

Maintaining Independence: Hip-Hop's New Business Model



- Quote by popular hip-hop producer *The Alchemist* (via Twitter)

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<http://www.independents.org>

“A record deal doesn’t make you an artist; you make yourself an artist” – Lady Gaga

Who needs a record deal anymore when you have Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and hundreds of other social media sites? The years of preparing a demo to send out to your favorite record labels A&R¹ are long gone thanks to all of the capabilities provided by the advancement of technology. With the click of a button, aspiring rappers, singers, and producers can upload their music for the world to see and hear, in hopes of building their own fan base and taking their talents to the next level. Once you have built your online presence, the most important part is maintaining it. Some of today’s biggest names in music all started through online communities, posting videos on YouTube, and releasing free mixtapes. But once the phone calls start to come in from major record executives, artists must make some tough decisions that will ultimately take their carriers to the next level, or result in them remaining YouTube favorites.

Independent can be defined as free from outside control; not depending on another's authority. In this case, “authority” is in reference to major record labels. We have all heard stories of record executives trying to court those who they think will bring success and fortune to their powerhouse. Generally, once the contracts have been signed that newly signed artist is given limited financial resources to record and placed on the backburner, never to be heard from again. In 2011, this no longer has to happen to those who never get their big break. In recent years, we have seen many artists step away from the 360 deals² and multi-album contractual obligations to create their own paths and in order to achieve individual success. Through artists such as Tech N9ne, Mac Miller, Odd Future, and more, today’s biggest names in hip-hop are all independent artists.

¹ A&R – Artist and Repertoire, responsible for listening to demos and placing records on albums

² 360 record deal – Recording contracts, which record companies broker deals with artists that are "all encompassing" in terms of revenue streams

“Industry rule #4080, record company people are shady!” – Q-Tip of A Tribe Called Quest

Each record label is different. Just because a major label signs you, doesn't mean you will be successful. Ultimately, it is up to the artist to find which label will be the best fit. For example, some labels are only good at getting their artist's radio play, but not TV time. Other labels don't have radio departments, but can get you in every major publication. It's often times hard to tell exactly how a major label will treat you and push your project once the excitement of signing you has gone away. This is because you never know if they see you as a long term success or as someone who is a short term investment who will help the company make back a certain percentage of money that was lost. Once all of the factors have been established, it is up to the artist and their management to make the right decision – should I stay or can I do this on my own? “One thing is for certain in this business: success is created by hit records and hard work. There is no other route to take. It is impossible to have one without the other to succeed”³ (Day, 733).

“A new generation of rappers is actively trying to build a new business model in which releasing oodles of free material online builds a fan base that paves the way for revenue streams: touring, merchandise, even something as old-fashioned as a record deal” – New York Times, November 19, 2011

The new generation of artists has made sure that they have a strong Internet presence. After all, this is where most of their fan base discovers them. Some of today's' top rappers including J. Cole, Wale, Machine Gun Kelly (MGK), and Big Sean all got their buzz through free mixtapes released online in recent years. With that, it was the free music that got all of these

³ Day, Wendy. *The Knowledge to Succeed*. Atlanta: Finders Keepers, 2011.

artists their record deals and attracted some of the industry's most important players to go on to mentor⁴ them.

One of the most exciting things about the new business model in hip-hop is that artists have the ability to tour and get radio play based on the strength of the records they are putting out for free on the Internet. In turn, major record labels begin to see the fans reactions to the records, sold out shows, strong buzz, and iTunes sales, which lead them to court artists to their labels. According to Jason Ross, head of media and strategic partnerships at concert promoter Bowery Presents in New York, "The frequency of events is growing with the demand to activate in markets outside the top five to 10 markets nationwide. So even developing artists that might not have been on the brand radar just a few years ago are seeing opportunities as well⁵" (Hampp, *Billboard Magazine*). In addition, not only are concert promoters benefiting from artists online success, but major brands are as well. This year alone, we have seen Adidas partner with Big Sean for a series of events and commercials⁶, MGK's song "Invincible" is featured in the new HTC Rezound phone commercial⁷, and Maybach Music Group rapper Meek Mill has partnered with Ecko Clothing. Richard Wallach, president of Live Nation, the world's largest live-events promoter, recently said at a conference, "[It's] important to get the record out there, if you're the brand and understand it's important to the artist, you're going to get so much more from that artist by helping them sell the record" (Hampp, *Billboard Magazine*).

The joint ventures that are being established between upcoming artists and major companies are definitely a winning combination, as Richard Wallach said. If an artist that is

⁴ Jay-Z is a mentor to J.Cole and signed him to Roc Nation, Rick Ross is a mentor to Wale and signed him to Maybach Music Group, Diddy is a mentor to MGK and signed him to Bad Boy Entertainment, and Kanye West mentors Big Sean and signed him to his G.O.O.D. Music imprint

⁵ Hampp, Andrew. "The Year In Branding: Top Tours And Festivals Got Closer With Sponsors This Year | *Billboard.biz*." *Billboard Magazine*. 8 Dec. 2011.

⁶ Link to Big Sean commercial - http://youtu.be/cXSw_iatE4g

⁷ Link to MGK commercial - <http://youtu.be/E5xAQ50KxuA>

signed to a major labels knows that they're only going to earn between 80 and 95 cents per CD sold, why wouldn't they use their talents to maximize their income elsewhere? In Andrew J. Rausch's book *I Am Hip-Hop* he says, "Hip-hop music is now used in advertisements for everything from automobiles to dish soap, and it is quoted and referenced freely in virtually every corner of American society. When right-wing conservative Bill O'Reilly says "Fiddy" Cent or country singer Trace Atkins uses the Keith Murray – originated phrase "badonka-donk" in a hit song, it is a testament to the power and universal nature of hip-hop music"⁸ (Rausch, xiv). With that being said, major brands are now opening their doors to a new and younger core target market, which in turn will help their incomes increase as well.

"Wiz Khalifa opened the door for rap's new generation of stars, and his labelmate Mac Miller kicked in another-without major-label distribution" – Elliott Wilson, Billboard Magazine⁹

When we think of the major hip-hop markets, we automatically say New York, Los Angeles, Miami, and Atlanta. The city of Pittsburgh can now be added to that list thanks to the independent powerhouse Rostrum Records. Founded in 1993, Rostrum Records has been developing and releasing music from some of our generations top artists including Wiz Khalifa (who is also signed to Atlantic Records) and Mac Miller (remaining independent via Rostrum). Through a string of mixtapes, Wiz Khalifa's name has been buzzing through the industry since 2006, but it wasn't until his debut album *Rolling Papers* was released in March 2011 which brought his career to another level largely due to the triple platinum single¹⁰ "Black and Yellow." Khalifa went on to sell 197,000 copies of his debut album in its first week of being released

⁸ Rausch, Andrew J. Introduction. *I Am Hip-Hop: Conversations On The Music and Culture*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2011. Xvi. Print.

⁹ Elliott Wilson. "The Year In Hip-Hop: Cash Money Records Senior VP Mel Smith On Lil Wayne, Drake, Nicki Minaj & The Label's Big Year | Billboard.biz." *Billboard Magazine*. 8 Dec. 2011.

¹⁰ "Black and Yellow" is #31 on Billboard's Year-End charts

based on his constant touring and the connection he has generated with his fans, whom he refers to as “Taylors.”¹¹

Unlike Wiz, Rostrum’s other priority artist, Mac Miller, a 19-year old white rapper from Pittsburgh, has decided not to sign with a major label and continue his journey organically. Since bursting onto the scene in mid 2010, Mac Miller found a way to develop a core audience through his YouTube-uploaded music videos and free mixtapes. With this success, Mac Miller has been able to headline two successful tours (including two separate stops in Ithaca, once in March 2011 and the other in May 2011) and has performed over 200 shows¹² since the end of 2010.

What most people don’t understand about Mac Miller is how he has been able to generate both the audience and revenue he has accumulated in the last year to become a household name. This can be answered in one word; connection. The amount of performances Mac has done clearly defines the connection he has with his fans and in return, they give back. For example, at Mac’s show in March at The Haunt in Ithaca, \$600 worth of T-Shirts were sold at \$20/shirt (total of 30 shirts sold)¹³. For a venue that most likely holds less than 200 people, this is incredible. In addition to that, Mac most likely received anywhere from \$2,000 to \$5,000 for his performance (based on the size of the venue). Mac’s ability to tour for three or more months consistently and make money on merchandise and appearance fees, there is no reason for him to sign with a major label.

Loyalty is the best way to describe Mac Miller’s fans and a large reason why this is the case is because most people who listen to his music can relate to him. Mac’s target audience is

¹¹ Short for Taylor Gang, Khalifa’s imprint and the school he attended, Taylor Allderdice High School

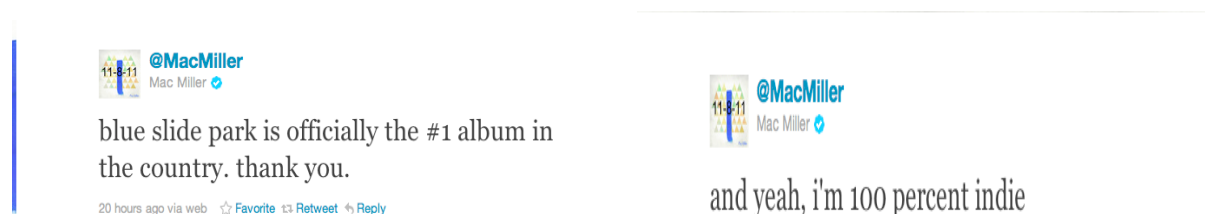
¹² "Allindstrom.com Presents: Peter Schwartz." Interview by Al Lindstrom. *Allindstrom.com*. 4 Oct. 2011.

¹³ Official Mac Miller merchandise can be found at <http://www.merchdirect.com/macmiller/> with products ranging from T-Shirt, Sweatshirts, Posters, and Accessories

teen's ages 16 to 24 who aspire to be rappers each day. Mac's success only encourages them more, which keeps them listening to his music. In addition, the things he raps about are some of the everyday activities his fans do such as party, talk to girls, and have fun. In almost every interview conducted, Mac Miller prides himself on not taking himself seriously and purely raps for the love of it. At Mac's show in March at The Haunt, I had the opportunity to sit down with him on behalf of Ithaca College's radio station 92 WICB and ask him about this very topic. His response was, "I want music to relate to as many people as possible. It's not a business move. Music is the one thing that is universal no matter what your background is and that's what I'm trying to do"¹⁴ (Cohen, 92 WICB).

So where does all of this loyalty and passion going to lead Mac Miller? To the #1 album in the country of course! On November 15, 2011, Mac Miller became the first independent artist since 1995 to have the #1 album in the country with the release of his debut album *Blue Slide Park* (150,000 copies sold first week). The last album to do this was Snoop Dogg & Tha Dogg Pound's "Dogg Pound."¹⁵

Below are excerpts (via Twitter) by Mac Miller, 9th Wonder, and Raekwon and their reactions to Mac Miller's success:



¹⁴ "Mac Miller Interview with 92 WICB." Personal interview. 18 Mar. 2011.

¹⁵ Caulfield, Keith. "Mac Miller Headed for Top of This Week's Billboard 200 | Billboard.biz." *Billboard Magazine*. 14 Nov. 2011.



@9thWonderMusic
9th Wonder ✓

Congrats [@MacMiller](#) for a #1 record....doing our way...#Indies

17 hours ago via web ☆ Favorite ↻ Retweet ↩ Reply



@Raekwon
RAEKWON ✓

Gotta respect that kid Mac miller's hustle, he did incredible numbers independently!
#Salute

“Aaron “Tech N9ne” Yates has consistently been one of hip-hop’s most successful artists over the last decade, yet casual rap heads wouldn’t even know it. For those who rely on radio and video outlets for their musical education, Tech N9ne and his Strange Music record label are mysteries.” – XXL Magazine, July 9, 2010

Whether Mac Miller is a fan of Tech N9ne or not, many of the moves he is making to be successful have been done on a larger independent scale already. Therefore, with the blueprint already drawn out Mac and other young independent artists can only prosper in the industry as time goes on.

Often credited as the #1 independent rapper in the world, Tech N9ne’s career is one worthy of being emulated and studied. In twelve years, Tech N9ne has been able to turn his Strange Music imprint into a \$15 million a year company consisting of music, the signing of artists, touring, merchandising, videos, social media, and more. All of these elements that

comprise the entertainment industry are rarely done in-house¹⁶ or in Kansas City, Missouri - two more statistics to add to Tech's resume.

The way Tech N9ne and Strange Music have been able to connect with their fans is ultimately what has gotten the label its success. Between 2007 and 2009, Tech N9ne consistently toured and performed over 600 shows. Unlike other artists who perform, take a few pictures, and then get on their tour bus and head to the next city, Tech N9ne takes his time and makes sure that everyone who came to see him can interact with him as well. "True friends to their fans, Tech and crew hold hour-long V.I.P. meet-and-greets before every show, for 30 to 300 fans, during which, for \$99, prepurchased-pass wearers can take pictures, get autographs and talk with all of the Strange artists, as well as walk away with \$200 worth of merchandise (posters, T-shirts, dog tags, CD samplers)"¹⁷ (Barone, XXL Magazine). Based on ticket sales from the tours, in addition to the merchandise sold and the meet-and-greet packages, Tech N9ne and Strange Music can earn between \$25,000 and \$125,000 a night on the road.

As an independent artist, your fans are ultimately defining your success. As a result, it is important to break down and understand the demographics of your core audience. For example, as previously stated, Mac Miller's target market is predominately white teen's ages 16 to 24 who enjoy partying. In addition, those who enjoy the always interesting and rambunctious independent group Odd Future, fronted by their fearless leader Tyler, The Creator, are most likely adolescent teens looking for an emotional outlet. Similarly, Tech N9ne's fan base consists of the same thing. In another XXL Magazine featured article, the journalist states that Tech's fan base is, "largely comprised of White kids with no qualms admitting to their minimal rap love

¹⁶ Take of tour of Strange Music headquarters - <http://www.mtv.com/videos/misc/672117/the-house-that-rap-built.jhtml#id=1667109>

¹⁷ Barone, Matt. "Strange Music, Most Known Unknown [Feature Story Excerpt] | *XXLMAG.COM*." *XXLMAG.COM*. 8 July 2010.

outside of SM, is an anomaly, much like Strange Music as a whole. But that's what make the company and its music so special."¹⁸ (Barone, XXL Magazine).

“Do you have a record contract? I have a recording agreement. What's the difference? One is an agreement and one is a contract! I am a man who deals by ear.” – Bob Marley

Once the all of the elements of connecting with fans have been established, the next step is to incorporate the record sales and business aspects into the equation. Not all record deals are the same. In music consultant Wendy Day's book *The Knowledge to Succeed* she says, “There is no such thing as a “standard” contract – a contract is just an agreement between two people that says who will do what by when, what happens if they do not do it, and how everyone gets paid. You don't get what you deserve in this business, you get what you negotiate.”¹⁹ (Day, 397).

As previously stated, almost all artists signed to a major label are engaged in a 360 deal (see footnote 2 for definition). This is largely due to the decline in record sales, downloading of music illegally, and a poor economy in recent years. Consequently, for these reasons alone is in large part why we have seen artists make the switch from major to indie, or simply enter the industry and remain independent. Once an artist decides to take the independent route, it is up to his or her team to successfully negotiate a distribution deal²⁰ in order to have their music reach the masses.

¹⁸ Barone, Matt. "Tech N9ne, Making Independence Work | XXL MAG.COM." *XXLMAG.COM*. 9 July 2010.

¹⁹ Day, Wendy. *The Knowledge to Succeed*. Atlanta: Finders Keepers, 2011

²⁰ Distribution Deal- An agreement between distribution companies and record labels/artists that gives them the right to sell the products to record stores that have an account with that distributor. The distributor takes a cut of income from each album sold and then pays the label/artist the remaining balance.

Networking: What are the top distribution companies that can help with my career?

Fontana Distribution: <http://www.fontanadistribution.com/>

Features:

- Ability to provide worldwide distribution
- Resources to develop and promote artists
- Partnership with Universal Music Group Distribution

Clients: Mac Miller, Juvenile, Tech N9ne, Pusha T

Red Music: <http://www.redmusic.com/>

Features:

- Division of Sony Music Distribution
 - Founded over 30 years ago
- Established in-house marketing & brand partnership agency

Clients: Mobb Deep, Odd Future, Bone Thugs-N-Harmony

In many cases, most distribution deals for established artists end up being an 80-20 split. This means that an artist makes 80% of all record sales and the record label/distributor makes 20%. Once again, all deals are different. Some of the most notable 80-20 splits occurred in the 90s with independent powerhouse Cash Money Records, No Limit Records, and Priority Records. In a recent interview on Sirius XM's Shade 45²¹, Tech N9ne stated that his distribution deal is closer to 100%, something that is extremely rare and a true testament to his independent success.

Below is a mathematical breakdown of how a distribution deal works and how it benefits independent artists:

As seen in Wendy Day's *The Knowledge to Succeed*

²¹ *Tech N9ne on Sway in the Morning*. YouTube. Web. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFVWbLI-kyM>>.

Physical Distribution	Digital Distribution (via iTunes)
Retail Price of CD = \$10	Retail Price of CD = \$9.99
Wholesale Price = \$6	iTunes Earning = \$6.99 (30% of \$9.99)
Artist Earning = \$4.80 (80% of \$6)	Artist Earning = \$5.59 (80% of \$6.99)
Distributor's Earning = \$1.20 (20% of \$6)	Distributor's Earning = \$1.40 (20% of \$6.99)

As you can see from the chart, digital sales and distribution allow artists to make 80 cents more than they would if their CD's were only sold physically. This is in large part due to the fact that when releasing a digital CD, you are only paying an upload fee, as opposed to having a wholesaler involved.

Based on the numbers provided, it is apparent why artists are not signing with major record labels anymore and remaining independent. Artists and their teams have begun to negotiate deals that allow them to profit off CD sales, tour both domestically and internationally, sell products, and live comfortably. Ultimately though, once the distribution deal is complete, it is up to the artists to invest in their own career in order to reach longevity. Studio sessions, travel, press, promotions, etc. will mostly likely have to be funded out-of-pocket.

“There’s some shit that’s organic that’s out there that you see, like, without record-company assistance. People are gravitating to it.” – 50 Cent, XXL Magazine, December 5, 2011

People are gravitating to artists who they can connect to through lyrics, emotions, and how they can relate to them. Below are a group of young, independent artists who are selling out shows in every city and making a strong presence in the hip-hop community.

Odd Future/Tyler, The Creator:

- Tyler, The Creator was the winner of the 2011 VMA for “Best New Artist” and nominated for “Video of the Year”
- Secured a label (Odd Future Records) distribution deal with Red Distribution
- Strong Internet presence

Kendrick Lamar:

- Protégé of Dr. Dre
- Featured on the cover of XXL Magazine’s 2011 Top Freshman issue
- His album *Section.80* was one of the top digital albums of 2011

Dom Kennedy:

- Released 5 independent studio albums since 2008
- Featured in the 2011 BET Hip-Hop Awards Cypher²²
- Endorsement deals with L.A. based companies JUST BE COOL and The Hundreds

“In lyrics, rap is presented as a renegade endeavor, but to make the hustle productive, you have to learn the rules of the music industry in order to outsmart the corporate executives and manipulate the system to your advantage.”²³ – Mickey Hess, author of Is Hip Hop Dead?

To be clear, the current state of independence in hip-hop is not a new phenomenon; it is simply an expansion to an approach that was shaped by many of the industries biggest names during the 1990’s. As previously stated, Snoop Dogg & Tha Dogg Pound, Bryan “Birdman” Williams, and Master P all signed unprecedented independent record deals that put them at the top of the hip-hop world. The entrepreneurial spirit that these men exhibited is a perfect example

²² BET Cypher (Blind Fury, Dom Kennedy, Lady Of Rage, Skillz) - <http://youtu.be/egek6QHgD6Q>

²³ Hess, Mickey. *Is Hip Hop Dead?: The Past, Present, and Future of America's Most Wanted Music*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007. Print.

of hustling²⁴, one of the most important elements of hip-hop culture.

In Hess' book, he established a connection between Nas' album "Hip Hop is Dead" and Cash Money Records (Lil' Wayne & Birdman). From Nas' perspective, he believes that hip-hop is too commercialized whereas Lil' Wayne has used commercial success to increase his bank account. If you think about it, does it really matter? Why should Nas be disappointed in Lil' Wayne for wanting to make money if money and the pursuit of the American dream are apart of the hip-hop lifestyle? Lil' Wayne's unique individuality and business sense is not very different from Kool Herc's reasoning for laying the foundation of hip-hop (Hess, 7). Herc saw an opportunity to capitalize off of mixing break beats and succeeded - hustling his way to the history books. Everything in hip-hop history can be connected, as history tends to repeat itself.

Being independent in every sense of the word is how hip-hop survives and grows. Of course it's great to see the deals rappers such as Tech N9ne have, but it is also important to see how independent deals changed the music business during a flourishing economic time period. Before anyone knew about Cash Money Records, or their artists B.G., Juvenile, Turk, and Lil' Wayne, Bryan "Birdman" Williams and his brother Ronald were selling thousands of CD's independently in the streets of New Orleans, Louisiana. The labels grind in the early 90s attracted them to Universal Music Group who went on to sign the label to an astonishing \$30 million distribution deal. To this day, nothing has ever come close to this deal and is still one of the most talked about moments in music history. Maintaining their independence, Cash Money and Universal Music negotiated a deal that would give the Williams brothers and their label 85% of its royalties, 50% of its publishing revenues and ownership of all masters²⁵. Fifteen years later,

²⁴ Hustling- The ability to take something out of nothing in order to succeed; creating your own path in order to make a profit

²⁵ Burgess, Omar. "Dino Delvaile Recalls Inking Cash Money Records' \$30 Million Distribution Deal | Get The Latest Hip Hop News, Rap News & Hip Hop Album Sales | HipHop DX." *HipHop DX*. 5 May 2011.

Cash Money Records deal is still active, allowing the independent label to earn \$500 million to date.

“Grand Opening, grand closing” – Jay-Z (“Encore”)

Hate it or love it, technology has changed the way we listen and experience music. Most of today’s popular rappers were only discovered a few years ago through your local blog site. Drake’s mixtape *So Far Gone*, which he released for free through his website changed his life forever. Mac Miller’s string of viral videos and mixtapes resulted him having the #1 album in the country. Kendrick Lamar’s weekly blog presence led him to collaborate with Dr. Dre on the long-delayed *Detox* album. Wiz Khalifa’s years of independent grind made him a household name.

Despite what is said about the decline in record sales and illegal downloading, music is in an incredible place right now. No matter what style of music you like, one click of a button can link you to your favorite rapper who you didn’t have to discover by watching the same things on MTV and BET or what was repeated on the radio.

As advancements in technology continue to evolve and kids can understand their functionality, we will begin to see more and more artists succeed without ever having to generate commercial success. Making \$25,000 to \$125,000 a night and earning almost \$6 for every album sold is not a bad life to live if you invest properly.

With that being said, think of the new business model of hip-hop as this; consumers are the new record executives. With the power at our fingertips, we can make or break an artists career. Therefore, major labels such as Universal Music, Sony, Warner, and EMI do not have a choice but to listen to the consumer and follow the trends if they in turn want to succeed.

Remember, Nas said it best...

Whose world is this?

The world is yours, the world is yours

It's mine, it's mine, it's mine

Whose world is this?

"It's yours!"

- Nas

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