

The Global Corporatization of Music

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The control of the worldwide music industry has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few very influential multinational corporations over the past several decades. These major powers have been very successful in gaining control of markets all over the world that were previously dominated by relatively small local companies or government organizations. An obvious result of these developments has been the global commercialization of music, something which has very negative consequences. This commercialization tends to homogenize the diverse musical styles of the world and to marginalize those styles that do not fit into the recording industry's preconceptions of what will sell. Other very worrying problems are the intrusive effect of mainstream Western culture on non-Western cultures and the exploitative and manipulative ideas promoted by record companies in order to increase sales.

More than 90% of the gross sales worldwide of recorded music in 1994 came from albums, singles and music videos owned or distributed by WEA, BMG, EMD, Polygram, Sony or UNI.¹ These six multinationals have used mergers and purchases to gain a stranglehold on the world music industry in the past several decades, to the extent that there are virtually no other companies that can compete with them on any significant level.

To give the 90% statistic some context, the traditional threshold of market concentration before monopolistic activities become apparent is a market share of 70% by the top eight firms in any particular industry.² It should be realized that the levels of ownership and market concentration that might be tolerable in other areas are particularly undesirable in the media industry.

The six corporate powers also have extensive control of numerous forms of media outside of the music industry as well as interests in the

hardware that is used to play music. This leads them to implement policies that benefit all aspects of their operation. This is particularly apparent in the case of films, where the commercial links between soundtracks and the movies themselves can be very strong, to say nothing of revenues from t-shirts, posters, children's toys, magazines and books.

A good example is the film *The Bodyguard* which featured Whitney Houston's hit *I Will Always Love You*. The success of the movie contributed to the success of the song and vice versa, leading to double profits for a company that held interests in both. The marketing strategies used in promoting films and soundtracks together are made apparent by the practice of recording videos that show movie clips. Film and music are even more closely linked in the Indian movie industry, where film music is the predominant popular music idiom.³

Traditionally, Western music was sold primarily in the West. This has changed dramatically in recent years, however, and American and British music industries now obtain over half of their revenues from foreign markets.⁴ This boom in foreign sales has been partly brought about by the increasing availability of cassette players in the developing world and by an opening up of world markets after the fall of Communism. Ten times as many recordings are sold now in most countries than was the case in the 1950's⁵ and the international music industry has an annual turnover of \$33 billion U.S.⁶

Another important change in the music industry is that the United States is no longer the only worldwide recording center. European and Japanese companies have now become major forces as well, leaving WEA as the sole U.S.

¹ Robert Burnett, *The Global Jukebox*. (New York: Routledge, 1996) 2.

² *Ibid.*, 13.

³ Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 40-41.

⁴ Robert Burnett, *The Global Jukebox*. (New York: Routledge, 1996) 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

owned company among the six giants. Nonetheless, the developing world still has virtually no ownership of any of these companies. In fact, these corporations have been rapidly buying up small local recording companies in the developing world, leaving the recording industry of the world almost entirely in the hands of American, European or Japanese companies. In addition, the cultural center of the music industry is still the United States, at least in commercial terms. American musicians sell the most recordings and it is the United States that invented music television and dominant commercial forms like pop, rock and rap.⁷

Given that the music industry of the world is now dominated by a few multinationals that are primarily influenced by mainstream Western culture, the next step is to understand how the negative effects of this manifest themselves. It is important to realize that the ultimate goal of these companies is to make as much of a profit as possible, not to be considerate of the social or artistic issues surrounding music. The sheer size of multinational record companies also makes them insensitive towards or unaware of local issues. Jacques Attali does an excellent job of highlighting some of the problems related to the corporate control of music production:

Fetishized as a commodity, music is illustrative of the evolution of our entire society: deritualize a social form, repress an activity of the body, specialize its practice, sell it as a spectacle, generalize its consumption, then see to it that it is stockpiled until it loses its meaning.⁸ . . . Everywhere we look, the monopolization of the broadcast of messages, the control of noise, and the institutionalization of the silence of others assure the durability of power. Here, this channelization takes on a new, less violent, and more subtle form: laws of the political economy take the place of censorship laws. Music and the musician essentially become either objects of consumption like everything else, recuperators of subversion, or meaningless noise.⁹ . . . The monologue of standardized, stereotyped music accompanies and hems in a daily life in which in reality no one has the right to

speaking any more.¹⁰ . . . Music now seems hardly more than a somewhat clumsy excuse for the self-glorification of musicians and the growth of a new industrial sector.¹¹

Music is a well-known agent of socialization and carrier of culture. As soon as music falls under corporate control, there is a very serious danger that these functions of music will be abused. Just as national anthems and hymns are used to reinforce loyalty to countries or religions, multinationals use music to reinforce corporate loyalty. The jingles used in television commercials are an obvious example of this.

The influences that can be exerted through control of the music industry are much less blatant than jingles, of course, but no less real. Product placement in music videos is already a very lucrative source of money for the musicians who consent to it. The content of many commercial pop songs, the imagery displayed in music videos and the conspicuous consumption apparent in the lifestyles of pop stars all reinforce the idea that mass consumption will lead to happiness.

Corporations are also in an excellent position to censor music that contains political content that is contrary to their interests. This takes on a form much subtler than government censorship. Rather than explicitly banning a particular song, corporations can simply choose to not record or promote it under pretexts different from its political content. They can then claim that the musician is free to have his or her music recorded by other companies, when the reality is that virtually all of the recording and distributing companies are owned by the same few multinationals. Continued refusals often lead musicians to self-censor their music in an effort to have their work recorded.

The feel-good content of much commercial pop music can have the effect of glossing over the reality of the structural oppression faced by people all over the world. This is particularly apparent in the film music of India, where audiences living in dire poverty go to see movies and listen to music that glorifies the lives of the middle or upper class citizens of India.

It can thus be seen that commercial pop has the triple socializing effect of making people forget the conditions under which they live, of

⁷ Timothy D. Taylor, *Global Pop*. (New York: Routledge, 1997) 199.

⁸ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Brian Massumi, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985) 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

making them believe that there is legitimacy in commercial power and of silencing people by mass-producing a deafening, syncretic type of pop music while censoring alternatives. This is particularly worrisome given the increasing diversity of media controlled by the same corporations.

The commercialization of music has important cultural ramifications that must be considered. The major corporations tend to promote primarily Western styles of music, which results in Western popular culture infusing the everyday lives of listeners and reproducing the dominant complex of ideology in colonized cultures.

Record companies want to maximize their profits, and taking a chance on new types of music is a risk that they are unwilling to take when their big stars are so lucrative. Since American-style pop music is already by far the most popular form world-wide, it is in the interests of companies to continue to promote and produce it rather than local or original styles that fall outside the mainstream. The resultant domination of Western music is made clear by the fact that it is much easier to buy Western music in other countries than it is to buy world music in the West.¹² A major U. S. copyright organization has stated that "for every one foreign song that is earning money in America, ten American songs are earning money abroad."¹³

Only one out of five releases generates enough income to cover the costs of production and distribution.¹⁴ This leads record companies to concentrate their resources on promoting their biggest stars rather than on giving opportunities to many different musicians of diverse musical backgrounds. There is an elite of less than 100 international pop stars that receive a very disproportionate amount of the promotional resources that are essential to success in the modern music industry.¹⁵ Record companies are also well known for promoting corporate clones of successful musicians rather than giving opportuni-

ties to more original bands. The numerous boy bands assembled by record companies in imitation of the New Kids on the Block are an example of this.

In order to take advantage of the economies of scale, record companies would rather sell 500 000 copies of one record than 50 000 copies each of ten different records. As a result, there are now fewer musicians signed to major labels than there were in the 1980's.¹⁶ Since the small record companies that used to record local musicians are being bought up as the big six multinationals increase their foreign ownership, these musicians are being given decreasing opportunities to have their music heard.

Lesser-known musicians are still at a huge disadvantage even if their work is recorded. Most popular radio stations add three or four new songs to their play list each week, yet receive approximately 7000 singles and 5000 albums per year.¹⁷ The situation is even more pronounced when considering music television. A musician who dares to diverge too much from the mainstream is facing very poor odds of being heard.

In addition to simply taking away the opportunities for local musicians to have their work recorded and promoted, the multinationals are also doing whatever they can to convince local audiences to listen to the Western stars in their catalogues instead of more local styles of music. It is in the interests of corporations to standardize audience tastes and institute programmed consumption because it maximizes economic dividends.

The result is that musicians who used to play local or minority styles are often left with little choice but to play music that conforms to the Western-style pop favored by record companies. There is a feedback loop between musicians and audiences that increasingly want Western sounding music that results in marginalization of music that is outside the Western mainstream.

As a side note, the situation is ironically reversed in the case of the less commercially significant types of music marketed as traditional world music, although the end result is unfortunately similar. Record companies tend to market this type of music using the language of authenticity, knowing that their consumers want music

¹² Timothy D. Taylor, *Global Pop*. (New York: Routledge, 1997) 201.

¹³ Roger Wallis and Krister Malm, "The International Music Industry and Transcultural Communication," in *Popular Music and Communication*, ed. James Lull (London: Sage Publications, 1987) 118.

¹⁴ Robert Burnett, *The Global Jukebox*. (New York: Routledge, 1996) 24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

that is “genuine” and not diluted by Western pop. To suit the desires of this niche market, record companies try to make musicians record music that seems premodern and untainted.¹⁸ The effects of this are to cause the music to remain static and to prevent it from existing as an organic, living music. It also greatly limits the freedom of expression of individual musicians who might like to experiment.

As an additional side note, It should be noted that there is nothing wrong with musicians from anywhere in the world recording music that has a very strong Western influence if they so choose. Some musicians, such as Youssou N’Dour, value the opportunity to be influenced by and to play Western styles of music.¹⁹ They should not, however, be coerced into doing this by the recording industry. Likewise, Westerners should be able to use music from other cultures as inspiration, but they must be careful to do so without stealing or trivializing the cultural significance of the music.

The institution of mass culture, standardization and mass production leads to homogenization and a decreasing number of cultural forms available to audiences. Corporations attempt to institute structured obsolescence and rhythmic cycles of style in order to maximize sales while minimizing costs. As Howard Koval has written, “old ideas are repeated over and over again. . . . and thus culture is no longer characterized by diversity but is reduced to the repetition of a relatively narrow spectrum of forms and ideas which change slowly and with great resistance.”²⁰ This use of repetitive stereotypes and mechanical formulae is hardly conducive to free artistic or cultural expression.

Even some of the high profile stars are rebelling against the authoritarian corporate control of the music industry. George Michael sued Sony in 1993 in an attempt to be released from his contract. Michael argued that the major record companies are signing musicians to long-term exclusive deals that give them the power to not release any music that a musician records if they do not like it. As Michael has stated:

Musicians do not come in regimented shapes and sizes, but are individuals who change and evolve together with their audiences. Sony obviously views this as a great inconvenience. They have developed hard sell, high profile sales techniques, and their stance is that if George Michael, or any other artist for that matter, does not wish to conform to Sony’s current ideas, there are plenty of hungry young acts who will.²¹

An argument often used in defense of commercialization is that consumers exercise the ultimate power over the recording industry through their choice of what to buy and listen to. It is thus reasoned that the dominance of the Western mainstream is simply a response to the desires and tastes of consumers, and as such should not be considered as a negative thing.

There are several very important flaws with this reasoning. To begin with, it is important to realize that consumers are never exposed to anything approaching the full range of music that is being produced, but only that which the record companies are choosing to record and promote. This makes it difficult to argue that the consumers have any free choice. In addition, the record companies produce music for those consumers who have the most ability to consume, which is to say the richest. This means that efforts are being made to meet the tastes of the rich, while the poor have little financial purchasing power to persuade the record companies to produce music that they like.

It is also important to consider the coercive effects of advertising. The way in which the conflict between the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) and Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI) in the years surrounding 1940 completely changed the face of American popular music is a good example of how industry forces can very successfully manufacture consumer demand for reasons that have virtually nothing to do with consumer demand.²²

Further proof for the relatively low influence of consumers is found in a study by Eric W. Rothenbuhler. In a list of forty-two different factors that he found affecting radio programming,

¹⁸ Timothy D. Taylor, *Global Pop*. (New York: Routledge, 1997) 21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

²⁰ Robert Burnett, *The Global Jukebox*. (New York: Routledge, 1996) 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

²² John Ryan, *The Production of Culture in the Music Industry*. (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 1985) 127.

only four were related to the audience.²³ This is particularly significant considering the very important role that radio has on influencing what consumers buy.

Although music produced by non-Western artists represents only a small fraction of the total music sold worldwide, it has been growing rapidly in popularity in the West since the 1980's. In 1988, the international buyer for Tower Records told *Newsweek* that his section was "definitely the fastest growing part of the store." The market share of "foreign music" sold by major American record stores like Tower Records attained parity with that of jazz or classical music by 1991, at a level of about 3%.²⁴

Although at first glance these statistics seem to indicate that the American public is becoming increasingly interested in diverse, international styles of music, this is not entirely the case. To begin with, a good deal of the music that is promoted as being from non-Western cultures is really only mainstream Western pop played by musicians who happen to be from non-Western countries. In addition, the charts show that the best selling world music is actually music made by Western musicians.²⁵ For example, the top three *Billboard* world music sellers from the early 1990's are the Gipsy Kings, Clannad and Strunz & Farah.²⁶ Not only do these bands play folk music from Europe rather than from other parts of the world, but their music is particularly influenced by generic rock or pop. The albums that sell the best of all tend to be ones that involve contributions from Western pop stars, such as from Ry Cooder on *Buena Vista Social Club* and from Paul Simon on *Graceland*.

The music awards that are given out also reflect an unwillingness to recognize non-Western music without some kind of mediation from the West. For example, the Grammy awards often go to recordings that are collaboration with Western pop stars. The 1991 world music Grammy was given to the *Grateful Dead* drummer Mickey Hart and the 1993 and 1994 Grammys went to Ry Cooder for two different collaborations that

he was involved in.²⁷ Only one world music Grammy has ever gone exclusively to a non-American group or musician.²⁸

All of this shows that, while Westerners are increasingly willing to listen to music from other parts of the world, they are most willing to do this when some important elements of their own culture are present in the music. Further examination of why Westerners are increasingly listening to music from other cultures and how the music is marketed to them uncovers some disturbing revelations.

In order to understand the dynamics at play, it is useful to discuss how this music is labeled. Establishing stable and homogenous categories helps the recording industry to boost their sales.²⁹ "World music" and "world beat" are two labels commonly used by the recording industry. Keeping in mind that the labels are sometimes used interchangeably, the former is generally used to denote folk or traditional styles of music from any country, whereas music falling under the umbrella of the latter tends to be music that is produced outside North America or Britain and is influenced by mainstream pop.³⁰ Although there are many problems with these labels, as will soon be demonstrated, they are useful when used to discuss the effects of worldwide commercialization of music as a common experience shared by many cultures. The terms will therefore be used in this particular context throughout this paper.

Terms like these lump together styles of music that are totally unrelated culturally or even aesthetically. The only commonality is that they are different from Western music. This reinforces the idea that there are only two types of music or, by extension, culture: the West and everything else. Not only does this ignore the reality that two different types of music from two different cultures can easily have much less in common with each other than with Western music, but it also denies the individuality of different cultures.

In the particular case of world pop, there are many sub-categories used, such as ambient music, trance music, space music, world ambient, tribal music, ethnic fusion, ethno-techno, ethno-

²³ Eric W. Rothenbuhler, "Commercial Radio and Popular Music," in *Popular Music and Communication*, ed. James Lull (London: Sage Publications, 1987) 89.

²⁴ Timothy D. Taylor, *Global Pop*. (New York: Routledge, 1997) 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7-9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

punk, techno-tribal and many others.³¹ Again, these categories make no distinction between types of music from different cultures. Many of these categories also blend together and overlap with new age music. The result is the creation of a genericized style that ignores the roots of any of the music or any cultural significance that it might have.

An example of the consequences of this kind of labeling is shown in the following posting on the newsgroup rec.music.indian.misc by an Internet user in Hong Kong:

I have never before been on this newsgroup. But I had to. In a local newspaper, a food journalist called the music in an Indian restaurant 'definitely newage.' I'm sure the music must have been Indian. Please tell me what is newage music and why would (if he did) the journalist call Indian music newage, when it has been around for thousands of years?³²

On the introduction of their World Music chart in 1990, *Billboard* wrote that "the chart will run biweekly in the Retail section in tandem with the 25-position New Age chart under the heading Top Adult Alternative Albums."³³ It should be noted that the same person manages both the New Age and World Music charts.³⁴ The lumping of world music with these other categories is an explicit demonstration of how world music is being categorized and marketed by the commercial music establishment. As written by Timothy D. Taylor, "[world music] is designed to be music for grown-ups, music as wallpaper, music that does not, on its reasonably attractive and accessible surface, raise sticky problems about misogyny, racism, colonialism, what have you."³⁵ Not surprisingly, it is the six major recording multinationals mentioned earlier and the companies that they own that dominate the world music charts.³⁶

Record stores often subdivide their world music sections based on country of origin rather than by style of music or performer name. This is markedly different from the way the classical, rock or jazz sections are subdivided. Organiza-

tion based on the country of origin produces the psychological impression that musicians from the same region all play the same stereotypical styles of music, minimizes the importance of the actual individual musicians and gives no recognition to the reality that there are many diverse musical traditions within each of these regions.

There are also many additional problems related to the ways in which world music is marketed in addition to the issues surrounding labeling. Some of these are illustrated in the following excerpt from a web page promoting the music of Tibetan monks of Gyuto:

This remarkable, transcendently beautiful sound, thought to arise only from the throat of a person who has realized selfless wisdom, is like nothing else on this earth. . . . Seeing and hearing the music is a very special experience, for in addition to their multiphonic chanting, the audience is feasted with the brilliant colors of their costume, the graceful movement of ritual activity, and a panoply of unusual instruments: mountain horns, bells, and drums.³⁷

Speaking from a Western aesthetic perspective, the music is in reality relatively dull in the sense that it is simply the Tibetan equivalent of Christian priests reciting prayers.³⁸ In order to make the music appeal to the public, it is exoticized and mystified by the record company. It is packaged as ancient Eastern spirituality without any true understanding of the beliefs and values that are so central to it.

Exoticization is a very common theme in the marketing of world music. A further example is given in the notes to the album *Boheme* by the group Deep Forest:

The enchanting timbre of a strange woman's voice unmistakably marked Transylvania as our new destination in that stationary journey which gives our music meaning. Echoes of deep forests, ancient legends and buried tales still resounded there.³⁹

Emphasizing the exotic aspects of world music and using mystical descriptive terms allows record companies to appeal to the desire of modern consumers to feel that they are not part of the mainstream, that they have individualized

³¹ Ibid., 4.

³² Ibid., 5.

³³ Ibid., 5.

³⁴ Ibid., 6.

³⁵ Ibid., 6.

³⁶ Ibid., 9.

³⁷ Ibid., 24.

³⁸ Ibid., 24.

³⁹ Ibid., 12-13.

and eclectic tastes. Unfortunately, the result of this kind of marketing is that the Western record buyers are even further alienated from the real cultural context of music and they are led to stereotype styles of music based on how they are marketed.

The irony is that record producers are well aware that most consumers don't really want music that is fundamentally that different from what they are used to. In reality, consumers want music with familiar elements that gives the illusion of being different. Record companies therefore either encourage their musicians to change their music to play up to Western stereotypical preconceptions about what music from a certain region should sound like or they ask them to incorporate elements of mainstream music into their work to make it appeal more to the Western buyers who believe that they actually buying something outside the norm.

There is a tendency to categorize musicians based on their ethnicity rather than their music in order to capitalize on the desire for music with an "ethnic tinge." For example, the singer Banig is a Filipina teenager who now lives in Los Angeles. Despite the fact that she sings in English in a style identical to mainstream Western pop/dance, her record company printed a full-page ad for her music in *Rhythm Music Magazine*, one of the few magazines devoted to world music in the United States.⁴⁰

A final issue that needs to be dealt with is the phenomenon of Western pop stars who record music with musicians from other cultures. In response to the accusations of appropriation, Paul Simon defended his *Graceland* album by saying that, "Culture flows like water. It isn't something that can just be cut off."⁴¹ Implicit in this statement is the assumption that his culture is different from other cultures. His culture can be protected by copyrights, agents and lawyers, while the music of other cultures is free for him to capitalize on.

Pop stars that go off to record with musicians in other parts of the world are often portrayed as explorers heading off to discover mysterious music, again raising issues of exoticism. An example is Stewart Copeland's *The Rhythmist*, which includes these album notes: "*Rhythmism* is the study of patterns that weave the fabric of life; with this speculation in mind a

black clad figure is on his way across the so-called dark continent. He meets lions, warriors, pygmies and jungles. . ."⁴² It is notable that the credits of this album mention several tribes, but no African individuals.⁴³

Collaboration between pop stars and musicians from other cultures are perfectly acceptable if the pop stars get no more credit for the resultant music than any of the other musicians. An implication of this is that all of the musicians involved should get comparable shares of the revenue from recordings, something that is very rarely done. It is also important that the cultural significance of any music not be overlooked.

Corporate influence, as opposed to intent on the part of the pop star, is often very influential in the dominance of the pop star over the other musicians. Record companies choose to promote the pop star's prominence because they know that doing so will likely bring in much higher revenues. The case of *Graceland* lends some support to this. The record, which was marketed and produced by Simon's record company, gave a very disproportionate amount of attention to Simon. The *Graceland* tour, in contrast, featured the entire ensemble relatively equally, with Simon being careful not to dominate.

To summarize, one of the most important problems with the commercialization of music is that it limits the freedom of musicians to produce music that inspires them and that is relevant to them. It also takes away the power of choice from the public by limiting the options available to them and by conditioning them to respond to consciously manufacturing trends. The cultural independence of different regions of the world are subordinated to mainstream Western culture, replacing musical diversity with genericized homogeneity. The marketing strategies used by the giants of the music industry stereotype and trivialize non-Western styles of music and remove them from their cultural context and significance.

New technology is providing a few glimmers of hope amongst the general barrenness of the situation. The Internet provides a medium by which music can be freely and openly disseminated independently of the corporations, although only certain segments of the population have access to this technology. The increasing quality and decreasing prices of home recording technology is also making it easier for musicians

⁴⁰ Ibid., 17.

⁴¹ Ibid., 22.

⁴² Ibid., 28.

⁴³ Ibid., 30.

to record their own work, although this does not solve problems of distribution. The revolutionary effect of cassette culture in India and elsewhere is perhaps a cause for hope, although there are issues of piracy involved. Perhaps the greatest hope of escaping corporate dominance of the music industry is given by the example of how subordinate groups in the United States have had radical effects on popular music in the past century. One hopes that subordinate groups around the world will now be able to do the same and break through the culturally repressive effects of the global commercialization of music.

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