

Major Record Labels vs. Independent Record Labels

Which is the better option for an upcoming artist?

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Introduction

Have you ever wondered if your favorite musician was signed to a major record label or independently owned? “The more commercial success increased, the more aspiring recording artists appeared... A record deal became the prize for aspiring artists, a symbol of success and validations, and a gateway to fame and fortune (Bruenger 111).” In the 21st century recording artists have shown that they don’t need backing from a label and have redefined success in the music industry. An artist can find success both signed to a major label or independently owned, but there are positives and negatives to both.

As a recording artist and live performer in hip-hop, I’ve met many successful individuals that either signed to a major record label or signed independently. I managed to get the first glimpse of what makes a great artist firsthand and wondered what route would be the most appropriate for an upcoming artist that wants to become mainstream. As independence became more of a trend in the eyes of pop-culture, artist have found new ways to increase popularity without the use of a major label. Major record labels seemed to always have an advantage over the public and have been trying to compete with advancements that have been made available. The one thing I noticed that these two types of labels had in common was that they both had serious teams that were committed to propelling the artists they were working with in the right direction. Their passion alone behind the scenes, is what really pushes an artist into the mainstream, and they have impacted the way a modern artist is able to assess music.

Innovative changes that have been made to the music industry have made it easier for the modern music consumer to truly appreciate the experience of an artists' music. The empowerment of music has directly affected the technological aspects, specific styles within subgroups, live performing and ways that an artist can monetize off their career. Proving that these certain factors play an important role in what makes an artist truly successful.

The Empowerment of Music & Technology

Music has empowered people throughout the ages, discovering new innovations to create, share and promote breaking artists. The way that people consume music plays a major role in the longevity of influence that an artist or record has on an audience. The consumption of music has always been subject to change as mentioned in the book *The Music Business: Career Opportunities and Self-Defense*:

Innovations changed the character of the record business. The 10- inch LP was eliminated in favor of the 12 inch record, and stereo, or 2 channel, sound was introduced. Today LPs have been largely replaced by cassette tapes and CDs... the manufacturing process is different in each case, there still needs to be a 2 track master tape in order to manufacture.

(Weissman 38-42)

Throughout decades advancements in modern technology have made it easier for recording artists to create, share and promote their content solidifying a more concrete connection with not only their craft but their audience. The empowerment of music through motivation can be recognized through a quote by the independent artist Russ, who says, "Joey was my early indicator of how tangible the dream was... I felt even closer to my dreams. In 2018

at my sold-out show at the theater at Madison Square Garden... the delusion paid off.” (Russ 31)

This passage exemplifies the empowerment of music through consistent motivation because having met someone who has already found success in independency, Russ made his dream tangible through proper networks and communication. The music industry is currently technologically based, utilizing streaming platforms, social media, and promotional tools.

Technology overall has reshaped how we not only experience music but has made it easier for artists to produce and distribute their music. The internet alone changed the entire structure of how music is discovered and distributed through sheer online networking. The ever-changing advancements within the music industry can be identified in the book *The Music Business: Career Opportunities and Self-Defense*:

The more isolated the place that you live in, the more useful the net can be as a form of contact, interaction, and general networking... it is quite possible that the role of large record companies will change during the next few years. Rather than maintaining their current position as a bank or a loan company that lends artists money to record, they may find themselves in more of a partnership situation, with the artist handling financing of the recording, and the record company involved in promotion and distribution. (Weissman 324-325)

Technology has reshaped how people experience music, whether positive or negative, because the power of networking and clear communication proves to build a wider audience. Weissman’s predictions on the shift in the music business is accurate because record labels focus on streaming numbers and social media followers when promoting and distributing music since the publication was released. This shift is important because it identifies how much control

major record labels have currently and how much they've lost due to online resources and networks.

Style & Subculture

Through style and subculture artists can appeal to larger communities and audiences. Hebdige says, "We are interested in subculture- in the expressive forms and rituals of those subordinate groups- the teddy boys and mods and rockers, the skinheads and the punks- who are alternatively dismissed, denounced and canonized (Hebdige 2)." This quote directly ties into building a fan base because through the calculation of style and subculture an artist can find their specific niche. Hebdige also says, "those emphatic combinations of dress, dance, argot, music, etc... choices contain a whole range of messages which are transmitted through the finely graded distinctions of a number of interlocking sets- class and status, self image and attractiveness, etc (Hebdige 101)." This quotation relates to style creating a message for an audience and can relate to the appeal of an artist being multifaceted through live performances or through digital content. Lastly, Hebdige states, "it is through the distinctive rituals of consumption, through style, that the subculture at once reveals its 'secret' identity and communicates its forbidden meaning (Hebdige 103)." Hebdige's observation on style and subculture can relate to the amount of influence or appeal an artist may have to their specific community and relates to the imaging and branding that both independent and major labels use to increase an artist's music, merchandise, and tickets sales.

Live Performing & Monetization

Artists make most of their money from live performances and merchandising. Popyk says, “Attitude will get you as many gigs as your talent, marketing, expertise, and sales skills (Popyk 55).” This excerpt discusses the seriousness of live performing as well as an artists’ ego having negative impacts in their monetization. Leaving a good impression is most important, especially when you’re entertaining an audience that solely came to see you perform live. Popyk also says, “The more people who hear you, the better chances of getting more work. Maybe not better work, but certainly more work...getting exposure will get you more work... your only as good as your last gig (Popyk 138-140).” The importance of leaving a good impression is viable for a rising artist because it exposes their music to a new audience and potentially increases their monetary sales. Increasing sales monetization is most important for an artist because it creates a demand on their products. Popyk states, “Selling yourself and your band takes a certain amount of assertiveness... if you really want to increase bookings dramatically get those people who said, ‘I’ll think about it’ on the phone one more time. Be persistent (Popyk 82-83).” Persistence plays a major role in an artists’ career because it creates new opportunities and expectations for a new audience or market. Lastly Popyk says, “As a professional musician, you need to treat it like a business. That means networking, promo kits, demo CDs, your own PR program, business cards, brochures, voicemail (or a decent answering machine) e-mail, a website and a business plan (Popyk 142).” This quote is important because it details promotional tools artists use to build and interact with their fan base. Live shows and merchandise deeply impact the connection that is formed between an artist and their fans by creating an authentic experience for both parties.

The History & Impact of Major Record Labels

Every artist's dream is fame and fortune, and record labels exist not only to make an artist mainstream, but to monetize off their releases and publicity. Contractual agreements are extremely important within the music industry, as mentioned in the book *This Business of Music: The Definitive Guide to the Music Industry*:

Under the standard agreement, the artist is engaged to render his or her personal services as a recording artist on an exclusive basis for the purpose of making recordings from which records can be derived. The term records encompasses not only traditional compact discs, cassettes, and other "hard" devices, including videos that contain the artist's recorded performances, but also interactive media (e.g., Enhanced CDs) and electronic transmissions (e.g., online digital audio, whether or not downloadable). The artist is required to appear at times and places designated by the record company to perform for the purpose of making recordings to be delivered to the record company. These recordings must be acceptable to the record company as being "technically and commercially satisfactory." Although the standard agreement states that the musical selections to be recorded will be selected by the record company, in practice the company may give the artist the right to select compositions to be recorded, subject to the record company's approval. (Krasilovsky, M. William, et al. 14)

Major record labels typically help an artist gain more visibility through contractual agreements and typically offer large amounts of money to cover any expenses with interest. Major labels can only make or break an artist. Weissman states, "There is a wide variety of record companies in North America, some of them are small specialty...but there are five giant, multi-national record companies that record virtually all styles of music and have worldwide distribution... (Weissman 318)." This quotation describes the history of record labels as a

business and the control that companies have over smaller divisions. More than often a record label may purchase an independent label to add to their smaller division or catalog. Major labels obtain smaller divisions, as mentioned in the book *The Music Business: Career Opportunities and Self-Defense*:

An independent label may wish to sell its company to a major label for two reasons:

(1) The label wants to obtain some cash. Even successful companies often have to reinvest their money in the business, so that the owners are sitting on tremendous assets without having much cash. (2) The smaller label may want to acquire better financing in order to enter the bidding race for acquiring major-league talent that is leaving their current label and seeking new deals. When these deals are made, the old management is usually retained, and the larger company always uses the rhetoric that the company will still have the same image and policies that it had when it was an independent. (Weissman 44)

Major label conglomerates merging with independent labels exemplifies the amount of power that is given to executives and the control that they have over our current music market. Lastly, Weissman says, “Major record companies all have publishing divisions. Most of these operations are there simply to pick up the publishing of some of the artists who record for the company... (Weissman 48).” The impact that publishing divisions have on the distribution of music plays a major role in what it means to break an artist, because through their vast network they are able to promote music globally through various forms of media. Having a major record label backing opens an artist up to opportunities that an independent artist would have difficulty acquiring. “Long-term survival of firms in the cultural industries depends heavily on these selection capabilities, since artistic creativity is a resource that firms can neither control nor create, they can only select and drive it to a market (Ordanini 84).” The creative process and the

market drive within the music industry is discussed as well as the control that an artist has over their own creative works. Different from independently run labels, major record labels have control over their artists' overall image and often control whatever damage an artist inflicts to their image and likeness. "Society sees artists as irresponsible eccentrics, if the arts system is shaped by big companies that value only the big hit superstar (Ivey 58)." Societal views depict the actions that major recording artists make as a form of entertainment because it appeals more to a public narrative. Bruenger says, "When the artist becomes the product, there is a risk of being consumed (Bruenger 181)." Signing to a major record label puts an artist's craft in jeopardy, resulting in lackluster music that might not appeal to your audience. Major record labels rely on an artist's ability to produce musical recordings as well as the demand that their new music has amongst the population which typically varies.

Major Recording Artists in Pop-Culture

Record labels have not only left an impact on the way that we digest music but have also created new opportunities for artists. Recording artists, such as Jay Z, Jeezy, Big Sean, 50 Cent, and Lil Wayne, have found success signing to a major record label within pop-culture. Jay Z embodies what it means to be successful with support from a major record label, as mentioned by Roc-nation:

Songwriters Hall of Fame inductee and 23-time GRAMMY award-winner, Shawn "JAY Z" Carter has been a dominant force in popular culture. With multiple businesses and accolades across the recording industry and strong relationships with global investment leaders like Warren Buffet, JAY Z personifies the "American Dream" . . . Among his achievements, Carter has served as President of Def Jam Recordings, launched the successful

“Made In America” festival, acquired luxury spirits brand Armand De Brignac and maintains his role as majority owner in the 40/40 sports clubs.” (Roc-nation et al.)

Jay Z’s accolades as a major recording artist helps support the claim that there is success in signing to a major label because of his current positions in business and entrepreneurship.

Jay Z’s success as an artist/ entrepreneur, signed to a major record label, reflects that there is success in signing to a major label. Rapper, Jeezy, is another example of success signing to a major record label as mentioned in *Variety Magazine*:

Veteran rapper Jeezy...has signed a multi-faceted contract with Def Jam Recordings that includes album releases as well as a consultancy with the label he has called home since 2005. The move was announced today by Def Jam’s interim Chairman & CEO, Jeff Harleston. In his new role, Jenkins will serve senior advisor to the chairman on matters related to A&R and artist development... ‘Jeezy is so meaningful to Def Jam; it’s legacy, it’s past, present and future,’ said Harleston. “Jeezy has always impressed me with his talent, his tenacity, his instincts, his entrepreneurial spirit, and his leadership. I’m a huge believer in trusting, supporting and enfranchising artists and bringing them into the process. But of course, Jeezy is so much more than an artist. He is family. (Aswad)

Jeezy’s success is exemplary to an artist that wants to become multifaceted in the music business within a major record label. This opportunity built a seemingly stronger connection between artist and label, which is important when a label is scouting new musical talent to add to their roster. In relation to Def Jam as a major record label, Big Sean’s departure is mentioned in *Revolt Magazine*:

Big Sean has parted ways with Kanye West’s G.O.O.D. Music record label.... Sean signed to Kanye’s G.O.O.D. Music label in 2007, releasing his debut studio album Finally

Famous four years later. Hall of Fame, Dark Sky Paradise, I Decided and Detroit 2 were also released via the record label, as well as his mixtapes, TWENTY88 with Jhené Aiko and Double or Nothing with Metro Boomin...Sean is still signed to Def Jam Recordings and What You Expect was released under “FF to Def Entertainment,” which could be the name of his new label imprint.” (Moorwood)

Big Sean’s departure from G.O.O.D Music, an independent label with support from a major label, serves as an example of an artist maintaining success even after parting ways. Maintaining ties with major labels gives an artist an advantage to negotiate or renegotiate existing agreements between both parties contractually. Another example of an artist maintaining ties to a major record label can relate to the career shift of rapper 50 cent, as mentioned in *Rolling Stone Magazine*:

50 Cent has severed ties to Interscope Records, as well as its Eminem– and Dr. Dre–helmed imprints, in favor of an independent distributor. All future Fiddy releases, as well as those by artists on his G-Unit label, will now come out via Caroline...Just because he’s left the label, though, doesn’t mean 50 Cent has relinquished all major label ties. His distributor, Caroline, is part of the Independent Services division of Capitol Records, which is itself a part of the Universal Music Group. (Grow)

50 Cent’s decision to depart from Interscope and his arrival to Caroline proves that major label conglomerates are connected within the music market. The success of an artist is established through meaningful connections, which is more valuable for an up-and-coming artist looking to sign to a major label. But not every artist has signed a great deal with a major record label and the first artist that comes to my mind is Lil Wayne, as mentioned by *Billboard*:

Lil Wayne has reportedly scored a big win in his ongoing legal battle with Cash Money Records... Court documents filed by Wayne's attorney Howard King (obtained by The Blast) claim that all sides in the lawsuit were willing to move forward and dismiss the suit. Sources also claim that Wayne walked away with a settlement of "well over \$10 million"... Wayne and Birdman's strained relationship has played out in the public for years. In 2015, Wayne sued Cash Money for \$51 million, claiming the record label violated his contract terms and withheld tons of money after delaying his album *Tha Carter V* several times. (Penrose)

Contractually, major record labels expect an artist to not understand every aspect of their agreement which can impact one's music career negatively. Close relationships and good business are bound to impact the trust and success that an artist has towards their label because major labels seek to control popular prospects in the music industry. Lil Wayne's negative relationship with his label influenced more artists into signing independently and also provoked artists into properly understanding what exactly they were signing after being discovered by a major label. Major Record Labels, for decades, have been discovering successful artists that can appeal to the masses as well as provide substantial monetary compensation back into the label. The success of Jay Z, Jeezy, Big Sean, 50 Cent, and Lil Wayne help assess the claim that there is success in signing to a major record label, despite negative relations and outcomes.

The Rise of Independent Record Labels

"Artists create (or produce) music, which consumers pay to listen to (and enjoy) (Gopal 1504)." The entire music industry relies on this notion whether signed or not, but independent artists rely heavier on consumer consumption. Absher says, "Without radio play, word of mouth

and community network of informal venues were essential to the musicians (Absher 85).”

Success independently signed is defined by the resources that are readily available for an artist, with support from their community and audience. Currently social media is used to engage and interact with your audience if you’re a recording artist. “Content was traditionally paired with a distribution channel, consumers can now access content from various media... An increase in distribution channels has enabled media companies to transmit vast amount of information (Asai 473).” Currently, independent artists have access to various media outlets, which effected the way music became popularized. For decades, artists have been reliant on a major record label deal and as of recently, more and more artists are going independent. The success in signing independently is mentioned in *This Business of Music: The Definitive Guide to the Music Industry*:

True independents, although numbering in the thousands, are capturing less of the total cash flow of the industry. Still, the growing independent sector comprises \$2.5 to \$3 billion of the U.S. music market... Certain smaller independent publishers and even some individuals have, like the majors, engaged in a deliberate course of investment in copyrights and interests in copyrights... Their principal interest, of course, lies in established musical compositions rather than untried, unproven ones.” (Krasilovsky, M. William, et al. 269-270)

Independent labels might not be as well known globally, but there is success in independency now more than ever. Major record labels have control over the product and distribution of albums, as revealed in *The Music Business: Career Opportunities and Self-Defense*:

Even relatively strong independent labels in the United States are now being entirely or partially distributed by the majors... another factor that limits independence of the

independents is that some of them have P&D (production and distribution) deals with the major labels. In these deals the companies pay a percentage usually in the neighborhood of 15 to 20 percent to the major labels, who then actually press and distribute their product... independent labels have some advantages over the majors. Because their staff are relatively small, and their ownership is limited to a few people, independents can make quick decisions... majors tend to be frightened of experimentation because of the large investments that they make in each recording project, with its accompanying artists advances and advertising campaigns. (Weissman 299-300)

The relationship between major record labels and independent labels help identify potential risks and positive advantages in independency. The author articulates the risks of being independent that frighten major labels because such shifts can affect one's branding, public appeal, and monetization. The work ethic that goes into an independent label is unmatched in comparison to major record labels, as stated in *This Business of Music: The Definitive Guide to the Music Industry*:

Independent labels, however, continue to spring up in all parts of the world. These companies are spearheaded by people who are willing to invest time, money, and creative energy in pursuit of potential sales perhaps only in the low five figures— between, say, 10,000 and 50,000 and who often actively nurture new talent... only artists with a reasonable expectation of hundreds of thousands of sales are generally considered appropriate for inclusion in the priority catalogues of the majors and backed by expensive promotional campaigns.” (Krasilovsky, M. William, et al. 277)

The complication of signing independently is completely based on their labels budget and the artists' likeness to the proper audience. Excluding expensive promotional campaigns, independent labels have proved that they are here to stay relevant especially within pop culture.

Independent Recording Artists in Pop-Culture

Independent record labels have been rising in popularity as the way we consume music changes, appealing to artists who want ownership and more creative freedom. Tech N9ne, Russ, Chance the rapper, Wu tang Clan, and Mac Miller have all found success within independency. Tech N9ne, one of the wealthiest independent recording artists, is described by *Strange Music*:

The independent underground would not be what it is today without pioneers like Strange Music cofounder Tech N9ne. Tech's unparalleled tour schedule and signature rapid-fire "chopper" style combined with the business acumen of Strange Music CEO Travis O'Guin have molded Strange Music into the number one independent hip-hop label in the world. (Strange Music et al).

Tech N9ne's success as an independent artist reflects that there is success within an independent label and that the sky is the limit. Another artist that has found success as an independent artist is Russ, who is revolutionizing independency in the music industry. Russ stands as an inspiration for aspiring independent artists, as mentioned by *XXL*:

Very few artists in the rap game have had as much independent success as Russ, who formed a solid following with nearly a dozen indie mixtapes and a unique Soundcloud strategy, which saw him drop a single a week for consecutive years. Since 2011, when he first started releasing projects, the formula has paid off. (Coleman)

Russ' strategy has positively affected his music career and continues to defy what it means to be successful as an independent artist. In relation to Independency and successful music release strategies Chance the Rapper is recognized by *Billboard*:

Chance the Rapper's rise to stardom and commercial success as an independent artist is undoubtedly considered a fairytale within the indie music industry. While many independent artists strive to get where Chance is in his career, Apple Music's Carl Chery, suggested that level of success isn't realistic for everyone." (Billboard et al.)

Chance the Rapper broke through the media rather unrealistically compared to other striving independent artists. *Billboard* points out that his commercial success is rare, but incredibly realistic in our modern society where mastering media algorithms defines what is perceived as popular or enjoyable. I would consider Wu-Tang Clan as one of the earliest pioneers in hip hop independency. Major record labels fought to acquire Wu-Tang Clan, as mentioned by *The New York Times*:

Record companies ignored Wu-Tang's early demonstration tapes, RZA collected \$100 from each member to put out its debut single, "Protect Ya Neck." Selling copies from the trunks of cars, the group traveled from Virginia to Ohio, promoting itself to radio programmers. When "Protect Ya Neck" turned into a regional hit, the same labels that had rejected the group came calling, but now Wu-Tang had some leverage... WU-TANG eventually settled on Loud Records, an unproven independent company distributed by RCA that offered an unheard-of deal: the group would take less advance money in exchange for creative control and its members would be free to sign anywhere else as solo artists." (Diehl)

Through independency all artists were given creative control over their production after Major record labels didn't see demand for their music. Eventually label executives would see the

faults in their decision in not signing Wutang Clan, which was a huge mistake. Relating to signing independently, Mac Miller exemplifies success in the lane of independency as mentioned in *Fader Magazine*:

Mac Miller... has signed with Warner Bros. The deal, according to a source, is rumored to be worth some \$10 million dollars. Miller has, until now, been unconnected to a major label in 2014, focusing instead on a self-released tape, *Faces*, and developing artists with his own independent label, Remember Music. At Warner, Miller will keep the Remember imprint, where he'll be able to sign and develop new artists. Upcoming Miller releases, as well as releases from artists he signs, will come through REMember/Warner Bros... "Warner is the most independent thinking company I met with," Miller told *The FADER* in an email. "It is a partnership and now I can focus on building my label Remember through music and let them handle everything I don't like doing. Nothing will change in how I do things. (Zeichner)

Mac Miller signed to a major record label because no matter the success of his independency, signing to a major label has support and financial backing. Through Independency, artists have found success, finding new lanes to achieve accomplishments in streaming and record sales. The success of Tech N9ne, Russ, Chance the rapper, Wutang Clan, and Mac Miller help assess the claim that there is success in staying independent.

The Contrast

A recording artist can benefit being independently run or signed to a label. "Record label reliance on music video grew so extensive that video clips became a necessity for artists to achieve commercial success in the pop market (Banks 293)." This quote relates to commercial success in the 21st century because through video streaming apps like YouTube, an artist can

create their own videos as an opportunity to achieve equal success. Bruenger says, “Performer-listener experience is put into social context that music’s full potential for creating can be realized... in order for music experience to be effectively monetized audience size must increase (Bruenger 238).” The author discusses the direct relation to success in the music industry and how a recording artists can efficiently monetize off their creative works. “Highmarket concentration leads to homogeneity and standardization while low market concentration (competitive market) leads to innovation and diversity (Lopes 56).” Lopes’ text relates to the music market and how competitive markets create diversity in sound, which is what makes a recording artist more successful.

In the modern era, success is determined by the size of your audience and how many people are watching you whether it be in person or on social media. Success can be found in independence, but independent labels have limited cash flow and must work harder on pushing a release because they don’t have the same vast network that a major label would have. Success in independency is having achieved the same level or higher than an artist that has backing from a major label, which has been proved possible. There is success being signed to a major label, but with independency on the rise it threatens major record labels because of their contractual freedom and their control of distribution sales in music. Success being signed to a major record label is achieved by selling or over selling whatever numbers were discussed within their contract and their overall relevancy in the music market. Both independent record labels and major record labels have a unique network that communicates with an audience, but what’s important is the demand of an artist music. Record labels don’t create the artists audience, but only serve to push an artist’s music and image whether it’s on a larger or smaller scale. As an upcoming artist the lane of independence has proved to be more accessible, whereas the perks of

being signed to a major label seemed enticing and desirable. Whichever label an artist chooses may vary depending on their style, experience, and personal feelings. Contractual offers given often effect the artists decision on which is their best option, where success and failure can be found in both label options.

Conclusion

In Conclusion, the 21st century has shown that independent recording artists don't need backing from a major record label and have redefined success in the music industry. An artist can find success both signed to a major label and independently owned, but there are positives and negatives to both. Research shows that independent labels work harder to achieve the same influence, with a lower budget, as major record labels. The resources provided to major record labels give them a high advantage at becoming more successful than any independent artist, but with independence on the rise it challenges the pre-existing notion that signing to a major record label defined success. Both artists desire success and validation within the music industry where there is a glass ceiling based on market projections and product consumption. Many factors can contribute to the success of an artist including empowerment, technology, style, live performances, and promotional campaigns. Through these factors, artists can choose the best label option that seems fit, but there is always a chance of failure or success no matter which option is chosen.

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