

Portugal. The Man: A Band In Love With The Road

An Introduction by Roger Brown

The pathways to success as a musician have always been complicated and unpredictable. But, today's musicians have to bushwhack new trails to recognition, audiences, and commercial success. With the rapid decline of recorded music in physical form and the decline in the inclination and ability of record labels to invest in breaking new acts, the artist or band and the manager are assuming that role themselves. In many ways this is a good thing. The age-old complaints about record labels making artists do things they abhor will diminish. And perhaps many new pathways will be discovered, creativity and innovation will be more highly valued and great new music will be produced.

The current state of affairs is open and evolving. At one extreme, you have artists who discover ways to use the Internet to achieve massive recognition and are attempting to convert that celebrity to enduring career success. At the other extreme are artists who are "touring their brains out" and using live performance to slowly build a dedicated, personally connected fan base.

Portugal. The Man may be the best example of the latter. Here is a band that found a tough-minded manager, the one who made the fewest promises and brought the mentality of a Marine drill sergeant to the task. Together, they decided to out-work every other band on the planet. And it seems to be paying off in strong, original music, growing success, and dedicated fans that have a personal connection to the band.

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"This is not rocket science. You can't over play. You can't record too much music. You can't connect with your fans too much. Rest assured, most bands will not do it enough. Most of them all have the same problem. They are lazy. Most adults wake up 5 days a week and go to work. They work somewhere between 40 and 70 hours a week at their job. Very few bands work this hard."¹

These are the words of Rich Holtzman, manager of the psychedelic rock band Portugal. The Man. Formed in 2004, the band has been reinventing the sounds of progressive rock and hard rock from the 1970's. Comprised of singer/guitarist John Gourley, bassist Zach Carothers, keyboardist Ryan Neighbors, and drummer Jason Sechrist, the band believes their music will

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span a legendary legacy. Their name is derived from an effort to invent a larger-than-life character; similar to how David Bowie is Ziggy Stardust and The Beatles are Sgt. Peppers. It seemed only fitting to create such a paradox through imagining an entire nation as a single person. So how does a band like Portugal. The Man even begin to strive to achieve a legendary status? What are their secret strategies and tools to their current success?

The Early Years

Before the formation of Portugal. The Man, John Gourley lived in Wasilla, Alaska and worked as a carpenter with his father. His friend Zach Carothers was also originally from Alaska, but currently lived in Portland, Oregon pursuing a career in music. In 2002, Zach formed a band called Anatomy of a Ghost and called John to join the band in Oregon as their singer.

“I have no idea why they asked me to do it. I didn’t know how to sing,” John mused. “I was pretty shy growing up, so I just tried to avoid anything that would ever put me in front of people. But I really loved music. And it was kind of one of those things where I did everything I would never do in my life, and I did it within two days. I just said, ‘Alright, I’m going to Portland.’ I never wanted to leave home before, but I just kind of did it. And I’m glad I did.”²

Anatomy of a Ghost was signed to Fearless Records, an alternative rock label in Westminister, California. Unfortunately, the band broke up relatively quickly so John and Zach returned to Alaska. John had a side project called Portugal. The Man and eventually enlisted Zach and a few other friends to join his musical endeavor. In the summer of 2004, the members of Portugal. The Man moved back to Oregon with the intentions of recording a few demos and touring.

The band rejoined their label mates at Fearless Records and embarked on a tour with post-hardcore band Chiodos. The original line-up of Portugal shifted, and Jason Sechrist joined the band as their drummer. On January 24, 2006, the band released their debut record *Waiter: "You Vultures!"*.

During the band’s initial tours, they had little to no money. They did not have a home, and instead, lived out of a van that they had bought together. Each band member would budget themselves to about \$2-3 per day for food. Fearless Records would occasionally lend them \$50 per gig for tour support, and they would only make about \$50 per gig from the venue. The band was determined to continuously tour with bands like Horse the Band, Circa Survive, and Thursday, mostly because it was the only way for them to make money to stay alive.

Rich Holtzman

Portugal quickly realized they needed a manager to gain success. In March 2006, they scheduled meetings with two different managers. During the first meeting, the prospective manager took the band out to a fancy restaurant for lunch. He was a loud and energetic personality, yelling at the waitress to bring the band shrimp and anything else that they wanted off the menu. Since the band was living off of such a restrictive budget at the time, they were appreciative of the gesture.

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The prospective manager told the band that he could land them a deal with Warner. He promised the band placements on popular late night television like *Saturday Night Live* and major festivals like Lollapalooza. Portugal had never considered these opportunities, but they were excited that the manager believed in them.

The second meeting was with Rich Holtzman. Rich had been active in the music industry for many years. He started as an intern at IRS Records while in college. Upon graduation, he worked at independent record label 4AD for about ten years as a label manager. In 2003, he took the reins of record label Reincarnate Music, which did distribution for Fearless Records. One of the owners of Fearless helped Portugal with management, but he felt conflicted acting upon both management and label roles. Knowing that Portugal was seeking a manager, he recommended that they meet with Rich.

When the band arrived at his office, Rich was busy on the phone and told them to wait five minutes. They waited in the lobby, and twenty minutes later, Rich finally emerged from his office looking exhausted. He slumped into a chair and asked the band what they wanted. Portugal wanted to play better shows, so Rich bluntly told them to fire their agent and hire a new one. They mentioned that the other manager promised them performances on talk shows and in festivals, but he said their live performance was not ready. He listened to their debut record, but he said it was just okay and that it needed work.

Portugal was taken aback by his direct responses. They did not expect him to shut everything down. The band left the meeting feeling depressed, but they soon realized they had to be realistic with themselves. Rich would be an honest and trustworthy manager. He would not let them exploit an opportunity prematurely. Consequently, Portugal and Rich drafted a formal management agreement on March 24, 2006.

Approaching Airballoons

Their debut record received a surprisingly positive response in Germany, so the band traveled to Europe to capitalize upon the demand. At that time, they had never performed longer than a 30-minute set. In Germany, however, they had to perform hour and a half sets each night, so it forced them to work together and quickly write a significant amount of songs while traveling. Their new writing style led to the new sound and songs that characterized their releases in 2007.

They released their second album, *Church Mouth*, and an EP, *It's Complicated Being a Wizard*. Fearless Records released *Church Mouth*, which effectively ended their two-album agreement. The EP was also released during the band's term with Fearless, however, it was independently released on Portugal's own record label / publishing company called Approaching Airballoons. The company's title was derived from the name John originally wanted to call his band – "Portugal. The Man and the Approaching Airballoons." Through the grassroots fan base that Portugal had built through a few years of extensive touring, the independent release sold between 15,000 and 20,000 copies. The allowance for independent releases was specifically negotiated in their contract with Fearless, and the EP's success became a critical testament to the band's yearning to take their career into their own hands.

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When Portugal began recording their third album, *Censored Colors*, in 2008, a few labels approached the band with new record deals. Portugal did not need a label to release *Censored Colors*, but Rich knew the band had considerable bargaining chips to negotiate a new deal in their favor. For instance, the band had already completed recording, mixing, and mastering *Censored Colors* without the funds of a label. Touring plans were already being crafted for the next ten months, and the band was already paying for its own publicist for the record. Portugal had secured their own distribution through SonyBMG, and they were on schedule to release the album themselves. Long time touring member and keyboardist Ryan Neighbors had recently officially joined the band, and members of the psychedelic rock group Kay Kay and His Weathered Underground were collaborating as arrangers and producers, which contributed to a fresh sound for the new album.

Rich negotiated a deal between Approaching Airballoons and independent rock label Equal Vision Records. Under the terms, Portugal would keep all rights to their master recordings and publishing. Equal Vision would provide the band with a few extra team members to help with their marketing, distribution, and accounting for three albums. With Rich's prior marketing and label management experience, Equal Vision's additional team members, and Portugal's determination to play by their own rules, *Censored Colors* was successfully released on September 16, 2008. The album peaked at #10 on the Billboard Heatseekers chart, and John won Alternative Press magazine's 2008 Best Vocalist of the Year.

Bonnaroo 2009

Since the band's inception, Portugal had been eager to perform at major festivals. Rich advised them to focus on their normal touring instead and to continue developing their live show. The band followed his guidance, concentrating on improving their communication and tightness together on stage. After about five years of meticulous touring and practicing, Rich and Portugal agreed that the band had arrived at a point where their live show was undeniably good. In the summer of 2009, they finally played their first festival – Bonnaroo.

Portugal hit the stage with an hour-long set of their strongest songs, and the audience was immediately taken by surprise. Many audience members could not believe that they had never heard of the band before. During the summer of that year, they continued performing at other festivals, including Lollapalooza and others in Europe, and they experienced the same audience reaction each time. The band's patience and determination had paid off.

Breaking The Glass Ceiling

Legendary producer and engineer Paul Kolderie had mixed *Censored Colors* and was scheduled to produce Portugal's fourth studio album, *The Satanic Satanist*. The majority of the material on their previous albums was written on the spot while in the recording studio. This was primarily because their extensive touring schedule did not allow for a long period of time spent in the studio. With the chance to work with Paul who has produced Radiohead and The Pixies, however, the band made a conscious effort to focus on pre-production. Portugal began to shift their concentration to the premeditated songwriting and arranging of more mature tracks.

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On July 21, 2009, Portugal released *The Satanic Satanist* under Approaching Airballoons / Equal Vision Records. The band was very pleased with the album and its developed songwriting, especially their single “People Say.” The record debuted at #81 on the Billboard charts, as well as several other Alternative charts. Despite positive feedback from fans and blogs, “People Say” did not receive the radio play that they had anticipated.

It seemed as if the band hit a glass ceiling, and Rich knew something had to be done to break through it. After the release of *The Satanic Satanist*, Portugal continued to receive offers from record labels, although the majority of the offers were not to the band’s liking. Atlantic Records, however, seemed to share and understand Portugal’s vision and goals. Rich knew that *The Satanic Satanist* could have been a larger success with a wider reach and more funding, and signing to Atlantic could launch the band to the next level. Rich began negotiating a deal with Atlantic, which took seven to eight months.

During the negotiation, Portugal continued their extensive touring and released their fifth studio album, *American Ghetto*, on March 2, 2010. The record was positioned as a limited edition album reserved for superfans. Only 15,000 physical copies were printed worldwide. The album was not solicited to press or radio, and promotional copies of *American Ghetto* were not pressed.

American Ghetto was the third album released with Equal Vision, which effectively ended their agreement. On April 2, 2010, their new deal with Atlantic was finalized and signed. Under the new agreement, Portugal reserved the right to release albums and EPs independently from Approaching Airballoons. The agreement also included hyper-accelerated album cycles, due to the band’s rapid pace of recording a new album every eight to fourteen months. Atlantic began working on *The Satanic Satanist* and landed “People Say” in the Top 15 on the Alternative charts. The benefits of the band’s relationship with their new label quickly revealed themselves.

Portugal immediately began recording their sixth album, *In The Mountain, In The Cloud*. By this point in their career, the band had become accustomed to having a large amount of freedom in the studio and allowing their instincts to guide their playing when tracking. Their previous producers, like Paul Kolderie, had always been accommodating to their process. For *In The Mountain, In The Cloud*, they began working with John Hill, producer of megastars like Shakira, Rhianna, and Christina Aguilera. Portugal chose to work with Hill because of his production and writing on Santigold’s debut album. Unfortunately, Portugal had difficulty adjusting to the new relationship. The band felt that his criticisms and suggestions to change melody and arrangement ideas were based upon an attempt to gain writing credits on tracks. Due to their frustration, Portugal lost the ability to rely on their instincts in the studio and hit a severe writer’s block.

Since the band was still in the middle of touring, they were forced to leave the studio sessions incomplete. In order to continue their work on the album while traveling, they had to record tracks in five different studios across the world. Abruptly stopping and restarting the creative process made it difficult to overcome the writer’s block. Due to the massive amount of recording sessions and gigs, each member slept for only one to three hours per night. After eight

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demanding months, the band experienced a break through in their writing and completed the album.

On July 19, 2011, Portugal released *In The Mountain, In The Cloud* through Atlantic. The album debuted at #42 on the Billboard Top 200 chart and #2 on the Billboard Tastemakers chart. The album also received recognition on the Billboard Rock, Digital, and Alternative charts. The band's determination to power through their struggles and decision to team with Atlantic was worth it. They had broken the glass ceiling.

Fan Relationships

Portugal believes in treating their fans like friends. They rarely stay back stage at their shows, instead spending their time in the audience with their fans. "I don't think Portugal. The Man fans like the band just because of the music," John explains. "It's like high school – people choose their friends based on their similar interests in music, movies, and pop culture. We have similar interests as our fans."³

Their social media pages are not only full of acoustic performances and behind-the-scenes photos of the band. Their posts also include photos of their fans, any artists and songs they are currently listening, and YouTube videos that they enjoy. The band responds to social media messages and emails that they receive, as any friend would do. Occasionally, the band will schedule one-on-one Skype sessions with their fans. They have sent thousands of handwritten thank you letters, as well as personal gifts to fans chosen at random.

"We do not view social media as simply a marketing tool," Rich explains. "It is our vessel to share who we are at our core, and it is just as much a part of our lives as tuning a guitar."⁴

Portugal ensures that their fans feel like they are a part of a secret club. They allow a limited amount of fans to hear their albums before the official release date. They send exclusive videos to the core of their fans, knowing that they probably will not be seen by anyone else. A large portion of their merch does not have the band name on it, so only fans of Portugal can recognize each other.

On August 8, 2011, while the band was at Lollapalooza, they received a phone call from their tour manager that their trailer had been stolen. Their trailer contained nearly \$100,000 worth of instruments and performance gear. They immediately posted the tragic news to Twitter and Facebook, including a list of their gear with photos. Their fans were infuriated – they felt personally robbed due to their strong bond with the band. The story rapidly spread to the Chicago police department, television, newspapers, and radio.

Within a few hours, the police found the trailer, but the contents were missing. On August 12, the police caught a man with most of their gear in his home. He claimed to have purchased the gear at a flea market, with the intention of reselling the equipment. Due to the media's mass coverage, however, the gear was too risky for him to sell. To show their appreciation, the band sent five-dozen doughnuts to the Chicago police department. Portugal

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triumphantly posted to their website, “It is more than just a win for Portugal. The Man – it is also a win for Twitter, the world of social media, the Chicago police, and old school journalism.”⁵

Touring Strategy

By the end of 2011, Portugal will have played 124 shows over the course of the year, and 838 shows over the course of their career. These statistics do not include the numerous acoustic and radio shows that the band has performed since 2004.

“Portugal. The Man logged over 800 shows in five years,” wrote The San Antonio Current. “To put that into perspective, consider the road hogs Dave Matthews Band. In January, Annie Lowery (of Slate) logged Dave Matthews Band as having played 1,692 shows in 18 years. At Portugal. The Man’s annual rate, they’ll log the same amount six years faster. The band quits working for about a month every December.”⁶

“Touring is one of the few real and sustainable avenues that an artist has direct control over,” Rich advises, “It’s viable for long-term success because it actually exists. It’s not like a viral YouTube video. All of those things are virtual and are good for a very short-term success. I called it the Juicy Fruit Syndrome. The gum is the best tasting thing for two minutes, but then you want to throw it away immediately.”⁷

With an arsenal of lights, lasers, fog machines, extended jam sections, and guitar solos, there is no question that Portugal pays a great deal of attention to building their live show production. Portugal has always dedicated the time necessary to develop their live performance. They recognize the importance of traveling to both major and secondary markets. The band values the physical connection that they can have with fans at shows, drinking a beer and hanging out with them before and after their performance. Touring is an essential aspect of the band because it created foundational skills of stage performance and audience interaction.

Carefully calculated planning and routing has always been a part of Portugal’s touring strategy, but the sense of community that the band has built within their team has also been crucial. When Rich signed as the band’s manager in 2006, they established a clear plan – all money earned by the band would be invested back into the band. Simply put, all guarantees, splits, buyouts, album sales, and merch sales were used for every expense. If the band needed lights to add to their live production, the band would pay for the equipment. If a band member got sick or needed stitches, the band paid for the doctor. If a band member needed new equipment, the band paid for the gear. If the band needed food, they would go to dinner and pay for the meal together.

A system of a secure community was quickly established. Even their tour manager, Ian Shaw, has been with the band for over five years and is considered a part of the family. This sense of community is essential to the band’s ability to cooperate and work together over extensive periods of touring and studio recording. Due to the constant cycle of reinvestment, the band is a continuously growing force.

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Portugal's extensive touring amounts to the majority of their income. Roughly 75% of the band's income is derived from touring, 15% from synch licensing, and 10% from recording revenue. During the band's most recent tour, they performed at venues with a 750 – 3000 capacity, and the average ticket prices were \$20. Portugal typically kept 60% of the total ticket sales, so the band earned about \$9,000 to \$36,000 per night. Even at Portugal's current level of success, their most recent tour was one of their worst grossing tours. The band did not turn a large profit because they invested a considerable sum of money into the lighting and production of their live show to deliver serious value for the ticket price paid by their fans.

Work Ethic

Since the band's formation in 2004, the band still does not have a home, nor do they desire one. They live out of their tour bus, and they have never had to pay rent, mortgage payments, electric bills, and cable bills. They constantly tour because it keeps them in business and it is what they love. "If they're not touring, they're recording. If they're not recording, they're staying with family and friends. If not that, they're back to touring," Rich describes.⁸

The band abides by Malcolm Gladwell's philosophy in his book *Outliers* – that the key to success in any field has nothing to do with talent. It's simply practice, 10,000 hours of it – 20 hours a week for 10 years.⁹ Portugal strives to achieve five years worth of work in one. They tour for almost half of every year. They view each album as a documentation of their progress. When Portugal initially formed, they could barely play their instruments, and yet, they were still determined to leave a legendary mark on the history of music. Rich advises:

"Traction can and will happen if you are doing something compelling and actually working hard to get it. If you expect it to happen without hard work, you are expecting luck. I am not one to generally believe in luck. It is pretty simple. You need to work hard, play as many shows as possible and connect with your fans. Do it and then do it again and again.

"This is not rocket science. You can't over play. You can't record too much music. You can't connect with your fans too much. Rest assured, most bands will not do it enough. Most of them all have the same problem. They are lazy. Most adults wake up 5 days a week and go to work. They work somewhere between 40 and 70 hours a week at their job. Very few bands work this hard.

"Once you have that traction, you need to keep doing it over and over again. With Portugal. The Man, we use the reference of John's upbringing. His father built houses for a living, and he would build a few houses a week. Most bands have trouble making one record every two years. We think that is somewhat pathetic. When creativity is flowing, you need to capture it. If it's not flowing, you need to try everything to start it flowing again. The output should be virtually constant."¹⁰

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Endnotes

- ¹ Holtzman, Rich. E-mail interview. 29 Nov. 2011.
- ² "Interview: Portugal. The Man Frontman John Gourley." *Inflatable Ferret*. 16 Feb. 2010. Web. 4 Dec. 2011. [<http://inflatableferret.com/interviews/interview-portugal-the-man-frontman-john-gourley>].
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- ⁸ Ibid.
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