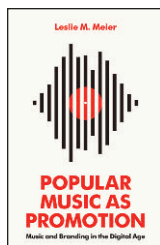


## Review



**Popular Music as Promotion: Music and Branding in the Digital Age.** By Leslie M. Meier. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016. 216 pp. ISBN: 9780745692227.

For nearly twenty years, scholars and critics have debated the central post-Napster proposition: “the music industry is dead.” Current theoretical and expository analyses regarding digitization’s impact on the music industry remain focused on the ongoing transmutations happening not only to the music industry’s external appearance, but to its internal structure as well (Knopper, 2009; Sterne, 2012; Arditì, 2014; Morris, 2015; Witt, 2015). Leslie Meier’s *Popular Music as Promotion: Music and Branding in the Digital Age* contributes a pertinent supplement to these exchanges; a novel theoretical thrust allows her to approach this debate with fresh insights. Drawing on a critical theory and political economy conceptual framework, she analyzes the empirical data collected from attending numerous music industry conferences, analyzing popular and trade press coverage, and conducting 36 interviews with promotional and music industry professionals from Los Angeles, New York, and Toronto.

As the music industry rallied against file-sharing platforms and their alleged ability to supersede the industry’s long-standing gatekeeping initiatives, Meier argues, an important if less spectacularly-covered business partnership was taking shape—a marriage of sorts. In lieu of simply testing the veracity of the claims made by the music industry and its defenders, Meier offers a sharp analysis of this business coupling to emphasize the significance of their corporate love story; while Napster was busy courting the contempt of copyright owners by leading the charge in facilitating peer-to-peer file sharing, the music industry and promotional industry were quietly eloping.

Meier’s revelation about music and branding’s corporate love affair thus poses an important question: What if the music industry was never really dead, but instead, it got re-married? Indeed, the industry got divorced from its restrictive relationship to its previous business model and started enjoying a revitalized love life with its new model, one based not on the production and distribution of physical goods, but on the ability to gather, maintain, and exploit an expansive copyright repertoire. The result, argues Meier, is that the oligarchic stronghold previously held by the majors has grown stronger, not weaker. Indeed, this relationship is not, as some would argue, a simple merger between the music industry and the promotional industry, but rather the “colonization of the former by the latter” (p. 12).

In the book’s introductory chapter, Meier explains that the corporate coupling between the music and promotional industries has transformed popular music and those who perform/produce it into “vehicles for promoting all manner of media and consumer products” (p. 12). This, she claims, calls for a revivification of Horkheimer and Adorno’s culture industry thesis. In Chapter One, “From Commodities to

Commercials?” Meier champions the contemporary value of the culture industry thesis for scrutinizing popular music’s transition from a mass-produced, standardized commodity product in the twentieth century, to a vital component of most commercial branding strategies in the twenty-first century, and weaves this thread of reasoning through the remainder of her book.

Building upon this logic in Chapter Two, “Capitalizing on Music,” Meier investigates the supposed death of the industry and introduces what is arguably the book’s most vital concept: the artist brand. The artist brand is the child conceived as a result of the marriage between the branding and music industries, and constitutes the primary basis for monetization and capitalization in the digital era (p. 44). It is under this promotionally-informed approach to producing music, Meier argues, that “artists are rendered branding vehicles, which has, in effect, transformed much popular music into a form of promotion” (p. 154).

In Chapter Three, “Brands: The New Gatekeepers,” Meier maintains her focus on the impact of branding imperatives within the music industry and turns her attention to a much-vaunted discourse that arose from the smouldering ashes of the supposed death of the music industry: advertising is the new radio. She agrees that during the reshuffling of the music industries, traditional intermediaries were replaced and, at times, altogether lost, but, she argues, this doesn’t mean that the industry has completely rid itself of gatekeepers. In fact, she suggests that the gatekeeping process has intensified as branding logics increasingly undergird the majority of the music industry business practices and introduce reams of market-oriented objectives for artists to meet. Record labels have been remade into retailers for music brands, according to Meier, which has widespread implications for musicians and fans alike (p. 104). So, what is ultimately at stake? The most obvious outcome is a narrowing of musical diversity and a propensity toward sonic sameness. For example, Meier argues that, while musicians have made, and will continue to make, dissenting music, it is less and less likely that it will be heard by a large audience if the imperative to sign a musician is contingent upon their potential to produce licensable—ergo, “happy”—music.

“Flexible’ Capitalism and Popular Music,” the book’s fourth chapter, is arguably Meier’s most theoretically dense, but nevertheless accessible, exposition. She employs David Harvey’s (1990; 2005) notions of “flexible accumulation” and “accumulation by dispossession” to explain the intensification of control that comes with the “binding of recording artists ever more tightly to single music companies” (p. 133). She aligns herself with the historical materialist perspective of Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter (2003), and stresses the importance of recognizing that the system within which music is produced and consumed is itself a product of history, of “decisions made by people and not nature” (p. 128), as opposed to viewing our current era as a clean break from Fordism.

In the concluding passages, Meier acknowledges that she would have liked to include a more thoroughgoing analysis of musician labour, but contends that it’s simply outside the scope of this particular project (pp. 148–151). The book argues that these newly adopted branding strategies have completely transformed the role of the musician, as now it is the brand that “develops the strategy, chooses the artist and sets the

terms of the relationship” (p. 162). If such a transformation has indeed taken place—and one could easily argue that it has—it is all the more necessary to include, if not foreground, a discussion of musician labour. A study whose major conceptual thrust is the artist brand, should not only include musicians in their list of potential interview subjects, but should also include a more comprehensive analysis of the labour they contribute. However, while her assessment of musician labour in the book’s concluding section is cursory, it nevertheless provides a productive starting point for future research and would produce an excellent coda to her existing analysis. This is a minor criticism of what is otherwise a strong and nuanced account of the decisive shifts that have occurred in the music and branding industries during the post-Napster era.

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