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The History of Rock's Pasts through Rock Covers (1998)

Deena Weinstein

She knows how to love me / Yes indeed / Boy you don't know / What she do to me.
—Little Richard, "Tutti Frutti"

She's a real gone cookie / Yes, sirree / Pretty little Susie / Is the gal for me.
—Pat Boone, "Tutti Frutti"

In this essay Deena Weinstein usefully defines the cover as an iteration or version of a specific *recording*, not simply an interpretation of a song, and describes how the purposes and meanings of covers have changed over time.

Cover versions played a significant role in the early history of rock, when major record companies had white singers cover hits by black artists to make those hits more acceptable to mainstream (i.e., white) audiences. These covers made the music more "vanilla," as Pat Boone put it (Szatmary 2009, 25), and earned millions for the cover artists and their companies; the original artists were paid little or nothing for their songs.

In the '50s rock 'n' roll had just been born and therefore had little history to draw upon. Audiences often did not know the original versions of cover songs; thus, rock was in a state of what Weinstein calls the "eternal now." By the '60s rock had developed a history, and covers both celebrated the original versions and used them to confer a sort of authenticity upon the cover artists. In the late '60s rock demanded originality, and the cover version became less important.

The classical music "covers" of such groups as Emerson, Lake and Palmer in the early '70s were not about authenticity, but rather, about demonstrating virtuosity. More significant are the punk rock covers of the '70s, which treated the original songs in ironic or parodistic fashion. The audience probably knew the original songs, which the covers now subverted to attack the idea of authenticity itself. Thus a gap opened up between the original and its cover. The '80s and '90s explored that gap, transforming the past through the free (postmodern) use of sampling. By now, a longer history could be drawn upon, with reissues, box sets, and soundtracks making obscurities from the past widely available (think of the soundtrack to Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*).

One of the most intriguing ideas presented here is the concept of stereophonic listening: the audience is aware of the original and hears the cover in terms of that original. More radical is

the suggestion that the audience, knowing only the cover version, might hear the original itself as a cover (of the cover, as it were).

Popular music continually references its own past. This is a form of intertextuality, the literary theory that, applied to music, suggests that one always brings other music to one's listening; that there is a network of musical texts that interact in every song and every hearing of that song; that music plays with that network of references; and that meaning, or at least appreciation arises from the interactions among those references. The cover song is one of the clearest examples of musical intertextuality.

As rock slouches in 4/4 time to the millennium, it is up to its ringing ears in history. There are tribute albums, several "history of rock" TV miniseries repackaged as video collections, a plethora of bands such as the Rolling Stones reprising their own larger-than-life history on gargantuan stages, major record labels growing fat on CD reissues, and dozens of tribute bands. If that isn't enough of the past in the present, there's the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Rock is dead. Long live rock?

Rock proclaims, as it always has, the now, the new beginning, the absolute origin. But like all cultural forms, it is intertextual, always already immersed in a past. My argument in this chapter, then, is that rock has always referenced a past, despite its "nowness," but that the way it has referenced the past has changed significantly over time. I want to describe both the historiography and the history of these references – that is, the differing ways in which the "past" has been constructed by and functioned for rock in different rock eras.

I will explore this history—through one of the major forms of rock's intertextuality, the cover song, which is intrinsically a relation to the past. Cover songs, in the fullest sense of the term, are peculiar to rock music, both for technological and ideological reasons. A cover song iterates (with more or fewer differences) a prior recorded performance of a song by a particular artist, rather than simply the song itself as an entity separate from any performer or performance. When the song itself (as opposed to the performance) is taken as the reference for iteration, each performer does a version or a rendition of the song, and none of these versions is a necessary reference. Forms of popular music other than rock, then, generally do not have covers as I have defined them; rather, they have versions.

Technologically, the electronic reproduction of the performance in recordings makes it practical to take a particular recorded performance as one's reference for iteration, rather than an abstracted "song" per se. But covering a song also presupposes an ideological element. That is, the practice assumes that the "original" recorded performance is privileged, and that in some way the song belongs to that performance and by extension to the original performer.

The following discussion will show that the rock cover has changed its signification over time. I'll briefly define three epistemic breaks that have distinctive relationships to the past—individually, they mark a modern, a modernist, and a postmodern moment in rock's history.

THE PAST AS ETERNAL NOW: FIFTIES COVERS

"Sh-Boom," Crew Cuts, 1954
(Original: Chords, 1954)

"Shake, Rattle and Roll," Bill Haley, 1954
(Original: Joe Turner, 1954)

"Ain't That a Shame," Pat Boone, 1955
(Original: Fats Domino, 1955)

"Hound Dog," Elvis Presley, 1956
(Original: Willie Mae Thornton, 1953)

Rock 'n' roll emerged from an amalgam of rhythm & blues ("race music" rechristened for commerce), country and western music, and pop music, some time during the first half of the 1950s. This reflected the appearance of a definable youth market on the economic side, and the emergence of a distinctive youth culture on the ideological side. Rock 'n' roll might be said to be coconstituted by a relation to its immediate past—by covers. "Sh-Boom," for example, originally done by the Chords, was a hit on the R & B chart in 1954. By July of that year, it also made the Top 10 on the pop charts when the Crew Cuts' cover of that song was issued. The Crew Cuts' "whiter" version made the pop Top 10 one week after its release.

Not all covers in the 1950s were covers in the full sense of involving reference to a particular performance, but they were appropriations of current recorded music within genres, across genres, and into genres-in-formation. Cover songs during the decade were done for commercial purposes—the original was seldom something the intended audience had heard. That is, although 1950s covers constituted a relation to the (immediate) past, that relation was not generally grasped by most audiences as it was not part of their listening experience. In the 1950s so many of the originals had been released only a few months prior to covers that even if some in the audience did know the original, they did not attach any particular past to it. Mid-1950s rock 'n' roll was constituted by timeless moments of now; the past was an eternal present.

Most 1950s covers modified the original in order to reach a wider and whiter audience. One type of modification was merely to cover the original using artists on a major label that had greater marketing clout than the independent label on which the original had appeared.[1] When the sound of the cover was as close as possible to the original it was called, at the time, a "copy."

[1]With the Fontaine Sisters, Pat Boone, and other artists, Dot became a major label by doing covers of upcoming R & B songs.

Successful cover records combined both commercial and aesthetic mediations. Often a few words were changed to make the lyrics less racy. Georgia Gibbs's cover of Etta James's "Wallflower" is a case in point. "Wallflower" was an "answer" record to "Work With Me, Annie" by Hank Ballard and the Midnighters.[2] Ballard's song used the word "work" as a double entendre for sex, imploring Annie to "work with me" and to "give me all my meat." James's reply, "Wallflower," using a similar tune and arrangement, challenged Henry's dancing ability (a code for sexual potency). Gibbs's cover, released by Mercury Records, retitled the song "Dance with Me, Henry," burying the sexual double entendre more deeply.

In general, the covers of 1954 and 1955 transformed the R & B arrangements in the direction of pop. Singers' voices were chosen for polish, rather than rawness, and their enunciation of the lyrics was clear, not gritty, as in many of the originals. Moreover, in contrast to the R & B arrangements, pop clearly segregated the vocal and instrumental parts of the song, subordinating the instrumentals. This Tin Pan Alley style allowed the Crew Cuts, the McGuire Sisters, and Pat Boone, among others, to have hit records covering more raw, mainly black, and generally indie-label, artists.

The mediation between the R & B and pop styles of the early rock 'n' roll covers served to make many white artists popular, while providing paltry songwriting royalties to mainly black musicians. In this way marginalized music crossed over to a white youth audience that was not yet prepared for its full counterhegemonic impact. By 1956, the ears of the white youth audience had been trained away from their parents' pop, and the ministrations of white pop musicians were no longer needed. In that year, Little Richard's "Tutti-Frutti" was a bigger hit than Pat Boone's criminally bland cover.[3]

Elvis built his early career on covers and succeeded in avoiding sounding like either black R & B or (before his Hollywood-Las Vegas careers) white Tin Pan Alley. His first record for Sun was a double-sided cover, Arthur "Big Boy" Cruddup's "That's All Right" backed by Bill Monroe's "Blue Moon of Kentucky."

By 1958 "rock 'n' roll" was transformed (aided by Dick Clark, major record labels, and ASCAP) into the domesticated-for-mass-consumption "rock and roll." With this change, rock became self-conscious of its own history. Songs from the first era became "oldies," grouped in radio formats and snipped into collages in novelty records.

[2]"Answer songs" were a common practice in early 1950s R & B that came close to being covers. In answer songs, the words are changed and the new lyrics respond to the original lyrics.

[3]Little Richard's "Tutti-Frutti" "was considerably cleaned up and censored before being released in the famous version which went on to become a hit. That immortal tag line from the song 'Awop-Bop-a-Loo-Mop Alop-Bam-Boom' actually began as 'Awop-Bop-a-Loo-Mop-a-Good-Goddam.' Another line expunged was 'Tutti-Frutti good booty – if it don't fit don't force it.' The song was written originally by Richard but a second writer was called in to help provide the cleaner lyrics" (Martin and Segrave, 1988: 73).

THE PAST AS AUTHENTIC SOURCE: SIXTIES COVERS

"Roll Over Beethoven," Beatles, 1964
(Original: Chuck Berry, 1956)

"I'm a King Bee," Rolling Stones, 1964
(Original: Slim Harpo, 1957)

"House of the Risin' Sun," Animals, 1964
(Original: Bob Dylan, 1962/Anon.)

"Mr Tambourine Man," Byrds, 1965
(Original: Bob Dylan, 1965)

"All Along the Watchtower," Jimi Hendrix, 1968
(Original: Bob Dylan, 1968)

The British Invasion hit the American shores in early 1964.[4] It was a modern "retro" movement, reviving the cultural menace that rock 'n' roll had been at its inception, and reclaiming rock, once again, for the young. Led by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, the invaders used weapons that were stamped, almost illegibly, "made in the USA," to conquer the American youth market. Cover songs were a staple of the invaders' early arsenal, but unlike the covers of the 1950s, these were covers with a past.

The 1950s cover usurps the original, asserts itself as freestanding, and functions as its own absolute beginning. The 1950s cover constitutes a relation to the past by negating that past. But in the 1960s British bands constituted for themselves a new relation to their origins, which were the components of the initial rock amalgam and its crystallization in early rock 'n' roll. Rather than seeking to usurp or efface these origins, British bands celebrated them and in doing so used them to validate their own authenticity as musicians.

The music of the early Beatles and Rolling Stones is saturated with intertextuality beyond the cover songs themselves. Belz (1969: 128) and other critics contend that "early Beatles records contained an encyclopedia of Chuck Berry guitar licks, Buddy Holly harmonies, and Little Richard falsettos." The early British invasion nodded to American black music at the same time that Americans were involved in the Civil Rights movement and Motown was supplying homegrown blackened pop.

The Beatles chose songs that had been successful in the United States. Many covers found their way into their April 1964 album (Beatles' Second Album), including Chuck Berry's "Roll Over Beethoven," Little Richard's "Long Tall Sally," and the Marvellettes's Motown hit, "Please Mr. Postman." In contrast, the Rolling Stones tended toward

[4]In April 1964 the top five songs were by the Beatles. Number two was a cover of "Twist and Shout."

covers of songs found on the R & B charts, such as "Time is on My Side" by Irma Thomas, Slim Harpo's "I'm a King Bee," and Jimmy Reed's "Honest I Do."

As the episteme of 1960s rock crystallized, it included new emphases on the original sources of rock 'n' roll and new sources of authenticity. The Delta blues and its Chicago and Detroit offspring became the sources of white blues rock. Bands such as John Mayall's Blues Breakers, the Yardbirds, and Cream covered blues songs. (They also helped to resurrect the careers of older, underappreciated bluesmen.) The blues-rock audience was, at least initially, unfamiliar with the originals, but no doubt heard the covers as referencing "real blues." Examples of blues-rock covers include Cream's Howlin' Wolf covers ("Spoonful" and "Sitting on Top of the World"), the Yardbirds' cover of Bo Diddley's "I'm a Man," and Led Zeppelin's cover of Muddy Waters' "I Can't Quit You Baby."

In the last part of the 1960s, cover songs were done less frequently. They tended to be relegated to B-sides and encore material at live shows, distancing the band from material that it didn't write, while at the same time maintaining some connection with authentic origins. The modern romantic notion of authenticity—creating out of one's own resources—became dominant over the idea that authenticity constituted a relationship, through creative repetition, to an authentic source.[5]

Notable examples of covers at the time, however, included the many covers of Bob Dylan's songs, such as Jimi Hendrix's "All Along the Watchtower." Moreover, about this time, as rock performance became increasingly skewed toward a style of the arena-rock spectacle, a style that indexed the general reactionary political and cultural moment, authenticity increasingly became a pose. This was most clearly expressed in the singer-songwriter style, made popular by Joni Mitchell, Jackson Browne, James Taylor, Carole King, Neil Young, Paul Simon, and John Denver. "And the appeal of each of them," Janet Maslin (1980) contends, "at least initially, had far less to do with either singing or song writing, than with the sheer allure of personality."

FRAGMENTARY PASTS: SEVENTIES COVERS

The Romantic Continuation: Heavy Metal

"Green Manalishi (With the Two-Pronged Crown)", Judas Priest, 1979
(Original: Fleetwood Mac, 1970)

"Beethoven's Ninth," Rainbow, 1980
(Original: Beethoven, 1823)

Slayer, "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida," 1986
(Original: Iron Butterfly, 1968)

Megadeth, "Anarchy in the U.K.," 1988
(Original: Sex Pistols, 1977)

[5]For a discussion of authentic repetition, see Heidegger (1962).

Heavy metal, initiated by the ur-metal band Black Sabbath, continued the blues-rock tradition of the 1960s. Black Sabbath did not do covers, in part, the band said, because no extant songs embodied their vision of existence (an inversion of the "love" of the counterculture). As the style of heavy music became a genre with a subcultural audience, some bands did covers, but, as in the 1950s, the audience had not often heard the originals. For example, Judas Priest, definers of the classic metal that came to dominate the late-1970s and early-1980s heavy-metal sound, redid early Fleetwood Mac's blues-rock "Green Manalishi (With The Two-Pronged Crown)." The song became a well-loved anthemic staple of Priest's repertoire; hardly any fans knew the original, or even that there was one.[6]

Metal did not acknowledge a premetal past. The classical music motifs and the few metal covers of modern classical music (Rainbow's rendition of the fourth movement of Beethoven's Symphony no. 9; Manowar's remakes of the "William Tell Overture" and "Flight of the Bumblebee"; and Accept's "Metal Heart," a remake of Beethoven's "Für Elyse") were not meant to provide an authenticity rooted in a valorization of the past, but to validate and proclaim a musical virtuosity valued by the subculture.

THE PAST AS OBJECT OF PARODY: PUNK COVERS

"Eve of Destruction," Dickies, 1978
(Original: Barry McGuire, 1965)

"Viva Las Vegas," Dead Kennedys, 1981
(Original: Elvis Presley, 1964)

"Eight Miles High," Hüsker Dü, 1983
(Original: Byrds, 1966)

A new episteme emerged with the eruption of punk rock in the mid-1970s. As a fundamentalism in revolt, punk drew much of its vitality from its engagement with the musical past. Punk adopted intentions ranging from playful irony laced with tribute, to scathing, high-energy parody. Following the example of the Ramones, covers became a common punk practice. But punk covers were of a different order then previous rock covers. They tended to be stereophonic, depending for their full impact on the audience being acquainted with the originals and thus reminding listeners of the past. Punk covers deconstructed their originals, removing and/or exaggerating the pretty, the pompous, and the pop. The audience's knowledge of the original allowed it to hear punk's fast and raw style more clearly. The Ramones' revision of the Contours' "Do You Wanna Dance?" the Dead Kennedys' remake of the bloated late-Elvis trademark, "Viva Las Vegas," and the Dickies' sarcastic delivery of Barry McGuire's "Eve of Destruction" all subverted the originals by transposing them to an irreverent musical attitude.[7]

[6]Judas Priest also redid Joan Baez's "Before the Dawn," fully covering over its folky roots.
[7]The Dickies did many, including the Moody Blues' "Nights in White Satin."

Through parody, the punk cover attacked the conventions of authenticity in rock as pompous, pretentious, and (laughably) lame. The punk cover took the new position of distancing criticism, opening up an intentional gap in attitude between original and cover that had not been present before. Covers in the 1950s often attempted to escape their status and be taken as self standing (perfect simulation where the simulation substitutes for the reference), whereas 1960s covers paid homage to their referents. Punk covers negated the originals without attempting to obliterate them; consequently, they keep the originals in play by constituting themselves over and against them.

THE PAST AS ARCHIVE FOR APPROPRIATION: EIGHTIES AND NINETIES COVERS

"Mrs. Robinson," Lemonheads, 1993
(Original: Simon and Garfunkel, 1968)

"Girl You'll Be a Woman Soon," Urge Overkill, 1995
(Original: Neil Diamond, 1968)

"Lay, Lady, Lay," Ministry, 1996
(Original: Bob Dylan, 1969)

"Unplugged" albums by Eric Clapton, Nirvana, Rolling Stones, etc.

Tribute albums to Kiss, Tom Petty, Jimi Hendrix, Joy Division, Thin Lizzy, John Lennon, Black Sabbath, etc.

The postmodernist, postpunk moment of rock music negates punk's negation of the 1960s, not in order to restore authenticity, but to explore the gap opened up by punk between original and cover. The past now becomes not something to transcend, to honor, or to criticize and parody, but something to appropriate. Facilitated by audio technologies that allow sampling, the postmodern past is transformed in any way that one wishes.

In the postmodern moment, covers are no longer relegated to the periphery but share the center with original work. The raw material of rock is no longer life, but culture. If God is dead and all things are allowed, the god that was knocked off by punk was the myth of the individual, along with its master name, Authenticity. Musicians can now plunder the past with abandon. The immediate postpunk "new wave" did covers, but extended reinterpretations far beyond parody. Devo's cover of one of the most central and praised rock songs of all time, "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," fully removed the romantic individual from the first-person pronoun.

Postmodern covers are generally stereophonic: the audience is aware of the original and hears the cover in terms of it. Well-known originals are often chosen, but

more importantly the audience for rock now is far more knowledgeable about rock's past. The looming presence of the past for the current rock audience and potential creators is a complex phenomena. Rock is no longer confined to adolescents or even youth. Youth became a free-floating signifier in the postmodern moment and many who were young during the 1960s or later see no reason to give up youthful lifestyles and attitudes, including rock music, which is one of the prime signifiers of youth (Weinstein, 1994a).[8] These chronological adults, some pushing into late middle age, want access to the music of their youth.

CD reissues and box sets of extinct rock acts and artists have made record companies fat with profits. New albums by the older bands (including once defunct but now profitably reformed bands, such as the Eagles and the Sex Pistols), and groups sounding like them, have cross-generational appeal. (Indeed, the notion of generations has been blurred in postmodern culture.) Television, Hollywood soundtracks, and retro radio formats ("oldies," "classic rock," "retro flashbacks") make rock's past available to everyone. The most lucrative tours in recent years have been those of Pink Floyd, the Rolling Stones, and the Grateful Dead—all 1960s bands.

Record companies are releasing compilations of the original artists whose songs were the basis for hits by other bands.[9] Most listeners will hear these originals as covers of the far more familiar rock hits. Covers have become so fashionable in the 1990s that the Association of Independent Music Publishers has an award category for "Best Pop Cover Song."

Covers are done in every conceivable way now, ranging from radical modification to slavish imitation. The reasons for doing covers in the postmodern moment are as varied as the ways in which they are done: the commercial advantage of familiarity, homage, introducing obscure artists to a wider audience, gaining credibility, criticizing the past, appropriating a song from one genre into another, demonstrating one's roots, finding the original song to express the cover artists' views or feelings as well as if not better than anything they could write, and lack of creativity.

The so-called hip bands of the 1980s (lumped into a category called "indie rock") played with rock's past via covers. The Rolling Stones' *Exile On Main Street*, released in 1972, was remade by Pussy Galore.[10] Sonic Youth's side project, Ciccone Youth, did a noisy remake of several Madonna (Ciccone) hits in 1988. Hüsker Dü released a souped-up version of the Byrd's "Eight Miles High" in 1983. R.E.M.'s many covers, including those of "Superman" by the obscure psychedelic band the Clique, and Wire's "Strange," as well as the covers on their 1987 album, *Dead Letter Office*, were never hits as originals, but were influential in underground rock culture. The Residents did a whole album of Elvis covers, *The King and Eye*, which combines the

[8]See also Weinstein (1994b) and Weinstein (1995).

[9]For example, Yazoo Records released *Roots of Rock* in 1994, a collection of the original renditions of songs made popular by bands including Cream, the Allman Brothers Band, and Led Zeppelin. A similar Rhino release, *Blues Originals* vol. 6, includes originals of songs made famous by Canned Heat, the Yardbirds, Jeff Beck, Elvis Presley, and Led Zeppelin. There is also *Stone Rock Blues*, a CD of the originals that the Rolling Stones covered.

[10]Issued as a limited-edition cassette in 1986.

punk practice of deconstructing bloated rock with the postmodern penchant for tribute albums.[11]

Mainstream listeners have heard a fair number of cover songs become hits, including remakes of Neil Diamond's "Red Red Wine" by UB40 and "Girl You'll Be a Woman Soon" by Urge Overkill. Artists such as Guns N' Roses, the Ramones, Slayer, and Pat Boone have put out entire albums of covers.

A torrent of cover songs has flooded the market in the 1990s in the form of tribute albums, in which an artist's songs are covered by a variety of current artists. Tribute albums have become so ubiquitous that record stores stock them in a separate section. Some are put out by indie labels to gain exposure for new, unknown groups. Other compilations have well-known bands doing the covers. (And some even have the tributee producing or playing on the album.) Releases have honored a wide variety of artists, including Kiss, Tom Petty, Kraftwerk, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Richard Thompson, Black Sabbath, Arthur Alexander, Roky Erikson, Van Morrison, and the Carpenters, to name only a handful.[12]

As heavy metal fragmented in the 1980s, both the punk-influenced thrash bands and the more pop and popular hard-rock groups were not averse to doing covers. Metallica redid songs by obscure bands that had influenced them. Megadeth's reworking of the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the U.K." has been the highlight of their live show since they recorded it in 1988.[13] Thrash bands have even covered classic heavy-metal songs. For example, Sacred Reich and Faith No More each redid Black Sabbath's "War Pigs," Exodus did AC/DC's "Overdose," and Metal Church revisited Deep Purple's "Highway Star." The pop metal covers that became well known include Great White's cover of Ian Hunter's "Once Bitten Twice Shy," White Lion's reinterpretation of Golden Earring's "Radar Love," and W.A.S.P.'s version of the Who's "The Real Me." (Death metal, more than just commercially underground, is probably the only style that avoids covers.)

Rap and hip-hop practiced their own strategy of aural collage via sampling, exploiting the archive by recombining the past while at the same time affirming authenticity by adopting their own attitude toward the material. Associated with hip-hop, dance mixes are covers of songs specifically made for play at urban clubs. The key

[11]"More insidiously perceptive than most critics, the Residents dismantle and rebuild sixteen of his standards, from 'All Shook Up' to 'Burning Love,' offering radical new ways to hear the commonplace. ... Cruelly but kindly pushing the songs to the limits of recognizability, the Residents deliberately strip away everything familiar to reveal previously hidden depths of passion, leering sexuality and gripping drama. Such dusty jewels as 'Viva Las Vegas,' 'Return to Sender' ... and 'Teddy Bear' are reborn in twisted melodies, imposed rhythms, radical rearrangements and distended vocal phrasings rendered with an exaggerated Southern drawl" (Robbins, 1990).

[12]"In the best tributes the covering artist steals a song from the original artist and makes it their own, while they keep, even exaggerate, its original spirit. It's a tough trick, demanding authenticity and empathy, but Hasil Adkins pulls it off when, on Turban Renewal, he puts his seriously deranged persona all over "Wooly Bully," opening up a new understanding of the Sam the Sham sobriquet. Megadeth's Dave Mustaine literally absconds with "Paranoid." Sure Ozzy, with and without Black Sabbath, rides a crazy train, but Mustaine has hijacked it and parked it permanently in the paranoid station" (Dasein, 1995).

[13]In So *Far*, So *Good*. . . So *What!*

to these covers is the use of a drum machine to manufacture a made-for-dancing disco-style beat to any song. Mainstream exposure of this style began with the remixes of Suzanne Vega's "Tom's Diner" and Bruce Springsteen's "Dancing in the Dark." The original Springsteen performance, from the megaplatinum *Born in the USA* album, was well known, helping to promote the cover (Tankel, 1990).

It is no small irony that a feature of the 1990s rock scene, tribute bands (Dasein, 1994), which cover other bands' sounds and images in live shows, honor just those bands, such as Rush, the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, and the Doors, that privileged authenticity and the romantic self. Tribute bands do not put out albums; they are only heard live. Without merchandise to sell and without the possibility of large tours, such bands, despite their musical expertise (often exceeding that of the bands to which they pay tribute) are not especially lucrative. Other sorts of tribute bands (let us call them "indexical" bands) skirt the tribute band's limitations. They do not cover the songs but imitate the original band's arrangements and performance style. Kingdom Come indexed Led Zeppelin and Phish indexes the Grateful Dead. This form of intertextuality allows the bands to make albums and have arena tours.[14]

Does the pan-appropriation of the past from a simultaneous archive that makes everything contemporaneous spell cynicism and the passing over of creativity as a value? The situation seems far more complex than that—allowing for, as it does, the emergence of new genres, recurrence to external sources, and, most importantly, authentic appropriation. Perhaps the notion of an authentic relation to the past, in which one draws upon the resources of that past to find oneself in the present, is the living alternative to cynicism in the postmodern moment of rock. Or perhaps, as Simmel noted in "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (Simmel, 1950), the overwhelming din of the past will finally obliterate people's ability to hear themselves.

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[14]Of course, the indexical bands are rather similar to reformed, like the Allman Brothers and Lynyrd Skynyrd, which bring together only a few of the original musicians.

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18

Courtney Love Does the Math (2000)

Courtney Love

As Napster grew and ultimately hit its peak, if you look at CD sales [they] were up as long as Napster was popular.
—Shawn Fanning, founder of Napster, 2002 (Coleman 2003, 182)

If music executives sold bottled water, they'd be calling for a ban on tapwater downloads.
—Victor Keegan (Keegan 2010)

In this speech to the Digital Hollywood online entertainment conference, given in New York on May 16, 2000, the musician Courtney Love surveys the record business from a performer's perspective, and makes an impassioned, and remarkably prescient, appeal for change. Love begins with a fictional account of a band that signs with a major record company and sees its first album go platinum, but makes not a dime from that album because of the way record label contracts are structured. Her numbers don't all add up; nevertheless, the basic picture is correct, and disturbing. Still more disturbing is the revelation that the record label will own the copyright to that fictional band's recording—like almost every other recording, but unlike books and other forms of art—and that it will own that copyright in perpetuity. (The law giving labels this right was enacted in 1999, but reversed the following year. See Garofalo 2011, 430.) Love calls these arrangements "piracy," cleverly turning on its head the industry's own term for those who download music without paying for it. In her opinion, the real pirates are the labels.

Love's speech was delivered during the heyday of Napster, whose success she attributed to the fact that it was a better music delivery system than the ones in place at the time. According to Love, the Internet was about to fundamentally change the music industry. At that time, artists needed major labels for one reason: distribution. The record companies controlled promotion and marketing: they bought radio play, created buzz, and got records into the big chain stores. In other words, they were gatekeepers. Love suggests that with the Internet, artists can connect directly with their audiences, eliminating these middlemen, and they can do so more efficiently, without artificial limits such as radio promotion dollars and bin space in stores.

Today I want to talk about piracy and music. What is piracy? Piracy is the act of stealing an artist's work without any intention of paying for it. I'm not talking about Napster-type software.

I'm talking about major label recording contracts.

I want to start with a story about rock bands and record companies, and do some recording-contract math:

This story is about a bidding-war band that gets a huge deal with a 20 percent royalty rate and a million-dollar advance. (No bidding-war band ever got a 20 percent royalty, but whatever.) This is my "funny" math based on some reality and I just want to qualify it by saying I'm positive it's better math than what Edgar Bronfman Jr. [the president and CEO of Seagram, which owns Polygram] would provide.

What happens to that million dollars?

They spend half a million to record their album. That leaves the band with $500,000. They pay $100,000 to their manager for 20 percent commission. They pay $25,000 each to their lawyer and business manager.

That leaves $350,000 for the four band members to split. After $170,000 in taxes, there's $180,000 left. That comes out to $45,000 per person.

That's $45,000 to live on for a year until the record gets released.

The record is a big hit and sells a million copies. (How a bidding-war band sells a million copies of its debut record is another rant entirely, but it's based on any basic civics-class knowledge that any of us have about cartels. Put simply, the antitrust laws in this country are basically a joke, protecting us just enough to not have to re-name our park service the Phillip Morris National Park Service.)

So, this band releases two singles and makes two videos. The two videos cost a million dollars to make and 50 percent of the video production costs are recouped out of the band's royalties.

The band gets $200,000 in tour support, which is 100 percent recoupable.

The record company spends $300,000 on independent radio promotion. You have to pay independent promotion to get your song on the radio; independent promotion is a system where the record companies use middlemen so they can pretend not to know that radio stations—the unified broadcast system—are getting paid to play their records.

All of those independent promotion costs are charged to the band.

Since the original million-dollar advance is also recoupable, the band owes $2 million to the record company.

If all of the million records are sold at full price with no discounts or record clubs, the band earns $2 million in royalties, since their 20 percent royalty works out to $2 a record.

Two million dollars in royalties minus $2 million in recoupable expenses equals ... zero!

How much does the record company make?

They grossed $11 million.

It costs $500,000 to manufacture the CDs and they advanced the band $1 million. Plus there were $1 million in video costs, $300,000 in radio promotion and $200,000 in tour support.

The company also paid $750,000 in music publishing royalties.

They spent $2.2 million on marketing. That's mostly retail advertising, but marketing also pays for those huge posters of Marilyn Manson in Times Square and the street scouts who drive around in vans handing out black Korn T-shirts and backwards baseball caps. Not to mention trips to Scores and cash for tips for all and sundry.

Add it up and the record company has spent about $4.4 million.

So their profit is $6.6 million; the band may as well be working at a 7-Eleven.

Of course, they had fun. Hearing yourself on the radio, selling records, getting new fans and being on TV is great, but now the band doesn't have enough money to pay the rent and nobody has any credit.

Worst of all, after all this, the band owns none of its work ... they can pay the mortgage forever but they'll never own the house. Like I said: Sharecropping. Our media says, "Boo hoo, poor pop stars, they had a nice ride. Fuck them for speaking up"; but I say this dialogue is imperative. And cynical media people, who are more fascinated with celebrity than most celebrities, need to reacquaint themselves with their value systems.

When you look at the legal line on a CD, it says copyright 1976 Atlantic Records or copyright 1996 RCA Records. When you look at a book, though, it'll say something like copyright 1999 Susan Faludi, or David Foster Wallace. Authors own their books and license them to publishers. When the contract runs out, writers gets their books back. But record companies own our copyrights forever.

The system's set up so almost nobody gets paid.

RECORDING INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA (RIAA)

Last November, a Congressional aide named Mitch Glazier, with the support of the RIAA, added a "technical amendment" to a bill that defined recorded music as "works for hire" under the 1978 Copyright Act.

He did this after all the hearings on the bill were over. By the time artists found out about the change, it was too late. The bill was on its way to the White House for the president's signature.

That subtle change in copyright law will add billions of dollars to record company bank accounts over the next few years—billions of dollars that rightfully should have been paid to artists. A "work for hire" is now owned in perpetuity by the record company.

Under the 1978 Copyright Act, artists could reclaim the copyrights on their work after 35 years. If you wrote and recorded "Everybody Hurts," you at least got it back as a family legacy after 35 years. But now, because of this corrupt little pisher, "Everybody Hurts" never gets returned to your family, and can now be sold to the highest bidder.

Over the years record companies have tried to put "work for hire" provisions in their contracts, and Mr. Glazier claims that the "work for hire" only "codified" a standard industry practice. But copyright laws didn't identify sound recordings as being

eligible to be called "works for hire," so those contracts didn't mean anything. Until now.

Writing and recording "Hey Jude" is now the same thing as writing an English textbook, writing standardized tests, translating a novel from one language to another or making a map. These are the types of things addressed in the "work for hire" act. And writing a standardized test is a work for hire. Not making a record.

So an assistant substantially altered a major law when he only had the authority to make spelling corrections. That's not what I learned about how government works in my high school civics class.

Three months later, the RIAA hired Mr. Glazier to become its top lobbyist at a salary that was obviously much greater than the one he had as the spelling corrector guy.

The RIAA tries to argue that this change was necessary because of a provision in the bill that musicians supported. That provision prevents anyone from registering a famous person's name as a Web address without that person's permission. That's great. I own my name, and should be able to do what I want with my name.

But the bill also created an exception that allows a company to take a person's name for a Web address if they create a work for hire. Which means a record company would be allowed to own your Web site when you record your "work for hire" album. Like I said: Sharecropping.

Although I've never met any one at a record company who "believed in the Internet," they've all been trying to cover their asses by securing everyone's digital rights. Not that they know what to do with them. Go to a major label-owned band site. Give me a dollar for every time you see an annoying "under construction" sign. I used to pester Geffen (when it was a label) to do a better job. I was totally ignored for two years, until I got my band name back. The Goo Goo Dolls are struggling to gain control of their domain name from Warner Bros., who claim they own the name because they set up a shitty promotional Web site for the band.

Orrin Hatch, songwriter and Republican senator from Utah, seems to be the only person in Washington with a progressive view of copyright law. One lobbyist says that there's no one in the House with a similar view and that "this would have never happened if Sonny Bono was still alive."

By the way, which bill do you think the recording industry used for this amendment?

The Record Company Redefinition Act? No. The Music Copyright Act? No. The Work for Hire Authorship Act? No.

How about the Satellite Home Viewing Act of 1999?

Stealing our copyright reversions in the dead of night while no one was looking, and with no hearings held, is piracy.

It's piracy when the RIAA lobbies to change the bankruptcy law to make it more difficult for musicians to declare bankruptcy. Some musicians have declared bankruptcy to free themselves from truly evil contracts. TLC declared bankruptcy after they received less than 2 percent of the $175 million earned by their CD sales. That was about 40 times less than the profit that was divided among their management, production and record companies.

Toni Braxton also declared bankruptcy in 1998. She sold $188 million worth of CDs, but she was broke because of a terrible recording contract that paid her less than 35 cents per album. Bankruptcy can be an artist's only defense against a truly horrible deal and the RIAA wants to take it away.

Artists want to believe that we can make lots of money if we're successful. But there are hundreds of stories about artists in their 60s and 70s who are broke because they never made a dime from their hit records. And real success is still a long shot for a new artist today. Of the 32,000 new releases each year, only 250 sell more than 10,000 copies. And less than 30 go platinum.

The four major record corporations fund the RIAA. These companies are rich and obviously well-represented. Recording artists and musicians don't really have the money to compete. The 273,000 working musicians in America make about $30,000 a year. Only 15 percent of American Federation of Musicians members work steadily in music.

But the music industry is a $40 billion-a-year business. One-third of that revenue comes from the United States. The annual sales of cassettes, CDs and video are larger than the gross national product of 80 countries. Americans have more CD players, radios and VCRs than we have bathtubs.

Story after story gets told about artists—some of them in their 60s and 70s, some of them authors of huge successful songs that we all enjoy, use and sing—living in total poverty, never having been paid anything. Not even having access to a union or to basic health care. Artists who have generated billions of dollars for an industry die broke and un-cared for.

And they're not actors or participators. They're the rightful owners, originators and performers of original compositions.

This is piracy.

TECHNOLOGY IS NOT PIRACY

This opinion is one I really haven't formed yet, so as I speak about Napster now, please understand that I'm not totally informed. I will be the first in line to file a class action suit to protect my copyrights if Napster or even the far more advanced Gnutella doesn't work with us to protect us. I'm on [Metallica drummer] Lars Ulrich's side, in other words, and I feel really badly for him that he doesn't know how to condense his case down to a sound-bite that sounds more reasonable than the one I saw today.

I also think Metallica is being given too much grief. It's anti-artist, for one thing. An artist speaks up and the artist gets squashed: Sharecropping. Don't get above your station, kid. It's not piracy when kids swap music over the Internet using Napster or Gnutella or Freenet or iMesh or beaming their CDs into a My.MP3.com or MyPlay.com music locker. It's piracy when those guys that run those companies make side deals with the cartel lawyers and label heads so that they can be "the labels' friend," and not the artists'.

Recording artists have essentially been giving their music away for free under the old system, so new technology that exposes our music to a larger audience can only be a good thing. Why aren't these companies working with us to create some peace?

There were a billion music downloads last year, but music sales are up. Where's the evidence that downloads hurt business? Downloads are creating more demand.

Why aren't record companies embracing this great opportunity? Why aren't they trying to talk to the kids passing compilations around to learn what they like? Why is the RIAA suing the companies that are stimulating this new demand? What's the point of going after people swapping cruddy-sounding MP3s? Cash! Cash they have no intention of passing onto us, the writers of their profits.

At this point the "record collector" geniuses who use Napster don't have the coolest most arcane selection anyway, unless you're into techno. Hardly any pre-1982 REM fans, no '60s punk, even the Alan Parsons Project was underrepresented when I tried to find some Napster buddies. For the most part, it was college boy rawk without a lot of imagination. Maybe that's the demographic that cares—and in that case, My Bloody Valentine and Bert Jansch aren't going to get screwed just yet. There's still time to negotiate.

DESTROYING TRADITIONAL ACCESS

Somewhere along the way, record companies figured out that it's a lot more profitable to control the distribution system than it is to nurture artists. And since the companies didn't have any real competition, artists had no other place to go. Record companies controlled the promotion and marketing; only they had the ability to get lots of radio play, and get records into all the big chain stores. That power put them above both the artists and the audience. They own the plantation.

Being the gatekeeper was the most profitable place to be, but now we're in a world half without gates. The Internet allows artists to communicate directly with their audiences; we don't have to depend solely on an inefficient system where the record company promotes our records to radio, press or retail and then sits back and hopes fans find out about our music.

Record companies don't understand the intimacy between artists and their fans. They put records on the radio and buy some advertising and hope for the best. Digital distribution gives everyone worldwide, instant access to music.

And filters are replacing gatekeepers. In a world where we can get anything we want, whenever we want it, how does a company create value? By filtering. In a world without friction, the only friction people value is editing. A filter is valuable when it understands the needs of both artists and the public. New companies should be conduits between musicians and their fans.

Right now the only way you can get music is by shelling out $17. In a world where music costs a nickel, an artist can "sell" 100 million copies instead of just a million.

The present system keeps artists from finding an audience because it has too many artificial scarcities: limited radio promotion, limited bin space in stores and a limited number of spots on the record company roster.

The digital world has no scarcities. There are countless ways to reach an audience. Radio is no longer the only place to hear a new song. And tiny mall record stores aren't the only place to buy a new CD.

I'M LEAVING

Now artists have options. We don't have to work with major labels anymore, because the digital economy is creating new ways to distribute and market music. And the free ones amongst us aren't going to. That means the slave class, which I represent, has to find ways to get out of our deals. This didn't really matter before, and that's why we all stayed.

I want my seven-year contract law California labor code case to mean something to other artists. (Universal Records sues me because I leave because my employment is up, but they say a recording contract is not a personal contract; because the recording industry—who, we have established, are excellent lobbyists, getting, as they did, a clerk to disallow Don Henley or Tom Petty the right to give their copyrights to their families—in California, in 1987, lobbied to pass an amendment that nullified recording contracts as personal contracts, sort of. Maybe. Kind of. A little bit. And again, in the dead of night, succeeded.)

That's why I'm willing to do it with a sword in my teeth. I expect I'll be ignored or ostracized following this lawsuit. I expect that the treatment you're seeing Lars Ulrich get now will quadruple for me. Cool. At least I'll serve a purpose. I'm an artist and a good artist, I think, but I'm not that artist that has to play all the time, and thus has to get fucked. Maybe my laziness and self-destructive streak will finally pay off and serve a community desperately in need of it. They can't torture me like they could Lucinda Williams.

YOU FUNNY DOT-COMMUNISTS. GET YOUR SHIT TOGETHER, YOU ANNOYING SUCKA VCS

I want to work with people who believe in music and art and passion. And I'm just the tip of the iceberg. I'm leaving the major label system and there are hundreds of artists who are going to follow me. There's an unbelievable opportunity for new companies that dare to get it right.

How can anyone defend the current system when it fails to deliver music to so many potential fans? That only expects of itself a "5 percent success rate" a year? The status quo gives us a boring culture. In a society of over 300 million people, only 30 new artists a year sell a million records. By any measure, that's a huge failure.

Maybe each fan will spend less money, but maybe each artist will have a better chance of making a living. Maybe our culture will get more interesting than the one currently owned by Time Warner. I'm not crazy. Ask yourself, are any of you somehow connected to Time Warner media? I think there are a lot of yeses to that and I'd have to say that in that case president McKinley truly failed to bust any trusts. Maybe we can remedy that now.

Artists will make that compromise if it means we can connect with hundreds of millions of fans instead of the hundreds of thousands that we have now. Especially if we lose all the crap that goes with success under the current system. I'm willing, right now, to leave half of these trappings—fuck it, all these trappings—at the door

to have a pure artist experience. They cosset us with trappings to shut us up. That way when we say "sharecropper!" you can point to my free suit and say "Shut up pop star."

Here, take my Prada pants. Fuck it. Let us do our real jobs. And those of us addicted to celebrity because we have nothing else to give will fade away. And those of us addicted to celebrity because it was there will find a better, purer way to live.

Since I've basically been giving my music away for free under the old system, I'm not afraid of wireless, MP3 files or any of the other threats to my copyrights. Anything that makes my music more available to more people is great. MP3 files sound cruddy, but a well-made album sounds great. And I don't care what anyone says about digital recordings. At this point they are good for dance music, but try listening to a warm guitar tone on them. They suck for what I do.

Record companies are terrified of anything that challenges their control of distribution. This is the business that insisted that CDs be sold in incredibly wasteful 6-by-12 inch long boxes just because no one thought you could change the bins in a record store.

Let's not call the major labels "labels." Let's call them by their real names: They are the distributors. They're the only distributors and they exist because of scarcity. Artists pay 95 percent of whatever we make to gatekeepers because we used to need gatekeepers to get our music heard. Because they have a system, and when they decide to spend enough money—all of it recoupable, all of it owed by me—they can occasionally shove things through this system, depending on a lot of arbitrary factors.

The corporate filtering system, which is the system that brought you (in my humble opinion) a piece of crap like "Mambo No. 5" and didn't let you hear the brilliant Cat Power record or the amazing new Sleater Kinney record, obviously doesn't have good taste anyway. But we've never paid major label/distributors for their good taste. They've never been like Yahoo and provided a filter service.

There were a lot of factors that made a distributor decide to push a recording through the system:

How powerful is management? Who owes whom a favor? What independent promoter's cousin is the drummer? What part of the fiscal year is the company putting out the record? Is the royalty rate for the artist so obscenely bad that it's almost 100 percent profit instead of just 95 percent so that if the record sells, it's literally a steal? How much bin space is left over this year? Was the record already a hit in Europe so that there's corporate pressure to make it work? Will the band screw up its live career to play free shows for radio stations? Does the artist's song sound enough like someone else that radio stations will play it because it fits the sound of the month? Did the artist get the song on a film soundtrack so that the movie studio will pay for the video?

These factors affect the decisions that go into the system. Not public taste. All these things are becoming eradicated now. They are gone or on their way out. We don't need the gatekeepers any more. We just don't need them.

And if they aren't going to do for me what I can do for myself with my 19-year-old Webmistress on my own Web site, then they need to get the hell out of my way

[I will] allow millions of people to get my music for nothing if they want and hopefully they'll be kind enough to leave a tip if they like it.

I still need the old stuff. I still need a producer in the creation of a recording, I still need to get on the radio (which costs a lot of money), I still need bin space for hardware CDs, I still need to provide an opportunity for people without computers to buy the hardware that I make. I still need a lot of this stuff, but I can get these things from a joint venture with a company that serves as a conduit and knows its place. Serving the artist and serving the public: That's its place.

EQUITY FOR ARTISTS

A new company that gives artists true equity in their work can take over the world, kick ass and make a lot of money. We're inspired by how people get paid in the new economy. Many visual artists and software and hardware designers have real ownership of their work.

I have a 14-year-old niece. She used to want to be a rock star. Before that she wanted to be an actress. As of six months ago, what do you think she wants to be when she grows up? What's the glamorous, emancipating career of choice? Of course, she wants to be a Web designer. It's such a glamorous business!

When you people do business with artists, you have to take a different view of things. We want to be treated with the respect that now goes to Web designers. We're not Dockers-wearing Intel workers from Portland who know how to "manage our stress." We don't understand or want to understand corporate culture.

I feel this obscene gold rush greedgreedgreed vibe that bothers me a lot when I talk to dot-com people about all this. You guys can't hustle artists that well. At least slick A&R guys know the buzzwords. Don't try to compete with them. I just laugh at you when you do! Maybe you could a year ago when anything dot-com sounded smarter than the rest of us, but the scam has been uncovered.

The celebrity-for-sale business is about to crash, I hope, and the idea of a sucker VC [venture capitalist] gifting some company with four floors just because they can "do" "chats" with "Christina" once or twice is ridiculous. I did a chat today, twice. Big damn deal. 200 bucks for the software and some elbow grease and a good back-end coder. Wow. That's not worth 150 million bucks.

... I mean, yeah, sure it is if you'd like to give it to me.

TIPPING/MUSIC AS SERVICE

I know my place. I'm a waiter. I'm in the service industry.

I live on tips. Occasionally, I'm going to get stiffed, but that's OK. If I work hard and I'm doing good work, I believe that the people who enjoy it are going to want to come directly to me and get my music because it sounds better, since it's mastered and packaged by me personally. I'm providing an honest, real experience. Period.

When people buy the bootleg T-shirt in the concert parking lot and not the more expensive T-shirt inside the venue, it isn't to save money. The T-shirt in the parking

lot is cheap and badly made, but it's easier to buy. The bootleggers have a better distribution system. There's no waiting in line and it only takes two minutes to buy one.

I know that if I can provide my own T-shirt that I designed, that I made, and provide it as quickly or quicker than the bootleggers, people who've enjoyed the experience I've provided will be happy to shell out a little more money to cover my costs. Especially if they understand this context, and aren't being shoveled a load of shit about "uppity" artists.

It's exactly the same with recorded music. The real thing to fear from Napster is its simple and excellent distribution system. No one really prefers a cruddy-sounding Napster MP3 file to the real thing. But it's really easy to get an MP3 file; and in the middle of Kansas you may never see my record because major distribution is really bad if your record's not in the charts this week, and even then it takes a couple of weeks to restock the one copy they usually keep on hand.

I also know how many times I have heard a song on the radio that I loved only to buy the record and have the album be a piece of crap. If you're afraid of your own filler then I bet you're afraid of Napster. I'm afraid of Napster because I think the major label cartel will get to them before I do.

I've made three records. I like them all. I haven't made filler and they're all committed pieces of work. I'm not scared of you previewing my record. If you like it enough to have it be a part of your life, I know you'll come to me to get it, as long as I show you how to get to me, and as long as you know that it's out.

Most people don't go into restaurants and stiff waiters, but record labels represent the restaurant that forces the waiters to live on, and sometimes pool, their tips. And they even fight for a bit of their tips.

Music is a service to its consumers, not a product. I live on tips. Giving music away for free is what artists have been doing naturally all their lives.

NEW MODELS

Record companies stand between artists and their fans. We signed terrible deals with them because they controlled our access to the public.

But in a world of total connectivity, record companies lose that control. With unlimited bin space and intelligent search engines, fans will have no trouble finding the music they know they want. They have to know they want it, and that needs to be a marketing business that takes a fee.

If a record company has a reason to exist, it has to bring an artist's music to more fans and it has to deliver more and better music to the audience. You bring me a bigger audience or a better relationship with my audience or get the fuck out of my way. Next time I release a record, I'll be able to go directly to my fans and let them hear it before anyone else.

We'll still have to use radio and traditional CD distribution. Record stores aren't going away any time soon and radio is still the most important part of record promotion.

Major labels are freaking out because they have no control in this new world. Artists can sell CDs directly to fans. We can make direct deals with thousands of other Web sites and promote our music to millions of people that old record companies never touch.

We're about to have lots of new ways to sell our music: downloads, hardware bundles, memory sticks, live Webcasts, and lots of other things that aren't even invented yet.

CONTENT PROVIDERS

But there's something you guys have to figure out.

Here's my open letter to Steve Case [Chairman, AOL/Times Warner]:

Avatars don't talk back!!! But what are you going to do with real live artists?

Artists aren't like you. We go through a creative process that's demented and crazy. There's a lot of soul-searching and turning ourselves inside-out and all kinds of gross stuff that ends up on "Behind the Music."

A lot of people who haven't been around artists very much get really weird when they sit down to lunch with us. So I want to give you some advice: Learn to speak our language. Talk about songs and melody and hooks and art and beauty and soul. Not sleazy record-guy crap, where you're in a cashmere sweater murmuring that the perfect deal really *is* perfect, Courtney. Yuck. Honestly hire honestly committed people. We're in a "new economy," right? You can afford to do that.

But don't talk to me about "content."

I get really freaked out when I meet someone and they start telling me that I should record 34 songs in the next six months so that we have enough content for my site. Defining artistic expression as content is anathema to me.

What the hell is content? Nobody buys content. Real people pay money for music because it means something to them. A great song is not just something to take up space on a Web site next to stock market quotes and baseball scores.

DEN [Digital Entertainment Network] tried to build a site with artist-free content and I'm not sorry to see it fail. The DEN shows look like art if you're not paying attention, but they forgot to hire anyone to be creative. So they ended up with a lot of content nobody wants to see because they thought they could avoid dealing with defiant and moody personalities. Because they were arrogant. And because they were conformists. Artists have to deal with business people and business people have to deal with artists. We hate each other. Let's create companies of mediators.

Every single artist who makes records believes and hopes that they give you something that will transform your life. If you're really just interested in data mining or selling banner ads, stick with those "artists" willing to call themselves content providers.

I don't know if an artist can last by meeting the current public taste, the taste from the last quarterly report. I don't think you can last by following demographics and carefully meeting expectations. I don't know many lasting works of art that are condescending or deliberately stupid or were created as content.

Don't tell me I'm a brand. I'm famous and people recognize me, but I can't look in the mirror and see my brand identity.

Keep talking about brands and you know what you'll get? Bad clothes. Bad hair. Bad books. Bad movies. And bad records. And bankrupt businesses. Rides that were fun for a year with no employee loyalty but everyone got rich fucking you. Who wants that? The answer is purity. We can afford it. Let's go find it again while we can.

I also feel filthy trying to call my music a product. It's not a thing that I test market like toothpaste or a new car. Music is personal and mysterious.

Being a "content provider" is prostitution work that devalues our art and doesn't satisfy our spirits. Artistic expression has to be provocative. The problem with artists and the Internet: Once their art is reduced to content, they may never have the opportunity to retrieve their souls.

When you form your business for creative people, with creative people, come at us with some thought. Everybody's process is different. And remember that it's art. We're not craftspeople.

SPONSORSHIPS

I don't know what a good sponsorship would be for me or for other artists I respect. People bring up sponsorships a lot as a way for artists to get our music paid for upfront and for us to earn a fee. I've dealt with large corporations for long enough to know that any alliance where I'm an owned service is going to be doomed.

When I agreed to allow a large cola company to promote a live show, I couldn't have been more miserable. They screwed up every single thing imaginable. The venue was empty but sold out. There were thousands of people outside who wanted to be there, trying to get tickets. And there were the empty seats the company had purchased for a lump sum and failed to market because they were clueless about music.

It was really dumb. You had to buy the cola. You had to dial a number. You had to press a bunch of buttons. You had to do all this crap that nobody wanted to do. Why not just bring a can to the door?

On top of all this, I felt embarrassed to be an advertising agent for a product that I'd never let my daughter use. Plus they were a condescending bunch of little guys. They treated me like I was an ungrateful little bitch who should be groveling for the experience to play for their damn soda.

I ended up playing without my shirt on and ordering a six-pack of the rival cola onstage. Also lots of unwholesome cursing and nudity occurred. This way I knew that no matter how tempting the cash was, they'd never do business with me again.

If you want some little obedient slave content provider, then fine. But I think most musicians don't want to be responsible for your clean-cut, wholesome, all-American, sugar corrosive cancer-causing, all white people, no women allowed sodapop images.

Nor, on the converse, do we want to be responsible for your vice-inducing, liver-rotting, child-labor-law-violating, all white people, no-women-allowed booze images.

So as a defiant moody artist worth my salt, I've got to think of something else. Tampax, maybe.

MONEY

As a user, I love Napster. It carries some risk. I hear idealistic business people talk about how people that are musicians would be musicians no matter what and that we're already doing it for free, so what about copyright?

Please. It's incredibly easy not to be a musician. It's always a struggle and a dangerous career choice. We are motivated by passion and by money.

That's not a dirty little secret. It's a fact. Take away the incentive for major or minor financial reward and you dilute the pool of musicians. I am not saying that only pure artists will survive. Like a few of the more utopian people who discuss this, I don't want just pure artists to survive.

Where would we all be without the trash? We need the trash to cover up our national depression. The utopians also say that because in their minds "pure" artists are all Ani DiFranco and don't demand a lot of money. Why are the utopians all entertainment lawyers and major label workers anyway? I demand a lot of money if I do a big huge worthwhile job and millions of people like it, don't kid yourself. In economic terms, you've got an industry that's loathsome and outmoded, but when it works it creates some incentive and some efficiency even though absolutely no one gets paid.

We suffer as a society and a culture when we don't pay the true value of goods and services delivered. We create a lack of production. Less good music is recorded if we remove the incentive to create it.

Music is intellectual property with full cash and opportunity costs required to create, polish and record a finished product. If I invest money and time into my business, I should be reasonably protected from the theft of my goods and services. When the judgment came against MP3.com, the RIAA sought damages of $150,000 for each major-label-"owned" musical track in MP3's database. Multiply by 80,000 CDs, and MP3.com could owe the gatekeepers $120 billion.

But what about the Plimsouls? Why can't MP3.com pay each artist a fixed amount based on the number of their downloads? Why on earth should MP3.com pay $120 billion to four distribution companies, who in most cases won't have to pay a nickel to the artists whose copyrights they've stolen through their system of organized theft?

It's a ridiculous judgment. I believe if evidence had been entered that ultimately it's just shuffling big cash around two or three corporations, I can only pray that the judge in the MP3.com case would have seen the RIAA's case for the joke that it was.

I'd rather work out a deal with MP3.com myself, and force them to be artist-friendly, instead of being laughed at and having my money hidden by a major label as they sell my records out the back door, behind everyone's back.

How dare they behave in such a horrified manner in regards to copyright law when their entire industry is based on piracy? When Mister Label Head Guy, whom

my lawyer yelled at me not to name, got caught last year selling millions of "cleans" out the back door. "Cleans" being the records that aren't for marketing but are to be sold. Who the fuck is this guy? He wants to save a little cash so he fucks the artist and goes home? Do they fire him? Does Chuck Phillips of the LA Times say anything? No way! This guy's a source! He throws awesome dinner parties! Why fuck with the status quo? Let's pick on Lars Ulrich instead because he brought up an interesting point!

CONCLUSION

I'm looking for people to help connect me to more fans, because I believe fans will leave a tip based on the enjoyment and service I provide. I'm not scared of them getting a preview. It really is going to be a global village where a billion people have access to one artist and a billion people can leave a tip if they want to.

It's a radical democratization. Every artist has access to every fan and every fan has access to every artist, and the people who direct fans to those artists. People that give advice and technical value are the people we need. People crowding the distribution pipe and trying to ignore fans and artists have no value. This is a perfect system.

If you're going to start a company that deals with musicians, please do it because you like music. Offer some control and equity to the artists and try to give us some creative guidance. If music and art and passion are important to you, there are hundreds of artists who are ready to rewrite the rules.

In the last few years, business pulled our culture away from the idea that music is important and emotional and sacred. But new technology has brought a real opportunity for change; we can break down the old system and give musicians real freedom and choice.

A great writer named Neal Stephenson said that America does four things better than any other country in the world: rock music, movies, software and high-speed pizza delivery. All of these are sacred American art forms. Let's return to our purity and our idealism while we have this shot.

Warren Beatty once said: "The greatest gift God gives us is to enjoy the sound of our own voice. And the second greatest gift is to get somebody to listen to it."

And for that, I humbly thank you.

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Will.I.Am and the Science of Global Pop Domination (2010)

Chris Norris

I consider us a brand ... Here's our demographic. Here's the reach. Here's the potential. Here's how the consumer will benefit from the collaboration [between a corporation and the Black Eyed Peas].

—Will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas (Jurgensen 2010)

Immediately, I saw that we were a rock 'n' roll brand, not just a rock 'n' roll band. See, the rest of the guys with guitars around their neck want credibility. I don't want credibility. That means nothing. Remember, none of these guys learned to play their instruments properly. They all did it by ear, the lazy man's out. So a big word like credibility coming out of a guy who's unqualified to say anything other than 'Do you want fries with that?' is delusional.

—Gene Simmons of Kiss (Rabin 2002, 15)

On April 29, 2010 the cover story in *Rolling Stone* was "40 Reasons To Get Excited About Music." Reason number one? The Black Eyed Peas, one of the most popular groups in the world at the time. Three of the songs from their 2009 album *The E.N.D.* ("I Gotta Feeling," "Boom Boom Pow," "Imma Be") hit no. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100; a fourth ("Rock That Body") reached the top 10. In this essay Chris Norris, music critic, describes the Peas' leader Will.i.am's "global campaign to build the world's most ubiquitous music brand." Note the use of the word *brand*, not *band*. As John Jurgensen recently noted (in an article titled "The Most Corporate Band in America"), the Peas are not about selling records, but, rather, selling "corporate connections." (Jurgensen 2010) The group has made ads for or been sponsored by Apple, Pepsi, Target, Verizon, Coors, Levis, Honda, Best Buy and others. Their 2010 tour was sponsored by Bacardi Rum and BlackBerry, corporations the Peas are said to have chosen because they "fit their lifestyle." (Concepcion 2010, 27).

Norris's essay outlines Will.i.am's plan for global domination in point form: *Control the Cloud* (that is, stay at the forefront of technology); *Whoever cracks dance music wins* (the future is EDM, Electronic Dance Music); *Adapt every tune* (songs must have multiple uses); *Sell your audience* (to

advertisers and sponsors; see the quote above); *Always listen to the girls* (or, better, to 14-year-olds); and *The whole song should be a chorus.*

The last point is one of particular musical interest. Will.i.am suggests that popular music today follows a trajectory similar to that of consumer electronics. Electronics become ever smaller and more packed with information; songs, too, become more concentrated: "every chorus is getting shorter and shorter." The implication is that one day songs will consist of nothing but chorus. The Peas' no. 1 hit "Boom Boom Pow," according to Will.i.am, has one note and says "boom" 168 times. To many, that might seem simple, but the composer suggests that it is actually complex, and this is why the song works all over the planet.

The Black Eyed Peas' approach to music and business suggests one possible future for popular music. As Norris notes, "To Will.i.am, songs aren't discrete works of art but multi-use applications—hit singles, ad jingles, film trailers—all serving a purpose larger than music consumption."

Many years ago, a great American shared a dream that one day our nation's children might sit at the table of brotherhood, that justice and freedom might ring through the land, and that a 35-year-old black man in leather pants and glitter boots might lead 73,000 Texans as they sing in one voice: "Whatcha gonna do with all that junk—all that junk inside your trunk?"

That day is here at Houston's Reliant Park, which pulses with the lights, sounds and smells of the 78th annual Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, concert site for giants from Elvis Presley to Miley Cyrus. Tonight's headliners, the Black Eyed Peas, appear after the six-year-old sheep riders of "Mutton Bustin'." Midway through their first smash hit, 2005's "My Humps," singer Fergie struts the stage catwalk in a skintight metallic suit like the sleek android of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, only with hair and the Song's titular "humps." "I drive these brothers crazy," she raps as Peas Apl.de.ap and Taboo strike street-ogler poses. "I do it on the daily."

When the chant returns, eight giant video screens flash the broad, beard-fringed and enigmatic grin of the song's author and master Pea, Will.i.am, who pauses to thank the group's followers: "Houston, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts to the depths of our souls. In 2005, we put out a record called *Monkey Business,*" he says, then names two outlets that drove it to 10 million sales: "Tower Records and Virgin. They don't exist anymore." The crowd roars. "Last year, we released our latest record and it's because of you it sold—"

"I wanna say something!" Fergie says, cutting in. "Hi, Mom and Dad!"

The nation's largest rodeo is merely one of the last dominoes to fall in Will.i.am's global campaign to build the world's most ubiquitous music brand. In the 15 years since forming the Peas, Will.i.am has toured the world a dozen times, sold 27million albums and done ads for Apple, Pepsi, Target, Verizon and the president of the United States. "He's a real force," says Bono, who enlisted Will.i.am to work on U2's 2009 album, *No Line on the Horizon.* "He's got the biggest songs on Earth right now, he's the most wonderful spirit to be around, and he's interested in the macro as well as the micro."

In fact, his view is so macro he's unlike virtually any musician that preceded him. To Will.i.am, songs aren't discrete works of art but multi-use applications—hit singles, ad jingles, film trailers—all serving a purpose larger than music consumption. Creatively, he draws no distinction between writing rhymes and business plans, rocking arenas and Power Point, producing albums and media platforms, all these falling under a cleareyed mission to unite the largest possible audience over the broadest range imaginable. It's a mission he communicates with a combination of Pentecostal zeal and Silicon Valley jargon, suggesting a hybrid of Stevie Wonder and Steve Jobs. In conversation, he has a tendency to drop koanlike pronouncements that, like his songs, often go from moronic to brilliant with repeated listening. A journey through the mind of Will.i.am follows a twisty trail, but if you pay close attention certain themes emerge....

MAKE ART WORK IN SQUARES

Backstage in Houston, Will.i.am has changed out of his costume into street clothes: a black Jedi-ish shawl-collared shirt, punkish low-slung trousers and a shoulder satchel made of recycled soda flip tops. While dancers, managers and band-mates chatter behind him, Will.i.am starts breaking music and commerce down to subatomic particles. "It's about frequency, currency," he says. "The words 'current' and 'frequent'-what do they mean? Time. If currency also means something you can spend, that means it's fluid—a current. If I'm currently doing something and keep doing it, I'm doing it *frequently.* And if I change my frequency to being positive, I attract *currency.*"

Will.i.am speaks quickly, stands a bit too close, and keeps his wide-set eyes fixed on yours like a boxer's cornerman psyching his fighter up. "Every time music was put out on circles, it was successful," he says. "When records came out, you had 45s, then 33s, then 12-inches—all multiples of three, all circles. As soon as tape decks came out and there were 8-tracks—square. Didn't work. A cassette is a rectangle—didn't work. CD came out—through the roof. The iPods and laptops put music on rectangles—doesn't work, can't monetize it. You have to figure out how to make art work in squares."

After taking a call from. Interscope chairman Jimmy Iovine, Will.i.am returns and gives a quick summary of their conversation. "'Hey, Will, it's Jimmy'," he says in Iovine's hoarse Brooklynese. "'Blah-de-*blah*, congratulations, blah-de-*blah*, through the roof, blah-de-*blah*, game-changing, blah-de-*blah*, one billion.'" "'One billion?'" asks Will.i.am. "'One billion,'" says Iovine. "'Yes,'" says Will.i.am. "'OK,'" says Iovine, "'Bye.'"

Will could easily be a stand-up comedian, with his uproarious, infectious laugh and spot-on impersonations of everyone from ad execs to Aussie ravers to Michael Jackson, all recent members of a calling circle that now includes Bono, Quincy Jones. Oprah, Hugh Jackman, Diddy, a founder of YouTube, Prince, the CEO of BlackBerry and—as a sheer mathematical certainty—Kevin Bacon. Unlike most fans, Will.i.am learned of Jackson's death in Los Angeles not from CNN but from 20 text messages he received while DJ'ing in Paris, whose conflicting information he sorted out with updates and eventual confirmation in a phone call with Quincy Jones—who was in Moscow.

CONTROL THE CLOUD

While Will.i.am's producing credits read like a playlist on shuffle—Nas, Sergio Mendes, Celine Dion, the Rolling Stones—his influence now stretches into the boardrooms of BlackBerry, YouTube and other companies that consider the MC a tech visionary. "He'll sit with Evan Williams at Twitter or Chad Hurley at YouTube and give them ideas for their business," says legendary Silicon Valley venture capitalist Ron Conway, whose start-up investments have included Google, PayPal and—most recently—Will's own social-media platform, Dipdive, which is kind of like a cross between Facebook and Hulu (but as of now seems mostly to exist to promote the Peas). "Corporations use words like 'cloud computing' and 'data cloud,'" Will says. "This thing we all communicate with is in the clouds, on a tiny bandwidth that very few people control."

Will intends to be one of them. With Dipdive, he plans to build an entire distribution system—from singer's voice to user's earbud. Selecting artists from various fields on a "dopeness" criteria, Will.i.am says Dipdive's filtered, curated social-media platform will unite millions of "partners" and play a role somewhere between ad agency, record label, radio and TV network. "That's coming in 2013," says Will.i.am. "The biggest artist is going to do it all: play, produce, remix and distribute music. The next Jimi Hendrix or John Coltrane will play the whole system. He's coming by 2013."

WHOEVER CRACKS DANCE MUSIC WINS

On paper, the Black Eyed Peas sound like the worst band you can imagine: one brainy leader, one break dancer/martial artist, one Filipino MC who learned English at age 14 and one rock chick/ex-meth addict. Like a true visionary, Will flipped these deficits into a global-domination scheme. "I go to Brazil, they think I'm Brazilian," he says. "I go to Panama, they think I'm Panamanian, because I speak Spanish." In Sweden? "They like Fergie. We'll put her in front. South America? Taboo, you get in the front, be Latin! Southeast Asia? Apl, go! Speak Filipino!"

In 2008, Will.i.am found the final key to claiming a global audience. He was in Australia shooting a co-starring role as the teleporting mutant John Wraith in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* when he had one of those everything-you-know-is-wrong insights: After asking some friends to bring him to a hip-hop club, he was told, "'Ip-'op's daid, mate. Electrow." He returned to the States possessed. "I came back hollering, 'Dance music, Jimmy [Io-vine], dance music! Whoever cracks dance music wins.'"

Will approached *The E.N.D.* less as an album than as a DJ set—and even hired the French superstar DJ David Guetta himself to produce the second single, "I Gotta Feeling." "The only reason I see to make an album is to occupy an hour with a mood," Will says. "If I'm a doctor and you say, 'I just want to dance,' I prescribe this." Hence, 15 midtempo, upbeat tracks, light on gray matter and heavy on good vibes. Of critics who impugn their simplicity, the Peas say that such people aren't using *The E.N.D.* as directed: "It's meant as escapism," says Fergie. "We specifically wanted people to forget about their money problems, losing their jobs, their homes."

ADAPT EVERY TUNE TO A SPECIFIC USE

To Will.i.am, songs are fluid, free-floating entities that function in various frequencies. In some of those frequencies—like frequently played ads—that function tends to bring currency. Lots of it. For nearly a decade, the Peas have been perfecting a music style that works seamlessly in commercials. In 2003, they rereleased the modestly performing "Let's Get Retarded" as the NBA theme, "Let's Get It Started." That same year, the band broke in America, largely thanks to Apple's use of "Hey Mama" in an iPod commercial. In 2009, the group debuted "I Gotta Feeling" months before its official release as the theme song to CBS's summer prime-time lineup—and that was just the beginning. The Peas performed outside Oprah's studios, then went on to play *Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve*, Super Bowl weekend, the Grammys and a live set in Times Square shot by James Cameron's company, to be released as a 3-D concert film. By 2010, the Earth was Planet Pea.

In a way, this was a macro version of what Will does everywhere he goes. "If we go to a party, I'll just be chilling in the corner, absorbing everything," says Apl.de.ap. "I'll look over and see Will talking with Prince." Two years ago, Prince invited Will.i.am to sit in with him at a show in Las Vegas. Will asked if he could invite a singer-songwriter he was working with—Michael Jackson, who Will says had a beef with Prince running back to a 1983 misunderstanding at a James Brown concert. Jackson showed. "I told Quincy, and he was like, 'I can't believe you got Mike to go there,'" says Will.i.am. "Prince and Michael Jackson? Come on, dude. That's connecting worlds."

Of course, connecting worlds can do wonders for the connector. In a 2009 Pepsi commercial, Will.i.am rapped over Bob Dylan's "Forever Young" while a digital montage branded him the successor to rock's greatest songwriter. A year earlier, he took a chunk of Barack Obama's stump speech, added a guitar part played by actor Bryan Greenberg, tapped a friends list that included Scarlett Johansson and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and released a viedo—watched 26 million times—that helped sweep a one-term black senator into the White House. "Yes We Can" didn't exactly hurt Will.i.am's profile either, making him the songwriter of America 2.0.

SELL YOUR MUSIC TO THE AUDIENCE, THEN SELL YOUR AUDIENCE

Will's unorthodox views on blending art and commerce—a bit extreme even for hip-hop—stem from an outsider perspective he's had since childhood. He grew up in the mostly Mexican projects of East L.A. and was bused daily to a magnet school in prosperous Pacific Palisades. To survive, he had to learn how to be a chameleon. "Being a black guy in an all-Mexican neighborhood who went to an all-white school—I don't give a fuck what anybody says," says Will. "There's a reason why I am who I am, that upbringing and conditioning. 'Why you dressed like that, *ese*?' he says, channeling a cholo neighbor. "Then I'd go to school with *Brett* and *Brent*," he says, going white boy. "'Hey, William.' Today, people are like, 'Where you from, London?'" says Will. "'No. That's an East L.A.-and-white-boy accent.'"

Initially a break dancer, Will had switched to MC'ing by high school and formed the De La Soul-inspired hip-hop group Atban Klann with fellow breakers-turned-MCs Apl.de.ap and Taboo. Will scored his first record deal in 1992 by winning a Hollywood freestyle battle against Twista, the Chicago MC who would light up his and Kanye West's "Slow Jamz" and who once claimed the Guinness World Record for speed. Asked how he slew such a dragon, Will.i.am says, "My thing was, I do what you're doing better than you."

By pursuing just that strategy, Will.i.am built a Black Eyed Peas that delivers: pumping excitement, giddy spectacle and a message of peace, love and pan-inoffensiveness. As it happens, those are the exact qualities ad agencies seek for selling just about anything—a fact that has blurred the boundaries between song and ad as the Peas' fame has continued to rise. *The E.N.D.'s* rock song "Now Generation," for instance, doesn't just bear a close titular resemblance to a Pepsi jingle, it sounds like one: a defiant declaration of young consumers united by a taste for the new. The fact that Will is also a Pepsi-sponsored artist who wrote a 2007 song called "More" specifically for a Pepsi ad makes things even more nebulous. Do the Peas make songs? Or jingles?

To Will, the very question is so 20th century. "Since the 1960s, it's been a taboo for bands to fuck with brands, like they should only sell music," he says. "But music was never the product. When you played in a bar, music drew people in to sell a ticket and drinks. The first music industry was publishing, because they sold sheet music." Beethoven? Verdi? "They were selling aggregation, the ability to bring people to a concert hall."

REAL GANGSTAS DON'T RAP

Until he was 14, smart, music-obsessed William James Adams Jr. wore a Mom-enforced dress code of suits and an Afro. When this was repealed in ninth grade, he chose the flat-topped style he wears today, the Gumby, which perfectly complemented the harem-pants ensemble he wore to his first live concert: a 1989 USC performance by a man he still calls an inspiration. "People are going to shit on me for saying this, but it's the fucking truth," says Will.i.am. "MC Hammer opened the door for all of us. Without Hammer there wouldn't be Puffy, there wouldn't be me."

But he owes just as much to the founders of gangsta rap. Atban Klann's first record deal was with Ruthless, founded by N.W.A's Eazy-E. While Eazy's 1995 death from AIDS derailed the project, the gangsta rapper confirmed something Will already knew. "I'm from the fucking projects, and the gangsters, the real niggas—they're out doing shit," he says. "They're out calling shots, ain't got time to rhyme. It's the little soldiers that want to be like that dude: Those are the gangster rappers."

Despite first appearing on an Eazy-E single called "Merry Mothafuckin' Xmas," Will says his progressive, pan-racial vision was in place from the beginning: "On our first underground record, 'Joints and Jam,' we said, 'We're about mass appeal, no segregation/Got black to Asian and Caucasian....' It was part of the plan. My first album was *Behind the Front*. Which meant, 'This is what I truly am, behind the front.'"

ALWAYS LISTEN TO THE GIRLS

Shortly after entering a Black Eyed Peas afterparty at a velvet-rope Houston club—where Jay-Z's "Empire State of Mind" is followed by a string of Black Eyed Peas songs—Will.i.am pronounces the vibe wack, lets a few drunks blast him with digital-camera flashes, and ducks out into a waiting car. He's headed to an after-after-party where he'll DJ what he promises will be "some real underground shit." On the ride to the spot, Will asks the club's promoter what kind of music the crowd likes. "Oh, they'll like whatever you play-Top 40, hip-hop, dance," says the young white dude, whose girlfriend cuts him off, saying, "Electro."

"Always listen to the girls," Will.i.am says later, a theorem with the corollary "Hook the 14-year-old fan." "Why? Because I fell in love with music when I was 14, and you couldn't tell me anything—I thought I knew what was going on. I built my personality off of music listened to at 14."

Minutes later, amid the flashing lights and jackhammering beats, Will sets up a MacBook and a rectangular interface with illuminated knobs and buttons. As the crowd screams, he pulls on a pair of orange headphones and picks up a mike. "Yo - *Houuuuuuuston*," he calls out, triggering a dramatic orchestral synth chord from a David Guetta record. "Y'all ready to rock?"

With a hand-chopping flourish, Will kicks in a pounding techno beat, then sets into a live performance of rapping, chanting and cross-fading between four channels on a system he calls "iTunes on steroids." His shades and fade suggest Wesley Snipes' vampire hunter Blade, as he weaves his own beats with "remixes of other people's remixes of classic records," drawing from a massive hard drive of tunes.

"On to the next, on to the next, on to the next," he chants, as he segues from Basement Jaxx's 2001 "Where's Your Head At" into the opening of Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and into Pat Benatar's "Hit Me With Your Best Shot," whose chorus he merges into that of the 2009 hit "Shots" by the electro group LMFAO, whose MCs Redfoo and Sky Blu he has known since high school and whose father and grandfather, respectively, is Motown founder Berry Gordy. "If you're a DJ at the top of your game, you got 80,000 people in the middle of Los Angeles in the hood," says Will. "Eighty thousand cats. No Rihannas, no fuckin' Beyoncés. DJs."

THE WHOLE SONG SHOULD BE A CHORUS

As a songwriter, Will.i.am ascribes to Moore's Law, the software principle whereby increasingly smaller devices hold increasingly more information. "Right now, every chorus is getting shorter and shorter," he says. "Soon we'll be listening to blips. Nowadays, the more complex things sound, when you break them down, all the veils and sheets are just disguises." On the other hand, an apparently simple song, like "Boom Boom Pow," is actually downright avant-garde. "It has one note," says Will.i.am. "It says 'boom' 168 times. The structure has three beats in one song. It's not lyrics—it's audio patterns, structure, architecture. Lots of people say, 'Black Eyed

Peas shit is simple,' and I'll be like, 'No, fool, it's the most complex shit you even could fathom, that's the reason it works everywhere around the planet.'"

Will.i.am can apply this kind of thinking to any tune. So how would he rewrite the national anthem? He suggests a simple approach. "There wouldn't be no verse and chorus," he says. "The whole song should be a chorus. It should be about a minute and have highs and lows able to be sung by males and females in all keys." The mix to shoot for, he says, is "We Are the World," for its ingenious simplicity, and the Dolly Parton-penned Whitney Houston hit "I Will Always Love You," which ruled the charts for 14 weeks—a feat matched by the Peas' "I Gotta Feeling." The new anthem, says Will, "should tell our stories, say we've done bad things, that we've suffered and grown, and we care about the future. The Whitney Houston song has all that—humility and passion and pain and joy and love all at the same time. You take those two approaches and marry them—that's power. That's how America should talk to the world."

GO STRAIGHT TO JOY

In the cold reality of the marketplace, networking, promotion and synergy do a fine job of making the mediocre popular every day. The rarer successes, those that truly win hearts and minds, work an alchemy even Will.i.am hasn't quite wired, one he discusses without mentioning brands, audio patterns or BPMs. "What is the easiest emotion to act?" he asks. "Anger. What is the hardest? Joy. That's 'cause joy is complex. It's somber, sad, happy, heartbroken, hopeful—it's all these emotions in one. What you hear in 'I Gotta Feeling'? To me, that's joy. You're in pain, but tonight's going to be a good night. You can't feel happy when you've been pissed off the whole week. You have to go straight to joy."

He thinks back to an insight he got from Bono. "Bono said, 'Our music gets to people closer than you ever can be: You're in their ears, they put us in their head.' That changed my whole view on things. Someone consciously put you this close to their brain. That's serious."

Within two weeks of that conversation, Will was back at his home in Los Angeles. It was a year after he had stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial next to the new president, a moment during which his mind raced with thoughts about his childhood, his hour-and-a-half bus ride to school, his grandmother. "I was thinking of her watching the inauguration of a black man as president with her grandson onstage—all those thoughts running through me," he says. "I was up there and I was like, 'Why me?'"

And within an hour he wrote "I Gotta Feeling," a song that nails every single note of a state-of-the-art, multi-user, good-time delivery system—although its intended use, its reason for existence, may be just as significant to its success.

"Nobody asked me to write 'I Gotta Feeling,'" says Will.i.am "It just came."