

The puppet masters of the music industry

Is it all sex, drugs and rock and roll? Do stars make the music business, or is it the other way around? [Oliver Trotman](#) speaks to band manager Dick O'Dell and discovers what drives one of the most popular, competitive and profitable industries

Wednesday 27 October 2010



Natasha Khan of Bat For Lashes

The music industry is big. Its stars grace our red carpets, its scandal becomes family debate and its profits affect the stock exchange. We all know about the exploits of stars – ranging from Lady Gaga and her meat dress to Keith Richards and his recent shocking autobiography. But what is it that drives this huge industry? It is the work of those that go unseen – the managers, producers and record company employees who oil the wheels of this all-conquering industry.

A man who has seen it all is Dick O'Dell. In the 1980s, O'Dell managed punk groups, including The Slits, in the 1990s he ran Guerilla Records, specialising in acid house and collaborating with William Orbit, and in the 2000s he has moved into the 'alternative genre' with artists such as Ed Harcourt and Bat for Lashes.

As a manager, he is employed by artists to fight their corner, advising them on everything from record labels to musical direction and stage sets. The bond between artist and manager is often intense.

"The relationship is the strongest thing because it's about trust. Trust is the most important thing, because when you start being successful there are large sums of money involved and it's really important for artists to feel that their manager has a good strategy. It's important for a manager to achieve that for an artist." He points out that Radiohead have been with the same managers ever since they started.

The music industry is often regarded as a 'chilled out' and 'creative' place in which to work. However, as is perhaps inevitable in such a high-profile industry where large sums of money are handled, this could not be further from the truth, particularly in the aftermath of an album release.

Managers will have to battle through a blizzard of emails – "normally 2-300 every day" – and phone conversations every day, organising roadies and agents for tours and promotions around the world. With album cycles lasting for roughly two years, this is a stressful time in a fairly harrowing profession. Having

to coax, cajole and even force artists, who by their very nature may not be particularly business-minded, into seeing their careers as a business rather than an artistic endeavour can be a constant challenge. "It's basically madness from dusk until dawn."

This tension between commerce and the arts can sometimes manifest itself in disagreement between artists and record labels. "It's a very difficult path. On the artist's side there's a strong commitment to credibility and artist creativity, but from the record company's point of view, you have to sell a certain number of records for any artist to make sense. If you don't, then you will be dropped. You have to make sure there are a certain number of singles on any album, which will be something that's decided in advance."

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But he insists that this tension is not always a negative thing. "On the record company's side, they recognise the value of an artist's perception. Bat For Lashes, for example, is perceived as being very artistic and creative, which they see as being of value."

But the music industry is changing. Since the 1980s, there has been something of a revolution in the way artists and labels generate revenue, in the way record labels manage their artists and in the way artists behave. In recent years, commentators have noticed a steep decline in the health of record labels. Last year, total album sales declined again, meaning fewer albums were sold than in 2000. The music retailer Zavvi collapsed into administration. An estimated 95% of music downloads were illegally file shared. Since 2005, not a single album has sold more than 20m copies – a stark contrast with Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, which sold 110m copies. The most recent release in the 70 top-selling albums of all time was released in 2004. The industry is in trouble.

Any discussion on the direction of the music industry cannot help but take in the 'spectre' that has hung over and divided the industry for many years now – file sharing, or P2P (person 2 person). Across the world this issue has begun to wrestle its way onto the centre stage of politics. In Brussels, the Swedish Pirate Party has its first MEP sitting in EU Parliament and in the UK, the Digital Economy Act sparked vociferous debate. Artists such as Lily Allen and James Blunt have openly stated that they believe P2P to be tantamount to theft. However, the Featured Artists Coalition, which includes Radiohead and Annie Lennox, argue that there is a definite place for P2P in aiding the take-off of up-and coming bands.

But O'Dell doesn't agree: "If you hire a plumber, you expect to pay them, if you buy food from the shops, you have to pay. So on a basic level, artists are entitled to be paid for their work." He also thinks that internet service providers (ISPs) have a significant responsibility but that they've unjustly "managed to get themselves out of this discussion". Yet, he also doesn't agree with the new 'three strikes and you're out' legislation. Why? "Because it's not just about individuals; it's about ISPs and what the internet is there for."

O'Dell has some sharp words for Apple too, who he sees as worsening the problem: "Everybody thinks that Apple is the hippest thing in the world but actually it is a very, very, very business-driven company." What's wrong with that, one might think? "Apple will do anything to create as much of a neomonopoly as it can – it's done it with laptops, it's done it with iPods, it's done it with iPhones, and it does it with iTunes."

Instead, O'Dell believes that part of the solution to the P2P problem lies in a more cohesive world pricing plan for downloads so that consumers in the UK cease to pay more than those in continental Europe and the US, a situation which he concedes is grossly unfair.

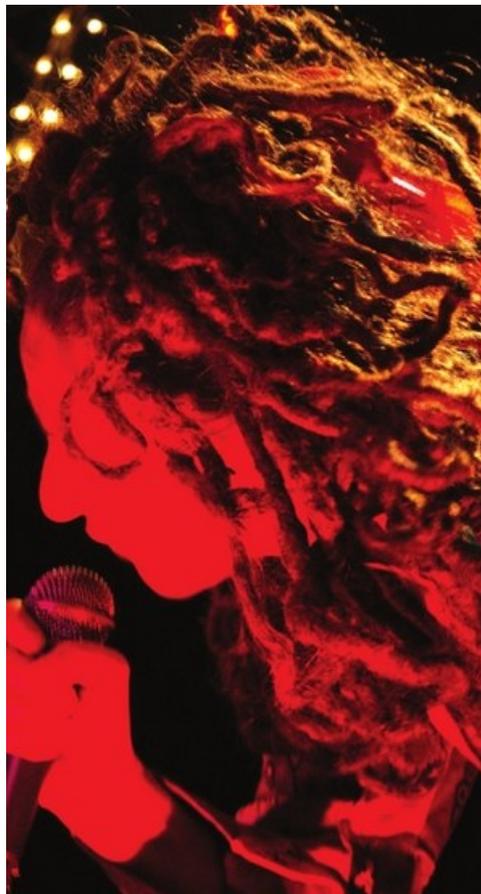
But despite grim sales figures, declining profits and the increasing prevalence of illegal P2P, perhaps

there is some cause for optimism. "In the bad old days, record companies would completely control their artists," observes O'Dell. Happily record labels are now "much fairer" in their contracts, allowing artists more time to develop their sounds, albeit within the requirement for a set number of singles on each album. He believes that this is in no small part due to the fact that "people who work in record companies do so because they love music", so there is a level of empathy between the record label and the artist and their team.

As times change, the music industry is becoming more savvy and creative about ways to make money. "Record companies are getting way more active in areas like syncs," O'Dell adds. Product placement to us, or 'sync' to insiders, is part of this diversification. Bat for Lashes for instance has been 'synced' with Jack Wills, The Twilight Saga and the latest Gucci perfume campaign - and just think of Lady Gaga's 'Telephone' video.

Yet, O'Dell, perhaps because of Bat for Lashes' unique reputation, shies away from calling it product placement. For him "it's a culture merge" whereby "advertisers use music they feel is appropriate on a lifestyle level for the brand they're trying to sell".

But 'syncing' doesn't stop at advertising. It extends to films, shop floors, TV soaps, computer games and mobile ringtones. With games such as Guitar Hero generating around £30m in royalties, 'syncing' is generating increasingly important revenues for record labels and is just part of the fight-back.



A tribute to the lead singer of The Slits who passed away last week

At EMI and Warner, major artists are progressively being moved onto so-called '360 deals' which bring concert takings, merchandise sales, endorsement deals and ringtones into the record labels' revenue streams. These are not without controversy, however; some high profile artists and music critics have accused the labels of ripping off their artists to save themselves.

"The truth is that while record companies are developing artists they put a lot of money in and they feel they should be recompensed for that," observes O'Dell, who admits that he has "sympathy with that view". This debate is one that has miles to run.

On a personal level, the industry can be immensely fun and highly rewarding. Bat for Lashes has recently toured with both Radiohead and Coldplay who are both now “good friends”. Being behind the scenes also brings a new perspective to performances according to O’Dell. “A lot of people put Coldplay down, but it’s a wonderful thing to see the relationship between them and their audience; it’s a really strong bond.” Anyone who has seen Coldplay live at Wembley could certainly testify to this. The tours also provided Natasha, who supported them on their South American tour earlier this year, with valuable experience, having full use of “a huge PA, all the lighting, all that stuff”.

But this good, clean fun has not always been so innocent. The 80s saw AC/DC and Led Zeppelin lose band members to excessive drinking. A member of The Eagles was arrested with cocaine, marijuana, ‘smarties’ and a 16-year-old prostitute. The lead singer of The Germs died of a heroin overdose. In the words of O’Dell, “everyone was mad, really”.

Happily, this has been another area of change for musicians. The hedonism, sex, drugs and alcohol that characterised the industry in the 1980s is now gone – “it’s a very different world these days and I think people got bored of all that,” reflects O’Dell.

He should know – he was at the centre of the acid house scene of the early 1990s, made famous by Manchester’s Hacienda club and London’s Ministry of Sound. The scene was notorious for alcoholism and hardcore drug abuse, but “there’s only so many clubs you can stand in and only so many DJs you can watch. It’s all very good fun, but I wanted to get back to something less hedonistic and more spiritual. The age of the superclub is now over, really.”

Illegal downloads, declining sales and the near-monopoly of Apple over music downloads have created significant problems for the music industry over the last decade. But the introduction of the controversial Digital Economy Act, ‘360 deals’ and more holistic handling of artists could signal a revival. “Audiences are very, very, very committed and the music remains inspiring to people and it’s part of their lives.” Whether the sustained enthusiasm of fans and new industry initiatives will stop the rot will be revealed over the next few years.

One thing is for certain – the record labels won’t go quietly.

For more information on the acts, visit batforlashes.com, genefluxmusic.com or myspace.com/mechanicalbride



2 comments

Greg Nisbet

29 Oct '10 at 9:54 am

This is a magnificently insightful post, that takes a very balanced view of how the industry runs. Bravo!

P.S. Ed Harcourt is awesome.

Report

Trololo

1 Nov '10 at 1:44 pm

Jaypers, you’ve really bitten the record companies’ line hook line and sinker, haven’t you...

In actuality what is happening is that the creation and production of music is increasingly returning to a more grassroots level, cutting out the horrendously outdated major labels’ methods of promotion and accessing the fans directly. I mean, “culture merge”? Bollocks. And the legislation that has been rushed out to deal with the issue of piracy is poorly thought out and reactionary – the Digital Economy Act was an

absolute farce that was pushed through parliament in the wash up period after Peter Mandelson spent a weekend on David Geffen's yacht. Odd coincidence, that...

To quote one of the greatest producers of the past twenty years, Steve Albini, "People said access to music on the Internet was going to kill the music industry. What it killed was the record industry." (<http://www.gq.com/blogs/the-q/2010/09/steve-albini.html> - well worth a read) For a definitive account of the horrors of being signed to a major label, read his piece *The Problem With Music*, you'll come away with significantly less sympathy for the plight of the poor record companies. "Some of your friends are probably already this fucked."

<http://www.negativland.com/albini.html>

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