

# Music, The Business of

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For the most part the general public conceives of those businesses that produce, promote, and benefit from the work of musicians in almost wholly predatory terms. In their eyes musicians invariably sell out in order to be successful; they sacrifice their authenticity for marketability; the executives who represent musicians' interests conceive of musicians and their work as interchangeable vehicles of revenue. However, if one accepts that commerce and creativity do not constitute a dichotomy and that corporate entities, large or small, rarely operate in a uniform let alone logical fashion, then these ideological assumptions lose their luster. At the same time the forces that give rise to these notions remain compelling and worthy of investigation. The notion of the presumptive disgrace of commercial success or the invariable malfeasance of corporate executives is fueled by long-standing American ideas about romantic individualism and anti-institutionalism. The durability of the belief in authenticity exists in the United States as a result of a pervasive national separation of aesthetic endeavors and worldly experience. Artists are, it is believed, above the fray of filthy lucre. American music, to the contrary, remains an endeavor that invariably fuses and confuses commercial and creative spheres. A study of it needs to rest on a clear-eyed examination of the manner in which these two domains coexist, albeit antagonistically and, in some senses, without consistent recognition of each other's assumptions or ideologies.

The difficulty of adequately assessing the history and substance of the business of music is made even more difficult by the lack of a body of information about it. In contrast to the study of film, there are few histories of individual record labels or publishing houses and little documentation about the day-to-day practices of corporate boardrooms or executive suites. Much work remains to be done solely to assemble the historical record of this subject, which will invariably confront the limited archiving of their pasts on the part of music companies. In some cases even obtaining access to the master recordings they own is difficult in light of the frequent selling of back catalogs as a result of corporate restructuring and market consolidation. The emergence of an academic field, popular music studies, has begun to establish not only the outline of the body of empirical material needed to examine the music business in detail but also to delineate the sort of theoretical apparatus that can move beyond the flawed myopia that has governed earlier scholarship.

The history of the music business in the United States can be roughly divided into three segments, each defined by the dominant body of interests at a given point in time. From the dawn of the republic through the ascendance of the publishing interests collectively designated Tin Pan Alley, publishers of sheet music occupied the center of power for more than one hundred years. They paid songwriters and composers outright for their material and publicized it through an effective and systematic exercise of "plugging." A hit song or instrumental melody could possess a three-to-six-year period of opportunity in the marketplace. Its publicizing began in the bars and music halls associated with the working class and slowly worked its way up the theatrical, and social, scale eventually to be featured in the acts of theatrical headliners. They would receive time-tested material in return for their compensation from the publisher in the form of cash as well as, sometimes, credit as a cowriter. The audience for sheet music was predominantly women whose instrument of choice remained the piano. Until this system and the publishers' dominance eroded at the start of the second decade of the twentieth century, sales of 100 thousand copies were considered substantial. During the period 1902–1907, 100 songs exceeded that number: 50 over 200 thousand; 30 over 250 thousand and four over 700 thousand. **These songs possessed a uniform format with verse subordinate to**

chorus; simple lyrics in a common language; and a memorable melody devoid of ornamentation that led the listener forward through time to a deliberate and satisfying climax. The lyrical content often, if not typically, played on the listener's emotions and, on other occasions, racist or sexist stereotypes. The aim was to stimulate but not unsettle an audience by reinforcing their sense of well-being as well as their unconscious ideologies.

By the middle of the 1920s, recordings began to outsell sheet music. The public became less the performer of a published repertoire than the purchaser of recordings of that body of music. Tin Pan Alley lost its luster, and other forms of entertainment began to control the public's attention. The erosion of the publishers' position was initiated by the addition of the compulsory licensing provision in the Copyright Act of 1909. Thenceforth, a royalty was granted for the sale of recordings. A wide range of types of performance was recorded with the hope that an audience existed. In the process the major record labels began to regard many vernacular forms of American culture as economically viable entities. Jazz, blues, country, and, later, rhythm and blues and rock 'n' roll therefore emerged both as forms of performance and marketing categories. However, the manner in which the music was marketed remained limited by ideological presuppositions about class and race. African American works remained directed to that community alone, whereas country music was presumed to appeal singularly to working-class rural whites. During the course of World War II, the races and classes mixed in the factories and on the front line, eroding slowly these entrenched beliefs as well as providing the opportunities for various forms of American musical culture to merge in a hybrid fashion. The explosion of the number of American teenagers, and their fascination with popular music that began in the 1940s, accelerated this process. It should be added, however, that attraction to the music of another race, class, or culture need not lead to the desire to ameliorate the conditions that make those individuals' lives unequal and onerous.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, structural changes occurred in the music business. The capital supporting the record companies was increasingly transnational in nature, and efforts were therefore made to create artists who sold across borders. These "superstars" dominated the attention of the major labels and saturated the marketplace. The multinational conglomerates who now controlled record companies—as in the case of Sony Corporation's purchase of Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) Records in 1988 for two billion dollars—led to the use of all available forms of media to market music. Crossover promotion became the norm, with music featured in films and on television and radio as well as, with the proliferation of computers, over the Internet. In the process small labels suffered; many of the independent companies were either purchased outright or treated as farm teams whose successful artists were plucked up by the conglomerates. Furthermore, the introduction in 1981 of the music-video channel, Music Television (MTV), demanded a new type of photogenic performer whose skills were often untransferable to the live concert arena. However, the most substantial and potentially long-lasting phenomenon may well be the replacement of analog by digital technology. This did not merely lead to a new recording format, the compact disc (CD), but also helped bring about the ability to create digital files of compositions that might be downloaded without purchase through the use of MP3 technology. As the millennium passed, the music business understandably feared a loss of control over the product they market and the profits they had grown to expect. Their hegemony over U.S. musical culture may not be eroded, but it has certainly been shaken.

The archiving of American music is a comparatively recent phenomenon. So much of the material had been considered ephemeral, the trivial byproduct of a commercial transaction. Furthermore, for all the erosion of aesthetic categories, music associated with the concert repertoire has been cataloged and retained more readily than the transitory productions of the popular arena. Even the original manufacturers and property owners of this domain have routinely neglected its retention and preservation. In the case of recordings, metal discs and master tapes have customarily been warehoused and inventoried, even if the efforts to transfer their contents to the most efficacious technology remain spotty at best, driven by the reissue process more than the urge to preserve history. Ancillary but significant materials—including album cover art and publicity ephemera—traditionally are disposed of once their subject's moment of fame has passed. Consequently, private collectors frequently act as the first line in archival efforts, and museums, even record companies themselves, turn to them to fill a dismaying void of evidence. In addition, a number of professional commercial enterprises—the Michael Ochs Archives, for example—acquire and profit from the recycling of the by-products of the music business.

Systematic preservation and documentation of the American music industry remains, therefore, a comparatively recent phenomenon. The holdings in the Library of Congress and the National Museum of American History are considerable and cross generic, temporal, and regional boundaries. Privately funded institutions dedicated to the archival enterprise have flourished of late, yet, surprisingly, no single entity exists that addresses American music of all types and periods. Instead, music-focused museums, halls of fame, and archives seem to be by and large genre-driven enterprises. Some of the most noteworthy and longstanding include the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, established by the Country Music Foundation, and such academically housed collections as the folk music-centered Jonathan Edward Memorial Foundation Collection initiated by the University of California at Los Angeles and later housed at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and the jazz archives of Rutgers University. In addition are the Cleveland-based Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the Experience Music Project, located in Seattle and underwritten by the computer entrepreneur Paul Allen. Notwithstanding such noteworthy enterprises, a number of genres remain unrepresented; there are no structures dedicated to rhythm and blues, blues, rap, or mainstream pop. Furthermore, a common criticism might be made of many of the existing sites, for they too often come across as dedicated more to content than contextualization. It goes without saying that collecting artifacts does not amount to a self-sufficient enterprise without due attention paid to what those artifacts signify. Accordingly, the documentation and analysis of American music and its business remains a wide-open field, which will undoubtedly provide scholars, students, and writers with ample opportunities for study far into the future.

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