

A PACKAGE DEAL: BRANDING, TECHNOLOGY, AND ADVERTISING  
IN MUSIC OF THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores the history and influence of branding strategies on the music industry during the 20th and 21st centuries in order to give insight into the commercial ideologies that underlie music commodities and the ideologies of the musicians and companies that make them. The project is organized into four case studies that span the history of recorded music, from pre-1900 phonograph advertising to 21st-century popular music.

After an introductory chapter that frames the study and presents its main themes, Chapter II explores the early years of the recorded music industry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to uncover the birth of modern branding as a commercial strategy in the music industry. I argue that branding practices were an adaptation to the development and challenges of new technologies. With their seminal and successful Red Seal line of records, the Victor Talking Machine Company responded to the development of mass duplication processes, harnessed high-brow cultural cachet, and aggressively marketed



their products on a mass scale. Chapter III investigates the anti-commercial attitudes of communities, musicians such as Joan Baez, and—paradoxically—businesses in the urban “folk music revival” of the 1960s. Relationally-focused branding strategies were emphasized in order to counteract the perceived corruption of a commercially-focused industry.

Chapter IV brings the discussion into the 21st century by introducing and analyzing the music and career of American “indie-folk” musician and composer Sufjan Stevens, especially as mediated through the alternative music press. Stevens aligns himself with what I call the “artist brand,” which simultaneously pits him ideologically against commercialism and provides him with a powerful marketing strategy. Chapter V describes how Apple Inc.’s attention to product design and packaging in their original iPod solved a tension between digital music technology and the listening experience. Through an analysis of iPod advertisements, I argue that Apple sought to promote the iPod as an enhancer of cultural status and the listener as a star.

This dissertation introduces branding as an influential factor in music commodification and advocates for the development of more music-branding studies.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Branding is the process of turning simple commodities into meaningful cultural objects through communication of company values, product design, marketing, and advertising. Historically, the flourishing of the recorded music industry and the first experiments in brand-name strategies in the marketplace paralleled one another. In the first decade of the 20th century, the Coca-Cola Company was pioneering the corporate development and dissemination of “brand image.”<sup>1</sup> During the same time, the Victor Talking Machine Company introduced its Red Seal line of records (1902), as well as its Victrola phonograph player (1906), advertising both as status symbols of the elite and educated.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the rest of the 20th century, strategies of music commodification—and even of the commodified personalities of musicians and composers—paralleled, reacted to, and diverged from concurrent developments in the branding of other products and services.

Today, brand language is the ubiquitous international language of modern commodification.<sup>3</sup> It is certainly a lingua franca among college-age students, especially in urban environments, where the genre of music one listens to (or avoids) can be as indicative of identity and personal style as the brand of shoes one wears or the handbag

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<sup>1</sup> Marcel Danesi, *Brands*, ed. Paul Copley, Routledge Introductions to Media and Communications (New York: Routledge, 2006), 14-15.

<sup>2</sup> Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: Music, Records and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> Celia Lury, *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 18-28.

one carries. The logic of branding, as I will argue in what follows, also affects the way that musicians navigate the marketplace. Some artists embrace music's relationship to commercialism, such as hip-hop artists like Sean "Diddy" Combs, and even exploit it by connecting their musical output to clothing lines or television productions. In contrast to Diddy's brazen embrace of capitalism, some serious pop artists seem to eschew money concerns altogether, in favor of what I call the "artist brand." This commodified persona draws on traditional notions of creativity and artistry in Western culture, and presents itself as transcendent of economies and supposedly cheap marketplace advertising. American indie-folk "wunderkind" Sufjan Stevens,<sup>4</sup> whose work comprises the case study of Chapter IV, is a primary 21st-century example of a musician who relates to the musical marketplace via the artist brand.

This dissertation places the commonly held dichotomy of commercial and anti-commercial musicians under scrutiny, and comes to the conclusion that the boundaries between the two are far more fluid than sometimes thought. Though Sufjan Stevens is critical of commercialism, for instance, I argue that he too leverages the power of the brand to make his music accessible and desirable in the marketplace. He does so by offering an interpretive framework for his music. Take, for example, his "Fifty States Project," the now-abandoned quest to write a concept album for each of the fifty United States. Branding operates on multiple levels in Stevens's career (as in those of other musicians): in the crafting of his personal identity, the different aspects of his catalog,

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<sup>4</sup> Karen Schoemer, "Playing in Traffic: Indie Wunderkind Sufjan Stevens Tries His Hand at an Orchestral Suite—About the BQE," *New York Magazine* (2007).

and within a given album. Thus, even though Combs and Stevens call on very different brand types with differing brand values, they have one thing in common: both exist in the same marketplace system.

There has been a recent surge in scholarship on branding practices in business history and cultural studies, acknowledging the profound influence brands have had on global society over the last 150 years.<sup>5</sup> There have been studies of music's influence on the branding and advertising of a wide variety of consumer goods, but hardly any attention has been given to the branding of music itself.<sup>6</sup> I proceed from the assumption that music, as both a cultural and commodified entity, is also affected by processes of branding, and can benefit from a study of these processes. Perhaps surprisingly, given the broad interest in branding across many disciplines, this is the first major study that I know of to apply brand theory to the history of the recorded music industry. This discrepancy may be a result of the specialized nature of the field of music, and the fact

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance: Thomas Frank, "Brand You: Better Selling through Anthropology," *Harper's Magazine* July 1999; Naomi Klein, *No Space, No Choice, No Jobs, No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (New York: Picador USA, 2000); Lury, *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy*; Adam Arvidsson, *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Danesi, *Brands*.

<sup>6</sup> One exception in the scholarly literature is Nicholas Vaszonyi, *Richard Wagner: Self-Promotion and the Making of a Brand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Vaszonyi argues that Wagner generated a specific type of musical taste in the contemporary public, through his extensive journalism and media events, and subsequently fulfilled the desire for this taste with his own music. Other studies have indirectly addressed certain corporate entities' attention to branding via a consideration of how genres and genre rules operate throughout the production and sales process in the minds of corporate executives, musicians, and music consumers. See Simon Frith, "Genre Rules" in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 75-95; and Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1999). Personal branding (presenting oneself and one's music as a brand) has also seen some attention as a strategy for professional musicians. See W. Blake Althen, *Brand, Buzz & Success: Your Guide to the New Music Industry* (Kearney, NE: Morris Publishing, 2008).



that many who study branding are not trained musicians. The benefit of a musicological approach, then, is the ability to meet the demands of a discussion in this specialized field. Moving beyond general cultural commentary, I discuss how branding processes affect the creation and performance of the music on a detailed, interpretive level. This perspective also allows for modern processes of commodification to be placed in the context of music history, explaining, for instance, how a 21st-century popular musician draws on classical repertoires to brand his music as art.<sup>7</sup>

To support my claims, I will also occasionally refer to branding practices in the other arenas of consumer goods, such as soft drinks, apparel, food goods, and luxury brands. Several scholars, such as Marcel Danesi and Celia Lury, have already formulated historical narratives of these general practices of branding, and they provide the framework for my own approach, which brings music-specific examples into the discussion. I contend, however, that music is not just another consumer good that can be plugged into existing narratives without some acknowledgement of its difference. When talking about the development of record labels, one cannot simply swap a Red Seal record for a can of Campbell's Soup, with no consequences.<sup>8</sup> When compared to branding strategies in other industries, commercial music strategies sometimes conform, sometimes diverge, and sometimes lead the way. Accounting for and documenting these comparisons will be one of the aims of the narrative.

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<sup>7</sup> See the case study on Sufjan Stevens (Chapter IV).

<sup>8</sup> As Timothy Taylor has pointed out, music is never a commodity in a simple way. Timothy Dean Taylor, "The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of 'Mechanical Music'," *Ethnomusicology* 51, no. 2 (2007): 302.

At its heart, this dissertation investigates the interplay between technology and branding in the music industry of the 20th and 21st centuries, and interprets what this multilayered relationship can tell us about the connection between music and culture in a capitalist economy. As such, this project shares much with recent studies of music commodification.<sup>9</sup> Studies on the commodification of music have, however, so far tended to hold advertisements as the privileged texts.<sup>10</sup> While this approach is valuable (analysis of advertisements will factor into my own study), more attention needs to be paid to the ideologies that underlie individual advertisements, ideologies that might also be expressed in a number of other ways. I contend that this can be accomplished by considering approaches to branding more broadly. By emphasizing the more encompassing concept of branding—of which, as I will explain below, advertising is one component—I hope to draw more attention to the commercial ideologies that underpin advertising, marketing strategies, and even entire product categories in the music industry.

The present study reaches beyond previous music commodification studies in another way, exploring not only how music is marketed, but also created. This approach may be unsettling to some who wish to deny or ignore the proximity of commerce and

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<sup>9</sup> Examples of scholarship in this area include: Will Straw, “Music as Commodity and Material Culture,” *repercussions* 7 & 8 (1999-2000); Taylor, “The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of ‘Mechanical Music’”; Timothy Dean Taylor, “Advertising and the Conquest of Culture,” *Social Semiotics* 19, no. 4 (2009).

<sup>10</sup> This is largely the case in and Timothy Dean Taylor, “The Changing Shape of the Culture Industry; or, How Did Electronica Music Get into Television Commercials?” *Television & New Media* 8, no. 235 (2007); David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009). Timothy Taylor and Mark Katz also have a forthcoming book on the history of advertising in music.

art. In fact, in the course of this study it became apparent that some musicians and companies in the arts will go to great lengths in order to deny, cover over, or deflect their commercial dealings. And while a deep-seated skepticism towards commercialism has long been prevalent in artistic and academic circles, I will approach the issue from a rather different perspective. In what follows, I categorically reject the presumption that commercialism necessarily has a negative effect on music. To be clear, I mean my subjects of study no harm. In fact, I have great admiration and affection for the music of Sufjan Stevens and Joan Baez. Yet rather than uphold an invidious separation between artistic and commercial music, I feel that there is much to be gained from acknowledging the commercial backdrop behind all activity in the music industry, from Elvis to Joan Baez, Britney Spears to Sufjan Stevens.

Musicologist Jon Stratton helpfully points out that popular music, because it was created within a capitalist system, cannot be separated ontologically from a capitalist context, even though critics often attempt to do so.<sup>11</sup> This observation can and should be extended to the realm of classical music in its recorded form as well, since it is but a different branch of the same capitalist tree. In fact, as Chapter II will demonstrate, classical music was the first segment of the music industry in which marketplace and mass advertising took a firm hold. Thus I view all of the musicians in the present study not as commercial or non-commercial (notwithstanding an artist's claims to this categorical division), but as each occupying a particular place in the commercial field. "Non-commercial" is a category that is reserved for music that is made outside of the

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<sup>11</sup> Jon Stratton, "Capitalism and Romantic Ideology in the Record Business," *Popular Music* 3 (1983): 144.

realm of the marketplace, and which will not be the subject of this dissertation. This perspective allows me to consider, as I do in chapters III and IV, how companies' and musicians' claims to anti-commercialism can be an important part of their brand images and marketing plans.

The examination of layers of musical mediation is at the forefront of the methodology of this dissertation, but not as a way to peel them away to reveal the true musical text or work. Instead, my approach takes mediation as seriously as “the music itself” that scholars and critics have long assumed to be the real object of scrutiny. Neither do I want to throw “the music” out, but rather, I want to show how music reaches people and how the world of discourse that surrounds it matters. On this score, I take seriously Nicholas Cook's argument that music is always multimedia in nature, and never can be confined to the music alone.<sup>12</sup>

There are several other themes that recur throughout the dissertation. The first is the lasting effect that 19th-century Romantic ideals about music, art, and genius have had on the music industry. From the “high-class” status of classical music in the early recording industry (Chapter II), to the claims of authenticity in the “folk music revival” of the 1960s (Chapter III) and the later singer-songwriter category (Chapter IV), to the ability for music to transform our everyday lives into transcendent alternate realities (Chapter V), certain aspects of Romanticism or Romantic ideology continue to inform 20th and 21st century musical activities.

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<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

A second theme, found especially in chapters II and V, is that technology and commodification do not always march in lockstep with one another. Rather, both fall into the realm of human intention. Just as a new technology must be developed and fine tuned, so must that technology's practical application for the general public be revised, sometimes repeatedly. It may be difficult to imagine, for instance, that Thomas Edison's original product concept for his recording device could have been anything other than the music player we know it to be today. But in fact, the original long-term product plan for his invention was as an aid to office dictation.<sup>13</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, it can be tempting to accept the false notion that when a new technology is invented, its particular usefulness for consumers automatically emerges as well. But this is rarely the case. Even when a technology and its practical application are identified almost simultaneously during the creation process, the relationship between these two tracks is not deterministic. In other words, technology does not determine what use it will be for consumers, humans do. In reality, new technologies often go through several stages of product development before the right combination of function, packaging, and target market is found, as I will show was the case in the early years of Edison's invention of the talking machine, as well as at the beginning of the digital music (MP3) revolution (see Chapters II and V).

When the technology and commodification tracks do align successfully, the result can define a product category. Victor's Red Seal line represents the archetypical example as the first branding success story of the recorded music industry. The company's cultural branding strategies and mass advertising set the foundation for the recording industry as

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<sup>13</sup> See Chapter II.

we know it. Almost exactly a century later, a similar success story emerged when Apple's iPod portable music player became the colossal success story of the new digital music landscape (see Chapter V). Though different in situational details, Apple had to solve the same basic problem as Victor: how to take a pre-existing technology and package it in such a way that would resonate with consumers. Both solutions defined their respective product categories.

A third theme is that even though music journalism stands outside the world of advertising, it is a vital part of the branding and marketing process for music. In each chapter I consider some form of journalism as key evidence. In Chapter II, I take a close look at the articles and advertisements in the early trade magazine, *The Phonoscope*, to demonstrate pre-Red Seal marketing strategies. In Chapter III, the New York folk protest music magazine *Broadside* bears witness to the ideology of anti-commercialism in the folk music revival community of the 1960s. No single publication is focused on in Chapter IV, but instead patterns are sought in articles on and interviews with Sufjan Stevens in a variety of publications in the alternative music press. In Chapter V, I note that the excitement surrounding the success of the iPod gave rise to a flurry of books on the device, including how-to guides, odes to the device, and philosophical musings about its significance. "Brand textuality," a phrase I use to refer to the words written about music and musicians in the music industry, plays a major role in the consumption process. Though journalism is typically considered a non-commercial space—that is, separate from advertisement both visually and ideologically—the boundaries between the two areas are in reality quite fluid. What I find is that the relationship between a

company's message (branding) and journalism is a two-way street. Branding shapes journalism by directing the flow of information and emphasizing certain company attributes. Journalism is an important instrument of communication between a company and its public.

## **Branding Basics**

In modern consumer society, a brand refers to a type of product from a particular company under a particular name.<sup>14</sup> The main function of a brand in this sense is to indicate the commercial origin of a product, and enable the consumer to distinguish it from similar products in the marketplace. The modern brand not only encompasses a product's distinguishing mark, but also its name, as well as a representation of the company that produced it and that company's public identity, as deployed chiefly through advertising. As sociologist Celia Lury has argued, the brand system comprises the framework for an interface between consumer and producer.<sup>15</sup>

Branding practices have varied over time, and any consideration of their impact on music must take this mutability into account. It would be a mistake, for instance, to anachronistically apply today's branding practices to the early recording industry, or to apply those of the 1960s to the digital age. To avoid these pitfalls, in what follows I will historicize musical branding practices and branding practices more broadly, moving back

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<sup>14</sup> In its more general, and enduring, sense, a brand refers to a distinguishing mark of ownership. The practice of branding of cattle by searing a mark on an animal's flesh goes back to ancient times. Danesi, *Brands*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Lury, *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy*, 48-52. Emphasis in original.

and forth between the two worlds as necessary. The juxtaposition of the two histories is a natural one, since branding as a modern commercial strategy emerged at roughly the same time as the recording industry first became commercially viable.

Furthermore, branding practices vary widely from company to company even within a limited time period. There is no centralized or regulated code of branding practices, and the diversity of branding approaches is limited only by the imagination of a company's strategists. Innovation is prized, and can hold great risk and potentially great reward for businesses. Thus whereas I will talk of branding in terms of trends or conventions, it should always be remembered that divergent practices are ever present in real-world applications of these strategies.

Another definition of branding, a cultural one, will also factor in to this survey. In this sense, a brand can be considered a mental construct that organizes relationships between producers and consumers. Or in the estimation of Lury, "the brand is *the organization of a set of multi-dimensional relationships between products or services....* The brand is thus a mechanism—or medium—for the co-construction of supply and demand."<sup>16</sup> The development of pervasive brand presence in this sense is a more recent development in branding history, emerging more or less in the last third of the 20th century.<sup>17</sup> The implications of this cultural development will be more fully considered in Chapter III, where a connection will be identified between the marketing strategies of Joan Baez and other members of commercial folk music. Though not to the same extent,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>17</sup> This is one reason I have chosen a case study of commercial folk music (Chapter III), because it corresponds with the beginning of this shift.



earlier brand practices also associated products with cultural mythologies. In this regard, we will see that the music recording industry in some ways pioneered such types of cultural branding, through their emphasis on fostering trusted relationships between producer and consumer. This can be seen most conspicuously in the case study in Chapter II on The Victor Talking Machine Company, whose Red Seal series became one of the first commodities to be marketed on a mass scale as an artifact of high culture. Furthermore, as I will argue, this cultural strategy predates even the Red Seal series, and can be found in advertisements and industry journalism in the last years of the 19th century, such as in the audio-visual technology magazine, *The Phonoscope*.

The connections between branding practices and broader cultural currents, and especially those connected with the world of art, have been accounted for in recent scholarship by using a semiotic approach, as can be seen in Marcel Danesi's introduction to the topic. Brands are inherently referential, and semiotics can account for the power of brand signification. As Danesi summarizes: "brands are signs that stand for *ideas* that have great emotional appeal."<sup>18</sup> Brands tap into cultural mythologies, Danesi argues, in order to "build a bridge between the product, media, and cultural performances."<sup>19</sup> As we will see, this was the case in the early phonograph industry, as its major players sought to make their products an integral part of a high-brow musical experience.

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<sup>18</sup> Danesi, *Brands*, 137.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

## *Branding Resources*

Over the past two decades, marketers and advertisers have made branding a main focus of their attention, and there has been an avalanche of written discussions of brands and branding. The publishing industry has seen an influx of books on the subject, showing businesses how to harness brand strategies.<sup>20</sup> The increasing focus on branding has more recently gained the attention of scholars. These have included general introductions to the subject,<sup>21</sup> approaches from the fields of business and marketing research,<sup>22</sup> as well as sociological accounts of the effects of brands on culture and society.<sup>23</sup> There is also a growing trend that frames business histories in terms of the history of a brand.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See, for instance: Kevin Roberts, *Lovemarks: The Future Beyond Brands* (New York: PowerHouse Books, 2004); Douglas Atkin, *The Culting of Brands: When Customers Become True Believers* (New York: Portfolio, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Danesi, *Brands*; Rita Clifton, Sameena Ahmat et al., ed. *Brands and Branding* (New York: Bloomberg Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Albert M. Muniz Jr., and Thomas C. O'Guinn, "Brand Community," *Journal of Consumer Research* 27, no. 4 (2001); Stephen Brown, John F. Sherry Jr., and Robert V. Kozinets, "Teaching Old Brands New Tricks: Retro Branding and the Revival of Brand Meaning," *Journal of Marketing* 67, no. 3 (2003); J. Josko Brakus, Bernd H. Schmitt, and Lia Zarantonello, "Brand Experience: What Is It? How Is It Measured? Does It Affect Loyalty?" *Journal of Marketing* (73, 2009): 52-68.

<sup>23</sup> These include: Arvidsson, *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture*; Danesi, *Brands*; Lury, *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy*; Jonathan E. and Miriam Salzer-Möring Schroeder, ed. *Brand Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Klein, *No Space, No Choice, No Jobs, No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*.

<sup>24</sup> Nancy F. Koehn, "Henry Heinz and Brand Creation in the Late Nineteenth Century: Making Markets for Processed Food," *Business History Review* 73, no. Autumn (1999); Davis Dyer, Frederick Dalzell and Rowena Olegario, *Rising Tide: Lessons from 165 Years of Brand Building at Procter & Gamble* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004).

### *Brand Consciousness*

Brand consciousness may be considered from at least two viewpoints: producer consciousness in the intentional branding of products, and consumer consciousness of the brands around them. Producers have applied branding strategies to varying degrees. Some companies, such as Coca Cola, have made the development of brand image a priority for over one hundred years.<sup>25</sup> Other, newer companies, such as Nike (a sports lifestyle company) or Apple (a computer and consumer electronics company), have also made the development of a strong brand image a signature aspect of their business strategy.<sup>26</sup>

The level of company consciousness with regard to branding has also varied from company to company, and over time. In the case of phonograph companies, for instance, in the early recording industry, it is difficult to know the level of producer consciousness of brand strategies. But a lack of direct testimony about these issues will not preclude an analysis of a brand's significance. In these cases an analysis can be accomplished through examining the public aspects of the brand, such as products, packaging, logos, advertisements, press releases, and articles.

A second important consideration in our history is consumer brand consciousness. How aware are consumers of brands and branding strategies? The answer to this question is never a simple one, and will vary depending on the time period and consumer demographic. The 1960s were a watershed in consumer awareness of marketing

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<sup>25</sup> Danesi, *Brands*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> These two brands, as well as Coca Cola, are frequently cited as case studies in literature on branding strategies and development.

practices, and resulted in a significant trend toward skepticism of advertising. In response, advertisers have not only recognized consumer skepticism, but have successfully turned it to their advantage in selling products.<sup>27</sup> Since the 1960s, as brands have become more and more pervasive in cultural life, consumers have also become increasingly aware of the practices of advertisers. This awareness is fueled, albeit in a limited way, by anti-advertising organizations such as Adbusters, who seek to lay bare what they consider to be criminal practices of the business and advertising worlds.<sup>28</sup>

### *Branding, Marketing, Advertising*

In order to understand how music media are presented to consumers, we will need to understand branding, marketing, and advertising as related, but distinct, processes. Branding is the process of defining certain characteristics, impressions, or values as core to a company, product line, or individual product. Marketing can be described as the specific and comprehensive plan of communication from a company to its constituents, including both consumers and shareholders. Advertisements, press releases, media events, new stories, and product placements are all avenues of marketing that allow a company to communicate its core brand values and attributes to the consumer. Advertising is the process by which a company creates and publishes discrete documents (advertisements) with the intent of persuading a target market to patronize a company's products and services.

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 63, 226, 34-35.

<sup>28</sup> See "Adbusters," <http://www.adbusters.org/about/adbusters>.

To get a better idea of the differences among these processes, consider Apple Computer's famous "Think Different" campaign, which that company launched in 1997. Apple created and published a set of print *advertisements* that featured iconic cultural heroes, including Miles Davis, Maria Callas, Albert Einstein, Richard Feynman, Ghandi, and Thomas Edison, among others. The advertisements featured full-frame, black-and-white photos of these recognizable faces, with the Apple logo and the slogan "Think Different" in one corner. These printed advertisements were one facet of a larger *marketing* plan of the campaign, which also included television advertisements, brochures, posters, and other components. The advertisements and marketing plan were organized around communicating the *brand* message that Apple is the creative rebel—genius even—of the personal computer industry, and were intended to impress this notion on the minds of consumers. Put yet another way, the brand is the idea of the company's values communicated through published media (advertising) strategically released in time and space by a company's plan (marketing) to persuade patrons to purchase their products or services. The processes of branding, marketing, and advertising are interrelated, and each will factor into the case studies that follow.

### **Outline of Chapters**

*A Package Deal* is divided into six chapters. Following this introductory one, its four case-study chapters progress more or less chronologically, and make up the body of the dissertation. Chapter II is set in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, during the early years of both the recorded music industry and of modern branding as a commercial

strategy. I first give a brief account of the strategy's historical beginnings. From there, I tell the story of the development of technology in the early recording industry, and how that technology was packaged and sold to consumers. Victor's seminal Red Seal line is the fulcrum of the chapter, but I begin in the years leading up to its introduction, showing how Victor's success resulted from a combination of their development of mass duplication processes, the harnessing of high-brow branding, and their willingness to aggressively market their products on a mass scale. The idea of the Red Seal line came to define Victor's company values—that is, its brand—in the first two decades of the 20th century.

Chapter III investigates the anti-commercial attitudes of communities, and even businesses, in the folk music revival of the 1960s. The main argument is that the anti-commercial emphasis of the folk revival became embedded in the music industry as a prominent marketing strategy for creative artists. This strategy favored making record label brands an invisible presence in the marketplace, allowing for patronage of musicians while developing the illusion of artistic autonomy (that is, it gave the impression that certain musicians were capable of shedding commercial concerns and focusing on artistry). Chapter IV brings the discussion into the 21st century by introducing and analyzing the music and career of indie-folk musician and composer Sufjan Stevens. I examine Stevens's commodified persona, as it is purveyed by the music industry press. Stevens draws on what I call the “artist brand” to shape his image. It is a position that pits him ideologically against commercialism, but simultaneously provides him with a powerful marketing strategy for his music. He draws primarily on two

dominant cultural discourses to effect this strategy: 1) the romantic genius as “authentic,” and 2) the American rebel against the culture industry.<sup>29</sup>

Chapter V looks at branding from the perspective of the listener. The rise of the MP3 as a listening technology, and the resulting disappearance of the disc, has emphasized the material appearance of music commodities in new ways. When it was introduced, the MP3 showed much promise as a technology. It was an excellent product, and in many ways better technology than compact discs—an MP3 is a non-rivalrous resource, unprecedentedly accessible, and often free (to users of peer-to-peer [P2P] networks or smaller scale file sharing).<sup>30</sup> But it faced a major consumer satisfaction problem in its early years because it was inherently packageless. Unlike the compact disc, cassette tape, long-playing record, or phonograph, the makers of the medium did not also design the way it would look to consumers. In the days of Napster and other P2P networks, this led to a default “packaging” of these recordings that was inconvenient and messy. Music files were housed on computers, and were often mislabeled, incomplete, or unreliable. The central argument of the chapter is that the iPod closed this gap between product quality and packaging quality. The iPod was a success in part because it considered packaging. The designers at Apple realized that the MP3 needed a proper

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<sup>29</sup> This discourse is traced back to the writing of Max and Theodor W. Adorno Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment and Mass Deception,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1993 [1944]), 120-67. Its later incarnations are subsequently discussed.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*, Revised ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010 [2004]), 163-75.

package to be more broadly successful, and they created one.<sup>31</sup> Their efforts were so successful that the iPod became the paramount symbol of contemporary youth culture in the first decade of the 21st century.<sup>32</sup> By tracing these developments in the music listening landscape, we can also get a glimpse into how the debate surrounding “the music itself,” or “music alone,” maps onto a digital listening economy. As the visual traces of the mechanized recorded object disappeared, the importance of the reamplification device increased, giving rise to a new hegemonic musical object—the iPod.

Chapter VI provides summary conclusions and recommends further avenues of research.

### **Review of Relevant Literature: Branding, Music Technology and Advertising**

The following literature review includes discussion of scholarship that my project will acknowledge, build upon, or critique. It looks at several key works with an eye toward the theories, approaches, and information germane to the present project.

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<sup>31</sup> The iPod package included not just its industrial design, but also its software as a key part of the overall experience. When accounting for the success of the iPod, Apple CEO Steve Jobs has boiled it down to the following: “It’s software wrapped in a beautiful package.” From an interview with Walt Mossberg in 2007 at “D5: All Things Digital, The Wall Street Journal Executive Conference.” Video available at: <http://video.allthingsd.com/d5/?bctid=1111441639>.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Bull has called it the first consumer cultural icon of the 21st century: Michael Bull, *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience*, International Library of Sociology. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1, and throughout the monograph.



## *Technology and Music*

Mark Katz's book on the history of recording technology, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*, has been influential in guiding discussions of the subject of technology and music. He argues that, contrary to the common presupposition, recorded sound is mediated sound, not a pure reflection of the "real thing." Katz traces what he calls "phonograph effects" throughout the history of recording, that is, tangible ways that the practicalities of recording technology have affected the creation of music. When, in 1925, Igor Stravinsky tailored the movements of his *Serenade for Piano* to accommodate the 3-minute limit of a 78-rpm record side, it was an example of a phonograph effect.<sup>33</sup>

Katz also broke scholarly ground by laying a foundation for accounting for digital music technologies. In "Music in 1s and 0s: The Art and Politics of Digital Sampling,"<sup>34</sup> Katz argues that the practice of digital sampling encompasses not mere quotation, but transformation of music. To support this argument, he interprets the emotional and political transformations of samples in gospel and rap music. Ultimately, the phonograph effect of digital music reaches the heart of composition itself: "When composers sample existing works, they begin with expressions, transform them into ideas, and then again into new expressions."<sup>35</sup> This turned-over, re-formed, and redeployed nature of sampling technique points to its ability to create a dense polyphony of sounds and meanings.

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<sup>33</sup> Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*, 3. A revised version of Katz's book was published in 2010.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-57.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

In the final chapter, “Listening in Cyberspace,” Katz turns his gaze to the listener.<sup>36</sup> This chapter is especially beneficial to the present study for its foundational explication of the history of the key players—he calls them “partners in crime”<sup>37</sup>—in the digital listening landscape: P2P networks (especially Napster), and MP3 technology’s creation and unforeseen rise to broad use. Katz also explains the mechanics of listening to an MP3, compares the MP3 to the CD, and explicates the legal debate surrounding MP3 and P2P technologies. Katz concludes that although the major record companies see these technologies as a threat to sales of physical CDs, the two consuming practices are not mutually exclusive:

It is sometimes said that we are moving into a post-CD world—that we will be able to receive and hear digital music files anywhere and everywhere we might go, without the need for little plastic discs. I believe, however, that listeners will continue to buy CDs or whatever physical recording medium comes to replace them. *To put it bluntly, people like things.*<sup>38</sup>

With this last line, Katz hints at one of the central premises of the present study. In Chapter V I will argue that once the iPod was able to fulfill people’s need for things, the recording medium of the CD was fated to become relegated to the status of collector’s item, rather than a prime means of musical consumption.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 158-87.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 186. Emphasis added.

<sup>39</sup> Katz does not mention the iPod at all in the first edition of his book, and mentions it only briefly in the revised version, though he acknowledges its ubiquity in the current-day experience of music listening.

### *Branding, Music, and Advertising*

On the history and theory of branding, Marcel Danesi's *Brands* is an indispensable introduction.<sup>40</sup> As mentioned above, he approaches brands via semiotic theory, thus helpfully explaining why brands are so powerful and so readily applicable to the arts (brands operate under "poetic logic"<sup>41</sup>). In addition to Danesi's text, I will draw from a handful of others that look at branding from a cultural perspective.<sup>42</sup> The application of advertising theory to music is an approach that has seen too little attention in musicological scholarship.<sup>43</sup> There are, however, two examples that I would like to mention here, and which I will follow in this project.

Robert Fink's *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* studies minimalism not as a formalist practice, cordoned off from culture, but as a player in reflecting the culture of a mass consumer society.<sup>44</sup> The formalist approach has overwhelmingly predominated interpretation of minimalist music, and thus Fink's history is revisionist. With each case study, he challenges boundaries by bringing in topics that normally would remain outside of the discourse, such as disco, the Suzuki method, and—most pertinent to the present study—advertising theory. In his second case

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<sup>40</sup> Danesi, *Brands*.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>42</sup> These include: Lury, *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy*; Arvidsson, *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture*; Schroeder, ed. *Brand Culture*; Klein, *No Space, No Choice, No Jobs, No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*.

<sup>43</sup> A forthcoming book on music and advertising from Mark Katz and Timothy D. Taylor will be a welcome step toward correcting this deficiency.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Wallace Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

study, Fink compares the repetitive structures of advertising to those of the music of Steve Reich, Terry Riley, and Philip Glass. This move was not without some risk, as Fink acknowledges, due to the disdain and skepticism that musicologists have traditionally had toward advertising theory, the engine that drives a consumer society.<sup>45</sup> In a break with this prevailing stance, Fink reconsiders how the advertising theories of the 1950s and 1960s can illuminate our understanding of desire production through repetition, and how minimalist music reflected that societal reality, while also critiquing it.

Timothy Taylor, in his article “The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of ‘Mechanical Music’,”<sup>46</sup> also utilizes advertising in his research, though in a different way than Fink. Instead of relating musical structures to advertising structures, he analyzes advertisements for player pianos over the course of their early history. Taken together, the advertisements tell the various narratives surrounding the commodification of this new technology, both at its inception and as the product matured.<sup>47</sup> I will draw from Taylor’s work in this article in two main ways. First, I will do my own analysis of iPod advertising in chapter V, to illuminate the narratives that were created to support that product. Second, I will heed his warning that “[m]usic is never simply a commodity or, rather, it is never a commodity in a simple way.”<sup>48</sup> Taylor argues instead that the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 62-67.

<sup>46</sup> Taylor, “The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of ‘Mechanical Music’.”

<sup>47</sup> Taylor identifies two general stages in the commodification process of a new listening technology. The first is the education phase, in which ads tell the consumer how to use the product. Once this message is accomplished, the advertising for the product matures into a fetishistic phase. Fetishism, in the Marxist sense, describes “the attribution of powers to commodities that they do not actually possess in the absence of the human faces of social labor that made those commodities.” Ibid., 297. See also 297-301.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 302.

process of music commodification changes every time a new listening technology is introduced, and that each process must be historically situated.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, throughout this project I will be seeking out historically specific ways to describe, account for, and interpret the commodification processes of music technology and branding.

Brand strategies have exerted a significant influence on musicians, music recordings, compositions, and modern listeners. But the extent of this influence and the processes by which it developed are regrettably not adequately understood. Through this dissertation, I seek to provide a schematic understanding of branding's influence on music, in order to provide a foundation for further scholarship on the topic. I also provide detailed case studies that investigate some of the pressing questions raised by the acknowledgement of branding as a key process in the commodification of music.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 301-02.

## CHAPTER II

### EDISON, BETTINI, AND VICTOR: BRANDING AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE EARLY RECORDING INDUSTRY

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I contend that the Victor Talking Machine Company produced the first branding success story in the music industry: their Red Seal line of records. Victor led the way not only in the mass marketing of music commodities, but was a pioneer in cultural branding when compared to other industries as well. Cultural branding refers to the expansion of branding discourse beyond the traditional boundaries of commerce, to the point that, as Marcel Danesi has put it, “the messages of brand advertising and those of other cultural sectors are no longer perceived as different.”<sup>1</sup> The marketing of music recordings brought together many cultural narratives of artistry and authenticity that became vital to branding throughout the rest of the 20th century. We will see that the branding of music was the site of pioneering strategies in the worlds of technology, celebrity endorsement, high-brow commodities, and lifestyle. In its early years, the record company was promoted as the trusted purveyor of technical, as well as artistic quality. The lesson learned by the Victor Talking Machine Company was that it paid to promote musical celebrity over the recording company itself. They accomplished this transformation as a part of their Red Seal strategy, which featured their highest-quality opera and classical artists. Although high-brow cultural branding did not begin with

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<sup>1</sup> Danesi, *Brands*, 91.

Victor, the label introduced an important twist to the industry's marketing of classical music that boosted Victor's market share and prominence.

In the first part of this chapter, I examine the advertising and content of the early trade magazine, *The Phonoscope*. What I will show is that the very strategies that defined Victor's later successful advertising campaigns for Red Seal, such as class distinction and the "genuine article," can be found in the pages of *The Phonoscope*, half a decade before the Victor company was incorporated. If these marketing strategies were already prominent, how was Victor able to become the towering leader of the early 20th century recording industry? One of the key differences lay in the size of the market that was reachable before and after the turn of the century. Technology required for the process of mass duplication of recordings had not been perfected in the 1890s, leading to severe limitations on the size of the market for pre-recorded discs and cylinders. When Eldridge Johnson, founder of the Victor company, solved the mass duplication problem, however, he did not just release more records; he combined the new duplication capabilities with advertising campaigns based on high-class marketing. This combination precipitated a seminal shift in the recording industry, from a "collectibles paradigm" to a "mass marketed one," bringing consumers one of the world's first mass produced luxury products.

### **Modern Branding, A Brief History of Beginnings**

In the second half of the 19th century, consumer goods such as food, toiletries, and household cleaning products were increasingly factory-made, as opposed to being

provided by local producers. This transformed the everyday shopping experience of many Americans, who were now increasingly buying packaged goods at their local grocery and hardware stores, rather than out of barrels or in jars, as had been traditional.<sup>2</sup>

Shopkeepers, who monitored the quality of their goods, often obtaining them from local sources, had been the source of trust for consumers. This system was disrupted when the food was made at a distant factory and distributed across a region. As an example of the ways companies handled these new trends, it will be helpful to consider the case of Ivory Soap.

Historians of advertising consider Ivory Soap, made by Procter & Gamble, to be one of the first examples of a modern brand.<sup>3</sup> Originally simply called Procter & Gamble's White Soap, Harley Procter claimed to have come up with the name "Ivory" while reading from Psalm 48 in church. The company trademarked the name in 1879.<sup>4</sup> To promote this new and distinctive soap—unlike other soaps, it could float—the company invested heavily in magazine advertising, a forum that was just beginning to flourish. The new outlet provided a way for companies like Procter & Gamble to communicate directly with consumers, rather than through middlemen such as jobbers or grocers. In February of 1883, the company ran its first ad for Ivory Soap that reached a wide readership, touting the product's distinct qualities. In what would later become the core slogans of the brand, the ad proclaimed that Ivory Soap was "99 and 44/100 per cent. pure," and

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<sup>2</sup> Klein, *No Space, No Choice, No Jobs, No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Danesi, *Brands*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Dyer, *Rising Tide: Lessons from 165 Years of Brand Building at Procter & Gamble*, 26.



that, unlike any other soap on the market, “the Ivory Soap will ‘float’.”<sup>5</sup> Over the next two decades, Procter & Gamble pioneered strategies for the emerging mass market, with the promotion of Ivory Soap consistently accounting for many times more expense than any of their other products. The result, according to historians of the company, was the development of what would later be called a “brand identity” for Ivory Soap, and the formation of a relationship between brand and consumer.

The touchstones of this brand became purity (99 44/100% Pure), value, and domesticity. Images of mothers, children, families, and home imbued Ivory with an aura of familiarity and trustworthiness. The brand acquired the force of an article of faith between Procter & Gamble and its consumers.<sup>6</sup>

While Procter & Gamble were pioneers in name brand strategies, they were certainly not the only company building brands. Many brands still recognizable today such as Colgate, Royal Baking Powder, Quaker Oats, Wrigley, Coca-Cola, and Aunt Jemima’s were launched in the last two decades of the 19th century.<sup>7</sup> Companies that produced these factory-made goods found that naming their products creatively had many benefits. In many cases, like Ivory, the product-naming system was in part a way to establish consumers’ trust in unknown and unfamiliar companies. Giving a name and an image to a product or company has the effect of creating an ersatz identity for that product, product line, or company, and allows the consumer to engage with it

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 29. A similar version of this ad had been included in December of 1882, in *The Independent*, a religious weekly with a more limited readership.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>7</sup> This list is compiled from Danesi, *Brands*, 14; and Klein, *No Space, No Choice, No Jobs, No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, 6.

relationally. Some companies, such as Quaker Oats and Aunt Jemima, adopted human figures for their product names and logos. The logos for these products were intended to be comforting to consumers, supplying a face for a previously anonymous company, and replacing the traditional quality control relationship with the local shopkeeper as the source for consumer goods.<sup>8</sup> Companies quickly learned that naming their products creatively, and establishing a connection with the consumer through advertising, could generate increases sales and customer loyalty. By 1900 using brand-name strategies in the mass marketplace was becoming a common practice in the United States, even if the process was still experimental and mass markets were largely uncharted territory.

### **Finding a Market for the Talking Machine**

At the same time that Procter & Gamble and its competitors were changing the average consumer's grocery experience, there was a technological revolution changing many other aspects of daily life. The 1880s, which technology historian Vaclav Smil has called "the most inventive decade in history," saw an astounding number of developments, including:

reliable electric lights, electricity-generating plants, electric motors and trains, transformers, steam turbines, gramophone, popular photography, practical gasoline-fueled internal combustion engines, motorcycles, cars, aluminum production, crude oil tankers, air-filled rubber tires, steel-skeleton skyscrapers, and pre-stressed concrete.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>9</sup> Vaclav Smil, *Creating the Twentieth Century: Technical Innovations of 1867-1914 and Their Lasting Impact* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), dust jacket.

Lists like these can give a false impression that a technology and its practical application go hand in hand. The eventual destiny of all of these technologies, however, was not always clear, and inventors sometimes had to go through several product conceptions for a new technology before finding one that proved durable. Such was the case with Thomas Edison's invention of sound recording in 1877.

The first two decades after Edison's invention of the phonograph were filled with experimentation, change, and discovery as the new technology was developed and improved. Edison was as much a businessman as he was an inventor, and once the technology had been developed, he was faced with the problem of finding a commercial use for it. Although in hindsight it may be difficult to think of the phonograph as anything but a music-playing device, this was by no means a foregone conclusion in the early years of its development. Edison's phonograph, and other versions of talking machines developed by other inventors, went through three stages of product category conception.<sup>10</sup> The first was to simply exhibit the device as a curiosity and technological miracle, charging people for admission to experience it in action. This was acknowledged to be a short-term approach from the start, and Edison and his competitors set out to find a permanent commercial solution for the technology.

Edison's first attempt at a long-term solution was to market the device as an office dictation device and aid to stenography. Early phonographs could record as well as play back, and Edison's vision put this dual functionality at the forefront of his business plan.

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the different product conceptions for the phonograph in the early recording industry, see Timothy J. Dowd, "Culture and Commodification: Technology and Structural Power in the Early U.S. Recording Industry," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 22, no. (1-3) (2002): 106-40.

The idea was as follows: a businessman could record memos into the machine, and the recording would be later transcribed by a stenographer. Though Edison and his competitors aggressively pursued this idea in the early 1880s, they abandoned it before long due to impracticalities of the technology. The recordings were too low in quality, and when tested, stenographers could not understand the recordings well enough to transcribe them.<sup>11</sup> The third application of this technology, the sale of pre-recorded cylinders or discs, proved to be more promising in the end, and is the one we know as the main product category of the technology of recorded sound to this day. It was thus that the recorded music industry emerged, not when Edison invented the phonograph, but only later as commercial applications of this technology crystallized and a suitable market was found for it.

### **Marketing the Talking Machine in the Content and Advertising of *The Phonoscope*, 1896-1900**

By the second half of the 1890s, talking machines were actively being marketed according to the “music player” product category. We can get an idea of the advertising and marketing practices in the business of selling talking machines by considering the content and advertising in the magazine, *The Phonoscope*. *The Phonoscope* was a monthly magazine that covered all manner of visual and aural technologies, running from 1896 to 1900. It was a mix of journalism on technology, the arts, and human interest stories, and as such was a pioneer in the consumer technology magazine industry. The

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 120-22.

readership consisted of industry dealers and concerns, as well as the especially interested layman, of the type who would be called an “early adopter” today. Advertisements in *The Phonoscope* during the last five years of the 19th century give a good idea of the main strategies behind selling talking machines and records in this early stage of the recorded music industry. Advertising was oriented around the sale of talking machines as much as records, and the main question that advertising sought to answer for was the competency of the inventor behind the technology. Thus establishing—or merely asserting—the innovative genius behind a company’s main inventor was a foremost marketing strategy. And even though the magazine was unconnected to any particular company that advertised in its pages, and its editors claimed to present the news in a balanced fashion for the benefit of its readers,<sup>12</sup> the inventor that *The Phonoscope*’s authors esteemed above the rest was Edison.

If *The Phonoscope* had had a patron saint, it would have been Thomas A. Edison (1847-1941). Edison’s name dominated the publication, seemingly gracing every other page, either in an advertisement, or a story on one of his latest marvels. The inventor’s name was invoked with awe and reverence, and he was often referred to as “The Wizard”

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<sup>12</sup> In its second issue, the magazine’s authors emphasized this stance in an editorial: “It gives us great satisfaction to note that by taking up a stand absolutely independent of any particular interest, we have taken a step approved by everyone disinterestedly interested in the spreading of talking and kindred machines. We are not here to sound the praises of any particular machine or firm. We represent the public and not any manufacturer or brand.

“We look all around for whatever we may think of interest to our readers in any field coming within our scope, whether it bear a high-falluting [sic] name culled from the ancient tongues, or whether it be the product of an obscure Vermont Reuben. We want stuff, not gas. We do not advertise one machine and run down another. We shall persist in telling our readers all about the business, not a part only, assured as we are that the inherent merit will bring forth the best machine in due course. We shall not lend a helping hand in cornering a good machine, because somebody else wants it so. On the contrary, we shall uphold the truth from first to last.” “The Phonoscope,” *The Phonoscope*, (1, 2, 1896): 10.

in headlines or lead lines.<sup>13</sup> Seemingly anything and everything that Edison did was newsworthy. In the very first issue of the magazine in 1896, on the front page, the reader was treated to a behind the scenes portrait of “Edison: How He Works and Rests.”<sup>14</sup> A few months later, a front-page story declaring that “Thomas A. Edison is a Miner Now,” reported that Edison had been spending extended time at the iron mines in “Edison” (Ogden), New Jersey. The author lamented Edison’s absence from his laboratory in Orange, citing the deleterious effect it had on the whole town: “The old laboratory, the scene of so many triumphs, is a lonesome spot nowadays. The working force is small and the people of Orange bewail that the glory is departed from them.”<sup>15</sup> In alluding to Edison as “the glory,” the author was perhaps dramatizing the situation. But the story hints at the level of stature “the Wizard of Menlo Park” held among the magazine’s readership. In the exciting new world of technology, Edison was granted almost god-like status; another report described with awe Edison’s improbable “scientific dream” of sitting in New York and watching an opera at London (i.e., watching it on film, with sound). The reporter faithfully proclaimed: “Edison, the Wizard has said it, and it will be.”<sup>16</sup> It is imperative to take these examples into account when interpreting the influence of Edison’s advertisements. Edison was not only present in the advertising sections of the magazine,

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<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, these uses of the appellation: “The Wizard” (in *The Phonoscope*, 1, 1, November 1896, 15); “The Wizard Says We Will Sit in a New York Theatre and Enjoy a London Play” (in *The Phonoscope*, 1, 6, May 1897, 11); “the wizard of Menlo Park” (in *The Phonoscope*, 1, 7, June 1897, 13).

<sup>14</sup> “Edison: How He Works and Rests,” *The Phonoscope* (1, 1, November 1896), 1.

<sup>15</sup> *The Phonoscope* (1, 5, April 1897), 1.

<sup>16</sup> *The Phonoscope* (1, 6, May 1897), 11.

which were segregated at the beginning and end of the publication. His monolithic persona was written into its very narrative; indeed, he was largely responsible for the very existence of such a magazine, devoted as it was to the curiosities of recorded sound.

Edison's was not the only name in the industry, however, and by the 1890s, several other companies competed for prominence in the talking machine industry. The battle for prominence was fought on two fronts. The first way to get ahead in the talking machine industry was through controlling patent pools, and Edison fought continual legal battles over patent infringements. The second site of competition was in the advertising pages. Edison's presence loomed large here as well. In addition to advertisements connected to his various firms, Edison's name was sometimes used in advertisements for companies that were unconnected to his own but were licensed re-sellers of his phonographs or purveyors of cylinders that played on his machines. In some such ads, Edison's name was featured more prominently than the company paying for the ad, perhaps leading to consumer confusion as to the connection between Edison and other companies. These companies stood to gain from the perception of an endorsement by Edison. His signature was a mark of quality, authority, and—given the reverence with which his name was spoken in the magazine's pages—even genius.

To distinguish itself as the genuine name brand, Edison's National Phonograph Company ran an ad in April 1898, emphasizing the exclusivity of the Edison trademark. "Look for our Trade Mark," the ad instructs, "before purchasing a phonograph.... Every Genuine Edison Phonograph now being placed on the market bears a trade mark.... Accept no other." The advertisement features a stylized trademark depicting Edison's

signature, indicating his authority.<sup>17</sup> A modified version of the same ad appeared in the next month's issue, with its argument intensified both visually and textually. Instead of one instance of the Edison signature trademark, the ad prominently displays it three times across the top of the page. The visual repetition of the graphic mirrors the rhetorical insistence of the ad copy below it. This is the branding process at its most fundamental, linking authenticity of the source and distribution channels to an exclusive sense of value (see Figure 2.1):

This Trade Mark Is on Every Genuine Edison Phonograph. Look for it before buying a talking machine. Call attention to it. Edison Phonographs are made with the accuracy and nicety of a scientific instrument. *If you get the genuine, you get the best.*<sup>18</sup>

Edison's successive advertisements continued to use the angle of authenticity. An ad for Edison's Phonographs exactly one year later—with the title, “Phonograph Truisms,” in large letters—frankly acknowledged and capitalized on Edison's celebrity: “When a man who is famous the world over, backs the Phonograph with his name, it stands to reason it's a pretty good talking-machine.” This ad was for the complete line of Edison phonograph models, listing them from the economical model, The Edison Gem, to the priciest one, the Edison Concert. No matter what the price point, however, the ad reassured readers that “The signature of Thomas A. Edison, is on every genuine Edison Phonograph.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> On signatures as brands in the 20th century, see John Frow, “Signature and Brand,” in *High-Pop: Making Culture into Popular Entertainment*, ed. Jim Collins (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2002), 56-74.

<sup>18</sup> *The Phonoscope* (2, 5, May 1898), 2. Emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> *The Phonoscope* (3, 5, May 1899), 5.



Figure 2.1. Edison “trade mark” advertisement, *The Phonoscope*, May 1898

2
THE PHONOSCOPE
May, 1898

TRADE  
  
MARK

TRADE  
  
MARK

TRADE  
  
MARK

# This Trade Mark

Is on Every Genuine Edison Phonograph. Look for it before buying a talking machine. Call attention to it. Edison Phonographs are made with the accuracy and nicety of a scientific instrument. If you get the genuine, you get the best . . .

## The New “Standard”

RECORDS, REPRODUCES, SHAVES BLANKS; RUNS TWO TO THREE RECORDS WITH A SINGLE WINDING; CAN BE WOUND WHILE PLAYING. LIGHT, DURABLE, EFFICIENT. NO EXTRAS. COMPLETE WITH HORN AND HAND-SOME DUST PROOF POLISHED OAK CARRYING CASE . . .



**RECORDS : : :**  
**50 Cents Each : :**  
**\$5.00 Per Dozen :**

The National Phonograph Co., of Orange, N. J., is sole owner of my Phonograph patents for the United States and Canada.



**NATIONAL PHONOGRAPH CO.,**

OFFICE AND SALESROOM:  
ST. JAMES BUILDING. . .

**Broadway and 26th Street**

**NEW YORK**

FACTORY: ORANGE, N. J.  
EDISON LABORATORY.

— WRITE FOR CATALOGUE NO. 21. —

Edison had to emphasize his own name in advertising because the market was becoming increasingly crowded with the names of others. The naming and trademarking race of the 1880s and 1890s hit the consumer technology industry with a vengeance. For instance, the term “phonograph” referred to Edison’s cylinder format player, while “gramophone” was the name of Berliner’s machine, which played discs.<sup>20</sup> Another naming variation for this technology, the “graphophone,” which also played cylinders, had been developed by Alexander Graham Bell. The same trademarking tendencies also applied to new visual and photographic technologies, resulting in an alphabet soup of several key terms, mixed up together. For sound recording, the key words were “-phone” and “-graph”; for visual technologies they were “-scope” and many variations of “cinema” or “cine.” In April 1897, the author of *The Phonoscope*’s gossip and humor column wittily lampooned this ongoing and sometimes ridiculous practice. Of his own volition, he had undertaken to compile a list “of the frantic diversity of freakish names that have been foisted upon us to designate these otherwise admirable contrivances.”<sup>21</sup> The list, confined to names of picture machines, is worth reproducing here in all of its tongue-twisting abundance to show not only the sheer volume of names that assaulted the industry—and not least the consumer—but also to give a glimpse of the push back from the public about such practices. “The list is, I fondly believe a heartbreaker,” the author begins.

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<sup>20</sup> The generic name for the device at this time was “talking machine.” Phonograph later became the generic term used in the United States, and gramophone in the United Kingdom. See Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*, 224-25, n1.

<sup>21</sup> *The Phonoscope* (1, 5, April 1897), 7.

Behold not alone the eidoloscope, which was the name of the original downtown outfit, but also the biograph, bioscope, verascope, vitagraph, cinematographe, cinematoscope, cinetoscope, cineograph, kinematograph, kinematoscope, kinetograph, kinetoscope, kineoptiscope, triograph, trioscope, centograph, zimograph, multiscopes, hypnoscope, vitamotograph, magniscope, magiscope, animatograph, animatoniscope, kineoptican, motograph, mutagraph, alethoscope, projectoscope, and last and most dreadful, phantographoscope. There may be others, but are not these a feast?<sup>22</sup>

There was a similar feast of names served up for the talking machine business. By 1900, one could choose, among others, between a Phonograph, Graphophone, Gramophone, Metaphone, Echophone, Polyphone, Oratiograph, Vitaphone, or Zonophone to satisfy one's talking machine needs.<sup>23</sup>

If the practice of naming brands was originally intended to distinguish products in the marketplace, it could also have the opposite effect; by overloading the market with names, there was a danger of any new company's product being lost in the white noise. Clearly, if a company had any hope of rising above the fray, it would have to distinguish itself in ways other than just a product name. This is what lay behind Edison's advertising strategy in *The Phonoscope* during the last few years of the 19th century. It might be called the "genuine article" approach, confidently directing the consumer to look for the mark of genuine authority, and accept no substitutes. By virtue of the broad cultural influence of Edison's name and public persona, and the common knowledge that he

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Excellent pictures of these machines can be found in Timothy C. and George F. Paul Fabrizio, *The Talking Machine: An Illustrated Compendium* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, Pub., 2005).

indeed was the original inventor of the technology, this strategy made The National Phonograph Company a giant of the industry during this time.

*Selling “High Class,” “Original” Records Before Victor*

Another marketing approach involved investing records with social distinction. Selling records as “high-class” objects was a common industry marketing strategy in the years before Victor debuted its Red Seal series, as can be seen in the pages of *The Phonoscope* from 1896 to 1900. Companies routinely claimed in advertisements that they only dealt with the highest class of records. “If you want high-class original records,” the Universal Phonograph Company offered in an ad, “of the following celebrated artists, write to us.” Hereafter they provided a list of these celebrated artists’ names included in their catalog (see Figure 2.2).<sup>24</sup> When Roger Harding described his business operating procedures in an 1897 ad, he assured readers that he dealt exclusively with the best kind of records: “I handle High-class Original records only.”<sup>25</sup> “Lieutenant” Bettini, about whom more will be said below, made a similar claim in a July 1898 ad, though it was less visually prominent on the page: “[We have] Specialty high-grade records. High-class and popular music by leading performers and world-famed artists[.]” This ad then included another statement more rare for this time, indicating that the company possessed “a most complete operatic repertoire.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *The Phonoscope*, (1, 5, April 1897, 2).

<sup>25</sup> *The Phonoscope*, (1, 9, Aug-Sept 1897, 2).

<sup>26</sup> *The Phonoscope*, (2, 7, July 1898, 6).

**Figure 2.2:** Universal Phonograph Co. Advertisement, April, 1897



In these advertisements, companies not only emphasized the class of records made, but also that they only sold “original” records. In other words, and contrary to the practice just a few short years later, providers of pre-recorded materials were claiming to sell unique, *master* recordings rather than duplicates based on a master. In addition to the examples above, the firm of Harms, Kaiser & Hagen made this point insistently in one of their ads: “Harms, Kaiser & Hagen records are original master records of the highest attainable quality made on the best Edison blanks by skilled artisans... *We handle no*

*duplicates*.<sup>27</sup> A final example is an ad for Metropolitan Band Records, which provided an image of its director, Signor G. Peluso, and underneath made this promise:

The Metropolitan Band Records are acknowledged the world over to be the very best grade of originals on the market. *Each and every one is a master record, loud, clear and musical*, and the perfect reproduction of a full military band of eighteen first-class musicians.<sup>28</sup>

The emphasis on original records in advertising strategies was partly the result of the limitations on technologies of duplication, which had not yet been perfected. A singer would have to perform a song repeatedly and consistently, and each record sold typically represented a unique performance of a song, though some singers made multiple recordings at once by singing into several horns arrayed in front of them, each one attached to a phonograph creating a master.

To be a successful phonograph singer at this time required incredible physical stamina. One singer by the name of Dan W. Quinn (one of the “celebrated artists” listed in Universal’s ad above) took out an advertisement that claimed he had recorded more than 300 records for the U.S. Phonograph Company each week for two years, and had over the course of his career had made over 33,000 recordings for a total of five companies.<sup>29</sup> Another display of herculean stamina from the era before mass duplication came from George W. Johnson, the first African American phonograph star. His

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>28</sup> *The Phonoscope* (2, 8, Aug. 1898), 3. Emphasis added.

<sup>29</sup> *The Phonoscope* (1, 2, Dec. 1896), 4. These numbers is almost certainly an exaggeration. The advertisement was Quinn’s personal resumé; he offered his services to other companies, emphasizing that he was free of any exclusive contract and available to work.

“Laughing Song” was a best-seller in 1891, and as a result of its success he recorded his distinctive laugh on demand—about 40,000 times before the end of the century.<sup>30</sup>

Phonograph singers were occasionally the subject of articles in the magazine, and in the April, 1900 issue, an article with the headline “Phonograph Singing An Odd Occupation” described the scene of an imaginary recording session. The anonymous author describes the near-choreographed movements a singer had to perform to accommodate the technological realities of an acoustic recording session.

A stranger’s wonder would likely be excited by [the singer’s] antics. The singer takes his stand at a certain distance from the mouth of the horn and begins.

Now he throws back his head, now thrusts it forward, now poises it this way and now that. All this would look ridiculous to an audience, but is necessary before the Phonograph. The force of the note must be accommodated to the machine. If the composition calls for unusual force in propulsion, the singer must hold his head back so that his voice may not strike the diaphragm of the Phonograph too violently; if, on the contrary, the music is soft and gentle, the head must be brought nearer the receiving horn, so as to make the due impression on the wax... Moreover, the distance must be just right. This varies according to the size of the diaphragm. But the Phonograph singer, like the baseball player and the horse jockey, must be an exact judge of distance.<sup>31</sup>

Though the author compares the phonograph singer to an athlete, he does not imply that this type of singer lacks anything in the way of musicality. On the contrary, the author goes on to point out that in some ways, the career phonograph singer is held to even higher standards than singers on the stage.

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<sup>30</sup> Andre Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 87.

<sup>31</sup> *The Phonoscope* (4, 4, April 1900, 6).

Furthermore, the artist must be in perfect voice; there must be no trace of hoarseness, no nasal quality, or other defect or the record is useless. The machine has been brought to such a degree of perfection that it makes note of every slightest sound or lack of sound. A singer before an audience may excuse his hoarseness, and find sympathy; the audience will take his best and, probably, enjoy it in some degree. But the Phonograph accepts no excuses. It gives back the hoarseness as it hears it. The reproduction is ridiculous and entirely marred. A record that is flawed must be thrown away. On the other hand, the excellences of music are reproduced in their degree.<sup>32</sup>

The severe demands of the industry were not only physical, but technical.

Although techniques such as pantographic duplication and wax matrixes were available,<sup>33</sup> a duplication process that was efficient, cost-effective, and of adequate quality had yet to be perfected. But even though duplication was not a technical impossibility, there was a stigma attached to duplicate records, as can be surmised from the emphasis in advertising on original records. As any good advertiser would, the record houses of the late 19th century took these limitations and presented them as benefits. The inability to mass produce identical recordings became an opportunity to promote the fact that the records were “original.” The implication was that duplicates were less worthy than originals, or more accurately, that originals were superior presumably because they allowed the listener to remain closer to the artistic source of the recording; similarly to Edison phonographs, they were the genuine article. Within a few short years of this article, however, the world of the professional phonograph singer would be turned upside down

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> See Roland Gelatt, *The Fabulous Phonograph, 1877-1977, 2nd Ed.* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 81. Pantographic duplication involved linking the motion of two styluses via a pantograph. As the master would play back, its linked stylus would mimic the motion, etching it onto a blank.



by the development of mass duplication processes, as I will soon describe. But to appreciate fully the significance of this transformation, it is helpful first to consider how high-class marketing strategies manifested themselves not only in *The Phonoscope's* advertising pages.

### **Branding Through Journalism: Lieutenant Bettini, “Genius of the Opera”**

Associating records with high culture was an agenda that was not limited only to the advertising section of *The Phonoscope*, but was incorporated into the content of the magazine as well. When it comes to building a brand, assertive advertising is only one part of the picture. A marketing plan that disseminates the brand's image and values are also important, one aspect of which includes getting the press to include the company and its products in its regular articles. When it came to promoting a company's elite status, one good article could do far more to establish credibility than a half-page ad. This was free advertising, and also the sort that carried the extra benefit of credibility because it came from a third party, rather than directly from the company seeking profit. In fact, we have already seen the benefit of this approach above with Edison, and how his persona was maintained and promoted via *The Phonoscope's* content, not just through advertisements.

When it came to cultivating an image as the source for high-class, and especially operatic records, the phonograph impresario “Lieutenant” Bettini benefitted immensely from the magazine's endorsement. Gianni Bettini (1860-1938) was an Italian-born immigrant with an impeccable fashion sense and an impressive handlebar mustache.

Bettini's New York City home was a meeting place for many famous artists and musicians. When Bettini discovered Edison's phonograph, he decided that he could improve on the sound by modifying the design of the diaphragm and stylus to better capture sound vibrations. This he accomplished with the invention of the "micro-phonograph," which he then began to manufacture and sell out of his Fifth Avenue office.<sup>34</sup> The office became something of a local legend, and led to Bettini being profiled in *Phonograph's* January 1898 issue. The headline immodestly dubbed him "The Genius of the Opera."<sup>35</sup> Though it is a part of the regular content of the magazine, the article reads like a thinly veiled advertisement. It is wholeheartedly flattering, and casts Bettini as an opera insider, an Italian—his nationality connoting a sense of artistic authority—someone who knows every opera star in town, and possesses autograph letters of Verdi and Liszt. The smitten reporter informs the reader that the office—"chez" Bettini—is the meeting place for operatic luminaries, and let the busy man beware of developing a habit of going there, "for if he be a lover of music, he'll never get out again until the place is closed for the night."<sup>36</sup>

Built into the article, like a 21st-century product placement, is an explanation of the micro-phonograph. After establishing Bettini's credibility, the author points out Bettini's commercial connections:

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<sup>34</sup> For Bettini's biography and influence, see *ibid.*, 73-82. For a technical explanation of Bettini's "mica" diaphragm and "spider" stylus, see *ibid.*, 74-75.

<sup>35</sup> *The Phonoscope* (2, 1, Jan 1898), 10.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

At his Fifth Avenue establishment you can purchase the voice of Melba, of Calve, of Plançon, Campanani, and scores of lesser lights, for so much a rouleau, and be sure you are getting the genuine article, too.

From which you will infer that Lieut. Bettini is not unconnected with some brand of phonograph. In this surmise, dear reader, you are correct, for he is the inventor of an appliance which, attached to the ordinary Edison phonograph, gives results in the reproduction of musical sounds which are quite startling in their realism, and which are singularly free from that raucous squeaking which is a marked characteristic of the phonograph to which we listen in ferry houses and railway stations while waiting for boat or train. . . .

No, Signor Bettini's records are not of that distressing kind, as may be easily imagined from the great willingness which great operatic stars manifest to hand down through his invention their vocal achievements to future generations—and also the desire shown by connoisseurs to possess his artistic wares.<sup>37</sup>

The interweaving of a technological and cultural argument in this passage is instructive. Bettini's sensitive artistry and connoisseur status, established in the first part of the article, are presented as reasons that have led him to develop technological improvements so superior that "great operatic stars" choose to preserve their voices exclusively with him. Furthermore, one does not play such high quality records anywhere; a particular listening environment is implied. These are records not for the low-class contexts of the nickel slot machine, but for a new version of the Victorian parlor, where recorded music is enjoyed by knowledgeable listeners. The price of a Bettini cylinder reflected this class orientation: they sold for two to six dollars at a time when other companies sold recordings for fifty cents.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 79.

Figure 2.3. Bettini's Artists, *The Phonoscope*, June 1898

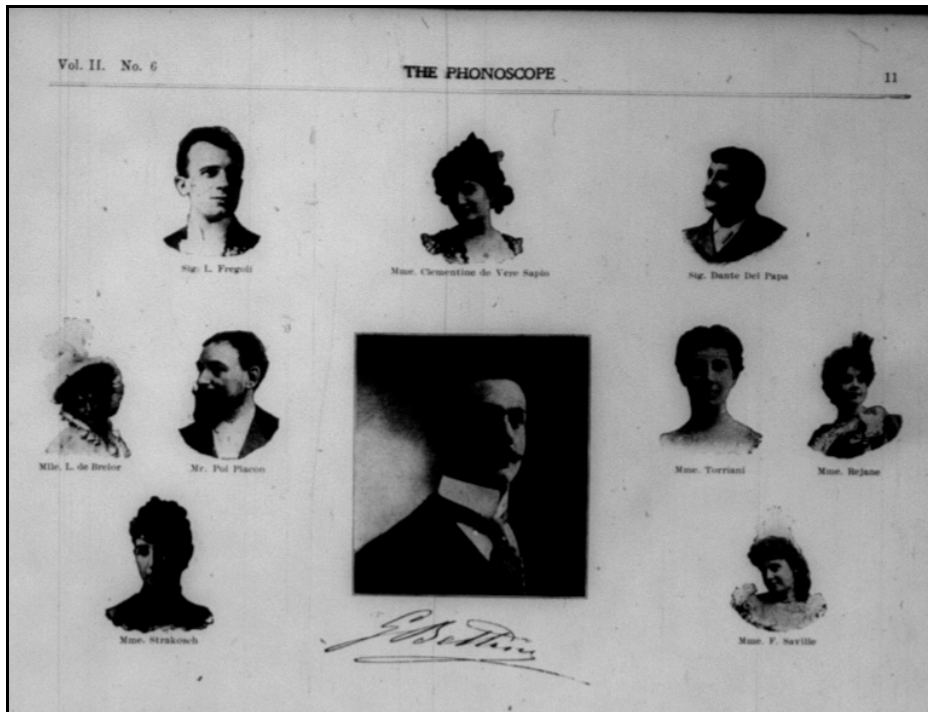


Figure 2.4. Bettini Advertisement, July 1898

THE PHONOSCOPE

July, 1898

**BETTINI Micro-Phonograph Recorder and Reproducer**  
For the Edison Electric and Triple Spring Motor Phonograph

**BETTINI Micro-Reproducer**  
(Special Model) For Edison Home Phonograph

The only diaphragms that indeed successfully records and reproduces female voices, flutes, violin, cello, etc. The most natural reproduction, clearer and louder than with any other diaphragms distinctly audible in large hall and theatre and yet with no metallic resonance.

**BETTINI Special Reproducing Horns**  
In corrugated tin and aluminum, all aluminum and also in brass for Bettini Micro-Reproducer

**BETTINI Phonograph Speed Indicator**

**SPECIALTY** HIGH-GRADE RECORDS, HIGH-CLASS AND POPULAR MUSIC  
BY LEADING PERFORMERS AND WORLD-FAMED ARTISTS

A MOST COMPLETE OPERATIC REPERTOIRE

Edison's Phonographs, Graphophones and Complete Bettini Micro-Phonograph Outfits

**BETTINI PHONOGRAPH LABORATORY**  
110 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK

From the N.Y. Evening Telegram:  
"Lieutenant Bettini has a most interesting laboratory in this city, and he has been much favored by the great European artists that have been heard in public in this country, both on the dramatic and operatic stage. I spent a delightful afternoon in his laboratory yesterday, and was astounded to hear in turn a reproduction, perfect in every detail, of the voices of these great artists. Mmes. Calve, Melba and Nordica, MM. Tamagno, Tassile, P. Plancon, Maurel and signorelli Ancona, Nicolini and Compagnoni, Tomaso Salvini, Coppola, Sarah Bernhardt, Ellen Terry, Little Langtry, Mlle. Rejane and her leading men, M. Maury, have each spoken into the Bettini Phonograph. Ex-President Benjamin Harrison and 'Mark Twain' have each left a record of their voices behind them."

This was not the only time Bettini secured key coverage within *The Phonoscope*'s content. He did so somewhat regularly, including one story in the fall of 1897 that featured half-tone reproductions of portraits of his star talent, promoting in a visually striking way his prize cast of recording artists (see Figure 2.3). Perhaps because the magazine features had already commented on Bettini's high-class persona, Bettini mostly used advertising space to promote his technology, rather than his artists (see Figure 2.4). His ads did not completely neglect his connection to high-brow circles; though a mention of artistry was sometimes buried visually within the ad, reading the fine print would show that Bettini indeed laid claim to his auspicious reputation: "Specialty: High-grade records, high-class music, and only by the leading performers and world famed artists."<sup>39</sup>

Bettini's example is representative of the "collectors" paradigm of the pre-1900 music industry. The journalists at *The Phonoscope*, as well as Bettini and the other sellers of "high-class" recordings, were aiming for a specialized audience of recording collectors, rather than a mass market of music consumers. This paradigm would undergo a dramatic shift in only a few short years, as the recording of classical musicians became oriented more towards general consumption by a mass market. The catalyst of this change was a technological development in the duplication of recordings made by Eldridge Johnson, founder of the Victor Talking Machine Company.

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<sup>39</sup> *The Phonoscope* (2, 11, Nov-Dec 1897), 2.

## **The Victor Talking Machine Company's Red Seal Records**

The first major branding success story in the history of the record industry came from the Victor Talking Machine Company. Though the company did not even exist before the turn of the century, by 1910 it had radically expanded the visibility of the phonograph through advertising to the American public, and it had changed the way the talking machine industry conceived of and carried out its business. Victor led the way in linking the recorded music industry with associations of high musical culture, especially with the culturally-loaded repertoires of classical music, and especially opera. This strategy had its genesis just after the turn of the century, when Victor made two important business moves. First, Victor acquired its soon-to-be-famous trademark, the image of Nipper the phonograph-listening dog. Victor acquired the trademark from the British Gramophone Company, in a cooperative distribution deal that also stipulated that the two companies would not compete with each other in any market worldwide.<sup>40</sup> As a part of the deal, Victor also acquired the trademark's accompanying slogan, "His Master's Voice."<sup>41</sup> The second important business move for Victor was to launch its Red Seal line of records.

The Red Seal line housed Victor's catalog of classical and opera recordings from 1902 to 1925.<sup>42</sup> Frederick Gaisberg, Victor's talent scout and recording engineer, led the charge to find marquee names to record for the company, a difficult task in a time when

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<sup>40</sup> Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*, 104.

<sup>41</sup> This slogan was the title of the trademark's source painting, by Francis Barraud. Ibid., 118-21.

<sup>42</sup> This represents the years of the Red Seal label in America. It began as an import series from the Gramophone Company in 1900. See *ibid.*, 105.

many leading artists were either dismissive or suspicious of the technology. Gaisberg traveled first to Russia, where he recorded the acclaimed Russian bass, Fyodor Chaliapin. He then traveled to Italy, where he signed what would in hindsight be a landmark deal: Italian tenor Enrico Caruso agreed to a recording deal of ten sides for one hundred pounds.<sup>43</sup> Caruso was well regarded in Italy as a singer, though not yet a superstar.<sup>44</sup> To American audiences, however, he symbolized an Old World authority that Victor capitalized on in their advertising. Aside from their genre exclusivity and the promotion of celebrity singers, Red Seal records had another important defining characteristic: the product itself, with a distinctive red label adorning each disc.

The core strategy behind branding is distinction. A company works to convince the consumer that its products are distinct and desirable, in an effort to direct the flow of consumer capital towards its product. Victor's Red Seal discs succeeded in this, and became a staple of the cultured American home. As Gelatt describes:

A collection of Red Seal Records established one as a person of both taste and property. Along with the leather-bound sets of Dickens, Thackeray, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Victor Red Seals became a customary adjunct of the refined American Parlor, to be displayed with becoming pride to impressionable guests and relations.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 104-05.

<sup>44</sup> Caruso's recordings are considered to be the first of lasting artistic merit, validating the phonograph as a worthy musical instrument not only to consumers, but also to other operatic stars who may have previously been wary about putting their voice to wax. After Caruso, many operatic stars began signing exclusive contracts, as the talking machine companies raced to secure them. The two main competitors in the United States were Victor and Columbia. Gelatt, *The Fabulous Phonograph, 1877-1977*, 2nd ed., 114-29, 41-57.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 149.

But it does no good to convince a consumer of a company's merit if the consumer cannot visually locate the product at the point of sale. By using a striking red label, Victor transformed an otherwise nondescript black disc into an eye-catching visual object.<sup>46</sup> The name of the line also subtly conveys its high-cultural orientation. Historically, a seal was used to provide a unique imprint on important documents as a proof of authentication. Wax seals have been used on letters for hundreds of years to ensure the security of a message. Receipt of a letter with an unbroken seal indicated that the message was undefiled, straight from the author, to be trusted. Suisman summarized the investment of symbolism that resulted from Victor's efforts:

If, as Walter Benjamin famously argued, mechanical reproduction stripped the unique work of art of its 'aura,' the specialty packaging of Red Seal records attempted to create an ersatz aura in its place, as if each disc consecrated a single and singular musical performance.<sup>47</sup>

Victor's successful deployment of its Red Seal records is widely considered to be a watershed moment in the early recording industry. Along with the development of new talking machines, it solidified the sale of pre-recorded musical performances as a main part of the company's business model. When the success of Caruso's records proved to be unlike anything the industry had seen before, Victor pursued and secured contracts with other acclaimed singers, such as Nellie Melba, Adelina Patti, and Francesco Tamagno. Other record companies had caught on to the potential of selling celebrity

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<sup>46</sup> Victor had the idea for this series from the Gramophone Company of Britain, which had in 1902 inaugurated their own catalog of high-priced discs featuring operatic stars, called Red Label. Victor had a reciprocal deal with the Gramophone company as domestic dealers of each others' recordings, and Victor's first "Red Seal" releases were imports from this line.

<sup>47</sup> Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*, 111.



discs, and a race to secure first-rate—and even second- and third-rate singers—from American and European opera companies ensued. The Red Seal recordings also linked records with the high culture associations of opera and classical music. America had long suffered from a widespread musical inferiority complex with regard to Europe.<sup>48</sup> Red Seal records offered access to “high-class” repertoire, performed by world famous singers. Regardless of the fact that Red Seal records cost more than five times as much as novelty records, the two- to five-dollar price tag was cheaper than a seat at the Metropolitan Opera House, and one did not have to leave one’s home to hear the performance. The result was what Suisman calls the “musicalization of the phonograph,” effecting a transformation of the technology from talking machine to music player.<sup>49</sup>

### **Technologies of Duplication**

This brings us back to our central question: if several record companies were already pursuing high-brow marketing strategies before the Victor Talking Machine Company even existed, why then did Victor, and not the Bettini or Universal companies, become the first branding success story of the recorded music industry? The answer has

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<sup>48</sup> On America’s perceived musical inferiority, and the early 20th-century belief that the phonograph could educate the general population about “good” or “high-class” music, see Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*, 56-62. A counter example of this view may be found in the recent work of Katherine K. Preston, whose forthcoming book on opera outlines the pro-American (and thus anti-European) marketing strategies of operatic diva Emma Abbott. Katherine Preston, “The Marketing of a Diva: The Triumphant 19th-Century Career of ‘The People’s Prima Donna,’ Emma Abbott,” (lecture, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, 14 April 2011).

<sup>49</sup> See Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*, 105-24. On the cultural history of Victor’s Red Seal records, see also Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: Music, Records and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa*; Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound*, 37-64; Gelatt, *The Fabulous Phonograph, 1877-1977*, 2nd Ed., 141-57.

to do with the refinement of record duplication processes and a shift in outlook towards duplicate records. Even while the pre-Victor advertisers mentioned above were touting their exclusive sale of “original” records, the major record companies were diligently working on perfecting a duplication process that was both efficient and able to preserve sound quality. As Andre Millard recounts, a competitive drama between Edison and Eldridge Johnson ensued as they raced toward the same goal.<sup>50</sup> 1899 was the turning point for both inventors; it was the year that suitable duplication processes were finally developed both for Edison’s cylinder and Berliner’s disc formats. Johnson developed a consistent and inexpensive process for creating a negative matrix from a master disc, and then stamping duplicates.<sup>51</sup> By 1900, Johnson had set up everything he needed at his Camden, New Jersey plant to create thousands of duplicates a day.<sup>52</sup>

Suddenly, the time and cost of making a high number of records was drastically reduced, and the potential profit from the sale of duplicates promised to drastically change the face of the music industry—only, that is, if duplicate records were seen to be of a high enough quality and low enough cost to override the consumer’s proclivity for “original” records. Indeed, duplicates did begin to overcome this discrepancy, primarily through reporting on the advances in technology. An article in May of 1900 in *The Phonoscope* described how duplicate records could actually be *better* than originals in

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<sup>50</sup> Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound*, 45-49.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 48.

longevity and sound fidelity, describing them as “indestructible.”<sup>53</sup> The new type of record, it was promised, “reproduces every detail perfectly and has the added merit of being louder than the master on account of the hard surface of the indestructible blank.”

The article also claimed many other benefits to the phonograph industry.

And to that end we will cite one example only; that of really perpetuating the voices of the celebrities, orators, friends, and the like without the danger that is attendant on the use of the wax record for like purposes. It will not have to be put away and carefully guarded for fear of its being worn out or broken.<sup>54</sup>

These two innovations, along with a realization about the benefits of mass advertising, allowed Victor to lead the way into carving out a mass market for luxury goods in the record industry.

The shift in approach, from Bettini to Johnson, encapsulates an important moment in the early formation of the music recording as mass produced commodity. Both men marketed their recordings as high-class, and they both secured the services of well-known singers for their records. The steep price points, also shared by both companies, marked their products as luxurious. But the main difference between these two businessmen lay in their attitude toward the market for such recordings. Bettini treated a recording made by a famous singer as a rare artifact. He had very little desire to do business on a mass produced scale. And that is why when it comes to posterity, as Roland Gelatt vividly states, “Bettini cylinders are even rarer [today] than Gutenberg Bibles or Shakespeare

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<sup>53</sup> *The Phonoscope* (4, 5, May 1900, 9).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

quartos.”<sup>55</sup> Eldridge Johnson, on the other hand, combined high culture, leading singers, and an efficient mass-duplication process with an aggressive advertising agenda scaled to a newly envisioned mass market.

### **Advertising Red Seal Records**

Victor had an unprecedentedly large advertising budget for a record company. Though the other members of The Big Three—the Edison Talking Machine Company, and Columbia—also employed mass advertising, the millions of dollars Victor spent to make their name and products known dwarfed the efforts of these other companies. In fact, Victor’s advertising budget was not only unprecedentedly high for the record industry, it was one of the largest in any industry at the time.<sup>56</sup> Victor pioneered strategies of mass advertising and creating a brand presence for a product and company.

Victor advertised Red Seal records as a luxury brand, frequently featuring their celebrity singers, such as Caruso, in full operatic costume. The company assured consumers that they were getting the genuine article, as can be seen in one famous advertisement from 1920. It shows Caruso holding up one of his records, and touting that “Both are Caruso.”<sup>57</sup> The pricing of the discs, significantly higher than average at the

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<sup>55</sup> Gelatt, *The Fabulous Phonograph, 1877-1977, 2nd Ed.*, 79.

<sup>56</sup> Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*, 114-15.

<sup>57</sup> Reproduced in *ibid.*, 119.

time, was a surprising but prescient business decision. When other companies pushed the affordability of their records, Victor went against this trend and added a premium.<sup>58</sup>

Distinction became the order of the day for a time, and singers began to demand their own distinctively colored labels. Francesco Tamagno stipulated as much in his contract.<sup>59</sup> Other singers followed suit, resulting in a personality palette of discs. Among the colors used were mauve (Nellie Melba), pink (Adelina Patti), orange (Mattia Battistini), and dark blue (Clara Butt).<sup>60</sup> One gets the idea that it did not matter what color was used for a singer, as long as it was distinctive.

### *The “Red Seal Effect” and the Development of the Victor Brand Ecosystem*

What makes Victor and its Red Seal records an ideal case study for branding is that the influence of the Red Seal approach reached far beyond advertising, into the core identity of the company and its image in the marketplace. The lessons learned from the success of Red Seal recordings influenced many other arenas of Victor’s business, including sales of non-Red Seal records, and the company’s development of record players, distribution practices, and cultural activism. I call this phenomenon the “Red Seal effect.” By observing the wide-reaching influence of the core values of high culture, a picture emerges of the Victor company’s gradual development of consistent relationships among brand components—what I am calling a brand ecosystem—with interlocking parts that refer to and reinforce one another.

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<sup>58</sup> Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound*, 61.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

The first, perhaps surprising, demonstration of the Red Seal effect was that advertising for Red Seal drove up sales of the other segments of Victor's catalog. "Black Seal" records, which consisted of popular fare, novelty acts, historical speeches, and lesser-known classical performers, experienced a surge in sales during the first decade of the 1900s.<sup>61</sup> Red Seal records did not comprise the highest selling portion of Victor's catalog,<sup>62</sup> but they were all-important in making Victor what it was. It boosted Victor's brand, and justified all of the money they spent in advertising. It also made records valuable in the eyes of consumers by virtue of its higher price point—the price of the most expensive Red Seal discs was five dollars when other records were going for thirty-five cents. In the emerging marketplace of mass-produced commodities, in which managing the value of a luxury brand was an exercise in experimentation, spending the large majority of one's advertising budget on a product line that provided a minority of gross sales may have seemed paradoxical. As David Suisman explains: "Given the imbalance between sales of Black Seal and Red Seal recordings, one might surmise that Victor would reorient its advertising around the better-selling Black Seals, but such a supposition misses the point; Red Seal boosted sales for all phonograph products."<sup>63</sup> Establishing their claim to artistry, and asserting their excellence in dealing with "high class" music, granted Victor credibility in other arenas of sound recording as well.

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<sup>61</sup> Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*, 122.

<sup>62</sup> Neither was it insignificant: Victor sold over 70 million discs from 1903 to 1925. Taking into account the higher price point of the discs, the line produced significant revenue. Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

Victor's orientation of its business around the production, sale, and advertising of recordings did not mean that it ceased innovation in its original business, the development of new record players. In fact, the new agenda of celebrity discs, set forth by the Red Seal paradigm, shed light on a cultural argument for the technological advancement of Victor's record players. People who desired high-class recordings of the most famous voices in the recording industry<sup>64</sup> naturally would want to hear them on machines that matched their prestige.<sup>65</sup> In 1907, Victor released the Victrola to close this loop. A high-end phonograph made of fine wood, Victrola's development did not flow directly from a Red Seal marketing campaign. But it made a perfect complement to the consumption process, and keeping customers inside the Victor family of products was a primary business strategy. A 1915 advertisement in *Literary Digest* ends by commanding: "Always use Victor Machines with Victor Records and Victor Needles—the combination. There is no other way to get the unequalled Victor tone."<sup>66</sup>

Not just sound fidelity was at issue here, however; the phonograph was made to look more like a fine musical instrument (advertisements touted its "piano-finished"

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<sup>64</sup> It is another mark of Victor's ambitious cultural agenda that they routinely claimed in their ads that their singers were the finest voices not only in the recording industry, but in the world. One ad said of Caruso that on a Victor record you can hear Caruso's "own magnificent voice, with all the wonderful power and beauty of tone that make him *the greatest of all tenors*." Qtd. in Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 215-16. Emphasis added.

<sup>65</sup> For a cultural and philosophical discussion of the genesis of mechanically reproduced sound fidelity, including a discussion of the Victrola, see *ibid.*, 215-86.

<sup>66</sup> Reproduced in Benjamin L. Aldridge, "The Victor Talking Machine Company," ed Frederic Bayh. (Camden, N.J.: RCA Sales Corporation, 1964), <http://www.davidsarnoff.org/vtm-chapter7.html>. Double emphasis in original.

wood<sup>67</sup>) than a technological show piece. Or as Evan Eisenberg has put it, the Victrola was the first phonograph in history to be marketed as a piece of high-end parlor furniture.<sup>68</sup> The Victrola was immediately successful, and opened up a new product category. Many competitors soon created their own copycat versions, with similarly stylized names. The names for the new players followed the torrent of stock suffixes—especially “-ola”—that the writer in *Phonograph* had playfully satirized a decade earlier. Some names played, like the Victrola, on the company’s name or patent names, such as the Grafonola, Gabelola, and Vitanola. Others, like the Humanola, furthered the anthropomorphism of the machine. Still others, like the Concertola, implied that a phonograph could turn one’s private room into a concert space.<sup>69</sup> These players began to be sold in music stores alongside pianos, rather than in hardware stores as before, symbolizing their new cultural category.<sup>70</sup>

The Red Seal effect reached beyond product development into the sales training programs and community services of Victor’s business. For their salesmen and dealers, Victor began providing a free two-week intensive course in 1919. The course taught everything from the particulars of the Victor catalog, to sales techniques and how salesmen could quickly read their customers in order to predict their tastes in music.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*, 113.

<sup>68</sup> Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: Music, Records and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa*, 13.

<sup>69</sup> Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound*, 57-58.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>71</sup> Aldridge, “The Victor Talking Machine Company.”



Though all aspects of the Victor catalog were covered, the curriculum was heavily weighted toward the Red Seal records; so much so that it was known as the “Red Seal School.”

Finally, Victor also blurred the lines between culture and commerce through strategies of cultural branding that included the realm of music education as a civic agenda. David Suisman chronicles how, after creating their Education Department in 1911, Victor launched a massive and successful campaign to put their players and records into the classroom at every level. School-related business represented significant profit potential, while establishing new and durable sales channels in three ways: “Schools constituted a large market in themselves, they used children to reach their parents, and they trained children to be lifelong phonograph consumers.”<sup>72</sup> Victor also provided music appreciation texts for classroom use, as well as recording guides for community music memory contests.<sup>73</sup> Beginning in 1912, they also produced the *Victor Book of Opera*, a comprehensive concordance of Victor’s opera offerings on disc. It was an intricate and lavishly illustrated publication, with plot synopses, musical commentary and record suggestions. It reads like an album review guide, but without the benefit of an impartial author. David Suisman has described the publication: “Blurring the line between advertisement and education, the book was part textbook, part reference, and part sales catalogue.”<sup>74</sup> The Red Seal effect, in the end, should be understood as Victor’s attempt to

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<sup>72</sup> Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*, 193.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 193, 201-02.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

make their particular brand of “high-class” canon incorporated so thoroughly into the broader culture that the boundaries between culture and commerce disappeared.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter outlines a key paradigmatic shift in the early recording industry from a collectibles paradigm to a mass market paradigm. The collectibles model is represented by Gianni Bettini, who positioned himself as a dealer of rare and valuable artifacts, the voices of high-class and renowned singers. In this strategy, the uniqueness of the performance was matched in the exclusivity of its price point and the rarity of its availability. It was a model that had many precedents in the historically aristocratic opera house and exclusive salon concert of Europe. In the collectibles model, there is something to gain from a limited distribution of recordings, as scarcity bolsters a product’s value.

Victor’s model is also predicated on the cultural capital of operatic and high-class music. The difference—and it is a big one—is that the trust formerly ascribed to a collector such as Bettini became attached to an entire line of mass-produced recordings. Whereas before, a select few consumers were relying on a trusted middleman to get access to quality performances, Victor persuaded a much broader public to buy into a trusted relationship with their brand. They stamped out duplicates by the thousands, and yet invested each one with an “ersatz aura,” as David Suisman calls it. This argument was played out in the advertising pages and magazine articles of a budding mass media, and it mirrored the type of argument that contemporary consumers were also facing at their

grocery and hardware stores: the displacement of personally mediated consumption channels by mass-marketed companies who actively worked to allay fears of the unknown by creating distinctive and trustworthy brands.

Victor's victory was that they successfully convinced the public that mass duplicated recordings of a single excellent performance by a celebrity singer—not an “original” performance by a lesser-known—was not only acceptable, but desirable. Then they stoked that desire by flooding the mass media with advertisements. This victory had lasting and major effects on the recording industry, and inaugurated its ascendancy to a major industry. It quashed the necessity for individual performances (original records), effectively putting an entire industry of singers in the “phonograph talent” business out of work. No longer would workhorses like Dan W. Quinn, the man of 33,000 recordings, be able to subsist on merely their physical stamina and consistency in performance. The new paradigm rewarded instead the development of musical celebrity. Though Quinn continued making recordings after the turn of the century—including “Strike Up the Band,” one of the first recordings released under the Victor name—the future of the recording industry would be for the Carusos and Melbas, not the Quinns. The development of celebrity music personas, and the investment of consumable objects with their auras, was a strategy that also affected the “folk music revival” of the 1960s, a subject to which I turn in Chapter III.

CHAPTER III  
HOW DO YOU SELL ANTI-COMMERCIAL MUSIC?  
THE 1960S FOLK MUSIC REVIVAL AND ITS  
COMMERCIAL CONTEXT

**Introduction**

This chapter is a case study on the folk revival in America in the first half of the 1960s. The so-called “folk music revival” of the 1940s to the 1960s in the United States and the United Kingdom refers to the renewal of interest in “the performance of traditional songs and dances by young singers and instrumentalists in coffee houses, clubs, concert halls and at special folk festivals.”<sup>1</sup> Within this broad context, I will be examining examples of the revival in the urban settings of New York City’s Greenwich Village, and Cambridge, Massachusetts’s Harvard Square. My question is: how did folk revival musicians market themselves, given that folk ideology was opposed to commercialism? I will consider several aspects of the industry, including record companies (Folkways and Vanguard Records), journalism (*Broadside* magazine), and musicians themselves (especially Woody Guthrie and Joan Baez). I wish to show how the record companies that supported the commercial folk music industry carved out an identity for themselves as counterweights to commercialized pop music, via the promotion of “authentic” musicians and musical experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Dave Laing, “Folk Music Revival,”  
<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/46854>.

Authenticity means different things to different people, as a description of the actors in this chapter will show. For Moses Asch, it meant developing a record company that delivered the best of all varieties of music to its listeners, but that did everything it could to avoid imposing company concerns on the process; for the editors and contributors—and presumably the readership—of *Broadside* magazine, it was an adherence to social justice through the topical song; for Woody Guthrie it was telling the story of the working man’s hardship; for Vanguard records it was a devotion to the highest quality in art music and other intellectual pursuits; and for Joan Baez, who will be one of the main subjects of this chapter, it was a combination of these: social justice through song, with an emphasis on the highest quality of music performance, and a disdain for the machinations of the music industry. What all of these definitions of authenticity have in common—and here lies the central argument of this chapter—is a rejection of “commercialism” in music. As I will show, this anti-commercial attitude was a central part of these artists’ and companies’ positioning in the marketplace. In other words, those in the folk music revival industry marketed themselves as anti-commercial, yet participated in the marketplace system. An entire segment of the music industry sprouted up to support this system, and it is this segment of the industry that formed the basis of industry support for later anti-commercial genres such as 1960s rock, 1970s punk, 1990s alternative, and 2000s “indie” music.<sup>2</sup>

It should be stated here—with emphasis—that a good marketing strategy alone does not a recording star make. In my close reading of the marketing strategies of Baez’s

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<sup>2</sup> Anti-commercialism is also an essential part of the career of Sufjan Stevens, the subject of Chapter IV.

early career, I am not seeking to account for the *existence* of her talent, but rather for the *way it was communicated* to a large number of people, and how that message articulates with patterns of consumption among music buyers. The two realms—inherent talent and marketing—are not mutually exclusive, however, and they necessarily affect one another.

### **Defining the “Folk Music Revival”**

The meanings of terms like “folk,” “folk song,” “folk revival,” and “traditional music” are far from clear, and the problematic nature of the concepts has been widely acknowledged. Anne Dhu McLucas chronicles several attempts to define folk music, both as a process (how the music is learned and transmitted) and a repertoire (what is played), calling attention to the quandaries that attend them.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars have looked at categories such as “folk” with skepticism, calling into question their very validity. Matthew Gelbart argues that “folk” and “art” are not objective categories, but rather that they comprise a socially constructed and invented binarism that developed in tandem over the course of one hundred and fifty years from the early 18th century to about 1850.<sup>4</sup> Karl Hagstrom Miller, treating the music of the South between the 1880s and the 1920s, uncovers the mutual influence of folk and popular music, showing how the two were not as separate as once thought. Rather, early 20th century academic notions of folklore were

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<sup>3</sup> Anne Dhu McLucas, “The Multi-Layered Concept of ‘Folk Song’ in American Music: The Case of Jean Ritchie’s ‘the Two Sisters’,” in *Themes and Variations: Writings in Honor of Rulan Chao Pian*, ed. Bell Yung and Joseph S. C. Lam (Harvard University Music Department and The Institute of Chinese Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1994), 212-19.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Gelbart, *The Invention of “Folk Music” and “Art Music”: Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner*, New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

used to identify and isolate examples of genuine folk music tradition, and those notions were subsequently utilized to add an “injection of folkloric authenticity” into popular traditions.<sup>5</sup>

In the face of such pitfalls, some scholars have called for an abandonment of the term “folk” altogether. Some of these calls have been based on the Marxist argument that sees the invention of “the folk” as a way for the bourgeoisie to leverage their power against the lower classes or foreign peoples.<sup>6</sup> Charles Keil, for instance, is emphatic: “Wait! Can’t we keep the folk concept and redeem it? No! and no! again. You can’t, because too many Volkswagens have been built, too many folk ballets applauded, too many folksongs sold, too much aid and comfort given to the enemy.”<sup>7</sup> The problem with such attempts at stomping the term into oblivion, however, is that they do not take into account the traction that the term has gained in cultural spheres, something that no scholarly pronouncement can easily erase. As McLucas has rightly pointed out, a shared understanding of folk music has been embedded in the social consciousness, evolving out of a “complex interaction of scholarship, commerce, and common use,” and therefore the term should not be abandoned, but rather scholars should specify their meaning when

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 98.

<sup>6</sup> See Charles Keil, “Who Needs ‘the Folk’,” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 15(1978): 263-65. See also the controversial study from British Marxist Dave Harker, *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British “Folksong,” 1700 to the Present Day* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985). An extensive discussion of this literature can be found in James Porter, “Convergence, Divergence, and Dialectic in Folksong Paradigms: Critical Directions for Transatlantic Scholarship,” *Journal of American Folklore* 106, no. 419 (1993): 61-98. A brief discussion of can also be found in Gelbart, *The Invention of “Folk Music” and “Art Music”: Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner*, 5-7.

<sup>7</sup> Keil, “Who Needs ‘the Folk’,” 264-65.

using it.<sup>8</sup> In other words, basic characteristics of what “folk music” is—and is not—have been deeply impressed across a broad range of people. This impression has been made via extensive processes of communication in the popular and scholarly press, and to change it would take equally extensive measures. As a solution to this conundrum, I will follow McLucas’s proposal to retain use of the term, but define how I intend to use it. In this study, the term “folk music revival” (and its variations “folk revival” and simply “revival”) refers to a period during the 1950s and 1960s in America, in which there was a surge of popular interest in “folk music,” that is, the songs and instrumental music of American and British oral traditions.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, it deals with what Ray Allen calls, in his recent book on the New Lost City Ramblers, the “Great Boom” of such interest that occurred during the early 1960s.<sup>10</sup>

What is the difference between a “folk singer” and a “folk revival singer”? The dividing line is a problematic one, although in practice it is often enforced via the parameters of origin and commercial orientation. One of the defining characteristics of a revivalist is that he or she did not originate from within the community that bears the musical tradition. In this sense, “revivalist” can assume a pejorative connotation, and is used by purists to call attention to the fact that a musician is ultimately a cultural outsider

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<sup>8</sup> McLucas, “The Multi-Layered Concept of ‘Folk Song’ in American Music: The Case of Jean Ritchie’s ‘the Two Sisters’,” 219.

<sup>9</sup> Though “folk music” in its broadest sense encompasses many streams of music in the oral tradition, the British-Irish-American tradition has been one of the most influential in American musical life. See the introduction to the forthcoming *Songs from the British-Irish-American Oral Tradition as Recorded in the Early Twentieth Century*, edited by Norm Cohen and Anne Dhu McLucas (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions).

<sup>10</sup> Ray Allen, *Gone to the Country: The New Lost City Ramblers and the Folk Music Revival*, Music in American Life (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 3, and throughout.



to a given musical tradition. For musicians such as Tracy Schwartz of the New Lost City Ramblers, this can be perceived as discrimination. Schwartz has claimed that he has been rejected for federal folklore funding specifically because he is viewed as a “revivalist” rather than a “traditional” musician.<sup>11</sup> Lamenting this state of affairs, he commented “If only I’d lied back in ‘57 [when he first started to play] I bet you a month’s supply of old strings I could have passed for traditional.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Schwartz and the Ramblers are widely acknowledged as credible practitioners of traditional Appalachian string band music, and were the ones who popularized it and brought it to a much wider audience.

This leads to the second dividing line between traditional musicians and revivalists: commercial orientation. Folklorist Norm Cohen has proposed that we can distinguish tradition from revivalism because the latter is commercially mediated and the former is non-commercial.<sup>13</sup> “Non-commercial” should not be confused with “anti-commercial,” another term used frequently used in the present study. “Non-commercial” refers to groups of musicians who make music in their communities outside of the recording studio, away from the concert stage, and without the exchange of money. “Anti-commercialism” is an attitude that I will show to be prevalent in folk revival singers, but which is cast against a commercial backdrop that includes exchange of music commodities such as recordings, and music services such as public concerts and

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<sup>11</sup> See *ibid.*, 243. The term “traditional” music is often used as a way to differentiate the more popular notion of “folk.”

<sup>12</sup> Qtd. in *ibid.* The interpolation is included in Allen’s quotation.

<sup>13</sup> Norm Cohen, *Folk Song America, a Twentieth Century Revival [Album Booklet]* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Collection of Recordings, 1990).

broadcasts. All of the folk revival musicians discussed below thus should be considered commercial musicians on a fundamental level.

As a cultural phenomenon, the 1960s folk revival included various groups of people who held various viewpoints, from disillusioned college students to radical Leftists, and ultimately to millions of American consumers who were inspired by the music and the movement. Allen's book is a valuable contribution to folklore scholarship in that it directly addresses the folk revival, and seeks to add a detailed understanding of the character and influence of the folk revival. After summarizing the recent scholarship on the topic, Allen outlines the complex social phenomenon that is the folk revival: "The postwar folk music revival was at once a commercial music boom, a protest song movement, a rebellion by disillusioned college students, a search for cultural roots, a do-it-yourself approach to homemade music, and more."<sup>14</sup> As it is commonly understood, the major players of the folk music revival are musicians and groups such as The Weavers (and Pete Seeger in particular), the New Lost City Ramblers, Joan Baez, Phil Ochs, Bob Dylan, Peter, Paul and Mary, and several others. Woody Guthrie, while his musical flourishing predates the folk music revival as I have defined it, also has become an important icon of the revival, as I discuss below.

Taking the output of these artists during the 1960s as an example, we can begin to get an idea of what the modern troubadours of the folk revival were expected to sound like. Emphasis was placed on songs, rather than instrumental-only pieces. Singers were expected to accompany themselves on their instruments, which was most often an

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<sup>14</sup> Allen, *Gone to the Country: The New Lost City Ramblers and the Folk Music Revival*, 4.

acoustic guitar, though there were other possibilities, such as the banjo. Other instruments, such as electric guitars and basses, or drum set, were patently excluded due to their evocation of commercial genres such as rock ‘n’ roll and the popular music heard on Top 40 radio. Many of the artists during the early 1960s (such as Baez, Ochs, and Dylan) cultivated a solo performance style, but duets (such as Mimi and Richard Fariña) and trios (such as Peter, Paul and Mary) carried on the vocal harmony traditions handed down by groups like the Almanacs or The Weavers.<sup>15</sup> Thus, though I acknowledge its problematic nature, I use the term “folk music revival” in this study as a common-use label to refer to the 1950s and 1960s revival, with special emphasis on the early 1960s. When the broader terms, “folk” or “folk music” are used, I am referring to the music of American oral traditions, as well as the attendant ideologies that this concept has acquired, a subject to which I now turn.

### **“Folk Ideology”**

In 1950s postwar America, as historian Lizabeth Cohen has argued, consumption rose to the level of a civic duty. In the wake of the economic hardships of the Great Depression and World War II, a new ideal citizen emerged, one who purchased goods not only to satisfy personal desires, but also in service of national economic health.<sup>16</sup> This newly integrated economic-civic reality, which Cohen calls the Consumers’ Republic, transformed Americans’ views towards mass consumption, linking it, in the minds of

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<sup>15</sup> Even solo artists frequently teamed up with guests for performances, as Joan Baez and Bob Dylan frequently did on tours and at the Newport Folk Festival.

<sup>16</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 8-9.

some, to patriotism. By the end of the 1950s, however, there were a growing number of young people who began to speak out against certain aspects of American society, such as racial inequalities, capitalism, and the United States military's involvement in foreign wars. This backlash was later given the title of "counter-culture," by virtue of the fact one of the movement's defining characteristics was the rejection of established social and economic values. In the realm of music, the American folk music revival had become by the beginning of the 1960s a bastion of anti-commercial, counter-cultural ideology in the midst of a commercially oriented industry.

Members of the folk scene in New York City's Greenwich Village had set up a community that emphasized collectivity over individual renown. At the coffee shops, folk clubs, hootenannies, or the informal musical gatherings in Washington Park, everyone who had a guitar was eventually allowed a turn to sing. Even popular groups like The Almanacs and The Weavers routinely gave up the exclusivity of their stages, leading audiences in group songs like "We Shall Overcome." To borrow an expression from the world of theater, in a folk revival music performance, there was "no fourth wall" between the stage and audience. For performers such as Pete Seeger, a stalwart of the older generation who inspired many young folk revival singers in the early 1960s, the ideology of folk music was closely linked to politics, and Seeger's openly socialist views got him blacklisted for a good part of the 1950s. Seeger was the flashpoint for a broader mistrust of capitalism among folk revivalists. They sought to quarantine themselves from the pop music industry, which to them had become overrun by commercialism. When folk revival musicians looked across the line at the music industry, they typically did so with morally

charged contempt. Folk ideology was authenticity; pop music's ideology was the bottom line. They believed that any self-respecting person had a moral obligation to shun such base practices. Pop music, geared as it was toward selling singles and securing airplay, represented to them the worst in pandering and insincere artistry.

The divide between the folk genre from mainstream popular music and rock 'n' roll had widened in the 1950s. The birth and ascendancy of rock 'n' roll had created cult personas, of whom Elvis Presley is a prime example. As rock critic and music sociologist Simon Frith has pointed out, this was something that ran counter to the values of the folk music community, which at the time emphasized collectivity over individual celebrity.<sup>17</sup> Frith has also described the antithetical ideologies of folk and popular music along the lines of their economic orientation. At mid-century, Frith explains, "folk songs worked differently from pop songs; the folk experience was 'authentic,' rooted in the experience of creation; the pop experience was unauthentic, involved *only the act of consumption*."<sup>18</sup> As Frith implies, consumption was often regarded as a shallow process that degrades art, and it follows that a focus on the musical act, rather than the ability to sell a musical object, undergirds the folk music community's claim to authenticity. Following Frith's pithy characterization, it could be said that an inverse relationship between authenticity and commercialism was a basic premise of folk ideology. My discussion of the values and practices in *Broadside* magazine below will bear this out.

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<sup>17</sup> Simon Frith, "'The Magic That Can Set You Free': The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community," *Popular Music* 1 (1981): 162-63.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 166. Emphasis added.

But Frith notes that in the 1960s, an important shift took place within the folk community from emphasizing collectivity to emphasizing individual artistic expression. “The criteria of sincerity began to shift from raw signs<sup>19</sup> to marks of artifice; the resulting separation of artist and audience was confirmed by the development of folk-rock.”<sup>20</sup> The period that Frith covers here in one brief sentence—from the emergence of the individual folk star to the development of folk-rock—is the one that I will be focusing on for the rest of this chapter. It can be roughly bounded on one end by the release of Joan Baez’s first record in 1960, which serves to mark folk’s turn toward the exaltation of individual stars. On the other end, the inauguration of folk-rock can be represented by Bob Dylan’s famous electric set at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival.

This was also the period in which record labels began to realize that they could make a real profit from folk music records. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and New York’s Greenwich Village were two hotbeds of young folk talent, and record executives began routinely offering contracts to the most talented singers in these locations. Cambridge was where Joan Baez first perfected her repertoire and performance styles, and Greenwich Village was where Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs were living when they were signed to recording contracts. By 1962, Baez had risen to national prominence, graced the cover of *Time* magazine, and was the household face of folk music to the rest of America.

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<sup>19</sup> By “raw signs,” Frith is referring to the direct, “no-frills” performance approach that was valued in the Greenwich Village folk scene of the late 1950s and early 1960s. See Marc Eliot, *Phil Ochs, Death of a Rebel: A Biography* (London: Omnibus Press, 1990), 51.

<sup>20</sup> Frith, “‘The Magic That Can Set You Free’: The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community,” 163.

The peak years of the folk music revival were characterized by an economic-aesthetic contradiction: members of the folk music community—singers, instrumentalists, fans, and journalistic pundits—were ideologically opposed to commercialism, and yet a thriving cottage industry sprang up around folk revival music. The industry consisted of local components, including the Greenwich Village folk clubs such as Gerde’s Folk City, equipment providers and local gathering points like Israel “Izzy” Young’s Folklore Center, and local folk music magazines like *Broadside*. It also consisted of promoting folk singers on a national scale, a few of whom, as in the case of Baez, found widespread success and significant profit. How was this contradiction between authenticity and commercialism negotiated by the folk music revival industry? Was it possible to reconcile folk ideology and capitalist enterprise? Yes it was, and the solution was for record companies to brand their products sympathetically with key values of the folk ideology.

### **The Non-Commercial Label: Moses Asch, Folkways, and Woody Guthrie**

No record label owner was more explicitly aligned with the folk ideology than Moses Asch, owner of Folkways Records. Asch had made it his mission to keep every one of his records in print, regardless of sales. This was an idea that ran counter to recorded industry trends, where records routinely went out of print once they had stopped selling. Moses Asch also believed in keeping the company out of the artistic decisions. His goal was to be an invisible facilitator, not a record producer; Asch later expressed this sentiment plainly in a company mission statement: “Folkways succeeds when it becomes

the *invisible conduit* from the world to the ears of human beings.”<sup>21</sup> Asch built a name for himself as someone who could be trusted, someone who cared, someone who was sympathetic to folk ideology. He recorded many of the greatest folk revival singers that the younger generations looked up to, including Leadbelly, Pete Seeger, and Big Bill Broonzy. One of the most influential revival musicians he recorded was Woody Guthrie, who exerted a major influence on the younger generation of musicians like Baez and Dylan.

Woody Guthrie (1912-1967) was an Oklahoman by birth and reputation, but he traveled all across the country during his lifetime. A product of the dust bowl era in Oklahoma, Guthrie traveled around the United States as a hobo in the 1930s, singing his songs and connecting with the “real” people in America, those who were downtrodden and living in poverty. Ending up in California in 1937, Guthrie developed into a popular radio personality playing guitar and singing on KFVD radio, Los Angeles. His repertoire of “old time” songs and originals, sung with Maxine “Lefty Lou” Crissman, reminded migrant workers, many of whom were destitute and desperate, of the homes they had left.<sup>22</sup> Through his songs of these years like “Do Re Mi,” and “Pretty Boy Floyd,” Guthrie began to use his music to tell these migrant workers’ stories, promote their values, and speak out on controversial political and social issues such as the unionization of workers in California.

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<sup>21</sup> Qtd. in Tony Olmsted, *Folkways Records: Moses Asch and His Encyclopedia of Sound* (New York: Routledge, 2003), ix. Emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> Ed Cray, *Ramblin’ Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 107.



Many years later, Guthrie became a musical and moral role model for the younger generation of folk musicians in Greenwich Village. Those who looked up to Guthrie as a folk hero spoke of him with great respect. It did not take much for his life to pass from story to legend. This legend persists even today in the writings of some historians of the American folk revivals. Lawrence Epstein, in his recent account of American folk protest music, paints a picture of Guthrie's mythic character:

Woody had a homeless soul. He was a spiritual orphan who went looking for storms. He drank the wild wind and slept in the dust. The very land became a part of his being. He loved people but often had trouble getting along with them. He told the truth and disappeared. He escaped confrontations by leaving.<sup>23</sup>

As many others have done, Epstein calls on one of the central images of Guthrie's biography: his inability to avoid *wanderlust*. As a cultural icon, the hobo was experiencing a surge in Romantic appeal during this time. The effects of the Great Depression and the agricultural disasters of the Oklahoma dust bowl had led to an increasing number of hoboes, either out of necessity for survival, or because the men wanted to abandon the harsh realities of their lives. Culturally, pre-existing notions of German Romanticism had been grafted onto the hobo: the wandering poet, social isolation and deficiency, and uncomfortable honesty. Guthrie's socially charged songs, like "Pretty Boy Floyd" and "Bizzness Ain't Dead," his flawed personal and family life, and his decline into sickness at the end of his life, contributed to Guthrie becoming the

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<sup>23</sup> Lawrence J. Epstein, *Political Folk Music in America from Its Origins to Bob Dylan* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2010), 36.

model of the Romantic hobo for the next generation.<sup>24</sup> Guthrie's legend, so cast, shares more than a few Beethovenian tropes of genius. Guthrie was, in a sense, working America's own brand of Romantic genius.

### **The Voice of Greenwich Village Folk Protest: *Broadside* Magazine**

To get a better understanding of the anti-commercial attitude of the Greenwich Village folk community in the early 1960s I will now turn to the pages of *Broadside* magazine. *Broadside* was a small operation in New York City, founded by the wife and husband team of Agnes "Sis" Cunningham and Gordon Friesen in 1962, and edited by them. Their joint venture brought together their respective talents: Friesen was a journalist, and Cunningham was a folk revival musician who had played with Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger in the Almanac Singers. The magazine was created in order to collect and make available the many topical protest songs being written in New York City at the time. The majority of the material in the magazine was transcribed by Cunningham from performances they had captured on tape. In her joint autobiography with her husband, Cunningham describes the process:

Though we did get some songs through the mails—mostly on tape, a few lead sheets—we got much of our material by setting up monthly meetings and encouraging writers to come to our little apartment with their guitars and sing into our big old reel-to-reel recorder. I transcribed the music and insisted on being supplied with a copy of the lyrics so that every word would be correct in the magazine. Bob Dylan came to these monthly meetings for well over a year.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Agnes "Sis" and Gordon Friesen Cunningham, *Red Dust and Broadside: A Joint Autobiography* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 276.

The music transcriptions made up most of the magazine's content, and were published as song sheets, consisting of lyrics, melody, and chords. Frequently interspersed throughout the magazine were excerpts of current newspaper stories, cut and pasted in collage format. Though more extensive written essays and editorials were scant at first, these were increasingly included at the back of the magazine. As I will explain in more detail below, there was no advertising in the magazine at first, and the lack of advertising revenue meant that subscription fees were a vital, if scant, source of *Broadside's* income. The fees were thirty-five cents an issue or five dollars per year, a price sufficiently low to necessitate the editors' repeated requests to their readership for more subscribers, and only just enough at first to cover postage of the magazine.<sup>26</sup> The magazine's circulation was modest—about one thousand in the mid-1960s and never more than about twenty-five hundred<sup>27</sup>—but *Broadside* was influential in expressing the ideas and values of the folk community during the peak period of folk music revival's popular and social appeal.

In hindsight it is clear that the first issue, published in February of 1962, set the tone for the magazine both in content and format. From the start, the content fostered an intentional discourse between song, the media, and current events by emphasizing the publication of topical songs, that is, newly written songs in the folk style that commented on current news events. The newspaper stories pasted into the pages were not haphazardly placed, but were often juxtaposed with the song to intentionally make

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 280.

connections between the two. For older folk songs, the newspaper stories might be more indirectly related to the subject of the song. Second, the format of the magazine—and its material realities—marked it as emanating from Greenwich Village, not Madison Avenue. *Broadside* was the antithesis of a slick, mass-circulated magazine like *Billboard*. *Billboard* was printed on a professional press; *Broadside* was produced on a home-operated mimeograph machine. The *Billboard* masthead was designed and laid out by designers in an art department; *Broadside*'s was hand-drawn.<sup>28</sup> Beyond that, *Broadside* featured handwritten song titles, grainy reproductions of newsprint clippings, and hand-copied—though generally tidy—music. Friesen described the magazine's appearance:

Physically, it wasn't a fancy showcase. There was no modern printing press available, only an ancient mimeograph machine. There was no slick paper; only sixteen-pound mimeo at eighty cents a ream. But though the magazine in appearance was lowly, its aims were lofty.<sup>29</sup>

In sum, *Broadside*'s format, design, and layout eschewed the slick visual presentation of a professional magazine. The implication was that a magazine not concerned with these commercial details could be more focused on the quality of the magazine's content and message: the songs. Thus the visual presentation of the magazine marked it as home-grown rather than a grand production (See Figure 3.1).

*Broadside*'s ethic of active social critique was already embodied in the connotations of the name they chose for the magazine. Historically, a "broadside" is a

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<sup>28</sup> This is yet another characteristic that may have been influenced by Woody Guthrie. Guthrie had personally hand drawn the cover art for his songbook, *Ten Songs* (1945). Illustrations in *Broadside* were created by Cunningham and Friesen's daughter, Agnes.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 283.



this web of meanings, at once claiming a connection to it as well as creating new associations for the term in the context of their present reality. The content, format, and name of the magazine clearly distinguished the projected values of the *Broadside* endeavor, and aligned them with the aesthetic and social values of the thriving Greenwich Village folk community.

Confirmation of these anti-commercial implications can be found both in the prose essays and the songs included in the magazine. An early example of this comes from Woody Guthrie, who has already been introduced as a legend among folk music revivalists, and Cunningham's old band mate. Guthrie's persona loomed large in the pages of *Broadside*, and Friesen later claimed that Guthrie was the main inspiration for the magazine.<sup>31</sup> Many of his songs were published there, and a serial biographical sketch of Guthrie was one of the first prose projects undertaken by the publishers.<sup>32</sup> The concluding installment includes an excerpt from Guthrie's introduction to his songbook, *Ten Songs* (1945). Here is a message from the legend himself, which Cunningham and Friesen reproduced at length for their readers. I reproduce most of the excerpt here, not only as evidence of the magazine's anti-commercial sentiment, but as an example of the fervent urgency with which Guthrie delivers the message. Guthrie was a spiritual father to members of the folk revival community, and it is impossible to understand their core values without understanding his.

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<sup>31</sup> Cunningham, *Red Dust and Broadside: A Joint Autobiography*, 291.

<sup>32</sup> This particular historical series began by telling the story of the Almanac Singers.

“Hollywood songs don’t last. Broadway songs are sprayed with hundreds of thousands of dollars to get them sprouted and going. They sprout, they burst, they bloom and fade. Wagonloads of your good money are shoveled and scattered onto them, but they are not our true history and we don’t take them deep into our heart.

The monopoly on music pays a few pet writers to go screwy trying to write and rewrite the same old notes using the same old formulas and the same old patterns. The songs sound sissified, timid, the spinning dreams of a bunch of neurotic screwballs. How can they be otherwise when they have no connection with the work and the fight of the human race? They are bad. They are hurtful, poisonous, complacent, distracting, full of jerky headaches and jangled nerves. I have seen soldiers and sailors on ships sail these insane records over the water by the dozens. I have heard fighting men in war zones scream and demand that the gibbery radio be shut off or it would be smashed.

Several million skulls have been cracked while our human race has worked and fought its way up to be union. Do the big bands and the orgasm gals sing a single solitary thing about that? No. Not a croak. Our spirit of work and sacrifice they cannot sing about because their brain is bought and paid for by the Big Money Boys who own and control them and who hate our world union. They hate our real songs, our work songs, our union songs, because these are the Light of Truth and the mind of the racketeer cannot face our Light. I would not care so much how they choose to waste their personal lives but it is your money they are using to hide your own history from you and to make your future a worse one. Some day you will have a voice in how all of your money is spent and then your songs will have some meaning....” W. W. Guthrie, 1945<sup>33</sup>

Guthrie states his contempt for commercial music boldly and incisively. He sets forth a sharp duality along class and gender lines. On one side are the capitalists, whose obsession with the flow of money will not allow them to move beyond a superficial and

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<sup>33</sup> Qtd. in *Broadside* 9-10, July 1962. Signature in original. Note that the issues of *Broadside* during this time did not include page numbers, and thus are not included in any citations of the periodical.

ultimately fabricated relationship with music. Their songs are “sissified,” their intentions “poisonous.” On the other hand are the workers, the real people creating “real” music, whose sensibilities are constantly assaulted by the “Big Money Boys.” Guthrie’s words provide a narrative schema for the struggle of the folk singer. This narrative had no room for Madison Avenue Ad Men and their oppressive coercion.

Indeed, these early issues of *Broadside* had very few advertisements in the traditional sense, and none at first. Unlike *Billboard* or *Harper’s*, *Broadside* had no dedicated advertising section, only the music, newspaper clippings, and a short section in the back of “Notes,” which included information about that issue’s songs and songwriters. Occasionally in this “Notes” section, however, the magazine would announce what label an artist’s release would be on, for instance: “Bonnie Dobson’s song is scheduled to be on a *Prestige* L-P to be released soon.... She wrote the song after seeing the movie ‘On The Beach’.”<sup>34</sup> Notices such as these were always buried with the other text, not marked off visually like an advertisement. It was positioned more like a public service announcement than an ad, and the magazine certainly did not receive any advertising revenue as a result of its inclusion.

*Broadside* had other, slyer ways of advertising for their publication. In the December, 1962 issue, there appeared a playful appeal for more subscribers. In the previous issue, the cover-page song had been a call-and-response song by Woody Guthrie, called “Bizzness Ain’t Dead” (see Figure 3.1 again), the first verse of which went as follows:

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<sup>34</sup> *Broadside* 7, June 1962.



And Bizzness ain't dead,  
(No bizzness ain't dead)  
It's only a-sleeping,  
(only a-sleeping)  
Dreaming someday  
(and a-dreaming someday)  
That a customer will come  
(a customer will come)<sup>35</sup>

This verse utilizes a subject-object structure. "Bizzness," the subject, dreams of the coming of a customer, the object. The customer then becomes the subject of the next verse:

The customer ain't dead  
(The customer ain't dead)  
He's only a-sleeping  
(only a-sleeping)  
Dreaming someday  
(and a-dreaming someday)  
That a good job will come  
(a good job will come)<sup>36</sup>

This subject-object structure is then repeated, and each time the object of the verse's second half becomes the subject of the next verse. The verses create a daisy chain of relationships: from the customer, to the paycheck, to the president, to the atom bomb (which the president dreams will *not* come), to the new world, to "you and me," to voters, to a big job. This leads back to the beginning verse, forming the chain into a circle. The editors of *Broadside* recognized the resonance of this song with their readership, even though it was written over a decade earlier. The song was featured on the cover of that November issue, and the editors included a footnote giving their rationale for its inclusion

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<sup>35</sup> *Broadside* 16, Mid-November 1962.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

in a magazine that published mostly current, topical songs: “Although written around 1950, this song will remain topical as long as we have our business ups and downs).”<sup>37</sup>

This song, which had been a part of the *content* of the magazine in November, was converted into an *advertisement* in the next issue. The magazine editors capitalized on this song, and the local celebrity of the author, when they included the following appeal in the “Notes” section:

Incidentally, we have composed a new verse to the Woody Guthrie song in *Broadside* #16 which you can sing while awaiting the latest issue:

NOW BROADSIDE AIN'T DEAD,  
IT'S ONLY A-SLEEPING,  
DREAMING SOMEDAY  
THAT MORE SUBSCRIPTIONS WILL COME.

Or, to get real wild:

...THAT A SUBSIDY WILL COME.<sup>38</sup>

And with that, they had made *Broadside* a character in a Woody Guthrie song, another link in Guthrie's daisy chain. This instance is a prime example of the blurring of the lines between content and commerce in music journalism.

How could the editors of an anti-commercial music magazine, who considered the co-optation of music by commercial forces to be detestable, wrangle a Woody Guthrie song into a plea for subscriptions and not consider their actions to be hypocritical? I would argue that the main rationale is in the authority of the magazine's political position

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> *Broadside* 17, December 1962. Capitalizations and formatting are retained from the original.

and voice. The editors clearly considered the magazine to be speaking with the voice of a folk insider, so much so that using Guthrie's song to create a jingle for their magazine did not qualify as co-optation. The result was advertising that was so intertwined with content that it was virtually undetectable; it was invisible advertising. In a very real way, *Broadside* was using the same strategy as Moses Asch did with Folkways; they cultivated a medium that sought to act as an "invisible conduit" for folk revival music to its readership.

Yet contempt for advertising culture remained a trope for *Broadside*, even creeping into the topical songs of the magazine. In a break from the usual political and journalistic song themes, established folk revival singer and songwriter Malvina Reynolds published a song called "Non-Ads" in March of 1963. It was a caustic parody of advertising jingles, revealing grim truths behind the cheerful advertising messages. The author included the following note along with the song: "Here's 'Non-Ads.' I propose it as a kind of zipper song with which people can have some fun kicking back at Madison Av."

Detergent, detergent, it gets your laundry white,  
It backs up in the water pipes, you drink it day and night,  
It makes your kitchen spotless, it keeps your bathroom clean  
It bubbles from the water tap and turns your liver green.

Use X or Y brand gasoline, it doesn't matter which,  
It all comes from the same big tanks, and makes Old Texas  
rich,  
It fills the freeways up with cars, it fills the air with lead,  
If you insist on breathing you'll have octane in your head.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Broadside* 23, March 1963.

On the same page, there were included verses sent in by readers. Here are two verses sent in by Nancy Schimmel:

Brushing your teeth takes so much energy,  
Better get some help from electricity  
Who's that in the bathroom gives everyone a shock?  
Better put your bathrobe on, it's Reddy Kilowatt!

Making a million can be done with ease,  
Just use our deoderant [sic] and you'll be sure to please.  
But if you use the other kind, you'll be sure to smell,  
And B.O. is a sin so you will go to \_\_\_\_\_.”<sup>40</sup>

Ironically, in the same issue as “Non-Ads” there appears what could be called the first genuine ad copy in the magazine’s one-year history to that point. It is for an album released by *Broadside*’s fellow folk music magazine *Sing Out!* The ad is not marked off visually. It appears within the flow of the text on the “Notes” page of the issue.

Sing out! Hootenanny. (Folkways Album #FN 2513. 121 W. 47th St. NYC, NY) Here is the *genuine* Hootenanny, a record put together from tapes made at NY Hoots held 1950-1955. Doesn't go all the way back to Sandburg, but sometimes feels that way. Spirited singing and playing of the kind we had almost forgotten in these sophisticated times. Determination to live and be free expressed with a youthful, uninhibited drive. (Is this the same Leon Bibb?). Betty Sanders making the whole thing sound so stupid and ridiculous, but how many good and innocent people have been washed over the HUAC dam in the years since (“Talking Un-American Blues”)...Bibb & group assuring us “This Land is Our Land.” Bibb, Pete Seeger & Fred Hellerman vowing “All I Want Is Union.” Bibb & Seeger inviting us *all* to “Get On Board.” Betty Sanders & group dreaming of the day when “the nightmare of the present fades away” (“Commonwealth Of Toil”). Hellerman & group throwing Jim Crow in the ash can (God, it's hard to keep him there!) “John Henry” with Seeger driving home the steel. “Gray Goose.” “Another Man

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. Line space in original.

Done Gone.” As a finale Bibb & group promising “Solidarity Forever”...All beautifully sung and beautifully played. And it was only yesterday.<sup>41</sup>

The urgent, excited tone; the claims to authenticity and nostalgia (“Here is the *genuine* Hootenanny,”<sup>42</sup> “almost forgotten in these sophisticated times”), the promotional descriptions of each song—there is no mistaking the voice of the Ad Man in these lines.

How could this ad exist in a magazine like *Broadside*, which so clearly disavowed music industry “racketeering,” as Guthrie called it?<sup>43</sup> It is because the publishers of *Broadside* did not object to advertisements per se; they objected to the brand values of some companies that produced advertisements. One might speculate, for instance, on whether or not Friesen and Cunningham would have rejected advertising offers from “commercial” labels—if, that is, they had been made in the first place. But companies probably would not have sought to advertise in a magazine that was critical of its way of business, not to mention one with relatively low circulation. The companies that did buy advertising space did so not only with money, but also with symbolic capital, with their

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. All emphases come from the original. Italics represent underlined text in the original.

<sup>42</sup> This phrase is almost certainly a reference to the television show called Hootenanny, which was set to debut in 1963 and was criticized a month earlier by the magazine for being inauthentic. The following account appeared in the notes section of *Broadside* 21, late February 1963: “Keep searching pilgrim. A major network has a weekly T.V. show to be called “Hootenanny” already to go—big money sponsors, performers, etc. all lined up. Even before the airing of the 1st show, however, the project has been crippled—and probably doomed—by the application of the BLACKLIST. The heroine of this latest episode of that serial “The Chicken Liver Boys Lost in the Wasteland” is Joan Baez. Approached by the producer to be on the show, her first question was, ‘Will Pete Seeger be on it?’ The producer said, ‘No,’ and Joan said, “Then count me out. When Pete Seeger goes on, I’ll go on.” So Joan won the biggest Emmy of the year hands down without even stepping before the T.V. camera. WHEN WILL THEY EVER LEARN...” Emphases and capitalizations in the original.

The concept of the “genuine article,” drawn upon in this advertisement, has been an important one for folklore studies in the United States. See Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*. See especially 98-102.

<sup>43</sup> See the above excerpt from Guthrie’s *Ten Songs*.

brands, which matched the values of *Broadside* and its readership. Indeed, after its early years, the magazine opened up their pages to regular advertisements by a small group of companies, which included Folkways Records, Vanguard Records, Elektra, and even Columbia Records. Each of these labels had in its catalog musicians who were beloved of *Broadside*: Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, and others had recorded for Folkways, Joan Baez was on Vanguard, and Phil Ochs recorded for Elektra. Columbia Records, the odd one out on this list because it was a major label, was redeemed by the fact that it was the label that supported Bob Dylan,<sup>44</sup> a major presence in the early pages of *Broadside*, as I will comment on further below. Each of these musicians contributed to the brand image of his or her record company, and the record company was invested in projecting and protecting a certain image of their artists that would reflect back well on their business and their brands.

*Broadside* also expanded their business into making records, releasing their first collection of songs in 1963. The album, called *Broadside Ballads, Vol. 1*, featured fifteen songs from the pages of the magazine, including a version of Guthrie's "Bizzness Ain't Dead" sung by the New World Singers, as well as songs by Pete Seeger and Malvina Reynolds, Gil Turner, Phil Ochs, and others.<sup>45</sup> Demonstrating the considerable influence that he had on the magazine during this time, five of the songs on the album—fully one-

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<sup>44</sup> Gordon Friesen attributed the rationale for Columbia's advertising in their magazine to the cheap fees: they could get a full-page ad for only seventy-five dollars. Cunningham, *Red Dust and Broadside: A Joint Autobiography*, 280.

<sup>45</sup> *Broadside Ballads, Vol. 1*. Folkways Records FH 5301, 1963, 33 1/3 rpm.

third—were by the young Bob Dylan.<sup>46</sup> When *Broadside* released their compilation, they formed a business partnership with another, more established record label to help them with the practicalities of musical releases, such as pressing the records and facilitating their distribution. Given that “trusting the source” was paramount, the record label that they chose to partner with should come as no surprise. They chose the only label that allowed them to enter the record business without compromising their strong values against that very industry. They worked with a man who shared their viewpoints and cared as much about the music as they did. *Broadside* chose the same brand that *Sing Out!* had trusted to release their records. They partnered with Moses Asch and Folkways, to create the Broadside-Folkways label.<sup>47</sup> In addition to reinforcing *Broadside*’s brand values, the partnership also benefitted Folkways by creating a new product that resonated with its brand values and commitments.

*Broadside* magazine represents a commercial endeavor that was particularly attuned to the values of the folk revival community in New York City in the 1960s. The magazine created a distinctive brand that both represented, and helped shape the values of the community. It proved to be a lasting strategy: *Broadside* continued to be published as a topical magazine for more than two decades.

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<sup>46</sup> The Dylan songs represented on the album were: “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “John Brown,” “I Will Not Go Down Under the Ground,” “Only a Hobo,” and “Talking Devil.” Dylan did not, however, perform his songs on the album; they were interpreted by the New World Singers, Blind Boy Grunt, and Happy Traum.

<sup>47</sup> In the album’s liner notes, *Broadside* editor Sis Cunningham extended special thanks to “Moses Asch and *Folkways Records* for the vital role of producing this most unusual record.”

### **“Records for the Connoisseur”: Vanguard Records and Joan Baez**

I would like to turn now from the brand identity of *Broadside* magazine and Folkways to the brand identity of another leading folk revival label, Vanguard Records, and especially to the contribution that Joan Baez made to this brand in the first half of the 1960s. Before 1960, the typical folk revival singer was often not considered to be an “artist” in the modern sense of the word.<sup>48</sup> Instead of embodying the personal expression and relentless innovation of the modern artist, folk singers were known more for collective expression and cultural preservation of traditional songs. This changed in the early 1960s when several young folk singers in Greenwich Village rose to the forefront of the folk revival, including: Phil Ochs, Richard Fariña, Tom Paxton, Buffy Sainte-Marie, and especially Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. In general, 1960s folk revival music was aligned with high art as a process of cultural validation. Folk music has a long history of relationship with traditions of art music, stretching back to its use as a nationalistic marker in 19th-century symphonic music.<sup>49</sup> For the 19th-century composer, folk music was raw material that needed to undergo a process of “gentrification” at the hands of art music composers.<sup>50</sup> But the 1960s folk revival was purportedly different. There was a desire to sing folk songs in a more direct form—recall Frith’s description of folk’s “raw

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<sup>48</sup> David R. Shumway, “Bob Dylan as Cultural Icon,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 111-112.

<sup>49</sup> On the “discovery of the folk” as a wellspring for high culture, see Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, 5 vols., vol. 3, *Music in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 120-23.

<sup>50</sup> See, for instance, Taruskin’s description of Russian folk song arrangements from the late 18th century to the collections in the early 19th century. Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3-24.



signs”—in order to tap into their political and social connotations. In reality, however, principles of refinement prevailed in the folk revival that were similar to the *Volkslieder* of the 19th century.<sup>51</sup> Joan Baez, for instance, was hailed for her great skill in finger-picking style of guitar playing, and for her “beautiful” voice, neither of which are necessarily emphasized in non-commercial traditional folk music.<sup>52</sup>

In postwar America, folk revival music became for many communities the sound of collective protest, and the folk protest singer became a cultural hero.<sup>53</sup> In addition to singers who were plumbing and preserving repertoires of the past, other musicians like Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs wrote new songs of collective protest in the pages of *Broadside*. In doing this they were carrying on the tradition of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Malvina Reynolds, an earlier generation of song composers that the younger singers revered. Casting new songs in a folk mold supposedly had the effect of imputing to them the authenticity and deep, lasting resonance of folk songs. Authenticity, working values, social justice, and honesty of voice were all values that were praised in the folk scene. They also came to represent what I identify as the core values for artists in this vein, including two of the biggest stars of the folk revival, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan.

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<sup>51</sup> *Volkslied* was the term that Johann Gottfried von Herder coined for the folk songs in his landmark two-volume collection of 1778-1779. Though his term referred to German folk songs, in English translation it has since become a generic term.

<sup>52</sup> Several authors have recently argued for considering the whole notion of folk music as a human invention, rather than an objective fact. See Gelbart, *The Invention of “Folk Music” and “Art Music”: Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner*; Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*.

<sup>53</sup> Jerome L. Rodnitzky, *Minstrels of the Dawn: The Folk-Protest Singer as a Cultural Hero* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1976). See also Epstein, *Political Folk Music in America from Its Origins to Bob Dylan*.

Bob Dylan has been the subject of many studies, and is rightly considered one of the most important songwriters of the second half of the twentieth century. He is often spoken of with a mixture of awe and reverence, typical reactions when people consider themselves to be in the company of genius. In an essay that deals explicitly with the phenomenon of Dylan's persona, David R. Shumway tracks the development of and rationale for Dylan as a cultural icon. Dylan, Shumway argues, was the one who introduced the aesthetics of modern art into folk music, and later into rock 'n' roll.<sup>54</sup>

Scholars' desire to pinpoint the source of a low art's ennoblement into a high art, in a sort of cause and effect way, is a common one. Another recent argument along these lines is Elijah Wald's contention that the Beatles "destroyed" rock 'n' roll by adding high-art aesthetics, dropping the last part of the name, and inaugurating the epoch of "rock."<sup>55</sup> I contend, however, that the story of rock was not as unique or isolated as it may seem. In other genres, including the folk music revival, record companies were also using industry-generated strategies to market their musicians as artists, as a way to develop the label's brand image. Before Dylan's poetry and the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band*, Vanguard Records was marketing Joan Baez as a folk musician whose songs were works of art.

When it released Joan Baez's first album in 1960, Vanguard Records was known as a classical and jazz label, with a growing interest in folk music. The label was created in 1950 by two brothers, Seymour and Maynard Solomon, who saw an opportunity for

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<sup>54</sup> Shumway, "Bob Dylan as Cultural Icon," 110-21.

<sup>55</sup> Elijah Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'N' Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 230-47.

classical music to shine in the new long-playing record format that had been unveiled in 1948 by Columbia Records.<sup>56</sup> The Solomon brothers quickly established Vanguard as a high-quality independent classical music label. A few years later, jazz was added to their catalog with the arrival in 1953 of John Hammond, an already prominent record producer who had been influential in advancing the careers of Billie Holiday and Benny Goodman. Hammond curated their Jazz Showcase series for several years before continuing his famous career at Columbia Records, where he discovered Aretha Franklin, and was the only producer in New York City willing to take a chance on the young Bob Dylan in 1961.<sup>57</sup> In 1957, Vanguard Records released the Weavers's 1955 Carnegie Hall concert, in the midst of the group's fight against an industry blacklist. The record was a success, triggering the company's growing involvement with folk revival singers, which would eventually include Odetta and Buffy Sainte-Marie, as well as Mimi Baez Fariña (Joan's younger sister) and her husband Richard Fariña. Their support of folk revival musicians has come to be one of the areas they are most remembered for today. When they signed Baez, the Solomon brothers had developed a brand image that emphasized trailblazing aesthetics in combination with the willingness to support radical Leftist musicians such as the Weavers and Paul Robeson. Baez, in turn, further solidified Vanguard's image while also reaching a much broader consumer base.

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<sup>56</sup> John Tebbel, "The Hardy Independent," *High Fidelity*, February 1964, 46. At the time that they started Vanguard Records, the Solomon brothers were already veterans of the classical music world: Seymour was a violinist and trained musicologist, and Maynard had studied music and literature. After his involvement with Vanguard, Maynard Solomon went on to have an extensive academic career as a classical music historian.

<sup>57</sup> Dylan was turned down for a contract by both Moses Asch at Folkways and Maynard Solomon at Vanguard before being signed to Columbia.

Marketing an artist in a way that enhanced a label's brand image was very important, and Vanguard was thoughtfully strategic when introducing new recording artists to its catalog. The label had a reputation among industry insiders for paying attention to detail in the recording studio, signing talented artists, and carefully planning the presentation of their artists to the public.<sup>58</sup> An example of their marketing approach can be seen in their handling of Netania Davrath, a classical singer whose first record they released in 1960, the same year as Baez. Davrath was a young, Ukrainian-born soprano, but completely unknown in the concert world. In a 1964 profile of Vanguard in *High Fidelity* magazine, Seymour Solomon explained his struggle to know how to begin Davrath's recording career. "We knew we had what was potentially a major talent to deal with.... The question then was, what to do with her?"<sup>59</sup> The difficulty stemmed from Davrath's lack of concert experience. A classical singer's typical introduction to the marketplace of classical recordings, Seymour went on to explain, was through the concert stage. The all-important step of first establishing a concert career would bolster record sales, which would in turn propel demand for more concerts and public recognition for the singer. This would lead to more recordings, forming a symbiotic relationship between stage and recording studio. But Davrath did not have the benefit of concert recognition—she was too young to have done extensive concertizing—and Vanguard did not have the benefit of time. The Solomon brothers decided that they did not want to wait to launch

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Qtd. in *ibid.*, 47.

Davrath's recording career, and decided they needed a different angle. Seymour described their solution:

We knew we had a chance to record someone who seemed certain to become a really important artist, though, so we talked to her and found out that she had a broad repertory of folk songs—in Russian, Israeli, Yiddish, and French. Now *that* was a field in which we had experience, and we concluded that people might buy beautiful folk repertory even by an unknown singer if she were good. We therefore presented Netania, somewhat cautiously, in an album of Russian folk songs.<sup>60</sup>

This they did in 1960, and the strategy proved effective. Davrath's early records of folk repertoire were well accepted, and led to a classical concert career as well as the opportunity to record classical repertoire.<sup>61</sup>

Vanguard's approach to launching Davrath's career is akin to marketing strategies that did not become common in other non-music industries until thirty years later. The strategy of creating a rationale for an artist, and distinguishing the artist in the marketplace through images, advertisements, and press content, is the nature of what we might today call the "branding" of an artist. At the time, it was simply called promotion. But it hints at a consciousness on the part of record labels of a larger system of cultural symbolism into which their artists fit, in this case the intersection of classical and folkloric values in 1960. It was a continuation of the system of cultural signs put in place over a half century earlier by companies such as the Victor Talking Machine Company (see Chapter II). By cultivating an ersatz mythology around an artist, the artist could be

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<sup>60</sup> Qtd. in *ibid.* Emphasis in original.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

placed symbolically within preexisting cultural codes. The outward focus of a company like Vanguard was mostly on its musicians, rather than itself, and thus the human focus was a natural part of the system. Later, applying human values such as authenticity to other commodities would be a common practice among companies such as Nike or Apple.

Appearance was very important to folk revival singers in the 1960s,<sup>62</sup> but no advertising agency or costume director was needed to advise Baez on how to augment her image. She already looked the part. She was a self-described “bohemian”<sup>63</sup> with long dark tresses, which she later said she grew so that she could be “like all the fair and tender maidens in all of the long and tragic ballads.”<sup>64</sup> In a practice begun long before she became a star, she frequently performed barefoot. She seemed the real-life embodiment of one of the mythical maidens in her songs, and her performances were frequently described as mesmerizing. Mythic connections were not lost on John McPhee, the *Time* magazine journalist who profiled Baez in 1962. The author dubbed Baez “Sibyl with Guitar,” referring to the prophetess of Greek mythology.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, Baez was reaching mythological status in folk circles, as folk revival music itself was reaching its peak popularity. The fact that Baez’s profile was the cover story indicates the broad popularity that the folk revival had attained, and Baez’s status as its leading icon.

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<sup>62</sup> Shumway, “Bob Dylan as Cultural Icon,” 111.

<sup>63</sup> See Joan Baez, *And a Voice to Sing With: A Memoir* (New York: Summit Books, 1987), 52, 54, 59, 64.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>65</sup> John McPhee, “Sibyl with Guitar,” *Time*, 23 November 1962.

Baez was conscious, however, of the theatrical nature of being a recording artist.

In her 1968 memoir, Baez described her attitude toward public personae:

Dick [Richard Fariña] and I knew when we talked how stupid the whole concept was—that a public image was based on some truths, some half-truths, some innocent rumors, and a few nasty lies. It meant general overexposure and self-consciousness (as opposed to self-awareness) and the constant danger of accepting someone else's evaluation of you in place of your own—your own being practically impossible to make already. Money meant power, an irresistible prestige value, and lots of extra attention—all of which could be used, almost in spite of themselves, for good things if you kept your head. We also knew the meaning of the word temptation, and what a smart thing it was for Jesus to say, "Lead us not into temptation," because He knew well that once we got there we were all so very weak.<sup>66</sup>

At Vanguard Records, Joan Baez was not destined to be introduced to the public without a solid plan. In 1964, reporter John Tebbel acknowledged this when he mused on the inherent talent of Baez, saying:

It might be supposed that a record company would have to do no more with such an artist than put a microphone in front of her and let her sing. At Vanguard, however, the intent was to bring out the best she had to offer rather than settle for something merely commercially viable.<sup>67</sup>

Her first four albums can be seen as a unit, consisting of two pairs of albums. The first two are self-titled, and are studio recordings. The second two are also self-titled, but are live recordings. The plan is not unlike the rolling out of a recital series for a classical artist. Indeed, Baez's plan can be seen as a mirror reflection of Netania Davrath's.

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<sup>66</sup> Joan Baez, *Daybreak* (New York: The Dial Press, 1968), 114.

<sup>67</sup> Tebbel, "The Hardy Independent," 48.

Whereas Davrath was a classically-trained singer whom the Solomon brothers marketed as a folk singer, Baez was an untrained folk singer whom the record label cast as a classical artist. Many years later, Baez described the experience of recording her first album in New York City in the summer of 1960:

We worked in the Manhattan Towers Hotel on a dingy block of Broadway. The ballroom was available every day of the week except Wednesday, when it was transformed into a bingo parlor for the local residents and their guests. I stood on the dirtiest rug in New York City in my bare feet, dwarfed by the huge, musty room, and sang into three microphones, two on the outside for stereo, and one in the center for monaural. Freddy Hellerman of the Weavers used a fourth microphone for six songs after I had decided, under great pressure, that a second instrument, tastefully played, was not “commercial,” but rather enhanced the music. The beautiful ballad “Mary Hamilton” was secured in one take, without a run-through. I would work for a few hours, and then Maynard and the engineer and I would go down the street for roast beef sandwiches. In three days we recorded nineteen songs, thirteen of which made up my first legitimate solo album.<sup>68</sup>

Baez was on a strict release schedule during her eleven years at Vanguard records. For the first eight years, folk fans could expect a new Joan Baez album every fall, like clockwork (see Table 3.1). She soon ascended to the position of first lady of folk, and her first five albums should be seen as the presentation of the core image of Baez’s early career, which in turn established Vanguard brand as one of the leading homes for folk revival musicians. A few central surface characteristics of these albums are worth noting. First, the album titles all emphasized Baez’s name, rather than a concept or title track. Second, the album covers all featured photos of Baez. Third, the instrumentation on these albums supported the expected instrumentation of a folk troubadour at the time: voice

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<sup>68</sup> Baez, *And a Voice to Sing With: A Memoir*, 65-66.



and guitar, with little more.<sup>69</sup> The Solomon brothers and Baez were establishing a remarkably consistent image and sound for Baez for the marketplace. I consider this period to be the “core” of her career, not in an objective sense, but in terms of the way she was marketed. This image of Baez was established and became a very real presence in the marketplace. And because Baez’s early albums sold well, Vanguard had a stake in developing and preserving this image of Baez. To change it would be a threat not only to Baez’s image and popularity, but also to the commercial viability of Vanguard’s brand, which they had spent considerable time and money to establish. Over the course of the

**Table 3.1.** Joan Baez’s album releases for Vanguard Records.

Album Name	Release Date
<i>Joan Baez</i>	October 1960
<i>Joan Baez, Vol. 2</i>	September 1961
<i>Joan Baez, In Concert</i>	September 1962
<i>Joan Baez, In Concert Vol. 2</i>	November 1963
<i>Joan Baez/5</i>	October 1964
<i>Farewell Angelina</i>	October 1965
<i>Noel</i>	November 1966
<i>Joan</i>	August 1967
<i>Baptism: A Journey Through Time</i>	June 1968
<i>Any Day Now</i>	December 1968
<i>David’s Album</i>	May 1969
<i>One Day at a Time</i>	January 1970
<i>The First Ten Years</i>	October 1970
<i>Blessed Are</i>	August 1971
<i>Carry It On (Soundtrack)</i>	December 1971

<sup>69</sup> The glaring exception is “Bachianas Brasileiras” on *Joan Baez/5*, which featured an orchestra.

1960s and early 1970s, Baez's focus shifted away from folk music, yet her connection with that image persisted in the minds of critics and the public, even after she had left Vanguard for A&M Records. "Though I had not officially sung 'folk songs' for years," she later recalled, "I was still called a 'folksinger.'"<sup>70</sup> We will take a closer look at how Baez's persona was shaped by the words written about her shortly, but first a word on music commodities and the nature of relationships.

### **Recorded Music, Branding, and Relationships**

Sound recording is a special phenomenon in that it allows for the very convincing illusion of a relationship between a listener and a performer. Ever since mechanical music broke the exclusively human interaction that defined music, the commodification of musical objects has sought to restore the relational nature of music to some extent. In whatever form—singing and playing for friends, with friends, or merely for oneself—music had always involved a relationship between the listener and an immediate human relationship to the one producing the music. With mechanical music, however, it was possible to remove the immediacy of that human producer in time and space, leaving only the listener and the artifact. When a consumer listened to a pre-recorded music disc, they were hearing the reproduction of sounds played or sung by a musician at some previous time, and typically at a considerable distance from the listening space.

The loss of the relationship between musician and listener was felt from the beginning of the recorded music industry, at least by music advertisers who sought to

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 170.

compensate for the loss in their advertisements. An advertisement in 1921 for Apollo player pianos, for instance, implied that when you put on a music roll of a Beethoven sonata, you invite the great composer himself into your parlor.<sup>71</sup> And in a strategy discussed in Chapter II, the Victor Talking Machine Company promised its consumers that hearing a Red Seal recording of Enrico Caruso was no different from hearing the great tenor himself as if he were standing in front of you. The promise of the advertisement is that you can feel confident that nothing of the live experience will be lost if you buy a musical recording. Rest assured that “Both are Caruso.”<sup>72</sup> These two examples are representative of a broader tendency in the early recorded music industry to claim that recordings can restore the very musical relationships that they disrupted.

The focus on the fidelity of sound recordings had only intensified by the 1960s, deepening the illusion of a relationship between the listener and musician through the means of the commodified sound recording. Hardware developers, engineers, and marketers of mechanical recordings and players strongly emphasized the importance of fidelity. A central rationale for the development and release of new technologies such as electrical recording, 45-rpm singles, stereo recording, and long-playing records, was that they enhanced the fidelity of the recording and playback process. Progress was measured in large part by the extent to which a new technology removed the distraction of

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<sup>71</sup> Reproduced in Taylor, “The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of ‘Mechanical Music’,” 299.

<sup>72</sup> See Chapter II. This 1917 advertisement is frequently reproduced, and can be found for instance in Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*, 119.

technology and allowed for the focus on sound.<sup>73</sup> In addition to sound fidelity and advertisements, the packaging of a music commodity also played an important part in the development of this relationship illusion by creating a commodified version of the artist's persona.

By providing a visual and textual complement to the music, the packaging design of a record represents a flashpoint of communication between the producer and consumer of recorded music, and a point of exposure to the record label's brand values. Not only can it have an influence at the point of sale, persuading a record buyer to choose one product over another, it can act as a longer-term influence once the record has been taken home. Album liner notes and song lyrics were often pored over by eager music fans, becoming an influential part of the listening experience. It should come as no surprise, then, that when Maynard Solomon designed packaging for Joan Baez's debut album, he did so with the assumption that consumers would go to the record store not just to buy a *recording* of Joan Baez, but a *relationship* with her. It was a relationship with the public version of Baez, what I will call her commodified persona.

### **“A Peak Alone Yet Planted Here Among Us”: The Commodified Joan Baez, 1960-1964**

What was the nature of Joan Baez's commodified persona, as seen through her Vanguard recordings? How did Maynard Solomon, Baez, and the others involved in making her albums, market her, her voice, and her music for consumption by the general

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<sup>73</sup> See Jonathan Sterne's essay, "The Social Genesis of Sound Fidelity," in Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, 215-86.

public, and how did these commodities in turn play a role in branding Vanguard records as a label that produced folk revival music as well as classical? In the remainder of this chapter, I will do a close analysis of the core products that best and most deeply outline Baez's early commodified persona to the consumer: her first five Vanguard albums, and the *Joan Baez Songbook*, a sheet music collection of her repertoire for musicians to play themselves. I will focus on the essays written to accompany these products. It is in these essays that we can see clearly the core themes used to brand Baez and her music for her audience.

One of the benefits of using a branding approach when analyzing recordings is that it provides a rationale for analyzing the various physical and textual components of a music commodity such as a record, and incorporating these elements in an account of the listening experience. As discussed in chapters I and II, a brand is a complex cultural artifact that brings together several communicative modalities—especially brand image and brand textuality<sup>74</sup>—under a unified ideological system. This can be useful when dealing with the interpretation of album art and liner notes, and accounting for the impact of these elements on musical meaning. In this section, I will analyze Joan Baez's first five albums for Vanguard Records, highlighting the way that the iconography (brand image), and especially the liner notes (brand textuality) helped shape the reality of Baez's public persona and by extension, her record label's brand.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> See Chapter II.

<sup>75</sup> In addition to the excerpts used in the following analysis, transcriptions of the complete liner notes for these albums can be found in the Appendix.

Before turning to the liner notes of Baez's early albums, it will be instructive to briefly consider an essay on Baez by John M. Conly, which will frame my discussion. In the essay, which prefaces *The Joan Baez Songbook*,<sup>76</sup> Conly openly addresses the reality of Baez's public persona, and acknowledges her awareness of it.

She is a personage, of which she is aware. Or, rather, perhaps, she may think of herself as a purpose, of which she has been given charge whether she wants it or not. She is conscious of her image. At an artist's studio, during the preparation of this book, she idly moved behind his drawing board and, half-doodling, sketched a picture (she draws very well and quickly). It was a Joan Baez. More to the point, it was a stylized Joan Baez, with tresses flowing forward over the shoulders, a young mystery. This is her image, and do not read the word in the Madison Avenue sense. It is not an image she created for any public; it is truly the image she has found, thus far, looking for Joan Baez. She offers it honestly.<sup>77</sup>

Here we find Baez not only aware of her public persona, but an active participant-mediator in its creation and sustainment. Conly is quick to quell any suspicion in the reader that the development of a persona in Baez's indicates any disingenuousness on her part. "Do not read the word in the Madison Avenue sense," he advises. And indeed Baez's commodified persona was not shaped by pithy advertising slogans or excessive merchandising. Rather, it was developed in a significant way through the longer form liner notes essays of her albums on Vanguard Records.

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<sup>76</sup> Maynard Solomon, ed. *The Joan Baez Songbook* (New York: Ryerson Music Publishers, 1964).

<sup>77</sup> John M. Conly, "Joan Baez," in *The Joan Baez Songbook*, ed. Maynard Solomon (New York: Ryerson Music Publishers, 1964), 7.

Joan Baez's first five records all included as liner notes extensive essays or poetry by guest contributors.<sup>78</sup> Each contributor is well known for his own accomplishments: Vanguard executive Solomon, music journalist and critic Nat Hentoff, fellow folk revival musician Bob Dylan, and poet Langston Hughes (see Table 3.2). In what follows, I will first do an in-depth analysis of Solomon's liner notes for Joan Baez's debut album, noting four themes of his approach to positioning Baez's entrance into the music marketplace. Second, I will survey the other liner notes, highlighting the other main themes used to enhance and shape Baez's commodified persona.

**Table 3.2.** Authors of liner notes essays for Baez's first five albums.

Album Name	Author of Liner Notes
<i>Joan Baez</i>	Maynard Solomon
<i>Joan Baez, Vol. 2</i>	Nat Hentoff
<i>Joan Baez, In Concert</i>	Maynard Solomon
<i>Joan Baez, In Concert Vol. 2</i>	Bob Dylan
<i>Joan Baez/5</i>	Langston Hughes

#### *Themes in the Liner Notes for Joan Baez (1960)*

Maynard Solomon's essay for Baez's debut album, *Joan Baez*, paints a picture of Baez and positions her as a musician worthy of continuing the venerable folk tradition. There are four themes about Baez that I would like to emphasize from this essay. First, Solomon claims that Baez is poised to become the next legendary folk singer. Solomon

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<sup>78</sup> For her sixth Vanguard album, Baez wrote her own liner notes, a practice that she repeated often after this point.

begins by acknowledging a historical canon of folk musicians whose style had grasped the popular and critical imagination: “Woody Guthrie, Huddie Ledbetter, Pete Seeger, The Weavers, and perhaps one or two others.” Then he adds Baez’s name to the list: “It may soon be possible to add the name of Joan Baez to the list of significant innovators. More than any other singer of the current folk music revival she has captured the heart of the folksinging audience.”<sup>79</sup> Though in hindsight Solomon’s words proved to be prescient, it was quite a claim for Solomon to make at the time. Baez had only given infrequent performances beyond the coffee shops in Cambridge, and was not yet twenty years old.

The second theme in Solomon’s essay is the importance of non-commercialism in folk music generally and Baez’s outlook specifically. “Joan,” Solomon explains,

is representative of the “new wave” among the younger folk-singers, who are disenchanted by the commercial, over-arranged-and-orchestrated trends in folk music performance, where the individuality of the singer is sacrificed to the arranger’s conception, and where “sound” rather than meaning predominates.<sup>80</sup>

Here is an explanation of an important intersection between social and musical values. Simpler orchestration and pared-down arrangements—recall yet again Frith’s “raw signs”—are an antidote for commercialized, inauthentic versions of folk music. Limited performing forces are equated with the retention of a singer’s individual voice and a focus on the music’s meaning. Indeed, the orchestration on this album—mostly limited to

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<sup>79</sup> Maynard Solomon, “[Joan Baez Liner Notes],” *Joan Baez* VRS-9078/VSD-2077 (1960).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*



Baez and her guitar—would set a precedent for Baez’s following albums in the folk style. Baez was complicit in the view that fewer instruments were better. As she recalled in the quote earlier in this chapter, she had to be talked into allowing even a second guitarist, Fred Hellerman, to accompany her on a few tracks for the album.

A third theme in Solomon’s liner notes essay is the tension between the collective nature of Baez’s repertoire, and the intensely personal nature of her expression.

On the surface, hers seems to be a personal art. But her special quality is that she has succeeded in mirroring so many of the emotional states and so much of the outlook of her generation. And it is this which lends depth to her personal vision. It is an indefinable quality, really, for one cannot adequately characterize her contemporaries with easy words like “aspiration,” “yearning,” “non-conformity,” “humanism,” “rebellion.” They have all of these qualities and many more. To one listener, the heart of Joan’s message is a kind of soft but unyielding affirmation, a sort of folksinging non-violent resistance, where the related threads of love and freedom run sweetly, sadly, unforced, without self-pity.<sup>81</sup>

This tension between singular talent and universal resonance would be a common trope of Baez’s commodified persona throughout her first five albums.

A fourth theme is the quality of Baez’s voice. Solomon describes Baez’s singing voice with comparisons that would become increasingly frequent with critics, as Baez’s renown grew:

A soprano voice with no break from the lowest to the highest registers, a choir-boy’s pure projection linked with an intense vibrato, a clear diction and a surpassing ability to grasp the communicative essence of every song, whether it be folk or composed, ballad or lyric, Appalachian, British or Mexican...

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

And here Solomon's use of the term "voice" shifts into the metaphorical sense, as he describes the impact of Baez's art on society and humanity:

hers is a new voice which speaks to us with wonder and compassion, reaching and re-awakening long-untouched regions of our heart and mind.

In this liner notes essay, Solomon links Baez to the cultural, aesthetic, and political narrative that Vanguard claimed as a vital part of its own history and *raison d'être*. By positioning Baez as the next link in a chain of artists that Vanguard has supported, Solomon not only promotes his promising new recording artist, he also reinforces the central brand characteristics of his own record label.

#### *Themes in the Liner Notes, 1961-1964*

The theme of Baez's voice became an important one in the liner notes of her following four albums. Frequently, the author would recount the first time he heard Baez's voice, and claim it as a moment of significance. Nat Hentoff recalled first hearing Baez at a taping for a television show, where he was impressed by her ability to remain true to her own style. The sound of her voice led the way in this impression:

Her concentrated purity of voice is an extension of an indomitably honest personality. During rehearsals and on the actual program, she remained implacably herself, no matter what preceded or followed her; and on the air she was the program's center of gravity, communicating with direct, distilled emotion and with no irrelevant furbelows of gesture.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Nat Hentoff, "[Liner Notes]," *Joan Baez, Vol. 2* VRS-9094/VSD-2097 (1961).

Like Solomon, Hentoff emphasizes Baez's laudable discipline for avoiding the more flamboyant and "irrelevant" gestures that typically accompany stage performance, preferring to retain a purity of expression in her performance. Langston Hughes's liner notes also recount the first time he heard Joan Baez's voice, at the Newport Folk Festival in 1959. First hearing that "cool clear voice" from a distance, late at night, was the moment that piqued his interest and led to an enduring admiration for Baez and her music.<sup>83</sup>

Perhaps the most visceral description of Baez's voice comes from Bob Dylan's liner notes to Baez's fourth album, *Joan Baez In Concert, Vol. 2* (1963). Dylan's notes, in the form of a lengthy free-verse poem, are concerned as much with developing the mythology of Bob Dylan as of Baez. But Baez and her voice form a central part in his telling of his own aesthetic development. Dylan tells how he tried to resist the effects of Baez's voice on the grounds that it was *too beautiful*, and the only "beauty" Dylan acknowledged at the time was in the ugliness of the real world around him.

A girl I met on common ground  
Who like me strummed lonesome tunes  
With a "lovely voice" so I first heard  
"A thing a beauty"<sup>84</sup> people said  
"Wondrous sounds" writers wrote  
"The only beauty's ugly, man  
The crackin' shakin' breakin' sounds're  
The only beauty I understand"<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Langston Hughes, "Joan Baez: A Tribute [Liner Notes]," *Joan Baez/5* VRS-9160/VSD-79160 (1964).

<sup>84</sup> As demonstrated by phrases such as this, Dylan employs a written dialect throughout the poem.

<sup>85</sup> Bob Dylan, "[Liner Notes]," *Joan Baez In Concert, Vol. 2* VRS-9113/VSD-2123 (1963).

The poem then recounts their developing relationship. As he got to know more about Baez's life, beyond what critics had said about her, Dylan began to realize that maybe there was something more that undergirded Baez's voice, something that he should pay attention to. He tells himself:

"Yuh oughta listen t' her voice ...  
Maybe somethin's in the sound ...  
Ah but what could she care anyway  
Kill them thoughts yes  
they ain't no good  
Only ugly's understood."

When Dylan finally allows himself to *hear* Baez's voice, he is overcome:

When all at once the silent air  
Split open from her soundin' voice  
Without no warnin' from her lips  
An' by instinct my blood reversed  
An' I shook an' started reachin' for  
That wall that was supposed t' fall  
But my restin' nerves weren't restless now  
An' this time they wouldn't jump  
"Let her voice ring out," they cried  
"We're too tired t' stop 'er sing"  
Which shattered all the rules I owned  
An' left me puzzled without no choice  
'Cept t' listen t' her voice  
An' when I leaned upon my elbows bare  
That limply held my body up  
I felt my face freeze t' the bone  
An' my mouth like ice or solid stone  
Could not've moved 'f called upon  
An' the time like velvet floated by  
Until with hunger pains it cried  
"Don' stop singing ... sing again"

Through all these descriptions, Baez's voice emerges as powerfully personal, yet universally powerful.

An extension of the voice theme is the liner notes' emphasis of the uniqueness of Baez's identity and art. By the early 1960s, as I pointed out earlier in this chapter, it was becoming acceptable within the folk community to promote talented individuals, though this had to be done somewhat cautiously. The authors of the liner notes address this by connecting Baez to the broader community of folk singing, but asserting that even though she sings folk songs like many others, Baez always remains herself. Anyone can sing folk music, the authors assert. But no one can sing like Joan Baez. In the words of Nat Hentoff, the uniqueness of her approach makes Baez stand out as an original artist:

Miss Baez...has not been content to merely copy folk styles and stylists. She is unmistakably herself in whatever she sings.<sup>86</sup>

Langston Hughes also makes a poetic and compelling argument for the primacy of Baez's identity in her art. Baez is somehow elevated yet grounded, set apart yet in our midst. She is:

A peak alone yet planted here among us: Joan Baez. Like rippling water, cool as a mountain stream, clear as Colorado sunlight in the morning. Yet body warm as you and I. And feet with toenails. Feet touching earth, floors, platforms, stages, in shoes or out. Human feet with toes—like yours and mine: Joan Baez.

Standing singing alone. Two hands that hold and finger a guitar. One mouth that sends out a song—but nobody else's song, only hers: Joan Baez. Although Bach provided the form and Brazil inspired the melody and Villa-Lobos, out of both, created the song—the Bachianas Brasileiras on this disc—the song comes out hers: Joan Baez. Entirely hers. Joan Baez.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Hentoff, "[Liner Notes]."

<sup>87</sup> Hughes, "Joan Baez: A Tribute [Liner Notes]."

Note also the rhetorical repetition of her full name, Joan Baez. With each repetition Hughes asserts her reality and identity, making Baez's persona concrete and more tangible for the reader. Even when Baez sings repertoire seemingly outside her typical folk fare, as with the Villa-Lobos piece "Bachianas Brasileiras" mentioned in this quotation, she still takes ownership of the music.

Hughes then goes on to plainly state another theme: he casts Baez's music as a "work of art."

Maybe that [i.e., Baez remaining herself in any circumstance] is what is called "a work of art," an individual work of art, a transmutation into self—so that for those moments of singing, *Joan Baez herself becomes a work of art*. But there is nothing about her singing that is arty. When something is arty, it is held in the hand and looked at with conceit. But when something is art, it is the hand. A Baez song is Joan Baez. Otherwise and ordinarily, when not singing, she is just a human being like the rest of us—ten toes, ten fingers, one body, one throat, one mouth. But when singing, so uniquely—she becomes the song—and it is hers. No matter who first sang it, or who first wrote it, it becomes hers—and she it. And therefore artlessly, art.<sup>88</sup>

By virtue of her ability to completely embody the songs she sings, Hughes argues, Baez transcends the everyday in the moment of song, into the realm of art. The authority of her voice and interpretation is emphasized again. The connection of Baez and the folk music revival to notions of modern art was one that was begun by Maynard Solomon in his earlier notes. In his essay for *Joan Baez In Concert*, he starts out not by mentioning Baez, but paraphrasing German Romantic poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856):

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

Heine once said that literature is a graveyard in which we wander, searching out and embracing the headstones of those ideas which are closest to our own beliefs. So it is with our researches in folk music.<sup>89</sup>

Over the course of the next three paragraphs, Solomon also quotes two sonnets by Percy Bysshe Shelley, and a line from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.<sup>90</sup> Such connections would seem natural in the program notes for a song cycle by Robert Schumann, but are more conspicuous in the context of a folk music album liner notes. It reveals that for Solomon, folk music and art music were two branches of the same tree—both were concerned with timeless beauty and authenticity—and the methods of approaching the brand textuality of the two were similar. Solomon indeed had reason to link Baez to traditions of Western art music, for Vanguard still considered itself a classical label.

The cover art for *Joan Baez in Concert* supports the narrative of Joan Baez as artist. It consists of a black and white photo that is almost completely engulfed in black shadow, with Baez's profile emerging from the darkness and providing the photo's only reflection of light. Though forever frozen in photographic form, Baez wears an ephemeral expression, mouth slightly open and eyes locked in a searching gaze. It is as if she is caught in the midst of communicating something very serious and meaningful. On the cover is Vanguard's motto: "Recordings for the connoisseur" (see Figure 3.2). Baez later recalled the difference between Columbia Records and Vanguard Records, respectively: "In my mind, the difference between the two companies was that one was commercial

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<sup>89</sup> Maynard Solomon, "[Liner Notes]," *Joan Baez In Concert* VRS-9112/VSD-2122 (1962). I have been unable to confirm the source of this paraphrase.

<sup>90</sup> See the Appendix for the quotations and annotations on their sources.

and had mostly to do with money, and the other was not so commercial and had mostly to do with music.”<sup>91</sup>

**Figure 3.2.** Cover image for *Joan Baez, In Concert* (1962)



Consider again the words of John M. Conly that opened this section of the chapter. He exhorts the reader to not see Baez’s public image as a Madison Avenue creation, to not doubt the fact that Baez offers her image not to coerce a sale, but because it is her honest image. Honesty, authenticity, artistry, all of these are excellent

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<sup>91</sup> Baez, *And a Voice to Sing With: A Memoir*, 61.



foundations for a marketing campaign. Conly himself proves as much in the very same essay, when his rapturous praise of Baez finally slips into a sales pitch. When one cares about something deeply, and is convinced of its value, one is often compelled to share it with others, and this is where Conly is coming from when at the end of the essay he writes: “It would seem highly likely that anyone who buys this book already owns at least one Joan Baez record. Anyone who doesn’t: buy one.”<sup>92</sup> Conly’s exhortation smacks not so much of the disingenuous ad man as it does the excited maven who cannot help sharing his trove with all his friends.

And this is exactly the point. In the folk music revival community, where commercialism and salesmanship were shunned on principle, Vanguard had found ways to make these aspects of the transaction as invisible as possible. That was their brand development strategy. But there should be no illusion that this type of branding is completely altruistic. Altruism is, after all, not a bad marketing strategy, and in the end, one goal of branding is to produce revenue. In fact, Conly’s essay was a direct participant in Joan Baez’s marketing promotional plan, sanctioned by the company line: *The Joan Baez Songbook* was published by Ryerson Music Publishers, a division of Vanguard Records, and edited by Maynard Solomon himself.

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<sup>92</sup> Conly, “Joan Baez,” 9.

## **Conclusion: Musical Legacy of Countercultural Branding, and the Folk Music**

### **Image**

One of the main points of this chapter has been to show how the marketing of folk revival music was centered on the promotion of artists, but how record labels' affiliations with their artists enhanced their company brand. The prevalent anti-commercial ideology of the 1960s folk revival community was one factor that influenced this approach, because it allowed for the record company to deflect attention away from itself, and thus perhaps to avoid being accused of excessive commercialism. The folk ideology that developed during the first half of the 1960s, and the young artists of the scene, such as Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, were deeply influential on later generations of musicians. Every musical generation since has had its own version of anti-commercial music: rock, punk, alternative, indie. All of the subsequent arguments against commercialism in music were, in one way or another, reflections of the folk revival argument. Likewise, the branding of these later genres also reflected the core strategies of artistry and sincerity.

I have also attempted to show how a musician—her recordings, statements, photographs, and discourse about her—can be interpreted as a commodified personality that develops, shapes, and reinforces the brand image of her record company. As my discussion of Joan Baez and her early recordings has shown, the goals of Vanguard Records' folk music branding share traits with other brand strategies: distinguish the commodity in the marketplace, and create a relationship of trust between producer and consumer. Vanguard Records, in the way that they introduced Baez to the marketplace (e.g., through album art and liner notes), did both of these things to great effect.

Branding is important even in the case of anti-commercial music; in other words, anti-commercial music is not non-commercial music. The music industry cannot entirely escape dealing with commercial realities if it intends to find an audience. Indeed, the only truly anti-commercial musician is one you have never heard of; the only truly anti-commercial record label is the one that does not exist; the only truly anti-commercial music magazine is the one that does not get sold. In the case of companies and musicians who engage with the music industry, then, this realization raises the question not of commercial or anti-commercial. Rather, the question is how one navigates the reality of the commercial landscape.

Folk musicians navigated it by creating an alternate commercial space, governed by the laws and values of their community. Successful products in the folk music industry adhered to, or added to those values. Folkways Records created the quintessential non-commercial record label, whose operating procedures contradicted the most fundamental logic of the music industry. Moses Asch did not let profit margins dictate what records would be pressed. He strove to keep all records in print, regardless of their sales history. *Broadside* created a music magazine that did not rely on advertising revenue for their financial support. They cultivated a musical and discursive attitude against the commercial aspect of music, and in support of the folk ideology of collectivity and protest. Because they did not have ad revenue to prop up their budget, they transferred some of this financial burden to subscribers, and accomplished the rest through the help of volunteers. As a result, they had to motivate new and continuing subscribers by appealing to their readership through invisible advertising, manipulating

the very values they knew to be shared with the reader—authenticity and a belief in the value of topical song.

Vanguard Records' attitude towards folk music aligned it with the sympathetic field of classical music. They marketed classical artists as folk, and folk musicians as classical artists. Joan Baez, one of their biggest success stories of the early 1960s, was cast as a mythical prophetess, a romantic artist, a modern troubadour, and an authentic soul. Her persona was actively enhanced and developed by herself, the label—especially Maynard Solomon—and by the essayists who crafted in-depth and evocative liner notes for her first five albums.

In the history of culture industry critiques that I will trace in the next chapter, musicians have long been mistrustful of commercial influence. Thus, it is no surprise that musicians and even record companies would be strongly skeptical of its hurtful influence on their music. What I hope to have shown here, however, is that the response to this skepticism has not been to abandon the commercial system. In the case of the folk music revival of the early 1960s, the response was instead to transform the commercial system by merging folk ideology with classical ideology, and to create a new approach to branding anti-commercial record labels on the basis of a trusted relationship between musician, label, and music listener.

CHAPTER IV

PORTRAIT OF AN “INDIE-FOLK” ARTIST: ANTI-COMMERCIALISM AND  
ROMANTIC GENIUS IN SUFJAN STEVENS’S  
*COME ON! FEEL THE ILLINOISE!*

**Introduction: A Striking Transformation**

Let us begin this chapter by considering two representative journalistic portraits of Sufjan Stevens,<sup>1</sup> a writer from Michigan who has found a career as an indie-pop singer-songwriter in New York City. In 2004, Sufjan Stevens was featured in an interview in *New York* magazine. The idea for the story was not exactly flattering: the journalist wanted to get the opinions of artists who lacked the kind of financial and mass success of a pop icon like Britney Spears. So she sat down for a dinner conversation with Stevens and his fellow “outsider” artist, Stephin Merrit.<sup>2</sup> The brief interview ran as a sidebar on page 13.

Three years later, another journalist sought to gain some interview time with Stevens. But this time the lead of the story had nothing to do with hearing the opinions of an outsider. Instead, this journalist aimed to capture the *inside* scoop, a preview of the latest musical creation of Sufjan Stevens, the “indie-rock superstar.”<sup>3</sup> This interview ran as a feature piece, on the front page of *The Brooklyn Paper*.

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<sup>1</sup> Stevens’s first name is pronounced “SOOF-yahn.”

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Marx, “Listening Station,” *New York*, 17 May 2004, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Rathe, “11.6 Miles of Bad Road; BQE Inspires Sufjan Stevens’s Latest Work at BAM,” *The Brooklyn Paper*, Saturday, 17 Oct. 2007, 1.

How did Sufjan Stevens go from outsider artist to insider superstar, from sidebar to front-page news in the span of only a few years? What were the strategies that allowed him to effect such a stunning transition in the music press? These are the motivating questions of this chapter, and the answers all rotate around his seminal 2005 album, *Come On Feel the Illinoise*. The album was an impressive artistic achievement, combining strong narrative songwriting, fresh orchestral arrangements, and an emotional openness that clearly resonated with a significant number of listeners, critics and fans included. Talent, which Stevens has in abundance, is essential to success in the music business. But talent and creativity only get one so far, and Stevens's music has also been influenced and mediated by strategies of branding.

My argument in this chapter will unfold in two main parts. First, I will argue that Stevens intentionally cultivates an artistic persona in the press that valorizes individual artistic expression, and vilifies commercialism as destructive to artistic integrity. I have given this persona type the label of "artist brand." Second, I will analyze the music of *Come on Feel the Illinoise*. I wish to demonstrate how the music reflects Stevens's carefully cultivated "artist brand." He draws on a complex set of historical repertoires, including American folk, "sophisticated" orchestral music, and American minimalism. Because Sufjan Stevens's music and career have only rarely been studied in a musicological context, this study introduces him as a vital case study of a 21st-century American composer's navigation of tradition and individualism, art and pop, and ultimately the breakdown of barriers between these categories in the musical marketplace.

The branding of Stevens's media image and music has not developed in the most obvious or uncomplicated ways, as we will see. In fact, the very notion of branding would seem contrary to his fundamental artistic values, which hold marketing and advertising as inherently dishonest practices. Yet Stevens himself also utilizes these very systems for the benefit of his own career and in the service of his music. However complicated or paradoxical it may seem, the relationship between authenticity and self-promotion that Stevens reflects is not an uncommon one among artists more generally. His employment of what I call the "artist brand" has been utilized by many musicians in the late 20th and 21st centuries, in both popular and art music. As others have argued, and as we will see in this case study, the effects of commercialism in the second half of the 20th-century have rendered such distinctions between "high" and "low" cultures increasingly tenuous. The tension between commerce and "authenticity" is in many ways a defining characteristic of many late 20th- and 21st-century musicians. Stevens's understanding of authenticity has its roots in the Romantic understanding of artistic musical genius, and he uses this connection as a vital marketing strategy for himself and his music.

### *Methodology and Theoretical Considerations*

In this chapter, I will show that in the 21st century, the brand can be a way of mediating the relationship between the musician (in economic terms, the "producer") and listener ("consumer"). The role of musician as producer, moreover, is one that has emerged fairly recently, as the means of musical production have become less prohibitive

to musicians, as I will explain later in this chapter. The musician's brand in the 21st century can give a *raison d'être* for each discrete aspect of an artist's career: media presence, promotion strategy, and music. A clear understanding of the ways that branding operates in this respect can suggest a rationale for the wide resonance that Stevens's music found with music critics and listeners. Because this chapter deals directly with media discourse, and specifically the *character* of the discourse surrounding Sufjan Stevens's career between 2004 and 2007, it is imperative for me to do more than just give the general tenor of that discourse. I will thus employ a generous number of quotations from journalistic writings about Stevens, as well as Stevens's own words from interviews. And it must be pointed out that Stevens's statements are sometimes contradictory from interview to interview. By pointing out the marketing aspects of Stevens's self-promotion, I do not mean to imply that his interviews consist of a short list of repetitive slogans about his music and his work. In fact the contrary is more common; Stevens frequently adjusts his opinions on what his music is supposed to mean and represent. His ambivalence, rather than diluting the strength of the artist brand, clarifies that the brand is built upon a relentless honesty: as Stevens's art progresses, he remains open to refashioning and re-envisioning his art, thus maintaining a claim to authenticity.

When academicians write about marketing and art, the implications are usually not complimentary. Many examples could be cited, but Theodor Adorno's indictments of the banality of mass culture, and his conviction that it tends to obliterate personal style, are among the examples best known to musicologists.<sup>4</sup> His ideas will be a recurring point

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<sup>4</sup> Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment and Mass Deception," 129-30.



of reference throughout this chapter. Additionally, the “great divide” between modernist art and mass culture codified by Andreas Huyssen has remained a durable concept both within and outside of academic circles.<sup>5</sup> Recent literary studies, especially on the topic of English and American modernist authors, have critiqued the presumption that marketing exercises an automatically negative effect on the creation of art,<sup>6</sup> and this critique merits being taken up by more music scholars who study European and American music from the last hundred years. The present chapter offers such an attempt. Thus I want to be clear that by linking Sufjan Stevens’s music to the commercial enterprise of branding, I do not intend to demean his work. On the contrary, I situate his music in a commercial context to suggest some of the reasons why Stevens’s music has found such a prominent place among music critics, as well as his many fans. Stevens is representative of an artist, who, faced with the tensions between culture and commerce, embraces them. Stevens utilizes commercial means, while simultaneously critiquing the commercial system. In other words, he stands with one foot solidly in the culture industry, even as his other foot tries to kick the industry in from the outside. And though Stevens provides a particularly stark example of this practice, he is an extension of many generations of artists who have

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<sup>5</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance: Kevin J. H. and Stephen Watt Dettmar, ed. *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, and Rereading* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1996); Elizabeth Outka, *Consuming Traditions: Modernity, Modernism, and the Commodified Authentic*, ed. Kevin J. H. and Mark Wollaeger Dettmar, *Modernist Literature and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Edward P. Comentale, *Modernism, Cultural Production, and the British Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); Thomas Strychacz, *Modernism and the Culture of Market Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Catherine Turner, *Marketing Modernism between the Two World Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); Ian Warwick Gould Willison, and Warren Chernaik, ed. *Modernist Writers and the Marketplace* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

shared this view of commercial culture, dating at least back to the sixties, as we saw in the previous chapter.

By framing his own music and artistry in terms of art versus advertising, Stevens places himself within a particular narrative of music history, which pits the culture industry as the prime adversary of art. This narrative, historically, was given a particularly forceful telling in 1944 by the German sociologists Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their oft-cited essay, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.”<sup>7</sup> The kernels of Stevens’s views can all be found there. In the essay, the authors present a stark dichotomy between “avant-garde art” and “the entertainment industry.”<sup>8</sup> With the rise of mass industry, according to the authors, has come a homogenization and sterilization of man. Corporate executives wish to dominate and suppress the masses, in order to impose upon them their own “hidden subjective purposes.”<sup>9</sup> The imputation of nefarious motivations to corporate executives—who are never named, but remain ever-present, faceless villains—is an important part of the discourse, one that continues to be influential today because it informs how we perceive and celebrate the tension in Sufjan Stevens’s artistic philosophy.

Adorno’s theories have been divisive and hotly contested. Whereas few scholars accept his answers uncritically, many acknowledge that his basic assumptions about the

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<sup>7</sup> Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment and Mass Deception,” 120-67.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 122.

damaging nature of mass society are true in the most fundamental of ways. Simon Frith, in his 1988 essay “The Industrialization of Music,” encapsulates this widely held view:

Pop is a classic case of alienation: something human is taken from us and returned in the form of a commodity. Songs and singers are fetishized, made magical, and we can only reclaim them through possession, via a cash transaction in the market place. In the language of rock criticism, what is at stake here is the *truth* of music—truth to the people who created it, truth to our experience. What is bad about the music industry is the layer of deceit and hype and exploitation it places between us and our creativity.<sup>10</sup>

Frith subsequently critiques this view for holding the false assumption that industrialization—what I have been calling commercialization—is “something which happens *to* music,” rather than “a process in which music itself is made.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Frith acknowledges the pervasiveness of this perspective in popular music circles, calling it “part of the common sense of every rock fan.”

Adam Krims has recently sought to mitigate the influence of Adornian analyses of popular music. He has pointed out that Adorno’s arguments are no longer relevant because one of its basic premises—the Fordist economic system of mass production—is no longer in use. It has been replaced by a post-Fordist economic system, which emphasizes the flexible accumulation of capital, rather than the rigid processes of the assembly line and economies of scale. As is the case with all perceptions and arguments, Adorno’s were developed from a limited historical perspective, which reflected particular

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<sup>10</sup> Simon Frith, *Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 12. Emphasis in original.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

urban and economic realities of his place and time. Krims argues that these realities have changed, and Adorno's theories must be changed as well.<sup>12</sup>

Other scholars have called into question the very existence of a distinction between the worlds of art and entertainment. Thomas Frank, a cultural historian of business and advertising, has pinpointed the 1960s as the decade in which the two worlds collided, and the trappings of the counter-culture movement were emulated by the corporate world of advertisement. Ever since this process occurred—he calls it the “conquest of cool”—advertisers have sought out urban notions of cool, and co-opted them for the sake of advertising.<sup>13</sup> Frank sees this drama of co-optation playing itself out repeatedly in the generations that followed the sixties, such as with the “alternative” music culture of the 1990s,<sup>14</sup> with the sixties counter-cultural argument always providing the basic model. To adjust Hegel's dialectic: business culture inevitably meets with its antithesis, counter-culture, resulting in a synthesized, commodified alternative culture; then a reaction to this synthesis emerges and the process is repeated. Though a business historian, Frank's work has been influential with musicologists, most directly with Timothy Taylor, who recently applied Frank's arguments in *The Conquest of Cool* to 21st-century popular music. Taylor declared, following Frank, that “there is no longer a significant distinction to be made between ‘commercial culture’ and ‘culture’—it is virtually the same, increasingly driven by the omnivorous advertising and marketing

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<sup>12</sup> See Adam Krims, *Music and Urban Geography* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 89-106.

<sup>13</sup> Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Frank, “Alternative to What?,” in *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from the Baffler*, ed. Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland (New York: Norton, 1997), 145-61.

industry.”<sup>15</sup> In another ripple of this narrative, there is the Culture Jammers movement, an organization that has mounted a concerted effort to oppose what they perceive as nefarious corporate domination of the marketplace and of culture. Through the defacement of advertisements and the production of their own anti-ads, their mission is to “topple existing power structures and forge a major shift in the way we will live in the 21st century.”<sup>16</sup> The group is not without its critics, who argue that their struggle against the system has no effect, and in fact reinforces its dominance.<sup>17</sup>

The basic opposition between individualism and mass deception, as described by Adorno, has also resonated more widely in popular culture. To take but one example, consider Apple Computer’s famous “1984” television commercial, a teaser for the release of the original Macintosh computer in that year. The commercial, directed by Ridley Scott, directly attacks Apple’s main competition at the time, IBM Computer. Set in an Orwellian techno-apocalyptic world, the commercial portrays IBM Computer as a Big-Brother-like talking head on a giant video screen, brainwashing the masses by delivering pedantic propaganda to an audience of blank-stared, bald-headed minions in drab blue-gray uniforms. Apple, on the other hand, is represented by a young, blond, rebellious woman wearing bright white and red. Disregarding her own safety, she runs toward the screen with a sledge hammer in her hand, pursued by soldiers in riot gear. At the climax of the commercial, the woman heaves the sledge hammer at the screen, which explodes

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<sup>15</sup> Taylor, “Advertising and the Conquest of Culture,” 406.

<sup>16</sup> “Adbusters.”

<sup>17</sup> See Joseph and Andrew Potter Heath, *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

with a burst of light and wind. Overtop of the shocked faces of the now-freed minions, the final caption, read by a narrator, scrolls onto the screen: “On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you’ll see why 1984 won’t be like ‘1984’.”

The one-minute-long commercial never shows a picture of a Macintosh, and though there is a stylized graphic version of it on the woman’s shirt, it is only discernible with repeated viewings. Though the commercial only aired once on broadcast television during the Super Bowl, it is well known throughout the popular press and Apple fan community, and is still discussed today.<sup>18</sup> This commercial resonates more conspicuously with George Orwell than Theodor Adorno, but the underlying fear of homogenizing totalitarianism, and the salvation by the Individual are the same in both narratives. The glaring difference between Apple and Adorno, of course, is that Apple was using this commercial as a marketing strategy to vie for a premier place in the very culture industry that Adorno scorned.<sup>19</sup> It is into this web of implications, sketched briefly here, that Stevens finds his own niche as the heroic artist, always seeking to remain true to his art in the midst of a banal world overrun by the culture industry.

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<sup>18</sup> At the time of this writing, a video of the commercial could be found at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYecfV3ubP8>.

<sup>19</sup> As we will see in chapter V, Apple went on to dominate a large segment of the culture industry—including both music and fashion—as a result of the vast success of the iPod.

## The Sufjan Brand, Part I: His Biography and Persona as Seen Through the Media

### *Sufjan Stevens: Towards a Biography*

Since his breakout album in 2005, *Come On Feel the Illinoise* (henceforth *Illinois*<sup>20</sup>), Sufjan Stevens has been a regular fixture of the mainstream and alternative music presses (see Figure 4.1, Figure 4.2 and Table 4.1). Though he had already released four albums before that time, Stevens had found it difficult to secure coverage for his music. Stevens has since made a name for himself—both in the press and among his fans—as a quirky, arty, indie pop musician with significant talent and ambition. With this release, his following grew bigger and his fans even more emphatic, though compared to successful mainstream artists his album sales were still modest.<sup>21</sup>

Most biographical outlines of Stevens emphasize that he never intended to become a professional musician and songwriter. As a child he learned to play the piano and recorder by ear. Then as a young man he studied the oboe at the Interlochen Arts Academy for a time, but eventually abandoned any hope of making a career out of it. “I grew tired of the fussiness of it. I knew I wasn’t good enough to pursue it professionally,” Stevens said in an interview.<sup>22</sup> He did, however, begin writing music on the piano. In another interview, he described those early piano compositions as ambiguous. “They

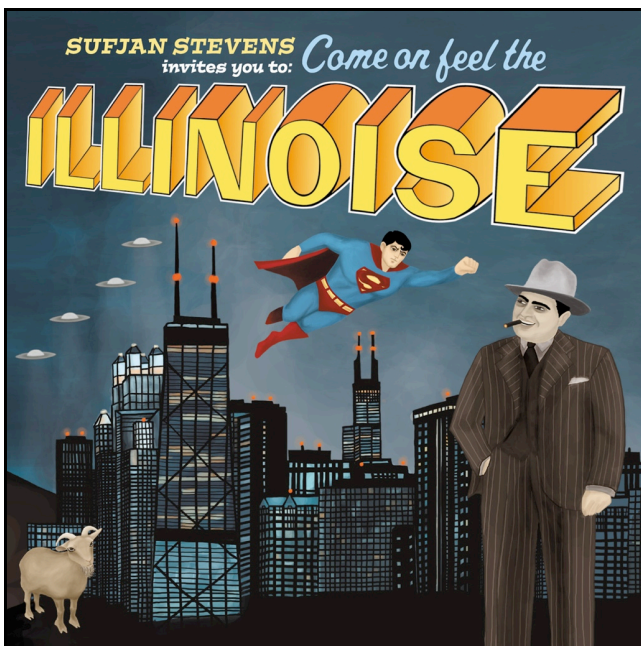
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<sup>20</sup> It has become common practice for journalists and others in the media to refer to the album with the state’s original spelling, rather than Stevens’s alteration, “Illinoise.”

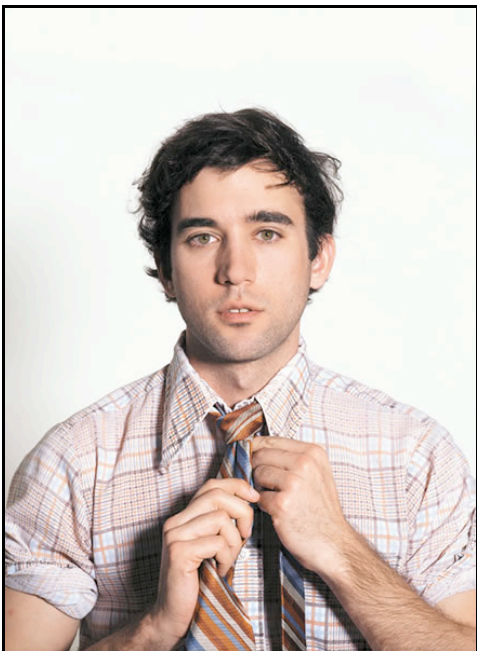
<sup>21</sup> For *Illinois* he received a 2006 New Pantheon Award, awarded to albums that sell fewer than 500,000 copies. According to Nielsen SoundScan, it had sold 300,000 copies by 2009. See Kate Kiefer, “On the Road to Find Out,” *Paste* November, no. 58 (2009): 36.

<sup>22</sup> Schoemer, “Playing in Traffic: Indie Wunderkind Sufjan Stevens Tries His Hand at an Orchestral Suite—About the BQE.”

**Figure 4.1.** Album cover for Sufjan Stevens's *Come On Feel the Illinoise* (2005)<sup>23</sup>



**Figure 4.2.** Sufjan Stevens, in a promotional photo for *Illinois*



<sup>23</sup> This image reflects the original album cover, which includes a graphic of Superman. Because of copyright infringement, Stevens had to remove the image, and later versions replace it with balloons.



**Table 4.1.** Sufjan Stevens's albums to date.<sup>24</sup>

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<i>A Sun Came (2000)*</i>
<i>Enjoy Your Rabbit (2001)*</i>
<i>Greetings from Michigan (2003)*</i>
<i>Seven Swans (2004)*</i>
<i>Come On Feel the Illinoise (2005)*</i>
<i>The Avalanche: Outtakes and Extras from the Illinois Album! (2006)</i>
<i>Songs for Christmas (2006)</i>
<i>The BQE (2009)</i>
<i>All Delighted People (2010)</i>
<i>The Age of Adz (2010)*</i>

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weren't clear, conservative pop songs. There wasn't singing. There were all these flourishes. It was kind of pseudo-classical...but there were pop elements. I was just sort of making stuff up.”<sup>25</sup>

Then while attending Hope College in Holland, Michigan, Stevens was in a band called Marzuki, for which he played recorder, “because it was all I could do.”<sup>26</sup> He felt that if he was going to get anywhere in the band he had to do more, so after his first year in college he began to learn to play the guitar and write more conventional pop songs, for the first time including his own voice. He discovered recording at this time, when he bought a four-track cassette recorder.

It was the exact time that I was learning guitar, the summer before my second year in college. I was nineteen or twenty. My friend was going down to Florida to stay with his mom for the summer, and he couldn't fit everything in his car. So he left one of those Ovation

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<sup>24</sup> Albums marked with an asterisk (\*) are those that Stevens considers to be major releases.

<sup>25</sup> Qtd. in Rafter Roberts, “Sufjan Stevens: So Right and So Wrong,” *Tape Op*, March/April 2009, 44.

<sup>26</sup> Qtd. in *ibid.*, 45.

nylon string guitars with the plastic in the back. That same week I went out and bought a Tascam Portastudio [cassette] 4-track. I wanted to write songs and sing. . . . It was 95 degrees all summer and I would come home after work, sit in my room for five hours, sweat and strum the guitar—strum E major over and over.<sup>27</sup>

Stevens pursued music as a hobby through college, and released his first album, *A Sun Came* (2000), which was made entirely by recording into his four-track recorder and then exporting tracks one by one into a digital recording software program. The album was carried in a few local music stores, and distributed to a small group of Stevens's friends.<sup>28</sup>

When Stevens graduated from college, music took a back seat as he pursued other creative arts: he worked as a graphic designer for Penguin/Putnam publishers in New York City while attending the graduate school at the New School for Social Research, where he eventually earned a masters degree in fiction writing. But he could not resist making music, and began work on what would become his second album, *Enjoy Your Rabbit* (2001), in his spare time at work.

A do-it-yourself ethic, coupled with an amateur-savant persona, stayed with Stevens even after *Illinois* made him more widely known as a musician. It is an important part of the public image he created for himself, and has been promulgated by many journalists and music critics who have lauded his music, which is why I have recounted it at some length in the present discussion. For example, when Karen Schoemer wrote a feature article on Stevens's film-and-orchestra piece, *The BQE* (2007),<sup>29</sup> in the weeks

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<sup>27</sup> Qtd. in *ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>28</sup> N. H., "Kitty Corner [Interview with Lowell Brams]," *Eye Weekly*, September 08 2005, 29.

<sup>29</sup> The BQE refers to the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. After its world premiere in 2007, Stevens packaged the music and video for sale in 2009.

before its premiere, her story was subtitled “Indie wunderkind Sufjan Stevens tries his hand at an orchestral suite—about the BQE;” not long after the article was underway she dubbed him “2007’s wacko cultural wonder boy.”<sup>30</sup> Though Stevens would probably never call himself a wunderkind, the association of precocity is not one he discourages. In the interview with Schoemer, he admitted that the process of composing for an ensemble was new to him, since on his previous albums he had typically played all of the instruments himself, overdubbing track after track. *The BQE* was Stevens’s first official foray into the world of art music, and all of the buzz words of that world were conspicuously touted in the press. *The BQE* was a “commission;” it was “orchestral;” it was a “composition.” Furthermore, it would be premiered in a concert performance by The Brooklyn Academy of Music, a conservatory that has been a visible and prestigious supporter of “new music.” As part of the interview, Stevens indicated that his pursuit of art had taken him far beyond his own physical abilities to play musical instruments. The passages he wrote were beyond his skill as a performer, even in the case of those instruments he plays, such as oboe:

It’s definitely beyond me. I’ve started to develop an interest in music that is far removed from my abilities. And that’s very frightening, because a lot of the life of the music is out of my hands, and I’m incapable of performing or playing most of it. So I have to hire these professional players to read it for me.<sup>31</sup>

I argue that when Stevens highlights the fact that his compositional interests have outpaced his physical abilities, it has two effects. First, Stevens reinforces his role as an

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<sup>30</sup> Schoemer, “Playing in Traffic: Indie Wunderkind Sufjan Stevens Tries His Hand at an Orchestral Suite—About the BQE.”

<sup>31</sup> Qtd. in *ibid.*

amateur musician, at the same time making his accomplishments seem more remarkable. His self-deprecation softens the reporter, and his fans, who can admire him for taking a risk beyond what is expected of him, something that could easily fail. Secondly, Stevens shows himself to be dedicated to the art of composition over that of performance.

*Stevens's Biography in the Music Press*

Building on the introductory biographical information above, I now turn to the matter of how Stevens's biography is shaped and deployed as an agent of his commodified persona. Consider a biographical sketch by Drew Fortune in an indie music magazine, *Death + Taxes*:

At an early age, Stevens had a voracious appetite for all things musical and, while self-taught, was composing sonatas on a toy Casio by age eight. By college, he had become proficient on the oboe, recorder, banjo, and guitar. The list goes on—even Stevens doesn't know how many instruments he can play. Following the success of *Come on Feel the Illinoise*, a concept album devoted to the state of Illinois, Stevens ascended from underground folk oddity to a marquee name, a title that Stevens never dreamed or cared to achieve. Music is an adventure, something that can never be figured out or conquered, yet Stevens is the intrepid explorer, eager to reach the summit or die trying.<sup>32</sup>

The information in Fortune's biographical sketch is accurate, though selective. Of course, a biography is never simply an objective transmission of details. Undergirding the factual details is a narrative structure that always is the result of choices made by the biographer. Some details are brought to the fore and others are minimized or excluded. A biographer

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<sup>32</sup> Drew Fortune, "Sufjan Stevens; Life Is a Highway: The Indie Wunderkind Turns Multimedia Artist with the Release of the BQE," *Death + Taxes*, November/December 2009, 48.

sifts through the details of a subject's life, discerns what out of those details is important to convey, and packages it all into a narrative that can be communicated to readers.<sup>33</sup>

There are differences between academic biographies of musicians and the types of biographies that are used in the popular musical press.<sup>34</sup> Whereas an academic biography can achieve factual soundness and completeness through extended periods of research, the journalistic approach must arrive at a result much more quickly. Because of the limitations of space and time (not to mention economic concerns) that are a part of the latter trade, brief and pithy biographical sketches are the norm, and these must communicate much information in very little space. A successful biographical sketch gives the reader an idea of the fullness of a musician's career in only a paragraph or two. This means that the successful writer must judiciously craft each sentence with an eye to its descriptive weight. Though these sketches often occupy marginal spaces in a journalistic article (typically appearing at the beginning), and are not often lingered on by readers or analysts, a closer look at them can reveal authors' essentialized notions of their subjects.

These essentialized notions in turn make up the central characteristics of Stevens's commodified persona. To get an idea of the basic *topoi* of Sufjan Stevens's

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<sup>33</sup> Several musicologists have pointed out that writing a biography is a political act, and must be read with a critical eye toward the vested interests of the writers. See, for example, Bryan Gilliam, "The Annexation of Anton Bruckner: Nazi Revisionism and the Politics of Appropriation," *The Musical Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (1994); Alexander Rehding, "Liszt's Musical Monuments," *19th-Century Music* 26, no. 1 (2002); David Schroeder, "Leopold Mozart's Biography of His 'Miraculous' Son," in *Mozart in Revolt: Strategies of Resistance, Mischief and Deception* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>34</sup> By popular musical press, I mean trade journals of all varieties, from internationally distributed publications such as *Rolling Stone*, regional publications such as *New York Magazine*, to publications with narrowly focused target markets such as *Tape Op* (for enthusiasts of recording gear, with an alternative approach). Stevens has been featured in all three of these publications, and many more like them.

commodified persona, consider again the biographical sketch above, written in 2009. The passage proceeds by addressing five main points: 1) Stevens's precocity and do-it-yourself ethic ("at an early age," "self-taught"); 2) his multi-instrumentalism ("even Stevens doesn't know how many instruments he can play"); 3) the importance of the album *Come On Feel the Illinoise* to his career ("Following the success of *Come on Feel the Illinoise...*"); 4) Stevens's disregard for fame ("Stevens ascended from underground folk oddity to a marquee name, a title that Stevens never dreamed or cared to achieve."); and most importantly, 5) Stevens's artistry, including his status as a prolific and perpetual experimenter, prone to take on projects of such epic proportions that they seem almost insurmountable ("the intrepid explorer, eager to reach the summit or die trying"). Indeed, Fortune's basic biographical structure is emblematic of Stevens's commodified persona, which is quite consistent from article to article. Virtually every journalistic story on Sufjan Stevens calls on some combination of these topics to give the reader an idea of who Stevens is and what his work is like.<sup>35</sup>

Of the five categories mentioned above, music critics in alternative magazines save their most rhapsodic writing to describe Stevens's artistry, frequently using tightly packed and sometimes hyperbolic statements to portray Stevens as exceptional. Samuel Roudman proclaimed Stevens to be "one of the most talented (and prolific) musicians

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<sup>35</sup> I am not the first to closely consider the public persona of a musician as mediated through the press. For two excellent precursors that have informed my approach, see David Brackett, "Writing, Music, Dancing, and Architecture in Elvis Costello's 'Pills and Soap'," in *Interpreting Popular Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Simon Frith, "The Real Thing—Bruce Springsteen," in *Music for Pleasure* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

around.”<sup>36</sup> In another estimation, Stevens is “a singularly talented 31-year-old singer-songwriter with a staggering creative drive.”<sup>37</sup> Jennifer Pappas expands on these notions of Stevens’s productivity by emphasizing his tendency for storytelling in his songs: he is “one of the most innovative and frenetically productive songwriter/storytellers on the music scene.”<sup>38</sup> Paul Robinson simply calls him “America’s most prolific songwriter.”<sup>39</sup> Other descriptions emphasize Stevens’s title as a star of the independent music scene. In an article on Stevens’s 2007 film and music project, *The BQE*, Adam Rathe dubs Stevens the “Kensington-based indie-pop star.”<sup>40</sup>

These laudatory statements, all written between 2005 and 2007, reflect the surge in media attention that Stevens received after releasing his fifth full-length album, *Come On Feel the Illinoise* in 2005. The album topped many critics’ lists for best album of the year, including those at *Pitchfork* magazine, Amazon.com, National Public Radio’s All Songs Considered, *No Ripcord*, and others.<sup>41</sup> Metacritic.com, a site that compiles an

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<sup>36</sup> Samuel Roudman, “Intellectual Property, the Terra Firma of Sufjan Stevens,” *Filter Mini UK*, July/August 2006, 10.

<sup>37</sup> Dan DeLuca, “48 States Will Have to Wait: Singer-Songwriter Sufjan Stevens Has Miles to Go (on Tour) and a Christmas Album Due out before He Returns to His Grand Project,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 28 2006, E9.

<sup>38</sup> Jennifer Pappas, “[Interview with Sufjan Stevens],” *Punk Planet*, November/December 2006.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Robinson, “Peter Robinson vs. Sufjan Stevens,” *NME*, 19 November 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Rathe, “11.6 Miles of Bad Road; BQE Inspires Sufjan Stevens’s Latest Work at BAM,” 1. The term “indie-pop” deserves comment. The “indie” label is commonly held to be antithetical to the genre of “pop.” In Stevens’s case, according to Rathe, his participation in the realm of popular music does not preclude him from also claiming the status of “independent” artist.

<sup>41</sup> Chris Dahlen et al., “Top 50 Albums of 2005,” *Pitchfork* (2005), <http://pitchfork.com/features/staff-lists/6222-top-50-albums-of-2005/5/>; Amazon.com, “Top 100 Editors’ Picks,” <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/593175>; NPR.org, “The Best Music of 2005,”

album's aggregate score from a host of different critics' reviews, gave the album a "metascore" of 90 out of 100.<sup>42</sup> This impressive score was enough to make *Illinois* the site's highest-rated album of 2005,<sup>43</sup> and to put it in the site's category of "universal acclaim."<sup>44</sup> And critics' veneration for the album has endured in the years since the release. For instance, the music staff at Paste magazine, in addition to naming *Illinois* the best album of 2005, recently named it the best concept album of the 21st century, as well as the outright number one album of the first decade of the 21st century.<sup>45</sup> The release of the *Illinois* album, and the media campaign that accompanied it, marked a major turning point in the story of Stevens's public image. It accompanied his move from "outsider musician"<sup>46</sup> in 2004, to critics' darling in 2005. By 2007, Stevens had risen to the top of the indie A-list.

### **The Sufjan Brand, Part II: Stevens's Influence on His Commodified Persona**

Sufjan Stevens has also been a key participant in the shaping of his commodified persona, through interviews with music journalists. All of the *topoi* mentioned above

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<http://www.npr.org/programs/asc/archives/bestof2005/>; "Top 50 Albums of 2005 (Part Two)," <http://www.noripcord.com/features/top-50-albums-2005-part-two>.

<sup>42</sup> See Metacritic, "Illinois—Sufjan Stevens," CBS Interactive Inc., <http://www.metacritic.com/music/illinois/critic-reviews>. Metacritic.com collects ratings from a wide variety of published album reviews and converts them to a weighted 100-point scale. An explanation of the conversion and collection process can be found at <http://www.metacritic.com/about-metascores>.

<sup>43</sup> Pappas, "[Interview with Sufjan Stevens]," 32.

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.metacritic.com/about-metascores>.

<sup>45</sup> Kiefer, "On the Road to Find Out," 36-38.

<sup>46</sup> Marx, "Listening Station," 13.



have been confirmed, created, or allowed by Stevens's comments in interviews. Two main aspects of this are his status as "indie" musician, and his stance against commercialism.

*"Indie" Musician, Romantic Artist*

An important aspect of Stevens's commodified persona is his status as an "indie" musician. "Indie," short for "independent," refers to a musician who is not affiliated with one of the major record labels. Thus it is a term that refers in the first place not to genre, style, or musical characteristics, but to the economic status of a musician in relationship to the major record labels, currently known as "The Big Four."<sup>47</sup> According to this rubric, Stevens is a model example of an indie musician. With his former stepfather, Lowell Brams, Stevens started his own independent record label, Asthmatic Kitty Records—named after Brams's pet cat, which had feline asthma.<sup>48</sup>

The fact that Stevens started his own record label, rather than seeking to be signed to a pre-existing one, points to a key difference between his situation and that of Joan Baez forty years earlier. In order to have a career as a recording artist, Baez relied on her record label to provide the means of production and the labor force such as recording engineers, marketers, and press agents. Stevens, however, took on many of these roles

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<sup>47</sup> "The Big Four" record labels are: EMI, Sony BMG, Universal Music Group, and Warner Music Group. This moniker is variable, given the trend of corporate consolidation in the music industry since the 1970s. The number of major music corporations was whittled down from six to four during that time. Given the uncertainty in the music industry today, this very well may change further.

<sup>48</sup> Lowell Brams, "Goodbye to Sara, an 'Asthma Kitty,' 1993-2008," <http://asthmatickitty.com/news.php?newsID=385>. The quirkiness of the label goes beyond its name: of the nine staff members that run the label, Stevens comprises the entire "Brooklyn Office," and is given the title of "Minister of Aesthetics."

himself. He typically produces, engineers, and mixes his own recordings. He also plays many of the instruments on his recordings, a feature that we have already seen to be an important part of his persona. As a result, Stevens had more opportunity to influence those aspects of his career that had typically been the responsibility of record label employees in Baez's early career. Baez was an artist whose music and persona enhanced the brand of her company, Vanguard Records; Stevens was a record label unto himself. His music developed his own brand, which were one and the same. The possibility of Stevens's expanded role is due in large part to changes in the music industry from 1964 to 2004. The proliferation of inexpensive but high quality recording technology, as well as digital distribution systems, in recent years has made it possible for musicians to circumvent the record label, and their heavy investment of capital, in order to produce music recordings and deliver them to consumers. This has led to the possibility of musicians being more involved in the business and marketing of themselves and their music, as a standard practice.

In addition to being an economic descriptor, the "indie" label is also typically indicative of a musician's stance as a rebel against big business. Indie musicians often pride themselves on being flagrantly anti-commercial—or at least independent of the major labels, big film studios, etc. As Thomas Frank argues in *The Conquest of Cool*, the notion of the rebel has been one of the defining characteristics of creative culture in the second half of the 20th century.<sup>49</sup> In the 1990s it was called "alternative" culture, and was

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

epitomized in cities like Seattle and Portland, which themselves were seen as alternative environments to the pop music hubs of New York City and Los Angeles.<sup>50</sup> Alternative culture thrived on the idea that corporations had co-opted mass-produced music, and must be resisted. In music, this is the stream that has gained the label “indie” more recently. But as Thomas Frank has elsewhere commented, the trappings of “alternative” culture itself have also been mirrored by corporate advertising strategies, including musical acts.<sup>51</sup> Each time an aspect of alternative culture is co-opted by advertising agencies, a new version of it sprouts up in reaction, which is then eventually co-opted itself. The result has been a perennial race to out-counter the counter-culture,<sup>52</sup> and thus to claim the right to the status of ultimate cultural rebel.

In the midst of this counter-cultural arms race, Sufjan Steven stands on the front lines. This can be seen in Stevens’s distrust of music producers. Stevens is quick to point out in interviews that he maintains complete control over the recording process, is his own producer, and often records alone, thus bolstering his image as an autonomous artist. In addition to recording many of the instrumental and vocal parts on his albums himself, he personally supervises the recording of all other parts on his albums whenever possible. In fact, it wasn’t until 2006—after he had made *Illinois* as well as four other albums—that he allowed any track of any song on one of his albums to be recorded when he was

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<sup>50</sup> Along these lines see Eric Weisbard, “Over & Out: Indie Rock Values in the Age of Alternative Million Sellers,” *The Village Voice Rock and Roll Quarterly* (Summer 1994): 15-19.

<sup>51</sup> Frank, “Alternative to What?” 145-61.

<sup>52</sup> “Counter-culture” is a term usually reserved to describe the 1960s, a fact that reinforces the link between Stevens and earlier musicians like Woody Guthrie and Joan Baez. See Chapter III.

not physically present. In that instance it was to record drum parts for his *Illinois* follow-up album, a collection of outtakes and extras. For that 2006 album, he allowed drummer James McAllister to stay in Seattle to record the parts, rather than making him fly out to New York. Even then, Stevens had worked personally with McAllister on *Illinois*, and he sent along exemplary versions of the new drum parts as guidance—which Stevens had recorded himself. He admitted: “[Before this,] I hadn’t ever sent material to have someone else record it and be in charge of how it would sound.”<sup>53</sup> Indeed, it would seem that Stevens equates relinquishing control with surrendering authenticity of authorship. He indicated as much when he recounted the recording experience of his friend and colleague, Rosie Thomas.

She just did this album with Sub Pop [*If Songs Could Be Held*], and I think it was a bit traumatic for her because she went to L.A. and was working with a producer, and it became this really slick, hyper-produced collection of songs. I think it was good for her to go through with that, but I don’t think she felt she had a real intimate, visceral creative experience.<sup>54</sup>

For Stevens, working with a producer is dangerous because it robs the musician of authorship. As this quote implies, it can result in a “really slick, hyper-produced” album, which is contrary to the desired recording experience, here described as a very “intimate, visceral creative experience.” What makes this example especially telling is that the record label at which he is taking aim—Sub Pop Records—was at one time the vanguard of independent music culture itself. Sub Pop is famous for signing some now-famous

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<sup>53</sup> Jason Crock, “Sufjan Stevens,” *Pitchfork* 15 May (2006).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

rock groups from the late 1980s and early 1990s Seattle music scene, most notably the legendary grunge-rock group Nirvana. Their patronage of “alternative” rock groups catalyzed the ascendancy of the grunge music craze of the 1990s. Although the label made a deal with Warner Music in 1995, relinquishing to them forty-nine percent of the company, they still claim the title “independent record label,” as well as the indie spirit.<sup>55</sup> It would seem to Stevens, however, that this indie-at-heart record label is not “indie” enough to avoid the pitfall of slick and sterile hyper-production.

To understand Stevens’s notion of authenticity of authorship, we must look further back in music history, past the 1990s “alternative,” past the 1960s counter-culture, and even past the creation of the culture industry. We must look all the way to the early 19th century and the development of the romantic artist. As Lydia Goehr has convincingly argued, the practice of classical composition took an important turn around 1800, when it began to be regulated by the work-concept.<sup>56</sup> In a system regulated by the work-concept, the intention of the composer is elevated to supreme importance. “The relation, once subordinated to the external relation between an artwork and that which is imitated, was now formulated as an internal relation of *expression*, more accurately *self-expression*, that bound an artwork to its creative source.”<sup>57</sup> This self-expression of the romantic genius, in the form of an external work, was thus able to evince faithfulness in performers. The faithfulness was to an ideal version of the work, which is to say an

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<sup>55</sup> JP/cmn, “[Sub Pop!] About Us,” <http://www.subpop.com/about>.

<sup>56</sup> Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 113.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

*authentic* one. The attainment of this ideal, and the expression of the authentic work, was to be the performer's ultimate goal.<sup>58</sup>

But how do we get from Goehr's theory of the work-concept to Sufjan Stevens? Goehr argues for a somewhat circumspect application of her theory of the work-concept. There are other traditions, she admits, such as popular music and jazz, that seem to operate without regard for the work-concept. How can Stevens draw on it if he is a popular musician? Though Goehr describes the barrier between western art music and popular music as it existed in the 19th century, Robert Fink has pointed out that those barriers are tenuous at best in the 21st. In his article, "Elvis Everywhere," Fink shows how composers in the academic and so-called "classic" tradition have begun drawing on the cultural vitality of popular music, namely rock (and by extension African American blues).<sup>59</sup> Stevens peers from the other side of the fence. He started his career in the realm of popular music, but appropriates classical prestige and 19th-century notions of artistic autonomy and musical genius. Stevens is, of course, not the only popular musician to draw on classical traditions. In the early 1990s, Robert Walser's groundbreaking study of heavy metal singled out the perhaps surprising influence of Baroque and Classical composers on the technique of guitarists such as Edward Van Halen.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Fink, "Elvis Everywhere: Musicology and Popular Music Studies at the Twilight of the Canon," *American Music* 16, no. 2 (1998): 135-79.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Walser, "Eruptions: Heavy Metal Appropriations of Classical Virtuosity," *Popular Music* 11, no. 3 (1992): 263-308.

The boundaries between western art and popular traditions have only become less distinct in more recent years, as musicians increasingly inhabit both spaces. On the one hand there are composers like Nico Muhly, who is Juilliard-trained but also a true inhabitant of popular realms. Muhly's music is heard in Carnegie Hall, in films such as *The Manchurian Candidate*, and as arrangements on a growing number of popular records such as Jónsi's *Go* (2010).<sup>61</sup> In a move in the opposite direction—from the rock auditorium to the concert hall—guitarist Jonny Greenwood, of the celebrated British rock group Radiohead, was commissioned to write a piece for the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) in 2004. The result was “Popcorn Superhet Receiver,” an orchestral piece that garnered him respect as a composer from critics. For the piece's New York premiere in 2008, Alex Ross, the esteemed classical music critic of *The New Yorker*, verified Greenwood's legitimacy as an “English composer,” casting him as a descendant in spirit of the great modern English composers, and ultimately of Edward Elgar and Ralph Vaughan Williams.<sup>62</sup> Sufjan Stevens made a similar move toward the role of composer in 2007, when he completed his first commissioned work, for the Brooklyn Academy of Music's (BAM) Next Wave Festival. The piece was *The BQE*, already introduced above as a music-film celebrating the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway.

In the music and careers of these three musicians—Muhly, Greenwood, Stevens—the traditional distinction between popular and art music is so negligible that it

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<sup>61</sup> Jón Þór (Jónsi) Birgisson is an Icelandic popular musician who fronted the band Sigur Rós, and has moved more recently into a solo recording career.

<sup>62</sup> Alex Ross, “Welling Up: A Film Score and an Orchestral Work by Jonny Greenwood, of Radiohead,” *The New Yorker* Feb. 24 (2008), [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/musical/2008/02/04/080204crmu\\_music\\_ross?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/musical/2008/02/04/080204crmu_music_ross?currentPage=all).

ceases to have any appreciable meaning. They are emblematic of many current-day musician-composers who are in this position. And yet the distinctions are upheld in discourses about the music: in critics' reviews, fans' comments, and from the musicians themselves. It is a situation that parallels the breaking down of barriers between two other arenas that were once held to be diametrically opposed: art and commercialism.

### *Stevens and Anti-Commercialism*

Another important aspect of Stevens's commodified persona is his anti-commercial stance. Like Woody Guthrie, he has frequently been critical of the strategies and morals of commercial culture, though unlike Guthrie, Stevens's critique is accompanied by a profound anxiety about his ability to reconcile his values with the realities of his participation in the commercial aspects of the music industry. The anti-commercial attitude flows out of, and is an extension of, the anti-corporate leanings of indie culture, which as I pointed out above has a long history, going back to the culture industry critiques of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Among indie musicians, a version this narrative still reigns, and there is still a significant stigma attached to "selling out," that is, signing with a major record label or allowing one's music to be used in a commercial. In the face of the ever-increasing encroachment of commerce on culture, indie musicians are often dissenting voices. Timothy Taylor has recently laid out the evidence of what he has called "the convergence of content and commerce."<sup>63</sup> In 2003, British pop star Sting allowed the music and music video for his new single, "Desert

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<sup>63</sup> Taylor, "Advertising and the Conquest of Culture," 406.



Rose,” to be used free of charge in a commercial for Jaguar’s S-Type car. As a result of this unprecedented business relationship, the record went on to sell four million copies in the United States alone, four times the projected international total.<sup>64</sup> In another example of an increasingly frequent practice, some ads pose as *objets d’art*, such as the Coors Light “Love Songs” ads, which sound like “real songs” rather than advertisements; they never mention the name of the product.<sup>65</sup>

Stevens, on the other hand, has not aligned his music with a car company’s marketing campaign, nor has his music been featured in any beer commercials. In fact, his music has never, to my knowledge, been approved for use in any commercial. Stevens has been very outspoken in interviews about the moral bankruptcy and baseness of advertising and marketing practices. For him, advertising is the enemy of authenticity, and authenticity is the most important aspect of artistry. In January 2007, Stevens lamented the commodification of the Christmas holiday in a *Rolling Stone* interview. Commercialism, in Stevens’s view, corrupts the sacred by its crude worship of the bottom line:

It’s a sacred form [Christmas songs], and yet it’s also incredibly annoying and profane because it’s the soundtrack in shopping malls across the country. I’m interested in reconciling this phenomenal event—the incarnation of God—with Santa Claus and blue-light specials at Kmart and the weird preoccupation we have with buying a lot of junk and giving it to each other.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 409.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 410.

<sup>66</sup> Austin Scaggs, “Q&A, the Indie-Rock Auteur on His New Five-CD Yuletide Set and His Obsession with Dudes Named Thomas,” *Rolling Stone*, Dec. 28, 2006-January 11, 2007, 42. The celebration of New Year’s is no better. In the same article Stevens professes: “I can’t stand it. There’s something about a New

To reconcile the sacred and profane in Christmas, Stevens had embarked on a multi-year project of recording Christmas songs. Every year from 2001 to 2006 (save for 2004), he recorded a Christmas album to be shared with friends and family. He recorded classic carols such as “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!,” as well as lesser-known Christmas hymns such as “Once in Royal David’s City.” But Stevens also injected his own personality into the project by writing original Christmas songs. Stevens’s ambivalence is conspicuous, as shown by song titles that range from imploringly joyful (“It’s Christmas! Let’s Be Glad!”) to sardonic (“Did I Make You Cry On Christmas Day? [Well, You Deserved It!]”), from sacred (“The Incarnation”) to skeptical (“Get Behind Me, Santa!”). In 2006, Stevens released all of the recordings in a five-volume set called *Songs for Christmas*. Stevens’s decision to make this collection for sale is extraordinary, given that he is so blatantly against commercialism during the holiday. In one way, his Christmas compilation is meant to be a subversive offering to the Christmas song racket; in another, he is perpetuating the very practice that he set out to critique.

Base materialism is not limited only to the holiday season, and Stevens has been more broadly critical of it in interviews. He considers an obsessive cultivation of the desire for things, primarily accomplished through advertising, to be a false idol of humanity:

I think we live in a modern world that is entrenched in material things, the possession of things. We live in a very corporal

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Year’s party that I find really phony. I don’t like false pretenses and false parties. In those environments I’m a bit of a curmudgeon.”

[sic],<sup>67</sup> material world and yet, there is a history to our world that reconciles with a divine order. Our history has a religion to it; there is a mythology of creation. And there is a sort of physical, metaphysical explanation for everything that's around us. Yet we live in a civilization that puts its faith in money and economy and physical objects. And in a modern, sort of enlightened world, we no longer have to reconcile with divine things. I think that's an incredible conflict to be in. In some ways, there's this modern, educated, enlightened person, but surrounded by the worship of things—junk basically. We condescend to kind of primitive superstitions—like a belief in god. And yet our junk, it does nothing for us. It doesn't really save us.<sup>68</sup>

As these quotes make clear, Stevens believes that Americans have in some way been duped into investing material things with more value than they deserve. This duplicity is apparently an inherent part of the general modern culture industry, an idea that is, *mutatis mutandis*, Adornian. In the music industry more specifically, the problems are no better. The music industry, Stevens asserts, has been so permeated by marketing and advertising forces, that he cannot discern what is real and what is manufactured.

There's so much hype, so much promotion that goes into the music industry that it's hard to determine what art is real and true and an honest individual's creative expression and how much is marketing. ... And everything is confused because we live in a world of commerce and advertisement. Some of the best art is made in the world of advertising.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> This should be “corporeal;” it is unclear whether this was Stevens's error, or an error in transcription.

<sup>68</sup> Pappas, “[Interview with Sufjan Stevens],” 32.

<sup>69</sup> DeLuca, “48 States Will Have to Wait: Singer-Songwriter Sufjan Stevens Has Miles to Go (on Tour) and a Christmas Album Due out before He Returns to His Grand Project,” E9.

Stevens is searching here for authenticity in music, a characteristic that for him is antithetical to base commercialism. The line is drawn between honesty on the one hand and marketing on the other.

Let us step back for a moment and consider the stakes in this narrative, as presented by Stevens. For him, there is a clear dichotomy between art that is, as he put it in the above quote, created as an “honest individual’s creative expression,”<sup>70</sup> and art created in the service of the bottom line. Each word here is instructive. “Honesty” is offered as the antithesis of manipulation, and manipulation is the modality of advertising, since advertising is designed to enact calculated manipulations of consumers’ desires. “Individuality” is also assaulted by advertising: ads are created by committees of researchers, psychologists, artists, and executives, not by an individual artist. By implication, the validity of individuality becomes lost in a committee approach. “Creative expression” is revealed to be the primary goal of art in Stevens’s estimation—something that he considers to be inherently antithetical to advertisement.

Stevens has also commented on the effects of advertising on the form and content of pop songs. Stevens interviewed his label-mate and sometime band-mate Shara Worden for the magazine *Venus* in 2006. While discussing the differences between popular and art music, Shara commented on the restrictions of a pop song, in that they force you to focus on one emotion rather than several. To contrast the perceived shallowness of pop songs, Worden offers the example of a Stravinsky dance, which for her allows for a much more diverse emotional and musical expression. Stevens responds in agreement, citing

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

advertising as one of the main culprits in stifling creative expression: “It’s indicative of our culture. We tend to want to encounter things more immediately and within a short span of time. It’s the work of the industrialization of the world, and the work of advertising.”<sup>71</sup>

Yet Stevens acknowledges the artifice involved in music performance, and has to reconcile a desire for authenticity with the reality of the performative aspect of music. He admits: “I never thought of what I do as having any pretense, but now in hindsight I realize that’s impossible, that any time you write music or make art, you’re entertaining a pretense.”<sup>72</sup> Stevens’s situation represents one of the central paradoxes of 21st-century musicians who align themselves with the artist brand. Faced with the distasteful but inextricably close relationship between music and commerce in the 21st century, the modern artist might feel confronted with a simple binarism: either completely reject the economic system of the music industry, and forfeit any hope of a career, or acquiesce to some aspects of the music industry at the cost of perpetuating the system. But there is a third option: to utilize the music industry’s system, while simultaneously critiquing it. This is the approach that Stevens takes. He stands for anti-commercialism, while at the same time offering his art in the form of a mass-produced commodity. This is one of the benefits of positioning oneself via the artist brand: it turns out that endorsing anti-

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<sup>71</sup> Suffjan Stevens, “My Brightest Diamond: Shara Worden Gets into a Heavy Conversation with the ‘States’ Musician About Classical Music, Short Attention Spans, and *American Idol*,” *Venus*, Fall 2006, 35.

<sup>72</sup> Scaggs, “Q&A, the Indie-Rock Auteur on His New Five-CD Yuletide Set and His Obsession with Dudes Named Thomas,” 42.

commercialism and disavowing marketing altogether is actually quite a strong marketing strategy.

*Anti-Commercialism in Stevens's Lyrics: "Come On! Feel the Illinoise"*

Stevens's critique of commercialism extends beyond his interviews, into the very lyrics of the songs that he writes. This can be shown by a lyrical analysis of his song, "Come on! Feel the Illinoise," the title track from the album *Illinois*. The album will receive a full introduction later in the chapter, but for now it will be enough to say that it is a concept album based on the history of Illinois. In this particular song, Stevens treats two important historical subjects related to city of Chicago: the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, and the poet Carl Sandburg. This two-part topic manifests itself in the formal structure of the song, which consists of two sections, each with a subtitle: "Part I: The World's Columbian Exposition; Part II: Carl Sandburg Visits Me in a Dream." There is no break between the two sections, but they are distinct in musical style. The music will be more closely analyzed below, but of more immediate interest are Stevens's lyrics for the first part of the song, wherein he critiques the close connections between innovation and commercial culture at the Exposition. In general, the meanings of Stevens's lyrics are often unclear or unconfirmed by him, and this is no exception. What follows is my own interpretation of the song's meaning.

In "Come On! Feel the Illinoise!," the speaker presents a series of images and emotions from the Exposition, while pointing out the inherent tensions between commerce and culture in the event. The Columbian Exposition was a gargantuan six-

month event celebrating the four-hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's voyage to America. It was a great showcase for the many new inventions and scientific curiosities that followed the astounding technological boom of the 1880s.<sup>73</sup> It featured the world's first Ferris Wheel, intended to rival the engineering prowess of the Eiffel Tower, built for Paris's world's fair four years before. It was also one of the first venues in which product branding strategies gained wider visibility. The fair held many consumer enticements: post-cards, mementos, and the introduction of many brands, some of which, like Cream of Wheat, are still familiar to shoppers today.<sup>74</sup>

Part I of Stevens's song begins by expressing the speaker's ambivalence toward the goals of the fair. Speaking in the first person, he acknowledges his good intentions, and presumably those of all who organized the fair. But the presence of commercialism in the midst of a pursuit of innovation gives him pause. It plants a seed of doubt in the speaker's mind, and makes him think twice about the sincerity of the endeavor.

Oh great intentions  
I've got the best of interventions  
But when the ads come  
I think about it now

The next stanza follows a similar structure to the first. It begins with a feint toward praising the entrepreneurial spirit as a grand panacea and a source of glory for America, only to end with the same questioning tone, now with a hint of cynicism.

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<sup>73</sup> On this technologically prolific decade, see Smil, *Creating the Twentieth Century: Technical Innovations of 1867-1914 and Their Lasting Impact*, throughout, esp. 278-79.

<sup>74</sup> Norman and Christine Laing Bolotin, *The World's Columbian Exposition: The Chicago World's Fair of 1893* (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1992).

In my infliction  
Entrepreneurial conditions  
Take us to glory  
I think about it now

Before continuing I must point out that there are two poetic voices in the song, and the above stanzas represent what I will call the “speaker’s voice.” Stanzas in the speaker’s voice are poetically and musically uniform, in that they are always sung by Stevens as a solo, and follow a parallel poetic structure. The last line of each of the above stanzas, in which the speaker thinks twice about the motivations behind the innovations he considers, closes each stanza. Though offered at first as a mild questioning, the discourse quickly becomes a refrain of skepticism whose amplitude increases as the song unfolds.

The next stanza of the song depicts the famed “White City” of the Exposition, a series of buildings at the fair that evoked classic architectural style, and was constructed out of white plaster. The city was also illuminated by many electric lights, a novelty at the fair. The stark and brightly lit whiteness of the buildings contrasted sharply with the dingy and harsh realities of the industrial city that stood just outside its boundaries.<sup>75</sup>

Oh great White City  
I’ve got the adequate committee  
Where have your walls gone?  
I think about it now

If we consider the White City to be a symbol of an improved version of reality, a consumer culture that offers an enhanced, commodified simulation of reality, then the meaning of Stevens’s question about “Where have your walls gone?” becomes clear. He

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.



is acknowledging that a barrier no longer exists between the White City and the rest of the world. The walls have fallen, and consumer culture has spread throughout American society. In some ways, all of America is the White City, offering at every turn the opportunity to experience the world through a commodified version of real life.

By the end of this first part of the song, the speaker goes so far as to question the moral soundness of the culture industry, as can be seen in the speaker's last two stanzas. For the speaker, what were once great intentions of the innovators have become no greater than shadows of reality—a Baudrillardian simulation of the real.<sup>76</sup> And in the midst of the destitution brought on by the charlatanry of the World's Fair, the "God of Progress" has abandoned those who worship at his altar. Just as the walls of the White City have fallen, allowing for commodity creep, the defensive walls around the God of Progress have fallen, letting commerce in.

Oh Great intentions  
Covenant with the Imitation  
Have you no conscience?  
I think about it now

Oh God of Progress  
Have you degraded or forgot us?  
Where have your walls gone?  
I think about it now

The speaker's voice is contrasted with a second poetic voice in Part I, which I will call the "corporate voice." I use this term in the first place because its lines are sung on the recording by a chorus, but also because of its allusions to the business world. Stanzas

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<sup>76</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, The Body, in Theory, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

in this voice, interspersed throughout the speaker's stanzas mentioned above (see Table 4.2), provide a counterpoint, rattling off in litany fashion all of the sensationalist consumer pleasures sought out at the fair. The litany in the corporate voice propels the speaker's observations, providing the rationale for his thoughtful reconsideration of the motivations behind the fair.

Chicago, in fashion, the soft drinks,  
expansion Oh Columbia!  
From Paris, incentive,  
like Cream of Wheat invented, the Ferris Wheel!

In the song, then, the marvel of the fair is undercut by the intrusion of commerce, which the speaker critiques from an achronological perspective, that is, he inhabits the past with the convenience of a present vantage point.

**Table 4.2.** Sequence of Poetic Voices in “Come On! Feel the Illinoise!”

Stanza	Poetic Voice
1	<i>Speaker</i>
2	<i>Speaker</i>
3	<i>Corporate</i>
4	<i>Speaker</i>
5	<i>Corporate</i>
6	<i>Speaker</i>
7	<i>Speaker</i>
8	<i>Corporate</i>
9	<i>Corporate</i>
10	<i>Corporate</i>

The speaker in this song is confronted with an imagined paradox that has haunted artists for two centuries, and found its identity in an oft-utilized narrative: the continual

struggle of Art for increasing autonomy (that is, without social referents) within a world driven by supply and demand. The leading proponent of this camp in the twentieth century is a name already familiar in the present discussion: Theodor Adorno. In Adorno's view, the *sine qua non* of art is its specialness, its ability to transcend the everyday and reach a higher plane. Popular music, on the other hand, is mass produced, and meant for mass consumption. The goal of an artist is to model in his art the pinnacle of self-realization, at the expense of all of the material and social demands—commissioned work, paying audiences—that threaten to dilute the artist's authentic pursuit of this goal.<sup>77</sup> The persistent and deeply rooted idea that art—and thus art music—must somehow resist commercial influence has significantly affected the way that Sufjan Stevens views his own work.

### **Three Musical Analyses: “Decatur...” “Out of Egypt...” and “Come On! Feel the Illinois”**

What does Sufjan Stevens's artist brand *sound like*? What are the musical tropes that he draws upon in *Illinois* to represent his identity of individual expression, anti-commercialism, and Romantic genius? He draws on a complex set of historical repertoires in both the art music and popular realms, making the musical style of his album something of a panoramic survey of the American musical landscape. On tracks such as “Decatur, or, Round of Applause for Your Stepmother!” the use of the banjo as

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<sup>77</sup> This description is inspired by Richard Taruskin, “Books: The Musical Mystique,” *The New Republic* (2007), <http://www.tnr.com/article/books-and-arts/books-the-musical-mystique?page=0,0>. Taruskin is not an unbiased voice in this debate—he is an ardent anti-Adornian.

the main accompanying instrument evokes American folk music. His use of chamber-orchestra-like ensembles on tracks such as “Jacksonville” or “Come On! Feel the Illinois!” combine with electric guitars and other standard rock instruments to create a sound that has been described as “chamber rock.” Then there is Stevens’s general tendency to favor complexity of time signatures and long-form, multi-part compositional structures, which align his compositional tendencies with ambitions toward the “classical” avant-garde. These tendencies are bolstered by the conspicuous influence of the American minimalist composers on Stevens’s compositional style, especially in the album-closing tack, “Out of Egypt...,” as a musical analysis will show later in this section.

In addition to the music, Stevens’s lyrics also bolster his claim to Romantic artistic genius through literary allusion and historical awareness, the result of months of research and reading on the social history of Illinois for the album. In addition to the references to the Chicago world’s fair mentioned above, the lyrics at various times also refer to Saul Bellow, Abraham Lincoln, John Wayne Gacy Jr., Carl Sandburg, Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, and others. When approaching the writing of lyrics for a concept album about Illinois, one is presented with fairly straightforward limitations of topical possibilities. They include history, recollections, and fictional stories that mostly occur within the boundaries of space defined by Illinois’s political and cultural boundaries. But the music tells a different geographical story. This is partly because music is much more difficult to constrain by any similar geographical boundaries. How should a composer capture the “sound” of Illinois? The answer is far more slippery. One

possible way would be through mimesis, using instruments to create a verisimilar soundscape of the state. But Stevens avoids a mimetic approach. There is no instrument on the album invoking the sound of a Chicago “L” Train, no Ferris wheel sound effect or carnival music. Instead, the music reflects a style that Stevens had been cultivating on his earlier album for Michigan, and expanded for this project.

Out of the several musical characteristics mentioned above, there are three elements that I argue are foundational to Stevens’s sound. The first is folk music, which evokes a general sense of Americana that can be heard as representing Middle America, and including Illinois. The second is the application of his musical ideas through complex and orchestral (read: “sophisticated”) compositional and arranging techniques. The third is music based on repetitive structures, which evokes the minimalist stream of 20th-century art music. As I will show in this section, the musical influences on *Illinois* can be traced to places outside of Illinois, and in one important way actually reflect the history of Manhattan’s musical scene more specifically than that of Illinois. I will argue that this departure from his stated geographical limitations was indicative of the overriding nature of the artist brand, over the constraints of the Fifty States Project. The following analysis will explain these elements by analyzing three tracks from the album, “Decatur...”, “Come On! Feel the Illinoise!”, and “Out of Egypt...”.

#### *The Folk Sound of Illinois: “Decatur...”*

Pinning down a single word to characterize Sufjan Stevens’s music is difficult, but the genre label most often used is “folk,” meaning the modern day variety of the

urban folk music revival descended from artists like Joan Baez.<sup>78</sup> More specifically, he can be described as a folk musician of the singer-songwriter variety, since he writes and sings all of his own songs. Like many singer-songwriters who have gone before him, such as Bob Dylan, Stevens writes many of his songs on the guitar. But Stevens also often writes and performs songs on the banjo, an instrument uncommon enough in modern-day singer-songwriter circles to differentiate him. His use of the banjo makes the “folk” label even more appropriate, since there are many American folk styles for which the banjo would not be out of place. Both the guitar and banjo figure prominently in the recorded arrangements of his songs. This is true not only of *Illinois*, but also his earlier albums such as *Seven Swans* and *Michigan*. The guitar and banjo also provided the foundation of Stevens’s live performances during the first five years of his musical career. In the years before *Illinois*, when Stevens played solo sets more frequently, he would bring along a guitar and banjo to use for his only accompaniment.<sup>79</sup> This stripped-down configuration found a place on his recordings as well, though never matching the complete sparseness of the solo set. Occasionally, when taking a break from his typically orchestral arrangements on *Illinois*, Stevens has an arrangement with limited instrumentation, often focusing on just guitar (or banjo) and voice. This occurs on a few select tracks, including “John Wayne Gacy, Jr.” and “Decatur, or, Round of Applause for Your Stepmother!” The folk label also influenced Stevens’s visual projection of his image. A promotional photo for *Illinois* shows Stevens in an American flag-patterned

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<sup>78</sup> See Chapter III.

<sup>79</sup> A rare glimpse into this period of Stevens’s career is a bootleg of his performance at Judson College on November 19, 2003. Stevens plays the first half of the set on acoustic guitar, and the second on banjo.

collared shirt, donning a straw hat, and holding his trusty banjo in playing position (see Figure 4.3). The fact that he posed with a banjo rather than an acoustic guitar—though either would have represented his music honestly—emphasizes the fact that he wanted to present himself as different from the average singer-songwriter. Any number of singer-songwriters might be seen playing an acoustic guitar, but not many would use a banjo. Compared to the image of Joan Baez in the previous chapter, this photo, like most other promotional photographs Stevens’s uses, is self-consciously campy, and should be understood as simultaneously projecting his image as an American troubadour, while also expressing anxiety about it.

**Figure 4.3.** Sufjan Stevens, holding a banjo (promotional photo for *Illinois*)



To get an idea of what Stevens’s folk component sounds like, let us consider “Decatur, or, Round of Applause for Your Stepmother!” the seventh track on *Illinois*. The

instrumentation for this piece consists of banjo, accordions, electric guitar, and two male vocalists. Save for the electric guitar, the sound of this song is similar to one that might be found accompanying a sing-along on the back porch of a mythical middle American home. Even with the inclusion of the electric guitar, this allusion is not completely derailed, since Stevens uses a “clean” sound (i.e., with no distortion) that fits into the sonic space of the acoustic instruments. The two male vocal parts form constant harmony, and the fact that Stevens uses a second male singer reinforces the illusion of performing live; if Stevens had overdubbed his own voice, as he frequently did elsewhere on the album, that illusion would be destroyed. The “liveness” of the track is further supported by the verbal count-off by Stevens at the beginning, and staged applause at the close, which gives the impression that we are listening in on a live performance rather than an overdubbed studio recording.<sup>80</sup> The song structure of “Decatur...” is simple and strophic with a chorus only at the end, which is also not incongruous with a folk song. The form consists of an instrumental introduction and four verses, with a repeated instrumental interlude after every verse. After the fourth verse-interlude pair, a chorus-like section enters, and leads to a false ending, after which a reprise of the chorus repeats, ending the song (see Table 4.3).

The connection between Stevens and folk music is not at cross purposes with his projection of the artist brand. In fact, as we saw in the previous chapter, this connection

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<sup>80</sup> Part of the charm of this song is the clever series of rhymes Stevens forms with “Decatur.” They range from “operator,” “aviator,” “hate her,” and “denominator,” to “kangaroo taker” and “wild alligator.” Often the rhyme is extended earlier in the line, as in: “No small caterpillar / go congratulate her.” To Stevens’s credit, the rhymes rarely sound forced, and fit seamlessly into the topic of the song and Illinois history: “Stephen A. Douglas was a great debater / But Abraham Lincoln was the great emancipator.”



**Table 4.3.** Form of “Decatur...”

Intro	V1	Inst. Interlude	V2	Inst. Interlude	V3	Inst. Interlude	V4	Inst. Interlude	Chorus (false end)	Chorus (reprise)
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aligns him with a stream of authentic American art that crystallized during the folk revival of the 1960s. As with the case of Vanguard and Joan Baez, this stream is not incompatible with artistic aspirations. Furthermore, the connection with folk music also aligns Stevens with a well established tradition of mistrust of commerce. Unlike Baez, however, Stevens also seems to mistrust himself and his ability to engage in authentic musical expression, leading to an anxiety about his relationship to the music industry market. Stevens’s self-consciousness about his image is dealt with through the modes of irony, wit, and camp, as portrayed in the above image and corroborated by other press photos for the release of the Illinois album.

*Complex, Orchestral, “Sophisticated”:* “Come On! Feel the Illinoise!”

A second component of Stevens’s musical brand that I would like to demonstrate is his emphasis on tropes of musical complexity and sophistication, such as asymmetrical meters, orchestral arrangements, and multi-part formal structures. These elements, as well as the previously mentioned elements of folk music and repetitive structures, can be seen in the music of “Come On! Feel the Illinoise!” which we have already been introduced to as a two-part critique of the influence of commercialism on art and innovation. Building on the lyrical analysis of this song offered above, which emphasizes Stevens’s anti-

commercial stance in favor of “authentic” artistry, I will now consider how the music supports this stance.

The song begins with a two-measure, repeated piano riff, immediately establishing a confident, rhythmically propulsive feel for the piece. The opening also establishes that the piece is in the asymmetrical meter of 5/4 (see Example 4.1). The use of complex time signatures like this one permeates Stevens’s writing. On *Illinois* alone, there are four pieces that use asymmetrical or mixed meters in all or part of the composition. For Stevens, using complex time signatures is a way to add sophistication to his music, as we can surmise from a comment he made to an interviewer in 2007. Stevens describes the music that he likes to listen to around New York City, and what he can take away from it, musically:

There’s a Balkan brass group that plays in Park Slope [Brooklyn] on Tuesday nights. It’s like a fusion of gypsy brass music, New Orleans brass, American jazz and funk, but they do a lot of traditional Balkan pieces, with, like, nine or ten horn players playing all at once. *It’s sophisticated because of the weird meters and time signatures*, but it’s just about dancing and partying and drinking a lot of beer.”<sup>81</sup>

Here Stevens presents an apparent duality between sophistication and carnality in the music of a Balkan brass band. Stevens seems to be saying that in the midst of a musical performance that is mostly concerned with pure revelry, an element of sophistication is added by the existence of “weird” time signatures. It could be said that by conceiving of

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<sup>81</sup> Scaggs, “Q&A, the Indie-Rock Auteur on His New Five-CD Yuletide Set and His Obsession with Dudes Named Thomas,” 42.

his own music in such time signatures, he is also attempting to add elements of sophistication to it.

**Example 4.1.** Opening four measures of “Come On! Feel the Illinoise!”<sup>82</sup>



Stevens has also developed an orchestral approach to the arrangement of his songs. After the opening four measures of “Come On! Feel the Illinoise!,” in which the piano plays alone, a much fuller set of instruments enters, creating the effect of a chamber orchestra. The entrance of this fuller ensemble is sudden, surprising, and in stark contrast to the monophonic piano opening. The “orchestra” (actually overdubbed by Stevens and other session players) for this first part of the piece consists of winds, mallet percussion, drum set, piano, electric piano, and electric bass (see Example 5.2).<sup>83</sup> It has been Stevens’s ear for the orchestral that has earned him a view in the press as a “composer,” rather than just a pop or folk musician. It was what led to his BAM commission, and was Alex Ross’s stated reason for including Stevens in a list of the

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<sup>82</sup> This and all following examples were transcribed by the author. A note on method: transcriptions were made based on close listening of recordings rather than scores, the latter of which in this case are not available. Rather than providing a complete account of the music, they are intended to communicate the essential points mentioned in my argument, and thus reflect an approximate description of the music. The “reverse engineering” approach necessitated by recording transcriptions is not without its deficiencies, and in the case of incomplete information, I have chosen the interpretation that most accurately reflects my close listening. I double-checked analysis in both CD and MP3 format versions of the tracks, and utilized the computer software program, The Amazing Slow Downer, to aid in transcription.

<sup>83</sup> In the second part of the song, “Part II: Carl Sandburg Visits Me in a Dream,” a string quartet enters, completing the song’s list of instrumentation.

composers currently driving the conversation between contemporary popular and classical music.<sup>84</sup>

**Example 4.2.** Opening repetitive groove of “Come On! Feel the Illinoise!” (m. 5)

$\text{♩} = 210$

Flute

Oboe

Trumpet in B♭

Vibraphone

Drum Set

Guitar

Bass Guitar

Piano

<sup>84</sup> Ross cites Stevens’s “elegiac orchestral arrangements”: Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Picador, 2007), 590.

*Minimalism: “Out of Egypt...”*

Perhaps the most striking example of Stevens’s awareness of American art music techniques occurs in the final track of the album, which has a typically lengthy title: “Out of Egypt, Into the Great Laugh of Mankind, and I Shake the Dirt from My Sandals As I Run.” The piece begins with a single repeated E on the piano, initiating a pulsing rhythm that the listener quickly identifies as the bedrock of the piece. On top of that ever-present and repetitive E on the piano, breathy synthesizers and vibraphones soon enter and take up the pulsing rhythms, gradually outlining an E major chord by a process of the aggregation of repetitive chordal cells. It becomes clear after a short time that the aggregation of these cells will be the foundational structure of the piece, and indeed this process provides the underlying structure to the piece (See Example 4.3a). On top of this pulsating foundation, Stevens introduces a melody in the piano, which starts high and gradually descends. Similar phrases follow, and over the course of this four-minute piece several other melodies occur, played on the piano, vibraphones, and oboes (see Example 4.3b).

If a listener familiar with 20th-century developments in art music were to stumble upon this piece without hearing what came before it on the album, she might immediately recognize that it uses techniques of certain American minimalist composers from New York City. Specifically, the music of Steve Reich, and his *Music for 18 Musicians* (1976), might come to mind. Indeed, the connection has not been lost on some journalists and critics, and Stevens has acknowledged his awareness of the music and careers of

Steve Reich and Terry Riley, and their influence on his album.<sup>85</sup> Though he has also downplayed this influence in interviews as only one of many musical influences, the music speaks loud enough, and the connection is unmistakable. Drop the needle anywhere on Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians*, and you would hear something strikingly similar to the sound of "Out of Egypt..."

As the piece develops, Stevens's "Out of Egypt..." continues to shadow Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians*. The piece reaches its first climax at around 1:30, the point at which the stacking of notes on top of the fundamental E reaches its limit. This reveals the piece's complete aggregate pulse chord, which could be described as an EMaj9 chord, or alternately as a stacked E major triad with the addition of scale degrees two and seven (see Example 4.3c). Then at 1:50 there is a phase shift, another quintessential Reichian technique, which doubles the perceived rhythmic pulse (represented in my transcription as a shift from eighth notes to sixteenth notes). The non-triadic pitches from the E major chord are extracted and placed on the offbeats, creating a rapid melodic and harmonic alternation defined by neighbor-note relationships. The shift alters the listener's perception of the aggregate chord, revealing two chords instead of one (see Example 4.3d).

As Alex Ross has pointed out, the repetitive structures of minimalist composition have been a constant influence on rock and pop since the 1960s.<sup>86</sup> This has been true especially of underground groups like the Velvet Underground in the late 1960s, and


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<sup>85</sup> "Q&A: Sufjan Stevens," *Uncut*, August 2005.


<sup>86</sup> Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*, 553-556.

**Example 4.3. “Out of Egypt...”**

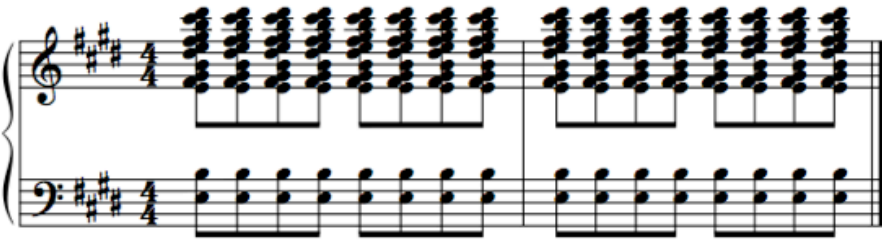
A. Initial Repetitive Cells  
Approx. ♩ = 115




B. Two examples of overlaying melodies (played on piano)



C. Aggregate pulse chord (condensed)



D. After phase shift (simplified)



continuing with other underground groups since. By so directly referencing minimalist techniques, Stevens places his album in the context of an ongoing musical discourse between popular and art music compositional techniques. Minimalist music has also been

compared to mass advertising, in its repetitive structures and incessant delivery, a fact that has alternately been used as a critique of the seriousness of the genre, while at the same time making it popular with audiences where other forms of 20th-century music have not.<sup>87</sup> Like the minimalist compositions it references, Stevens's music walks the line between mass appeal and art status. On one hand, his allusions align Stevens with trends in contemporary art music and pop music, differentiating his sound from mass-produced pop; on the other, it engages him with structures of mass production. In both cases, Stevens propagates the discourse between the popular and art music worlds, clearly drawing from both. The influence of repetitive structures has permeated much more continuing with other underground groups since. By so directly referencing minimalist techniques, Stevens places his album in the context of an ongoing musical discourse between popular and art music compositional techniques. Minimalist music has also been compared to mass advertising, in its repetitive structures and incessant delivery, a fact that has alternately been used as a critique of the seriousness of the genre, while at the same time making it popular with audiences where other forms of 20th-century music have not.<sup>88</sup> Like the minimalist compositions it references, Stevens's music walks the line between mass appeal and art status. On one hand, his allusions align Stevens with trends in contemporary art music and pop music, differentiating his sound from mass-produced pop; on the other, it engages him with structures of mass production. In both cases, Stevens propagates the discourse between the popular and art music worlds, clearly

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<sup>87</sup> See Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice*.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.



drawing from both. The influence of repetitive structures has permeated much more broadly into Stevens's musical style. The majority of the songs on *Illinois* feature prominently repeated cells of music that could loosely be described as block construction, that is, blocks of music that are introduced, altered, and return. This is the case in "Come On! Feel the Illinois!," discussed above, as well as in the similarly-orchestrated track "The Tallest Man, The Broadest Shoulders."<sup>89</sup>

"The Tallest Man, The Broadest Shoulders" is the antepenultimate track on the album, and its final bars present a modulatory chord sequence, moving from A major to E minor via the following sequence: A - Emin - C - Emin - Amin - Emin. This forms a transition to "Riffs And Variations On A Single Note For Jelly Roll, Earl Hines, Louis Armstrong, Baby Dodds, And The King of Swing, To Name A Few," the penultimate track of the album. As its name suggests, this one-minute piece consists of repetitions of a single note, played on a canon of overdubbed solo trumpets. The trumpets are each panned to a different place in the mix, and each has its own timbre, creating a distinct phonographic space for each. The piece is another manifestation of the influence of minimalism on Stevens's music—the canon "melody" consists of a repeated E, beginning slowly and quickly picking up pace, then falling into a ritardando at the end of the breath. Each trumpet's entrance follows this pattern, creating an ebb and flow as each part accelerates and decelerates. "Riffs and Variations..." also segues to the following track without a break. It has already prepared the listener for harmonic space of E, which we

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<sup>89</sup> This song is also a good example of Stevens's use of complex meter. The song alternates between long stretches of mixed meter (5/4 + 6/4), common time, and 5/4 time.

have already seen to be the starting place of “Out of Egypt...” These last three tracks should be seen as a compositional unit. They succeed one after the other without breaks, and Stevens has created a careful harmonic plan that moves from the key of A major to E minor, then to E major in the final track (see Table 4.4).

**Table 4.4.** Harmonic plan of last three tracks on *Illinois*

Piece	Harmonic Plan
“Tallest Man, Broadest Shoulders”	<i>A major</i> <i>Modulation: A - Em - C - Em - Am - Em</i>
“Riffs and Variations...”	<i>E minor</i>
“Out of Egypt...”	<i>E major</i>

The influence of the New York music scene is present on *Illinois*, and that influence on Stevens would only continue to increase in the following years. In addition to *The BQE*, Stevens music and performance has more recently veered more heavily towards performance art. The music for *The Age of Adz*, his first full-length album to follow *Illinois*, plunges into composed digital soundscapes and psychedelic music based on the prophecies of outsider artist Royall Robertson. The performance of this album on his ensuing tour also embraced a New-York-influenced performance art aesthetic: the elaborate costumes for Stevens and his band included strips of neon-colored reflector body-tape, metallic silver pants, space-age jump suits, and bright white skeleton graphics. The carefully choreographed performances combined a large, live ensemble, digital synthesizers and on-stage effects, extensive video presentations synched with the music,

intricate lighting programs, and choreographed dances between Stevens and his two female back-up singers.

### **Conclusion: The “Artist” Brand**

In this chapter, I have considered how Sufjan Stevens’s music has been represented in the music press, both by journalists and by Stevens himself. The narrative of Stevens’s commodified persona has been closely aligned with what I have labeled the “artist brand.” The defining characteristics of this brand, in Stevens’s case, have been his presentation as an artistic genius and his stance as a rebel against the ever rising tide of commercialism in culture. To recall Marcel Danesi’s point, the power of a brand is that it stands in for “*ideas* that have great emotional appeal.”<sup>90</sup> In this case, Stevens’s artist brand capitalizes on the deeply rooted artistic antipathy towards commercialism that has been historically influential in American culture, as we have seen in the case of the folk music revival of the 1960s. As I have also pointed out, the roots of this brand also extend beyond American culture, back to notions of artistic genius formed as a part of the developments of 19th-century European romanticism.

After the critical success of *Illinois*, the tension between Stevens’s persona and his lauded Fifty States project mounted, and he found himself in an artistic double bind. His “states” albums made him a cult figure to his fans, who eagerly awaited the project’s next installment, but the self-imposed demands of art, and his proclivity towards continual stylistic experimentation, made it impossible for him to fulfill the fans’

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<sup>90</sup> Danesi, *Brands*, 137.

expectations of completing the project. In the end, Stevens has now completely abandoned the Fifty States Project by all accounts. The desire to be true to his own self expression, to not let the restrictive boundaries of commercial demand dictate his artistic trajectory, have led him down increasingly unexpected and experimental avenues.<sup>91</sup>

For Stevens, musical and artistic models come not only from the realm of popular music, but also from traditions of western art music. In interviews, he has acknowledged the influence of the New York minimalist school on his compositional style, and has compared his tendency to embrace projects of epic proportions to similar tendencies in Richard Wagner.<sup>92</sup> As with these other artists, Stevens's quest to be true to his artistic sensibilities trumps a desire to fulfill an audience's expectations. By thus aligning himself with this self-critical, progressive perspective, he positions himself as a "serious" composer of artistic music. Out of this complex relationship with traditions of art, he strikes a seemingly paradoxical bargain. Stevens publicly critiques commercialism, and as a result gets a marketing strategy. And if his fans had understood the foundational importance of the artist brand to Stevens, they might have realized that the Fifty States Project was unlikely to be completed. After releasing *Illinois*, Stevens was very clear that he had no interest in stylistic stasis: "...I think I need to slow down and make sure I'm

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<sup>91</sup> Indeed, constant reinvention of and experimentation with one's compositional style is an important characteristic of the artist brand. This trend of constantly updating and changing one's approach to musical style and technique can be seen in the careers of other "art" bands that preceded Stevens, such as Radiohead. An essential characteristic of their career has been the shirking of labels in service of artistic progress, an example of which is their October 2000 release of *Kid A*, an album that incorporated electronic music techniques at a time when that was unpopular for a rock band.

<sup>92</sup> Rathe, "11.6 Miles of Bad Road; BQE Inspires Sufjan Stevens's Latest Work at BAM."

not repeating myself,” he stated in an interview. “The last thing I want to do is the same thing twice.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Tristan Staddon, “In-Store Session with Sufjan Stevens,” *Alternative Press* 2006.

CHAPTER V  
THE BRANDED LISTENER: DESIGNING, PACKAGING,  
AND SELLING THE IPOD

**Introduction**

This chapter takes the iPod as its subject, returning technology to the forefront of the discussion. Close in theme to my earlier chronicling of the rise of Red Seal records, but set a hundred years later, this chapter makes the argument that Apple's iPod was so successful in part because it emerged during a time of tension between new digital technologies and their uses in the field of mobile music listening. Apple's solution was to harness pre-existing technologies and create a valid product concept—that magical combination that also benefitted Victor's Red Seal line. Apple's winning combination was based on the principle of returning tangibility to music, something that had recently been lost as a result of the rise of MP3 music listening. Apple's focus on the physicality of their music player resulted in an advertising strategy that emphasized the average listener, rather than celebrity musicians, as the center of the music experience. Significantly, it was not a music company—such as Victor or Vanguard—but a consumer electronics company that produced the first blockbuster music product of the 21st century. As opposed to Victor, which set about creating music recordings as a way to bolster the sales of their talking machines, Apple did not start its own record label to support the sale of the iPod. Instead, they provided a conduit through which to manage and listen to a user's pre-existing music library. Thus, though it was an outsider to the

music industry, Apple found a way to harness the symbolic and monetary value that the industry had generated through a hundred years of marketing.

One aspect common to all of the case studies in *A Package Deal* up to this one is that the focus of branding, marketing, and advertising of music commodities has emphasized the recording musician over the listener. Enrico Caruso, Joan Baez, Sufjan Stevens—the marketing rationale for buying their music in commodified form stems from the specialness of the performer; the specialness of the listener-consumer is secondary. This is not to say, however, that marketing strategies of music commodities have not taken into account and emphasized the social or personal benefit that a consumer can derive from buying music or music players to some extent. We already know how Victor’s Victrola, the “piano-finished,” high-end phonograph player that doubled as exquisite parlor furniture, was marketed as a status symbol to those who wished to align themselves with the cultural elite. In other words, buyers of the Victrola were offered social benefits as well as musical ones. But throughout most of the 20th century, the emphasis of consumer benefit in marketing strategies was overshadowed by a lionization of the artist as unique, special, and worthy of support. This marketing strategy, as I have shown in the cases of Joan Baez and Sufjan Stevens, has been aimed at developing the brand characteristics of the artist. But I argue that the appeal of the iPod—the biggest product success story of the first decade of the 21st century (see below)—was predicated on the fact that it centered on the listener, meeting his needs for portability, ease of use, and aesthetic satisfaction. This is because Apple had no specific artist to sell;

it produced no content, but rather offered a new way to engage with the songs already in one's music library.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter will examine the emphasis on the visual and material aspects in the branding—especially the design and marketing—of the original iPod portable MP3 player. First, I describe the state of tension in the music marketplace around 2000 that resulted from two factors: the proliferation of MP3 technology, and the lack of a product that took full advantage of it. This brings me to an analysis of the iPod as a cultural and musical object. I chronicle the creation and ascendancy of the iPod portable MP3 player, released by Apple Computer in 2001, pointing out the special emphasis that the designers placed on its physical design.

Finally, I chart and analyze three initial stages of commodification of Apple's original iPod product category (now called the "classic" iPod). First, I describe the media event that Apple CEO Steve Jobs staged in October 2001 for the product's launch, pointing out the main components of its marketing message. This presentation contained the central points of the iPod's underlying narrative of commodification: a person's music library is a key symbol of personal identity, and that library should be "ultra-portable" and beautiful. Second, the first television ads focus on demonstrating the iPod's functionality while also proposing that the iPod can enhance a user's enjoyment and perception of life. Third, I argue that the popular "Silhouettes" advertising campaign intensified and abstracted the function of the iPod in daily life, promoting the device as fashionable, and the listener as a star. Paradoxically, though the ads feature music

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<sup>1</sup> This eventually included the acquisition of new songs through the introduction of the iTunes music store in 2003, two years after the launch of the original iPod.



prominently, they also promote a pattern of object worship that deflects attention from music and the producer of the music in favor of the visual aspects of the iPod.<sup>2</sup>

While many recent studies of musical commodification, including this one, choose topics that deal with the early periods of mechanical music,<sup>3</sup> the study of more recent developments such as the iPod are also needed. Though the subject is more recent, it is no less crucial, since the conceptions at play are nearer to the dilemmas of present-day companies and consumers. Neither is a historical look at the iPod an imperiled endeavor ideologically. For even in the product's relative adolescence compared to the phonograph or player piano, I argue that the iPod has already passed through its first complete phase of product conception. I call this phase the "iPod-alone" phase, to refer to the period of time for which the main product conception of the iPod is as a dedicated music player. This phase began with the introduction of the product in 2001, and ended in 2007. On June 29, 2007, when Apple's next "technological miracle,"<sup>4</sup> the iPhone, went on sale, it augured a major shift in the iPod brand away from a dedicated portable music player to an integrated mobile lifestyle device. The portable music player aspect of the iPod ceased to be its defining aspect, and instead took up residence among a host of other prominent applications. Though the iPod continues to exist as a software interface on

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<sup>2</sup> As a result of historicizing the various stages of its commodification, it also becomes clear that the original product concept of the iPod—as a dedicated music player, what I call the "iPod Alone" concept—has already run its course, and is now a part of history, replaced by the iPhone/iPod Touch model.

<sup>3</sup> See Sophie Maisonneuve, "Between History and Commodity: The Production of a Musical Patrimony through the Record in the 1920-1930s," *Poetics* 29 (2001); Dowd, "Culture and Commodification: Technology and Structural Power in the Early U.S. Recording Industry."; Taylor, "The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of 'Mechanical Music'."; Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Felicia Kitzmiller, "Apple's iPhone Hits Stores Today," *Independent Mail* (2007).

such devices, it has been subsumed into something larger. Given these historical considerations, the present analysis will limit its discussion to the original iPod (now known as the iPod Classic), with only peripheral mention of the rest of the full product line.<sup>5</sup>

### **Harmonic Tension: MP3s and How We Listen to Them**

The MP3 is the happenstance ruler of the digital music format. Like Edison's phonograph, which, as mentioned in Chapter II, was originally intended for recorded dictation,<sup>6</sup> MP3 technology was not created to be a dedicated music format. It was originally developed as a way to encode the audio layer of films so that large audio-visual files could be compressed to manageable sizes for storage on computer hard drives. It was the third layer of the MPEG-1 format (hence MP3), commissioned by the Motion Picture Experts Group (MPEG), completed in 1992. As Mark Katz recounts, a programmer outside the project named SoloH acquired the code for the MP3 encoder, tweaked its compression process to provide better quality sound, and made it available to other programmers to make their own improvements. Katz explains the tremendous impact that this initial piracy precipitated: "SoloH opened a box—Pandora's to some, a

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<sup>5</sup> The other models in the iPod line are also aimed at different markets and listening experiences as the original iPod. The iPod Shuffle is oriented around a random listening experience rather than authoritative management of one's library and listening, and the iPod Nano, by virtue of its smaller size, has been marketed heavily as an accompaniment to athletics such as jogging.

<sup>6</sup> For a historical account of the development of the phonograph's early product conceptions, see Dowd, "Culture and Commodification: Technology and Structural Power in the Early U.S. Recording Industry."

bottomless treasure chest to others—from which millions of files representing every conceivable type of music continue to pour forth.”<sup>7</sup>

The MP3 format is but one slice of a much larger language—that of binary code—that makes up the entire digital system. Rather than etching grooves on a disc, or recording to magnetic tape, the MP3 allows for sound to be reproduced with the same 1s and 0s also used to represent images, text, actions, loops, video games, and communications in the computer ecosystem. Significantly, it was also a format that did not demand the creation of a new delivery technology—such as a dedicated disc or tape<sup>8</sup>—for it to function. By the 1990s, consumer computers either had speakers or could be outfitted with them. Thus in the MP3 world the de facto delivery technology was the computer hard disk,<sup>9</sup> and the de facto player was the desktop computer and its speakers. At first, this format did not entice huge quantities of listeners to abandon their CD players in favor of a computer-centered music listening lifestyle. That all changed beginning in

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<sup>7</sup> Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*, 160-61.

<sup>8</sup> In the glossary of his highly influential book *Convergence Culture*, contemporary media expert Henry Jenkins defines delivery technologies as “[r]elatively transient technologies—such as the MP3 player or the 8-track cassette—that facilitate the distribution of media content” (p. 323) This category is distinct from that of media, which is the content being delivered. The distinction is important for Jenkins, whose goal is to further our understanding of the big picture of media convergence in the 21st century. Thus, he chooses to focus on the media—recorded sound, printed word, moving picture, social networking—rather than the delivery technologies—cassette tape or compact disc, hardback or paperback, television or cinema, Facebook or MySpace. Delivery systems die while media persist, Jenkins points out, as anyone who remembers the 8-track cassette tape—or does not remember it, for that matter—can attest. See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> A note on the spelling “disc” versus “disk”: the first spelling is reserved for phonograph records or in reference to the term “compact disc” (also abbreviated CD). “Disk” encompasses more general applications of the term, including references to any thin circular object, and including computer hardware such as “hard-drive disk” and “computer disk.” See Bryan A. Garner, *Garner’s Modern American Usage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 261.

1999, when Napster and other peer-to-peer (P2P) networks radically changed the landscape of music acquisition. These software programs facilitated huge file-sharing networks with which a user could make his music library available to any other user on the network anywhere in the world.<sup>10</sup> The Napster software indexed the files that each user allowed to be shared, making them easily searchable. To find music files on this network, all one had to do was type in a search term (often a song name, artist, or evocative keyword), peruse the results (which could easily be in the thousands for popular songs), and click to download the desired files—and all of this for free. The wildfire-like spread of P2P use on college campuses and among young people led to a substantial increase in the average size of a user’s music library. It was a brand new system of musical exchange, unhindered by geography or unit price, and only requiring access to a computer, an internet connection, and the free software. It was a system that was unthinkable even two years before. Suddenly tens of millions of users had amassed large libraries of music files on their computers, and needed to find a way to listen to them. That listening experience was far from perfect.

### *Listening to MP3s, Circa 2000*

At the turn of the 21st century, an early adopter’s MP3 listening experience may have looked something like the following. In his college dorm room, Tim begins research for a paper he is writing for his History of Popular Music class. He launches Napster and performs two searches. The first, for “Billy Joel,” receives several hundred results. He

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<sup>10</sup> Peer-to-peer networks can also share file types other than music, such as text, image, or video. Nevertheless, music files were one of the most frequently shared.

clicks to download twenty of them, including files labeled “goodnight saigon billy joel,” “billy joel – lullaby (live),” and “billy joel – oh what a night.” The second search, for “Elton John,” also returns ample results, and Tim downloads a dozen more files, including “elton john – rocket man,” and “john elton mona lisa and madhatters.” For playback, Tim chooses first to burn an audio CD of his newly downloaded songs. This process converts the songs into audio files that can be read by his CD players, unpacking and retranslating the file compression inherent in the MP3 format. As a result, he is able to fit only 15 of the 32 new songs onto the space of the disc. Tim will listen to this CD in his car, portable CD player, or the stereo in his dorm room.

But the appeal of file sharing is largely in the instant acquisition and gratification that the format and distribution system allows, so Tim also listens immediately to his new music files directly from his computer. The sound pumps (or in his opinion, trickles) through the computer’s factory-supplied speakers, the sound quality of which he considers good but not great. Not great, that is, compared to the set-up his friend has down the hall, an audiophile’s dream with high-end speakers complete with a booming sub-woofer. As he loads up and listens his way through the new songs, much of the experience is satisfactory, considering that he would not have had the money to buy compact disc versions of the songs down at the brick-and-mortar music store. But, whereas the convenience and affordability of the tracks are attractive to him, he runs into several problems while listening. First, when Tim goes to find the files on his computer, he realizes that when he dragged the music into the computer folder labeled “Tim’s music,” they took up residence with the other thousand songs that he already had placed

there. By default, the files were automatically dispersed alphabetically, and since some of the new files were labeled with the artist name first, and others with the song title, he had to hunt a bit to find them again. After finding them (or most of them—he had already forgotten that he downloaded Joel’s “Glass House,” which, as it turns out, would lay dormant and unheard on his computer for over two years until he got an iPod and discovered its “shuffle” capability), he drags the songs into his jukebox music-playing software program and begins to listen.

When Tim reaches John’s “Mona Lisas and Madhatters,” right away his face contracts into a grimace—the sound quality of the track is so poor that he cannot listen for more than 15 seconds. He immediately stops playback and deletes the file from his computer. Several songs later, he hears Billy Joel’s “Oh What a Night.” It starts out: “Oh what a night / Late December back in ‘63.” After about thirty seconds, he assumes a quizzical look. He has a sneaking suspicion that it is not Billy Joel’s voice that he hears on the recording. (Tim’s father is a Billy Joel fan, and after growing up hearing the records, the son has gained the father’s discerning ear.) A quick Internet search tells him that the song is not by Billy Joel at all. In fact, he learns that Billy Joel has never recorded a song with that name. *Whose song is this, then?* he wonders. His next search leads him to a track by The Dells called “Oh What a Night.” But since this single was released in 1956, and the song reminisces about ‘63, he guesses it is not the one he is looking for. Finally, with some digging, Tim finds that the song he is listening to (it is still playing in the background) is the mid-1970s hit for Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons. The reason

Tim did not find it right away was that the file had been mislabeled in more than one respect: the song's official title is "December, 1963 (Oh What a Night!)."

Tim becomes more irked with the problems he finds with each track, but calms himself with a sigh. He tells himself everything will be okay as the opening notes of "Rocket Man" begin. It is the last song in the playlist, saved for that spot because it was the one he was most eager to hear. Everything goes well until three minutes ten seconds into the song, when, in the midst of the climactic chorus, the music abruptly stops and gives way to silence. "Come on!" he hisses through gritted teeth, frustration finally consuming him. Like lightning, he diagnoses the potential problem—this is not the first time it has happened. The MP3 was either only partly downloaded, or existed as an incomplete file when he copied it. Even in the midst of his frustration, Tim cannot help but chuckle. By some wry twist of fate, the track had stopped just after Elton John sang the words "burnin' out his fuse."

### *Common Deficiencies in MP3 Listening*

Overall, the MP3 listening experience in 2000 could be quite messy. The fictional story of Tim exaggerates the frequency of the problems, but it nevertheless represents several of the most unpleasant aspects of managing and listening to an MP3 library at the time. The first was that files were labeled inconsistently. Computer filing systems thrive under conditions of orderliness and consistency. Humans are, with rare exceptions, not typically inclined to these particular traits. Anyone who has let files accrue on his computer desktop over the course of many months can attest to that. On a small scale, the

problem is a minor one. In a collection of a hundred songs, each labeled by a single person, it would be relatively quick to find a song, even if one had to read through each title. Magnify that ten-fold to a thousand songs,<sup>11</sup> and the problem becomes noticeable. Now assume that the thousand songs were compiled through P2P networks, from the unorganized libraries of five hundred different users, each one using his own file naming system irrespective of the other. The problem becomes a headache. Multiply that by ten again—users’ digital music libraries can easily top ten thousand songs today—and you would have a situation of considerable disarray.

The second problem was that the sound quality varied from file to file. This point requires a brief review of how MP3s and MP3 encoders (the software programs that convert an audio file into MP3 format) work. The MP3 codec<sup>12</sup> was created in order to enable the compression of audio data so that it would take up less disk space. The compression was accomplished through a process called perceptual coding. Perceptual coding is based on the acoustic principle that the human ear does not perceive the entire frequency range when hearing a sound wave. But digital audio signals reproduced the entire range of the sound wave, resulting in large amounts of data. The developers of perceptual coding at the Fraunhofer Institute created a process that removed that “extraneous” data. Their website describes the general criteria for deciding which data to retain, and which to remove: “Elements of the recordings that are easily perceived are

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<sup>11</sup> When they released the iPod in 2001, Apple considered one thousand songs to represent the average user’s entire music library. Steven Levy, *The Perfect Thing: How the iPod Shuffles Commerce, Culture, and Coolness* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 9-10.

<sup>12</sup> A codec is a microprocessor or software program that compresses (“codes”) data and, in turn, decompresses (“decodes”) received data. The name results from a conflated version of these two roles: *coder-decoder*.



represented with exacting precision, while other parts that are not very audible can be represented less accurately. Meanwhile, inaudible information can be discarded altogether.”<sup>13</sup> MP3 encoders differed in their level of compression (that is, how much overall data was removed), leading to differing quality in the sound files. In lower bit rate files, the compression might be audible, while at higher bit rates it would be less so.<sup>14</sup>

A third problem was the frequent mislabeling of files. As mentioned above, the labeling of files that populate P2P networks was decentralized and user-generated. This means that the information in the title is only as reliable as its author. Like Tim’s experience with “billy joel – oh what a night,” files could easily be misidentified and mislabeled. The user of a P2P network is at the mercy of the knowledge and available time of the user on the other end of the pipeline.

A final problem that proves the dictum, “you get what you pay for,” is that music files could often be incomplete. Interruption of a recording has been a reality with every delivery technology. A record may skip, or a CD may get scratched. These types of damages only affect a particular disc or cassette. With MP3s, however, any defect in a file is copied exactly, propagating that defect to other users. The only corollary in the pre-digital world would be a defect that existed in a master copy, the master disc or tape used as the source to manufacture all the others at the plant. But in those situations there are quality control checks designed to let as few errors slip by as possible. A P2P network has no such gate-keeping structure. With MP3 file sharing, any file can become a “master

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<sup>13</sup> Fraunhofer Institute for Integrated Circuits, “The MP3 History: Technology.”

<sup>14</sup> The default for the iTunes MP3 encoder is 128 kbps (kilobits per second), but it can also encode at 160 kbps, 192 kbps, or higher.

copy” from which countless others are copied. Once again, decentralization makes quality control difficult.

If the MP3 format had all of these drawbacks, how did it proliferate so rapidly? The truth is that the benefits of MP3 were more than enough to entice millions of users to join in the practice. Mark Katz lists the unique benefits of MP3 technology: 1) it is a non-rivalrous resource (i.e., one unit purchased does not preclude the same unit from being purchased again), 2) the music can be copied perfectly over and over, with no de-generation,<sup>15</sup> 3) its non-physicality makes for high portability, and 4) MP3s are free when acquired through P2P networks.<sup>16</sup> For music consumers in 2000, it was a product with so much potential and so many benefits that the negative aspects of the experience were tolerated. After all, if the MP3 listening experience was bothersome to a user, there were other options for listening. She could always use P2P networks to acquire music and amass a library, then burn series of CDs. This option was relatively inexpensive to produce, and worked within pre-existing delivery technology systems such as home and car stereos. As long as the glitches remained, however, the MP3 would never usurp the CD as the primary delivery technology for consumption. But the market was poised for a new innovation that capitalized on the features of MP3 and was *also* designed around the listening experience. The MP3 had revolutionized the music libraries of millions of consumers; all it needed was an equally revolutionary package.

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<sup>15</sup> This is an ultimate solution to the duplication problem that Thomas Edison and Eldridge Johnson faced a hundred years earlier. See Chapter II.

<sup>16</sup> Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*, 163-64.

## **“The Perfect Thing”: Designing the iPod**

Apple’s iPod is perhaps the most staggering product success of the first decade of the 21st century. In its first two years, the iPod steadily gathered accolades and adoption among music listeners, though its use was limited to users of Apple’s computers. Then when Apple released a version of iTunes (iPod’s complementary song management software) for Windows computers, the growth became exponential and the iPod dominated the mobile MP3 player market. They had sold over two million total units by the beginning of 2004,<sup>17</sup> crossed the three million mark later that summer,<sup>18</sup> and then sold over four million units during the holiday quarter of 2004 alone. The march to dominance continued: by the end of 2005, Apple had sold over forty-two million iPods, and captured seventy-five percent of the market for digital music players.<sup>19</sup> Soon, total iPod sales were counted in the hundreds of millions: one hundred million by mid-2007, and almost three hundred million by the end of 2010 (see Figure 5.1).<sup>20</sup> By April of 2008, the iTunes music store had become the number one music retailer in the United States, surpassing Walmart to take the top position.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Apple, “Over Two Million iPods Sold,” <http://www.apple.com/pr/library/2004/jan/06ipodmomentum.html>.

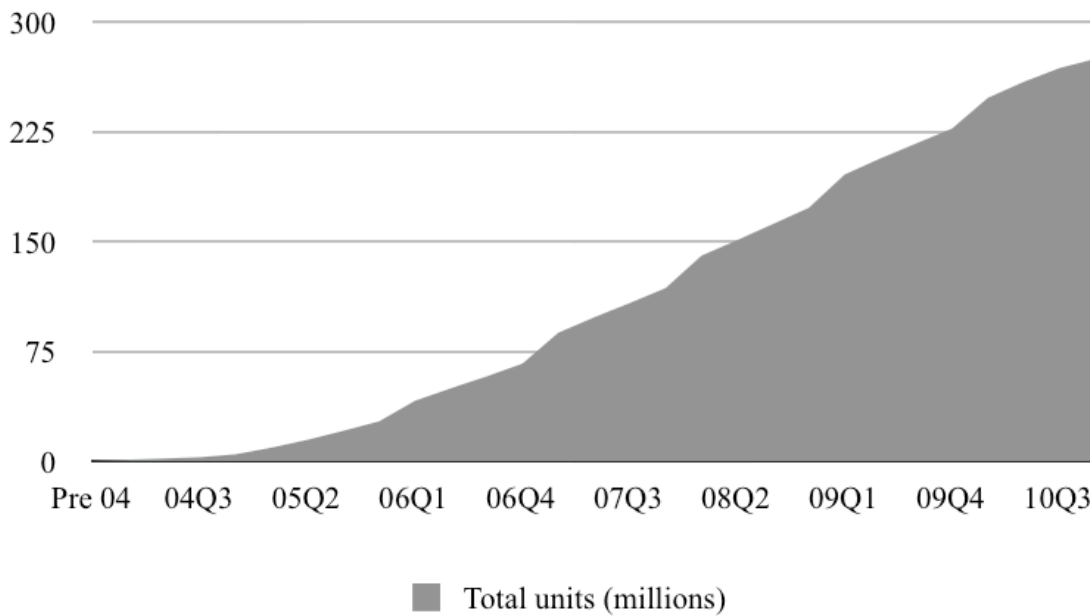
<sup>18</sup> Dylan Jones, *iPod, Therefore I Am* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), 5.

<sup>19</sup> Levy, *The Perfect Thing: How the iPod Shuffles Commerce, Culture, and Coolness*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Apple, “100 Million iPods Sold,” <http://www.apple.com/pr/library/2007/04/09ipod.html>. Steve Jobs announced at a media event on 1 September 2010 that Apple had sold two hundred and seventy-five million iPods.

<sup>21</sup> “iTunes Store Top Retailer in the US,” <http://www.apple.com/pr/library/2008/04/03itunes.html>.

**Figure 5.1.** Total number of iPod units sold (all models) from 2004 to 2010<sup>22</sup>



Given its utter dominance of the market, it is easy to forget that the iPod was not a guaranteed success when it launched. No new consumer electronics product, no matter how we view it today, enjoyed a guarantee of success at its launch. Each must be tested in the crucible of the market. The iPod was not entering a market in which it would be the only player in the product category, and it could not claim the title of “first portable MP3 player.” Several others preceded it, including Compaq’s Personal Jukebox (PJB), the Archos Jukebox by Archos Technology, and the Nomad Jukebox by Creative.<sup>23</sup> The iPod

<sup>22</sup> These statistics were compiled by the author, based on Apple’s publicly available quarterly data reports. Apple, “Press Release Library,” <http://www.apple.com/pr/library/>.

<sup>23</sup> Leander Kahney, *The Cult of iPod* (San Francisco: No Starch Press, 2005), 10.

also did not offer the largest amount of storage space or the most features. At 20GB,<sup>24</sup> the Nomad Jukebox could hold four times as many songs. For features, the Archos Jukebox could not only play MP3 files, but also record them. If the iPod was not the first, biggest, or most feature-rich player, what convinced so many millions of consumers that it was the best?

The iPod's success can be accounted for in part because the designers at Apple recognized the need for a designer digital music listening experience. Finally, users like Tim could have a music listening experience that *felt* good again. In place of a beloved disc was a beloved white box, about the size of a pack of cards. Once again, consumers could hold their music in their hands, palm it, study it with their eyes, squeeze it, kiss it. And the magic, as Apple described it, was that you were not holding a single album, but your *entire music library*, all in one place.

### *iPod and the News Media*

After its explosion into the marketplace, the iPod phenomenon was taken up in full force by the contemporary media. News reporters followed each upgrade and new TV advertisement closely. Technology magazines such as *Wired* and *Macworld* committed endless pages (both printed- and web-) to discussing the iPod and its culture. On the Internet, entire websites dedicated to the iPod sprouted up, such as iLounge.com. Dozens of books, covering all aspects of the iPod, were soon released. The most prolific category of publication was that of the technical guide to use and enjoyment of the

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<sup>24</sup> A gigabyte (GB) is one thousand megabytes (MB). One gigabyte can hold approximately 200-250 songs.

technology, examples of which abound, including *iPodpedia: The Ultimate iPod and iTunes Resource*, *iPod: The Missing Manual*, *iPod and iTunes for Dummies*, and *Absolute Beginner's Guide to iPod and iTunes*.<sup>25</sup>

The iPod was a subject worthy of crossing over into the book medium for three magazine newsmen: Leander Kahney, a reporter for the consumer technology magazine *Wired*; Dylan Jones, editor in chief of the British version of the men's fashion magazine *GQ* (*Gentleman's Quarterly*); and Steven Levy, chief editor and technology correspondent for *Newsweek*. Kahney's book, *The Cult of iPod*,<sup>26</sup> reads like an extended, themed issue of *Wired* magazine, a phenomenon that stems in part from the fact that many of the sections of the book were originally published in the magazine. It is brimming with iPod minutiae and special interest stories, including one about a reader who used his iPod Mini as a weapon to fight off muggers in Washington D.C.<sup>27</sup> Using a shotgun approach, with many mini stories covering a wide variety of topics relating to the iPod, Kahney ends up painting a broad picture of the cultish reaction to this device. The book is also replete with images, and is thus an important iconographic record of the iPod in popular culture. Dylan Jones's book, *iPod, Therefore I Am: Thinking Inside the White Box*<sup>28</sup> is part musical memoir and part cultural history, as Jones recounts in dramatic

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<sup>25</sup> J.D. and David Pogue Biersdorfer, *iPod: The Missing Manual, 8th Ed.* (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2009); Tony Bove, *iPod and iTunes for Dummies* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2009); Michael Miller, *iPodpedia: The Ultimate iPod and iTunes Resource* (Indianapolis: Que Publishing, 2007); Brad Miser, *Absolute Beginner's Guide to iPod and iTunes, 3rd Ed.* (Indianapolis: Que Publishing, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Kahney, *The Cult of iPod*.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 13. The user formed a fist around the iPod mini, making his hand mass denser.

<sup>28</sup> Jones, *iPod, Therefore I Am*.

fashion how the iPod changed his life. It is an ode to the iPod, and Jones lets his effusiveness for the device flow unchecked: “The iPod has consumed my life like few things before it. [...] And I think I’m beginning to really fall in love. Seriously...”<sup>29</sup> Steven Levy’s book, *The Perfect Thing: How the iPod Shuffles Commerce, Culture, and Coolness*, comes the closest out of the three to traditional reporting.<sup>30</sup> As a part of his responsibilities at *Newsweek*, Levy has been covering Apple for decades. His account is especially valuable, because he has what most others do not: access to Apple insiders. The company’s CEO, Steve Jobs, is notoriously secretive, and strictly monitors information flow to the media, making it difficult at times for reliable information to be found about the company, its employees, and its products. Thus, Levy’s account of the iPod’s creation and design history, which is informed by interviews with Jobs and others directly involved with the iPod project, will be a valuable resource in my recounting of the story of the product’s creation and design below.

Select academics have also recently completed book-length projects on the iPod. In 2007, Michael Bull, a British researcher of portable digital media, released a study called *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience*.<sup>31</sup> Recognizing iPod as “the first cultural icon of the twenty-first century,”<sup>32</sup> Bull seeks to analyze the effect of the iPod on the urbanite’s experience of space and self. Juxtaposing the ideas of Roland

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>30</sup> Levy, *The Perfect Thing: How the iPod Shuffles Commerce, Culture, and Coolness*.

<sup>31</sup> Bull, *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience*.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 1.

Barthes, Henri Lefebvre, and Theodore Adorno (among others), with the sentiments of interviewed iPod users, Bull crafts a cultural argument that considers the iPod as the latest step in a historical trend towards privatization and mobilization of public space, from the Gothic cathedral to the automobile to the Apple iPod.<sup>33</sup> The iPod is without question the most instantaneously philosophized music player ever. In every one of the writings mentioned so far—and including the present project—the authors cannot avoid the temptation to speculate as to the iPod’s greater significance to life and happiness. The most concentrated example so far of essays on the iPod’s transcendence is *iPod and Philosophy: iCon of an ePoch*,<sup>34</sup> a collection of essays by philosophers in which the iPod raises social, economic, and ontological issues. Henry Jenkins’s landmark book on contemporary media, *Convergence Culture*, only occasionally mentions the iPod in its pages. But the little white music player is prominently featured on the cover of the paperback edition of the book.<sup>35</sup> It is an instantly recognizable symbol of the cutting-edge spirit of digital media that Jenkins treats, its prominent visual placement framing his entire discussion. The common thread through all of the words written about the iPod is that virtually everyone speaks of it with a mixture of awe, desire, lust, wonder or affection. To choose one of many possible examples, consider the words of one anonymous iPod user from New York, who described to Michael Bull his attachment to the iPod:

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>34</sup> D. E. Wittkower, *iPod and Philosophy: iCon of an ePoch* (Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*.



The design is just flawless. It feels good, to hold it in your hand, to rub your thumb over the navigation wheel and to touch the smooth white surface. It feels nice, I'm proud of owning such a device. It represents and holds an important part of my life, so I don't want an 'ugly' package around it. I have never cherished anything I bought as much as this little device.<sup>36</sup>

Given the love affair of millions of people the world over with this little music player, several questions lurk. How intentional was it for the designers, engineers, and executives at Apple to create a product that hit the sweet spot of physicality? The evidence strongly suggests that the creators of the iPod intentionally utilized a user-centered approach that paid attention to the look and feel of the design. Could the iPod have been made at any consumer technology company, but Apple just figured it out first? By this point in the present study, it should be clear that such a question is misguided. It assumes a deterministic relationship between a technology and its packaging that discounts the reality that both technology and packaging must be developed together. The iPod did not *have* to be created just because the technology existed that made it possible, any more than a product called the Red Seal record had to be created. Rather, because Apple had created a corporate environment of creativity, excellence, and a focus on industrial design, it *was* the place where the iPod was created.

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<sup>36</sup> Qtd. in Bull, *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience*, 3.

### *The Importance of Industrial Design in the Creation of the iPod*

“I don’t know who your product designers are, but boy, you’re not paying them enough.”<sup>37</sup> Such was the reaction of recording artist and producer Moby, upon first seeing, holding, and using the iPod. Moby was one of the few people to get an advance preview of the original iPod before it was released. In return, he shared his reactions on camera, as a part of a promotional video produced by Apple that premiered at the iPod launch event in October 2001 (about which more later). Moby was reacting to the exterior appearance of the iPod, but if you were to crack the outer case of a first generation iPod and survey its inner equipment, you would find a conglomeration of hardware. Rather than invent each piece *de novo*, Apple incorporated several preexisting technologies to save development time. The hard disk was a 1.8-inch drive, made by Toshiba. The FireWire connector was from Texas Instruments, and the audio-processing chip (which handled the audio codec) was from Wolfson Microelectronics.<sup>38</sup> The mélange of silicon that was the inside of an iPod was a result of Apple’s astonishingly rushed production timetable: they started research on the project in January of 2001, and decided that it had to ship for that year’s Christmas season.<sup>39</sup> They introduced the iPod to

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<sup>37</sup> From an iPod promotional video produced by Apple, and premiered at the iPod launch event in October, 2001. At the time of this writing, the video can be found at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e84SER\\_IkP4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e84SER_IkP4).

<sup>38</sup> Levy, *The Perfect Thing: How the iPod Shuffles Commerce, Culture, and Coolness*, 56-57, 65-66. For an analysis of the components of the fifth generation, 30-gigabyte video iPod (released 2005), including their provenance, see Greg Linden, Kenneth L Kraemer, and Jason Dedrick, “Who Captures Value in a Global Innovation System? The Case of Apple’s iPod,” in *Personal Computing Industry Center* (2007): <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/1770046n>.

<sup>39</sup> See *ibid.*, 54-55, 61-62, 73.

the world on October 23, 2001. It took Apple's teams only nine months to dream up and bring to market the most revolutionary portable music device of its day.

Unlike the mixture of parts inside, the outer shell of that first iPod is a model of simple elegance and unity of design (see Figure 5.2). It is of a vertically rectangular shape that has often been compared to a pack of cards. This comparison is an apt one in several ways, because the iPod also has the rounded edges of a deck of playing cards, and roughly the same thickness. The front features a crisp screen in its top third. Filling the bottom two-thirds of the player is the famous disk-shaped scroll wheel, which with its scant five buttons forms a series of concentric circles. The dark gray text on the liquid-crystal screen is contrasted by the cool, white face. If you turn the iPod over, you see its shiny silver stainless steel back. It is smooth, with no protruding edges or screws to break the flow of the eye, or poke the skin as you hold it in your hand. In fact, you will find no visible screws anywhere as you pore over its form. On the top edge are the FireWire connector, headphone jack, and a hold switch (to prevent accidental button pushing). The other three edges are smooth. On the back, there is little else than the Apple logo and the device's name, laser etched into steel. It is a design that quickly became recognizable the world over.

Unlike the development of the inner hardware, there was no outsourcing when it came to the creation of the iPod's exterior design. Steve Jobs considers package design of products to be a point of pride for Apple:

Apple has a core set of talents, and those talents are...very good hardware design...very good industrial design; and we write very

**Figure 5.2.** The original iPod



good system and application software. *And we're really good at packaging that all together into a product.* We're the only people left in the computer industry to do that.<sup>40</sup>

I argue that this focus on the iPod's look—its packaging—can account for part of the reason the iPod became such a desirable object, and has enjoyed such success as a cultural icon. How did the iPod end up this way, and who was behind this so-often-lauded design?

Two men led the way in the development of the industrial design of the iPod: Steve Jobs and Jonathan Ive. Apple CEO Steve Jobs, who has already figured in the story so far, was involved in every aspect of the development of the iPod, from picking the

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<sup>40</sup> Steve Jobs, qtd. in Kahney, *The Cult of iPod*, 15. Emphasis in original.

name, to vetoing the inclusion of a power button,<sup>41</sup> to the smallest modifications of the menu-interface system.<sup>42</sup> Jobs is a modern-day Edison. He is a legend both in the technology and business worlds for being obsessive, secretive, draconian, and uncompromising, resulting often in the frustration of designers, engineers, and the news media. His professional life at Apple is a story of redemption. After starting the company in his garage with Steve Wozniak, and creating one of the first personal computers, as we think of them today, he was pushed out of the company in 1984. After starting NeXT and heading up Pixar, he returned to Apple as CEO in 1996, when the company was having both a financial and an identity crisis. After his return, he put together a string of successes, first with the iMac, then the iBook, the iPod, and in more recent years the iPhone and iPad.

Aside from his obsessive attention to detail, Jobs is also acknowledged to be a genius of marketing, a brilliant brand spokesman, and a relentless pursuer of excellence in every aspect of Apple's product lines. Or, as Steven Levy put it, "Jobs builds brands the way Michelangelo painted chapels."<sup>43</sup> Unsurprisingly, Jobs brought this attitude to the development of the iPod. When creating the iPod, he asked himself what he would like in a portable digital music player, and held Apple's product to that high standard. He had faith that others shared his tastes, and that the approach would translate into sales. "We don't underestimate people," Jobs later said about the iPod's development.

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<sup>41</sup> There has never been a dedicated power button on the iPod. Levy, *The Perfect Thing: How the iPod Shuffles Commerce, Culture, and Coolness*, 68-69.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 81.

We really did believe that people would want something this good, that they'd see the value in it. And that rather than making a far inferior product for a hundred dollars less, giving people the product that they want and that will serve them for years, even though it's a little pricier. People are smart; they figure these things out.<sup>44</sup>

Jobs found a kindred spirit in his Vice President of Industrial Design, Jonathan Ive.

Jonathan Ive is also an iconic figure in the design community. An English designer who studied at Newcastle Polytechnic, Ive had joined Apple a few years before Jobs's return. In his time at Apple, Ive has led the teams for such lauded products as the iMac, the Mac Cube,<sup>45</sup> and of course the iPod, as well as post-iPod successes such as the iPhone and iPad.<sup>46</sup> The industrial design of the iPod unified the product. It brought together disparate parts from disparate companies, finding a place for each one to fit snugly in its casing. It organized navigation and song management software into a physical interface. In a sense, it was the element that bonded all of the different ideas, technologies, and software together into a unified product. Jobs later encapsulated the significance of the iPod to his company:

If there was ever a product that catalyzed what's Apple's reason for being, it's this... Because it combines Apple's incredible technology base with Apple's legendary ease of use with Apple's awesome design. Those three things come together in this, and it's like, *that's what we do*. So if anybody was ever wondering why is Apple on earth. I would hold up this as a good example.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Rob Walker, "The Guts of a New Machine," *The New York Times*, 30 November 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/30/magazine/30IPOD.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>45</sup> The Mac Cube, introduced in 2000, was a high-end desktop computer which, though its design was praised, ultimately failed to be a commercial success.

<sup>46</sup> The iPhone, released in 2007, is a so-called "smart" phone, with an operating system and the ability to access the Internet. The iPad is Apple's tablet computer, and was released in 2010.

<sup>47</sup> Qtd. in *ibid.*, 73-74.

### *Continuing Emphasis on Design*

Exterior design continued to be emphasized as the iPod product matured in the years after its first release. The iPod line was perennially refreshed and updated, as Apple pressed ahead, constantly refining the device's design, hardware specifications, and interface. The first thing to note is that the design language held true throughout all versions of the original iPod: its white color,<sup>48</sup> its basic rectangular shape, its wheel-based interface, and its rounded corners. All of this remained, while the product became progressively thinner, and the interface was refined.

A good example of the refinement of the interface is the development of the wheel. The first version of the wheel, called a "scroll wheel" by Apple, physically turned as your finger rotated it. With the release of the second iPod in July of 2002, this changed to a "touch wheel," in which the basic navigation remained the same, but the touch wheel did not physically turn.<sup>49</sup> Instead, it sensed the circular motion of the finger to scroll through songs. In this model, the buttons for forward, back, play/pause, and menu were located above the click wheel, the only time they were not arrayed around or in the wheel. In July of 2004, Apple released a version that made the touch wheel clickable at its compass points. This did away with the discrete buttons and instead embedded them in the wheel, making what Apple calls the "click wheel."<sup>50</sup> The "click wheel" configuration

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<sup>48</sup> A black iPod option was added to the product line in 2004, with the release of the U2 branded iPod. A non-artist-branded black iPod was added to the line thereafter.

<sup>49</sup> Official technical specifications for all iPod models can be found at <http://support.apple.com/specs/#ipod>.

<sup>50</sup> The click wheel was originally introduced on the iPod mini. See Miller, *iPodpedia: The Ultimate iPod and iTunes Resource*.

turned out to be the optimal solution for navigation through a wheel-like interface, and Apple has used it on all subsequent iPod and iPod Classic models.<sup>51</sup> Design led the way.<sup>52</sup> As the designs of the various versions of the iPods show, great care was taken to craft the packaging of this music player. It not only revolutionized the way people listened to and acquired their music, it changed the way they felt it, and felt about it.

The iPod's wheel also had the much deeper cultural symbolic effect of continuing the legacy of the disc in tangible music. Since the time that Victor's Red Seal began the process of investing it with significance, the disc has been a central icon of tangible music, deep in the cultural memory of consumers of commodified music the world over. The invention of the iPod wheel interface, in addition to solving a software interface issue, allowed Apple to retain the symbol of the disc in their digital music device. This connection is exploited across the iPod line, invoking the specific visual iconicity and tactility of a disc-like interface, forming a connection between Apple's iPod and the genealogy of tangible music (See Figure 5.3).<sup>53</sup> In order to make the iPod more than just

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<sup>51</sup> The next stage of development for the iPod user interface was Apple's gestural "multi-touch" screen, first brought to market in 2007 with the iPhone. It was later incorporated into the iPod line with the introduction of the iPod Touch in 2008.

<sup>52</sup> The Apple team's focus on design can also be demonstrated by the unity of design language throughout the broader iPod line, which can be seen in the rounded lozenge shape that is so ubiquitously distributed throughout. The rounded lozenge shape can be seen as one of the fundamental shapes of the iPod's design make-up. It is found in the rounded corners of the face and the rounded edges of the screen. This rounded lozenge shape is mirrored when looking from the top as well. From this view, one can see that the front face of the device is flat, but the metal back features three-way rounded edges so that if you were to lay the unit on its back on a table, none of the corners would be touching the surface of the table. To the original iPod was added the iPod Mini (January 2004), the iPod Shuffle (January 2005), and the iPod Nano (September 2005), which replaced the Mini. (The preceding dates mark the initial announcements of these products, rather than the dates they went on sale to the general public.)

<sup>53</sup> Thanks to Glenn Geisendorfer for his assistance in developing this idea, and for creating the following diagram to express this point visually.



another obscure and scarcely-used MP3 player, Apple set out, in the words of Ive, “to design something that could become an icon.”<sup>54</sup> That process included dealing with the history of delivery technologies in the music industry, forming continuity with them while leveraging them in the iPod’s design.

### **“Everyone’s Going to Want to Have One of These”: Selling the iPod<sup>55</sup>**

#### *Conceptual Issues and Considerations*

To convince consumers that they needed to buy their “iconic” product, Apple promoted the iPod for sale through an extensive process of commodification. The strategies a company employs to promote a product reflect its understanding of the use and value of that product in the marketplace. Furthermore, because marketing strategies aim to communicate perceived value to potential customers, close readings of advertisements can in turn reveal the firm’s reading of the value systems and needs of its customers. Insofar as a particular advertising campaign can be demonstrated to be a success with consumers, then, the values promoted in those ads should be considered to be resonant with the values of consumers. The reverse is also true, in that the demonstrated failure of an advertising campaign is an indicator of the inaccuracy of the firm’s reading. Processes of commodification are also uniquely situated culturally and historically. Advertising campaigns develop over time to reflect developments in the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> This was the sentiment of recording musician Seal upon first handling an iPod. Apple promotional video; see note 37 above.

**Figure 5.3** Legacy of the disc. From left to right: Victor Red Seal, 72 rpm long-playing record, 45 rpm record, compact disc, iPod (1st Gen), iPod (2nd Gen), iPod Classic, iPod Shuffle.



<sup>a</sup> Diagram created by Glenn Geisendorfer.

market and the shifting needs and values of ideal customers. Consequently, advertisements also provide windows into the value systems and priorities of music consumers in specific locations and during specific time spans.<sup>56</sup>

As I have argued above, the particular circumstances of the MP3 delivery technology, combined with Apple's established focus on industrial design resulted in the iPod's physical appearance and attributes being hugely important, indeed unprecedented in the history of recorded music. As a result, the present discourse will focus not on the commodification of music, but on the commodification of the iPod itself. The marketing of the iPod demonstrated an unprecedented focus on the look of the music player, a trait that has since come to define the wider product category. As we will see, the music becomes in many ways actually secondary to the iPod object, something that can be witnessed in the priorities of the advertising.

There is reason to focus primarily on the iPod rather than the general category of portable MP3 players. First, the iPod has been so dominant as to make it for all practical purposes the only one worth studying. Its sales numbers and market share dwarf those of competing products from Sony, iRiver, and Creative. Furthermore, Apple spent an estimated \$200 million in advertising their player over the first four years—more than these three competitors combined.<sup>57</sup> Second, although other products have been developed since the iPod's introduction, they did so in the wake of the iPod's ascendancy. The iPod defined the product category, and led the way for other campaigns.

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<sup>56</sup> Taylor, "The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of 'Mechanical Music'."

<sup>57</sup> Levy, *The Perfect Thing: How the iPod Shuffles Commerce, Culture, and Coolness*, 84.

In this section I will describe the media event that Steve Jobs staged for the product's launch, within which can be found the seeds of the core narrative of the commodification of the iPod: a person's music library is a key marker of his identity, and that library should be ultra-portable and beautiful. Second, I will examine the first iPod advertisements, which emphasize an active rather than a passive listening experience. From there I will consider the next ad campaign, "Silhouettes," which also became the most durable, influential, and widely known. These ads intensified and abstracted the function of the iPod in daily life, while retaining a focus on active music listening and the iPod as fashionable and hip, fetishizing the object as a personality-enhancer, and the listener as a star.

#### *The iPod Launch Media Event: Start of a Commodification Narrative*

To introduce his new product to the world, Steve Jobs held a media event that was all about the iPod. The media event, attended by invited members of the press, represents the core storyline of Apple's product conception for the iPod, and featured three main facets: 1) it drew on the culturally charged notion of the *music library*, transforming the library into something portable; 2) it was the central component of their broader "Digital Hub" strategy; and 3) it was beautiful. On the afternoon of October 23, 2001 in Palo Alto, the seeds of the commodification narrative for the iPod were sown.

When Steve Jobs puts on media events, they are newsworthy in and of themselves, each one "carefully choreographed, and exquisitely casual."<sup>58</sup> This was no

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 7.

exception. Each point was crafted to build on the one before it, in one extended crescendo that culminated in the climactic moment when the device's appearance was revealed. The preparation began with a summary of Jobs's view of the digital media market, and the announcement that Apple had decided to go into the digital music business. Why, out of all the possible fields into which they could have branched out, did they choose music? Jobs's answer to this self-posed question revealed how closely the art and the business of music intertwine. Jobs testified to his and his team's passionate love for music. First, he expressed the pervasiveness and eternality of music, then almost in the same breath evaluated its real-time market potential.

We love music, and it's always good to do something you love. More importantly, music is a part of everyone's life. Everyone. Music's been around forever; it will always be around. This is not a speculative market. And because it's a part of everyone's life, it's a very large target market, all around the world. It knows no boundaries.<sup>59</sup>

For Jobs, the notion of music as an art form is indistinguishable from its business (music listeners as a "target market"). Unlike some other musicians considered in this dissertation, Jobs does not consider music and business to be mutually exclusive. In one fell swoop he positioned himself, his team, and his brand as passionate music lovers who also happened to be in the field of computing and consumer electronics.

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<sup>59</sup> An excerpt from this event was found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kN0SVBCJqLs&feature=related>. All transcriptions of the event are mine, and can be found at this address.

Next Jobs proclaimed that in the vast market of digital music, there was no firm who led the way—but he was confident that Apple was soon to change that. Other companies who have released portable digital music players, Jobs explains,

haven't found the recipe yet. No one has found the recipe yet for digital music. And we think, not only can we find the recipe, but we think the Apple brand is going to be fantastic, because people trust the Apple *brand* to get their great digital electronics from.<sup>60</sup>

Importantly, Jobs emphasized that the company's foray into music would not be at the expense of the brand image. Instead it would both draw from and build upon key brand points.

Much of the presentation was spent walking the audience step by step through how the product works. Typically, when a new product form or a new use for an old product form is introduced, there is a need to educate the consumer about the product's conception, specifications, and functions.<sup>61</sup> Jobs took great care to accomplish this. He went methodically through each component of the product: how it plays 160 kilobit audio, giving it CD quality sound; how it can play all popular open source digital formats.<sup>62</sup> And he spent considerable time describing the FireWire connection feature of the iPod, which allowed rapid transfer of songs from the computer to the iPod. Jobs pointed out that, compared to the USB connection on most portable digital music players, FireWire could transfer songs thirty times faster.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> See Taylor, "The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of 'Mechanical Music'."

<sup>62</sup> At the time of the presentation, these were MP3, MP3 VBR (variable bit rate), WAV, and AIFF.

Beyond the technical, Jobs also outlined how the iPod fit into his ideal consumers' lives. One of the central metaphors in this regard was the notion of the music library. Jobs drew on the cultural cachet of the music library. By the 1920s in America, as Sophie Maisonneuve has argued, the music library had become a symbol of literacy among music listeners, the musical analog to the book library. One's library symbolizes not only musical literacy, but also musical personality.<sup>63</sup> Jobs was introducing an object that—according to him—had the ability to shrink the music library, hypostasize its power, and could fit in the palm of your hand. This feature, the deft mobilization of one's music library, was an entirely new concept, not possible and therefore unthinkable before the advent of digital music and computer technologies. Thus Jobs also had to create the desire for such a feature, first by establishing the notion of what constitutes an “entire library” (one thousand songs), and then casting life situations in which having access to that library would be desirable. He obliges:

But the biggest thing about the iPod is that it holds a thousand songs. Now this is a quantum leap because for most people it's their entire music library. This is huge. How many times have you gone on the road with a CD player and said, “Oh God, the CD—I didn't bring the CD I wanted to listen to.” To have your whole music library with you at all times is a quantum leap in listening to music. But the coolest thing about the iPod is that whole—your entire music library fits in your pocket. You can take your whole music library with you right in your pocket. Never before possible.<sup>64</sup>

The mobilization of the music library was part of a larger initiative by Apple to digitize and mobilize all of the most important aspects of one's life, known as the Digital

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<sup>63</sup> See Maisonneuve, “Between History and Commodity: The Production of a Musical Patrimony through the Record in the 1920-1930s,” 100-04.

<sup>64</sup> See note 59.

Hub strategy. The Digital Hub strategy gave rise to applications that would allow the general consumer to make his computer the locus for management and enjoyment of his photos, movies, websites, and music. It began with an application that allowed the editing of home movies, and followed with iTunes. Over the next few years, applications for management of pictures (iPhoto), a digital audio workstation (GarageBand) and the creation and management of personal websites (iWeb) were added. Together, Apple named this group of applications the iLife suite, a moniker that belies the level of importance that Apple gave to its endeavors. They believed they were creating much more than mere software programs that push 1s and 0s—they were assembling the digital tools for the manufacturing of identity.

Given the high stakes set with music, as defined by Jobs, it is no wonder that the third component of the media event's storyline focused on the appearance of the product. Only a beautiful object is worthy of housing something as important as one's entire music library. As the presentation drew closer to its climax, Jobs harnessed the building pressure for the final, most important point: the revelation of what the iPod looks like. This is what all of the stalling and suspense gathering has been about. "Revelation" is not too strong a word. Apple had kept the appearance of the device under strict wraps before its launch. During product testing, they employed deception by encasing the iPod's parts in a shoe-box-size container, with navigation buttons and a little screen distributed unevenly across the box's surface, so that even inside product testers would not know the iPod's true size or the nature of its scroll wheel. Apple had gone to great lengths to keep the appearance of the iPod a mystery, and it was finally time to remove the veil. Jobs



revealed the device piece by piece, first describing how small and portable the device is, comparing it to the size of a deck of cards.

It's ultra-portable...And let me show you what I mean. iPod is the size of a deck of cards. A deck of cards. It is 2.4 inches wide. It is 4 inches tall, and it is barely over three quarters [0.78] of an inch thick. This is *tiny*. It also only weighs six and a half ounces; that is lighter than most of the cell phones you have in your pockets right now. So, *this* is what's so remarkable about iPod: it is ultra-portable.

Next Jobs extolled the talent of his design team and gave the world a first look at the actual device, one image at a time. But he did not start with the front. That would have spoiled the suspense too quickly. He began with the side and back views, gushing over them at each point.

But we didn't stop [at ultra-portability]. iPod has got Apple design. We've got one of the best design teams in the world, and they have done a remarkable job. And let me show you. This is what iPod looks [like] from the side. Again, about three quarters of an inch thick. I'm going to show you the back first because I'm in love with it. It's stainless steel, it's really, really durable; it's beautiful. And this is what the front of it looks like—

Then came the big reveal. To punctuate the moment when the image flashed on the screen, Jobs said: "*Boom*. That's iPod."

The drama of the presentation is recounted above in some detail so as to give an idea of the intensely visual and carnal nature of the storyline. Steven Levy has gone so far as to liken the event to an extended strip tease, in which the exhibition of the iPod in living color is the final garment removal—"full frontal!" Levy gushes.<sup>65</sup> It was the dance of the seven veils for the iPod, moment by moment drawing in the Herodian viewer and

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<sup>65</sup> Levy, *The Perfect Thing: How the iPod Shuffles Commerce, Culture, and Coolness*, 9.

replacing his reluctant will with desire. Strangely enough for the launch of a music player, no music was played at all through this whole portion of the presentation. There is no question that the visual element of the iPod had been central and even climactic to the product conception. Furthermore, by explaining the features first and leaving the mystery of the iPod's appearance to last, Jobs emphasizes that others would value its appearance as much as he did. After all, he could have followed the reverse order, displaying the device up front and then proceeding to explain all of the features.

With this media event, Jobs and his team delivered a well-defined and thorough casting of their product conception for the iPod. In addition to explaining the technical details of how the device and user interface functioned, they cast a vision of how the iPod would fit into its users' lifestyles. By mobilizing the music library, users would never be out of touch with the music they love; by making digital music a core component of the digital lifestyle hub, and giving them a better way to interact with it, users could be fuller versions of themselves; and by having a physical locus for music that was aesthetically pleasing, users could interface with this digital content joyfully.

It is in the context of branding that we can understand the entire ecosystem into which the iPod was introduced. The point that branding brings in is that the iPod did not exist within a vacuum. It was in the context of Apple's more comprehensive brand. The iPod reflected the brand values and benefitted from Apple's brand equity, but also contributed to it, in the process shaping future development of Apple's brand. One major change that the iPod helped bring about was Apple's move from a business focused exclusively on computing to one that encompasses a wider range of consumer

electronics. Whereas Apple had been reluctant to pursue such peripheral products, the success of the iPod, as well as the iPhone, prompted Apple to make a fundamental change to their company name. As mentioned earlier, in 2007 they changed their name from Apple Computer, Inc., to simply Apple, Inc.

### *The First iPod Advertisements: Listening Is a Lifestyle*

With the message out to the news media and the device in their hands, the next order of business was to advertise directly to consumers, a job for the marketing team. The job was eased by the fact that the product had been so carefully designed. As one BBC reporter noted, “Unlike 99% of campaigns the creatives’ job here is simply not to blow the product’s cool.”<sup>66</sup> Apple worked with their longtime advertising partners Chiat\Day to begin a marketing campaign of ads.

The very first television ad for the iPod debuted along with the product’s launch on October 23, 2001.<sup>67</sup> The scene opens on a young man—I will call him Tim, to connect him with my earlier discussion about the realities of listening to MP3s in 2000. Tim sits at his desk behind his Macintosh iBook.<sup>68</sup> Though the viewer cannot see Tim’s hands, audible typing can be heard, and after a few moments, a percussion-heavy, techno dance beat begins to play. He listens critically for a moment, as if he has just plucked this tune from the far reaches of the Napster universe and is hearing it for the first time. Tim’s

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<sup>66</sup> Qtd. in *ibid.*, 86.

<sup>67</sup> At the time of this writing, a video of this commercial could be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWqj6OQQOHA>.

<sup>68</sup> The iBook was Apple’s consumer-class portable notebook computer at the time.

positive appraisal is revealed as he begins to bob his head to the beat. The rhythms of the music increasingly take over his body until he begins to chair-dance vigorously. The young man pauses from his head-wagging to drag the song into his “favorites” playlist on iTunes. The computer screen flashes “updating songs on iPod,” and the camera pans over to give a first look at the iPod, lying on the desk next to the iBook, connected by a white FireWire cable. In a split second, the song has transferred to the iPod, and Tim puts in his earphones, unplugs the player, and stands up. The music, which had been playing continuously from the computer, suddenly stops, creating the briefest moment of silence while Tim finds on his iPod the song he just downloaded, clicks play, and the music resumes. Predictably, he immediately begins dancing again, but now has the freedom to go wherever his crazy moves take him, all across his apartment. After a slide, a shimmy, some head banging, and other assorted gesticulations, he moonwalks to his apartment door. Just before he dances out of his apartment into the rest of the world, he places the iPod in his shirt pocket, setting up the tag line, spoken by a narrator: “iPod. A thousand songs in your pocket.” (See Figure 5.4.)

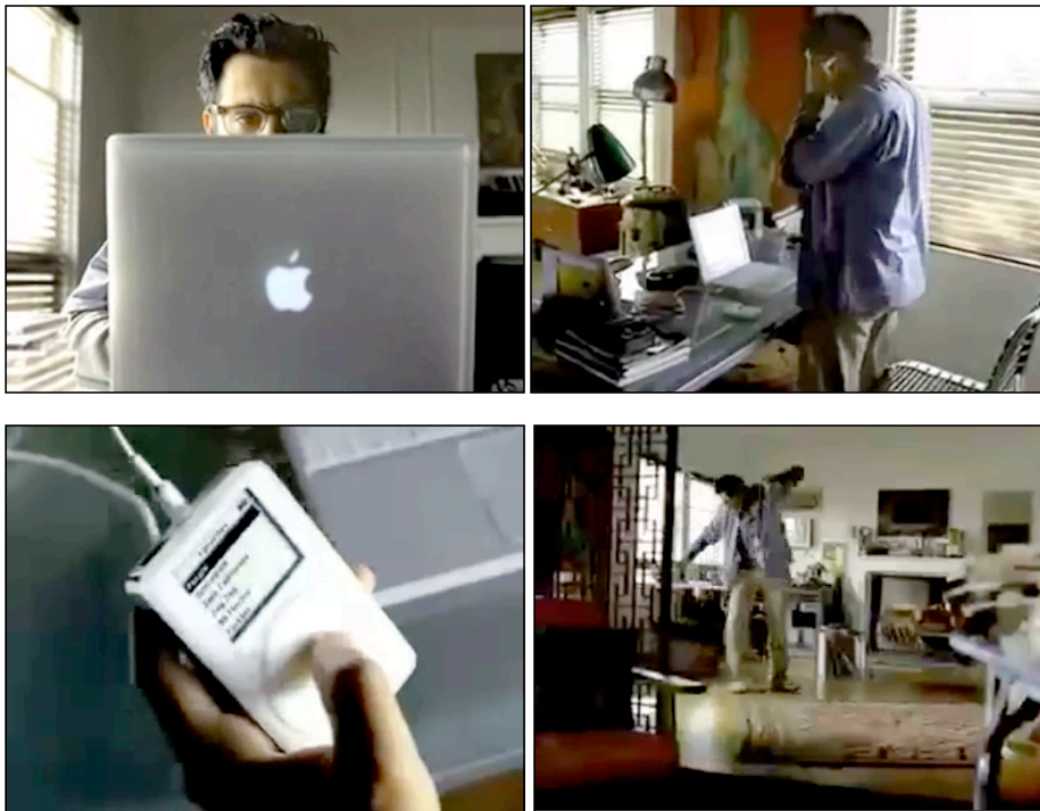
Though this minute-long commercial has only one phrase of spoken text, it very clearly educates the viewer as to the function of the iPod: it takes your entire music library anywhere you want to go. This agrees with Timothy Taylor’s proposed first phase of commodification. All of the basics of using the product are demonstrated visually. All that is required is to plug, unplug, and play.<sup>69</sup> The entire system is presented: acquisition (the notebook computer), song management (iTunes), portability (the iPod), and, of

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<sup>69</sup> This aphorism was introduced by Steve Jobs at the iPod media launch event.

course, the listener. The expediency of song transfer, ease of use, and seamless transitions across devices are the highlighted features. These features, however, are more likely to be absorbed unconsciously by the viewer, as the music and the dancing are foregrounded. The commercial is a variation on the typical narrative of democratization of availability. The trope has been used often in the case of recorded music, which can bring high-quality music performances to the consumer regardless of his or her ability to play music independently. The iPod, the commercial implies, allows you to take this music with you regardless of where you are or what you are doing. It is the ultimate unencumbered music listening experience.

**Figure 5.4.** Four Screen Shots from the First iPod Television Commercial



The commercial also offers a subtle musical persuasion that the listening experience on an iPod is better than the one on the typical notebook computer. As the musical track emanates from the computer during the first half of the commercial, the sound quality is adequate, though mixed with the ambient sounds in the room such as keyboard typing and shuffling. Then at the epiphany moment in the commercial, when the user breaks the short silence by hitting play on his iPod, the music resumes as if transformed. It is louder, more crisp, and of a higher fidelity, without any of the ambient sounds. Only then does the viewer-listener realize that the music he had been listening to before was being piped through computer speakers. The music moves from an environmental sound—a somewhat canned sound in the context of a room—to an all-encompassing one, simulating the experience of listening through earphones. It seems the intended impression is that through the iPod, the music listening experience is purer, more engulfing, more connected, more exciting. The feeling of getting “more” out of the music when listening to an iPod is corroborated by the dramatic musical development of the song used in the commercial, “Take California,” by the techno group Propellerheads. When playing through the computer speakers, the music features a thin texture, only percussion and a bass line. Just before the user makes the transition to the iPod music, a sampled voice and rhythm guitar line are briefly added to the mix, ramping up the music’s tension in a feint toward a climax. But at the moment when the music should crescendo to the next textural and dynamic level, it drops into silence as Tim makes the switch to the iPod. The viewer-listener’s frustrated musical expectations hang in the silence. The resumption of the music delivers the climax that had been foreshadowed,

and the music arrives in its full texture, with drums, bass, rhythm guitar lick, and most importantly a new melody, foregrounded and played by a synthesizer. It is a musical arrival carefully timed to coincide with the product's arrival as a sonic presence in the commercial. Though highlighted in this analysis, in the commercial the details of this musical transformation is subtle enough that they could be easily missed without repeat viewings. Nevertheless, the viewer gets the message that music sounds better through an iPod, even if he is unaware of the ways the commercial made the argument: downloading music and listening to it on your computer is good; hearing it on an iPod is great.

This television advertisement also educates the viewer by distinguishing the iPod from previous portable technologies. If you are at your computer, you cannot dance away, out of your apartment, and into the world; with the iPod you can. Portable CD players, the prevailing portable listening technology at the time, did not offer the same freedom of movement either. If you were to dance vigorously around with a portable CD player in your hand, it would skip so frequently that the music would be incomprehensible. The makers of CD players had begun to fight this drawback with a feature called skip protection, which read ahead on the CD, continuously storing the upcoming section of audio to create a buffer in case the CD skipped. It was not uncommon for players to boast 20-second, 40-second, or even 60-second skip protection. The first generation iPod had 20-*minute* skip protection, enough to nullify the problem for all practical purposes, and to keep Tim dancing until he wears himself out. The assumption in the advertising is that the user desires an active listening experience, and the advertisement implies that the iPod offered technology that works with, not against,

that desire. As Jobs had proclaimed at the launch: “[Y]ou can take iPod bicycling, mountain climbing, jogging; you name it. And you’re not going to skip a beat.”<sup>70</sup>

The educational approach of the early iPod ads was intentional. Steve Jobs later said that for the first ad, he realized that a more traditional approach was needed to introduce the product and its functionality.<sup>71</sup> Apple prides itself on creating products that are simple, intuitive, and “just work” with minimal need for instructional materials. Nevertheless, numerous how-to guides have also been written by outside authors for the inquisitive iPod owner, such as *iPodpedia*, *iPod: The Missing Manual*, *iPod and iTunes for Dummies*, and *Absolute Beginner’s Guide to iPod and iTunes*.<sup>72</sup>

#### *Silhouette Advertising Campaign: The Star Is You*

2003 was a big year for the iPod. In April, Apple released their third-generation iPod, as well as the iTunes Music Store, which would shortly thereafter become the largest seller of legally downloaded music in the world—and as of April 2008 the largest music seller of any kind.<sup>73</sup> Six months later, they rolled out versions of iTunes and the

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<sup>70</sup> iPod media event. See note 59.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 83. “Traditional” is a relative term when referring to Apple advertisements. The company is notorious for creating pointed, provocative, and at times even shocking ads. See, for instance, the description of the famous “1984” television commercial in Chapter IV.

<sup>72</sup> Biersdorfer, *iPod: The Missing Manual*, 8th Ed; Bove, *iPod and iTunes for Dummies*; Miller, *iPodpedia: The Ultimate iPod and iTunes Resource*; Miser, *Absolute Beginner’s Guide to iPod and iTunes*, 3rd Ed. The genre of technological how-to books is big business for the print industry, as a perusal of the “Computer & Technology” section of any American bookstore will demonstrate. There are manuals on everything from social networking sites and Google to web design and software programming.

<sup>73</sup> According to statistics by the NPD Group. Apple announced this milestone in a press release on April 3, 2008. <http://www.apple.com/pr/library/2008/04/03itunes.html>.



iTunes Music Store for computers running Microsoft's Windows operating system, bringing the iPod to a much wider market. It was the year that iPod sales really began to grow exponentially. 2003 was also the year that Apple rolled out its second advertising campaign for the iPod, called "Silhouettes."<sup>74</sup> These ads accomplished three further important aspects of the commodification of the iPod: 1) they intensified and abstracted the function of the iPod in daily life, while retaining an emphasis on active music listening, 2) they further developed the focus on the iPod as fashionable, and 3) most importantly, they invited the viewer to imagine himself as a participant in the alternate reality that the iPod could create.

First, the ads intensified and abstracted the function of the iPod in daily life. Rather than using live action footage, as in their first television commercial, Apple and Chiat\Day used video with cutting-edge post-production effects. The ads take place in an abstract space washed with bright, solid neon colors. The space is devoid of three-dimensional indicators of perspective, giving the impression of dislocation from reality. Engulfing the sound space of this alternate reality is one of several upbeat, dance-inducing songs that Apple used for the commercials. For the first three commercials in the silhouette campaign, the genres of the songs were hip-hop ("Hey Mama," by the Black Eyed Peas), rock ("Are You Gonna Be My Girl," by Jet), and dance ("Rock Star (Jason Nevins Remix Edit)," by N.E.R.D.). The songs are always loud, completely filling the soundscape of the ad. The music drowns out any ambient noise that might come from

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<sup>74</sup> The Silhouettes campaign first showed up as print ads in magazines, on billboards, and on bus shelters. Levy, *The Perfect Thing: How the iPod Shuffles Commerce, Culture, and Coolness*, 83.

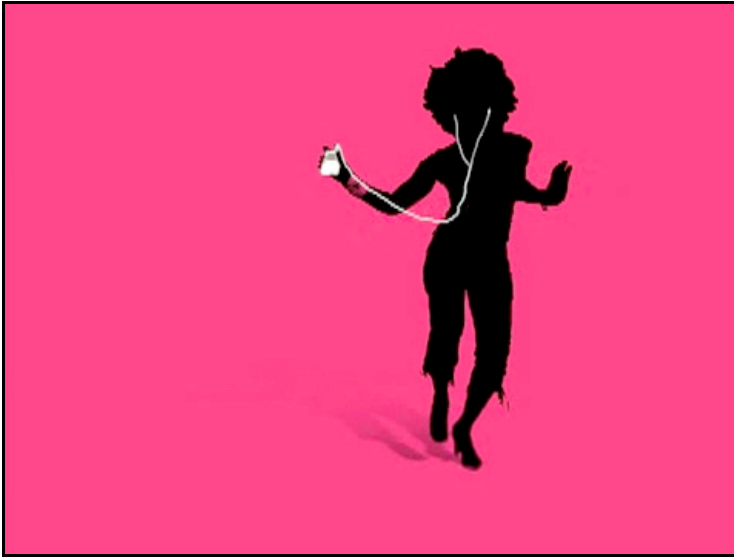
the dancers in the ads, or the outside world, just the way that listening to one's earbuds might do. The dancers are, along with the music, the main focus of the advertisements. They are cast as black silhouettes, each one holding a bright white iPod, and sporting white earbuds in his or her ears. The trademark white cord connects the two. The sharp black and white contrast against the bright neon-colored backgrounds makes for a striking, bold, attention-grabbing spectacle.

The ads also intensified the presentation of the iPod as hip and fashionable. Though the faces of the dancers were not visible, their silhouettes were clearly cut from the cloth of trend-setting urban culture. The dancers carry visual markers of hip-hop, rock, and techno fashion, and often one signature fashion accessory is highlighted with color, such as a blue-striped headband, gold hoop earrings, or pink arm bands as in the screen shot of one of this first set of ads, included below (see Figure 5.5). The dancers are also often marked with “a touchstone of hip minority status, like dreadlocks,” as Steven Levy has noted.<sup>75</sup> By the time these commercials were released, the iPod had already become a marker of trend-setting fashion, and indeed the placement of iPods in these commercials—always attached to the hand, hip, or clothing—both claims, reinforces, and intensifies its role as a fashion icon. Like the silhouetted dancers, the iPods in the commercials are not shown in all their detail. It is a white silhouette of the device, making the contrast even sharper between player and dancer. Devoid of its details and rendered a white silhouette, the iPod becomes even more iconic.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

**Figure 5.5.** Screen shot of “Silhouettes” television ad, featuring the song, “Hey Mama,” by the Black Eyed Peas



Finally, the ads invite the listener to envision himself as a possible participant in the alternate reality that the iPod makes possible. The silhouette doubles as a cut-out, inviting the viewer to put herself into the commercial.<sup>76</sup> The invitation is all the more enticing because the figures in the commercials are obviously professional dancers. As opposed to the dancer in the first campaign, whose moves were impromptu but clearly those of an amateur, the dancers in the Silhouettes campaign are clearly professionals. Their break dance, hip hop, and rock moves are more likely to be seen in performances by professional dance troupes than by the average urban twenty-something dancing around his apartment. These commercials offer larger than life portrayals, and offer the viewer the opportunity to think: “That could be me.” In short, the commercial claims—

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<sup>76</sup> Each advertisement featured multiple dancers, including males and females.

with no more than a few words of ad copy at the end—that the iPod can transform your everyday life into a psychedelic, energetic, colorful world in which you are a great dancer. The star in this commercial is not the iPod. The star is you.

### **Conclusion: After iPod**

The foregoing account should leave the reader with the impression that the physicality—the “thingness”— of music has never mattered more than in the last decade. As my examination of the iPod has shown, there was an incredible intentionality to its physical design. This design takes on more importance symbolically because digital media have no restrictions on what their form can be. The product is understood through the means of the package and the product together. When the iPod was released, the potential of the portable digital music market had not been fully exploited because the problem negotiating the interface between the human and the physical interface had not been solved. Jonathan Ive, and the rest of the iPod’s development team realized that the player’s design, its physical appearance, its package, was the linchpin. By creating an appealing physical relationship to the MP3 player as an object, they removed the final barrier of materiality, and unleashed the full potential of the format. The designers at Apple knew this; it is reflected in their focus on industrial design. The marketing team knew it as well; their ads promoted the physical interaction with the iPod as an emotionally rewarding endeavor. Finally, Steve Jobs knew it, which is why he structured his unveiling of the iPod to culminate with a desire-inducing presentation of the object. The team at Apple thoroughly understood their product conception for the iPod, and

indeed for an entire diversified product line for the portable MP3 player market.<sup>77</sup> Their product conception resonated with the consumer realities of the market, as is testified to by its astounding sales success.

The world of commodified music is also inescapably the world of branded objects. Each music object either enhances or detracts from the listening experience to some degree. And while the music recording sounds and then is silent, the object remains, filling the silence with its own symbolic influence. The success of the iPod has done away with the need to keep large music libraries in physical form. It has replaced the music library with a miniature representation of it, one that the user can carry with her at all times. The iPod is variously a music player, fashion accessory, image enhancer, and dance inducer. At the end of every iPod media event, Steve Jobs concludes by saying something like the following: “At these events, we like to remind ourselves why we do all of this stuff: it’s because we love music.” At which point he invites a musical guest to play a set to close out the proceedings.<sup>78</sup> He only has to remind us because the rest of the time we have been focusing instead on the hardware and interface and design—anything but the music.

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<sup>77</sup> At the time of this writing, the product line includes the iPod (now called the iPod Classic), iPod Touch, iPod Nano, and iPod Shuffle.

<sup>78</sup> Performances have included Kate Victoria “KT” Tunstall, Randy Newman, and Chris Martin of the British rock group Coldplay.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSIONS

#### **Summary of Chapters and Main Arguments**

In Chapter II, I argued that branding and technology develop along parallel tracks, both directed by human intention. The case study I used examined a pivotal moment of product category definition in the early recorded music industry, offering a particularly striking example of a time when technology and branding came together to momentous effect for the industry. Early in the recording industry, the product category was misjudged, and the technology was severely limiting on the viability of the technology in the marketplace. Later, when the device was at a point of crisis, there fell into place some strategies of the marketing of “high class,” pre-recorded discs and cylinders. But it was still on the level of a collectibles industry. Bettini, and the other advertisers in *The Phonoscope* magazine are representative of this approach. Then these marketing strategies, which emphasized class distinction, came together with Eldridge Johnson’s development of a mass duplication system, and the Victor Talking Machine Company hit on marketplace gold by pushing their “high class” records and building a brand that was associated with both artistic quality and technological dependability. Victor’s line of products became the first branding success story of the recorded music industry.

Once the Red Seal brand was established, it affected all other aspects of the company’s business. The image of quality that the brand impressed on consumers not only had a strong hand in establishing the classical records market, but it also boosted the

sales of Victor's "Black Seal" records, which contained popular and novelty songs, and the spoken word. Victor seized on this valuable asset—their brand—and wove it into the very fabric of their business. Along with the famous image of Nipper the dog, and the slogan of "His Master's Voice," the presence of Victor's Red Seal records in the marketplace was formidable, and it helped to shape and legitimize Edison's invention as not only a novelty, but a work of art.

Chapter III asked the question: how do you sell anti-commercial music? To answer this question, it was necessary to break down some of the ideologies that underpin the question, specifically that of the inherently adverse effects that commercial considerations have on music. Drawing a line from Woody Guthrie to *Broadside* magazine to Joan Baez, I established that there was a deep-seated skepticism of—and sometimes outright hostility towards—people in the music business who they believed to be overrun by commercial concerns. I also noted the paradoxical fact that because this value resonated with a considerable number of people, claims to anti-commercialism proved to be a sound marketing strategy for these musicians. Though many members of the folk community only ever achieved limited success, Joan Baez is an example of an artist who gained widespread acclaim—and significant record sales—through this approach.

Anti-commercialism is a negative identifier—it defines by what it *is not*—and there were other qualities that Baez *was* aligned with. She was cast as an artistic interpreter of folk songs, who simultaneously expressed universal emotion while retaining her unique personal expression. This was combined with the fact that she had

signed with a record label, Vanguard, that actively thought of itself as a classical label, and saw folk music as sympathetic to their values. Though it had undergone many changes since the days of Enrico Caruso and Red Seal records, the classical recordings market still laid claim to a particular form of cultural capital in the 1960s. The bond between artistry, and the folk counterculture proved to be an important moment of shift when, as Timothy Taylor has noted in an update of Bourdieu, social distinction comes not from “legitimate” culture or from the highbrow/lowbrow distinction, but from a knowledge of the trendy—the guiding concept of advertising culture.<sup>1</sup> Classical music, as has been widely commented, continues its downhill slide off the mountain of high-cultural capital, displaced by folk musicians like Baez, and, later, Dylan, The Beatles, Hendrix, Nirvana, and ultimately artists like Sufjan Stevens. Baez and Stevens are connected by a history of anti-commercialism that winds its circuitous path through generations of musicians, each step along the way with people around them to mediate their communications to their audience.

But concurrently with this new stream of cultural capital in the second half of the 20th century, which took the various guises of counterculture, rock, alternative, and indie, there was also a fragmentation of the marketplace into niches. This meant that there was no longer one hegemonic field of cultural capital, but many, each with its own rubric of hipness. This is reflective of—and reflected in—the coterminous economic shift to flexible accumulation of capital in what Krims calls the post-Fordist system.<sup>2</sup> Thus

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, “Advertising and the Conquest of Culture,” 416-17.

<sup>2</sup> Krims, *Music and Urban Geography*, 94-95.



although I have chosen to follow one particular stream that flowed from the folk scene, it also had many others. This includes the other streams that were distinct from folk in the 1960s, such as soul, jazz, and pop. All of these are worthy of the same type of attention as folk music, as I suggest below in my suggestions for further research.

Sufjan Stevens, as I point out in Chapter IV, represents a different version of the Romantic artist than Baez. He is representative of 21st-century artists who have the ability to control many more aspects of their careers than Baez did, due to the drastic differences in the means of musical production from 1964 to 2004. Whereas Baez performed, and was known early in her career as an interpreter of song, Stevens himself embodied many more roles in the commodification of his music. He was a composer, lyricist, performer (of multiple instruments), recording engineer, liner notes essayist, impresario, marketer, and spokesperson. Musicians are more able than ever before to take an active role in influencing not only the way their music is made, but also how their music takes shape in the marketplace. They are able to manage with intense care the impression that they wish to make on their potential customer.

For Stevens, who shares the anti-commercial attitude of his folk music revival forerunners, this meant aligning himself with the artist brand. I have argued that he intentionally projects an image of himself as an amateur savant, a Romantic genius whose highest goal is to be true to his authentic musical and artistic expression. And although he regularly takes aim at commercialism, and consciously aligns himself with the traditionally anti-commercial genres of folk and classical music, he, like Baez, benefits from this strategy by packaging his art in a compelling and resonant way. Furthermore,

the quality of his music is high enough to support his sometimes cavalier attitude toward the music press. And though I have taken a somewhat skeptical view of Stevens's career in this project, it should be reemphasized that I do not consider his music to suffer; his work, like everything else in the music industry, is cast against a commercial backdrop. On the contrary, this realization allows us to see even more clearly Stevens's position as critiquing the commercial music system even as he takes part in it.

If with Sufjan Stevens, all of the focus is on a single musician as the star, the creative genius deserving of praise, then the music listener has also been given the opportunity to shine brighter than ever before in the 21st century. As I argued in Chapter V, Apple's iPod has been designed and marketed as a device that allows listeners to feel good about their music again, and to become the star in the soundtrack of their own lives. Like Victor's Red Seal one hundred years earlier, the iPod was the result of a company bringing the technology and packaging tracks together in just the right combination to make it not only a huge success, but a major influence on the music industry. In a reversal of the Red Seal situation, this time it was the technology that existed (MP3s and mini-hard disks), but the product conception that was lacking. As I have argued, Apple's key positioning of the device as hip, fashionable, and beautiful was a major part of its success. Then, like the Red Seal, the iPod was developed into a complete ecosystem including the iTunes music jukebox software for file management and the iTunes Music Store for music purchasing. The iPod also infused the very business plans of Apple, its success giving them the confidence to branch out into other consumer electronics categories such as the mobile phone (iPhone), tablet PC (iPad), and television (Apple

TV). Although the era of the iPod has in many ways already come and gone, its presence will continue to be felt in the industry for years to come, both in Apple's brand image and values, and in defining standards for other companies that want to compete with Apple's products.

### **Guidelines and Possibilities for Future Research on Branding and Music**

One of the themes in this dissertation, especially in chapters II and V, has been the interplay between branding and technology. Branding and music have always been affected by technological developments. These must be considered any time one studies the branding of music commodities. As I have shown in these chapters, an intensive interplay between these two areas has been essential in accounting for the success of music commodities. Branding and marketing strategies and technological development are two separate tracks that are mutually influential, and both are guided by human intention. Just as technology changes rapidly in a continual process of development, branding and marketing strategies are continually evolving in a process of reaction to markets, and experiments are always being performed in the business of branding. Thus any study of branding must also take into consideration the common practices of branding at the time of the study. This will be different in the 1960s and the 1990s, for instance.

The study of branding and music is a wide-open field, and there are many possible avenues to be followed. These are the three main areas that I consider to be the most important future areas of research on the topic of music and branding. First, a more

comprehensive survey of the branding strategies used in the music industry is needed. Though I have opted for a case study approach in this project, there are still many holes that I would like to fill. A historical survey of the branding strategies of record labels, artists, and producers of music players throughout the 20th century would provide a valuable overview of the field's history. By comparing strategies across genres and decades, we may be able to recognize patterns along genre, race, class, and gender lines.

A second area for development is the addition of in-depth case studies on the branding of music in many different genres. In this dissertation, I have focused on only one stream within the tributary system that is the current music industry. I have focused specifically on genres of music that have sought to avoid overt connections with commercialism—classical, folk revival, and indie. But this is hardly a uniform view in the music industry. How do the labels and musicians in such genres as jazz, gospel, soul R&B, hip-hop, country, and rock negotiate their branded relationship with the listener? And what of the much-derided “commercial pop” industry itself? What is it, exactly, and what are *its* attitudes toward commercialism? Taking a closer look at artists in this last category would provide a better picture of the “Hollywood musician” that Woody Guthrie so vigorously derided, allowing those in the commercial pop industry to speak for themselves.

Then there are the more recent recording artists, such as Sean Combs, Jay-Z, Beyoncé, and Gwen Stefani, whose music careers have expanded into executive roles in business. These artists, who began with careers in music, have become the young music and fashion moguls of the 21st century. What effect, if any, have their connections with

these other careers had on how they create, conceive of, and brand their music? Studies on these artists, and others like them, would be a welcome addition to our understanding of music and musicians as branded commodities in the 21st-century marketplace.

The third major area of development that is in desperate need of additional research is in collecting the comments and opinions of listeners themselves, through empirical research. We need to hear from listeners about how branding has influenced their perceptions of artists, music, and how, if it all, these have affected their purchasing decisions. Some pressing questions are whether or not the values and ideologies of a musical brand need to align with their own ideologies, and to what extent branding affects their loyalty to a record label or musician.

### **The Future of Branding in Music**

In this dissertation, I have argued that branding in music, and its interplay with music technologies and advertising, deeply affect the way that music has been experienced and appreciated in American culture for more than a century. And today, at a time when there are more music consumers than ever before in history, branding strategies are at the forefront of the business world, shaping the quality of the relationships between producers and consumers. I hope this dissertation has indicated the benefit of branding studies to music-historical studies, as well as criticism and analysis of music in the very recent past. By addressing the genres in which musicians claim to fall outside of economic concerns first, such as classical music, folk revival music, and indie music, I have attempted to show that branding applies to all genres of printed or recorded

music, not just those that are considered inherently “commercial.” For the foreseeable future, professional musicians will likely continue to consider branding in their own music. Furthermore, given the increasing prevalence of branding strategies in other industries, there is good reason to believe that musicians will deepen—perhaps substantially so—their own connections with branding as a career strategy.

It is my opinion that a musician’s reliance on branding becomes more likely the more a musician acts as a one-person company. As we saw with Sufjan Stevens, who in addition to creating music also had a large part in crafting his own public persona, the more responsibility a musician has with regard to the business and marketing aspects of his career, the more accurately he can be thought of as a brand. I submit that this self-directed model may continue to gain prominence among existing and emerging musicians, for several reasons. First, the means of musical production are becoming less prohibitive to musicians who wish to maintain control of their careers, from the recording studio to the press release. Second, the proliferation of multimedia platforms, such as the social networking sites Facebook and Twitter, band or artist websites, and video broadcast sites such as YouTube or Vimeo have become essential tools of communication between musicians and their potential listeners. Significantly, they allow for a direct line of communication between musician and listener, rather than one that is mediated either by the record label (press releases or liner notes) or journalists (articles, album reviews, artist interviews). Third, easy access to online distribution outlets such as iTunes, Amazon.com, and Bandcamp.com have removed the need for musicians to rely on the record label’s ability to secure and maintain solid distributions channels for their

music. The size of investment needed to make a high quality recording may have drastically diminished over the course of the last few decades, but it is not free, and a project's initial investment is not insignificant. Here again, there are recently developed alternatives to the record label for raising this initial capital. Fundraising websites like PledgeMusic.com allow musicians to turn their fans into investors, by offering them incentives to pledge money towards a musician's proposed project. The rewards for donating vary based on the size of the pledge, and can include copies of the final product (digital or physical album), autographed merchandise, or one-of-a-kind personalized gifts from the artist. Thus three of the main roles once exclusively filled by record labels—investment of capital, production, and distribution—can now be filled or facilitated by musicians themselves with no or limited involvement from labels. This does not mean, however, that only independent musicians are utilizing these strategies of self-directed personal brand development. Many musicians who have a major record deal also keep public blogs and micro-blogs (e.g., Twitter), which allow them to develop and manifest their personalities to their fans.

In both cases—that of the independent and label musician—the artist is encouraged by the multi-platform nature of the technologies to take on the role of brand manager. When populating several media outlets with content, such as Facebook, Twitter, the artist's blog, and email lists, the artist is given the opportunity to manage the consistency of his or her image across all of these various points of exposure. This can easily lead to a need for branding, so that all these processes can reinforce the central brand image: the musician and his or her music. There is already evidence of this type of

thinking in the music industry. In his 2008 book, *Brand, Buzz & Success: Your Guide to the New Music Industry*, Blake Althen offers a handbook to musical success that is centered around the idea of treating musicians and their music as brands. Speaking directly to the aspiring musician, Althen says that the ultimate goal of the musician in the current-day music industry is to “develop a distinctive and recognizable style that is known and loved by your audience... In music today, the Artist is the brand. Odd as it may seem—you are the brand.”<sup>3</sup> Throughout his book, he lays out practical steps for musicians to develop a consistent, coherent brand: set goals, establish your music, understand the workings of the music industry, produce your music, develop your image, establish your presence in both the analog and digital worlds, create “buzz” (interest from media and audiences) in your music, distribute your music, and publish your music. Throughout these steps, he reinforces the fact that musicians must think like businesses, from deciding on a name that can be used across all marketing platforms, such as an artist’s website,<sup>4</sup> to crafting an artist’s personal appearance and clothing to fit into the expectations of a genre of music, but also to stand out as distinctive.<sup>5</sup>

Musicians will likely continue to consider themselves as brands, and perhaps develop their careers as such, cross-promoting and spanning multiple industries such as music, fashion, perfume, and more, always negotiating the delivery of their products with the latest music delivery technologies. But what are the ramifications of these

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<sup>3</sup> Blake Althen, *Brand, Buzz & Success: Your Guide to the New Music*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 84-86.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 56-58.



developments for artistry in music? How, for instance, is sincerity measured in such a landscape? At some point, does the relational distance that results from self-fashioning enter into the realm of deception? What does it mean to reduce music to a business, and how, if at all, can or should an artist operate outside this system? If one strategy of dealing with an unwanted commercial system is through irony (as with Sufjan Stevens), how much irony can pop music handle before the critique breaks down? These are all highly charged questions that cut to the core of what constitutes art, self-expression, and the very nature of the musical experience. Their answers are open for debate, and will differ depending on who addresses them. There are many different positions available, depending on one's background and values. The language of branding will not necessarily resolve these questions, but can provide the framework with which to have the discussion.

Through this dissertation, I hope to have impressed on the reader that branding can and should be applied to commercial music and the objects that accompany the experience of listening to music. When we listen to music in commodified form, we register much more than just "the music" in isolation. Rather, we also consume a complex of commercial ideologies, technological realities, and commodified personalities, all of which have been packaged together intentionally for the purpose of creating a desirable music object, and all of which contribute to the music listening experience. Unpacking these threads can give us a clearer picture of the way commercial music is mediated, from Caruso to Stevens and beyond. Most of all, this dissertation is an

appeal to scholars to take these layers of mediation seriously as an integral part of the musical experience in the modern world.

## APPENDIX: JOAN BAEZ LINER NOTES<sup>1</sup>

### ***Joan Baez (Vanguard, 1960), Liner Notes by Maynard Solomon***

A constant wonder of musical development is its unexpectedness. However carefully the critics and historians outline the past and present state of the art, analyze its trends, and attempt to predict its future course, a qualitatively new development is almost always a surprise.

And yet, after the fact, when the dust has settled, the appearance of a new musical technique or style, or of an artist who suddenly grasps the popular and critical imagination, usually seems to have been both natural and inevitable. The new is seen as an outgrowth of existing patterns and conditions. It has a “rightness” which makes one wonder how one could have failed to predict it.

In the past few decades, folk music of the United States has brought forth several such artists—Woody Guthrie, Hudie Ledbetter, Pete Seeger, The Weavers, Odetta, and perhaps one or two others. The list is a short one, but each artist has had a liberating impact in the field. And the overtones of their ideas have often filtered into the nation’s popular music; in diluted form, true, but nevertheless with a freshness and strength that momentarily revitalized our commercial culture.

It may soon be possible to add the name of Joan Baez to the list of significant innovators. More than any other singer of the current folk music revival she has captured the heart of the folksinging audience. Although her public appearances have been few she has already attracted a number of disciples and a host of devotees.

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<sup>1</sup> Finding liner notes for albums from the 1960s folk revival can be difficult. In fact there is no efficient way for scholars find liner notes from albums in any genre. No central database for such materials exists, and I know of no concerted effort to create one, although such a development would be a great boon to scholars of popular and classical music. In order to make these texts from Joan Baez’s first five albums available to more scholars, I have included the essays here. Though each album also contains descriptions of the album’s songs, I have not included those here. All notes have been transcribed by the author unless otherwise noted.

Some notes on transcription: I have reproduced the text here as exactly as possible. All formatting of the text, such as emphasis, is retained as in the original. Punctuation is also reproduced as in the original, even when inconsistencies exist. As a rule, an apparent error in the present text reflects an error in the original, but I have made errors explicit in a few cases to avoid confusion.

On the surface, hers seems to be a personal art. But her special quality is that she has succeeded in mirroring so many of the emotional states and so much of the outlook of her generation. And it is this which lends depth to her personal vision. It is an indefinable quality, really, for one cannot adequately characterize her contemporaries with easy words like “aspiration,” “yearning,” “non-conformity,” “humanism,” “rebellion.” They have all of these qualities and many more. To one listener, the heart of Joan’s message is a kind of soft but unyielding affirmation, a sort of folksinging non-violent resistance, where the related threads of love and freedom run sweetly, sadly, unforced, without self-pity.

Although her repertory ranges far afield, it is drawn for the most part from the Anglo-American ballad tradition, and, to a lesser extent, from Negro folksong, both secular and religious. An essential element of her approach may be that she transfers to each of these areas some of the special qualities of the other. To “Mary Hamilton” and “Henry Martin” she brings the sense of personal involvement, the warmth and visionary tenderness of the Negro spiritual, and to “All My Trials” or “House of the Rising Sun” the restrained, narrative quality of traditional ballad performance. The resulting style might be called a kind of controlled ecstasy, or, to adapt a title from Blake, a fusion of innocence and experience. And yet Joan retains a sense of stylistic authenticity, for she does not impose a uniform style on each song regardless of its origin.

Joan is representative of the “new wave” among the younger folk-singers, who are disenchanted by the commercial, over-arranged-and-orchestrated trends in folk music performance, where the individuality of the singer is sacrificed to the arranger’s conception, and where “sound” rather than meaning predominates. On the other hand, she does not follow those singers who painstakingly imitate the rich ethnic heritage, often thereby submerging their own personalities and more often draining the tradition of its essentially dynamic, creative qualities.

Born less than twenty years ago, of Mexican-Irish parentage, Joan was raised and schooled in New York, Palo Alto and Boston. She began to sing and play the guitar in her early teens, but came to folk music only in late 1958, giving her first public performance in a Boston coffee-shop. Shortly afterward, she sang at The Gate of Horn in Chicago, and in July of 1959 made an unheralded but widely acclaimed

appearance at the first Newport Folk Festival. Although she has reappeared at the second annual Newport Festival, and on the CBS-TV "Folk Sound, U.S.A." broadcast, she has restricted her recent performances primarily to concerts in various leading universities.

Joan is one of those consummate singers whose musicianship and technical equipment would mark her as an artist in many areas of musical expression. A soprano voice with no break from the lowest to the highest registers, a choir-boy's pure projection linked with an intense vibrato, a clear diction and a surpassing ability to grasp the communicative essence of every song, whether it be folk or composed, ballad or lyric, Appalachian, British or Mexican—hers is a new voice which speaks to us with wonder and compassion, reaching and re-awakening long-untouched regions of our heart and mind.

***Joan Baez, Vol. 2 (Vanguard, 1961), Liner Notes by Nat Hentoff*<sup>2</sup>**

The newest and most heartening development in the extraordinary rise of interest in folk music among the urban young has been the emergence of a very few singers who have fused their own heterogeneous backgrounds with a searching exploration of folk traditions and have developed striking, personal styles. Of all, the most penetratingly individual is Joan Baez whose first album for Vanguard, *Joan Baez* (VRS-9078/VSD-2077), clearly indicated the arrival of a major performer.

Before that album was issued, I had occasion to watch Miss Baez during the preparation and taping of two CBS-TV programs produced by Robert Herridge. The first was an uneven mixture of the overly polished and the authentic with, for example, an extraneous chorus on the one hand and John Lee Hooker on the other. Miss Baez provided her own island of integrity in the proceedings. Her concentrated purity of voice is an extension of an indomitably honest personality. During rehearsals and on the actual program, she remained implacably herself, no matter what preceded or followed her; and on the air she was the program's center of gravity, communicating with direct, distilled emotion and with no

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Judy Tsou and the staff at the University of Washington Libraries for providing me access to this album.

irrelevant furbelows of gesture. In the more spare, more logically integrated *A Pattern of Words and Music*, she held her own with the equally unbreakable Lightnin' Hopkins. Just as what Lightnin' sang came from a fully consistent approach to his music, so Miss Baez' [sic] singing reflected a total style and deeply felt conviction. Unlike many "city-billies", as Charles Seeger first named the urban singers of folk songs, Miss Baez is not an eclectic. She has transcended influences and has become her own, singularly evocative voice.

At the core of her expressive power is the remarkable strength and yet tensile flexibility of her voice which one reviewer has accurately described as "an achingly pure soprano." There is besides an acute sensitivity to the meaning of each song she sings and an understanding of its historical and social context. She makes these songs alive again because she is able to identify with the marrow of their stories while at the same time personalizing them so that they sound like an extension of her own experiences. It is this capacity to *live* a song that is so rare among the myriads of apprentice folk singers. Miss Baez is, moreover, a superlative actress as she sings; when she tells in *The Cherry Tree Carol* of how "Joseph flew in anger," one can *see* him flush with suspicion and rage. She assumes besides all the roles she sings, from the boy in *Engine 143* whose passion, however fatal, is railroading, to the girl in *Plaisir d'Amour*—a song she has made her own—who underlines the evanescence of love's joys and the durability of its sorrows.

She tells her stories with particular effectiveness because she also has a sure command of dynamics, the most subtle and unerringly accurate of any young folk singer I know. Nor does she make the prevalent error of overstating emotion, of confusing the *sound* of grief or rage with the content of those emotions. In her singing, the emotions rise naturally and often stabbingly out of the whole performance. There is an inevitability of cadence, an almost hypnotic weaving of the story-teller's spell in her work that accounts for her ability to gather an audience into the song with her so that its attention is inextricably held until she ends, and is only withdrawn with difficulty during the silence that follows. Like Mahalia Jackson and only a few others, Miss Baez can still be heard for long moments after the song is over.

One of the enduring attractions of the best folk songs is the clarity of their images, including the swiftly passing

scenes of the story itself. Miss Baez brings these pictures into instant relief, as in the short, flowering life of the boy husband in *Trees They Do Grow High* and the mournful departure of the *Wagoner's Lad*.

Miss Baez, in sum, has not been content to merely copy folk styles and stylists. She is unmistakably herself in whatever she sings. Similarly, the Greenbriar Boys, who have a brief part in this album, have also developed their own musical character which is based on a knowledge of the best of the bluegrass tradition to which they are committed. They have traveled through and listened in Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Tennessee; and although they have only been together since the fall of 1959, they have achieved so strong and individual a style that the Fiddlers' Convention in Union Grove, North Carolina—the oldest in the South—they won the old time band competition in 1959 and the banjo contest in 1960 and 1961. The Greenbriar Boys consist of John Herald, lead singer and guitar; Ralph Rinzler, baritone singer and mandolin; and Bob Yellin, tenor singer and banjo.

Miss Baez, to return to the center of the album, is only twenty, and it is remarkable that she has already achieved such capacity to communicate depth of feeling and intensity of presence. Hearing her is a unique experience because very few singers in any field equal her skill at creating a whole, enveloping musical situation. "Women and music," said Goldsmith, "should never be dated." Neither Miss Baez nor her material are.

***Joan Baez In Concert (Vanguard, 1962), Liner Notes by Maynard Solomon.***

Heine once said that literature is a graveyard in which we wander, searching out and embracing the headstones of those ideas which are closest to our own beliefs. So it is with our researches in folk music. Each singer draws his songs out of the deep well, and in so doing has both found and made a personal statement. Some choose the quaint ditties that used to form the major part of folk song programs; others the sweet, sentimental and surfacey; still others go for tunes that can be streamlined into a "real smooth swinging style." We've come a long way in the last few years, though, and many have tired of the froth. And in trying to say something different, deeper, we have discovered that our folk music is

so rich in thought, experience and imagery that it is capable of saying what we will if only we know how to use it.

And so, if Shelley wondered, “Ye hasten to the dead! What seek ye there ... ?”<sup>3</sup> we might answer that we seek the living, for we do not always find them around us. For many, the “living” are the long-gone makers and shapers of folk songs whose words and tunes are still with us, the shared possessions of ordinary people who handed on the songs of their great griefs and little victories, the lyrics of their loves and losses, the ballads of their guys who made it and those who didn’t but wouldn’t stop trying.

Perhaps we turn to folk music because we feel too “cabin’d cribbed, confined”<sup>4</sup> by the standards of our world, where to be cool is to be wise, and to avoid complications (such as other people’s troubles) is the road to suburbia and its house so fine, a world where love is a sometime thing and the voice of the turtle-dove is hushed in the shadow of the mushroom cloud. Perhaps this is why we love those few singers who are willing to expose their inner feelings (their souls, if you will) and speak in song of those things which are buried so deeply within us. Shelley cautioned: “Lift not the painted veil which those who live call Life,”<sup>5</sup> for underneath lie fearful things, and among them lies truth. But if we cannot ourselves lift the veil we are grateful to those who dare to do it for us.

Fixing the exact nature of Joan’s statement-in-song is difficult, not because it is obscure, but rather because it “lives,” moves, is growing, changing its shape, line, contour, emphasis. And like all living things, like a person or a character in a novel, it can be approached and analyzed from so many (perhaps infinite) points of view, has so many areas of relevance and meaning, both objective and subjective, social and personal. In music and poetry (and folk song has both in equal parts), precise measurement and analysis isn’t always possible, but most of us will *feel* meaning even if we can’t quite freeze it into words. And if the song has this emotional meaning for us, it builds a bond of sympathy

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<sup>3</sup> From a sonnet by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), “Ye hasten to the dead!...”; published in 1823.

<sup>4</sup> “But now I am cabin’d, cribb’d, confined, bound in / To saucy doubts and fears.” William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act III, Scene iv.

<sup>5</sup> From a sonnet by Shelley, “Lift not the painted veil...”; published 1818.



between us and those who made and sang it, gives us a consciousness that the rhythms of our hearts and minds are those of countless others as well. Joan and her songs give us this sense of common ground, of roots in the past and present, of the shared fund of experience which links us to her, to each other, to our history, and to the unassuming, hardworking and half-forgotten people who molded so beautiful a part of our national heritage while scraping a bare life out of the Appalachian hills or the Alabama cotton-fields or the West Virginia slagheaps or the Oklahoma flatlands or the California orange-groves.

Perhaps all of this is peripheral. When the explanations and analyses are done, we are left with the singer and her songs. And Joan's triumph is that she is a consummate interpreter of folk song, and her expressive power is inseparable from the beauty and greatness and startling contemporaneity of the music and poetry which speaks through her to us.

***Joan Baez In Concert, Vol. 2 (Vanguard, 1963), Liner Notes by Bob Dylan***<sup>6</sup>

In my youngest years I used t' kneel  
By my aunt's house on a railroad field  
An' yank the grass outa the ground  
An' rip savagely at its roots  
An' pass the hours countin' strands  
An' stains a green grew on my hands  
As I waited till I heard the sound  
A the iron ore cars rollin' down  
The tracks'd hum an' I'd bite my lip  
An' hold my grip as the whistle whined  
Crouchin' low as the engine growled  
I'd shyly wave t' the throttle man  
An' count the cars as they rolled past  
But when the echo faded in the day  
An' I understood the train was gone  
It's then that my eyes'd turn  
Back t' my hands with stains a green  
That lined my palms like blood that tells  
I'd taken an' not given in return

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<sup>6</sup> These liner notes were not transcribed by the author. They can be found at <http://dylanology.org/wrtwrddb.htm>.

But glancin' back t' the empty patch  
Where the ground was turned upside down  
An' the roots lay dead beside the tree  
I'd say "how can this bother me"  
Or "I'm sure the grass don' give a damn  
Anyway it'll grow again an'  
What's a patch a grass anyhow"  
An' I'd wipe my hand t' wash the stain  
An' fling a rock across the track  
With the echo a the railroad train  
Hangin' heavy like a thunder cloud  
In the dawn a t'morrow's rain  
An' I asked myself t' be my friend  
An' I walked my road like a frightened fox  
An' I sung my song like a demon child  
With a kick an' a curse  
From inside my mother's womb -

In later years although still young  
My head swung heavy with windin' curves  
An' a mixed-up path revolved an' stung  
Within the boundaries a my youth  
'Til at last I backed so far away  
From the world's walls an' friendless games  
That I did not have a word t' say  
T' anyone who'd meet my eyes  
An' I locked myself an' lost the key  
An let the symbols take their shape  
An' form a foe for me t' fight  
T' lash my tongue an' rebel against  
An' spit at strong with vomit words  
But I learned t' choose my idols well  
T' be my voice an' tell my tale  
An' help me fight my phantom brawl  
An' my first idol was Hank Williams  
For he sang about the railroad lines  
An' the iron bars an' rattlin' wheels  
Left no doubt that they were real  
An' my first symbol was the word "beautiful"  
For the railroad lines were not beautiful  
They were smoky black an' gutter - colored  
An' filled with stink an' soot an' dust  
An' I'd judge beauty with these rules  
An' accept it only 'f it was ugly

An' 'f I could touch it with my hand  
For it's only then I'd understand  
An' say "yeah this's real"  
An' I walked my road an' sung my song  
Like a saddened clown  
In the circus a my own world—

In later times my idols fell  
For I learned that they were only men  
An' had reasons for their deeds  
'F which weren't mine not at all  
An' no more on them could I depend  
But what I learned from each forgotten god  
Was that the battlefield was mine alone  
An' only I could cast me stone  
An' the symbols which by now had grown  
Outa shape but strong in sight  
Were seen by me in a sharper light  
An' the symbol "beauty" still struck my guts  
But now with more a shameful sound  
An' I rebelled twice as hard an' ten times as proud  
An' I walked my road an' sung my song  
Like an arch criminal who'd done no wrong  
An' committed no crime but was screamin' through the bars  
A someone else's prison—

Later yet in New York town  
On my own terms I said with age  
"The only beauty's in the cracks an' curbs  
Clothed in robes a dust an' grime"  
An' I searched for it in every hole  
An' jumped head-on t' meet its breast  
An' whispered tunes into its ear  
An' kissed its mouth an' held its waist  
An' in its body swum around  
An' on its belly passed out cold  
An' like a blind lover bold in flight  
I shouted from inside my wounds  
"The voice t' speak for me an' mine  
Is the hard filthy gutter sound  
For it's only this that I can touch  
An' the only beauty I can feel"  
An' I dove back in by my own choice  
T' feed my skin a hungry holes

An' rejected every other voice  
An' I walked my road an' sung my song  
Like a lonesome king  
Standin' in the fury a the queen's garden  
Starin' into  
A shallow grave—

Time traveled an' faces passed  
An' many times thoughts t' me were taught  
By names an' heads too many t' count  
That touched my path an' soon were gone  
But some stayed on t' remain as friends  
An' though each is first an' none is best  
It is at this time I speak 'f one  
Who proved t' me that boys still grow  
A girl I met on common ground  
Who like me strummed lonesome tunes  
With a "lovely voice" so I first heard  
"A thing a beauty" people said  
"Wondrous sounds" writers wrote  
"I hate that kind a sound" said I  
"The only beauty's ugly, man  
The crackin' shakin' breakin' sounds're  
The only beauty I understand"  
So between our tongues there was a bar  
An' though we talked a the world's fears  
An' at the same jokes loudly laughed  
An' held our eyes at the same aim  
When I saw she was set t' sing  
A fence a deafness with a bullet's speed  
Sprang up like a protectin' glass  
Outside the linin' a my ears  
An' I talked loud inside my head  
As a double shield against the sounds  
"Ain't no voice but an ugly voice  
A the rest I don' give a damn  
'F I can't feel it with my hand  
Then don' wish me t' understand  
But I'll wait though 'til yer song is done  
'Cause there's something about yuh  
But I don' know what"  
An' I walked my road an' sung my song  
Like a scared poet  
Walkin' on the shore

Kickin' driftwood with my shadow  
Afraid a the sea—

In a crusin' car I heard her tell  
About the childhood hours she spent  
As a little girl in an Arab land  
An' she told me 'f the dogs she saw  
Slaughtered wholly on the street  
An' I learned 'f how the people'd laugh  
As they beat the gentle dogs t' death

Through a child's eyes who tried an' failed  
T' hide one dog inside her house  
An' I turned my head without a word  
An' coldly stared out t' the road  
An' with the wind hittin' half my face  
My memory creeped as they highway rolled  
Back if not but for a flash  
T' the empty patch a grass that died  
About the same time a dog was hid  
An' that guilty feelin' sprang again  
Not over the roots I'd pulled  
But over she who saw the dogs get killed  
An' I said it softly underneath my breath  
"Yuh oughta listen t' her voice ...  
Maybe somethin's in the sound ...  
Ah but what could she care anyway  
Kill them thoughts yes"  
they ain't no good  
Only ugly's understood."  
An' I stuck my head out in the wind  
An' let the breeze blow the words  
Outa my breath as a truck roared by  
An' almost blew us off the road  
An' at the time I had no song t' sing—

In Woodstock at a painter's house  
With friends scattered 'round the room  
An' she talkin' from a chair  
An' me crosslegged on the rug  
I lit a cigarette an' laughed  
An' gulped light red wine an' lost  
Every shakin' vein that dwelled

Within the roots a my dancin' heart  
An' the room it whirled an' twirled an' sailed  
Without one fence standin' guard  
When all at once the silent air  
Split open from her soundin' voice  
Without no warnin' from her lips  
An' by instinct my blood reversed  
An' I shook an' started reachin' for  
That wall that was supposed t' fall  
But my restin' nerves weren't restless now  
An' this time they wouldn't jump  
"Let her voice ring out," they cried  
"We're too tired t' stop 'er sing"  
Which shattered all the rules I owned  
An' left me puzzled without no choice  
'Cept t' listen t' her voice  
An' when I leaned upon my elbows bare  
That limply held my body up  
I felt my face freeze t' the bone  
An' my mouth like ice or solid stone  
Could not've moved 'f called upon  
An' the time like velvet floated by  
Until with hunger pains it cried  
"Don' stop singing ... sing again"  
An' like others who have taught me well  
Not about themselves but me  
She laughed out loud as 'f t' know  
That the bars between us busted down  
An' I laughed almost an insane laugh  
An' aimed it at the ceiling walls  
When I realized the command I called  
An' my elbows folded under me  
An' my head lay back upon the floor  
An' my shaky nerves went floatin' free  
But I memorized the words t' write  
For another time in t'morrow's dawn  
An' held close unchallenged dreams  
As I passed out somewheres in the night - -

I did not begin t' touch  
'Til I finally felt what wasn't there  
Oh how feebly foolish small an' sad  
'F me t' think that beauty was  
Only ugliness an' muck

When it's really jus' a magic wand  
That waves an' teases at my mind  
An' knows that only it can feel  
An' knows that I ain't got a chance  
An' fools me into thinking things  
Like it's my hands that understand  
Ha ha how it must laugh  
At crippled ones like me who try  
T' pick apart the sounds a streams  
An' pluck apart the rage 'f waves  
Ah but yuh won't fool me any more  
For the breeze I heard in a young girl's breath  
Proved true as sex an' womanhood  
An' deep as the lowest depths a death  
An' as strong as the weakest winds that blow  
An' as long as fate an' fatherhood  
An' like gypsy drums  
An' Chinese gongs  
An' cathedral bells  
An' tones 'f chimes  
It jus' held hymns 'f mystery  
An' mystery's all too involved  
It can't be understood or solved  
By hands an' feet an' fingertips  
An' it shouldn't be called by a shameful name  
By those who look for answers plain  
In every book 'cept themselves  
Go ahead lightnin' laugh at me  
Flash yer teeth  
Slap yer knee  
It's yer joke I agree  
I'm even pointin' at myself  
But it's a shame it's taken so much time

So, once more it's winter again  
An' that means I'll wait 'til spring  
T' ramble back t' where I kneeled  
When I first heard the ore train sing  
An' pulled the ground up by its roots  
But this time I won't use my strength  
T' pass the time yankin' grass  
While I'm waitin' for the train t' sound  
No next time'll be a different day  
For the train might be there when I come

An' I might wait hours for the cars t' pass  
An' then as the echo fades  
I'll bend down an' count the strands a grass  
But one thing that's bound t' be  
Is that instead a pullin' at the earth  
I'll jus' pet it as a friend  
An' when that train engine comes near  
I'll nod my head t' the big brass wheels  
An' say "howdy" t' the engineer  
An' yell that Joanie says hello  
An' watch the train man scratch his head  
An' wonder what I meant by that  
An' I'll stand up an' remember when  
A rock was flung by a devil child  
An' I'll walk my road somewhere between  
The unseen green an' the jet-black train  
An' I'll sing my song like a rebel wild  
For it's that I am an' can't deny  
But at least I'll know not t' hurt  
Not t' push  
Not t' ache  
An' God knows ... not t' try –

***Joan Baez/5 (Vanguard, 1964), Liner Notes by Langston Hughes***

Joan Baez: A Tribute  
by Langston Hughes:

*Cool as rippling water, clear as a mountain stream.*

Once as a child I lived for a while in Colorado. There I remember the mountains with pointed peaks, sometimes seeming to float above the clouds as though disembodied, each peak of earth, each tip of mountain alone. The fluffy whiteness of clouds at morning between each base and summit all along the range. You knew base and summit—and that each peak rose from the lap of earth, each mountain top and mountain root being a unit together, one. But when clouds floated low to earth, between base and peak, they made each summit seem alone, quite alone, high and alone, up there alone.



A peak alone yet planted here among us: Joan Baez. Like rippling water, cool as a mountain stream, clear as Colorado sunlight in the morning. Yet body warm as you and I. And feet with toenails. Feet touching earth, floors, platforms, stages, in shoes or out. Human feet with toes—like yours and mine: Joan Baez.

Standing singing alone. Two hands that hold and finger a guitar. One mouth that sends out a song—but nobody else's song, only hers: Joan Baez. Although Bach provided the form and Brazil inspired the melody and Villa-Lobos, out of both, created the song—the *Bachianas Brasileiras* on this disc—the song comes out hers: Joan Baez. Entirely hers. Joan Baez.

There is this about Joan Baez and her repertoire.

Although her songs come from many regions, American or foreign, and from many sources, anonymous or composed, she does not try to be Brazilian in singing a Brazilian song, or Negro in singing a spiritual, or English in singing a British ballad. Maybe that is what is called “a work of art,” an individual work of art, a transmutation into self—so that for those moments of singing, Joan Baez herself becomes a work of art. But there is nothing about her singing that is arty.

When something is arty, it is held in the hand and looked at with conceit. But when something is art, it is the hand. A Baez song is Joan Baez. Otherwise and ordinarily, when not singing, she is just a human being like the rest of us—ten toes, ten fingers, one body, one throat, one mouth. But when singing, so uniquely—she becomes the song—and it is hers. No matter who first sang it, or who first wrote it, it becomes hers—and she it. And therefore artlessly, art.

I first heard Joan Baez at Newport where official duties brought me as a member of the Jazz Festival Board in the days before the riot of the 1960 closed (temporarily) the festivities down. After midnight on a patch of lawn between the new building and the old of the Viking Hotel, a miscellaneous assortment of kids were singing and playing guitars on the grass until the wee hours of the morning. Ever [sic] so often out of the melee a cool clear voice would rise in song and float up to the highest of the hotel windows.

“Who’s that girl with the pretty voice?” folks coming out of the basement bar to cross the lawn would ask. The next evening when, unprogrammed, a slight lass with a guitar took to the microphones in the vastness of Peabody Park outdoors under the spotlights, accompanied by Bob Gibson, again they asked, “Who’s that girl?” She sang, I think, only two songs,

but it was like a preview of things and songs to come. “That girl” was Joan Baez. “Who?” folks kept turning to each other to ask. Answer, “Joan Baez.” From that moment on, her name began to get around.

From a seemingly very simple song like the lyric and lovely *There But For Fortune*, a contemporary ballad by Phil Ochs, to the Villa-Lobos *Bachianas Brasileiras* No. 5 with an orchestra of ‘cellos conducted by Maurice Abravanel ... With great musicality, Joan Baez goes from a pure folk song to the complexities of a Villa-Lobos score—but a score in which the folk feeling, albeit South American, is so deeply engrained that the leap does not seem strange, nor the language either. The softness of the Portuguese sounds in the *Brasileiras* and *O’ Cangaceiro* soothe and charm. “If you will teach me to make lace, I will teach you to make love,” says the lover to the beloved on *O’ Cangaceiro*, where the microphones capture Joan Baez singing along with Joan Baez.

From a Brazilian poem by Ruth Correa, the Portuguese text of the *Bachianas Brasileiras* might roughly be paraphrased thus, “Through the vastness of the midnight sky, the clouds, luminous veils of loveliness, float gently. Out of unfathomed depths of ocean the moon rises like a radiant maiden glorifying the night. As she reveals her beauty the earth and sky, indeed all nature adore her. And the birds cease their mournful chirping as the silver moonlight bathes the sea with its balm for tears and balm for loneliness.” With a boy-soprano-like voice, Joan Baez brings to life the moonlight moods and mysteries of Brazilian song as no one I have heard has done since the Brazilian Elsie Houston, who died twenty years ago.

*The Death of Queen Jane* and *the Unquiet Grave* are old English ballads, the first based on an actual happening, and the latter a lament for the loss of the one true love. *Stewball* is an American version of a British broadside ballad of the 19th Century, while *It Ain’t Me, Babe*, is very much of our own day and time, composed by one of the most talented of contemporary troubadours, Bob Dylan. *I Still Miss Someone* is a today-song, too, by two writers of modern country and western songs, Roy Cash, Jr. and Johnny Cash. *When You Hear Them Cuckoos Hollering* is a melange of lyrics derived from Negro work song; whereas *So We’ll Go No More A-Roving* is at the opposite pole—a setting by Richard Dyer-Bennet of a Lord Byron lyric. And from John Jacob Niles,

one of the most distinguished of American folklorists comes Go 'Way From my Window. But drawn from the newspaper headlines of our times is Birmingham Sunday by Richard Fariña, musically so beautifully understated and on this recording so softly sung by Joan Baez. In a worried period, the folk singers, and many of them, particularly the city folk singers, are taking the troubles of our times and wrapping them up in songs—documentary songs, musing songs, angry protest songs. Birmingham Sunday is a quiet protest song. It was September 15, 1963, when four little girls went to Sunday School on Sabbath morning and never came back homes. Instead they left their blood upon the church house wall, with spattered flesh and bloodied Sunday dresses torn to shreds by dynamite, victims of the race war in the American South. From this incident comes this song, and this disc records it for history. On this disc the songs range from Brazil to Birmingham but center in Baez, sweet singer of herself—and us.

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