



Who Calls the Tune? When Businessmen Make Music Rock

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► To cite this version:

Claude Chastagner. Who Calls the Tune? When Businessmen Make Music Rock. *Transatlantica. Revue d'études américaines/American Studies Journal*, 2010, 2. hal-04393758

HAL Id: hal-04393758

<https://hal.science/hal-04393758>

Submitted on 18 Jan 2024

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Who calls the tune?

When businessmen make music rock

The real action was taking place behind the scenes.

Irwin Pincus, music publisher

A couple of weeks ago, while researching for this paper, I decided to read again *Chronicles*, Bob Dylan's autobiography¹. Chapter 4 deals with the recording in a rented New Orleans mansion of *Oh Mercy*, the 1989 album produced by Daniel Lanois, unanimously hailed as Dylan's resurrection. Dylan insists on the significant impact Lanois had on his own artistry. Through conversations, flashes of rage and frustration, and the sheer intensity of music making, his contribution to the final product was more than anecdotal. According to Dylan, on "Political World", "Lanois got committed to a funk style-he heard one of Mason's licks and decided to put the whole song on it," (*Chronicles* 183), on "Most of the Time," "Danny was contributing as much as any musicians" (185), while for "Series of Dreams", he was "struggling to help [him] make this song work and he had the confidence to try anything." (194) The same compliment is paid for "Ring Them Bells": "The song sustains itself from beginning to end-Lanois brought out all its keen, harmonic sense." (197) Probably the most perceptive comment on Lanois's input is that "he likes to push artists to the psychological edge, and he'd done that with [Dylan]." (217)

What I was looking for was first-hand confirmation that not just the musicians themselves, but their entourage too are involved in the artistic, creative process, be it by pushing artists "to the psychological edge." However, producers like Daniel Lanois, Phil Spector, or Steve Albini *are* artists in their own right. Lanois plays several instruments and has recorded five solo albums and several movie soundtracks. That under his aegis Dylan was able to come up with songs that would/could not have been recorded otherwise owes more to the chemistry between two fellow musicians than to the creative powers of a businessman. I was on the wrong track. Producers cannot be considered as businessmen. They belong to the musical side of the business².

My point was elsewhere. I wanted to explore to what extent "pure" businessmen (by which I mean record company executives, managers, impresarios, A&R men, promoters; one could also add the developers of new technologies, but these are primarily technicians, not businessmen) can play a role in the artistic process. Beyond the obvious and stale clichés (the "this album could never have been made without the help of my record company/producer/manager" Grammy Awards' syndrome), had businessmen played a distinctive part in the production of music, had they influenced it, could we hear their impact, would the final product have been different had the artist been managed, or his records released, by someone else? The underlying questioning to this inquiry had to do with the specificity of this impact: is there

¹ Dylan, Bob. *Chronicles*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.

² For more on the musical impact of producers, see Moorefield, Virgil. *The Producer as Composer: Shaping the Sounds of Popular Music*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005.

anything specifically American both in the fact that businessmen can be creative, and in the nature of their influence, in the very sounds they contribute to make? Is there a pattern? For this, I had to turn not to record producers but to the wheeler-dealers, the moneymakers, rock businessmen.

There is a subtle difference between asking ourselves whether these men (obviously, they were almost exclusively men) were themselves artists, and whether they influenced artistic production. Elsewhere in this issue of *Transatlantica* we come across businessmen, engrossed in industrial, or commercial activities that had no relation with the arts, who turn to painting, or writing as a hobby, albeit sometimes vying with full-time artists in terms of commitment, or quality. The situation in the music business is different inasmuch as every single person involved in this business, a definitely commercial and industrial activity, is connected, to some degree, to the production of art. The fierce debate that raged for many years among practitioners and scholars alike regarding the nature of the relationship between rock music and the business world is now over. No one in his full mind would today challenge the ties that bind rock music to capitalism, to make it brief. There remain pockets of protest, of resistance, the most convincing being often the least vocal; but, as a whole, rock is a business, not an act of rebellion. As Frith put it, “far from being ‘counter-cultural’, rock articulated the *reconciliation* of rebelliousness and capital.” (Music For Pleasure 2) The paradox of rock is that its ideological opposition to commerce was precisely the basis of its market value and commercial exploitation³. Rock artists do not produce in a vacuum, they need money, a whole industry, and the people who run it. But the people in this industry are nevertheless involved in the production of something that can be called art. The question thus rather bears on the extent of this connection, the degree, and nature of the influence. Not “can we find businessmen who in their free time write songs or go on stage?”, but rather “what have some of them done in the exercise of their profession that can be described as an artistic gesture?”

The first difficulty lies in identifying the characters. For much of the commercial work regarding music is collective. True, most artifacts belonging to popular culture (from comic books to television series, films to magazines) are the result of collaborative efforts, to the extent that what could perhaps define popular culture is the symbiotic, entangled relation between art and business, between technicians, promoters, developers, A&R men, and artists. In the music industry, this collective work is performed by the clerks of record companies, the writers and designers of the music press, the teams of managers. However, we can hardly call them businessmen, as the term usually applies to individual entrepreneurs, not salaried employees. I thus decided to focus my analysis on single, easily identifiable figures who had launched record companies, established publishing corporations, or managed artists rather than on the anonymous personnel of the music industry, in spite of their sometime dramatic input.

Next came the difficulty of selecting these business moguls. Had I been working on British rock, I would have come up with an abundance of names, managers mostly, from Brian Epstein of Beatles’ fame, to Larry Parnes (the 1950s rockers), Andrew Log Oldham (the Rolling Stones), Giorgio Gomelsky (Gong, the Animals, the Moody Blues, the Yardbirds), Kit Lambert (the Who), Simon Napier-Bell (the Yardbirds, T-

³ See Frith, Simon. *Popular Music: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Rex, Marc Bolan, Wham!) Don Arden (the Small Faces, Electric Light Orchestra, Black Sabbath), Malcom McLaren (the Sex Pistols), all of whom flamboyant, charismatic, *and* immensely influential businessmen. Britain can also boast quite a few entrepreneurs (many of them former band managers) who left their imprint on the record company they created: Robert Stingwood (RSO), Richard Branson (Virgin), Tony Stratton-Smith (Charisma), Chris Blackwell (Island), Daniel Miller (Mute), Ivo Watts Russell (4AD), Geoff Travis (Rough Trade), Tony Wilson (Factory), Alan McGee (Creation), Dave Robinson and Jake Riviera (Stiff), all contributing to defining a specific sound, a recognizable style, which attracted bands, and individual artists, including graphic designers (Peter Saville, Jamie Reid, or Roger Dean, for instance), since the visual dimension is an essential ingredient of rock music's appeal.

Things are not so obvious in the United States. At first glance, Britain's businessmen seem to have played a more creative role than their transatlantic counterparts. One can only speculate as to the reasons of this situation. Does it stem from the less defined contours of British capitalism, the more amateurish quality of its practitioners which gave them more freedom, a capacity to cross borders and lean on the artistic side? Does it have to do with the more adventurous nature of British music, on its paradoxically (given the antiquity of the country) lesser degree of reliance on a majestic, imposing body of songs? Would British businessmen have felt that they could put their fingers on the pulse of the music makers and shape their sound without provoking the ire of the gatekeepers? Whatever the reasons, fewer American names can be quoted whose presence was felt on the music itself. The most influential ones, Sam Phillips, John Hammond, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, or Phil Spector are rather producers in the sense alluded to earlier, half way between musicians and technicians. They may have doubled as businessmen (fierce ones in some cases), but this is not what they were first and foremost. For *bona fide* businessmen, one has to focus on the founders of record companies, who often started their careers in concert promotion or artists management, and on media moguls.

There are those who, just by creating a label, or starting a record company, gave a space for musicians to develop their ideas, find their style, attract like-minded artists, until a new sound, a new scene comes to life. Ahmet Ertegun is among the earliest ones⁴. The son of a Turkish ambassador, as he is often referred to, Ertegun has often been described as having single-handedly shaped the face of American music and recorded the defining sounds of an era⁵. Indeed, the company Ertegun set up in 1949, Atlantic, became one of the foremost American record companies, producing some of the most famous artists of the jazz, rhythm & blues, pop and rock eras. But is that enough to bestow on him the above-mentioned epithets? What does "shape the music" or "define the sounds" mean? What does his business acumen have to do with artistic integrity or musicianship?

⁴ For an early assessment of Ertegun's influence, see Wade, Dorothy, and Justine Picardie. *Music Man: Ahmet Ertegun, Atlantic Records, and the Triumph of Rock'n'Roll*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1990. For a more recent inquiry, see Ertegun's autobiography, supplemented by a number of essays by rock and soul historians: *'What'd I say'. The Atlantic Story, 50 years of Music*. Welcome Rain Publishers, 2001.

⁵ Florida, Richard. *The Flight of the Creative Class: The New Global Competition for Talent*. New York: Harper Business, 2005, 107.

More than the combination of commercial goals and artistic ambition, Ertegun's impact is better described as the natural, unforeseen outcome of his passion for music. When he set up Atlantic with two friends, Ertegun's idea was to capture the music they heard in clubs and grab every unsigned black act they could find, in jazz but also in other styles of black American music. The changes he initiated were not primarily motivated by aesthetic reasons nor by commercial motives. As he made clear, he never had the presumption that the music he loved could be improved: "we started Atlantic simply because we wanted to ... make the kind of records that we would like to buy." (What I'd Say 47) But he also wished to expose it to the largest number: "we wanted to be a commercial label." Trying to capture as many ears as possible led him to several experiments, unexpected combinations of musicians or styles for instance, like Clyde McPhatter (of the Dominoes) with the Drifters, in order to remove what he identified as the reason for "race" music's lack of success with white, mainstream America: voices too rough, instruments too coarse, rhythm sections too strident. Together with Jerry Wexler, a white Jewish music writer for *Billboard* turned producer, they tried to give to what Wexler had termed "rhythm & blues", a lush, more mainstream sound. As Marc Eliot puts it, "one of Wexler's goals was to combine the lyrical content of mainstream pop with the more heated vocal stylistics of rhythm and blues singers⁶." Ray Charles was one of the first to benefit from this treatment. There is a fascinating tape where one can actually hear Ertegun trying to teach Charles to sing "Mess Around" in a more suave way⁷. Here, as in many other cases, Ertegun, the "mere" founder of a business venture, is actually making history, pushing a musician into uncharted territories, defining new sounds, breaking grounds. It takes some nerves to teach Ray a different way of singing, something only a true lover of music (Ertegun had written the song, and many others, under the pseudonym A. Nugetre) endowed with a strong personality could attempt. Obviously, Ertegun is here going beyond the traditional role ascribed to a record executive.

Atlantic's success paved the way for similar ventures and brought rhythm and blues into the mainstream. Chess, which had been recording Chicago R&B since 1946, hit the charts with artists like Muddy Waters or Bo Diddley, Vee-Jay with the El Dorados, and the Dells, Jubilee with the Orioles, and Bobby Freeman, Rama with the Cleftones, or Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, Gone/End with the Chantels, Little Anthony and the Imperials, or the Flamingos, Aladdin with the "King" Cole Trio, Lester Young, and the Five Keys, Specialty with Little Richard, and Imperial with Fats Domino. Most of these companies were run by one or two entrepreneurs, who dreamt of making a living out of music. They have not become household names, but as a collective entity, they have definitely contributed to shaping a new scene, and pushing forward a different aesthetic and political agenda. What had started, in the case of Ertegun, as the simple desire to share a passion for a certain kind of music, and for many others, as the dream of hitting it big, spawned, almost inadvertently, a whole new genre, or at least turned an already existing style, mostly enjoyed by the young African-American community, into something palatable for mainstream (i.e., white) ears. For if in some cases (Chess for instance), the music was left untouched, with hardly a suggestion to the musicians to alter their sound in order to reach a larger audience, most of the time, the companies' managers suggested alterations that would

⁶ Eliot, Mark. *Rockonomics, the Money Behind the Music*. New York: Carol Publ. Corp., 1993, 40.

⁷ In *Ray Charles, Pure Genius: The Complete Atlantic Recordings 1952-1959*, Rhino, 2005.

lead to a “cross-over”, i.e., achieving white, mainstream success. And white, mainstream America was where the money was.

The practice of crossing over is directly related to the segmentation of the American music market⁸. Whereas music entrepreneurs usually took for granted that “niche” genres (mountain folk, rural blues, Mexican conjunto, Creole Zydeco, etc.) could only appeal to a limited market, defined by its ethnic, social, or regional characteristics, to which it would be sold under a restricting label (to name but one strategy, African-American music was commercialized, prior to WW2, as “race”, “sepiá”, or “ebony”), more and more frequently, from the fifties onward, other communities became attracted by these genres. Songs written for, or by African-Americans started to appeal to white, or Latino teenagers in growing numbers.

The process towards the de-segmentation of the markets was not a linear one. As Oscar Gandy remarks, “It seems ironic that during a period in which the United States was just beginning to dismantle formal structures of racial segregation, increased involvement and control of black-oriented radio by African Americans actually sharpened the extent of segregation within the radio audience. The heightening of Black racial identity and pride coincided with an appreciation of the economic value of audience segmentation. Black radio programming, including popular rhythm and blues music, helped to reinforce racial pride, and the salience of racial identity that would reach a historic peak in the 1960s and 70s⁹”. Nevertheless, what had happened for rhythm & blues, would occur again later for soul, funk, rap, or bhangra. In all instances, beyond the artists’ desire to be heard by new categories of people, one can also find the shrewdness of savvy businessmen, from managers to record companies’ founders, who chose to alter the music in order to cross over. One of the best-known examples is the “whitening” of Bob Marley’s songs (with the artist’s eager approval) by Chris Blackwell, Island’s founder, thanks to the addition of more “rock” sounds.

The logic of crossing over is also behind Berry Gordy, Jr.’s company, Tamla-Motown¹⁰. Except that this time, “ a black record producer began to secure a major

⁸ For a more complete account of the impact on the music market of ethnic segmentation, see the excellent Szwed, John F. *Crossovers: Essays On Race, Music, And American Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. See as well Ang, Ien. *Desperately Seeking the Audience*. London: Routledge, 1991, Newman, Mark. *Entrepreneurs of Profit and Pride. From Black Appeal to Radio Soul*. New York: Praeger, 1988, Schiller, Dan. *Digital capitalism. Networking the Global Market System*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999.

⁹ Gandy, Jr, Oscar H. *Audience Construction: Race, Ethnicity and Segmentation in Popular Media*. Unpublished paper submitted to the Popular Communication Division, 50th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, May 2000, 21.

¹⁰ The story of Motown has been widely (and expertly) documented. See for instance George, Nelson. *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2004, Hirshey, Gerri. *Nowhere to Run: the Story of Soul Music*. New York: Da Capo, 1994, Posner, Gerald. *Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power*. New York: Random House, 2005. George, Nelson. *Where Did Our Love Go. The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound (Music in American Life)*. Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois, 2007. Gordy, Berry. *To Be Loved. The Music, the Magic, the Memories of Motown*. New York: Warner Books, 1995.

share of the *white* market¹¹.” More than Ertegun’s Atlantic, or the numerous independent R&B record companies, Gordy’s Motown influenced its artists, and shaped them so that they would appeal to a specific market. Although, as Simon Frith writes, there is “no way to make a musician make music, and certainly no way to force an act to make good (or commercial) music¹²”, careful grooming can always be attempted. And the attempt was successful, both artistically and commercially. What had begun as a modest black music company would eventually be sold in 1988 for \$61 million.

Gordy’s past helps to understand why and how he used such a heavy-handed approach with his artists. A genuine music fan, Gordy made his first steps into the music world with a record shop. However, he was so obsessed with jazz that he refused to stock the blues records his clientele asked for and went bankrupt. After closing his shop, Gordy went to work on the assembly line at Ford’s Lincoln-Mercury plant. He then turned successfully to music writing. He had his first hit in 1957 with “Reet Petite” recorded by Jackie Wilson. In 1959, Gordy set up Tamla Records, and in 1960 Motown Records as a sister label, followed by Motown Record Corporation. But contrarily to Ertegun, Gordy’s passion for music soon developed into an unmitigated entrepreneurial spirit as he aimed for the mass (white) market. In Nelson George’s words, Motown was “totally committed to reaching a white audience...The label seemed hell-bent on injecting itself into the mainstream.” (86) The roster would eventually include acts such as Barrett Strong, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, Mary Wells, the Supremes, Martha Reeves and the Vandellas, the Temptations, the Marvelettes, Stevie Wonder... Gordy also established his own publishing company, Jobete Publishing, and a management agency, International Talent.

Motown’s functioning, and the way artists were shaped, has often been described in terms of industrial organization. Gordy developed from his stint at Ford (and perhaps under the influence of his father, a self-made entrepreneur) both a desire to facilitate the upward mobility of Blacks and a sense of industrial organization. Accordingly, he tried to make the teens from the streets of Detroit he was recording acceptable to mainstream America, as Ertegun had done, except that he did not restrict his grooming to the voice or the music but also to their physical appearance. In 1964, Maxine Powell, who owned a finishing school, was hired to polish his artists, teach them how to walk, talk, and dress. Similarly, Maurice King, a veteran of the jazz club scene, introduced them to the subtlety of stage patter. Besides, Gordy did extend his influence to the music. Like Jerry Wexler, he aimed at presenting a music that could reach and please white, middle America by removing the too direct evocations of the funky world of blues and rhythm and blues. Hence his rejection of material that sounded too bluesy and a preference for the call-and-response pattern of gospel, to which he added the insistent rhythm of tambourines and drums, the punctuation of horns, orchestral string sections, and the slick, suave voices of his all-girls bands. The recipe was applied to all Motown’s acts, and the sound came to define black music for thousands of people throughout the world.

Gordy’s methods also had a lot to do with what he had seen in Detroit factories. The organization at Ford became a model for the structure of his company, “run on the

¹¹ Portis, Larry. *Soul Trains. A People’s History of Popular Music in the United States and Britain*. College Station, Tx: Virtualbookworm.com Publishing, 2002, 101.

¹² Gillet, Charlie, and Simon Frith, eds. *The Beat Goes On, The Rock File Reader*. London: Pluto Press, 1996, 100.

principles of mass production and salaried workers.” (Rockonomics 161) The various parts of both songs and acts were put together with the stringency and the precision of an assembly line process, from standardized song writing procedures (by teams such as Holland-Dozier-Holland), to recording, promotion, and distribution routines. “Quality control” was ensured through weekly meetings, on Fridays, when songs were scrutinized in order to make sure they left the “factory” without any blemish and with the absolute certainty of being hits. The family-like organization at Motown was reminiscent of the paternalism of Henry Ford in the early years of the century. Gordy also controlled the shows on which his artists appeared, making sure they were all the slick, glossy ones that reached white America (the Ed Sullivan Show, the Dean Martin Show, Las Vegas hotels, etc.), hiring famous comedians like Sammy Davis Jr. to write the lines they would say on stage, and Broadway stars like Carol Channing for the liner notes.

The image of Motown conveyed by most American books written on the subject is of a relentless organization, led forward by an “autocratic, ruthlessly ambitious” Gordy (Soulsville USA 48), whose main accomplishment, more than his song writing abilities, was his capacity to transform amorphous, unstructured artists into Motown products. The speech that was given at his induction in 1988 to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (in the Non-Performer category) testifies to his impact on the American musical and social scenes: “Gordy endeavored to reach across the racial divide with music that could touch all people, regardless of the color of their skin. Under his tutelage, Motown became a model of black capitalism¹³.” Indeed, contrarily to the more flamboyant and maverick British businessmen, the distinctive feature of the American record companies’ founders seems to be their ability to blend into the mainstream business landscape, turning their firms into orthodox capitalistic ventures. “Don’t worry. I just want to be like you” seemed to say Berry Gordy to white America (The Death of Rhythm & Blues 88); “I just want to do what it takes, artistically and commercially, to become a successful entrepreneur, not a revolutionary.” Few American businessmen displayed a sufficient amount of artistic flair to allow them to create, on a par with their artists, the distinctive sound of their companies. Gordy or Ertegun belonged to both worlds, the world of business and that of music, the material and the spiritual. They stand as emblematic brokers of a culture they tried to sell to middle America, go-betweens between the realm of money and that of art, moneymakers with a message, and a purpose.

The businessmen we have come across so far belong to the R&B or soul scene. With their more rock-oriented peers, it is harder to find the same combination of business savvy and artistic acumen. Some of the independent labels that dabbles with rock were set up by authentic musicians, not businessmen (Reprise by Frank Sinatra, A&M by Herb Alpert, Maverick by Madonna), most being sooner or later bought over by one of the Majors (Sony BMG, Warner, EMI, Universal). The founders of the most successful ones (David Geffen, with Asylum and Elektra, Miles Copeland, with I.R.S.) had little specific impact at the aesthetic level. These companies’ success must be attributed more to sound business practices than to any artistic influence. Many of the more recent independent American rock labels remain too obscure to play any structuring role in the music scene (Brett Gurewitz’s Epitaph, Voxx, Enigma, Dischord).

¹³ Rock and Roll Hall of Fame 1988 Induction Ceremony, accessed at <http://rockhall.com/inductees/ceremonies/1988/>

One exception could be Olympia's Sub Pop (later moving to Seattle), founded by Bruce Pavitt and which achieved fame for having launched Nirvana and the subsequent grunge scene (Soundgarden, Mudhoney, Pearl Jam)¹⁴. Though the company is today 49% owned by Warner, Pavitt has indeed been instrumental in shaping the grunge sound. One key move was the inclusion of audio-cassettes in the fanzine he published, *Subterranean Pop*, which led to radio interviews, a growing fan base, and the setting up of Sub Pop Records. Pavitt did not directly interfere with the music as Ertegun or Gordy had done (though he contributed to shaping the groups sound by choosing producers like Jack Endino), but he found new ways to expose it, as when he opened a subscription service, the Sub Pop Singles Club, through which fans could each month receive singles by local bands, or when in 1989 he had *Melody Maker* journalist Everett True fly to Seattle to cover the burgeoning scene. However, once again, such moves were hardly more than standard, efficient business practices, and it would be stretching too far to credit Pavitt for having had a truly creative impact.

To find one last breed of record labels whose founders have not only been successful businessmen but also influential music makers, one has to turn once more to black music, hip-hop this time. Two names stand out, Death Row Records and Def Jam. Death Row, founded in 1991 by the controversial Suge Knight and Dr. Dre, is considered as the breeding ground of gangsta rap, the West Coast style that developed in the early 1990s with artists like Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, or Tupac Shakur. Although Knight cannot be directly credited for artistic influence, and despite his unorthodox, threatening, sometimes downright violent business methods, he was inspired by a musical and commercial commitment similar to Berry Gordy's. He even declared that he wanted to make Death Row "the Motown of the '90s." He eventually sold 50 million units of his artists' records worldwide, generating almost \$750 million in revenue. In order to achieve such a level of success, Knight gave complete artistic freedom to his artists, while Dr. Dre was more involved with the production aspects of the business. Freedom included in this case involvement with the underworld. Knight himself ended up embroiled in several, sometimes serious, cases. Contrarily to Gordy's policy, Death Row cannot be blamed for having tried to convince its artists to "clean up" their acts. On the contrary, Knight urged them to rely on their experience as drug dealers or gang members, to the extent that violence became a key component of gangsta rap, and that the whole genre developed in part around the fascination Suge Knight generated.

The other major rap music company, Def Jam, was born out of the common effort of Russell Simmons, an African-American manager specialized in black acts (Kool DJ Kurt for instance) and a white producer, Rick Rubin (who went on to release, on his American Records, Johnny Cash's last records, and is currently co-chairman of Columbia Records). Simmons had already played an active role in shaping East-Coast rap. He had persuaded Kool DJ Kurt to change his name into Kurtis Blow, which

¹⁴ For the most reliable histories of the grunge movement, the reader can refer to Prato, Greg. *The Oral History of Seattle Grunge Music*. Toronto: E.C.W. Press, 2009; Blecha, Peter. *Sonic Boom! The History of Northwest Rock: From Louie Louie to Smells Like Teen Spirit*. San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2009; Anderson, Kyle. *Accidental Revolution: The Story of Grunge*. New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2007; Azerrad, Michael. *Come As You Are. The Story of Nirvana*. New York: Main Street Books, 1993; Cross, Charles R. *Heavier Than Heaven: A Biography of Kurt Cobain*. New York: Hyperion, 2002.

contributed to his growing fame. The company released seminal groups like Run-DMC, Public Enemy, Eric B. Rakim, The Beastie Boys. The pair came up with groundbreaking ideas, which, as with rhythm and blues before, turned rap into a mainstream sound. They are behind the association between hard rock band Aerosmith and rap duet Run-DMC for the hit “Walk This Way”, merging in the process rap with hard rock, a combination carried on further with Jay-Z and Lil’ Jon recordings. They also introduced brevity and song-structure into hip-hop, making it easier to be played on the radio. Together with Rubin, Simmons is famous for having developed rap’s pared down sound, with limited instrumentation and naked vocals, just rapping and beats. In Don Charnas’ words, “he shows [artists] how to make it better, and he gets more honest and exciting performances out of people than anyone¹⁵.” However, on top of his musical influence, Simmons definitely is a savvy businessman, and he went on to create a fashion line, Phat Farm, and a fragrance label, Atman.

Sean John Combs, also known as Puff Daddy or P. Diddy, is another extremely influential rap businessman, the second fortune in rap, just before Simmons¹⁶. Apart from having established Bad Boys Records on which he released The Notorious B.I.G., Sean Combs manages restaurants, is an MTV producer, and a clothes designer. The first hip-hop fortune belongs to Def Jam President and CEO, Jay-Z, the founder of the Roc-A-Fella empire (record, film, and clothes companies, clubs, various brands of drinks, sports teams, real estate corporations, etc.) Once again, Jay-Z is a complex figure, involved both in the business world as an extraordinarily successful entrepreneur, and in the music world as an artist, while providing through his record companies outlets for other African-American artists to perform and make a name for themselves. At a level rarely reached before, these successful though often controversial businessmen *cum* artistic brokers though infrequently involved with producing new sounds or shaping new styles, provided black youth with the possibility to make music that reached both the white and the black communities, both the specialists and the mainstream. This at least is sufficient to include them in our roster.

Gordy, Knight, Simmons, Combs, and countless others: the specific artistic and commercial impact of black businessmen in American popular music is worth exploring. If indeed we chose to examine other facets of the music business, and turned to media people or concert promoters, the most successful people we would find would have little or no specific connection with the black community, neither through their own ethnic origins nor through their involvement. Alan Freed, the would-be musician and influential radio DJ of the ’50s who coined the phrase “rock and roll”, and has been described as “the man who brought rock and roll into mainstream, [and] succeeded in changing forever the parameters of American pop, the way it sounded and the way it was sold,” (Rockonomics 87) is probably the one who had the closest involvement with the black community, inasmuch as his business

¹⁵ ‘The ‘Song Doctor’ Is In, *Washington Post*, January 15, 2006, by J. Freedom du Lac.

¹⁶ The financial dimension of rap music is particularly well documented in: Evil, Pierre. *Gangsta Rap*. Paris: Flammarion, 2005; Heller, Jerry. *Ruthless: A Memoir*. New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2006; Ro, Ronin. *Gangsta: Merchandizing the Rhymes of Violence*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996, and *Have Gun Will Travel: The Spectacular Rise and Fall of Death Row Records*, New York: Main Street Books, 1999.

practices helped break down racial barriers. In his radio programs, writes, James Miller, “He addressed his listeners as if they were all part of a make-believe kingdom of hipsters, united for their love of negro music¹⁷.” The concerts he organized from 1952 until 1958 were multiracial events as much on stage as in the pit. It is probably one of the reasons why the business and the authorities cracked down on him so harshly when the *payola* (bribery) scandal hit rock and roll while other radio or television DJs like Dick Clark (of *American Bandstand* fame) escaped unscathed. Already Freed’s 1956 show *The Big Beat* had been cancelled when black singer Frankie Lymon was seen dancing with a white girl. However, none of the most famous and influential media personalities from Dick Clark to Jann Wenner, the founder of *Rolling Stone*, were particularly close to the black community. Neither did they exert an influence on music comparable to that of the black businessmen we have mentioned.

So that the presence of African-Americans in the music business seems to be limited to managers, producers, and founders of record companies, i.e., those closer to the music makers, rather media personalities or concert promoters. The key to understanding this specificity may be given by rap music. Through *double entendre* and *signifying* practices, rappers have repeatedly signaled that the numerous allusions to hoes, pimps, and prostitution were more than allusions to hoes, pimps, and prostitution. Rappers earn a living by selling their words, in the same way as pimps sells their girls. Their clients are the record buyers and concert goers; these pay to hear to the artists, who sell themselves and their words. Such emphasis on money can be read, and is often explicitly described by rappers themselves, as the ultimate way to fit in. America is portrayed as the land where financial success and entrepreneurial acumen is the only key to integration; hence the rappers’ fascination, both in their songs and in their lives, for the world of money, the celebrated “bling-bling.” When they flaunt their wealth, rappers do not do it as a mere gesture of provocation or retaliation, but as a testimony to their capacity to be as American as apple pie. A successful rap businessman is the embodiment of mainstream America. It no longer is necessary to choose between two histories, the white man’s and the black man’s. By adopting the core values of white America, rappers emphasize that there is only one history left, the American one¹⁸.

Rap has made this more obvious than before, but the same yearning is at work in the various businessmen whose trajectory and influence on music we have traced earlier. As we have seen, these individuals’ financial ambition was primarily motivated by other purposes: the desire to allow the music of black artists a recognition, an audience, and a dignity it had never been granted before. In the process, they gave this community pride, cultural clout, and enhanced economic power. It is not surprising that it is the entrepreneurs closest to the music, the record makers, rather than the concert promoters or media personalities, who had the strongest creative and artistic impact. For we are dealing here with people who belong to the margin of mainstream society, those whose entanglement with the artists is at its closest. As Michael S. Kimmel reminds us, “cultural innovation almost always moves from the margins to the mainstream. Those marginalized by existing social arrangements have a different

¹⁷ Miller, James, *Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll, 1947-1077*, Simon & Schuster, 1999.

¹⁸ For a stimulating and erudite perspective on this issue, see Rouveyre, Julie. “*I’m low, down, and dirty*”, *la quête identitaire du Dirty South des années 80 à nos jours*. Mémoire de Master 2, Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier III, 2006.

angle of vision on the culture, and need alternative avenues for cultural expression.” (286) The marginal position of “ethnic” businessmen must have a lot to do with their involvement with the artistic dimension of their business. Let us not forget that one of America’s most famous impresarios, Colonel Tom Parker, who managed Elvis Presley, and by his business decisions, shaped his *protégé’s* career and music for better or for worse, was a foreigner of Dutch origin, whose real name was Andreas Cornelis van Kuijk, who spent his whole life in the United States as an undocumented alien.

Indeed, many successful non-African American music businessmen had in common with their black counterparts that they too belonged to the fringes: foreigners like Ehmet Ertegün, and particularly foreign Jews like Albert Grossman (Dylan’s manager), the son of Russian immigrants, Berlin-born Bill Graham, or David Geffen, of Polish and Ukranian ancestry, via Palestine. For many of these marginalized individuals, music was another venue of social (and cultural) mobility. Perhaps, as Kimmel suggests, in countries with a strong, well-defined social class system like Britain, it is the self-conscious working-class which, being the underdog, will strive for recognition through the few outlets left for them, sports or the popular arts. But in the United States, where the issue is also one of ethnic mobility, it is the members of the ethnic minorities who seem to work the hardest for social recognition (and its most visible manifestation, financial success) through the management of popular music, while “white trash” – the American equivalent of the British lower working class – seem to achieve a higher status rather as performers, from Presley to Britney. So, if not rebels, these businessmen nevertheless represent a progressive force, changing the social order, opening new vistas.

Here is the root of their artistic leaning and influence. Because the music industry allows (and enables) members of these different ethnic minorities to reach positions of power, they exert a musical influence of a nature that mainstream professionals rarely provide. These “side-stream” businessmen, with more than business in mind, bring to their trade a yearning to ensure national or worldwide recognition for their artists, a commitment to turn the downtrodden into top dogs, the unheard into the famous, the obscure into stars. More than money, it is visibility they strive for. Music is not a mere aesthetic pursuit, but a quest for identity, be it vicariously. Hence the influence they exert on musical choices, their desire to soften certain sounds to enable them to reach the mainstream, to groom their artists, or, on the contrary, at other periods, to boost the ferociousness, the unsavory appeal of their performers if such are the expectations of the crowds.

In the process, these artistic businessmen bring into mainstream taste the edge of the periphery, they allow stale sounds to recover their freshness, familiar practices to look exotic again; they are the zest, spice, and piquancy that justify the claims to authenticity and honesty bestowed on popular music, they preserve its flavor in the face of homogenization, its uniqueness as globalism intensifies. They add an urgency and a purpose that, with the help of the artists they produce and release, translate into new, different sounds.

So, yes indeed, even businessmen can call the tune and make music rock.

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