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Recommended Citation

Chan Huggins, Alexander (2014) "House of Cards: Valuing Music in the Digital Age," *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 3.

House of Cards: Valuing Music in the Digital Age

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At its most fundamental level, music is the organization of sound in temporal space; an art form with as much creative and structural intent as a painting or a cathedral, yet that does not inhabit the realm of physical space. The difficulty in assigning a monetary value to a piece of music is due to its inherent lack of a physical attribute to which value might be assigned—unlike, for example, a work of visual art, which at the very least may be valued at the cost of its constituent raw materials. It is the intangibility of music that simultaneously complicates the determination of its value, while necessitating a process of rendering a given work, a process that then acts as a proxy for the work itself. Thus, the monetary value is not in the work, but in the sale of the experience of it: for a live performance, the cost of a ticket is justified by the need for performers, technical personnel, and a physical performance space; the publication of sheet music requires editors, engravers, and printing; recorded media requires recording engineers, packaging, and manufacturing. In each of these cases, the capture and dissemination of music requires a vast chain of processes—abstracted from the

work itself—culminating in a single musical “product” that a consumer can purchase. For a consumer in this paradigm, the distinction between paying for music and paying for the process by which music is experienced is obscured. The digitization of media and the ubiquity of personal computers and portable media devices have compelled listeners and artists to confront the issue of value, and to consider more directly the relationship between one another.

As recording technology developed over the course of the twentieth century, the distinction began to break down between the musical product as a delivery process and as an art object, an authentic representation of the work itself. As this technology and practice matured, the recording came to be viewed not as a mere reproduction of real acoustic space, but as “imagined” acoustic space with dimension unto itself. The recording studio was not simply the medium between real and recorded space, but a compositional tool that allows an artist to realize their work as close to its “ideal” form as possible. This change in composition and dissemination had specific ramifications for the reception of works. As Elijah Wald notes in his history of popular music in the United States, “People would come to think of [a recording] as the definitive version of that performance.”¹ Further, audiences began to claim ownership over musical works through recordings, as commodities, and as tokens of an emotional relationship with the artist and their work.²

1. Elijah Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 127.

2. Wald writes about the experience of jazz arranger Sy Oliver, who observed that audiences were disappointed if they heard a live performance that deviated from the recorded version. In the process of

Following the Second World War, the United States saw rapid technological innovation as well as the rise of a culture driven by consumerism. The development of recording technology during this period was driven by an effort on the part of record companies to appeal to consumers with more novel and convenient products; these advances initially meant very little for the agency of the artist—or, for that matter, the listener. In the twenty-first century, innovations driven by personal computing have disrupted or rendered obsolete much of the “traditional” music industry. The combination of improvements in audio compression algorithms and the release of the iPod in 2001 offered consumers a convenient and portable means of accessing a reasonably-sized digital music collection (up to 5 gigabytes), all but eliminating the need for compact discs and cassettes. Internet radio services like Pandora, and Last.fm upset traditional radio by offering audiences custom radio stations tailored directly to their taste, creating new channels of promotion and discovery. Online music retailers—and their underground, peer-to-peer forebears—like iTunes, Amazon, and Beatport would soon overtake the market share of their brick-and-mortar counterparts.³ The rapid development of personal computer technology has shattered the formerly prohibitive twin barriers of financial cost and

recording jazz music, musicians performed a given piece several different ways, only one of which ended up on the final record. For the musician, it was simply one take of many; for the listener, Wald writes, “it was the only one,” in Wald, 127.

3. Edna Gundersen, “Digital stores now leading source for album sales,” *USA Today* online, January 24, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/music/2013/01/23/digital-stores-beat-mass-merchants-in-album-sales/1843627/>.

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technical knowledge, allowing all musicians an affordable and accessible means of producing their music independently. The manner in which the internet has effectively torn down a century's worth of infrastructure is nothing short of revolutionary.

In his landmark work, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan observed that:

With automation, for example, the new patterns of human association tend to eliminate jobs, it is true. That is the negative result. Positively, automation creates roles for people, which is to say depth of involvement in their work and human association that our preceding mechanical technology had destroyed. Many people would be disposed to say that it was not the machine, but what one did with the machine, that was its meaning or message. In terms of the ways in which the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves, it mattered not in the least whether it turned out cornflakes or Cadillacs. The restructuring of human work and association was shaped by the technique of fragmentation that is the essence of machine technology. The essence of automation technology is the opposite. It is integral and decentralist in depth, just as the machine was

fragmentary, centralist, and superficial in its patterning of human relationships.⁴

When applied to the radical changes the music industry faced at the turn of the twenty-first century, McLuhan's analysis from 1964 is outright prophetic. The dismantling of the record industry apparatus has resulted in the elimination of jobs within the abstracted, fragmented process that was the production and distribution of musical products. However, the ability of artists to create music in the industry's decline has not suffered, nor the audience's ability to access it. Instead, the relationship between the artist and the audience is enhanced, not only by the ability of both parties to communicate and engage in transactions directly, but by the newfound consciousness of the active role each has in a larger cultural process.

Amanda Palmer is standing on a street somewhere in Melbourne, Australia, wearing something resembling a kimono with a keytar strapped to her back, holding a handful of cue cards. Palmer does not say a word, instead reveals her message via the cards that she holds up one at a time, before tossing them into the street. It is a plea to the audience to fund the promotion, mixing, manufacturing, and distribution of her latest music project: “When I was on a major label,”

4. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Toronto: Gingko Press, 2003), 7.

one card reads, “They footed the bill for all that stuff.”⁵

Palmer’s stunt alludes to an iconic scene from D. A. Pennebaker’s film, *Dont Look Back* [*sic*], in which a deadpan Bob Dylan stands in the middle of the street with a handful of cue cards containing the lyrics to his song “Subterranean Homesick Blues.”⁶ There is an element of subversion to Dylan’s video: the image of a silent messenger communicating via stylized, ironic, somewhat cryptic—yet certainly anti-authoritarian—messages. Palmer’s allusion to Dylan suggests a similarly alluring subversiveness to her proposal. “THIS IS THE FUTURE OF MUSIC,” she writes, “THIS IS HOW WE FUCKING DO IT. WE ARE THE MEDIA.”

Palmer, who Glenn Peoples described as a “provocative cult artist,” has a history of this kind of anti-establishment, populist stunt; indeed, she deliberately cultivates this persona. In 2009, she actively campaigned through her music for her label to release her from her contract, singing, “Please drop me, what do I have to do? / I’m tired of sucking corporate dick.”⁷ Rejecting major label politics and structures, Palmer favoured spontaneous and direct interaction with fans, frequently hosting house parties in which fans had the opportunity to meet her and jam in a

5. Amanda Palmer, “AMANDA PALMER’s new RECORD, ART BOOK, and TOUR (pre-order on KICKSTARTER),” YouTube video, 3:05, posted by “amandapalmer,” May 4, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TveAzAs6NAY>.

6. See D. A. Pennebaker, *Bob Dylan: Dont Look Back*, directed by D. A. Pennebaker, Leacock-Pennebaker, 1967.

7. Amanda Palmer, “Amanda Palmer, ‘Please Drop Me,’” YouTube video, 3:45, posted by “mkhall,” March 29, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmbeuUYtFDc>.

more intimate setting. Of her fans, Palmer says, “They know me as well as my good friends do.”⁸ This is the essence of her appeal: access, through both the intimate nature of her music, and in the way it is created, performed, and experienced.

It should not come as too much of a surprise, then, that Palmer’s Kickstarter project was met with overwhelming support from her fans. In fact, it became the highest-funded project by a musician in the website’s history, making over \$1 million (ten times the initial \$100,000 goal). The project’s success was not without controversy, raising questions of an artist’s accountability to their contributors when their fundraising targets are so thoroughly exceeded. Palmer was criticized for inviting local musicians to perform with her in exchange for “beer, [and] hugs/high-fives,”⁹ which, in light of her Kickstarter windfall, came across as exploitative, drawing criticism from veteran producer Steve Albini.¹⁰ Palmer’s success was regarded by many as a positive indicator of the dismantling of the music industry in the Information Age, a sentiment that was captured in the subtitle of a *Billboard* article

8. Glenn Peoples, “Amanda Palmer Changes the Way Albums are Funded Through Kickstarter,” *Billboard* online, June 15, 2012, <http://www.billboard.com/biz/articles/news/1093507/amanda-palmer-changes-the-way-albums-are-funded-through-kickstarter>.

9. Amanda Palmer, “WANTED: HORN-Y AND STRING-Y VOLUNTEERS FOR THE GRAND THEFT ORCHESTRA TOUR!!!!,” *Amanda Palmer: The Official Website Of Amanda Fucking Palmer. Yes It Is.* (blog), August 21, 2012, <http://amandapalmer.net/blog/20120821/>.

10. Steve Albini, comment on “amanda\$1.2m’ palmer wants you to play with her for free,” *Electrical Audio* (forum), September 13, 2012, <http://www.electricalaudio.com/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=4&t=60267&p=1545867#p1545867>.

on the topic: “Crowd Control: How Amanda Palmer’s \$1 million Kickstarter campaign changes the music industry.”

A musician in the twenty-first century has access to the greatest production, promotion, and distribution tool ever known, and is able to reach audiences worldwide, no longer requiring the muscle of a multinational media conglomerate to do so. The internet has provided a direct channel between performer and listener, with the potential to achieve a greater degree of intimacy without any of the corporate entanglement that had so long defined that relationship. Yet for all their talk of revolution and cries of “WE ARE THE MEDIA,” musicians like Palmer seem just as reluctant to let go of that old model as anyone else in the music industry. With their newfound independence, these musicians still long for the benefits of a major label record deal (mass production and distribution, worldwide touring, etc.) without any of the drawbacks (lack of personal attention, unequal distribution of revenue, etc.). For Palmer, Kickstarter’s most significant function is a platform for artists to acquire capital, and for audiences to show their support for those artists directly.¹¹

According to Kickstarter’s statistics page, the majority of successfully funded projects fall under the Music category (generally, though not exclusively, projects for the production of physical copies of albums). These projects tend to share similar goals: the music has been written and recorded, and all that is left is to acquire the funding for a “professional release.” In a piece on *The A. V. Club*’s Crosstalk column entitled “Policing Amanda Palmer,” Marah Eakin states: “It’s a new way to do the same old record pre-sales that labels did and still do. It’s the same old model wrapped up in shiny,

11. Peoples, “Crowd Control,” 15.

well-designed web packaging.”¹² The “FUTURE OF MUSIC” that Palmer champions looks an awful lot like the past.

The commodification of popular music, and the music industry as we recognize it today, can be traced to the Tin Pan Alley tradition at the turn of the twentieth century. The process of commodification has had repercussions on the way music is perceived by both audiences and creators. In his essay, “When Songs Became a Business,” David Suisman quotes Harry Von Tilzer, a prolific professional songwriter from the period. Tilzer states that the songwriter’s product was “a commodity, a cash value, and in order to augment the value he must subordinate his own personal tastes to those of the music-buying public.”¹³ This is an idea that is taken for granted in contemporary Western culture: music is the inoffensive wallpaper, a product whose commercial success, and thus its legitimacy as an artistic product, hinges on its mass appeal. Theodor Adorno expands on this idea in his essay, “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening”:

This is the real secret of success. It is the mere reflection of what one pays in the market for

12. Marah Eakin and Tasha Robinson, “Policing Amanda Palmer: How crowdfunding has changed expectations for artists,” *The A.V. Club*, September 24, 2012, <http://www.avclub.com/article/policing-amanda-palmer-how-crowdfunding-has-change-85283>.

13. Harry Von Tilzer, introduction to *Writing the Popular Song*, by Edward Michael Wickes (Springfield, MA: Home Correspondence School, 1916), xv–xvi, quoted in David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 20.

the product. The consumer is really worshipping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket to the Toscanini concert. He has literally “made” the success which he reifies and accepts as an objective criterion, without recognizing himself in it. But he has not “made” it by liking the concert, but rather by buying the ticket.¹⁴

The notion of a business model based on “crowdfunding” complicates the relationship between artists, listeners, and works. The development of recording and playback technology has meant that virtually any acoustic space is now a “venue”: listeners can enjoy their favourite recordings in their homes, during their commutes, or as “background” to any number of activities—a far cry from the days when one required either musical ability or a concert ticket in order to listen to music. It is in the very nature of this ubiquitous technology that the active process of listening is inflected with a passive process of consumption. So far, the real revolution of Kickstarter has been an escalation of that process of passive engagement: artists are no longer selling a product but the creation of the product; Kickstarter has commodified the artistic process itself. Where, in Adorno’s example, the cost of the concert ticket supplants the value of the concert—representing the fact that the financial value of a musical product lies primarily in its delivery, and secondarily in the symbols of its having-been-paid-for—the value of a

14. Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” in *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 296.

proposed project on Kickstarter is somewhat more difficult to discern.

Ostensibly, “backing” a project on Kickstarter is a kind of micro-investment; however, instead of a financial return in accordance with the project’s success, “backers” are rewarded with one-time gifts, separated into tiers based on the amount contributed. These (often personalized) gifts generally include, at the lower tiers, merchandise (posters, t-shirts, etc.) or small gestures (e.g., a phone call from someone involved in the project). At the higher tiers, these gifts often take the form of products that far exceed the unit value of the proposed item, as well as custom alterations to the content of the product itself. In the “Kickstarter School” guide to the creation of a successful project, Kickstarter suggests project managers give the following rewards for the people who “back” their projects with a donation:

- *Copies of the thing*: the album, the DVD, a print from the show. These items should be priced what they would cost in a retail environment.
- *Creative collaborations*: a backer appears as a hero in the comic, everyone gets painted into the mural, two backers do the handclaps for track 3.
- *Creative experiences*: a visit to the set, a phone call from the author, dinner with the cast, a concert in your backyard.

- *Creative mementos*: Polaroids sent from location, thanks in the credits, meaningful tokens that tell a story.¹⁵

It seems only common sense that “copies of the thing” should top the list; it is perhaps the most cost-effective gift option, as CDs are often printed in runs of upwards of 1000 discs at a time. Also, for a potential backer CDs may be the most enticing offer as an audience member (playing the role of both consumer and financier) whose interest in seeing the project to fruition is motivated by their desire to purchase the product. Furthermore, increasingly enticing gifts might persuade a “backer” to fund a project not on the merits of the project itself, but out of desire for the gifts. Here, the fundamental premise of Kickstarter becomes obscured: is it intended as a vehicle for funding projects, an album pre-order service, or a personal storefront? Arguably, it has become the latter. Integration of the backer into the work itself, either directly or by offering credits further distorts the audience’s role in the production process. One could conceivably be the creator, producer, and audience of an artistic product all at once. The result is the commodification of the artistic process, from creation to experience.

Thus, the much-publicized radical reconstruction of the music industry offered by Kickstarter is, at best, the aggressive maintenance of the status quo. At worst, it is something far more insidious. The role of the oft-maligned middle-man has not been eliminated so much as merged into

15. “Kickstarter School: Creating Rewards,” *Kickstarter*, accessed May 26, 2014, https://www.kickstarter.com/help/school#creating_rewards.

that of the artist, leaving the audience to fill in the gaps. It is the passivity of consumerism bleeding into all aspects of the creative process.

When Radiohead announced that their seventh album, *In Rainbows*, would be released digitally using a “pay-what-you-want” model, it was initially seen as a blow against the major label system and the music industry at large.¹⁶ Radiohead’s contract with EMI had been fulfilled with the release of their previous album, *Hail to the Thief*, and rather than continue their relationship with the label, they chose to release the album independently. This afforded them a great degree of control over how their music was distributed and received. The band members themselves were certainly more interested in the efficiency of an independent release than with revolutionizing the music industry: for guitarist Jonny Greenwood, it simply ensured that the album would be released “quickly” and that “everyone would hear it at the same time.”¹⁷ The “Radiohead model,” as it came to be known, is considered an aberration, something that, while certainly liberating for internationally beloved rock stars, offers very little to up-and-coming artists trying to build an

16. Jeff Leeds, “Radiohead Said to Shun Major Labels In Next Deal,” *The New York Times* online, October 23, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/23/business/media/23music.html?_r=0.

17. Jonny Greenwood, “Radiohead’s Jonny Greenwood on ‘In Rainbows,’” by Brian Hiatt, *Rolling Stone* online, October 10, 2007, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/radioheads-jonny-greenwood-on-in-rainbows-its-fun-to-make-people-think-about-what-music-is-worth-20071010>.

audience and a career.¹⁸ However, an important detail is lost in such a reductive interpretation: by offering their record in a digital format where the price was determined by the consumer, Radiohead was directly acknowledging the inherent lack of value in digital files, forcing consumers to instead consider the value of Radiohead's music itself. Moreover, listeners would not have heard the music before purchasing the album, meaning that the price they decided to pay would have been an expression of how they valued their relationship with the band. The *In Rainbows* experiment forced audiences to consider their relationship with artists and the value of the musical work itself—not the incidental costs of producing, packaging, and promoting it—in a way that they previously would not have done.

A Nielsen study conducted in 2012 found that while teenagers consumed the majority of their music from free, ad-supported streaming services like YouTube, they were still “more likely than other age groups to have purchased music of any format.”¹⁹ Glenn Peoples, writing about the study in an article for *Billboard Magazine*, suggests that teens purchase music in such high numbers due to the convenience of digital download services like iTunes, and the fact that they are often spending their parents' money.²⁰ However, it seems likely that

18. Jacob Ganz, “‘In Rainbows’: A Pragmatic Experiment,” *National Public Radio* online, December 30, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/2009/12/30/122006767/in-rainbows-a-pragmatic-experiment>.

19. David Bakula, “The Music Industry: A Mid-Year Guide,” Lecture from Nielsen Entertainment, August 1, 2012, http://www.rs.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2012-Webinars/nielsen_entertainment_webinar_deck_final.pdf.

20. Glenn Peoples, “Business Matters: Teens Listen to Music Most on YouTube, Pay for Music More Than Other Age Groups, Nielsen

there is another factor at play, as people continue to purchase music while it is widely available for free by both legal and illegal means. The notion of purchasing music to “support the artist” has permeated the public consciousness in the wake of the controversy surrounding file-sharing services like Napster, to an extent that would not likely have factored into an individual’s decision to purchase a record. Even if it had, the reality of the record industry and exploitative contract practices made it so that the sale of a record (or millions of records) alone did very little to benefit the artist. Remarkably, “scene groups” (collectives dedicated to the ripping and leaking of all manner of digital products) are known to urge downloaders to purchase the files legally. For example, from the release notes for Wiz Khalifa’s *Rolling Papers* released by the scene group “H3X”: “DEBUT! DEBUT! DEBUT! ANOTHER H3XCLUSIVE!!! Enjoy & Go Support The Artist.....pz1.”²¹

The (perhaps unintuitive) notion that people who download music illegally—and are thus more likely to be the target of industry lawsuits—are actually the people most likely to purchase music, attend concerts, and generally seek out ways to interact more closely with their favourite artists was apparent even in the early days of the file-sharing controversy. A 2003 European study predicted that file-sharers, “strong music fans...more likely to listen to digital radio and visit

Study Says,” *Billboard* online, August 14, 2012, <http://www.billboard.com/biz/articles/news/1084161/business-matters-teens-listen-to-music-most-on-youtube-pay-for-music-more>.

21. MAFIAA, peer-to-peer file sharing content, “Wiz_Khalifa-Rolling_Papers-2011-H3X,” *The Pirate Bay*, March 3, 2011, http://thepiratebay.se/torrent/6260648/Wiz_Khalifa-Rolling_Papers-2011-H3X.

artist Web sites,” would come to comprise “the bedrock community for those willing to pay for legitimate (online) music services in the future.”²² In 2004, Felix Oberholzer-Gee and Koleman Strumpf released a study in which they concluded that consumers who downloaded music illegally were no less likely to purchase music, and that downloading had “an effect on sales that is statistically indistinguishable from zero.”²³ What.CD, currently the largest private BitTorrent community devoted exclusively to the sharing of music, conducted a poll on the subject in 2011. When asked, “How do you prefer to buy music?” nearly two-thirds of the almost seventeen thousand respondents answered that they bought music, with a quarter saying that they did not purchase music. Of those who said they purchased music, more than half said they preferred to purchase directly from artists.²⁴

22. B. Warner, “Europe’s Downloaders are Big Consumers too: Study,” *Reuters* online, September 17, 2003, <http://www.reuters.com/topNews&storyID53461693>, quoted in Kembrew McLeod, “MP3s Are Killing Home Taping: The Rise of Internet Distribution and Its Challenge to the Major Label Music Monopoly,” *Popular Music and Society* 28, no. 4 (October 2005): 525, doi:10.1080/03007760500159062.

23. Felix Oberholzer-Gee and Koleman Strumpf, “The Effect of File Sharing on Record Sales: An Empirical Analysis,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 115, no. 1 (February 2007): 25, doi:10.1086/511995.

24. What.CD, “How do you prefer to buy music?” *What.CD* (online poll), 2011, <https://what.cd/forums.php?action=viewthread&threadid=124493>. Used with permission.

FIGURE 1. Poll conducted by What.CD

© Copyright 2011 What.CD

What this data suggests is that even as sales of music appear to struggle, it is not due to a sudden absence of demand; it could be said, rather, that it is the technology that has finally risen to meet an already-existing level of demand. The digital age has tremendous potential to enhance the way in which music is experienced, allowing audiences and artists the ability to engage in a direct exchange with one another on an unprecedented level.

In an interview with DP/30, filmmaker Eugene Jarecki marvelled at the ability of technology to extend human consciousness, to communicate the lived experiences of people around the world:

The way we are all interconnected by these devices—which I know isolate us, and we spend too much time [looking at our phones]—keeps us very aware of each other’s realities. A guy wrote me last night from Israel to tell me he had just heard [about] me and my film on NPR. That’s tremendous. That means there’s a brain in Israel right now thinking about these issues. That wasn’t true 15 years ago. That wasn’t true in the 1930s; in fact, it was very easy in the 1930s to keep people so separate that you could control their thinking

very deeply.²⁵

There is a personal connection that listeners feel with the music they listen to and the artists who create it. If music listeners became jaded after decades of assault from a bloated industry, it is perhaps in part because they recognized the artificiality of those entities that sought to dictate their culture to them. The miracle of the digital revolution is that it allows artists and audiences to shed the extraneous, abstract elements—that acted as a bottleneck on popular music—by providing a direct channel of communication.²⁶ With the music industry rendered all but obsolete, the representation of the musical work has been as close as it has ever been to a total expression of the work itself. As for the work’s “value,” it is a quantity no less ethereal than it had been prior to the digital revolution, but now, at the very least, based on something real.

25. Eugene Jarecki, “DP/30 @ Sundance 2012: The House I Live In, Documentarian Eugene Jarecki,” by David Poland. *Movie City News* online. February 6, 2012. <http://moviecitynews.com/2012/02/dp30-sundance-2012-the-house-i-live-in-documentarian-eugene-jarecki/>.

26. An interesting side effect of the digitization of music has been a renewed interest in “archaic” media like the vinyl record and the cassette in some musical circles. No longer necessary for the transmission of the work, the unique characteristics of these media become characteristics of the larger work. If it served the work, a musician might choose to release their work on cassette for the same reason a painter might choose to paint on cardboard instead of canvas.

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