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Knowledge For What? A Change Is Gonna Come, and Maybe We Should Be Part of the Solution

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In 1939 sociologist Robert Lynd wrote the book *Knowledge For What?* In it he outlined ten major issues that sociologists didn't ever study. One, for example, was the question of what causes wars. What you are about to read is my "mini-version" of Robert Lynd studying today's music business.

The impetus for this paper has been percolating for thirty-five years. At that time I was doing studio work in New York City, mostly working on commercials. I had been playing about two sessions a week for one particular composer, almost all of them with the same electric guitarist and electric bass player. Both of these musicians were well-known players from the swing era. One had been in many big bands and the other had played with Billie Holiday, among others. I'd say they were both about fifty to fifty-five years old. The guitar player was doing especially well, and he moved north of New York City in Westchester County. Towards the end of the time we worked together, around 1968, he moved an hour further north to a larger house.

Then it all fell apart. Suddenly I was doing the sessions, but my two friends weren't. I asked myself what was happening. In the world of studio work you don't call people up and ask them why they aren't working. It just isn't done. After a while I figured it out. They were starting to look "old." It wasn't just a matter of what you could play. People in advertising wanted you to *look* as though you could play young people's music. My friends, dressed neatly in their suits and ties, didn't look young. The guitar player started drinking; he got divorced, he lost his house, and his health declined. I never saw the bass player again. I also began to see studio players and singers wearing gold jewelry and turtleneck sweaters. Mind you, these were people who used to go to recording sessions as though they were dressing for gigs at IBM.

It was then that I realized it didn't matter how well you were doing in the music business, or how good you were at doing it. Things would always change, and inevitably there would be a time when you would not be part of the change. And then I tried to forget about it.

Let's turn to the current music industry scene. Earlier this year EMI announced it was laying off 1,500 people, and cutting its artist roster by twenty percent. In effect, some thousand people fell victim to the Mariah Carey fiasco. Sony, BMG, and Universal have already had their layoffs, and if Sony and BMG do finally unite, it is fair to assume there will be more people joining the ranks of the unemployed. When WEA was spun off from Time Warner it announced 1,000 layoffs, including the president of Atlantic and the president of Elektra. Sylvia Rhone, the ex-president of Elektra, was possibly the only black woman holding a CEO position with a major record label. More recently, Warner is said to be cutting its artist roster in half, which will likely mean more corporate job cuts.

We could get very involved in philosophizing about whether all of this is a result of file-sharing, as the record companies would like us to believe, whether it represents young people turning away from music as one of their favorite ways of spending money, or whether some of this has to do with some very foolish decisions on the part of record company executives, along with an almost insane mania for overcompensating executives not only when they are hired, but when they are fired.

An interesting sidebar is the alleged increase of productivity in the workplace. Is there really increased productivity, or is it an increase in employee workloads? For example, as a full-time professor at a state university, I used to teach five classes each year. If I were forced to add a class, wouldn't that show up to the state legislature as a 20% increase in productivity?

Back to record companies. In 1998 EMI fired Jim Fifield just six months after his contract had been renewed for five years. Buying him out cost about ten million dollars, plus another ten million in pension payments. Ken Berry was hired and in turn let go in 2001, to be replaced by Alain Levy, who had been shown the door at Polygram (remember Polygram?). One wonders what kind of golden parachutes these gentlemen received. We do know that Berry's demise virtually coincided with Mariah Carey's \$28 million dollar going away present from EMI. Edel Records, the largest worldwide independent now that Zomba has become part of BMG, is down from 1,600 employees to about 600. The "new" WEA hired Lyor Cohen

away from the quite successful Interscope Records, at God knows how much money. Are we surprised that the WEA layoffs followed this news?

What does all of this have to do with college music industry programs? Quite a bit, I would venture. We have been teaching from a model that assumed the record industry is a growth business that would employ a good many of our qualified students. We thought that the rest of them would end up at the organizational end, in ASCAP, BMI, NARAS, or other organizations. We guessed that there might be a small percentage of the more daring and rebellious students who would become individual entrepreneurs, making their own path through the music industry maze.

It seems to me that we now have to work on a whole new set of assumptions about the music industry. Below are five suggested starting points.

- 1) Whatever we think we are training people for, it is probably not what they are going to be doing five to ten years from now. It is also reasonable to anticipate that in their working lives our students might experience four or five similar career transformations. The best thing we can teach students to do is how to identify what they want, and to determine whether it is possible for them to relate that to the existing industry, or whether they can create their own niche in the business.
- 2) Critical thinking is no long a desirable attribute. It is a necessity. We don't even really know what the box is in the phrase "thinking outside the box."
- 3) The program in which I used to teach has shown incredible growth over the last three years—at the same time that the industry has been showing drastic declines in revenue, and a grim picture on the employment front. If we don't start to cap enrollments in our programs, we will be in the same position as other areas of music where we train far more people than can possibly be employed. And, while we're at it, how can anyone justify our enrolling an ever-growing number of techno-freaks who imagine that they are going to make a living as recording engineers?

- 4) The business itself has to undergo some serious changes. According to *Billboard*, the Neptunes and Timbaland are supposedly getting \$300,000 a track for submitting finished tracks to record companies. This means that a ten-song album would cost \$3,000,000 to make, not counting promotional costs or artist advances. Does anyone want to buy George Strait's oceanfront property in Arizona?

Everyone knows that the traditional record company model of royalties with endless deductions is not only unfair; it no longer makes any sense. When are the majors going to smell the coffee and do something about it? When will executive compensation be based on performance, and not on rhetoric or ancient track records? Maybe production advances should be minimal, and dollars tied closely to the sale of recordings. Possibly that is the way we should deal with artists and record executives as well.

- 5) The internet will not solve everyone's problems. I'd like to see the real numbers on how many people are trying music business enterprises on the net, and what their ratio of success turns out to be. I know for example that CD Baby, which is certainly a laudable enterprise, has stated on its own sites that most of its thousands of records sell less than ten copies. What is the ratio of success of people who pay the fees at TAXI, to the ones who actually get deals through them?

Finally, in all humility I have to say that if I were still teaching I would have to rethink all of the things I used to present as stock wisdom. The best example of something I think is still valid comes from a story told by Tommy Noonan at a music business seminar in Denver. He was head of national promotion at Columbia, and was asked by Clive Davis to promote *My Fair Lady*, a Broadway show in which Columbia was the major investor. Noonan created a special dinner event, inviting 50 of the richest and most powerful people in New York City. Citing security concerns, he convinced the city of New York to allow him to build an overpass, leading

from the restaurant to the theater. As a little bonus, Noonan then used the overpass to post two massive rent-free billboards advertising the show. And he got a young Barbra Streisand, who starred in the show, to make a guest appearance at the dinner.

The night went beautifully, and for two weeks Noonan left the overpass there, with the giant billboards continuing to provide free publicity. The city finally called him. He played dumb, and told them that he had forgotten about it. The next day he arranged to take the overpass down.

If we can teach people that level of ingenuity and inventiveness, then we won't need to worry about whether our students will make it in the music industry.

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