Book Review:

Popular Music as Promotion: Music and Branding in the Digital Age

Meier, Leslie M.
Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2017.

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In the fourth episode of the HBO documentary miniseries *The Defiant Ones*, famed record producer Jimmy Iovine and other music industry executives describe the tumult they experienced in the late 1990s and early 2000s with the rise of Napster and peer-to-peer file sharing. The program's depiction of these events offers a striking audiovisual illustration of this transitional period: Images of downloading files collide with images of record stores bearing closeout sale banners, set to the Nine Inch Nails's anti-materialist polemic, "Starfuckers, Inc." This sequence—and its grounding for the miniseries' climax focusing on the advent of hip-hop mogul Dr. Dre's Beats headphones—echoes the dominant industrial narrative about file sharing: that piracy destroyed the record, the foundational commodity for the recording business, but prompted the remaking of the music industry into a more decentralized, forward-looking, technologically adaptive, consumer-driven, and, eventually, innovative enterprise.² Yet *The Defiant Ones* dedicates three of its four hours to the history of popular music as organized around record production in the last quarter of the twentieth century; beyond select innovations credited to

prominent individuals, the miniseries has greater trouble demonstrating exactly how music drives commerce today.

Leslie M. Meier's book, *Popular Music as Promotion: Music and Branding in the Digital Age*, compellingly stages a much-needed intervention in and deconstruction of the music industry's current self-image-making. Beyond providing a detailed explanation of the multifaceted ways in which popular music currently functions as a commercial industry, Meier analyzes how these material operations are shrouded by industrial mythmaking. She argues that the music industry has largely come to work in the service of, and has been remade via, promotional industries through brand sponsorships and endorsements as well as synchronization deals that license music for other media.³ Critiquing both the music industry's notion that such arrangements are mutually beneficial for industrial actors across music and branding as well as the academic instinct to categorize such activities as yet another example of media convergence,⁴ Meier pushes media industry scholars to consider how a meeting of industries can result in something far from a bridge between them. The business of popular music, Meier contends, has become rendered in service of the business of promotion in both its commercial logic and value system.

Meier urges readers to see the current business of popular music as one that stretches out through "multiple revenue streams" following the decline of the record as a commodity. Music's central "product" is now the "artist-brand," "the central primary hub around which various 'ancillary' products and licensing agreements may be forged."⁵ The author explores this component of her argument by examining the concomitant rise of the artist-brand and branding itself as a dominant industry that has grown to "colonize" popular music,⁶ topics that are given standalone attention in the two middle chapters of this concise volume. In so doing, *Popular Music as Promotion* demonstrates how the primary audience that motivates decision making in popular music is not the consumer, but "business-to-business licensing agreements" that "sell music to a range of media and brand partners."⁷ Meier compels readers to consider how the use value of music in the twenty-first century has been determined less by the price of a ringtone or a song on iTunes than by its synchronization value.

Through these critical frameworks, Meier is able to both specify the historical changes that have formed popular music's promotional functions and place these changes within an industrial focus that considers the sellout myth—the rock 'n' roll ideal that sees the combination of music and marketing as compromising music's cultural and political meanings—in material rather than ideological terms. Of course, for at least the second half of the twentieth century, the recording industry and star musicians' representatives have profited greatly from selling commodities (not only records but also promotional items) by capitalizing on lucrative star images. But the stigma of selling out, as Meier insightfully asserts, "actually had a market value insofar as it served to limit the number of artists interested" in branding ventures.⁸ For Meier, the sticky ideological question of what has become of the sellout myth is important not because of the conspicuous absence of a value system that so dominated the late twentieth century's rock-driven popular music culture but because of what it has been replaced by following the decline of the record. In this way, *Popular Music as Promotion* makes a historical distinction between the recording industry dominant in the late twentieth century and today's larger brand-driven music industry.

In contrast to the democratic notions of particularism that accompany narrowcast assumptions about contemporary popular music culture, Meier demonstrates how the prominence of branding within entertainment corporations has shaped which music and musicians get to be heard and remunerated. Through a combination of numerous interviews with industrial actors as well as attendance at industry conferences and conventions, Meier's extensive research illustrates how the branding logic of popular music has established several key practices, including privileging happy music, preferring musicians with existing social media followings, and standardizing "restrictive new contracting conventions" through brand partnerships, "360 deals,"⁹ and nondisclosure agreements (the many problems of which extend across media industry practices, as has been illuminated in recent news).¹⁰ *Popular Music as Promotion* explains with specificity how, despite music executives' adoption of artist-centered discourse in the wake of the digital music shift, the labor of rising artists has largely been met with new forms of precarity. Indeed, this book makes a convincing case that the stars who have benefited most from the new shape of this industry are the ubiquitous names who established themselves within the recording business of yore, such as Beyoncé, Madonna, and Radiohead.

Popular Music as Promotion is the kind of book that may cause the reader to feel surprise that it has not been written before. This illustrates the usefulness and importance of Meier's work, as she explains with authority and specificity the issues that even a casual observer may have wondered about contemporary popular music. At the same time, this speaks to the considerable scope of this topic and the multiple implications that it entails. Perhaps as a result, Meier's principal intervention reads at times like a shifting target in her introduction, which variously states the book's argument as focusing upon popular music's formation around market values, the promotional industries' reconfiguration and uses of the cultural meanings of popular music, the transformation of popular music itself and recording artists themselves, and the post-Fordist commodification of culture that these practices evince. *Popular Music and Promotion's* body chapters refine this book's focus, particularly in the consecutive chapters on artist-brands and music branding. The book's excellent conclusion brings these concerns together with the urgent clarity that this topic warrants, closing with an overview of the material conditions and effects of musical-promotional practices that Meier contends should shape future research. I certainly hope that Meier and other scholars continue take up this task.

In the first issue of *Media Industries Journal*, Jonathan Sterne argued in a provocatively titled short article that "There is no 'music industry'." Rather, the analysis of music in relation to media industries should "assume" instead "a polymorphous set of relations among radically different industries and concerns."¹¹ *Popular Music as Promotion* is a rigorous and illuminating answer to what those industries and concerns are and how they shape popular music today.

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- ² Aram Sinnreich deconstructs the music industry's self-mythmaking around peer-to-peer file sharing in *The Piracy Crusade: How the Music Industry's War on Sharing Destroys Markets and Erodes Civil Liberties* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 69–93.
- ³ Leslie M. Meier, *Popular Music as Promotion: Music and Branding in the Digital Age* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2017), 4.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.
- ⁹ Meier defines such agreements as “a type of contract that allows music companies to capitalize on key revenue streams that formerly lay outside their reach, including live performance, music publishing and music merchandise, in addition to the new rights and digital products that are now essential to record label profitability.” *Ibid.*, 75.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.
- ¹¹ Jonathan Sterne, “There Is No Music Industry,” *Media Industries Journal* 1, no. 1 (2014): 53.

Bibliography

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