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Osborne, Richard ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4111-8980> (2020) The gold disc: one million pop fans can't be wrong. In: Music by numbers: the use and abuse of statistics in the music industries. Osborne, Richard ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4111-8980> and Laing, Dave, eds. intellect, Bristol, UK, pp. 39-55. ISBN 9781789382532, e-ISBN 9781789382556, e-ISBN 9781789382549. [Book Section] (Accepted/In press)

Final accepted version (with author's formatting)

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## 2. RICHARD OSBORNE, 'THE GOLD DISC: ONE MILLION POP FANS CAN'T BE WRONG'

One million is the magic number, or is it 500,000, or 100,000 or 400,000? The record industry has a confusing relationship with statistics. Looked at from one perspective, sales figures are central to its operations. In this chapter I am going to explore the phenomenon of gold, silver, platinum and diamond discs; awards that are presented to artists and industry personnel when specified sales or 'equivalent sales' have been achieved. Although other cultural industries have their sales charts – the *New York Times* has been publishing its lists of best-selling books since 1931, and the box office returns of movies have been enumerated since *Birth of a Nation* in 1915 – the record industry is alone in offering trophies based on the number of copies sold. These awards are more than markers of success; they provide a symbol of the record industry's preferred business model. This is a business in which the recording is central and sales numbers are fetishized.

Yet the record industry is also vague when it comes to calculating its returns. The sales charts for books give a clear indication of the number of items retailed, while box office figures signal the net income that a film has achieved. It is also usually possible to find out the production costs of a film and thus make some estimates regarding its profits. In comparison, *Billboard* in the US and the Official Charts Company in the UK do not publish a record's sales figures or streaming data as part of their charts. The only indicator in both cases is a symbol to indicate that a record that has achieved a gold, platinum, silver or diamond award. It is as though any sales figure between zero and award status is of not worth noting. In addition, the record industry is reticent about disclosing the costs of any given recording, as well as the differing royalty rates its artists receive.

It is perhaps obvious why the book and film industries do not hand out sales awards. The two art forms have a financial and generic diversity that would render the idea absurd. This obviousness should make us think again about the recording industry: is it really so homogenized that sales awards can work fairly for all? The rules for receiving these awards are statistically rigid: all artists working within a territory have the same target to work towards; these targets are published freely; there is one local governing body that oversees them. At the same time, there is an elasticity about these awards that hints at the wider diversity of the record industry: the numbers needed to achieve award status have differed between territories and have shifted over time. The awards have also been adapted to encompass new recording formats, such as downloads and streams. The incorporation of streaming raises a further question. Why does the industry continue to issue awards based on the sales of singles and albums when the consumption of streamed music utilizes a different model?

In the following I shall highlight some of the standards and variables relating to the gold disc and its elementary partners. I shall look at the history of these trophies and examine the rules by which they can be acquired. I shall also examine the record company accounting that the sales awards tend to obscure. In addition, I shall address the continuing use of these awards in the digital age. Finally, I shall look at the musical culture that the awards endorse, examining their impact upon artistic creation and audience reception. To explore these themes I will address the recording industries in the US and the UK. The sales awards are both local and global in nature. The International Federation of Phonographic Industry (IFPI) lists over 50 territories that operate an award scheme. It also acknowledges the different criteria that each territory utilizes (IFPI 2018: 133). Therefore, while much that follows can be applied broadly, regional differences should also be borne in mind.

### *The origins of the gold disc*

Joseph Murrells, in his history of the gold disc, states that ‘The exact point in time when a golden disc was first given by a company to an artist has not been established’ (1974: 7). His own candidate for the original recipient is the violinist Marie Hall, who in 1905 was awarded a ‘presentation charm bracelet [that] was made of gold and pearls and displayed a minute violin, a tapered gramophone arm, and seven tiny *golden discs*, representing her seven best selling records’ (1974: 7, original emphasis). Later awards have not featured miniaturized discs but have instead been copies of actual records. The first award to bear a similarity to those issued today was presented on 10 February 1942, marking 1,200,000 sales of Glen Miller’s ‘Chattanooga Choo Choo’. Miller was given a master copy of the record, which was painted gold and framed. Attached to the presentation box was a plaque that noted the sales that had been amassed.

While Miller was the first artist to receive a gold disc, it was Elvis Presley who did most to institutionalize the award. Ed Ward has claimed that the singer received his first gold record in April 1956, stating that it was ‘an award RCA invented especially for him’ (1986: 120). This is not true. RCA Victor was after all also Glenn Miller’s record company. What is nevertheless certain is that Presley increased the currency of the gold disc. In 1958 he became one of the first popular music artists to have their hits gathered together on a long playing record. This release was given a significant title: *Elvis’ Golden Records*. There is a simple reason why Presley was RCA Victor’s golden artist: he was selling a huge quantity of discs. Five months after his first RCA Victor release he was responsible for half the company’s popular music income, and a decade later he was still making up a quarter of RCA Victor’s record sales (Jorgensen 1998: 48; Chapple and Garofalo 1977: 210). More broadly, the rock ‘n’ roll era was the point at which the

record industry gained a firm ascendancy over the music publishing industry (Garofalo 2005: 70). This transformation had already been underway:<sup>1</sup> the arrival of singles charts based on the sales of recordings had been indicative of the trend (in America, *Billboard's* 'best sellers in stores' chart began in 1940; in Britain, the first singles chart was published in 1952). The success of Presley and his contemporaries confirmed the change. This was the case in America, where in 'the new order of rock'n'roll, sheet-music sales and public performances followed a successful recording' (Millard 1995: 257), as well as in the UK, where *Record Mirror* reported, 'If there has been a decline in sheet music sales in 1957 then some of the blame must be laid at the door of the R and R craze' (Conley 1957: 84).

The Record Industry Association of America (RIAA) formalized the award programme on 14 March 1958, when Perry Como, another RCA Victor artist, received their first official gold disc for his single 'Catch a Falling Star' (RIAA's first gold album was the cast recording of *Oklahoma!*, which was given its award four months later). Como's record company were celebratory of his achievements: in 1958 they released an album titled *Como's Golden Records*. RIAA have wished to associate their award with other forms of music, however. In 2008, they chose to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of their golden records, not with Como's music, but instead with Presley's 'Hard Headed Woman', which on 11 August 1958 became the singer's first single to receive the trade body-authorized gold disc (RIAA 2008). It was rock 'n' roll and not Como's easy listening that placed the record centre stage. While 'Catch a Falling Star' worked well as print music, 'Hard Headed Woman' did not. In 1957 the *Melody Maker* reported that 'the

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<sup>1</sup> Undertaking a copyright study for the US government, William M. Blaisdell reported that, 'Between 1951 and 1955, while sheet music royalty payments fell by 44 percent in volume, the volume of mechanical royalty payments by record producers to music publishers increased by 60 percent' (1960: 94).

successful Rock-'n'-Roll numbers were only hits on a record and just didn't mean a thing so far as sheet music was concerned' (David 1957: 10), and in 1958 the publisher Bill Phillips stated 'Sure, rock sells records – *but not music*' (Nicholl 1957: 8, original emphasis). More than other genres, it made sense to represent rock 'n' roll success with a gold disc. This was the starting point for new forms of popular music where the golden record could serve as a business model as well as an award.

IFPI has been keen to perpetuate the idea that recording is at the centre of the music industries. Biannually from 2010 until 2016, the organization published reports titled *Investing in Music*. These reports denigrate the importance live music income as well as the ability of artists to go the DIY digital route (IFPI 2012: 4, 5). IFPI argue that 'if an artist wishes to sell their music in significant volume and attract large audiences, they need the support of a major or independent record company' (IFPI 2012: 5). Their mention of 'significant volume' is important. IFPI define 'commercial success' as 'breaking an artist to Gold or Platinum status in an individual market' (IFPI 2012: 11). We need to examine what this status is, before considering why their criterion of success is set so high.

### *The gold standard*

There has been more than one gold standard. There is confusion, in fact, about the amount needed to acquire the first official awards. RIAA state that 'In the beginning, there was only a Gold® album award for the sale of 500,000 copies' (2014a). In contrast, Murrells believes that gold discs were first certified by RIAA for '1,000,000 single sales and a gross of 1,000,000 dollars for album sales' (1974: 7). The difference in procedure for singles and albums is indicative of the fact that albums used to sell in fewer numbers than singles but were more highly priced, thus it would be easier for

them to achieve a million dollars in revenue than a million copies sold. This measurement nevertheless demonstrates how the quantities sold to achieve award status have fluctuated.

Although they do not readily admit it, RIAA have shifted their standards several times. In 1976 the organization introduced its platinum award, which could be gained by achieving one million album sales or two million singles sales. To achieve a gold record for an album, an artist now had to sell 500,000 copies of their release. In 1989 the figures for single sales were halved. Artists had to sell 500,000 copies to achieve gold status and one million for platinum. This reflected an overall downturn in the importance of this format in America. In comparison, album sales continued to grow. Consequently, in 1999 the diamond award was introduced, celebrating records that achieved ten million sales (RIAA 2017).

In the UK the qualifying sales tallies have also changed. The British Phonographic Industry (BPI) was set up in 1973, launching its own awards in the same year. At first its scheme shared the same split between singles (copies sold) and albums (gross income received) as the US. An artist would have to achieve sales of 500,000 singles to receive a gold disc and 1,000,000 for platinum. For albums they would have to generate £150,000 to receive a gold disc and £1m for platinum. The gross-income target for albums shifted several times in the 1970s before being switched to a copies sold target in 1979. This manoeuvre was qualified by the fact that differently priced LPs needed to sell different amounts: those with a dealer price below £2.24 had to sell 200,000 units to achieve gold and 600,000 to achieve platinum; for LPs priced above this the targets were halved. These dealer prices have been altered periodically and so has the tally for singles. In 1989 it was reduced to 400,000 to achieve gold and 600,000 to achieve platinum. Indicative of the fact that the UK is a smaller market than the US, there is no diamond

award. BPI have instead created a lower silver award, which artists could originally achieve by selling 250,000 singles or £75,000 worth of LPs. As of January 2019, the criteria for achieving this trophy were set at 200,000 singles or 60,000 full price albums.

Writing in 1974, Murrells stated that the differing amounts between territories were derived by 'taking into consideration the total population of the country concerned, these being their equivalent of a "million" sales' (1974: 8). Curiously, the figures do equate for the US and the UK today: if we take recent population figures, to achieve a gold album in each country that record would have to be bought by approximately 0.16 per cent of the population (the census figures for the US from 2010 give a population total of 308,745,539, while those for the UK from 2011 have its population at 63,181,775). Nevertheless, the changing tallies throw into question any clear link between population size and the awards given out. These differing amounts also cast doubt on the idea that commercial success can be equated with 'Gold or Platinum status in an individual market'. A record does not cost less to create and to promote just because you are in a smaller country. The record industries' economies of scale do not work this way (MMC 1994: s. 285).

### *Breakeven points*

The crucial determinant in calculating the profitability of a record is its breakeven point: the amount of copies it needs to sell (or the number of times it needs to be played) to generate a profit. The record industry has a maxim: 'revenue is vanity, profit is sanity' (Sutherland 2019). Yet this is a factor that the sales awards obfuscate. It is also a factor that it hard to calculate, as breakeven points have varied across time and between releases.

Writing about the UK music industry in 1978, Simon Frith suggested that ‘The average single costs about £2,000 to make, the average album £15-20,000’, while ‘costs of promotion and advertising start from about £2,000 a record’ (1978: 117). This was an era in which artists used professional studios to make their recordings and major record companies controlled the manufacturing and distribution processes.

Consequently, expenditure on each release remained fairly consistent. Frith equated the breakeven point for singles with Top 30 chart success, meaning that a 45rpm disc of this era would have to sell around 20,000 copies to achieve a profit. For albums he leaned towards IFPI’s model of equating commercial success with sales awards. However, he selected the lower silver award, which in this era was set at £100,000 in sales, or roughly 30,000 LPs (1978: 118).

The late 1970s was nevertheless a period in which new business strategies were being employed. Some UK independent record labels were making records that were relatively cheap to produce and market. Dave Laing suggested that ‘By dispensing with the need for expensive productions, promotional staff and the other overheads of chart-oriented companies, Stiff and the other small record labels which set up from 1977 onwards to release punk rock and new wave material, could work to “break-even” figures which could be as low as 2000 copies for a single’ (1985: 10). This represents only ten per cent of Frith’s target.

The reason for the discrepancy between Frith’s and Laing’s figures is the different business ideals that the major and independent companies were operating. While the smaller companies wanted (and needed) to achieve profitability with the majority of records they released, the major record companies had been adopting a ‘mud-against-the-wall approach’ to their release schedules, issuing a large variety of records into the marketplace in the hope that some would stick around as ‘hits’.

Estimates of the success rate for this approach have varied, but the most commonly cited ratio is one-in-ten. The major labels' policy could be witnessed in a fatalistic belief that 'There are no formulas for producing a hit record' (Hirsch 1971/2: 664). Paul Hirsch noted that 'Under these conditions it apparently is more efficient to produce many "failures" for each success than to sponsor fewer items and pretest each on a massive scale to increase media coverage and consumer sales' (1972: 652). This is not to say that the majors spent less money on promoting each individual record than the independent companies. The reverse is the case (MMC 1994: s. 6.30, s. 10.49, s. 12.150; Dannen 2003: 264).

The seemingly democratic sales target of the gold disc has hidden a bias towards the major labels' way of doing things. If the tallies are supposed to equate to commercial success, then this is success as defined by the larger companies' breakeven points. A cheaply made record might be more profitable than a high-profile release even if it is selling fewer copies, yet this has meant nothing when it comes to the awards, which have been based on total sales or gross income only (Jones 1997: 61-2; MMC 1994: s. 2.135). Moreover, it is not just the bottom line for the record companies that these trophies have obscured. They provide no indication of the share of sales revenue that an artist might receive.

### *Artists' income*

There are two times in an artist's career when they are most likely to be photographed alongside record industry personnel. One is when they are signing their contracts; the other is if they are lucky enough to be presented with a sales award. The lack of evidence of interaction between these two parties at other times is telling. Few pictures have been taken of A&R staff or marketing teams in action. In particular it is unusual to

see them working together with artists in the creation of the final product. This could in part be due to romantic ideals: the audience wants to feel that musicians and singers are the principal authors of the music. It could also be reflective of high rates of failure. Responsibility for the product is placed squarely with the artists. Unless the record happens to be a success, that is, at which point industry personnel re-enter the frame.

If one aim of sales award photographs is to emphasize the industry's contribution to artistic success at the moment of triumph, another is to pronounce the artist's share of the company's success. The gold disc symbolizes an industry in which an artist's income is tied to the number of records they sell for their label. However, just as with the breakeven point, this is a playing field that is skewed. Although gold disc status should at least ensure profitability, it does not mean that there is parity among recording deals.

One important discrepancy is royalty rates, which can vary widely. Some independent and production companies offer 50/50 contracts, whereby an artist gains 50 per cent of the profits once costs have been recouped. In contrast, many artists who have exclusive recording contracts with major companies will receive half that percentage for record sales at most, albeit that royalty rates have varied in accordance with different types of product and they have also generally improved over time. The independent contract might offer an artist a more profitable contract, but in the 50/50 deal all costs need to be covered before royalties are paid. In contrast, recoupment in many exclusive contracts is restricted to recording costs, video costs and personal advances (Harrison 2017: 88).

Record contracts have also differed when it comes to deductions and reductions. In relation to physical product (and sometimes to digital product too), money has been deducted from artists' royalties in order to account for special packaging and to cover

the record companies in the case of breakages and faulty products. While the amounts charged have been fairly standard, they have varied according to contract and the format of release. It has also been possible for some artists to demand their removal. Moreover, in the second decade of the twenty-first century such deductions are finally becoming a thing of the past (Harrison 2017: 98). Artists' royalty rates have been further reduced if their recordings are advertised on television or sold at a budget price. In many cases, they will have little control over these promotional decisions. Although these policies have been adopted to gain a sales boost, the trade bodies have paid little attention to them when handing out awards. RIAA and BPI have not been particularly stringent when it comes to accounting for the budgeting of records by major record labels and they have not taken into account product that is advertised (RIAA 2019b).

Regarding physical products, the award schemes have received criticism for being based on the amount of records shipped to retailers rather than using sales-based evidence derived from barcodes (RIAA 2019b). In America the award calculations factor in records that have been returned to record companies by retailers, thus rendering moot the old industry joke that a record has 'shipped gold and returned platinum' (Dannen 2003: 167-8). They do not, however, take into account the number of records that sit unsold on store shelves (RIAA 2019b). In Britain the rules are looser: to qualify, a record company merely has to provide evidence of 'firm, invoiced sales to the trade' (BPI 2009).

The trade organizations in the two countries differ when it comes to factoring in promotional copies. According to RIAA's audit requirements 'Promotional radio and press copies, cut-outs, inventory sell-offs, and surplus sales are not included toward certification' and neither are 'promotional track downloads' (RIAA). BPI qualifying criteria make no mention of these factors. Record contracts are usually clear on this

point, however, commonly deducting as much as fifteen per cent of a record's sales from royalty calculations to factor in a 'free goods' allowance (Harrison 2017: 98). The labels claim that this allowance is 'irrelevant' for the majority of artists because 90 per cent of them fail to reach breakeven points and therefore are not receiving royalties anyway (MMC 1994: s. 12.161). They fail to point out that the imposition of this allowance makes it harder for artists to recoup.

Record companies are able to request award certification quickly. In America, sales of physical albums become eligible 30 days after a product is released (RIAA 2019b). In Britain it used to be the case that companies could apply when their recording had reached 'the appropriate level of sales' (BPI 2009).<sup>2</sup> Awards have therefore been granted before the true retail profile of a record has been established. In comparison, when it comes to an artist's royalties, it has been common practice for record companies to hold a reserve against possible returns. Donald S. Passman provides the example that 'if a company ships 100,000 records of an artist, they may only pay the artist on 65,000 of these and wait to see if the other 35,000 are returned' (2014: 79). Here, rather than establishing a sales record after 30 days, the record company can wait up to two years to pay the artist for the proportion of the reserve that has actually been sold (Passman 2014: 79-80).

Despite the differences between recording contracts, all artists working within a territory are judged according to the same sales award rules. Moreover, as with the cost of recordings, little information about recording contracts is made publicly available. The apparent simplicity of sales award criteria hides the complexity of record

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<sup>2</sup> Downloading and streaming work differently, resulting in the fact that titles are 'automatically certified' when they have 'reached the appropriate level of sales as measured by the Official Charts Company' (BPI 2019).

companies' financial and contractual operations. Moreover, these operations have only grown more complex and diverse in the digital age. There are many oddities about the perpetuation of sales awards based on physical products in the era of downloads and streaming, and in some ways these awards are now performing more of a cover up operation than they did before. In the remainder of this chapter I will explore the awards' transformation in the modern era. Just as significantly, I shall look at ways they have remained the same. I shall close by looking at the reactions of artists and consumers to the golden ideal.

### *Embracing change in the digital era*

BPI and RIAA have made efforts to keep up with digital trends. BPI has allowed downloads to contribute to sales figures for their awards since 2004. RIAA also incorporated downloads in 2004, introducing a new 'Digital Single Sales Award' in this year. The two organizations have additionally incorporated streaming data in their awards calculations. Reflecting the lack of physical single sales in the US, RIAA's awards for singles are now wholly digital: 'on-demand audio and/or video song streams' have been tabulated along with downloads since May 2013 (RIAA 2017). RIAA also include streams alongside downloads and physical sales for their album awards. BPI has included streams for its singles awards since July 2014, and for its album awards since June 2015.

If RIAA and BPI had not incorporated this data their awards would have become outmoded. They would have been ignoring the most popular ways of consuming music and it would have been hard for artists to reach unit thresholds on the sales of physical products alone. However, while the purchase of downloads is akin to the purchase of vinyl records and CDs, streaming works on a different model. Songs and albums are not

paid for on a per-item basis. Consumers either pay a monthly subscription to access the 'premium' versions of the streaming sites or alternatively no fee is paid if they elect 'advertising-supported' versions instead.

RIAA and BPI have nevertheless chosen to view each stream as a sale. RIAA's initial calculation for singles was that 100 streams would equal one download sale (RIAA 2014b). In January 2016, this was increased to 150 streams per download (RIAA 2019a). This was reflective of the increased popularity of streaming, rather than indicating any change in breakeven points or royalties paid to artists. BPI's ratios are based on those established by the Official Charts Company for its singles chart. They began with a 100:1 streams-to-sale ratio, which was increased to 150:1 in January 2017, and was subsequently recalibrated in June 2018 to a rate for subscription services of 100:1 and for ad-supported of 600:1 (BPI 2019). The organizations have different criteria for album awards. RIAA's calculation is '1,500 on-demand audio and/or video song streams = 10 track sales = 1 album sale' (RIAA 2019). BPI quantify the twelve most-streamed tracks from the standard version of an album; the two most popular songs are then 'down-weighted' and made equivalent to the average figure of the ten remaining tracks; the total is then divided by 1,000 and added to the physical and download sales of the album to determine the award (BPI 2017). Ignoring the fact that many listeners consume streams via playlists rather than in the form of older recording formats, this convoluted methodology has been introduced in the UK in an attempt to distinguish between the consumption of streams as 'singles' or as 'albums'. RIAA and BPI also diverge when it comes to video streaming. RIAA includes 'official label/company videos' towards certification, but 'user generated videos' do not qualify (RIAA 2019a). As of January 2019, BPI does not incorporate video streams in their certifications.

As these fluctuating and diverging criteria make clear, there are problems in equating sales with streams. Nevertheless, there are ways in which download and streaming data provide a more accurate picture of the sales and usage of music than has previously been available. When it comes to downloading, no reserves can be held against sales, thus the tally that goes towards the sales award is more in keeping with royalties that artists receive. In respect of streaming, the access-based figures help to remove some doubts that might previously have been held about the use value of a record. This factor is somewhat negated, however, due to the fact that if a song is played for at least 30 seconds and then skipped it will still count towards the sales awards (Official Charts Company 2017). There are also new problems to consider. Is the consumption of audio streams via playlists passive? Does the inclusion of YouTube figures in RIAA's tally reflect music usage or are some videos clocking up viewing figures because they offer some mild curiosity or titillation to the consumer? In addition, the omission of user generated videos hints at the digital world that escapes copyright and royalties.

Ultimately, while the trade bodies have embraced digital formats, it can be argued that they have done so without acknowledging the major changes these technologies have entailed. Moreover, they continue to honour both the sales and streams of intangible digitized music with an award that is physical and which celebrates the mass reproduction of singles and albums.

### *Ignoring change in the digital era*

The sales awards have become deliberately old fashioned. During the 1980s and 1990s most of the awards handed out were framed compact discs, appropriately so as this was the leading format for much of this period. Today, despite the fact that vinyl record sales

are dwarfed by streaming activity and remain lower than the sales of compact discs, it is this format that is being used for the awards. Many of the trophies look similar to those given to Elvis Presley in the 1950s. They feature vinyl discs that have been metalized, tinted and framed. This peculiarity is being taken to extremes in America, where some artists are being awarded vinyl albums to mark the popularity of digital single releases.<sup>3</sup> The awards have always been symbolic rather than functional objects,<sup>4</sup> representing an industry that is focused on the sales of recordings and in which the record company is the locus of power. In the digital era this symbolic function has been extended: in the return to the vinyl record, the sales awards imply continuity in a world that has changed.

One striking thing about IFPI's definition of commercial success as 'breaking an artist to Gold or Platinum status in an individual market' is that it is being applied in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The awards are derived in concept and appearance from the physical record, yet since the early 2000s overall sales of physical records have been in decline and recordings have formed a decreasing share of total music industry revenue. The latter transformation is, of course, one of the reasons why IFPI is upholding the sales award. They wish to perpetuate the idea that recording remains at the centre of the popular music industries.

As record sales have declined in importance, their breakeven point has become more variable. Although it was possible for Frith and Laing to suggest figures in the 1970s, there can be no such certainty today. It is possible to make and distribute

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<sup>3</sup> For examples see the website for the official framing company, 'Jewel Box Platinum': <http://jewelboxplatinum.com>.

<sup>4</sup> It has never been possible to play a gold disc: they are rendered inert by their coating and due to the fact they have been framed. In addition, the awards have usually housed the wrong record: the disc in the frame rarely corresponds with the disc whose sales were being honoured: a close look at its grooves gives away this fact.

recordings cheaply. On the other hand, because of the openness of the digital environment, huge expenditure can be involved in trying to ensure that a new record is heard. According to IFPI, a newly signed artist can cost up to \$2m promote (IFPI 2016: 6). With an average dealer price for an album of \$8, this would mean that 250,000 copies (and streaming equivalents) would need to be sold for the project to break even. Some records have to sell far more than this. For example, it has been suggested that Lady Gaga's record label Interscope spent between \$25 and \$30 million on the production and promotion of her 2013 album *Artpop* (Houghton 2013b). With such a figure it would be virtually impossible for an artist to earn back their recording advance through sales alone, even if reaching gold or platinum status.

The widely publicized 360° deal is indicative of the fact that record companies have searched beyond recordings for sources of income. In return for providing marketing, promotion and touring support for an act, the record company expects a share of an artist's profits from areas such as merchandising, brand sponsorship and ticket sales. In these instances, it is particularly problematic to equate 'commercial success' with a sales tally, as breakeven points are spread across a broad spectrum of activities (Pakinkis 2015: 15). These 360° deals obviously affect artists' incomes too: the sources of revenue has diversified, but artists are paying back money from more areas as well.

This is not the case for all performers, however. Some of them have gained increased control of their careers. Here too, we can witness a turn away from a concentration on record sales. In 2007, Prince's album *Planet Earth* was not sold in record stores or via websites in the UK; it was instead given away free with the *Mail on Sunday*. In return Prince was reported to have earned £250,000 from the newspaper (Forde 2012: 39). In 2013, Jay-Z distributed one million copies of his album *Magna*

*Carta Holy Grail* for free to Samsung customers. His fee for doing so was a rumoured \$5m from the company. While these 'sales' were ruled out of his *Billboard* chart placing, they were said to have earned him a 'multi-platinum award for his wall' (Houghton 2013a).

Some artists have reduced the bottom line. Released in 2007, Radiohead's *In Rainbows* was first issued according to a 'pay what you want' basis. The album is reported to have turned a profit on these initial sales alone, largely because Radiohead had few production and distribution overheads, while the novel sales tactic generated a considerable amount of free publicity (Wikström 2013: 113). In 2013, another innovative method of release received widespread attention. Amanda Palmer was dropped by her label for selling only 25,000 copies of an album, a figure far below sales award status (Palmer 2013). She was nevertheless able to generate large revenues for her subsequent album, *Theatre is Evil*, by approaching customers directly. Rather than buying a ready-made CD, they were asked to donate funds towards its creation, and would eventually receive a copy when the album was complete. Palmer managed to raise \$1,192,793, constituting 'the biggest music crowd-funding project to date' (Palmer 2013). The money came from 24,883 fans, roughly the same number that led to her being dropped (Palmer 2013).

It has therefore been possible for some artists to escape the gold and platinum standard. In some instances they have not needed to sell their recordings to make money; in others they have not needed to attain award status to generate a profit. For other artists, the maintenance of these awards is problematic. They further the recording industry's inference that downloading and streaming are akin to the sale of a physical product. This, in turn, has helped the companies to uphold traditional contractual policies. While some new signings, independent acts and superstar artists

might be able to set their terms in accordance with the digital environment, this is not the case for the majority of artists who were contracted before downloads and streaming were popularized (Ingham 2018). Despite the fact that their record companies' manufacturing and distribution overheads have been vastly reduced and their digital products should not warrant deductions, they will be receiving the same royalty rates for downloads and streams as for physical releases.

While the sales awards provide a mask of continuity, there is also some truth in IFPI's arguments. The revenue generated by recordings might be declining in importance, but recording itself remains primary in the music industries. In most cases, live tours and merchandising follow on from the creation of new records, rather than the other way around. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that these sales awards continue to be embraced by the majority of artists who are in a position to attain them. RIAA and BPI have created Facebook pages for their trophies, providing photographs of winners receiving their tinctured discs. Moreover, it can be argued that as well as there being a commercial need for records to achieve golden status, there is a cultural one as well.

### *The golden audience*

The large sales and streaming tally required to receive a sales award is, in part, a result of the poor success ratios of the recording industry. This is a business that requires vast returns from its successful artists to offset losses from its failures. It is centred on hits: records that are ideally successful on a global scale. When it comes to audiences, there are both pessimistic and optimistic ways of reading this situation. The pessimistic view is that the bigger a hit becomes, the more it is forced upon the public. The recordings that receive gold awards are the ones that are most enmeshed within the capitalist

system. What is selected for this process is music that, rather than challenging capitalist ideology, renders it safe. Classically, this is the 'hypodermic syringe' model of culture in which popular music acts as an opiate of the people (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 5).

The optimistic way of looking at this situation is to suggest that the public is active in its response to popular music. It is even possible to argue that the more successful a recording is, the more it becomes the people's music. Contrary to the belief that the public is injected with the biggest hits, it is when a record attracts a large audience that it escapes the chicanery of the record and media industries. Although records can be hyped into the charts, they can only become hits on a golden scale if they genuinely connect with the public (Dannen 2013: 15; 'How to Make a Number One Record' 2015)

What happens when a recording receives a mass audience? Some artists have talked with enthusiasm about the ways their work is taken over and reworked by the public. Manfred Mann claimed that 'the more people buy a record, the more successful it is – not only commercially but artistically' (Frith 1978: 202), while Imogen Heap has stated 'unless somebody else hears it, music is like a joke without a punchline' (Kappala-Ramsamy 2010). It has been suggested that the more successful a recording is, the more it becomes public property. Speaking of their hit 'One Day Like This', Mark Potter of Elbow has stated, 'We don't own that song any more [...]. It's grown legs and it's doing its own thing' (Lynskey 2014: 41). Danny Boyle was able to convince Mike Oldfield to perform *Tubular Bells* at the London Olympics in 2012 because this platinum record 'does belong to Britain' ('Tubular Bells' 2013).

This leaves us in a peculiar situation. The gold disc is reflective of a record industry that sets the bar for success at an artificially high level. Yet when it comes to

audiences the consequences can be viewed positively. It results in music that has a dynamic public life. By the same measure, some of the 21<sup>st</sup> century business models cannot be viewed as being successful. The album releases by Amanda Palmer and Prince, for example, are better known for their economic strategies than for their music; they have had little public resonance. The gold disc may be bogus, biased, duplicitous, capitalistic and out-of-date, but perhaps it also results in something that is good. What if the most useful popular music comes from stars who are golden and whose record sales are huge?

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