



# Behind the Scenes: The French and North-American Music Industries

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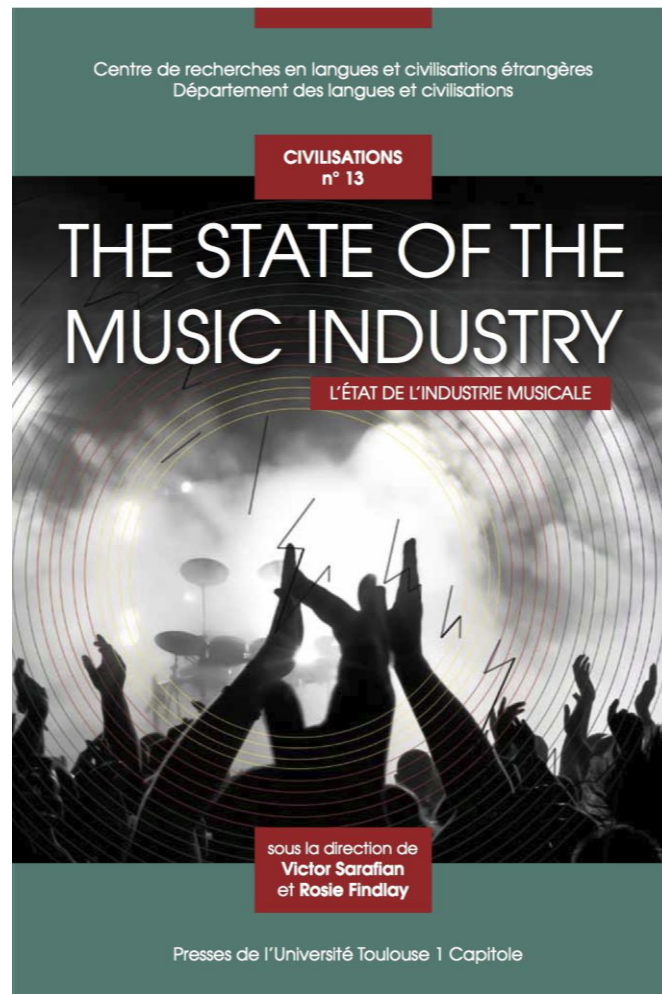
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“To conclude this issue of *Civilisations*, François Hugonnier takes us out of the corridors of academia and gives a personal account of the ins and outs of the music industry. Having travelled back and forth between France and the USA, Hugonnier highlights the similarities and differences between the two countries. He examines the rising role of new technologies and explores alternatives to traditional industry models that have arisen from DIY initiatives.”

(Victor SARAFIAN, “Introduction”)

“BEHIND THE SCENES”:  
A BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT ON  
THE FRENCH AND NORTH-AMERICAN MUSIC INDUSTRIES

François Hugonnier

This article is a biographical statement on the music industry, derived from my own experience as a singer-songwriter for the French rock trio NOVELS. Contrary to widespread and misleading preconceptions, putting together a band is not just a question of music. Indeed, my additional activity as an international tour booker, enriched by several years of Modern Music Management teaching at the University of Le Mans, forms an essential part of the story which follows.

Largely influenced by Anglo-American culture, our band has travelled back and forth between France and the USA, playing a hybrid genre that might be qualified as pop-punk-rock-noise-metal. Our experience of the music industry is itself hybrid, wavering between mainstream and DIY. Many professionals and non-professionals have been involved in this collective project. They have followed the long-winding road of gigs, self-promotion and partnerships, leading us to the release of several albums and performances worldwide, to audiences varying from a single person to six thousand people.

This “behind the scenes” report features tour anecdotes as well as recent facts on the French and North-American rock music scenes, aiming to highlight their similarities, differences and changes (production costs, marketing strategies, grants, club and festival booking, pay-to-play venues and openings, technical riders and salaries). After focusing on the music *and* the industry, underlying their paradoxical yet vital equation, I will present alternatives to the industry stemming from our DIY undertakings. Finally, I will examine the rise and revolution of new technologies, including digital streaming, fanfunding and the quintessential role of social networks.

### The music and the industry

First the collocation “music industry” needs explanation. Speaking of music as an industry connotes popular music, reproduction and consumption which are too often, though not always, opposed to music as a true art form. It is worth emphasizing that there is no clear-cut line between so-called “commercial” music on the one hand and artistically or politically significant acts on the other. To the extent that there is a distinction, it hinges on aesthetic and ethical issues which cannot be excluded from consideration. A personal approach to how and why you play music is a prerequisite for any given rock band. Creating music is synonymous with taking action, basically taking your songs outside the four walls of the rehearsal space.

Yet, sounding good is not enough. Because music is an industry, a professional musician is not just a musician. Performing in a band requires many different skills, some of which were completely alien to us in the first place. Jamming, writing and rehearsing are part of the creative process. But this initial impulse will not be heard if you do not seek out a public environment for your music. The first steps are playing live and recording your songs. Soon, an important question is raised (at least since the sale of CDs plummeted and digital streaming changed the goalposts): are we sharing or selling our music? Should we give away our demos or try to sell them? Once the music is recorded, it is reproduced as a CD, a vinyl or simply as a digital file. Music that can be bought as a product—whatever its content—is part of the music industry. Underground rock musicians tend to wrestle with these issues most keenly because they often feel like outsiders, for social, esthetic and economic reasons. Today’s underground rock music owes punk its freedom, and its alternative perspective. What is more, lesser-known acts can get off the ground, in record stores, on I-tunes and Deezer. In other words, they are on the fringe of the music industry, contributing to it economically and artistically, with each band having its own hues.

As far as NOVELS is concerned, since our early teens the songs have always been there, but we did not get to understand the tricks of the trade until much later. The thing we absolutely ignored was the paramount importance of other factors, including the band’s image (name, pictures, looks, logo, art work, music videos), the building-up of a fan base and the need for a solid crew which, in the final analysis, is central to the success of an independent DIY band. Speaking of the music industry and DIY underlines a paradox which our band, given its relative insignificance, modestly embodies. We do things entirely by ourselves, and enjoy complete



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artistic freedom. We are truly DIY in the sense that we manage to make our *uncompromised* music independently. But there are other factors which impinge on a band's career. We did not care much about them when we began. That, I believe, was our weakness.

The role of the fan base is essential, and manifold. They are artistic guides and sustain the growth of the band, both humanly and economically. The more you play live, the more musicians, artists, fans, reviewers and chroniclers you meet. That expanding nexus contributes to the building up of a band's identity and reputation. The more the band is heard about, the further it will go. But music is just *part* of this phenomenon. Hang around the local bars and venues, meet the fans, have fun, and your music will be heard. This, even unconsciously and disinterestedly, is a form of promotion. Being nice to the audience is a form of self-promotion. Being an "asshole" publicly is part of it too. Either way, it gets people talking about your thing. I am inclined to think that bands should find their own balance between their music and their self-promotion. Even RADIOHEAD's not-wanting-to-communicate is a potent kind of self-promotion. Their rejection of consumerism and mass media did not prevent them from coming up with a groundbreaking e-marketing strategy based on free fan-funding when they self-released *In Rainbows*.<sup>1</sup> Such revolutionary ideas are viable for prominent bands like RADIOHEAD, with their established fan base, but what about non-professional bands who are just getting started?

By any means, the music needs to get to the hands and ears of people in the business. Let me draw from our own experience as a rock-metal band. In March 2010, a few months prior to the release of our first full-length record *Savior*, we managed to get the personal address and phone number of one of the organizers of HELLFEST, the biggest alternative-metal festival in France, through one of their partners, who submitted our band as an opening act. After listening to our latest songs, the programmers nevertheless hesitated, and almost refused to sign us up: as an extreme music festival, some of NOVELS' softer songs would not match the audience's expectations. The Metal Corner stage, especially on Thursday nights, would require something tougher. Little did they know how seriously loud our band sounds on big stages. As we knew the address of one of the programming directors, Fred, our guitar player, literally hand-posted a letter in his personal mailbox (150 miles away from our hometown). It featured a live

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<sup>1</sup> Radiohead, *In Rainbows* (MP3 album download), October 10, 2007. Thanks to this unprecedented device, fans could choose the amount of money they wished to donate for the download.

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video shot a few days before during an on-stage rehearsal, as well as a copy of our first EP *Picture Perfect*, containing louder songs. We added a brief note to the effect that obviously we would not play acoustic songs at such a festival.

And we made it. On June 17, 2010, we got there. Upon arrival, a few minutes before line-checking and blasting the ears of 6,000 people in what turned out to be a *perfect* show, we got a bit nervous. The previous band was a Belgian death-metal act, and we were to play before American headliners Valient Thorr, at 10.30 pm. I remember our sound engineer going “hey guys, are you sure you still wanna play?” The weird thing is, our mid-tempo heavy power-rock-grunge-metal-and-what-not seemed to give a new lease of life to this wild audience. Admittedly, the beer we gave away for free might have helped too. Anyhow, we had an encore. Our show pleased the audience as much as us, and a few days later, we found our band’s name on the website blog, in the “bands you would like to see again next year” section. Put the music in the right hands, and thousands of ears will listen to it. Nevertheless we made a strategic blunder that night: we did not hire a guy to film this once-in-a-life-time moment. A few amateur shots do exist, but we entirely missed such a crucial moment in terms of *image*. Such a show, well-recorded and filmed, could have been a key to further exposition and recognition of the band. This is something our friends from 7WEEKS and BUKOWSKI, when they opened at HELLFEST the following years, handled successfully from a purely marketing view point.

The organizers of HELLFEST, as any other major festival, are well aware of the *value* of such openings. Some bands agree on a low-paid contract, others play for free. In many prestigious venues and festivals, openings are even for sale. Promoters actually sell the openings of major acts, sometimes for huge amounts of money. This is the reason why we did not open for GOJIRA in Le Mans for instance, and shared the stage with MASS HYSTERIA instead (March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013). Some well-known bands buy such opening slots in order to gather a wider audience, strengthen or rejuvenate their current fan base. Fame is for sale, and it is an endless quest. MOTÖRHEAD’s openings are for sale provided the band is good or famous enough. In other words, though most people in the audience ignore this, the pay-to-play system is just an ordinary form of investment. Even though it has now become commonplace on the Paris scene (I have in mind pay-to-play rental venues such as the Scène Bastille) it is relatively new elsewhere in France. But this business strategy, widespread in huge cities around the world, is a common phenomenon in the UK and the US, which is where it



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began—in Los Angeles in the 1980s. Think of the NIRVANA song “Stay Away”, whose original title was “Pay to Play”.<sup>2</sup> I remember understanding the true meaning of the title during our first US tour, while heading south to Portland after playing a memorable show in Seattle (at the mythical club El Corazón, where most of our favorite bands, including NIRVANA, had played before). The next day, we were to play at the Cat Club, Hollywood. It was the last show of the tour, and it turned out to be a once-in-a-life-time disaster.

We performed at 8 pm sharp, in front of a single person and a ridiculously haughty bartender. In truth, this was a pay-to-play venue, and it was the first and last one we’ve ever played at. Just as in many Paris clubs, the owner and former member of the Stray Cats makes a living by ripping off young bands from all over the world. We bought a 30-minute opening slot for 120\$, and were followed by three other bands who had paid the same sum, and finally by the headliners, the all-star cover band STARFUCKERS. But no one cares about them on the strip. The next band had cancelled the show, and we played in front of nobody. The managers of the outfit knew it. And they did not care. They did not even postpone the beginning of the show. As if to emphasize the failure, we were fined 150\$ for parking the car on a lane closing after 5 pm in front of Guitar Center. Nice rehearsal. Welcome to Hollywood.

Whatever the ups and downs, the fan base of an indie band gets bigger with each show. The better you play, the more merchandising items you sell. This is an absolute rule, provided your stall is not out of the way. Lately, following the release of our records in 2010 and 2013, we have noticed that the audience tends to buy more merchandizing than they used to. Somewhat paradoxically, this trend may be linked to the dematerialization of the music industry, and, I believe, to the fact that fans want to help the bands by buying directly from them at the end of the show. Some will not use the CD or Vinyl as an audio medium, but the object becomes a relic of a great evening: a signed souvenir in sounds, words and pictures. For others it springs from the will to support diversity, which is threatened by mainstream narrowness.

Therefore, what a rock band needs is an overall community, in which everyone is either a musician, an artist, a music lover and a follower, or all

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<sup>2</sup> Nirvana, “Pay to Play”, demo version of “Stay Away” from *Nevermind* (DGC, 1991). Written by Kurt Cobain, published by EMI Virgin Songs, Inc. Recorded by Butch Vig at Smart Studios in August 1990.

these things at the same time. Together they share a common goal, and create a strong alternative to the music industry.

#### Alternatives to the industry: towards a collective project

The hardest thing for a band to do is to start from scratch. It needs to work hard both at music and at marketing, which underscores the need for a musician's polyvalence and creativity in a given context. Today, our band is surrounded by a team including labels, distributors, tour bookers, managers, sound and light engineers, guitar technicians, graphic designers, photographers and film directors. Needless to say, this crew was not built up overnight, and we, as musicians, have taken part in some—if not all—these activities as well. Looking back, most non-professional members of our extended crew are former fans. Many professionals were part of the audience too. They have been fans or friends of the band at some point. Some professionals need to surround the band to help them build up their project. But more often than not, the musicians on stage provide the salaries of a few full-time professionals. Associations, partnerships, independent labels and companies offer a multi-faceted alternative to the music industry, and it might be the only long-term solution for a DIY band.

Our first record was physically distributed by a small independent label (Yr Letter Records), an average independent distribution company (Anticraft-MVS), and a worldwide independent digital company (Believe). Yr Letter Records was the mainstay of the project. As for Anticraft, it was a small team working for five hundred bands at the same time. They have been supportive, and believed in our artistic potential. Physical distribution gives—or rather *used to give*—the band its official status. It enhanced its credibility. Nevertheless the CDs which are displayed in shops have been chosen by shop managers, and therefore current activities, including tour and media support, help to convince them to buy into a particular band's production. The influence of small companies like Anticraft is limited, and the band members themselves need to go in the shops and check whether the CDs have been delivered on time. They also need to advertise the release of the record by their own means.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The retail price of our digipak was 12 €, out of which the store, the distributor and the producer (us) each collected roughly 4 €. The sum is quite small, especially knowing that we had paid for all the production costs (recording, mixing, mastering, artwork, pressing, and part of the promotion).



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Given the collapse of the CD market, fewer and fewer bands even think of pressing their music altogether. Our latest record, *Mirror Dog* (March 2013), was thus released exclusively digitally. Still, physical copies were pressed in order to be sold during the shows, on the band's websites, and in a few stores. We hesitated before releasing the new record physically through Anticraft, and unfortunately for them, a few months later, the company was actually facing liquidation. On January 2, 2014, they sent us the following official statement, which illustrates the crisis some victims of this fast-changing industry have faced: "the company Anticraft-MVS Distribution is going into liquidation. Despite all our efforts, the drop in sales in the music industry got the better of us" (my translation). As we had sensed prior to the release of *Mirror Dog*, selling CDs is no longer profitable. Other alternatives must be found: a band must play live and adjust to these perpetual changes in order to survive.

With a new ethic of sharing, partly derived from the economic crisis and the democratization of social networks, other opportunities are emerging. Before NOVELS, at the end of the 1990s, our first gigs were promoted through posters, flyers and the occasional media appearance. When we started the new band, in 2006, the music industry was at a crucial turning point. Emerging rock bands still believed in mainstream contracts with major labels, a path we almost followed at that time.<sup>4</sup> Myspace and Facebook were the social networks where a band's community could expend swiftly, not only locally and nationally, but worldwide.

In April 2007, we were to release our first EP after a few openings which had made us quite famous locally. On the 21<sup>st</sup> we opened for DOG EAT DOG and GLEN MATLOCK (SEX PISTOLS). A few years before, such a

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<sup>4</sup> In 2007, upon hearing our first demo, Maleko, a producer who worked for the major company Sony BMG, proposed us a 360 deal. This was at a time when the market had not yet undergone fundamental transformations, and we had discussed a tremendous deal including a 50,000€ advance per musician. We were inexperienced, but some professional musicians told us it was a dream deal. However, as it turned out, Maleko gave the wrong song to one of the international artistic directors. He made him listen to an old song of ours which was blatantly inspired by NIRVANA ("Journey's End"). The song Maleko was really interested in was "Color-blind", which weaves ethereal vocals and loud guitars. He loved the song but did not dare to use it as a demo because he feared it might be too heavy for mainstream airing. As French radios would not play French artists singing in English back then, he asked me to write a song like "Color-blind", but in French this time, which I was unwilling to do. Despite his best intentions, our approach was the very opposite of his, and we were not made for music on demand.

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show could well have gone unnoticed nationally. But in 2007, most musicians and professionals visited the Myspace pages daily, and discovered new bands this way. That's how we received an email from the French guitar magazine *Guitar Part*, making us the self-produced "band of the month"<sup>5</sup> following the release of our EP *Picture Perfect*. Our song "Restart" was to feature in the sampler of this national magazine. A few weeks later, DJ Darkside contacted us in order to air our songs on BreakThru Radio (BTR, New York City).<sup>6</sup> Little did we know that this was the first of many airings and tours in the US, which were made possible thanks to social networking and e-booking.<sup>7</sup>

As I had been planning a trip to the United States in the fall, DJ Darkside's enthusiasm enticed me to give it a try on the other side of the Atlantic. After a GOES CUBE show in New York, I met the band and told them I really enjoyed their music. They checked our own music on the internet. "Pretty rad", they said. David Obuchowski, the lead singer of GOES CUBE, was the original spark. He asked which dates would suit us, and managed to book NOVELS in downtown Manhattan right away. This is how my work as an international tour booker got started. I did not think about it in so many words at the time, of course, but that is actually what happened. As a student and assistant teacher at the University of Maine at Farmington, I travelled a lot in the US, met people, played and sang on various occasions and realized that our music was meaningful to North Americans. Rock music was, and still is, at the core of their identity and culture. Following a solo acoustic gig during a festival in Maine, I told my band mates in France that we might be able to put up a whole tour. From then on, NOVELS was online night and day (my brother Fred at night – which was daytime in France – myself during the day). We talked to everyone from music fans and bands to promoters and clubs. I put up the tour while Fred and our new drummer David rehearsed and sent me the demos, which I would play in my dorm room to practice the songs out loud.

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<sup>5</sup> "Novels : Renaître de ses cendres", ("Band A Part" interview, with sampler CD featuring the song "Restart"), *Guitar Part*, n° 162, September 2007, (p. 28 / track 1).

<sup>6</sup> DJ Darkside's profile on BTR features a few words on his "vision for change within the music industry" (DJ Darkside, (BTR), <<http://www.breakthru radio.com/#/djprofile/?id=13>>, [January 15, 2014]).

<sup>7</sup> Contrary to France, in 2007 and 2008, many venues in the US were already refusing physical music. An Electronic Press Kit (EPK) was welcome, but a mere web link would do. Be it in France or in the US, musicians and promoters do not like to read detailed biographies. One needs to go straight to the point in the music industry.



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It would take a whole book to put our US tours into words, so I will quickly select some elements which I judge particularly relevant to this article. One of them took place during our first days in New York (Spring break 2008), when we arrived at our friends' from the indie rock band OBJECT. We were to share the bill with them in Manhattan. On the day of the show, I bought the *Time Out New York* magazine, which featured an article on OBJECT.<sup>8</sup> Honestly, I was both glad for them, and disappointed to see our band's name listed quickly. But a few minutes later, we checked our emails. The Fox News website invited us to have a look at their American "Gig Guide": we clicked on the link and saw Julie Garcia presenting "NOVELS, a frappuccino of grungy electric guitars [...], tonight in the Big Apple."<sup>9</sup> The report included live images of the band and an extract from the song "Restart". Regardless of how the journalists had come across our music, none of this could have happened without the help of two New York bands: GOES CUBE, who helped us with the promoters, and OBJECT, who offered hospitality without knowing us in the first place. This was no battle of the bands. It was the beginning of a new way of making music, by surrounding ourselves with other artists and musicians who shared a common vision.

We toured in several states, in all kinds of venues. Following GOES CUBE's impulse, and thanks to OBJECT's assistance, I managed to book all the dates through promoters, venues and bands, who provided for the backline and even let us play on their amps. Most American venues are open daily and feature four bands on the bill each night, with an average thirty-minute slot. Consequently, the venues are well-equipped, which enabled us to travel light, bringing along merely our guitars and cables, snare and sticks; in cars and cabs, on Greyhounds and planes. We rented a hotel room only once, in Seattle. We slept in OBJECT's underground rehearsal space in Brooklyn, in buses and airports, and even outdoors one afternoon, in a Providence park.

We discovered a very different *milieu* than the one we had known back in France: musicians were always on the road, playing daily. Due to the lack of social resources and infrastructures, American bands could only rely on themselves and their fan base in order to get some gas money, or a meager salary at best. But individualism is very paradoxical in the United States. For instance, most New York venues poll. They ask each person in the audience

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<sup>8</sup> *Time Out New York*, n°655, April 17-23, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Julie Garcia, "Gig Guide", *Fox News*, Thursday, April 17, 2008 <<http://www.foxnews.com/topics/gig-guide.htm?&start=-10>> (January 11, 2014).



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what band they have come to see or support. This was bewildering to us as a French band. The Trash Bar in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where we have played a couple of times, is archetypical in that respect. In France, if several bands play in a *café concert*, or a *salle de musiques actuelles*, most of the time they will be paid in accordance with a specific contract,<sup>10</sup> or get the door money and share it as they wish. Unless the headliner is prominent and costly, bands will get a decent salary, or an even share of the money, in small venues and bars. But many American venues poll, with the first forty or so tickets for the guy who polls and the sound engineer, and the rest for each band, according to their draw (you get paid starting from the eleventh fan you draw). Even if on the whole, the clubs' stages are functional in the US, and the sound engineers highly efficient; the owners, who may or may not be promoters, do not really care about backstage facilities, food and *per diem*. The musicians tend to adjust to the venue's specificities—not the other way round. Even large clubs like El Corazón, which has a small backstage area, will not ask for your technical rider. The bands sometimes have to wait with their gear by the stage, in front of the audience, before opening for a bigger act in huge venues. We actually experienced that at Crocodile Rock Cafe, Allentown, one of the biggest clubs in Pennsylvania.

Yet, I am not claiming that this is a typically American pattern. To a lesser extent Paris and several major French cities have taken a similar turn. If the Ferrailleur, in Nantes, is a nice and welcoming state-of-the-art venue, promoters and bands can either rent it or play for free, which is halfway between French and American rental policies. Whether in the US or in France, there *are* exceptions and alternatives. The AS220 in Providence, Rhode Island, for instance, offered an equal share of the door money and comfortable backstage areas including computer access and a helpful crew. Their artistic and political activism is rare in New England though, and they proudly claim it on the home page of their website.<sup>11</sup> Facing a tough music industry, where competition verges on absurdity (countless musicians and hipsters live in Williamsburg, where even the guy working in the bagel shop is tattooed and looks ten times cooler than your own touring rock band),

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<sup>10</sup> The musicians and/or producer must sign a *Contrat de cession* or a *Contrat d'engagement*, depending on the musician's professional status (in France, full-time musicians need to obtain the *intermittent du spectacle* [entertainment worker] status, which provides unemployment benefits).

<sup>11</sup> "AS220 envisions a just world where all people can realize their full creative potential" (AS220 [home page], 115 Empire Street, Providence, Rhode Island, <<http://www.as220.org/>>, (January 11, 2014).

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while the States seldom participate financially, alternatives are being found by the musicians and artists themselves.

As opposed to the individualist methods and the rivalries we have repeatedly noticed in New York, we have been given the totality of the door money by the other bands on the bill in New Jersey. The musicians knew how hard it was to be touring in a foreign country, and they helped us simply because we “deserved it” after our “great show”.

Such generosity was incredible. It highlights the fact that music can live on thanks to the musicians and the fans belonging to the same community. When we returned to France, with new projects going on (we went on tour in the US again later on, recorded a song in Brooklyn and mastered our first record at Sterling-Sound, NY), we realized we had learned how to make it not only by ourselves but also thanks to others.

Since then, we have teamed with other French promoters and bands, including our brothers in arms from NOÏD and our booking agency Syncope Management. The rise and revolution of social networks and fan funding have confirmed this way of making and sharing music on the margins of an unadventurous industry.

### The rise and revolution of new technologies: from instant sharing to fan funding

The concomitant growth of new technologies and direct-to-fan strategies has greatly contributed to the bypass of the major record label model. According to Mike Lang, digital music has “encouraged consumers to become participants in the creative process”, as they are “interacting with music in revolutionary new ways”.<sup>12</sup> Digital streaming and distribution offer instant access to global music. Music fans will find new material in a few clicks, whether from underground artists or mainstream bands. Comparatively, the physical market looks like prehistory to young audiences. Why would you go to a record store if it takes several weeks to order a CD, and if you do not even use CD players? As teenagers in the 1990s, we recorded our first demos on tape, and had them played in the local rock venues. Releasing a CD was a big project, which was inaccessible to most local bands. We discovered new music on community radios, in record stores and fanzines. They were the backbones of indie music. You

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<sup>12</sup> Mike Lang, *The Digital State: The Devolution of the Music Industry and the Democratizing Effects of Digital Music Markets*, Indiana University, 2009, <<http://www.indiana.edu/~hightech/papers/Lang.htm>>, (January 5, 2014).



would borrow CDs from your friends, listen to them or copy them on tape. Mainstream audiences bought expensive two-track CDs massively (while a full-length digital record is cheaper today). Then came slow and sketchy CD burners. It felt like a revolution. Now it feels like prehistory. Well, the Middle Ages rather. As a rock band, our vision was limited to the people we met on a local scale. Our vision was narrow because we were young as well, but it was indeed harder to advertise your music back then.

The Internet gives bands access to unlimited resources around the world, including band mates, fans, venues and webzines. A whole community is connected daily. As Joshua Smotherman puts it, "This is one thing that the Internet has definitely accomplished for indie musicians — the ability to be found by anyone at any random time on this planet."<sup>13</sup> The beginning of our new project with NOVELS coincided with this revolution, thanks to social-networking websites like Myspace, Facebook and Deezer. To some extent, the physical release of our first album in 2010 followed the archaic guidelines of an obsolete model. Physical music has not totally disappeared, but it has become a secondary aspect of the industry, a means rather than an end. Even if the artistic director who signed NOVELS on Believe Digital told us right away that digital sales might just pay for a cheap meal, this has actually been pure benefit. Conversely, the weaknesses of the CD industry are the incompressible production cost and the delays of stock management and shipping.

From a purely musical view point, the major drawback of the dematerialization of music is the deterioration of sound quality. Music files undergo compression, and mastering is now mostly concerned with squeezing the files, cutting frequencies in order to put great music into low-fi yet fancy smart phones. Listening to MP3 files with hi-fi headphones is a common paradox in 2014. Mainstream music is turned into ringtones which require specific mixing and mastering work. Following their own needs, DIY bands also have to adjust to the market's evolution and requirements, which are mirrored by production costs.

Independent projects require clever investment on cheap sound and videos. A fun idea will bring you more views than great music. This is something we are not doing with NOVELS. Partly because we are musicians and think about the music first, and partly because we just do not know,

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<sup>13</sup> Joshua Smotherman, "My Best Advice for Bands Using Social Media for Marketing in 2014", *Middle Tennessee Music*, Empowering Independent Musicians Online, <<http://www.midtnmusic.com/my-best-advice-for-bands-using-social-media-for-marketing-in-2014/>>, (January 5, 2014).



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and do not want to know, how to do it. The Facebook and YouTube revolution calls for other forms of talent. It has to do with buzzing. To put it in a nutshell, what will bring more views, the ten-second cat-in-the-toilet home video, or a twelve-minute musical improvisation?

Anyhow, instant sharing is the key to the building-up of a strong fan base. A band needs to keep in touch with the fans and keep them updated on their activities. However, like Virginie Berger,<sup>14</sup> Joshua Smotherman insists on the need for an effective and sensible use of social networks. He advises bands to “start building a tribe one supporter at a time”, yet to “stop paying so much attention to social media and get out more. The relationships you develop offline are way more valuable.”<sup>15</sup> Web socialization is just part of a larger process. As a result, musicians using social networks as redundant or uninspired marketing tools will lose their audience. The fans need to be involved in the project. They do not want to view impersonal ads. This activity is time-consuming, but it has become one of the skills DIY musicians need to work on.

The *topos* of a rock band’s crazy project, which was epitomized by funny movies like *Wayne’s World* (1992) and *Tenacious D in The Peak of Destiny* (2007), is an apt way of caricaturing the familiar dilemma: how to raise cash in record time? A few weeks before the release of *Mirror Dog*, which had been delayed due to insufficient funds, we turned to fan funding solutions. As we had decided to work on our own, without a label (after the death of our regretted Mathieu Bierne aka Matt Showman, head of Yr Letter Records), we faced new difficulties. Recording the album and shooting the music video for “Left for Dead” cost approximately 11,000€. Voluntary work and partnerships helped us to reduce our expenses to this relatively low budget. But months went by and we could not pay for other expenses, including merchandizing products (CDs, shirts) and promotion, which were necessary items for a successful self-release.

In France, many grants (on local, regional and national scales) are provided for aspiring and professional musicians. It had covered half the budget of our first record. But with *Mirror Dog*, some of these trump cards

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<sup>14</sup> Virginie Berger, “Introduction”, *Music and Digital Strategies (Marketing, promotion, monetization and mobility)*, e-book, trans. Fabien Burnol, preface by Dave Kusek, Paris: Irma, 2012, 23-32.

<sup>15</sup> Joshua Smotherman, “My Best Advice for Bands Using Social Media for Marketing in 2014”, *Middle Tennessee Music*, Empowering Independent Musicians Online, <<http://www.midtnmusic.com/my-best-advice-for-bands-using-social-media-for-marketing-in-2014/>>, (January 5, 2014).

had already been played, and we found ourselves paying for 90% of the production costs. The money we earned by playing live was not enough. We wrote to our fans and invited them to contribute to the release of the album via a fan-funding website.<sup>16</sup>

We had no idea of the sum that could be raised that way. The extent of a fan base and the potential participation of “true fans” is hard to figure out.<sup>17</sup> There were hardly three weeks to go before the release of *Mirror Dog* on March 23, 2013. Our drummer David, who is in charge of the band’s artwork, created a page which explained the project. Not knowing where we were going, we agreed on a timid 1,200€, which would cover plain jewel-box CD pressing, as we could not afford digipaks. As with most fan-funding websites, the project would have been cancelled if the money had not been collected on time. However, the goal was reached in a few days, and by the end of a fortnight, it was overtaken (1,635€). Hence the money raised allowed us to pay for CDs and T-shirts. People had made online donations in exchange for certain products (signed CDs, backstage access for the release party, etc.). We added funny deals, like playing live in people’s homes, fully dressed or stark naked (with or without “sox on cox” in the Red Hot Chili Peppers fashion). To our greatest amusement, we got an email from two unknown fans from Paris and Lyon: “are you serious about playing live in our basement?”

We ended up playing at their parents’ house, which was located only a few miles from our rehearsal studio. We agreed on the date and time, and at 4 pm sharp on Saturday, August 3, 2013, we rung the bell of a suburban house. We looked at the surrounding houses thinking, are we really going to make it in here, with all our gear and a PA system? They opened the door and we stood there, with our loaded van parked in the alley, ready to make it for real in their garage. We soon learned they had decided to throw a little party and offer the show as a present to their father. We felt like special guests in an intimate reality TV show. We played from 8 pm to midnight, alternating between live sets and starters, mains and dessert, all the while engaged into endless talks. It was halfway between a family reunion and a small festival, with access to the garden from the basement. By the end of the evening we had become friends and exchanged a hundred stories. We took pictures, signed the freshly painted basement walls and hugged. We

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<sup>16</sup> « NOVELS souhaite sortir son album *Mirror Dog* en mars 2013 », <<https://www.octo.com/novels>>, (January 13, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Virginie Berger speaks of “three different types of fans”: “casual fans (passive fans)”, “regular fans (committed fans)”, and true fans (super fans)” (Berger, 39-40).

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realized that one of the guys played in a band too. I had actually heard of their music in the past. I was really impressed by what people in your little community were ready to do for you. Our host Gaylord tried Fred's guitars and started playing one of our latest songs, "Left for Dead". He had learned how to play it beforehand. We rehearsed with him quickly and played it live together as an encore, while Fred, our guitarist, was now one of the spectators.

We did not expect such a reaction from our fans, and decided to rethink our marketing strategy altogether next time. Fan funding will be at the heart of the creation of our new record, as it will involve our audience more directly. We have always loved music for purely human reasons, and it seems to me that indie music cannot live on without the involvement of a whole community made of musicians and fans who help each other out for the sake of artistic freedom and diversity.

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If well-managed, social networking might contribute to the reshaping of the way music is exchanged and practiced, offering freer means of expression and creation. Before the music industry takes yet another turn, we will keep building a world of our own from our tiny corner of the earth, through our idiosyncratic artistic lens, all the while getting ready for further upheaval. As for now, I will conclude by following Smotherman's advice, which illustrates the vital equation between the music *and* the industry in the digital era. According to him, time-consuming marketing questions should not overshadow the essential activity of a DIY band, which is "Making Great Music while you find a balance and a social media strategy that works FOR YOU, not against you" (original emphasis).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> SMOTHERMAN, Joshua, "My Best Advice for Bands Using Social Media for Marketing in 2014", Middle Tennessee Music, Empowering Independent Musicians Online, <<http://www.midtnmusic.com/my-best-advice-for-bands-using-social-media-for-marketing-in-2014/>>, (January 5, 2014).



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