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## A Success to The Tune of \$4 Million

Corey Smith Makes Himself Heard, One Fan at a Time

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CHARLOTTE -- "Hi, I'm Corey," the self-made, \$4 million musician says, extending his hand.

"I know!" the fan in the backward baseball cap says to Corey Smith. "Me and my friends listen to your songs all the time."

They shake and pose for an iPhone picture, and then the fan raises his Miller Lite can -- the ultimate expression of approbation among people who wear backward baseball caps.

Smith smiles, and then repeats his introductory ritual, over and over, until he's pressed flesh with every one of the roughly three dozen fans who've come to the pre-concert meet-and-greet.

It's an amusing approach, for nobody seems to know who Corey Smith is -- except for the fans who do.

While he's not exactly invisible on the national radar, he's not easy to find, either: 9:30 club executives, who make it their business to monitor rising stars, hadn't even heard of Corey Smith before his booking agent inquired about scheduling a show there last year. (Smith wound up drawing 693 people to the D.C. rock club in December -- a strong showing for a first-time headliner at the 1,200-capacity venue; he returns to the 9:30 club for another concert on Wednesday.)

Smith's ruminative, biographical, sorta-country songs -- about drinking, Dixie, God, girls and the good old days (not necessarily in that order) -- aren't played on the radio. He is never booked to perform his music on TV, and his name never shows up on any of the Billboard charts.

His life story -- small-town boy from Jefferson, Ga. (about an hour north of Atlanta), who taught high school social studies and moonlighted as a musician before deciding to become a full-time, professional singer-songwriter at age 28 -- isn't regularly recounted in the media. In fact, Smith doesn't even have a publicist.

Nor does he have a record label funding, marketing or promoting his recordings, on which Smith comes across something like a Southern-fried Jack Johnson, or maybe

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Dave Matthews with a country-music jones.

Smith, who turns 32 this month, has nonetheless become a star in his own, independent corner of the popular music galaxy. He's a do-it-yourselfer who is really doing it: Last year, he grossed roughly \$4 million through sales of tickets, merchandise, CDs and MP3s. That figure wouldn't necessarily register in pop's big leagues -- a single, sold-out Kenny Chesney concert at Philadelphia's Lincoln Financial Field last month accounted for \$4.4 million in ticket sales, according to Billboard Boxscore.

But \$4 million is a significant amount of revenue for an emerging artist whose success has been built organically, through constant touring (especially in college towns, particularly in the Southeast), viral buzz and a business philosophy that's predicated on the belief that the best way to sell an artist is to give people easy access to him and his art.

Go to [Coreysmith.com](http://Coreysmith.com), and you'll find 19 free MP3s, including some of Smith's most popular songs -- youthful reminiscences "Twenty-One," "If I Could Do It Again" and "Carolina" among them.

Go to one of Corey Smith's raucous concerts, where tickets are often less than \$20 and some sell for as little as \$5, and you'll find hundreds -- and sometimes thousands -- of (mostly) college-age kids singing along to those set-list staples, beers in hand. ("My fans tend to come to the show and get drunk and then go to church the next day," Smith says.)

At night's end, more than a few of the fans will leave with newly purchased Corey Smith albums (he's self-released four, along with a live EP) and T-shirts emblazoned with Corey Smith lyrics and even Corey Smith-branded foam beer koozies.

At the show here -- opening night at Live Nation's new Fillmore Charlotte, where 1,367 people came to hear Smith sing nostalgic songs about his salad days, and songs about his reluctance to grow up ("Maybe Next Year") and his penchant for self-medication ("I'm Drinkin' Again") and his run-in with corrupt cops back home in Jefferson ("[Expletive] the Po Po") -- Smith sold \$2,302 worth of music and merchandise.

As always, he met his public, too. Whereas many artists maintain a safe distance from their fans, Smith will shake hands, take pictures and chat with anybody who's interested. His meet-and-greet lists are open to whoever e-mails Smith's manager through the singer's Web site, and he won't leave a venue after one of his boozy shows until he's visited with all of the fans who are waiting for him.

It's good marketing -- all those photos posted online by excited fans, who are the most credible promoters and publicists an artist can have anymore -- and it's also good for building bonds. "We're making sure there aren't any barriers between Corey and his fans, because we have faith that some sort of emotional relationship will develop between the fans and Corey," says Smith's manager, Marty Winsch. ". . . It's a human approach as opposed to a fiscal approach."

The finances have followed, though. In 2007, in just his second full year as a full-time musician, Smith grossed roughly \$1.7 million. The following year he more than doubled that but neither he nor Winsch will say how much of that \$4 million Smith pocketed

after expenses.

So far this year, in the midst of a recession, Smith's revenues "are better than 2008," Wunsch says. "We've seen increases in most of the markets that we've played in, and sales of Corey's music continue to increase. . . . That kind of bucks the industry trend."

As the traditional music business becomes increasingly decentralized and destabilized, and record executives and managers and musicians scramble to come up with viable business models, Smith and Wunsch have found a formula that works, making them something like indie oracles.

It's one thing for an established act to experiment in pursuit of a new paradigm, whether it's Radiohead's name-your-own-price approach with its "In Rainbows" album or No Doubt's decision to give away its entire digital catalogue with the purchase of a ticket to its reunion tour or Madonna's all-encompassing deal with Live Nation, which is paying the pop star handsomely for a stake in her music, merchandising, movies, touring, licensing, sponsorships and such.

But Smith was an unknown, building his fan base from scratch, without any record-label muscle behind him; as word of his success has spread, other acts and their reps have been coming to him and, especially, Wunsch with questions. Principally: What's the secret? And will it work for me?

"I get phone calls and e-mails from random artists and random managers all the time," Wunsch says. "They're all trying to figure out how we're doing what we're doing. I talk to all of them, and everybody's tendency is to pin it on the process; people are constantly looking for something tangible. But Corey brings that X factor to the table. I know music is subjective, but he's figured out how to write songs that people find consumable. And people really react to him in a live setting."

Says Glenn Peoples, a senior editorial analyst at Billboard: "An important question here is why other artists who do the same thing are not as successful as Corey." Plenty of other unsigned acts give away free downloads and try to connect with their fans and tour, tour, tour, Peoples says. "So why aren't they selling more tickets?" The answer, he says, is that while many of those bands simply aren't very good onstage, Smith delivers the goods.

If not for the songs and live-show prowess, Smith would still be teaching at North Gwinnett High School in Suwanee, an Atlanta suburb.

"I'd like to think that it's more about the songs than the method," Smith says softly. (Onstage, he has a powerful, soulful voice; offstage, not so much.) "It's more than just giving the music away. People can talk process all day long, but in the end, I hope that they respect me as a songwriter, not just as a do-it-yourselfer or a businessperson."

Smith's fans, of course, don't particularly care that he's cracked the music-biz code. It's the music, stupid.

"It relates to my life," says Brittany Long, a 20-year-old from Charlotte. "Getting pulled over by the cops, drinking underage, the best times in life, hanging with friends, road trips, high school/college days and eventually having to grow up but still having fun. . . ."

. Corey is the theme music."

There was a lot of boozing and nostalgia in Smith's earlier work; he's writing more about spirituality and love and human nature now, explaining: "Life is about a lot more than drinkin' and thinkin' about the good old days."

Smith recorded his 2003 debut album, "Undertones," after he won a half-day's worth of studio time in a songwriting contest at a coffee shop. He made a second album, "In the Mood," on the cheap in 2004, and self-released another one, "The Good Life," in 2005, while he was still teaching. He was performing in college towns around Georgia, though, two or three nights every week and was starting to make serious headway.

"It got to the point that I would make more in one night than I would in a month teaching," Smith says over dinner. "I would get paid in cash, and I'd come home and say to my wife: 'Honey, here's a car payment.' We'd put the cash in this drawer next to my bed, and all of the sudden, it was overflowing. It was more than I could even fathom. It made it a lot harder to get up at 4:30, 5 o'clock and go to school."

Smith grew his touring base "in a circular fashion" with Atlanta and Athens at the center, Wunsch says -- "one state, one market, one fan at a time, building from the center out. It wasn't anything more complex than that."

But there were strategy meetings, in which Smith and Wunsch discussed "The Future of Music: Manifesto for the Digital Music Revolution," a book by a couple of music technology gurus who wrote about the free-flowing way that fans consume music in the digital era and how that affects everything from distribution and marketing to artist compensation.

They decided not to worry about radio, not to worry about physical retail. Instead, they'd focus on getting the music into kids' hands, hoping they would love the songs once they heard them. That would lead to a series of payoffs: The new fans would spread the word about Smith, maybe buy some music and, of course, come see Smith in concert.

The plan worked. Eventually.

The first time Smith performed in the Chapel Hill area, in July 2006, "we sold like 30 tickets," Wunsch says. "I thought Corey was going to end it right there and impale himself with a bottle of Jim Beam." But in his four return trips, Smith has sold out Cat's Cradle (capacity: 600) each time.

Says Smith: "It's almost like politicians. When they're running for office, they just start beating the campaign trail. They may gather in front of five or 10 people in some places, but it grows. And eventually, it swells. Music is kind of the same way."

Not every market is a success for Smith, though. A recent Southwestern swing took him to Albuquerque for the first time, and Smith sold fewer than 70 tickets. "It was a disaster," he says.

Smith is working on a new album now, to be released in the fall. On his tour bus (leased, he notes), he previews a couple of the songs, which are unfinished and

unmastered but have higher production values than anything he's ever recorded.

He mentions having studied some John Mayer and Jason Mraz records -- "stuff that's been really successful in the pop world." He says he's thinking about radio and partnering with a major record label.

Yep, the self-made \$4 million musician is ready to introduce himself to the masses.

"We have a solid fan base; we can keep doing this probably as long as we want," he says. "But because we've done all this groundwork, I think we can go to that next level. As an artist, I want to get my songs out to as many people as possible. . . .

"The key is balancing it with the grass-roots approach and finding a partner that trusts me enough to give me that creative control. But who knows; I'm prepared to do it either way."

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