

# FEATURES

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*Peddling recordings as inexpensive artworks is a much-diminished enterprise. Musicians, who have to eat and be heard, are turning their hands to merchandising to make megabucks*

BY JON PARELES  
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From left, the musicians Julian Casablancas, Santogold and Pharrell Williams in a Converse ad. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

## Like music to the accountant's ears

In *Creator*, the rawest track on Santogold's debut and self-titled album, the singer Santi White boasts, "Me I'm a creator/Thrill is to make it up/The rules I break got me a place up on the radar." It's a bohemian manifesto in a sound bite, brash and endearing, or at least it was for me until it showed up in a beer commercial. And a hair-gel commercial too.

It turns out that the insurgent, quirky rule-breaker is just another shill. *Billboard* reported that three-quarters of Santogold's excellent album has already been licensed for commercials, video games and sound tracks, and White herself appears in advertisements, singing for sneakers. She has clearly decided that linking her music to other, mostly mercenary agendas is her most direct avenue to that "place up on the radar."

The question is: What happens to the music itself when the way to build a career shifts from recording songs that ordinary listeners want to buy to making music that marketers can use? That creates pressure, subtle but genuine, for music to recede: to embrace the element of vacancy that makes a good sound track so unobtrusive, to edit a lyric to be less specific or private, to leave blanks for the image or message the music now serves. Perhaps the song will still make that essential, head-turning first impression, but it won't be as memorable or independent.

And as music becomes a means to an end

— pushing a separate product, whether it's a concert ticket or a clothing line, a movie scene or a Web ad — a tectonic shift is under way. Record sales channeled the taste of the broad, volatile public into a performer's paycheck. As music sales dwindle, licensors become a far more influential target audience. Unlike nonprofessional music fans who might immerse themselves in a song or album they love, music licensors want a track that's attractive but not too distracting — just a tease, not a revelation.

It's almost enough to make someone miss those former villains of philistinism, the recording companies. Labels had an interest in music that would hold listeners on its own terms; selling it was their meal ticket. Labels, and to some extent radio stations and music television, also had a stake in nurturing stars who would keep fans returning to find out what happened next, allowing their catalogs to be perennially rediscovered. By contrast, licensors have no interest beyond the immediate effect of a certain song, and can save money by dealing with unknowns.

As the influence of major labels erodes, licensors are seizing their chance to be talent scouts. They can be good at it, song by song, turning up little gems like Chairlift's *Bruises*, heard in an iPod ad. For a band, getting such a break, and being played repeatedly for television viewers, is a windfall, and perhaps an alternate route to radio play or the beginning

of a new audience. But how soon will it be before musicians, perhaps unconsciously, start conceiving songs as potential television spots, or energy jolts during video games, or ringtones? Which came first, Madonna's *Hung Up* or the cell phone ad?

Not wanting to appear too crass, musicians insist that exposure from licensing does build the kind of interest that used to pay off in sales and/or loyalty. Hearing a song on the radio or in a commercial has a psychological component; someone else has already endorsed it. Musicians who don't expect immediate mass-market radio play — maybe they're too old, maybe they're too eccentric — have gotten their music on the air by selling it to advertisers. That can rev up careers, as Apple ads have done for Feist and for this year's big beneficiary, Yael Naim, whose *New Soul* introduced the MacBook Air. (Sites like findthatson.net help listeners identify commercial sound tracks.)

The Sri Lankan art-pop-rapper MIA already had all the hipster adoration she could ever want for her song *Paper Planes*, which compares international drug dealing to selling records, and it turns gunshots and a ringing cash register into hooks. But having the song used in the trailer for *Pineapple Express* was probably what propelled the song to a Grammy nomination for record of the year.

(Grammy voters often seize on music from everywhere but the albums they purport to

judge; they seem particularly drawn to film sound tracks.) And if the song now conjures images of the movie trailer for many listeners, that's the trade-off for recognition.

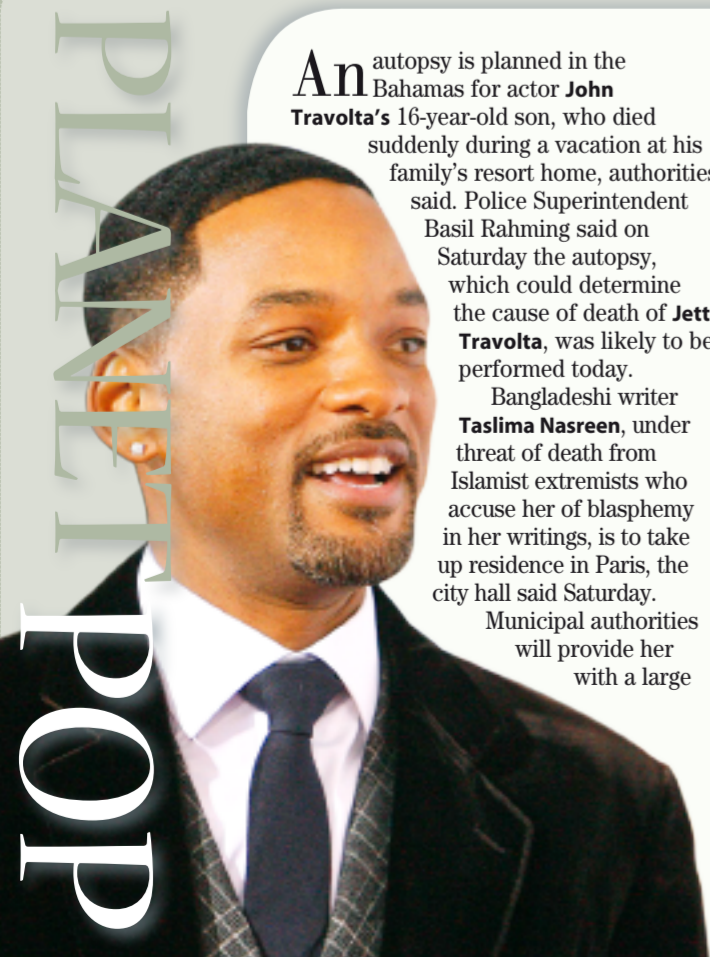
The old, often legitimate accusation against labels was that they sold entire albums with only one good song or two. Now there's an incentive for a song to have only 30 seconds of good stuff. It's already happening: Chris Brown's hit *Forever* is wrapped around a jingle for chewing gum.

Apparently there's no going back, structurally, to paying musicians to record music for its own sake. Labels that used to make profits primarily from selling albums have been struggling since the Internet caused them to lose their choke hold on distribution and exposure. Now, in return for investing in recording and promotion, and for supplying their career-building expertise (such as it was), they want a piece of musicians' whole careers.

Old-fashioned audio recording contracts are increasingly being replaced by so-called 360 deals that also tithe live shows, merchandising, licensing and every other conceivable revenue stream — conceding, in a way, that the labels' old central role of selling discs for mere listening is obsolete. Some musicians, like the former record company president Jay-Z, have concurred, but by signing 360 deals with labels but with the concert-promotion monolith Live Nation.

Maybe such dire thoughts are extreme, since some people are still buying music. The iTunes Music Store has sold more than 5 billion songs since 2003. But it's harder and harder to find a song without a tie-in. It took Guns N' Roses 15 years between albums to complete *Chinese Democracy*, certainly long enough to receive worldwide notice when the album was released this year. But instead of letting the album arrive as an event in itself, the band licensed one of the album's best songs, *Shackler's Revenge*, to a video game that came out first. Metallica fans have complained that the band's new album, *Death Magnetic*, sounds better in the version made for the *Guitar Hero* video game than on the consumer CD, which is compressed to the point of distortion so it will sound louder on the radio. But they take for granted that the music will end up in the game in the first place. Consumers reinforce the licensors almost perversely: They pay for music as a ringtone, or tap along with it on the iPhone game *Tap Tap Revenge*, but not as a high-fidelity song.

Perhaps it's too 20th century to hope that music could stay exempt from multitasking, or that the constant insinuation of marketing into every moment of consciousness would stop when a song begins. But for the moment I'd suggest individual resistance. Put on a song with no commercial attachments. Turn it up. Close your eyes. And listen.



PIANNO POP

An autopsy is planned in the Bahamas for actor **John Travolta's** 16-year-old son, who died suddenly during a vacation at his family's resort home, authorities said. Police Superintendent Basil Rahming said on Saturday the autopsy, which could determine the cause of death of **Jett Travolta**, was likely to be performed today.

Bangladeshi writer **Taslima Nasreen**, under threat of death from Islamist extremists who accuse her of blasphemy in her writings, is to take up residence in Paris, the city hall said Saturday.

Municipal authorities will provide her with a large

studio in an artists' residence in the 10th arrondissement, in the east of the French capital, and initially pay her rent.

Nasreen, who was made an honorary citizen of Paris in July of last year, put in an application for housing six weeks ago.

Nasreen was forced to flee her native country in 1994 after her novel *Lajja* (Shame) about the persecution of a Hindu family by Muslims in Bangladesh drew accusations of blasphemy.

A gynecologist by training, she spent several years moving between Europe and the US before settling in India in 2004. Renewed threats drove her to Sweden in March last year.

Actor **Will Smith**, star of *Hancock* and *Seven Pounds*, was voted the top money-making movie star of last year, dethroning **Johnny Depp** in an annual poll released on Friday of movie theater owners and film buyers. Smith, 40, is only the second African-American actor to win the Quigley poll in its 76 year history. **Sidney Poitier** was placed first in 1968 after the success of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *In the Heat of the Night*.

Surviving members of The Grateful

Will Smith makes hearts flutter and cash registers ring.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Mickey Hart, left, and Bob Weir and the other members of The Dead are regrouping for a 19-city tour, their first since 2004.

PHOTO: AP

Dead say they'll regroup for a 19-city tour, their first since 2004, beginning April 12 in Greensboro, North Carolina.

The group, which now calls itself The Dead, announced its plans on Thursday.

Original band members **Bob Weir**, **Phil Lesh**, **Mickey Hart** and **Bill Kreutzmann** have toured sporadically since the 1995 death of guitarist **Jerry Garcia**, but struggled to get along personally and artistically. They told *Rolling Stone* in November that they've worked out their differences, aided by a successful October benefit concert in Pennsylvania for then-presidential candidate **Barack Obama**.

**Warren Haynes** joins The Dead on lead guitar, and **Jeff Chimenti** will play keyboards.

British actor **Edmund Purdom**, star of Hollywood blockbusters *The Egyptian* and *The Prodigal* in the mid-1950s, has died aged 82 in Rome where he was a longtime resident, his family said on Friday.

Purdom, who died Thursday, began his acting career in theater on both sides of the Atlantic.

He landed the lead role in the MGM musical *The Student Prince* in 1954, displacing an overweight **Mario Lanza**, and moved on to replace **Marlon Brando** who opted out of *The Egyptian* the same year.

After settling in Rome in the mid-1960s, Purdom played in "sword-and-sandal" epics and Italian B movies, and then worked for many years as a voice-dubbing actor, mainly from Italian into English.

In a romantic history that included four weddings and three divorces, Purdom was best known for abruptly leaving his first wife **Anita Philips** and their children to marry Mexican actress **Linda Christian**, with whom he starred in *Athena* (1954).

Christian was the ex-wife of heartthrob **Tyrone Power**.

Mystery writer **Donald Westlake**, one of the most prolific figures in US literary history, has died after a career that spanned half a century, it was reported Friday. He was 75.

His wife **Abigail Westlake** said he collapsed of a heart attack while heading to a New Year's Eve dinner in Mexico where he was vacationing, the *New York Times* reported.

The versatile writer — who banged out his stories on a manual typewriter — was also nominated for an Academy Award for his screenplay of *The Grifters* (1990) and received three Edgar awards by the Mystery Writers of America.

Westlake's Web site lists him as the author of 86 books and five screenplays, beginning in 1960 with his novel *The Mercenaries*.

In a 2007 interview he said his output was up to 104 books. The latest, *Get Real*, was due to be published this year.

Fifteen of his novels were made into movies, including *The Hot Rock* (1972) starring **Robert Redford** and *Payback* (1999) with **Mel Gibson**.

In a May 2007 interview with the publication *On Writing*, Westlake said he was less interested in historical accuracy than in developing his characters and their actions.

"It's like quicksand," he said about doing too much research for a novel. "You can get drowned in research and never be heard from again."

—AGENCIES