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Music in Corporate Controlled
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Abstract

For the radio industry, music has become a tool for attracting listeners with the purpose of providing a specific demographic audience for corporate advertisers. As profit increasingly becomes a predominant focus, individual artistic expression and limited opportunity become a growing concern for aspiring musicians, producers and songwriters. This essay begins by demonstrating what hopeful artists often encounter when they begin their journey within the realm of the music business. It will be argued that artistic integrity often becomes compromised in a business where powerful gatekeepers often shape and dictate cultural trends that optimize consumer consumption. This essay will explore how illegal business practices flourish, as payola (pay for play) becomes a way of securing limited airplay within a radio station's playlist. In a business where music is regularly selected for its profit potential, music has become a way of shaping popular culture rather than reflecting its true nature.

KEYWORDS: Music, Radio, media monopoly, society, mass media, record label, aspiring artist, culture, payola, advertising

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Music is an art form that has the power to soothe, invigorate and enlighten. It is a means of conveying ideas, expressing insights and informing humanity of its condition. Precisely because of its alluring and influential nature, music has been used as a means of gathering and forming a collective audience for economic exploitation. It is meticulously selected, packaged and distributed via an elaborate industrial process that is tied to a complex money making system (Frith, 1992:49). On July 25, 2005 at a press conference in New York, Attorney General Eliot Spitzer stated that “songs are not selected for airplay based on artistic merit and popularity. Airtime is often determined by undisclosed payoffs to radio stations and their employees” (Gallo & Learmonth, 2005). In a world dominated by communication technologies, mainstream music in North America has been disseminated through carefully networked corporate channels where it is used to create, develop and target a particular audience for the purpose of product consumption and corporate gain. This process leads to musical homogeneity, limited artistic expression and opportunity, corporate hegemony, unethical business practices and a society that is influenced by music that is controlled and chosen to serve the needs of corporations.

Trying to secure a record deal with a major label often becomes a disenchanting process for many aspiring artists. The overwhelming majority of songwriters and musicians soon discover that the unrelenting determination is not enough to supersede the business climate. In this environment the dream of a record contract almost always proves elusive. Artists, who are inspired by success stories of mentors, will base their hope of a satisfying career in the music industry not realizing that many of the musicians survive largely due to commercial exposure rather than on musical talent alone. The reality is that the majority never hear about the numerous aspiring artists who will probably never attain commercial success; only the privileged few have the occasion to speak and thus their success stories become available precisely because of their renowned status.

Hopeful artists usually begin their attempts at breaking into the industry by sending a multitude of original demos to record labels. Unbeknownst to the artist, “at the bottom of the corporate hierarchy, working in a cubbyhole in the A&R¹ department, is the office person who listens to unsolicited tapes” (Weisman, 1997:45). These low profile gatekeepers generally have no power within the company and replies to demos received will usually be in the form of a generic letter explaining to the artist that the label has no use for their material or it is not what they are looking for at this point in time. This is assuming that a reply will be sent out at all. Major labels do not like to invest in artists who are not well known because there is a higher degree of uncertainty concerning success, thus, they “put the big money on acts they know will sell, the superstar musicians” (Beeching, 2005: 70). Therefore, limited opportunity for aspiring artists becomes a byproduct of corporate conservatism and “profit takes the place of aesthetic quality as the selection

1 Artist and Repertoire

criterion for the development and the dispersal of culture” (Münch in Kubacki and Croft, 2005:228). The artists who will have any chance at receiving attention from A&R executives are those who acquire a high degree of self-directed exposure. If a band is able to build a fan base that promises to generate a substantial profit, then the major record labels might take notice. Even then, if the music or image of the artist does not comply with what the record label is seeking, then, the artist will either not be considered or in the best-case scenario, the industry will attempt to modify and sculpt the artist in order to fit the “ideal” image. This process is financially risky and the label will not waste their time and money.

The record label seeks airplay for its repertoire of artists in order to transform a band into a commodity (Ahlkvist, 2001:351). Therefore the record label will typically license artists who “fit the mold” of what the radio industry is willing to present to its listeners. In order to obtain the “scoop” of what is “hot” and what is “not”, schmoozing among record executives and radio program directors become an essential part of the business and informal deals begin to develop outside of public view. In extreme cases “such goodies as free drugs [...] cars, trips, illicit sex, or other such favors” (Weissman, 1997:77) have been used. Music on commercial radio becomes less and less a product of personal artistic exploration because “many of the decisions that are made by songwriters, artists, producers, record company executives, and promoters are heavily influenced by anticipation of what the radio industry wants” (Rothenbuhler & McCourt, 1992:104). No matter how talented, if the artist does not possess qualities that are deemed “effective” in acquiring a large listening audience, the doors to record labels and radio stations remain closed. This close knit circle between radio and label leaves a very small window of opportunity for an artist seeking to advance within the industry. This condition invariably leads to artistic conformity and musical homogeneity. In *Popular Music and Communication: Second Edition*, James Lull states that “a tremendous degree of cooperation takes place between the records and radio industries,” this is “an alliance that further standardizes the sound” (1992:5). Therefore, if an artist wants to get his/her foot in the door, he/she must conform to industry standards.

It is easy for the average listener to assume that only the best music receives airplay. Contrary to popular belief, radio “formats are selected for their estimated ability to accumulate profit, rather than to present music” (Rothenbuhler & McCourt, 1992:106). This process is intended to reach and create a particular audience for the benefit of corporate entities who advertise on the radio. Advertising becomes the leading focus in broadcast programming and thus the art of music takes a back seat to profit because it is used only as a means to define a demographic (Bennett in Ahlkvist and Fisher, 2000:304). This process greatly reduces opportunity for aspiring artists because if new artists do not reflect label and radio expectations, then chances for further growth within the industry will diminish and opportunity will be available only to a privileged few that “fit the bill”. The artists who do not suit industry criteria usually tend to conform to current market trends set by a clique of powerful gatekeepers. This might give musicians and songwriters a “chance to earn a lot of money, but only at the cost of their artistic integrity” (Kubacki and Croft, 2005:233).

As the Telecommunications Act in 1996 came into effect, Clear Channel Communications has been able to purchase over 1,225 radio stations within the United States (Sharlet, 2005:195). It owns and operates over two hundred radio stations abroad and it “controls more live-music venues than any other company” (ibid). As one of the most prominent gatekeepers in the radio industry, “Clear Channel has designed itself as a self-contained, nationwide feedback loop, calibrating the tastes of its listeners and segmenting them into market-proven ‘formats’” (Sharlet, 2005:197). This monopoly proves to be very useful and powerful for corporate profit but does very little for musical innovation and aspiring artists. John Hogan, President and Chief Executive Officer of Clear Channel said, “if you have a younger, female-skewing advertiser who wants access to that audience, we can give them

stations in, you know, Boston and New York and Miami and Chicago, literally across the country” (Sharlet, 2005:195). The record labels will then scout for artists who possess all the musical and aesthetic qualities that will enable them to attract a specific audience the radio industry is seeking. This is done so radio stations can provide an advertiser with potential consumers. Therefore, the corporations who pay for radio advertisements indirectly determine the artists and music that become prominent throughout society.

One can understand why major labels such as Sony BMG, Universal, Warner and EMI would want to comply with radio industry demands. Clear Channel provides a huge market for the music industry and airplay will not be granted unless the artists appeal to audiences that are accessible to advertisers. The majors understand the power of radio and all “efforts are geared almost exclusively to radio exposure” (Segrave, 1994:221). Whether the music is lousy or distasteful is of no importance; what matters is if radio stations are willing to integrate it into their playlist and give it multiple “spins” a day. “A record must be played and heard before it is bought” (ibid) and airplay is what “determines which recordings become popular and which remain obscure” (Rothenbuhler & McCourt, 1992:101).

This pervasive need to receive airplay is often a catalyst for unethical business practices within the music industry. In the book *Payola in the Music Industry: A History, 1880-1991*, Kerry Segrave claims that “long before we had television, or radio, or records, the music industry had payola. It still does. It always will” (1994:221). This way of doing business is still very much alive today. In a recent crack down on payola practices the *Chronicle Herald* stated that Attorney General Eliot “Spitzer said his investigation showed Sony BMG paid for vacation packages and electronics for radio programmers, paid for contest giveaways for listeners, paid some operational expenses of radio stations and hired middlemen known as independent promoters to provide illegal payments to radio stations to get more airplay for its artists” (Gormley, 2005). Record labels often provide radio stations with a selection of artists that will prove useful in reaching listeners. Limited openings within a radio stations playlist usually spark private bidding wars that become a way of securing a spot on the airwaves. Payola is a phenomenon that has always been a part of the music industry and most players accept the established shady game. Segrave states that “annoyance with payola, on the part of the established industry, becomes greatest when a new company has enough resources behind it to attempt to bid up the payola price for all companies. It is then that cries to eliminate payola may be heard at their loudest” (1994:221). Therefore, amongst all the bribing, schmoozing and politics, ironically the artist and the music become the variable of least importance in an industry where music is used as its primary influence.

Given the information mentioned, the focus turns to questions regarding music and its effects on culture and society. It has been widely accepted that music has tremendous power in shaping receptive audiences. According to Jaret and Boles, “song lyrics along with other elements of popular culture both reinforce beliefs, values and attitudes and help to form or guide them” (Herd, 2005:1260). If music is primarily used as a means of increasing revenue, what will its message be and how will it influence its audience? Mention of products and brand names are increasingly becoming commonplace in popular music and this form of calculated advertising further perpetuates and solidifies collective exploitation and program standardization. Herd claims “companies promoting high-end beverages such as Courvoisier, Hennessy and Remy Martin have greatly expanded on premise advertising using rap music” (2005:1259) and the mention of alcohol consumption resulting in sexual encounter in lyrics has recently become common (2005:1265-6). This is a rather disturbing statistic considering the average listening age of rap music is twelve to twenty years of age (Herd, 2005:1267).

Music has become a way of shaping culture and society rather than reflecting and informing of its realistic condition. This process is determined in part by placing an overwhelming focus on profit.

The music industry depends on the radio industry for promotion of its artists and the radio industry employs the music industry to gather a specific audience for its advertisers. Most decisions regarding musical format revolve around this concept. Program standardization becomes a byproduct of collective priming because the process of gathering a large audience for consumption becomes increasingly viable when the public is presented with musical content that is standard and equally experienced by everyone. This practice leaves a large set of creative individuals outside the established circle of the music industry.

Music has always been a driving force throughout society and it is increasingly becoming used as a tool for economic exploitation. Le Cocq states “commercialism in the music business is merely ‘looking for what sells, and trying to reproduce it as closely as possible to maximize sales’” (Kubacki & Croft, 2005:228). Fantasy becomes packaged with the intention of priming and transforming society into a collective web of receptive consumers which entice people into accepting and believing an ideal rendition of reality rather than having artistic integrity reflect and shape culture and society. This is evident when unethical business practices such as “payola” begin to surface. Artistic conformity becomes an essential but unsettling demand for the majority of aspiring artists who fall outside general market trends. Musicians and songwriters who stay true to their artistic integrity become forced to distribute their music by means that are not tied to the established monopolistic industry. Effective promotional channels remain costly, thus the spotlight is often reserved for “big players” who possess extensive business connections and financial resources. For the independent artist, “the corporate voice booms across the land” while “individual expression, at best, trickles through tiny, constricted public circuits” (Shiller, 2005:186).

The music and radio industries have become notorious for advancing the few that have been chosen by powerful influential trend setting gatekeepers whilst the majority of talented innovative artists sit idly and watch a minority receive unprecedented public acclaim because they have been deemed effective at amassing the greatest potential for profit.

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