

The Future Of Music

There's too much music made by too many people and performers are frustrated they're broke and listeners are completely overwhelmed. What's going to happen?

Hit music will survive. Even if the definition of a hit is a shadow of its former self. There won't be as many sales, few people will even be aware of the track and the act will not be able to tour, or, if so, very briefly (did you catch the gross for the Jonas Brothers movie...ALREADY has-beens?)

Making it is so difficult that most "musicians" give up very early in the process. It's easy to write and record a song and distribute it. Everything that was difficult yesterday is easy today. You just fire up GarageBand, select some loops, create a track and upload the result to MySpace and you're an "artist"!

Well, no. You're someone who's recorded a track that most people don't care about, probably because it sucks. But what if it's good?

It almost definitely isn't. But, if it were, most people STILL wouldn't care, because they're not aware of it. So, we've got two halves of the pie, quality and awareness.

Let's start with quality. You can be a supernova like Picasso, incredibly good from the start. But it's almost impossible. Usually you've got to experiment, practice, go down the road to dead ends until you finally come up with something good. And most people don't have the patience for this process. Everybody wants instant fame. And instant riches. And it's easier than ever to be instantly famous, but it doesn't pay well. You can be on a reality TV show and be broke and working as a waitress. Furthermore, fame doesn't possess the ogle value it used to. We make fun of the famous. As for riches...they're almost unreachable. Which is why most "artists" give up.

It was easier in the nineties. The formula was simple. If you were incredibly cute or beautiful you got a record label to sign you and put a ton of money behind you, filming an expensive video for ubiquitous airplay on MTV and paying radio stations to play your record. The system was easy to figure out. Even though there was a winnowing process, which frequently had little to do with musical talent. Today? If you can get a label interested, they want to pay less and own more and success is a fraction of what it once was. Which is why if you want to be rich and famous you start a Website.. Unless you're truly a musician.

A true musician HAS to play. The money is secondary. As is fame. Sure, you want both, but you've got no choice. And now, with the field separated so clearly between the wannabes and the true devotees, we can start to see the future of the music industry. Those who see themselves as musicians are going to practice and play for Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hours, building an audience all along the way, and eventually a great portion of the rest of the public is going to wake up and pay attention.

Mutt Lange started off doing sound-alike records. Reg Dwight recorded demos. So many of the stars of yore paid incredible dues. So when they were finally foisted upon the marketplace we were stunned by their talent. "Your Song"? A classic still performed today. A Jonas Brothers track? That's an exercise in finance, based on marketing. Just like no one wants Hanson anymore, in a few years the Jonas Brothers will be a nostalgia item that does a fraction of their present business. The boys have got experience in promotion, in acting, but in music? Their musical history is very brief, they've got very little in the way of chops. Rather than practicing in their basement, they're busy performing in throwaway Disney pics.

You don't have to be thirty to get enough experience. Those piano lessons your parents make you take count. As do all those rehearsals in the aforementioned basement.. And no matter how good your musical skills, performing is a separate talent completely. Like an NBA player with enough games under his belt not to choke in the playoffs, you've got to perform enough to be able to hit every note and keep the audience in the palm of your hand. So when people drag their friends to your show, they're mesmerized.

Everything you hated is essentially gone. Looks-based music. Formulaic radio. Usual suspect writers and producers. They all still exist, but suddenly they're the sideshow. The real money is in the bands that play live. But people really only want to see the dinosaurs in quantity, because they've been at it so long that they've not only got a catalog of great tunes, they're great on stage.

Walk into the wilderness with me. If you believe in yourself, you're never going to give up, you're going to play until you make it. And believe me, if you put in all that time and no one is paying attention you will give up, that life is just too frustrating. But if you've got talent, you'll see signposts along the way, enough positive feedback to keep you going.

So, maybe we'll have a vibrant music scene in the future. When the old game plays down to nothing (and Terra Firma just wrote down their EMI investment), and the new music-based acts have enough hours/time/practice/performance under their belt to gain a head of steam. Instead of being worked on a track by a street-teamer looking to get ahead, a true friend will hip you to something that blows your mind to the point where you'll have to tell everybody else you know.

The opportunities are not only in playing, there are giant holes in infrastructure as well. These new acts need managers. Organizations akin to labels to run their businesses. Even concert promoters to believe in them and showcase them live. None of the old farts want anything to do with these developing acts, because the payday is so far away, and a trickle at first.

We could be on the verge of a renaissance. But it could take five years to start to come clear and ten to burst into a supernova. Practice, practice, practice. If you're truly good, you'll find an audience. But remember, it won't happen instantly and you'll struggle as opposed to living the high life. You'll be driving a rickety old van as opposed to flying first class. But when the money starts to come in, it will POUR!

Yes, you want to get paid. But even more, you want people who are touched by your original music, who NEED to go to the show. Which will be cheap. Because you'll want a big tent, you'll want to include everybody. That's the Net ethos. The old boys are about being exclusionary, whereas today's kids know everybody else in their entire town!

The audience is waiting. Listeners want something great to pop up on their radar, that they can believe in. It's human nature. Think of listeners, not executives or gatekeepers. You can write the script. We're ready for you!

Bob Lefsetz