Popular Music as Promotion
For Liv
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Today, strategically chosen popular music permeates the commercial media system, binding the work of recording artists to the world of brands. ‘My Silver Lining’ by Swedish folk duo First Aid Kit provides the musical accompaniment for a Renault automobile commercial, ‘Nous Étions Deux’ by French psych-punk rock band La Femme sets the vibe for an Apple Watch commercial, and ‘Lightning Bolt’ by English indie rock artist Jake Bugg has been woven into advertisements for British Airways and Gatorade. Instrumental clips or versions of ‘The Universal’ by Blur, ‘Have a Nice Day’ by Stereophonics and ‘Where Is My Mind?’ by the Pixies provide a quiet backdrop for British Gas, Premier Inn and Facebook commercials, respectively. No longer the sole domain of major label artists, original songs by independent artists are included in advertisements ranging from youth-oriented ‘lifestyle’ brands to less ‘cool’ brands (e.g. detergent brand Cheer, health insurance company Cigna and hardware franchise Lowe’s) (Beltrone 2012). Meanwhile, in a new twist on the endorsement deal, major stars are working with brands in the roles of ‘creative director’ (e.g. Justin Timberlake with Bud Light and Lady Gaga with Polaroid) and ‘brand ambassador’ (Beyoncé with Pepsi and Taylor Swift with Diet Coke) (Barker 2013). Though such pairings take a myriad of forms, in each popular music is used as a
vehicle for achieving the partner organization’s marketing and promotional objectives. Music serves as a kind of cultural currency used in the service of commercial ends.

Television programmes and video games likewise feature popular music prominently, marking an extension of the well-established practice of using popular music in film. The opening credits to television programmes Weeds (2005–12) and Parenthood (2010–15) are accompanied by Malvina Reynolds’s ‘Little Houses’ and Bob Dylan’s ‘Forever Young’ respectively, while House (2004–12) opens to ‘Teardrop’ by Massive Attack and Mad Men (2007–15) to ‘A Beautiful Mine’ by RJD2. Canadian rock band Barenaked Ladies were hired to write and perform the theme song for the sitcom The Big Bang Theory (2007–). Gossip Girl (2007–12) and Grey’s Anatomy (2005–) are notable for their use of original recordings by independent and lesser known artists, and Glee (2009–15) and American Idol (2002–16) for their cover versions of top hits. Popular music is not only a feature of music-related video games such as the Guitar Hero and Rock Band series (first released in 2005 and 2007, respectively), but also many others, such as FIFA, MLB: The Show and Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater, which include songs by artists ranging from Johnny Cash to Grandmaster Flash to Gorillaz. Countless music makers participate in the now commonplace practice of licensing music for use by media and consumer brand partners – a development that has penetrated the mediascape so deeply that it almost seems unremarkable.

This book provides a critical examination of key changes that have brought together popular music worlds and brand worlds, and in so doing, ushered in what has in fact been a striking change in the fundamental tension between creativity and commerce as a site of ‘negotiation, conflict and struggle’ in the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh 2013a: 82). I consider how the digital transformation of the music industries (sound recording, music publishing and live performance), combined with the emergence of an increasingly promotion-oriented culture, have contributed to shifting attitudes among industry executives and working artists regarding the appropriate relationship between music and marketing. While the participation of a broader array of corporations and brands within music-related endeavours has opened up new opportunities for musicians, it also has engendered overwhelmingly commercial and promotional understandings of and assumptions regarding popular music and its role in society. As we shall see, the music industries have grown increasingly reliant on the promotional industries – a dynamic that has influenced how record companies view recording artists and popular music not only as commodities, but also as instruments of promotion. Critically reflecting on a wide range of brand-related strategies
and uses, this book asks: what is popular music used in such ways for, what does it do (or what do brand partners hope it does) and why does its promotional character matter? With the scales tipped firmly in favour of commercial considerations, a new system of promotional gatekeeping threatens to circumscribe the diversity of musical sounds, voices and perspectives privileged.

The Music Industries Meet the Promotional Industries

The music industries’ digital transition has been widely – and problematically – heralded as a democratizing music revolution. In a fast-changing media environment shaped by the introduction of ever-new digital formats, products and services, how we learn about, access and consume music has changed and continues to change in fundamental ways. Listeners have never had more options: the digital media system boasts an overwhelming array of online media stores, streaming services and social media sites accessible via computers, tablets and smartphones, all of which have rendered popular music exceedingly abundant and instantly available on demand. In a culture of purportedly ‘free’ digital content, we have also seen the extension and intensification of property relations linked to creative works, with the music publishing and live performance industries playing key roles alongside the recording industry. Recorded music, the linchpin in the music business models that dominated for much of the twentieth century, still lies at the heart of everyday listening practices. However, the ways that the recording industry seeks to profit from popular music has undergone an extraordinary transformation. This book focuses on the central role of marketing within this commercial system. It highlights how business-to-business (B2B) licensing agreements – arrangements through which music companies sell music to a range of media and brand partners – serve as a crucial complement to the sale of music to end consumers in the contemporary music industries.

Industry cries regarding a ‘crisis’ in profitability set off in the wake of Napster’s launch in 1999 dominated discussions of the first decade of the music industries’ digital transition. Seeking to safeguard generous revenues from compact disc (CD) sales amid the advent of peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing and the spread of unauthorized downloading, record companies initially adopted aggressively protective business strategies, including legal action. After years of stalling and deferment, the recording industry then experimented with various new business models, spearheading a period of substantive industry reconfiguration and restructuring. Figures compiled by the International Federation of the Phonographic
Industry (IFPI), a recording industry lobby group, suggest that in 2012, the value of global recorded music revenues grew for the first time since 1999, reaching US$16.5 billion, as compared with the figure of US$27.8 billion achieved more than a decade earlier (Smirke 2013). Revenues from digital formats (downloads, streaming) rose to US$6.85 billion in 2014, matching the revenues generated by physical formats (CD, vinyl) – a first for the global recording industry (IFPI 2015: 6). Moreover, if music publishing revenues are added to the equation, the worldwide music copyright industry exceeded US$25 billion in 2014, according to music industry economist Will Page (Ingham 2015a) – a staggering figure that does not even include live music, sponsorship and merchandise revenues (Peoples 2015a). The branding business – a category that includes tour and festival sponsorships, endorsement deals and synchronization (‘sync’) revenues for the use of music in television, advertising, films and games – reportedly generates roughly US$2 billion for the music industries (Billboard 2016). Although their traditional business models have been seriously undermined by digital distribution, these figures suggest that copyright owners have found ways to make money off music in the digital age nevertheless.

Despite declining record sales, the old guard of the CD era music industries, the major music companies, have proven resilient. Universal Music Group (UMG), Sony Music Entertainment and Warner Music Group (WMG), the ‘Big Three’ record companies, boast deep rosters that feature top-selling stars and are also powerhouses in music publishing. The continued market dominance of the majors is a result of a key shift in business strategies and practices informing the ‘monetization’ (i.e. converting into money) of music: what was formerly primarily a record business now centres on the generation of multiple revenue streams. As entertainment marketing and brand management scholar Kristin J. Lieb explains, CDs and digital music files are no longer ‘the artist’s primary product’ but ‘are instead used as brand pieces … for artists to use as they pursue more profitable sales channels. Licensing, touring, and the sale of merchandise have become increasingly important parts of the artist’s profit portfolio’ (Lieb 2013: 70). Recorded music, though still essential, is now just one music product among many connected to a different product: the ‘artist-brand’ (see also Klein et al. 2016; Meier 2015; Stahl and Meier 2012). The recording artist ‘personality’ is the primary hub around which various ‘ancillary’ products and licensing agreements may be forged.

Technological change is only part of the story of the music industries’ digital era makeover. Also crucial has been the growth of the promotional industries (advertising, branding, marketing and public relations) (Davis 2013), and the corresponding emergence of a ‘promotional
culture’ in which communications designed to facilitate ‘some kind of self-advantaging exchange’ have become ‘virtually co-extensive with our produced symbolic world’ (Wernick 1991: 181–2; see also Aronczyk and Powers 2010; McAllister and West 2013). The enveloping logic of branding has not only shaped the range of business opportunities available to recording artists and music companies today, but also the ‘common sense’ that governs decision-making regarding the appropriate distance between musicians and corporations, art and commerce. The positioning of recording artists as brands – and the drive to pair them with partnering brands – is consistent with wider changes inside neoliberal capitalism. Amid expanding privatization, marketization and commodification, the use of branding has spread from the corporate world into the reaches of the public and not-for-profit spheres, and is applied not only to organizations but also individuals (Aronczyk and Powers 2010) – even nations (Aronczyk 2013) and ‘the self’ (Hearn 2008). From a music industry perspective, recording artists may be seen as ‘person brands’ whose ‘commercial value comes from the possible extensions of their respective star “brands”’ (Lieb 2013: 49) via merchandising, licensing, branding and sponsorship opportunities.

The positioning of recording artist personae as private property to be mass marketed via multiple media is not new. The case of recording, radio and film star Bing Crosby provides an early example of carefully executed cross-media promotion; more recently, music industry executives have used the language of corporate branding to describe the image cultivated by rock bands such as U2 (Negus 1992: 24, 71–2). However, the notion of the artist as brand as a concept, strategy and set of business arrangements has assumed greater significance in a context marked by shrinking record sales and a swelling number of branding opportunities. Furthermore, changes to recording contract terms – the introduction of the ‘360 deal’ – have enabled record companies to take a cut of revenue streams that formerly lay beyond their reach, including endorsement branding, touring and merchandising income (see Stahl and Meier 2012; Marshall 2013). The prospects and practices of the music industries and the promotional industries have become increasingly interdependent and intertwined. As a result of brand partnerships, popular music has emerged as a dominant form of advertising music or, more broadly, promotional music.

Advertisers and brands have eagerly followed in the footsteps of consumers in the migration from old media to new and for good reason. The branding potential of popular music – online and offline – is part of a bigger marketing picture. According to Swedish brand communication agency Heartbeats International, which specializes in branding with music,
The same digital technology that changed the music industry is changing advertising as we know it. In a world where everyone is connected all the time and customers are in charge of the remote control, the rules of communication have transformed. ... Music branding ... offers a strategic way to reach consumers in ways that traditional advertising can’t. (Heartbeats International 2009: 5)

In a world of ‘on-demand’ media, ad blocking and tremendous competition for audience attention, marketing, advertising and branding executives have turned to popular music in order to make marketing communications more inviting and even desirable. Brands’ interest in popular music is rooted in its perceived ability to overcome audience distraction, signify a type of cultural authenticity and credibility, and connect with listeners on an emotional level. The top executives involved in ‘marketing with music’ ‘don’t just pair artists with trademarks – they shape the culture’, claims Billboard (2016). Contemporary music-related marketing and branding is distinct from the well-established practice of using background music to create a desired mood or atmosphere, as in the case of standard incidental music, film scores and elevator music. Consumer and media brands now attempt to take the process a step further: they seek to insinuate promotional messages into webs of positive associations tied to popular music, and capitalize on those emotions, feelings and moods through targeted marketing strategies.

From Marketing Music to Popular Music as Promotion: Key Concepts and Terminology

This book distinguishes the now conventional practices of promoting new music releases and live performances via radio, print advertisements, television commercials, billboards, music videos, appearances on talk shows and so on from what I mean by popular music as promotion. Marketing and marketing research have grown in significance across the cultural industries in recent decades, often eroding creative workers’ independence from commerce and commercialism (Hesmondhalgh 2013a: 233–5). Marketing has become such a central consideration that music marketing and artist publicity are no longer limited to the more traditional media channels. Significantly, partnerships with brands are seen as additional sites not only for promoting music, but also for using music to market other products, services and brands. Through such licensing and branding agreements music is rendered a marketing instrument – a promotional text. Many music-related branding deals are arranged under the auspices of mutual cross-promotion – a notion that
this book complicates by revealing the power relations that govern such arrangements.

I draw on a range of marketing and business terms in order to conceptualize the transformation of popular music into a form of promotion. Following Andrew Wernick, I understand promotion as a broad set of practices that ‘crosses the line between advertising, packaging, and design, and is applicable, as well, to activities beyond the immediately commercial’, and ‘promotionalism’ as a dominant cultural condition (Wernick 1991: 181). Our media environment and even physical spaces are saturated with messages designed to persuade. This broader system does not simply promote consumerism: it also endorses market values. Defining branding is no straightforward task, given its wide range of uses and the ever-new thinking on the subject contributed by marketers, as Liz Moor explains, but in general it ‘tends to have a much more expansive notion of the appropriate media for communications than either advertising or other aspects of marketing, and it tends to take a much more strategic, programmatic and totalizing approach to such communications’ (Moor 2007: 7–8; emphasis in original). It is closely connected to promotion in my use. In the business world, brands are seen as a form of private property linked to reputation, whereas branding is viewed as a type of marketing strategy and activity. According to one marketing communications textbook,

A brand is an intangible, legally protectable, valuable asset. It is how a company is perceived by customers (or the target audience). It is the image, associations and inherent value customers put on your product and services. Brands include intangible attributes and values. ... A brand is far more than just a logo or a name. ... It is the complete customer experience (the integrated sum of all the marketing mix and the communications mix from products to customer service, from packaging to advertising, from rumour to discussion). (Smith and Zook 2011: 32)

Another claims that ‘a brand represents the full “personality” of the company and is the interface between a company and its audience’ (Davis 2009: 12). The fact that companies are perceived as having personalities according to this logic is one of the reasons why marketers deem certain kinds of music, and not others, to be appropriate for the image they attempt to communicate in their promotional and branding activities.

One term used to characterize advertisers’ and brands’ strategic use of music is sonic branding – also known as music branding, sound branding and audio branding – which ‘refers to the use of sound to enhance brand awareness, appeal, and cohesion’ (Powers 2010: 293). While such
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terminology is used primarily by executives who specialize in this area, the practice – in principle if not in name – is becoming more common-
place and multi-platform. John Groves, a pioneer in this approach, cites
1995 as the first year that he ‘was paid specifically for consulting and advising about the process of creating a Sound Identity and not just music production’ (Groves n.d.: 1). Sound identities are used to com-
municate and bolster brand identities. Sonic branding can involve the creation of ‘audio logos’ – brief aural hooks designed to be ‘[m]ore concise than a theme song and subtler than a jingle’ (Jurgensen 2012). These mnemonics or ‘memory trigger[s]’ (Nygren, personal communica-
tion, 2009) are typically two- to five-note melodic figures that do not include slogans, as in the case of the three-second Intel audio logo.

I use the terms music branding and music-related branding interchangeably to signal a broad range of practices that involve the licensing, creation and ‘curation’ of popular music by consumer and media brands. Branding with music does not stop with audio logos, nor is it simply a matter of licensing music for use in advertising campaigns. There has been growing recognition among many marketers that taste in music is related to identity formation, and that this link can be mined in efforts to build and capitalize on distinctive brand identities. The strategic music-consulting world is currently advising brands to use particular types of music or sound identities as a means of uniting the many plat-
forms used to communicate these brand identities. While the ‘emotional powers of audio have long been understood to add storytelling value to a marketing initiative’, audio branding company Elias Arts (2011) claims, music’s unique power lies in its ability to function as ‘connective tissue’. More than ‘an audio logo or brand soundtrack’, according to branding specialist Marcel de Bie, ‘sonic branding is the totality of the sonic expe-
rience’ (quoted in Khicha 2008). For instance, a brand’s sound may be communicated across television commercials, websites, retail spaces and even music on-hold (MOH) heard by telephone callers. In this way, the strategic choice of the popular music inserted within media texts and retail spaces may be used to connect virtual and ‘bricks-and-mortar’ brand experiences. Strong brand identities are forged not only through strategically chosen music, but also through alignment with the musi-
cians, celebrities and media personalities behind the music.

When used primarily for the purposes of branding or promoting other products, services and brands, popular music becomes a type of branded entertainment or advertainment. In her analysis of the branding of female pop stars, Lieb remarks on ‘the increasingly blurring lines between enter-
tainment content and advertising – now called “branded entertainment”’ (Lieb 2013: 53). On a basic level, marketers and advertisers regard branded entertainment as product placement within media texts and
branded sponsorship of live events (Elliot 2010a). Advertainment is ‘programming designed to sell as it entertains’ (Deery 2004: 1). More grandiously, such strategies are pitched as part of ‘a fundamental transformation from an intrusion-based marketing economy to an invitation-based model’ (Donaton 2004: 3). This decisive shift, marketers argue, offers ‘the opportunity to recreate an emotional link with a consumer, for whom the brand has often lost its legitimacy over recent years’ (Lehu 2007: 238). Marketing boosterism aside, content-related partnerships between consumer brands and entertainment businesses have emerged as a standard component of the marketing toolkit. The media environment is overflowing with advertisements, logos, product placements and the like, but due to their sheer pervasiveness, these promotional texts often dissolve into marketing ‘clutter’. Promotion ‘appears everywhere and, at the same time, we no longer notice its presence’ (Davis 2013: 5). From the perspective of marketers, this tendency for promotional messages to recede into the background is seen as a challenge they aim to overcome, hence the turn to branded entertainment and advertainment. In a media environment characterized by entertainment and information ‘overload’, and in which audiences can evade promotional messages with ease, brands use popular music in their efforts to be entertaining, attention-grabbing, culturally relevant and, ultimately, persuasive.

As part of this pursuit of legitimacy, hip lifestyle brands have sought to position themselves as active participants in and ‘curators’ of culture. Advertisements, meanwhile, have been pitched as the ‘new radio’ – the new medium for promoting music releases – especially for independent and lesser known artists who have been frozen out of mainstream promotional channels, such as commercial radio and MTV (for an overview and critique, see Klein 2009: 59–78). Yet when placed in other audio-visual media, popular music actually assumes a decidedly different role than it does on radio. In advertising in particular, songs are played in abbreviated form, reduced to choruses or ‘hooks’ in order to create a certain mood or achieve the maximum ‘catchy’ effect quickly. As such, they arguably function much like the jingles they have replaced. By design, the music is subordinated to the brand message: from the perspective of the advertiser, it is more important that the audience remembers the brand name than the featured artist. Extending beyond just television commercials, within retail and coffee franchises we likewise have seen the privileging of soundtracks that contain music by original artists and the use of in-store music as an advertising tool (e.g. via branded compilation albums) (Kassabian 2004: 209). Fashion chains such as H&M and Topshop have featured live DJs as a way of communicating a sound identity within the retail environment. We have witnessed the saturation of both media and physical commercial environments, then, by popular
music whose use abides by a promotional logic: its purpose is ultimately to reinforce the brand.

Anahid Kassabian uses the term ubiquitous musics to describe popular music not of our own choosing that we nevertheless encounter in everyday life – musics inserted into retail stores, films, television programmes, commercials, video games and other media, which she suggests are not ‘actively listened to in any recognizable sense’ (Kassabian 2002: 131; see also Kassabian 2013). It is fitting that in coining the term ubiquitous musics, Kassabian took her cue from Mark Weiser’s (1991) term ‘ubiquitous computing’; today, ubiquitous musics and ubiquitous computing have merged, with the mobility characteristic of both allowing for seamless integration into daily life. Elsewhere (Meier 2011), building on Kassabian’s terminology, I use the term ‘promotional ubiquitous musics’ to describe the use of music by advertisers and brands. Whereas ubiquitous musics suggest ‘a kind of “sourcelessness”’ (Kassabian 2002: 137), promotional ubiquitous musics reflect strategic decisions made by a specific source: brands. The migration of popular music into new listening contexts is tied to the twin phenomena of ubiquitous music and ubiquitous promotion. It is the increasingly strategic and calculated pairing of popular music and brand partner – not the presence of popular music in and of itself – that makes contemporary music-related branding practices distinctive.

In this book, I shift my terminology to popular music as promotion in order to prioritize the significance not of the particular musics, but instead, of their character as promotion under this model. According to Wernick, promotion ‘is defined not by what it says but by what it does, with respect to which its stylistic and semantic contents are purely secondary’ (Wernick 1991: 184). When popular music is used as a form of promotion, what it actually sounds like and says is secondary to what it does – or is intended to do. Thus, the semiotic diversity reflected in the examples discussed at the beginning of this chapter does not alter the promotional character of the use of these songs. Cultural factors and meanings tied to music are still of paramount importance, hence the turn to popular music in the first place, but they are subordinated to the brand’s objectives – to the promotional intent behind the music’s use. The choice of particular songs is rooted in instrumental business thinking, even as it may reflect creative considerations.

What does popular music as promotion ‘do’ more broadly? In its broad range of promotional uses, popular music contributes to the aestheticization of consumerism and to the production of ‘affect’ – of certain emotions, feelings and moods (Hesmondhalgh 2013b: 11) – in service of capital accumulation. Inside contemporary promotional culture, consumer brands have shown interest in ‘experiential’ and multisensory
marketing strategies designed to capitalize on the affective dimensions of popular music (Powers 2010: 288–9). This book considers how various corporations attempt to cultivate and till emotional and affective bonds with ‘desirable’ audiences through the use of popular music, and how recording artists are advised by music industry executives to prioritize explicitly commercial considerations. According to Jonathan Sterne, ‘Programmed music in a mall produces consumption because the music works as an architectural element of a built space devoted to consumerism’ (Sterne 1997: 25). In a similar way, when used as a branding tool, popular music works to foster consumer-oriented dispositions, identities, values and desires.

*Popular music* is a complex and much debated term – one sometimes used to label certain musics as ‘inferior’ or, conversely, ‘authentic’, as the products of mass media or, conversely, ‘the people’, or simply as music that is well liked and widely listened to (for an overview, see Middleton 1990: 3–6). I use the term popular music not with the intent of making judgements about the quality of music or as a way of signalling particular genres (e.g. pop music), sales figures or audience sizes. Instead, I use it as an umbrella term that designates a wide range of music produced as a commodity within the commercial music system, including pop, rock, hip-hop, R&B, country and electronica, among other genres. In the twenty-first century, the process of sound recording has become unmoored from corporate control, and it is now possible for musicians to independently produce and market recorded tracks from personal laptops or tablets virtually anywhere: the means of production are now more accessible. This analysis centres on songs by recording and performing artists that are recorded as ‘tracks’ and albums, either under contract to record labels or independent of record label participation, and then sold in the music marketplace (even if those tracks are sometimes given away for free for the purposes of promoting other products, such as live performances or merchandise). I am primarily concerned with professional music making and the capitalist relations of production that underpin the promotional deployment of popular music. Not all popular music is written and performed within this commercial and promotional framework, of course. Moreover, there are musics produced within the commercial music system that I would not classify as popular music (e.g. classical and art musics) that may be included in promotional texts, but which are not my focus here.

My use of the term *commodity* to describe popular music is not intended to diminish or comment whatsoever on the legitimacy or artistry of popular music. Rather, it underscores the fact that the products of the music industries are created and circulated as objects of exchange within capitalist markets. Thus, commercial considerations inform the
production of popular music: the drive to turn a profit means that creativity is channelled in particular ways, although creativity is not necessarily stifled within this system. As David Hesmondhalgh argues, the commodification of culture, a process whose origins reach back centuries, is ‘fundamentally ambivalent’ – both ‘enabling and constraining’ (Hesmondhalgh 2013a: 70). The commodification of music cannot be adequately conceptualized simply in terms of capitalist ‘co-optation’ or incorporation. As Tiziana Terranova’s analysis of digital capitalism and the internet suggests, many popular cultural forms ‘originat[e] within a field that is always and already capitalism’ (Terranova 2000: 38–9). What is distinctive today is the ways that popular music is being produced not just as a commodity, but also as a form of promotion intended to help sell other products, services and brands within this capitalist system – something I see as a constraining force that places decidedly commercial parameters around creative expression.

Core Argument and Approach

This book conceptualizes the promotional agreements and partnerships forged between music companies, consumer brands and media companies as an extension of previous logics of commodification. I argue that new branding strategies adopted in both the music industries and promotional industries in the twenty-first century have come together to transform popular music and recording artists who perform it into vehicles for promoting all manner of media and consumer products. While the content of the popular music under consideration here is cultural (i.e. primarily symbolic), the intent behind its use by marketers is primarily promotional. Its function and usefulness as a marketing instrument is prioritized and privileged by brands. While not all popular music is drawn into this promotional system, music and branding executives treat a very broad array of popular music as a resource that can potentially be tapped into and attached to brands.

Drawing on critical theory and political economy, I examine the tightening relationship between music worlds and brand worlds – a relationship I characterize not as a simple merger, but, crucially, as the colonization of the former by the latter. After all, the brands typically devise the strategies, select the music and dictate the rules – all significant factors when evaluating the power relations that define these pairings. Promotional industry practices have been imported into the music industries. Though not total or complete, this process of colonization is intensifying. A key product of these colliding business strategies has been record companies’ reconstitution of the core popular music commodity as an