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Proposing a new score for the music business

A nickel a download can really add up, says former rock producer and music scholar

BRENDAN KELLY

The Gazette

Monday, October 24, 2005

Sandy Pearlman has a plan to revolutionize the music business. But first he wants to talk about The Clash.

Pearlman is a visiting Long Island scholar and occasional lecturer at McGill University's newly renamed Schulich School of Music, and he and his colleagues at McGill are in the midst of some heady research they hope might change the way millions of people download music.

But Pearlman is much more than just another academic. He also happens to be one of rock's legendary producers. Music-trade bible Billboard magazine has called Pearlman "the Hunter S. Thompson of rock, a gonzo producer of searing intellect and vast vision." He produced and wrote songs for innovative '70s hard-rock band Blue Oyster Cult, produced The Dictators' 1975 classic Go Girl Crazy! (cited by many as the blueprint for punk-rock) and also twirled the knobs for The Clash's controversial second album Give 'Em Enough Rope.

Sitting in a cramped kitchen in the brand-spanking-new McGill music building, the topic-du-jour is supposed to be the future of downloading music. But, before he gets to that, Pearlman takes time to make it clear that he's still upset by his undeserved reputation as the guy who tried to tame The Clash.

It has been 27 years since the release of Give 'Em Enough Rope, but it's still a sore point for Pearlman. That's because the official rock myth is that Pearlman was supposedly brought in by the nefarious record company bosses to make the punk pioneers more commercial.

This is a version of events largely perpetrated by The Clash, and Pearlman says it's simply b.s. He says it was Clash leaders Joe Strummer and Mick Jones who came to him because

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they loved the sound of the Blue Oyster Cult records. "I paid for a lot of (Give 'Em Enough Rope) myself," Pearlman said. "I just thought they were the best band in the world."

At the time, Give 'Em Enough Rope was put down by the punks for being too mainstream, but, listening to it today, there's no denying the sonic power of Pearlman's production. It's a great record, period.

But Pearlman doesn't stay up nights worrying about his place in rock history. What keeps him excited these days is plotting ways to radically revamp how people around the world consume music.

Pearlman and others at McGill, notably professor Daniel Levitin, are working on creating a search engine for the Internet that could potentially make millions of piece of music available to listeners around the globe.

These researchers have already amassed a huge amount of material on how people respond to music. They've collected hundreds of thousands of responses to questions about specific songs, giving them invaluable data on how people perceive different pieces of music.

But the real revolutionary part of the research is Pearlman's idea that all songs should be offered to downloaders for five cents a song. Unsurprisingly, the multinational record companies are vigorously opposed to this concept. Apple's iTunes, the leading legal music download service, sells songs at 99 cents a pop, and the last thing the labels want is to reduce that price by almost 100 per cent.

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Proposing a new score for the music business

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But Pearlman thinks they just don't see the big picture. He notes that there are an estimated 45 billion free music downloads happening annually, compared to around 360 million annual paid downloads. In other words, most people are still downloading music for free and, in spite of all of the legal challenges to the Napster-like services, the amount of free downloading just keeps increasing.

"The five-cent price point is very attractive," said Pearlman. "It's certainly better than the system we have right now. If you charge five cents for 45 billion annual downloads, it's a lot better than nothing."

He knows the record companies will never buy into this, and that's why he has an even more radical idea. He thinks incredibly wealthy high-tech/dot-com giants like Yahoo, Google and/or Apple should buy up the major labels, take over their huge music catalogues, and get into the five-cent download business.

"If you did make available all of the music in the world for almost nothing, suddenly tremendous amounts of money - dwarfing anything the record business has ever dreamt of - would appear, and a lot of it would, I hope, end up in the hands of the creators."

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