMusicScene.com](http://ArlingtonMusicScene.com) is an excellent resource for this information. You can also visit the Washington Area Music Association's website, [www.wamadc.com](http://www.wamadc.com) and explore which producers have been nominated for the "Producer of the Year" Wammie award or look on the back of your favorite local artist's CD and see who they used. Producers usually start at \$50/hr.

**3.** Find a studio. A producer is usually affiliated with a studio and engineer (the person who actually pushes the record button) but gear needs, comfort level in the surroundings (comfy home atmosphere or cut-

ting edge sleek) and cost are really going to drive this decision. In today's market, studios can be in someone's basement utilizing recording software (Pro Tools, LogicPro, etc.) on their computer ([www.omnitonestudios.com](http://www.omnitonestudios.com)) or studios with isolation rooms ([www.jamminjava.com/studio.php](http://www.jamminjava.com/studio.php).) You can pay anywhere from \$50-\$100/hr. If you use the producer and his/her studio, you may receive a combined (producer and studio) rate. The timing for the recording process can be done as quickly or slowly as preferred. It really depends on how quickly the tracks are performed to a satisfactory level and at what point you feel 100 percent satisfied or finally can just "let go."

**4.** Record. You can play live, tracking all instruments at once (usually requires isolation booths in the studio for bands) or you can track each instrument at a time ("overdubbing") which is the most common. To track instruments individually it is helpful to have previously worked with a "click" track so that your timing is solid. A click track is the time keeper so that every instrument is played to the same tempo.

**5.** Mixing. This is the process where you balance all the sounds (vocals, guitar, kick drum, etc.) in relation to each other. Typically the producer will want to have control over this but there are professionals who do nothing but mix. The mixing process can be tedious and time consuming but will make or break the record. For example, if you have an amazing vocalist but the vocal track isn't high enough in the mix, it could be lost in the other instrumentation. The cost is usually an hourly rate (\$50) but can be a flat rate. Allow 7-10 days for mixing because this process wears on the ears (hearing the same song over and over and over). A good rule of thumb is mixing one to two songs per day.

**6.** Mastering. This is the final process for the music. It is meticulous work that focuses on compression, EQ which is the boosting or minimalizing

ets. "Some can secure financing or an individual backer, but I would think most are self-financed," he adds.

When asked how much money it takes for a band to make it overall, Lacy emphatically answered that if that question could be answered, "every band would just save up that amount of money. There is no set amount. Some bands have become phenomenally successful after spending almost no money at all; others have plugged away on the circuit for years to only moderate success after spending hundreds of thousands of dollars, if not more."

Chris Hartwell, a local singer/songwriter who was featured in the January issue of *Voice of the Hill* and who has experience in recording, has done a lot of work at Jammin' Java in Vienna, Va. ([www.jamminjava.com](http://www.jamminjava.com)). It could cost as much as \$20,000 to record and produce a full-length CD, Hartwell says. Hoping to release a new CD by the end of 2005, Hartwell would like to send copies of it "everywhere" once it's done, he says. He also stresses the importance of the internet, explaining how he puts his name and link to his website on any Internet site he can find ([www.chrishartwell.com](http://www.chrishartwell.com)).

As Lianna did, Hartwell also describes the recording process as a "learning experience" because there are so many facets to it. He plans to put together a press kit to send to radio stations once his new CD is finished, he says.

#### The Artists on Music

Lacy feels great about playing music, he says. "I could not not play music. I think most musicians would feel the same way."

Gonzalez of Dr. Fu loves playing. "It's my favorite thing to do. It's a good tension release. There's nothing like it," he says matter-of-factly, explaining that he likes the way his life is structured right now with his family, music and career.

Lianna stresses that her faith is a huge part of who she is. "God's been good to me," she says, later noting that every part of her is made to play live music. She wants people who come to see her to feel connected and comforted, she says. "I feel this is what I was made to do. I feel honored even if one person listens."

*Katie McLeod works in journalism in the Washington, DC area. She is originally from Barnstable, Mass.*

of frequencies (more booming low end or a brighter high end), finalizing the song order, fade in/out timing, setting the volume of the record and more. For more info visit: [www.wolfproductionsinc.com/mastering.htm](http://www.wolfproductionsinc.com/mastering.htm). This is most often done by a professional who only does mastering and is typically completed in one 8-10 hour day. Seek out this person using the same resources utilized in the producer search.

**7.** Duplication. This is the actual printing of the CDs. There are many different providers of this service so do your research. A typical first run of 1000 CDs breaks down to \$1-\$2 per CD depending on what packaging (4 color, 4 page insert, cardboard sleeve, etc.) you choose. Most duplication houses offer samples of the packaging and promotional bundles offering posters, inclusion on compilation CDs and more to earn your business. You will need to send them you final mastered CD with all of the necessary paperwork (guidelines are provided by the duplication house and followed by the person who masters) as well as all of the artwork in electronic format. Again, the duplication house will provide you with the template for your graphic artist to use when designing the insert. Manufacturing can take as little as days to months depending on your project requirements. ALWAYS allow more time because many unexpected things can delay production. Also, be sure your manufacturer creates a "glass master" to press the CDs. Some use a copying technique that can cause CDs to skip. Further, be sure the printing for the disc itself is not on a thin label stuck to the disc but that ink is printed on the actual CD. Some car players won't play discs with labels.

**8.** All finished! Now wait and relax! Don't start second guessing all of the work you've done. Be happy with the record being a reflection of your talent at that moment and know that your next record will be even better as you grow! Get to work on booking and promoting a CD release show and establish the means to distribute your product!

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## Useful Information

### Local Artists/Bands:

\*Note: Many artists include a schedule of events on their official websites.

Mike Holden  
[www.mikeholdenmusic.com](http://www.mikeholdenmusic.com)

The Midnite Roger: band  
[www.midniteroger.com](http://www.midniteroger.com)

John Ireland:  
[www.johnnyireland.com](http://www.johnnyireland.com)

Scott Shumaker: singer/songwriter  
[www.scottshumaker.com](http://www.scottshumaker.com)

Laura Tsaggaris  
[www.lauratsaggaris.com](http://www.lauratsaggaris.com)

### Local Studios:

Sugoi: band  
[www.sugoiband.com](http://www.sugoiband.com)

Jammin' Java:  
Find information about the recording studio at:  
[www.jamminjava.com](http://www.jamminjava.com)  
[www.dragonflyeast.com](http://www.dragonflyeast.com)  
[www.echoesrecording.com](http://www.echoesrecording.com)  
[www.wduncan.com](http://www.wduncan.com)  
[www.jeffseverson.com](http://www.jeffseverson.com)

Dr. FU: band  
[www.drfu.com/](http://www.drfu.com/)

Lianna: singer/songwriter  
[www.liannaonline.com](http://www.liannaonline.com)

Bicycle Thieves: band  
[www.bicyclethieves.com](http://www.bicyclethieves.com)

Tinsmith: band  
[www.tinsmith.net](http://www.tinsmith.net)

Chris Hartwell: singer/songwriter  
[www.chrishartwell.com](http://www.chrishartwell.com)

Soft Complex: band  
[www.softcomplexmusic.com](http://www.softcomplexmusic.com)

Resources for Artists:  
[www.ArlingtonMusicScene.com](http://www.ArlingtonMusicScene.com)  
Washington Area Music Association:  
<http://wamadc.com/wama>

DC 101 - "Local Lix": local radio  
[dc101.com/onair/locallix](http://dc101.com/onair/locallix)  
[mp3.washingtonpost.com](http://mp3.washingtonpost.com)  
[www.partydc.com](http://www.partydc.com)  
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[www.openmikes.org](http://www.openmikes.org)