

# Beyond the headlines: media representations of artist discourse on the artist-label relationship.

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## Abstract

The relationship between artists and record labels is instrumental in developing successful artist careers. Such relationships are periodically discussed in the popular media, with headlines that often cast them as disadvantageous for artists. A number of published audio-visual media texts were analysed to further investigate artists' perspectives on the nature of these relationships and to identify the key topics that arose, as represented by artist discourse in the popular media. Analysis showed that pertinent factors included: the competence, expertise, and value of labels; arrangements pertaining to contracts, ownership of recordings, and payment; the nature of interpersonal interaction between artist and label; and the alignment of expectations and goals. In certain cases, the behaviours and characteristics of specific individuals within a label had significant impact on whether artists' experiences were positive or negative; organizational and systemic factors were also influential.

KEYWORDS: record label, artist, recording industry, artist-label relationship

## Introduction

The relationship between record labels and the artists they sign is of fundamental importance in the development of successful artist careers (Negus 2011). Many such relationships have engendered great creative and commercial success, and yet

others have bred conflict and acrimony, leading to the demise of various artist careers (Bernbaum 2002; Kreps 2015; Soocher 1998).

Much of the attention that the artist-label relationship garners in the popular press tends to focus on the negative aspects of this relationship, even in the face of commercial success. A number of these anecdotal accounts of artist-label conflict are familiar to many: Prince turning his name into a symbol in protest at his record label Warner Bros (Lussenhop 2016); Michael Jackson parading past Sony Music's New York headquarters, proclaiming then-CEO Tommy Mottola to be the devil (Dansby 2002); rock band Thirty Seconds To Mars dealing with a \$30 million lawsuit served up by their label, EMI, whilst trying to record a new album and negotiate a new deal (Cubbins 2012); Taylor Swift feuding with both her former label head, Scott Borchetta, and the new owner of her former label, Scooter Braun (Rushe 2019).

Some artists, less-oft reported, do appear to experience positive relationships with their label (Lindvall 2012; Perkel 2017), and Neil Young, an artist famous for his frequent wrangling with labels (McDonough 2002), even commented: "What I like about record companies is that they present and nurture artists. That doesn't exist on iTunes, it doesn't exist on Amazon. That's what a record company does, and that's why I like my record company. People look at record companies like they're obsolete, but there's a lot of soul in there – a lot of people who care about music, and that's very important" (Paczkowski 2012: para. 16).

Nonetheless, media headlines routinely portray the artist-label relationship in the most combative terms. One major media outlet reported, "Taylor Swift Escalates Battle with Scooter Braun and Big Machine" (Coscarelli 2019), while another ran with "'I lost my identity': The artists who left major record deals to form their own indie labels" (Peirson-Hagger 2020). Meanwhile, a recent media headline about a feud between rap artist Lil Wayne and his label Cash Money proclaimed: "Cash Money Allegedly Holds Lil Wayne's Music Hostage, Doesn't Pay Him, Tries To Kill Him, Then Sues Him" (Ulloa 2015). Such headlines reinforce an implicit narrative: artist-label relationships are fraught with conflict and exploitation, and are never favourable for the artist. As journalist Bob Lefsetz claimed in *Artifact*, a documentary about the aforementioned rock band Thirty Seconds To Mars making a record while fighting with their label, "I've never heard of a label that doesn't screw an artist" (Cubbins 2012: 1.28–1.30).

This begs the questions – what is happening in these relationships to prompt such a narrative? What elements of the artist-label relationship are deemed most important? And what are the factors that positively or negatively impact the quality of this relationship?

Despite the significance of the artist-label relationship and its coverage in the popular press, there is little formal research into the relational and interpersonal factors that influence its quality and outcomes (Author 2019). Much established literature discussing the record industry pertains to the frameworks of the business – such as the nature of contracts and the financial systems of royalties – that describe how ownership of music and revenue streams attached to it flow throughout the music industry (Frith 2001; Graham et al. 2004; Lesser 2018; Negus 1999, 2011; Toynbee 2000). There is also a body of literature that discusses the nature of creative labour and the political and economic interplay of power and property, autonomy

and subordination in the relationships between record labels and recording artists, as well as the dynamics operating within organizations in the creative industries, and the impact that these dynamics have on the creative practitioners with which these organizations are aligned (Catmull and Wallace 2014; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; Negus 2011; Saintilan and Schreiber 2018; Stahl 2012).

However, beyond the reporting of individual anecdotes, there is little discussion of the interpersonal dynamics and interactions between recording artist and record label, little scrutiny of the quality of each party's individual experiences of the relationship, and little analysis of where the pressure points for relational conflict or success might lie.

To address this deficiency, primary research is being conducted by the author, and 30 interviews with artists, label personnel and artist managers (who often conduct aspects of the artist-label relationship on the artist's behalf), have taken place, generating some 50 hours of interview data.

This paper, however, has a different aim; it turns its focus back to the popular media reporting of the artist-label relationship to look beyond the headlines and investigate in more detail what artists are saying publicly about this relationship when they have a platform in the popular media to do so. As such, it will provide an analysis and typology of pertinent factors of the artist-label relationship that are represented in artist discourse in the popular media.

It must be noted that such media texts are performative, as discussed further below, and mediate the artist's public image such that they cannot be taken to adequately represent the artist's authentic or accurate perspectives on their careers and their interactions with their record label. In accordance with such media analysis (Charmaz 2014), this paper does not seek to discern the 'reality' of the artist-label relationship (which is the concern of future research), but instead to investigate and quantify the issues that artists do pinpoint when they publicly discuss the relationship in the media. Through scholarly analysis, this paper aims to provide more context for the media headlines that often portray the artist-label relationship in such a negative – and often sensational – light, albeit a context that is bound by certain considerations. This media narrative might subsequently be compared with findings from the primary research; but in the meantime, such analysis provides more meat on the bones of the headlines that discuss the artist-label relationship through the prism of the popular media in often damning terms.

## Media reporting as data

The process of analysing artist perspectives as represented in the media presents various complexities and challenges to account for, with regard to the reliability of the data and its attendant biases (Charmaz 2014; Gennari 2006; Powers 2011, 2012).

Since these materials are "extant documents" rather than "elicited documents" (Charmaz 2014: 100), we must consider: the intentions of the originators of the document, as well as those of other parties involved in its creation; how the document was produced and the form it takes; how audiences receive, interpret, and subsequently use the document; and what other effects the document might have (Charmaz 2014).

Artists frequently interact with the media to promote a project (album, tour) or to promote their own artist brand (Passman 2019). Encapsulated in this artist brand is a range of characteristics that they seek to promote through projecting specific personae within their media interactions (Marshall 2014). Indeed, many artists engage in media training before they begin making media appearances, to ensure they are well versed in inhabiting the identity and promoting the message that achieve their aim. Artists may project certain different personae on different occasions (Marshall 2014) as they strive to establish different elements of their brand, and contradictions may emerge that colour the veracity of any one statement or appearance. In particular, there may be notable contrasts or complex tensions between an artist's publicly voiced perspectives, and those expressed in private (Eastman 2010, 2012).

In terms of an employment relationship, many artists find themselves in an interesting position, as an external practitioner contracted to provide creative content to the label exclusively (Passman 2019; Stahl 2010). At the same time, for certain artists, their perceived autonomy is often crucial to their value and authenticity among audiences (Moore 2002). Not only does this circumstance introduce tension to the relationship, but also provides motivation for the artist to publicly champion their own independence from the label as well as opposing any label control. Artist discourse in media texts might therefore be designed to assert the artist's persona in terms of independence and authenticity, or to exert pressure or further an agenda with regard to a label or the wider industry.

The data analysed in this study presents one particular set of perspectives from the public identities of the artists in question, delivered through a media lens to meet certain aims. Other perspectives, and resulting contradictions, may emerge in other circumstances to provide a more nuanced and complex picture. Consistent with a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014), this study aims not to generate generalisable findings, but to bring analysis to a body of qualitative data that merits closer investigation.

The aims and purposes of the media outlet that created the content, as well as the contexts for these purposes, must also be acknowledged. For much media, the overarching aim is to attract a large audience (and subsequently generate revenue streams such as advertising and subscriptions) (Pickard 2020). They may attract this audience by providing entertainment, information, or gossip – whatever content is proven to appeal and demand attention. As a result, there are certain narratives that are more appealing than others, scandal and conflict amongst them (Tumber 2004). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the narrative of artist-label conflict is prominent in many interviews, documentaries, and biographies.

The media texts analysed in this paper utilise two media formats whose characteristics must be noted. Most texts take the form of talk-show style interviews with the artist conducted by host media personalities. As such, it is unclear the extent to which the interaction might be planned, scripted, rehearsed, edited or re-recorded (Timberg and Erler 2002). The personality and agenda of the host themselves also has significant influence. Data is also drawn from a documentary film that focuses on an artist and, in this particular case, whose published form was also created – with control over filming, production, direction, footage selection

and editing – by the artist itself. As such, the content is driven by the artist's intentions for such a production.

To reiterate, therefore, this paper aims to thematically appraise the factors in the artist-label relationship that are publicly discussed by artists in media texts, but does not attempt to account for the factors mentioned above in appraising the veracity of such discourse.

## The Method

To undertake the research for this paper, a grounded theory analysis of non-academic videographic source material was conducted (Charmaz 2014). A selection of audio-visual interview and documentary texts that directly present the words of artists – described below – was transcribed, coded (primarily using in vivo coding and process coding, followed by axial coding (Saldana 2013: 91-100, 218-223)) and analysed.

## The Data

Another number of factors must be acknowledged in using this data set. In order to identify pertinent data, the author investigated a number of audio-visual texts, comprising broadcast TV and radio interviews, podcasts, and documentaries available on YouTube.

Audio-visual texts were chosen as the analysis aimed to appraise recordings of the artist themselves speaking, rather than subsequent transcription and written reporting of their words. Texts in which an artist is interviewed were located by conducting searches on YouTube for 'artist interview' and 'artist label relationship'. Since there are a considerable number of such texts available, a convenience sampling approach (Messenger Davies and Mosdell 2006) was then taken, and the first 50 texts containing interviews with artists were selected. Since these texts may or may not include discussion of one of more features of the artist-label relationship, a purposive sampling approach (Messenger Davies and Mosdell 2006) was then employed, and the 50 texts were analysed for keywords and content pertaining to the artist-label relationship. Those texts that did not contain discussion of the relationship were discarded, and the texts found to address the research problem in sufficient detail were included in the data set.

The resulting ten texts, therefore, were selected based on availability and accessibility, as well as on the presence of dialogue pertaining to the artist-label relationship. As such, this data set makes no claim to present a comprehensive review of all texts that contain artist commentary on the artist-label relationship, nor a balance of positive and negative perspectives on the artist-label relationship, nor is it indicative of any selection process other than that noted above.

Accordingly, before proceeding to the analysis and discussion, it is necessary to acknowledge and address particular biases that emerge in the data set. Firstly, there is a greater presence in the data of male artists than female artists, and this skew is unfortunately indicative of music industry trends that continue to evidence a male bias among artists (Smith et al. 2000).

Secondly, the artists in the data are predominantly from the rock/alternative/singer-songwriter genres, rather than from pop, rap, or other genres. Different musical genres have different cultures of production (Negus 2011), and such predominance may be reflective of how certain genres approach the artist-label relationship and discussions thereof, as well as reflecting the genres most predominantly featured in the media space accessed. Furthermore, the artists in the data predominantly present as white, with only one artist of colour included, which may be reflective of the genres of music prevalent in the data set (Hamilton 2016).

It must also be noted that the artist commentary analysed reflects on relationships with major labels rather than indie labels. Subsequent research might seek to investigate any difference between majors and indies as it pertains to the artist-label relationship, as well as addressing the other noted disparities.

The data includes interviews with the artists listed in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1: Artists included in the data set.

Artist	Background	Interview Context	Year
James Hetfield, vocalist/guitarist of metal band Metallica.	Formed in 1981, Metallica has sold over 120 million albums worldwide (MJD 2019) over the course of 18 albums. The band continues to write and record music and is considered one of the biggest rock groups in the world (Erlewine n.d.-b).	<i>The Joe Rogan Experience</i> , a podcast series broadcast online via the streaming service Spotify, now reaching an average audience of 11 million people per episode (Nolan 2021; Rogan 2016).	2016
Taylor Swift, a solo country/singer-songwriter/pop artist.	Taylor Swift released her self-titled debut album in 2006 and has released 12 studio albums to date, regularly topping the single and album charts, and earning numerous platinum certifications and awards (Erlewine, n.d.-f). She has been one of the biggest music stars of recent times, and her most recent album <i>Midnights</i> (2022) debuted at number 1 on the Billboard Top 200 albums chart.	<i>Good Morning America</i> , a morning TV show on the major US network ABC (ABC 2019)  <i>BBC Radio One</i> , a British national contemporary music radio station (BBC 2019)	2019  2019
Prince, a solo pop/rock artist.	Prince was one of the most significant pop/rock artists of the 1980s and 1990s (Erlewine, n.d.-c). He released his first album <i>For You</i> in 1978, and his last, <i>HITnRUN</i> , in 2015. He passed away in 2016.	<i>Larry King Live</i> , a celebrity interview TV show on the US cable channel CNN (CNN 1999)  <i>The Arsenio Hall Show</i> , a celebrity TV talk show on the major US network CBS (CBS 2014)	1999  2014
Miley Cyrus, a singer-songwriter/pop artist/actor.	Miley Cyrus rose to prominence in the Disney Channel TV show <i>Hannah Montana</i> , and recordings from the show, featuring Cyrus singing, sold extremely well. She commenced her solo career in 2008, and has released six albums to date, regularly topping the charts and gaining award-nominations. Her latest studio album <i>Plastic Hearts</i> was released in late 2020. She remains a prominent recording artist, continuing to release music, as well as acting in a number of productions (Phares n.d.).	<i>The Joe Rogan Experience</i> podcast (Rogan 2020)	2020
Billy Corgan, vocalist/guitarist of rock band Smashing Pumpkins.	Formed in 1989 and breaking up in 2000, Smashing Pumpkins were one of the pre-eminent grunge groups of the early 1990s, enjoying global success with the albums <i>Siamese Dream</i> and <i>Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness</i> in particular. Since 2007, Smashing Pumpkins have reconvened in several guises to record and release new music, most recently the 2020 album <i>Cyr</i> . Throughout this period, Billy Corgan has launched other musical projects and continues to write and record music, but his biggest commercial success to date remains that with Smashing Pumpkins (Erlewine n.d.-d).	<i>The Joe Rogan Experience</i> podcast (Rogan 2017)	2017
Patrick Carney and Dan Auerbach, drummer and vocalist/guitarist respectively of alternative blues/rock band The Black Keys.	Debuting in 2002, The Black Keys started its career with releases on independent labels, before switching to a major label and subsequently enjoying international success with seventh album <i>El Camino</i> and the single <i>Lonely Boy</i> . Patrick and Dan continue to write, record, and perform as The Black Keys (Erlewine, n.d.-g).	<i>The Joe Rogan Experience</i> podcast (Rogan 2019)	2019

Everlast, a solo artist and formerly a rapper in the group House Of Pain.	House of Pain enjoyed success in 1992 with its hit single <i>Jump Around</i> , and subsequent eponymous album (Erlewine, n.d.-a). Upon the demise of the group, Everlast commenced a solo career, and enjoyed success with the albums <i>Whitey Ford Sings The Blues</i> and <i>Eat at Whitey's</i> . His commercial success has since declined, but he continues to write, record, and perform music (Ankeny, n.d.).	<i>The Joe Rogan Experience</i> podcast (Rogan 2018)	2018
Jared Leto, vocalist/guitarist and principal songwriter of rock band Thirty Seconds To Mars.	Thirty Seconds To Mars was formed in 1998 and has released five albums to date, gaining several platinum-selling certifications. The band continues to write, record, and perform live (Leahey, n.d.).	<i>Artifact</i> (Cubbins 2012) – a feature-length documentary made by Thirty Seconds To Mars, which details the band's relationship with its record label EMI – against the backdrop of a major contract dispute and lawsuit – and contains interviews and commentary from a range of artists, label executives, and journalists, as well as the band members themselves.	2012
Serj Tankian, vocalist with metal band System Of A Down.	System Of A Down was prominent in the 1990s and 2000s, releasing five well-received albums between 1998 and 2005, and enjoying multi-platinum success with second album <i>Toxicity</i> . (Erlewine n.d.-e) Following the band's hiatus, Tankian released a number of solo albums (McIntosh n.d.).	<i>Artifact</i> documentary (Cubbins 2012)	2012
Chester Bennington, vocalist with alternative metal band Linkin Park.	Linkin Park enjoyed multi-platinum success with their debut album <i>Hybrid Theory</i> , released in 2000, and subsequently released 11 albums through major label Warner Bros (Yeung n.d.-b). Bennington passed away in 2017 (Yeung n.d.-a).	<i>Artifact</i> documentary (Cubbins 2012)	2012
Damian Kulash, vocalist with alternative rock band OK Go.	The band formed in 1998 but didn't experience significant success until 2005. In particular, the hit single <i>Here It Goes Again</i> was promoted by an inventive video that involved dancing on a series of treadmills, and gained huge attention. OK Go left its major label deal after its third album in 2010, but continues to record and release music independently (Sepich n.d.).	<i>Artifact</i> documentary (Cubbins 2012)	2012
Brandon Boyd, vocalist with alternative rock band Incubus.	Incubus enjoyed significant success in the 1990s and 2000s, with the single <i>Drive</i> from the band's third album <i>Make Yourself</i> enjoying major global success. The band continues to release music, with eighth studio album <i>8</i> released in 2017 (Huey n.d.).	<i>Artifact</i> documentary (Cubbins 2012)	2012



## Analysis and discussion

Interviews and documentary footage were transcribed, coded, and re-coded, with further iterations to examine the key themes as they emerged (Charmaz 2014; Saldana 2013). The analysis revealed certain patterns and showed that when artists spoke publicly about the relationship they had with their record labels, the discourse related to a number of key topics and areas of engagement between artist and label:

1. The competence and expertise of labels in taking appropriate action to advance the work and career of the artist.
2. The value of labels to the career of the artist; what labels bring to the relationship.
3. The parameters of the contract, including ownership of the master recordings, and the process of getting paid/remunerated.
4. The nature of interpersonal interaction between artist and label, and the resulting levels of truthfulness, trust, respect, and communication.
5. The relative levels of control and the extent to which the expectations and goals of artists and their labels are aligned or competing.

The artists' commentary spanned a range of perspectives within these themes, including both positive and negative assessments of the relationship and certain elements therein. The following sections analyse what the artists said to discuss these five key themes, quoting directly from the data to ground the findings in the words of artists rather than in an interpretation thereof.

### 1. The competence and expertise of labels in taking appropriate action to advance the work and career of the artist

A key topic of discussion that emerged from the analysis was the extent to which labels were competent, 'knew what they were doing', and took appropriate action on behalf of the artist to advance that artist's work and career. Some comments were specific to certain areas of the business, while others were more general in scope, as outlined below.

#### *Digital fluency and expertise*

The extent to which labels demonstrated proficiency in promotion and distribution in the digital space was discussed; this scrutiny remains a legacy of the significant disruption brought to the music industry by file sharing (Knopper 2009) and subsequent digital technologies (such as streaming and social media platforms) across the first two decades of the 2000s, and the challenges faced by the recording industry in adapting accordingly. Against this backdrop of major music industry upheaval, Metallica frontman James Hetfield commented, "It's hard to fathom, and what it seems like to me – and I could be talking out my ass – but the record companies dropped the ball and the new record companies became iTunes" (Rogan 2016: 57.52–58.04). Hetfield then implicated iTunes as well ("They don't know

what they're doing") before extending this comment more broadly still: "No one knows what they're doing!" (Rogan 2016: 58.43–58.46).

Taylor Swift echoed this criticism of labels by highlighting their faults in the transition into a new digital era, when she remarked, "I remember when I first got a record deal I went to Nashville, and I was like, 'You guys don't understand, like, the Internet's gonna be a big part of music. Like, I have a MySpace and I have all these followers on MySpace, and these people listen to my music on there.' And they're like, 'What, like, all we need is radio and CD sales,' and I'd be like, 'I'm pretty sure this is gonna be a factor'" (BBC 2019: 8.06–8.28).

Further comments by singer and songwriter Miley Cyrus shed light on the ongoing complexities in the music industry brought about by rapid technological change, and the challenges in gaining and retaining ongoing expertise. "It's very complex, and they say that some of the best lawyers don't even understand quite what's going on in the music industry because we're having such change, such a shift in the way that everything's happening. Sales of records to streaming to videos to TikToks... TikTok is like a fricking label now" (Rogan 2020: 1.59.40–1.59.57). Cyrus then explained that labels paid users of (social media platform) TikTok to include the music of the labels' artists in video content: "So they pay TikTokers to TikTok to your music because it counts as streams" (Rogan 2020: 1.59.57–2.00.02).

#### A&R

Another area of business that received specific scrutiny in the data was the extent to which labels involved themselves in the creative process of writing and recording music, particularly through the label function of A&R ('Artists and Repertoire'), the area of the label that interacts with the artist while they are writing and recording music.

Patrick Carney of The Black Keys noted that "We've never had A&R guys sit around and tell us to speed a song up or whatever," but also described an unwanted hypothetical situation that could transpire for artists, particularly those without the necessary industry or recording experience to stand their ground. "You sign a big big record deal off the bat, [and] some fucking dumbass who has a communications degree from like fucking Pepperdine is gonna be sitting down next to you, and be like 'I think the hi-hat's too loud, bro, I mean [influential radio station] KROQ can't play that, the drums aren't...' And this guy doesn't know what he's talking about. [...] You get those notes coming from some dude that's your A&R guy that doesn't really know what he's doing..." (Rogan 2019: 1.59.25–1.59.50). Carney also conceded that, "There are some good A&R guys" too (Rogan 2019: 1.59.53), though whether this assessment was because their input was viewed as appropriate or because they remained hands-off in the creative process altogether remained unspecified.

Prince described his own relationship with a record label, commenting that he received no such creative guidance, nor experienced any creative differences as such, and that the label was "gracious enough to allow me a very wide palette to, you know, put colours on" (CNN 1999: 3.53–3.59).

For both these artists, therefore, the preferred situation entailed the label taking a hands-off approach to the creative process; as Carney noted, this does not always transpire for other artists.

### *Marketing & promotion: general competence and expertise*

Much of what labels do to advance their artists' projects and careers can be classed as marketing and promotion, and some of the more general comments made by artists in the data pertained to this area of business. Solo artist Everlast acknowledged the expertise of certain labels in general terms of marketing and promotion: "There's labels that are doing their thing out there that actually know what they're doing marketing-wise and all that. There's still a lot of kids that are being made, you know, famous by a label" (Rogan 2018: 1.38.36–1.38.45).

In the case of Thirty Seconds To Mars, it appeared that the band had respected the opinions of their label colleagues earlier in the relationship, but that this respect had evaporated subsequently, apparently as a consequence of a corporate take-over and the resulting personnel changes. The band's manager Irving Azoff commented that, "In the old days, you'd say, 'What does EMI think?' You would name ten people that had worked there for twenty or thirty years. You'd worry about what they thought. But there's nobody that's worked there for twenty or thirty years. It's not the company or the people that it ever was" (Cubbins 2012: 55.35–55.48). More recently, attitudes had changed, with frontman Jared Leto referring to a certain individual as "some giant fucking moron at the company" (Cubbins 2012: 1.18.38–1.18.41) in response to a decision that had been taken.

The variable nature of competence and expertise at labels was given some context by the comments of one former label executive featured in the Artifact documentary, who sought to clarify "the popular misimpression that the music industry is populated by idiots and thieves. We've got our fair share of them, but there's a lot of smart, good people in the business" (Cubbins 2012: 1.36.10–1.36.20). Music attorney Peter Paterno, who represented Thirty Seconds To Mars, further noted that in EMI's case, there were "guys who don't understand the business trying to tell people who do understand the business how to do their jobs" (Cubbins 2012: 54.53–54.57). An artist's experiences of their label's competence and expertise may well depend, therefore, on whether they are dealing with the industry's 'idiots and thieves' or the 'smart, good people'.

## 2. The value labels bring to the relationship

Artists discussed the value of working with labels, and the weight that they bring to the relationship in exchange for what they take from it. On the one hand, artist comments suggested that record labels did not provide enough. For example, Patrick Carney described a senior executive at his record label that provided The Black Keys with no "tour support or promotion," but then claimed credit for the band's success because he was "smart enough not to fuck it up." Carney quoted the executive as saying, "I really take a lot of pride in that band and really helped them a lot by just staying out of the way" (Rogan 2019: 2.34.34–2.34.50).

Serj Tankian, vocalist of metal band System Of A Down, complained of a lack of investment in fledgling artists, saying, “[Record labels] use the word ‘artist development’ but it’s offensive to a certain point because they don’t really do that” (Cubbins 2012: 42.12–42.16).

However, the data also included comments by artists that did recognise the value labels could offer. They acknowledged that labels provided important functions, expertise and support to their artists, often bankrolling, marketing, promoting and distributing records, particularly on a global scale (Rogan 2016, 2018); whether these activities were appropriate and executed effectively was a different matter. Some artists recognised that these functions were (or had been) beyond their own capacity to undertake independently or would take them so far away from the process of making and recording music as to be undesirable (Cubbins 2012; Rogan 2016).

James Hetfield explained, “Basically, the record company was a bank and a marketing tool to get you where you wanted to be. So, you know, it was a necessary thing” (Rogan 2016: 44.51–45.01). Jared Leto conceded, when considering whether Thirty Seconds To Mars should release their next record independently, “Basically, you’re looking for a record company to handle very specific things like promotion and marketing and things that I don’t really want to have to deal with. [...] If we go completely independent, I’ll end up... that’ll be my life. Morning, noon and night is going to be having to [be] a record company [...] You need the help. You can’t do it on your own” (Cubbins 2012: 39.33–39.56, 1.01.12–1.01.14).

James Hetfield further affirmed the value of working with certain labels as he spoke of the recent deals Metallica had made, commenting: “There’s no way we can deal with the distribution in each different country, so we’ve cut really good deals with other record companies” (Rogan 2016: 45.47–45.55).

Jared Leto echoed this necessity for international label support. Conversing with his bandmate, guitarist Tomo Milisevic, Leto asked: “Give me a name of one band that’s had continued worldwide success without a label.” Milisevic replied, “I can’t give you one” (Cubbins 2012: 39.13–39.21).

Everlast did, however, note that the changing digital landscape meant that the dependence on label support might be changing: “Now it’s totally different, now you can do this on your own” (Rogan 2016: 1.37:50–1.37:51).

### 3. Contracts: ownership & money

The discussion of the value that labels bring to the artist-label relationship underpinned a more specific examination of the nuances of contractual aspects of the relationship.

The artists in this study discussed a variety of considerations regarding the terms of their contracts, mostly pertaining to the ways in which their contracts dealt with who owned the music they recorded (the master recordings, or ‘masters’), how the finances of the relationship were set up and revenues shared, and how they were actually paid their share of the revenues (or not).

Recording contracts come in numerous forms, but there are some principles that have historically underpinned the most common contracts. Within the exclusive

agreement – lasting for a number of albums, although the label often has sole discretion to end the agreement during that period – the label provides funding, often including an advance, and services such as marketing, promotion and distribution, in order to create and deliver the artist’s music to the public. In return, the artist assigns ownership of the masters to the label. Revenues are collected by the label with a (usually minority) share (‘royalty’) paid on to the artist, who must repay any advance, as well as a designated portion of the money spent on the project, from this share. Even if the artist’s advance and expenses are repaid (‘recouped’), the label retains ownership of the masters (and the majority of revenues), whilst the artist continues to receive royalties. For further explanation, the reader should consult one of the many resources on the topic (e.g. Passman 2019).

### *Ownership*

The ownership of masters (and resulting majority share of the corresponding revenues) continues to be a long-standing source of tension in the music industry, and has recently become a particularly well-publicised issue through the efforts of several high-profile artists, including singer-songwriter Taylor Swift, to secure ownership of their masters (M.H. 2019).

Comments by Swift and other artists invoked a sense of moral principle behind the fight to regain or retain ownership of their masters. Swift commented, “I think that artists deserve to own their work, I just feel very passionately about that” (ABC 2019: 2.18–2.23). Similarly, Prince stated, “I don’t consider it proper that my creations belong to someone else” (CNN 1999: 17.21–17.26).

A principled stance on the part of artists complemented a broader perception that the lack of ownership by artists of the work that they create was perverse and unjust. As James Hetfield explained, “I tell my kids, ‘Hey,’ you know, ‘Let’s go celebrate, we’ve got the master recordings, we own it finally!’ And they were just looking at me, like, ‘What the hell are you talking about? You wrote it, why isn’t it yours?’” (Rogan 2016: 44.25–44.40). Likewise, Prince commented, “I can go up to a little kid on the street and say, ‘Do you know that I don’t own Purple Rain,’ and they’re appalled by that” (CNN 1999: 17.27–17.35). And Taylor Swift announced during an interview at an outside broadcast for Good Morning America that her new record was the first one that she ‘owned’, to a roar of approval from the gathered crowd of fans (ABC 2019: 1.25).

Jared Leto complained that even with a “slightly fair deal,” the label were still in “complete domination” of the band (Cubbins 2012: 7.48–7.55). As explained above, this situation has traditionally been widespread and systemic (Passman 2019), even as some label deals are starting to evolve towards more equitable arrangements (AWAL 2019). Chester Bennington, former vocalist with rock band Linkin Park, claimed that an exploitative approach to contracts had been ingrained at labels since the birth of the industry. “It goes back to how the music industry was set up in the very early stages of the recording industry, taking advantage of uneducated, easily-swayed artists who don’t really care about money” (Cubbins 2012: 30.18–30.31).

Despite the perceived injustice of this arrangement, some artists expressed an understanding of the labels’ argument for owning the masters, at least according to

the traditional terms of a record deal. Everlast (who owns the masters for his most recent material) described the traditional label stance: “I was gonna just play the devil’s advocate and say, ‘Well, it used to be that I’m the guy to put up all the funds... If I’m the label, I’m putting up millions of dollars in advance, gambling it on you. Now when you win you want to take away my lion’s share? No, fuck you!’” (Rogan 2018: 97:38–97:50).

James Hetfield also acknowledged the premise of the exchange involved. “You would somewhat sell a little bit of your soul to get a bigger something” (Rogan 2016: 4.44–4.51), that is, you would trade ownership of the music to secure the investment and label marketing efforts necessary to record and release the music.

Prince also recognised that his label’s ownership of the masters, and their subsequent control of the timeframe of releases, were simply good business on their part: “They’re businessmen, they’re doing what it is that makes their business successful.” However, he followed up by saying, “I’m also allowed to do things and make my business successful, and for me that would be to own my work, so I just chose to step away from [the record deal]” (CNN 1999: 16.37–16.50). Given that ownership of the masters generally confers the majority of revenues, as well as control over use of the masters, it follows – as Prince implied – that ownership of the masters would be in the best interest of both label and artist.

Success for the artist also brings with it the opportunity to renegotiate the contract as the pendulum of power and privilege shifts from label to artist. Indeed, Taylor Swift has leveraged her success to negotiate a record deal with Universal Republic that sees her retain ownership of all the masters that she creates moving forward (M.H. 2019). But for Thirty Seconds To Mars, there was a sense of frustration that their label resisted exploring a more balanced exchange in the contract. Beyond ownership, there are numerous other elements in any deal that contribute to the perceived fairness of arrangements, such as share of revenues, payment of advances, or reversion of ownership rights – as well as exploring alternatives to ownership such as a licensing arrangement – and these elements differ across deals. Accordingly, artists made comments that implied that some deals were perceived to be better than others: “it was a bad deal” (artist manager Irving Azoff in Cubbins 2012: 5.36–5.37), “they have shitty deals” (Everlast in Rogan 2018: 88.46), “we’ve cut really good deals” (James Hetfield in Rogan 2016: 45.53–45.55). Jared Leto complained that, in his band’s negotiations with their label, the latter “kept offering us variations of the same terrible deal,” and he vented his frustrations that the label was repeatedly unwilling to address the elements of the deal that made it so unfavourable, even though a “slightly fair deal” was still advantageous to the label (Cubbins 2012: 7.17–7.57, 1.27.54–1.27.57):

You would hope that in success that they would even take the initiative, and be like, ‘Hey look, you guys, you have the worst record deal on the planet. Let’s make this right because we know at some point, you’re going to educate yourself so you’re gonna realise that you’re being stolen from and being hijacked. But they don’t do that. They make the artist do that and they don’t want to do what’s fair, what’s right. You have to threaten them with legal action, you have to threaten them with creating precedences in order to get them just to make a slightly fair deal that still leaves them with a complete

lion's share of everything and in complete domination of Thirty Seconds To Mars.

Finally, Leto laments the enduring and exclusive nature of traditional contracts, preventing them from leaving their label to work with another label. "Most people out there who have jobs, they can go to their boss, ask for a raise, they can leave and go get another job if they're not happy. Musicians don't really have that ability to do that" (Cubbins 2012: 33.22–33.34).

### *Payment*

Artists also discussed the process of actually getting paid the money they felt they were owed by the terms of their contracts. The media perspective is often particularly damning; as journalist Bob Lefsetz commented in *Artifact*, "You talk to anybody who audits their label, they're always owed money, and if nothing else, usually the label holds back enough money that your cost of auditing is such that you won't do it. So that's the business model, is screwing the artist" (Cubbins 2012: 29.35–29.50).

The views expressed by artists in the data were equally negative. There were a number of factors that led to artists feeling that they were not getting paid the royalties to which they were entitled, and one artist (Brandon Boyd, vocalist with alternative rock group Incubus) spoke of how his band "had to sue our label to get paid" (Cubbins 2012: 30.37–30.38).

Artists discussed the opacity of contracts that, thanks to the inclusion of numerous complicated clauses and processes, seemed designed to confuse the artist. As Jared Leto commented, "[The labels have] created this strange convoluted system that you have to be a lawyer to really understand... or a mathematician" (Cubbins 2012: 30.39–30.48), reflecting Miley Cyrus's earlier comments on the difficulty for even seasoned lawyers to understand certain aspects of the music industry (Rogan 2020).

Furthermore, there have traditionally been clauses in many contracts that allow the record label to deduct further revenue from the artist's share, ostensibly to cover certain shared costs. But, as certain artists explained, some of these deductions appeared to be archaic and no longer applicable, such as a deduction for 'breakages' (originally to take into account the loss of physical records broken in transit) from revenues from digital downloads and streams, and as a result, the artist was left feeling exploited and 'ripped off'. Again, the sense that labels had no interest in 'doing what's fair' prevailed; instead, it was the view of System Of A Down vocalist Serj Tankian that labels had used these clauses in full awareness of what they were doing, essentially "trying to get away with murder" (Cubbins 2012: 32.17–32.19).

## 4. Interpersonal interaction: Truthfulness, trust, respect, and communication

Artists discussed elements of the interpersonal interaction within their relationships with record labels, and their comments highlighted both positive and negative

aspects of the interaction, sometimes in reference to specific behaviours, and sometimes more general in tone.

Jared Leto expressed considerable frustration at his treatment at the hands of his label and its personnel. “They’re trying to manipulate us with a little bit of fear [...] They’re fucking with us [...] They say one thing and they do another thing. It’s disgusting that they do business like this. They wonder why they have a bad fucking name. It’s because they treat people like fucking shit.” At one point Leto flew from Los Angeles to New York to meet with the label, only to have the meeting cancelled at the last minute, whilst on another occasion, the label refused to participate in a face-to-face meeting with the artist to discuss their differences. Signalling a complete breakdown in cooperation between the two parties, Leto exclaimed, “EMI should be ashamed of themselves [...] Well guess what, they can kiss my fucking ass, it’s over [...] Greedy fucking corporate hubris!” (Cubbins 2012: 1.04.27–1.04.32, 1.04.58–1.05.09, 1.18.31–1.18.56).

Damian Kulash (OK Go) also commented in kind on the quality of dialogue with his label. “Do I think EMI ever lied to us? I am seeking not to get sued for thirty million bucks, so I can't tell you whether or not they lied.” (Cubbins 2012: 50:11–50:19)

In more general commentary on his interaction with the label – and an unidentified individual within it – Patrick Carney complained about being “treated like dog shit by this person that you’ve made millions of dollars for” (Rogan 2019: 2.28.48–2.28.52). However, Carney also commented separately that when The Black Keys first signed a deal with a subsidiary of a major label, they had a “really supportive president” (Rogan 2019: 1:59:09), suggesting that the quality of interaction between artist and label was impacted by the distinct and varying approaches of specific individuals within the label.

Prince also spoke of a positive dynamic with his record label and a positive relationship with a particular individual within the company. He commented that, despite their contractual differences, he and his label had engaged in a positive interpersonal relationship (“We got along otherwise” (CNN 1999: 3.36–3.38)), and when he decided to terminate his contract over ownership and control of his masters, he wrote in friendly terms to the label president: “I sent a nice letter to the president, then-president, because they changed a lot – weekly during that time – and I told him that I loved him and that, you know, I was glad that I had this experience” (CNN 1999: 16.53–17.05).

These comments are general in scope, and don’t detail the specific actions or occurrences that led to such sentiments. However, the quality of communication in particular was discussed by several artists in specific terms, with poor communication – including failing to listen and failing to respond in timely fashion – noted as a negative influence on the artist-label relationship.

Thirty Seconds To Mars complained that their label “basically told us to shut up and go make another album. They weren’t addressing our concerns that we had with the contract” (Cubbins 2012: 5.37–5.45). The stand-off between the band and label as they attempted to agree a new deal, against the backdrop of a lawsuit between them, came to a head when the band stated their final contract terms, take-it-or-leave-it. The label said that they would respond to the terms in twenty-four



hours; it then took them thirty days to respond, with no communication in the meantime.

The Black Keys described a situation they encountered early in their career, in which various major labels promised the band a recording contract, but kept stringing them along and taking so long to deliver the contract (despite assurances to the contrary) that the band decided to cut its losses and sign with an independent label instead (Rogan 2019).

The analysis, therefore, exposed a variety in the quality of the interpersonal relationship and interaction between artists and labels, with comments assessing behaviours attributed both to specific individuals and to the label as a whole. A comment by Damian Kulash, suggesting that a scarcity of attention may be an underlying systemic issue among major labels, provides further context. “Major labels are giant cyclopes and they have one very monstrously powerful eye right in the middle of their forehead, and when it’s staring at you, you know, the world is a very bright and shiny place, and when it’s not, there’s no getting the attention of that thing” (Cubbins 2012: 41.45–41.56).

## 5. Alignment of expectations and goals

A final theme that emerged from the data pertained to differences in goals, expectations and perspectives between artist and label that could cause considerable tension in the relationship. The familiar struggle between creative expression and commercial outcomes was apparent, but there were further elements involved. This tension also revolved around expectations for the relationship, as well as notions of what constituted success, and led to struggles for control. A perceived lack of control on the part of the artist led to feelings of frustration at being misunderstood and unseen, as well as being unable to stand up for what they felt was ‘right’. This ultimately led to expressions of resentment and anger.

Discussing the release of a particular album, Patrick Carney commented, “The whole motivation behind this record was like... it was to not partake in the current bullshit in the music industry.” He said that, as a band, The Black Keys decided that they “don’t want to do anything we’re not excited about [...] we want to do [...] what’s important to us.” Yet one of the major challenges that they faced was the pressure they felt imposed by the record company to achieve strong record sales: “As an artist you’d better try to get the good [sales] numbers, get that first week [of sales] up there” (Rogan 2019: 46.58–47.31, 49.39–49.45, 2.27.08–2.27.10). He then went on to explain that if the band’s song *Lonely Boy* had won a Grammy Award, for which it was nominated, the record label would have serviced the track to Top 40 (pop) radio, in complete opposition to the band’s wishes. The band may well have been aiming to do only what they were ‘excited about’ and what felt important to them, but for the label, it was simply a case of maximising commercial success. “We’re, like, in the fucking top point zero zero one percent of this shit and [it’s] still fucking annoying every single fucking day,” Carney complained (Rogan 2019: 2.35.41–2.35.47). Likewise, Jared Leto lamented working with a “company that has no interest in really doing anything except making the numbers work” (Cubbins 2012: 38:00–38:15).

However, James Hetfield's reflections explored some of the factors that might contribute to a more successful alignment between artist and label in this regard. He commented that the record companies that Metallica was working with at the time were "record companies that have a vision and have a love for Metallica and understand that this is powerful stuff and people love it" (Rogan 2016: 45.54–46.05). Though the factors mentioned are undefined, the comment suggested the possibility of working successfully with a label that 'gets' the artist and shares their vision for their music.

Ultimately, the challenge is not just to find a way to reconcile any differences in goals and expectations, but also to understand the parameters of the relationship from the outset. Artists, who tend to have far less experience of the artist-label relationship than the label, may be undone by a failure to properly understand the label's agenda – with all the potential challenges discussed above – when they enter into the relationship. Realistic expectations may be powerful; as Damian Kulash, whose band OK Go were formerly signed to a major label, commented, "If I knew a band was going to sign a major label deal, I would probably try to dissuade them or I would at least try to figure out what they thought they were going to get out of it" (Cubbins 2012: 41.57–42.04).

## Conclusion

This analysis has sought to better understand the nature of artists' public discourse when they discuss their experiences of artist-label relationships in the media, and the factors and dynamics in those relationships that they bring to light.

As the analysis shows, the topics discussed related to five key areas of focus in which artists and labels engage: the nature of action (or inaction) taken by the label to advance the career of the artist; the value of the label in the relationship; the nature of the contract and payment process; the nature of interpersonal interaction between artist and label; and the alignment between artist and label on expectations and goals.

The discourse highlights each relationship's missteps, tensions, differences of opinion, and disputes, but also reveals instances of positive interaction, exchange and relationship-building, portraying a complex and multi-faceted relationship – more so than the media headlines might suggest.

Given the challenges and limitations associated with such insights from the words of artist identities presented in the media alone, such analysis cannot, however, be taken to adequately represent the artist's authentic or accurate perspectives on their careers and their interactions with their record label. Further research of a primary and confidential nature is required, investigating both label and artist sides of the relationship; by conducting such research in a way that diffuses the performance of identity, we might begin to more fully understand the factors that influence the quality of the artist-label relationship, and draw insights on how artists and labels might interact to influence the relationship for the best.

## Endnote

The Joe Rogan Experience podcast interviews included in this data set were initially accessed on YouTube as a result of the sampling process, and subsequently coded and analysed. During the research period, Joe Rogan signed an exclusive deal with streaming service Spotify that saw much of his content move to Spotify. As a result, the reference list includes citations for the relevant interviews on Spotify.

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