

# Money for Nothing: Behind the Business of Pop Music

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## SYNOPSIS

*Money for Nothing* opens with this question: “Of the thousands of musicians who perform music today, why do some of them become stars and have their music heard by millions, while others don’t?” Looking beyond obvious questions of individual talent and ambition, the film attempts to answer this question with an inside look at the business of popular music. It draws on insights from a number of alternative artists and music journalists to document the ways that musical and artistic expression have been severely limited by a shrinking corporate culture – a new world business order in which four or five huge media conglomerates control virtually the entire music industry. The film demonstrates how this consolidation of the industry has restricted almost every aspect of contemporary music: the way it’s produced, distributed, promoted and performed, and how it has changed the very conceptions of consumer choice and what’s considered “good” music. The film also traces a highly-regulated musical culture in which sensation has replaced talent, marketing has replaced aesthetics, and the historical power of music to change the way people look at the world has been harnessed to turn people into more efficient consumers.

After introducing these issues, the film takes an in-depth look at the four primary “Gate Keepers” of popular music – those who control radio, TV, touring and retail – and shows how each serves the interests of the other more than the interests of music or musicians. The result is a marketing phenomenon called “synergy,” which Ben H. Bagdikian, in his book *Media Monopoly*, defines this way: “a combination of two or more forces that creates a result greater than the sum of the individual parts [in which] each part of ... a firm feeds business to other parts of the same corporation.” In this way, the shared interests and interdependence of these individual sub-companies, owned by the same four or five umbrella corporate conglomerates, feed and feed off of cross marketing and total media saturation.

One of the primary arguments is that the five big music companies take advantage of their lock on these four varied “gates” into the music world to push the acts they deem most profitable. The effect is a musical landscape in which art has become subservient to commerce, “artists” and radio stations have come to sound more and more alike, consumers have been systematically sold the illusion of choice, and new, original and truly alternative acts find it virtually impossible to gain exposure.

## **KEY POINTS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY SECTION**

### **I. Introduction/Opening Section**

#### **Key Points:**

- There's a crisis in the music industry: while music has historically been a primary means of popular expression and communication, it no longer belongs to the people; instead it belongs to four of five corporations that decide what gets played and what gets produced.
- The five companies that control virtually every aspect of the industry are BMG (German); Sony (Japanese); AOL-Time Warner (U.S.); Vivendi (French); and the smaller but still substantial EMI.
- As companies have merged and gone global, independent and smaller labels have been sucked into the corporate vortex; taking risks on music has now become secondary to more immediate concerns about the bottom line.
- With the intense pressure for these companies to maximize profit immediately, the cultivation of sensation has come to replace the more time-consuming and risky cultivation of talent.
- The nature of the business demands that the emphasis now be on the quick sell: generating large sales from a few artists, rather than smaller sales from a greater number and diversity of artists.
- The monopoly status of these companies provides no incentive for companies to provide choice.
- This risk-averse system puts immense financial, and creative, pressures on new artists and those who are considered "mid-range" (those who sell fairly well, but not at blockbuster levels).
- Artists pay the costs for producers, studio time, video production and tour support before their albums are even released. The company fronts the money, the artist goes into debt, and are then required to sell approximately 50,000 albums to break even.
- If artists refuse to take on this debt, they are not signed.
- As a result of these practices, the industry is seeing growing support for unions similar to the Screen Actors Guild, which negotiates collective contracts and protects the interests of even struggling actors.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. How has the merging of smaller labels into giant media conglomerates affected the kinds of music we hear on the radio?
2. Corporate executives might question the film's premise that their concern for the bottom line is incompatible with bringing quality and diversity to the airwaves. How do you feel about this?
3. The film talks about a number of groups who sold lots of records and ended up bankrupt. What are the reasons for this? How does the film's explanation differ from the kinds of perceptions created by mainstream media – shows like VH1's "Behind the Music" – when they talk about artists who go broke?
4. Music journalist Dave Marsh observes that the new music industry would rather create "sensation" than develop talent. What are some examples of who you'd consider to be "sensational" singers or musical acts? What defines the line between talent and sensation?
5. One implication of the film's opening section is that the current musical environment is hostile to "art" – that the big labels who control the industry are interested in what will be wildly popular more than what's good. Does this imply that "art" is destined to be unpopular? That to produce and promote "quality" music requires companies to take risks and lose money? How do you define "art" and "quality" in music? And do you feel that if the system were more open, more diverse kinds of music could themselves become popular? Should popularity be the issue at all?

## **II. The Gatekeepers**

In the music industry, there are four primary gateways to consumers: radio, television, touring and retail. After a record is produced, it gets promoted when radio stations play its songs, when channels like MTV show its videos, and when concert promoters and venues take on their acts. The fourth and final gateway involves getting the actual record to consumers in stores. Because all four of these gateways are caught up with one another's corporate interests, music's passage to the public is severely narrowed. Key points and discussion questions for each of these four gateways follow:

### **1. Radio:**

- The 1996 Telecommunications Act removed restrictions on the number of radio stations any one company could own and accelerated the trend of a small number of companies owning the vast majority of stations.
- Because three super "corporations" own almost all of the radio stations in the country, the system is closed: independent music is shut out, and the result is that deejays have no power and big-market stations around the country all sound the same.
- Major labels have a huge influence on what records radio stations play: they work closely with radio stations and pour substantial amounts of money into them to assure that their music is played.

- In the 1950s, Congress conducted hearings into “payola” scandals involving record deejays who took money under the table from record executives in exchange for playing the company’s music.
- Today the scenario is much the same, except that it’s become legal and no longer triggers public discussion about “musical or artistic integrity.”

**Discussion Questions:**

1. How did the passage in 1996 of the Telecommunications Act alter the media and musical landscape? What does it mean that the radio airwaves are “public” and that they were given, rather than bought, by corporations? And what does this mean to musicians who want their music to reach the public?

(For reference, go to a critical analysis of The Telecommunications Act by Mark Lloyd of the Civil Rights Forum on Communication Policy>>

<http://www.civilrightsforum.org/cause4concern.htm>)

2. If the Telecommunications Act was designed expressly to increase competition, why is there so little diversity in the music played on radio?
3. Why is that it that deejays at radio stations lack the power they once had to play the songs they want?
4. What was the “payola scandal” and how does it mirror the situation with radio today? Why was it a scandal then, but not now? What does it say about changes in America culture that there was such outrage when that scandal broke, and little mention of how things work today? What role, if any, do you feel media have played in these changes in perception?
5. Robert McChesney speaks of “musical and artistic integrity” toward the end of this section. What do you think he means by this?

**2. MTV:**

- MTV has immense power to advertise music by broadcasting videos that reach 320 million houses in 90 countries on five continents.
- MTV is essentially a 24-hour infomercial, virtually all of its content designed to sell the products of their parent company or the paid advertisers with whom they do business.
- The major record labels have extremely close ties to MTV – the two feed off one another.

- MTV's Total Request Live, perhaps the most influential television show in the music industry, is live, but in reality limits what can be "requested" to a very slim, carefully crafted roster of corporate-approved choices. To even be in a position to be "requested", an artist needs plenty of promo money, connections and tie-ins – by definition excluding truly alternative choices.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What is the baseline purpose of music videos?
2. What are some examples of MTV being what McChesney calls a "24-hour infomercial"?
3. What is MTV trying to sell – beyond the specific products advertised there? Why?
4. Total Request Live is billed as democracy in action. What kind of power do viewers really have to request the music they want to hear? Why might it be that viewers, in reality, request the very same songs that MTV happens to want them to request?
5. Do you feel TRL's brand of choice and democracy have anything in common with Presidential politics? How do media work similarly in both instances? And what questions does this raise about the overall relationship between media and democracy (See *Constructing Public Opinion*).

### **3. Touring:**

- Corporate control is also central when it comes to the business of touring.
- If artists, even alternative artists who gain popularity without corporate backing, want to play large venues, they must pass through the corporate gates.
- This control amounts to huge touring costs, which translates into further debt for artists and high ticket prices.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. The film talks about how Ani DiFranco and Pearl Jam have faced almost overwhelming obstacles in trying to gain more control over how they perform their music. What are the problems? What do they have in common?
2. What is the relationship between corporations and concerts?
3. Why are concert ticket prices so high? Where does the money go?

#### **4. Retail:**

- Three companies exercise inordinate control over the retail music industry: Walmart, Best Buy and Transworld.
- These three companies account for the majority of retail music business, which gives them tremendous influence over the kinds of music that are produced.
- If Walmart, who alone accounts for almost 10% of all music sales, decides it will not carry a record because of objectionable content, this exerts huge pressure on the major labels to change musical content rather than retailers.
- Similarly, with sales at the Walmarts of the retail world determining the national taste for music, more diverse tastes are crowded out because they are considered too expensive and risky – threatening the livelihood of an entire generation of artists and an entire generation of independent music store owners.

#### **Discussion Questions:**

1. How have the major music retail chains affected the kinds of music that are produced and promoted? Why?
2. Why do the three major retail chains have such power over the big record companies? Why isn't it the other way around? Or is it, in part?
3. Why do you feel so many people buy their music in retail chains like Walmart? Do you think it's realistic to expect more consumers to buy their music elsewhere? What would it take to make this happen? And why would it make a difference?
4. What do you think of Walmart's policy not to carry "offensive" music?

### **III. Music Advertising & Marketing**

#### **Key points:**

- Cross media marketing, or "synergy", is now standard practice, as big companies have bought up other kinds of companies that they can use to help sell products across markets.
- The result: many movies and television shows have become glorified music videos, basically advertisements for music, and advertisements themselves have become advertisements for music – as seen in the new trend of using TV commercials to sell records and break new acts.
- What's new is that the standard relationship between music and marketing has been turned on its head: we have marketing first, then the music.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. How does “synergy” work? What are some examples – real or possible?
2. What can be done to reduce the power marketing experts believe “synergy” exerts on the public mind?
3. Do you feel “synergy” affects content other than music? For example, should the fact that Disney owns ABC change the way we look at ABC news?
4. The film makes the point that “the standard marketing relationship has been turned on its head.” What does this mean, and how does it work? What are some examples – real or possible – of marketing preceding product? Why do you feel this is so effective?

### **IV. Alternatives**

With the consolidation of the music industry, it becomes more important to devise ways to counteract the corporate monopolization of the public airwaves. This section lays out a rationale and direction for opening up the system.

### **Key Points:**

- The current system is not a fixed system. While it feeds the consumer habits, taste and behaviors that benefit it, it also feeds off of these behaviors. The system depends on consumers as much as consumers depend on the system. Therefore, if consumers change the way they look at and buy music, the system will have to adapt to these changes to survive.
- The role of independent labels is to take the risks, and develop the talent, that the major labels won't. Noticing the label, understanding who's producing the music you buy, can help you make informed choices about the kind of music – and attitude toward music – you support with your money.
- Because independent labels operate with a different economic model, their record prices tend to be lower. At the same time, more money goes to the artists themselves. Understanding where you're money is actually going when you buy CDs can give you more power as a consumer.
- The Internet is providing new and radical ways for artists to get their music to the people without the approval and sanction of the corporate mindset. Privately-owned, “mom-and-pop” music stores offer more choice than the chains. And cable access programming often provides insight into music the networks usually ignore for their own financial reasons. Exploring these alternative venues can give you more choice and power over the kind of music you buy.

- Existing anti-trust laws – written to break up monopolies that threaten competition, creativity and consumer choice – can be used to bring more diversity to the airwaves by weakening the stranglehold the five major media conglomerates have on the music industry. Putting pressure on your representatives in government can help put this on the agenda and begin to open up the system.
- Despite the Telecommunications Act, which essentially gave the public airwaves to corporations, the airwaves are still public property. The government has the power to create more FM radio stations with more diverse musical tastes. Alternative stations where deejays actually choose the music they play already exist. Listening to these stations drives up ratings, sells independently-produced records, and sends a signal to the majors that consumers are interested in more than their thin, market-tested roster of songs.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Do you feel consumers, you yourself, have any real power to change the system? If so, give some specifics. If not, why not?
2. What kind of consumer behavior, what kind of psychology, does the music industry rely on to sell records? What's their view of the public?
3. This section mentions a number of ways we can change the music industry and make it more open to new, original and diverse kinds of music. Can you think of any others?

### **EXERCISES FOR WRITING & RESEARCH**

The following exercises and assignments are designed to encourage students to think critically about the music industry – the way it works and how it affects the music they consume. These assignments can be adapted for class discussion, writing assignments and/or group or individual research projects.

1. Test Robert McChesney's argument in the film that MTV is basically a 24-hour infomercial. Watch MTV for a full hour and keep a running log of everything you see. As you do so, note the number and type of actual advertisements or commercials you see (note the product and describe the ad). At the same time, record your observations about the "content" you see – describe the actual programming or show featured that is not supposed to be an advertisement.

At the end of the hour, turn off the TV and look at your notes. Did you see anything in the course of the hour that wasn't trying to sell something else? Was the so-called "content" itself a kind of commercial? If so, what do you think it was selling? What differences did you notice between "official" ads and this "content" ?

For class, organize your notes into the kinds of advertising you noticed: official ads; ads posing as content, and any other categories you come up with.

Note: prior to this assignment, it may help if you do some research into Viacom, which owns MTV, and its other companies:

- Go to Viacom corporate site >> <http://www.viacom.com>
- Go to a list of the major media conglomerates, including Viacom, and what they own>> <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/giants/>

2. Check out *Billboard* Magazine's hit list for this week (<http://www.billboard.com>). Write down the top 20 songs and the record label for each. Then go to the link that follows (from the documentary film *Merchants of Cool*) and see if you can locate these record companies on the map provided of Corporate Media Giants and their properties. Record your findings.

- Go to Corporate Giants:  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/giants/>

3. Write a paper or prepare for a class discussion about “synergy.” How is it defined in the film, and how would you define it in your own words? Some possible topics:

- Why is the concept of “synergy” important to understand in order to understand popular music?
- What's new about “synergy”?
- What makes it possible?
- How does it affect the music we hear on the radio?
- What effect do you feel it has on new, alternative or unproven talent and creativity?
- How is it changing the kind of “content” we're getting on TV and in movies?

For an article related to this topic, written by Ben Bagdikian, go here >>  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/etc/bagdikian.html>

4. Do some research into MTV's “Total Request Live” and compare and contrast the way the show is promoted with some of the key ideas presented in *Money for Nothing*.

- First, review your notes about what *Money for Nothing* says about the show.
- Second, read and take notes on the inside look at TRL provided on the website for the PBS documentary film *Merchants of Cool*.  
(<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/etc/trl.html>)
- Third, go to MTV's website (<http://www.mtv.com>), read what they say about the show, and record your own observations about how it's promoted.
- Fourth, actually watch the show and record your observations.
- Finally, prepare some discussion points, or write a paper, about TRL – perhaps about one specific episode – drawing on all of your research and your own observations.

5. In *Money for Nothing*, the point is made that MTV recycles and repeats certain ideas and stereotypes again and again. Watch MTV for an hour and take notes about any ideas or stereotypes it portrays. Consider these questions:

- What kinds of general *ideas* or themes were conveyed during the hour you watched MTV? Be specific.
- What kinds of *stereotypes*, if any, did you observe? Be specific.
- Were these ideas and stereotypes similar in both the show you were watching itself, and the commercials aired during the show? Explain.
- Do you agree with the film that these ideas and stereotypes may be designed to make viewers “better consumers”? If so, how? If not, why not? Be specific.
- On a more personal level, do you feel that MTV affects your habits as a consumer, even if in subtle ways? Explain.

6. Call a local FM radio station – a major radio station – and request a contemporary song that’s not on the Billboard Top 100 list. Share with the class what happened

7. Read an interview with either a media executive or market researcher from the archive at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/interviews/>. Summarize the key points that are made, the ideas that inform the individual’s vision, and relate them to the issues presented in *Money for Nothing*.

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