

Promoting Original Music with Integrity in Today's Music Industry

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It was a Saturday afternoon that I sat at a Brooklyn coffee shop staring off in a daze when Ryan tapped me on the shoulder. We exchanged small talk, and before leaving he asked if I was going to see a band called Pile play that evening. I told him I hadn't known they were playing, but that I would definitely like to go. He said they were playing at a hip new venue called Villain and that I had better buy tickets soon because it was most likely going to sell out.

Pile is a rock band from Boston that has gained a lot of attention in the music industry over the last year. What I didn't mention to Ryan is that I've known the members of Pile for years and have toured numerous times with them. As I walked home to buy a ticket, I became really excited at the prospect of seeing my old friends. It had been almost two years since I'd last seen them when we parted ways after touring. From our time on the road during that tour, I could sense that their popularity was on the rise.

That night, when I arrived at the venue, there was a long line of fans waiting for the doors to open. As I waited in line, a few guys I had met through playing shows in the area came and stood with me. We talked for a little while and then around the corner came the band members of Pile. We greeted each other as old friends, and they told me to follow them through a side door. We went through a large corridor, up a flight of stairs, and to a back stage area where there were couches and a fully stocked bar for the band and their guests. The back stage area overlooked the main floor and before long the 500-person capacity room was nearly full. Pile was the night's headliner, and when they finally took the stage and played their 45-minute set, it was surreal. They were met with a mass of screaming fans who seemed to know every word to their songs.

As I walked home later, I couldn't help but smile. There was so much going through my mind. I was proud of my friends; Here was this band that had spent long hard years of grassroots efforts to build community, promoting shows, recording albums, connecting people with each other and with the music. They'd forged an identity, both sonically and ideologically, and found an audience who not only appreciates it, but thrives on it. And while they'd sacrificed to arrive at this success, they managed to do so without succumbing to the commercialization of the music industry.

The purpose of this paper is not to preach that I hold the answer to adequately promote original music, but rather that there are alternative methods to the modern status quo that have proven to be effective. Through my experiences playing music over the past 23 years, I have observed a path of integrity that musicians can follow in promoting and sharing their music on which they are not entirely reliant upon the music industry to achieve their goals. However, it is only a worthwhile path if one is whole heartedly committed to their craft and truly believes in the what they are creating.

In the music industry today, bloggers, publicists, business men and women bombard artists with advice on what they ought to be doing to be successful and warn that without following these steps, there's no hope for success. For example, in the well-respected blog, Music Think Tank, writer James Moore advises artists to "hire people to promote your music; preferably a lot of them. Get the forums buzzing. Get people requesting your music. Get people writing about your music. Donate to blogs you like."(Moore, 2013) This type of sentiment and advice teaches artists to be dependent on the services offered by music businesses including public relations agencies, licensing firms, and booking agents. These services have their place in

the music world, but they are only beneficial if a band, on their own, has laid down the necessary groundwork to build upon.

A thriving market exists for the services that many corporate music businesses are selling because musicians are given an inaccurate depiction of the artists that they themselves look up to. The public are only shown a snapshot of a prominent artist's career; an image of bright lights and glory. Aspiring musicians are not given the back story of a successful band, and are left unaware of the realities of the sacrifice and struggle. The years of empty clubs, rejection, and self-doubt. Take, for instance, the evening that I saw Pile perform at Villain. I remember contemplating that many people attending the show had no idea of the band's struggle to get to that stage. I knew that for years the band had often played to near-empty rooms. I only knew because I witnessed this first-hand on those early tours. This lack of knowledge leaves aspiring musicians vulnerable to the marketing rhetoric they are exposed to. Musicians aspiring to for the kind of recognition bands like Pile receive, are often swayed into taking the quickest and easiest route to success even if they may not completely agree with the process.

When popular bloggers like Ari Herstand advise that with less than 1,000 Facebook likes a band is simply “[not] worth paying attention to,” (Herstand, 2014) it is easy to see how musicians can be swayed to employ immoral tactics such as buying Facebook likes, which can be accomplished through sites such as www.buylikesandfollowers.net or fbskip.com. For \$300, a user is guaranteed 1,000 likes, enough to convince those people critical to success in the industry to “watch a YouTube video or two and definitely check out the music”. (Herstand, 2014)

Not all experts, however, believe that artists can bypass the hard grassroots work of growing a following by inflating their social media presence. Chris Robley, editor of CD Baby's DIY Musician Blog, writes “fake social interactions will actually HURT you in the long run by

making it more difficult to share your music and message with your actual fans”. If social media numbers do not echo a true public interest in your band, then you are fabricating growth which will inevitably backfire. Robley goes on to say “it’s about real fans. Fake fans are worthless.” He forewarns musicians “if you’re trying to super-size your stats to look bigger than you are, remember this: There’s no one on the other end of that empty statistic who’s excited about your music, who’s going to share your music, who’s going to buy your music.”(Robley, 2015)

Author and producer Jesse Cannon refers to this process of fabricating followers as “astroturfing”. “It is a term for fake grassroots” he explains. “You may be able to fool some clueless manager who doesn’t notice that you paid for fake fans, but at some point they’re going to figure out that you were faking it and their enthusiasm towards you will end.” (Cannon, 2016, p.124)

Rick McGuire, frontman of Pile, expresses that “[he’s] taken the long road and it has proved to be invaluable”. He explains that “building a loyal fan base doesn’t happen on the internet, it happens through hard work and dedication.”(McGuire, personal communication, November 30, 2016) The path Pile has taken is finally paying off for the band. They have just played a string of sold out shows in Europe and have recently been added to the roster of a prominent booking agency due to their ever growing loyal fan base. Paul Thompson of the well-known online music magazine, Pitchfork, wrote that the band is “idolized by a growing army of diehards, [and] they are the overwhelming consensus pick in the Massachusetts indie scene for the next to blow”. (Thompson, 2015)

If the secret to reaching fans does not lie in outsourcing work to businesses professional but rather embarking on the “long road”, what does this path entail? Author and producer Jesse Cannon believes the answer is to put “as much time and resources in the promotion side of music

as you do with the music itself”. (Cannon, personal communication, November, 28, 2016)

Cannon has worked in the music industry for the past 20 years and in this time has produced and managed successful international acts such as Man Over Board and Transit. In his book, “Get More Fans: The DIY Guide to the New Music Business,” Cannon offers valuable advice on this topic to motivated musicians.

In an interview conducted with Cannon, he expressed that “although I have offered up a wealth of knowledge in my book and guided bands that I work with on all the rights steps to take, very few actually do.” This highlights a huge problem with artists; while they are willing to work hard on their music, they are unwilling to spend the time behind a computer or on the phone on the behind the scenes work that Cannon claims will inevitably make the difference in their career. Cannon explains “when you look at bands that have attained success, it’s never attributed to luck, although luck can sometimes play a role. I’ve worked with many bands that have been very successful in the music business, and it’s always the case that they are the hardest working bands”. (Cannon, personal communication, November, 28, 2016)

Based on Cannon’s advice, the hard work starts with research. Cannon explains that “whether it’s getting press, booking shows, writing your bio or figuring out your social network presence, you need to reference other musicians to get an idea of what you should be doing to promote your music”. (Cannon, 2016, p.101) The hope is that through research you can target certain groups and identify potential fans. Cannon proposes that you start to develop a list of 10-20 artists that are similar in sound. The list should include acts that are local to the area you live, smaller in size, similar in size, and bigger in size to you. He proposes that bands should use internet based platforms such as Bandcamp, Last.fm, Jango, and Facebook to find similar bands.

Once you have devised such a list, then you can begin to follow your targets. (Cannon, 2016, p. 102)

Apps such as Google Alerts or Mention allow users to diligently follow bands. These tools send a notification every time the band is mentioned on the internet. (Cannon, 2016, p. 101) The information gathered should give insight into the scene, platforms, and general environment in which the band exists and operates. Examples of useful information may include the press outlets that are writing on the artist, the venues the artists are playing, who and what fans are talking about them, and who the team members are (record labels, managers, booking agents) that are associated with the act. The ultimate goal in doing this research is for an artist to find potential fans who would be interested in their art. As Cannon states, if an artist isn't able to identify and target the right audience, then efforts in promotion are in vain. (Cannon, 2016, p. 104) As a personal example, Cannon points out that "[his] music collection is equal parts punk, classic rock, dance music, pop and hip hop. But if you sing about your pickup truck and going to church [his] subway-riding-atheist self cannot relate in any way". (Cannon, 2016, p.101).

Recognizing target audiences and identifying similar bands to learn from requires that artists have a self-awareness about their music and can recognize similarities in sonic characteristics as well as ideology. Consider the example of the bands the Clash and Guns and Roses. Sonically these two bands aren't so different. Both play fast, loud, energetic rock 'n' Roll, but what they represent is completely different. The Clash built an identity around political awareness while Guns and Roses' identity was about living the rock star lifestyle of glamour and fame. Clash song's that condemn imperialism in third world nations will most likely be lost on the young rocker who just wants to listen to loud music and party. Conversely, activists who

enjoy dissecting song lyrics and exploring the topical nature of the content will probably not be too interested when Axle Rose sing's about doing drugs with a prostitute in Tijuana.

Business experts in the music industry will often refer to this concept of identifying a target audience and building an image tailored to it as branding. When asking McGuire his thoughts on this idea he said “branding is a tool for people in the business to dupe an audience into thinking that a band is worth seeing or spending money on. It really cheapens the art”. (McGuire, personal communication, November 30, 2016) Here McGuire highlights industry people's impulse to exploit what is unique about a band in order to generate sales. Many times in our interview he commented that music industry business practices as “cheapening the art”. However, he acknowledges that building a strong identity and exposing the right audience to your art is extremely important. McGuire explains, “at this point all of us in the band know what we sound like and what we stand for. It's almost as if we already know the fans that will respond to our music and as we have uncovered that knowledge over the years it has no doubt helped us grow”. (McGuire, personal communication, November 30, 2016)

It is important to clarify a distinction here between brand and identity. The difference lies in the intent. Identity refers to characteristics including the sound, ideals and style of an artist where the discovery of one's self or music is of importance. Brand is a way for an entity to “differentiate a company from their competition” in order to appeal to the consumer. (Achacoso, 2014, p. 1) For example, an artist focused on branding may research their target audience and determine that the consumers comprising that audience are likely to follow bands that wear t-shirts with animals on them. An artist focused on identity might recognize that a unique characteristic of their band is that they always bring their dog on stage during live performances. Recognizing this identifying characteristic, the artist might then promote their identity by

determining audiences that love dogs.

Brand and identity both have their place in music promotion. However, where the danger lies is in fabricating identity in order to satisfy a brand. Currently there is much emphasis on branding in the music world. Due to influential people in the industry emphasizing the importance of branding combined with artists' desire for success, many bands succumb to creating an artificial identity. This is most apparent when a trendy image or sound begins to garner the attention of the masses. Opportunistic bands see this as a great branding opportunity and a pathway for instant success. In a Huffington Post article, "The Music Industry Formula for Success Does Exist", Patrick Hess explains that "too many artists get obsessed with trying to replicate what is already popular in the music scene." Not only does this lead to unauthentic and weak art, but it can also be hurtful from a business standpoint. Hess elaborates that, "you hear songs that sound the same, hairstyles that look the same, clothing that represents the culture of the scene they're trying to impact." When in fact, "the consumer of music likes originality". (Hess, 2014) So although jumping on the bandwagon of momentarily popular fads may seem like a way to acquire a built in fan base, it is short sighted and will dissipate when a new trend comes along.

Perhaps the most valuable element for an artist is their community, which is often referred to as their "scene". This is where the foundations for growth are constructed and the groundwork is laid for a support system that an artist might carry with them for their entire career. In my discussion with McGuire, he emphasized the importance of community in the evolution of his band and more importantly for him as a musician. When he first began playing live music, it was always in a bar whose goal was to make money and the musicians up on stage were a means to this end. "Then at some point I was introduced to people putting shows on at

their homes, in their living rooms or basements,” he says. In these scenarios “you didn’t feel like you were a customer, you felt like you were a part of a community.” As he became more involved in non-commercial DIY (“do it yourself”) shows, he recognized that it was important to see “the audience as an equal participation in the equation”. This concept is of paramount importance as it allows for a deep connection to exist between performer and spectator.

McGuire explains:

“Prior to modern times, music was a way to bring people together. And then when money got involved it changed things. Music should be approached as a way to connect with people rather than just a way to get up on stage, or get people to pay attention to you. What you are really aiming to do as a musician is make a connection with someone else through art”. (McGuire, personal commentary, November 30, 2017)

McGuire’s thoughts emphasize what is at the core of a healthy music community. The intent of gathering is not finance driven but rather an arena to celebrate and connect through art. It is in such an atmosphere that musicians are supported in their creative endeavors and inspired to continue to grow. When an artist exists in such a community, a sense of identity is inevitable and inherent to the community and deliberate branding is unnecessary.

Perhaps the most notable movement in modern music that was marked by a community style ethos was the punk rock scene of the 1980’s. Bands such as Black Flag, Minor Threat, the Minutemen and Bad Brains created a sound that was fast, loud, energetic and aggressive with a message that was poignant. Their movement was an underground one that was in opposition to the establishment of the times, and it created a self-contained nationwide network of like-minded people. Author Michael Azarrad refers to the movement as a “cultural underground railroad” where they functioned “beneath the radar of the corporate behemoths” (Azarrad,2001, p. 3). While their philosophies and ideals drove them, it was hard work and dedication that got them there. Joe Carducci wrote “in an age of big entertainment conglomerates, big management, big

media, touring the lowest-rent rock clubs of America in an Econoline is the equivalent of fighting a ground war strategy in an age of strategic nuclear forces.” (Azarrad, 2001, p. 3)

The music business has no doubt changed dramatically since the 1980s. With the introduction of the internet, most networking and promotion is done through email and more prominently through social media. In many instances social media has become the dominant way for artists to interact with fans and bands alike. However, it should be recognized that these forms of media will never replace face to face interaction. McGuire points out that social media should be treated as an “appendage” of something greater. “Social media” he says “is not the substance”. He goes on to explain, “it can help to get people in the know and to get people to performances but once they are there, that face to face interaction where you foster a relationship is really how you build a community”. (McGuire, personal commentary, November 20, 2017)

Ian MacKaye, who was the leading pioneer of the punk rock movement of the 1980’s and the front man in the bands Minor Threat and Fugazi, is equally remembered for his impact offstage as he was onstage. Not only was he the founder of Dischord Records, an independent label that released much of the underground music from the time period, but he was also the father of the Straight Edge movement- an ideology where individuals prided themselves in abstaining from drugs and alcohol in a music scene that was characterized by exactly that. In a recent interview he was asked to discuss the present music industry and how he would be navigating it if he were just starting out today.

“It’s a game that I am surprised that so many bands play. There is a lot of music business that’s in place [today]. What I see that is interesting to me, is that the things that seem to have been inherited from the major level industry that I found so vexing in the late 70’s are precisely the things that have been adopted by newer bands. For instance, there are press agents, managers and booking agents... Things have become mechanized to serve the industry people.... For me, my engagement with punk was to completely shake ourselves free of that kind of constriction and to engage in human interaction with each other. It wasn’t just take a number in the machine and hope people will call you.

You create a community.... My interest was always despite the industry. [Today] I would be looking for people to engage with, to make something together with. There are aspects of the internet that are an incredible tool. But organizing also involves people knowing each other and people trusting each other. One way of doing that is to be in the same room.” (MacKaye, 2016)

Here MacKaye raises a valuable point, although the methods and tools may have changed dramatically over the years, the motivations and systems at play in the commercial music industry are by and large the same as they have always been. Back at the turn of century, when business executives in suites first recognized the great amount of wealth that could be generated from music, the game changed completely. Mainstream music became a commodity that could be bought and sold where artistic merit was secondary to a price tag. However, with the advent of big business in music, came a subculture that resisted the greed and exploitation of art. Troubadours who refused to accept that music could be deduced to a packaged product to be bought and sold like toilet paper or soap organized and created effective movements. Every generation in America has had bohemian movements such as these and when these movements prove to gain genuine popularity, they too are hijacked by commercial businesses. In the 1950's it was the beatniks, in the 60's it was the hippies, in the 70' and 80's it was the punk rockers. They may have looked different but they stood for the same ideals, to protect something sacred at the core of their art.

Maintaining integrity through my music endeavors has always been important to me. I have found it is the case that the most lasting and meaningful art in our culture has been a product of integrity. Therefore, it is my duty as a musician of the current age to do my part in preserving honest art. Even more important than preserving art, is conducting myself in a manner which I take pride in. As a musician, I understand the desire for success. I understand the urgency in proving to your parents that writing and playing music is not just a hobby. However,

we must step back and seriously consider the actions we are taking and the life we are leading. Ultimately, the person we are and the impact we have on others is the most lasting legacy we will leave behind. I want ensure that whether on stage, behind a computer or in the studio that I was a descent and good person.

Uncovering the most effective approach in getting your music heard must be looked at as an ongoing process. In three months time I will release my third full length solo album. In preparation for this release, I have spent hours upon hours researching the best ways possible to get my music to folks who will enjoy it. Inevitably some of these methods will prove to be effective while others will prove to be ineffective. It is through this active process that I will continue to build upon my research and continue to improve upon my approach. My hope is that once the album is released I can implement some of the information I derived from this project, specifically concerning community. Like I had mentioned, much of my involvement with music communities are from when I was younger and more active in putting on shows with friends in available spaces. However, as I have grown older, I have been less involved. In the coming months I hope to rekindle my spirit for fostering community and have devised a few ideas on how to do so. The first is to organize a residency at a local venue where I will be in charge of putting together a weekly show. Each show will involve three to four new artists who will bring different folks to the show. The hope is that this will create an environment that will foster future friendships and collaborations. The other idea is to become involved in running a community space that puts on shows. In a recent discussion with a close friend, we discussed the possibility of a finding a space that can serve as both a rehearsal room and music venue. Hopefully over the course of the next year this idea will materialize.

For most musicians, the tension lies in figuring out how to balance idealism with realism. After all, the music industry is a business like any other business. It would be naïve to think that there should be no compromise on an artist's behalf if they truly wish to have a career in music. The more productive questions to be asking are what compromises are worth making and which ones are not. This must be answered on a personal level and will vary depending on the individual. In order to answer this question with the attentiveness it deserves, artists must equip themselves with knowledge of the many options available in building a career in music. However, if there is one thing that is certain about those who succeed in the music business, it's their persistence. Their ability to keep at it, day in and day out despite the discouragement they will most definitely receive. As Joe Strummer of the band the Clash said-

“Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not. There is nothing more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not. Unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not. The world is full of educated derelicts. persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.”

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