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What price fame and glory?

May 31, 2008

In October 2006, I went backstage at the Commodore Ballroom to shake the hand of the only man I know who has actually beat media mogul Rupert Murdoch at his own game.

Billy Bragg laughed when I said this and modestly downplayed his “victory.” He said he doubted that Murdoch paid much attention to the issue surrounding proprietary rights on MySpace but Bragg was pleased that young and up-and-coming artists would now be assured of all rights to their own creations.

Like many other artists Bragg has embraced the new digital technology, but early in 2006 he had boycotted MySpace because he was concerned that the website was “harvesting residual rights from original songs posted there by unsigned musicians.”

As a result of Bragg’s complaints, MySpace changed its terms and conditions to state clearly that all rights to material appearing on the site remain with the originator. Other social networking sites such as Youtube, Facebook and Bebo followed suit by changing their contract language, which all members must sign in order to participate.

It’s a thorny issue in this age of mp3 file-sharing. Too many people feel they have the right to use and distribute the creations of artists without paying for it. And it is destroying once viable music businesses, all of which are struggling to find new ways to survive in the Internet age.

While it is hard to sympathize with a multi-national music conglomerate such as record companies or record store chains, or even with a multi-millionaire like Paul McCartney or Prince, it should be remembered they all started out as nobodies and worked their way up. And while many of the big names are set for life, it is the young budding artists that we should be concerned about.

Until recently the music business model was for artists to record a potential hit album, then hit the road to perform shows that would help sell the album. Those concert tours were generally money-losers, but as the word of mouth spread the potential for huge financial reward was in album sales.

Record companies would front the tour money to the artists and relentlessly work the media – radio, TV and publications – to get the artists the public’s attention. It was a gamble and not every act paid

off for the record company but enough of it did stick in those salad years.

I was writing about music back in the '70s and '80s and record companies would vie for writers like myself to check out their new artists. Back in the day when they couldn't get the time of day from the public I was backstage with Bryan Adams, REM and dozens of other up-and-comers, conducting interviews and reviewing their shows.

Today that business model has been turned on its head. Artists and record companies are getting diminishing returns from record sales – some like Radiohead and Coldplay are even giving their tunes away on the Internet – but they're making huge money on concert ticket sales.

If they're an established in-demand artist, that is.

If they're a new artist, they're not making a living wage on either their recorded music or ticket sales.

That was Bragg's concern too. As he says, he enjoys watching someone's creation on Youtube, whether it's a cat performing funny stunts or a singer with a new song. However, if a social networking site is reaping all the financial reward from this creativity, how will the artists survive?

And as Bragg recently wrote in the New York Times, Bebo.com, a social networking site whose membership has risen to 40 million in just two years, was recently sold to AOL for a staggering \$850 million. Bebo's founders, Michael and Xochi Birch, walked away with \$600 million for their 70 per cent share in the company.

Birch had come to Bragg two years ago because he wanted to expand his business by hosting music and wanted Bragg's advice on how to construct an artist-centred environment where artists could post original songs without fear of losing control over their work.

Bragg says that in all fairness Birch should now pay some dividends from Bebo's sale to the artists who posted their creations on Bebo.

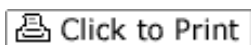
“After all, wasn't he using their music to draw members and advertising to his business? Social networking sites argue that they have no money to distribute – their value is their membership. Well, (this past March) Birch realized the value of his membership.”

Bragg says, “The huge social networking sites that seek to use music as free content are as much to blame for the malaise currently affecting the industry as the music lover who downloads songs for free. Both the corporations and the kids, it seems, want the use of our music without having to pay for it.”

Kurt Langmann is editor of the Aldergrove Star.

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