Research Note: Breaking into the Popular Record Industry

An Insider's View on the Career Entry of Pop Musicians

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A B S T R A C T

■ This study focuses on the career entry and development of professional musicians in the Netherlands. Ten artist and repertoire (A&R) managers, key decision-makers in the selection process at the input side of the record industry, were interviewed to investigate the essential characteristics a musician requires to become a successful professional. In addition, the practices and criteria applied in the A&R manager's selection process were discussed. Based on these interviews, a number of background, personality and contextual factors influencing career success were identified. The musician's social environment should be supportive but critical, while likeability, perfectionism, motivation, insecurity and self-criticism were said to be key personality traits to become successful. For A&R managers, the most important source for finding out about new talent is their professional network. The main criteria for selection are the musician's skills, quality of their music and live performance, and the perceived possibility to sell their music and attract media exposure. The study's findings are consistent with earlier research on the American and British record industry practices, indicating that such practices in the record industry are persistent over time, and that they are similar in other, smaller European music markets.

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Introduction

Studies on popular music production usually focus on the organization of the record industry (Frith, 1996, 2001; Negus, 1992, 1999; Peterson and Berger, 1975; Peterson and Ryan, 1983; Toynbee, 2000). The career development of its main characters, the artists, has received far less attention. With notable exceptions (Cohen, 1991; Finnegan, 1989; Jones, 1998; Peterson and Ryan, 1983), relatively few studies have focused on musicians and their entry into the record industry. Some authors have noted the crucial role of artist and repertoire (A&R) managers in the selection of artists (Frith, 1996; Negus, 1992, 1999). In this study, 10 of the most influential Dutch A&R managers were interviewed in order to investigate (1) what individual characteristics they perceive to be beneficial to becoming a successful professional musician and (2) what selection criteria they apply when signing artists.

Peterson and Ryan (1983) state that the usual means of career entry for musicians is 'breaking into' their chosen line of work. Instead of clearly defined requirements or formal selection procedures, musicians must find ways of gaining the interest of record industry executives. Networking is important, a finding repeated in later studies by Jones (1998) and Giuffre (1999). Record industry staff play a key role in these networks as they decide who 'gets a break' and who does not. This type of decision-maker has been referred to as gatekeeper (Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996), cultural intermediary (Bourdieu, 1984; Negus, 2002) or creative manager (Hesmondhalgh, 2002, 2006; Ryan, 1992). These concepts refer to creative industry personnel (e.g. the A&R manager), acting as crucial mediators between the interests of the creators of symbolic content (the musicians) and the companies that reproduce and circulate this symbolic content (the record companies).

The Internet has been described as a democratizing medium (Fisher and Wright, 2001), in that it enables musicians to bypass the 'middlemen' of the record industry and reach audiences directly. In recent years, only a few new acts (e.g. Arctic Monkeys and Panic at the Disco) have succeeded in utilizing the possibilities of the Internet to build a broad fan base. However, it was through their record labels that these bands were further marketed and promoted, showing that the bargaining power of the 'offline' record companies is still largely intact (see also Kretschmer, 2005). Record companies still occupy a central position, as they have the ability to boost a musician's career by financing album

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recordings, enhancing access to national media and securing national distribution (Jones, 1998; Negus, 1996; Toynbee, 2000). The oversupply of aspiring artists forces record companies to make selections, and the A&R manager plays an important role in deciding who will be signed (Negus, 1992; Stratton, 1981, 1983).

Based on interviews with record industry personnel, Negus (1992) has formulated a list of the main selection criteria for judging new artists on the basis of the quality of: (1) the live, stage performance, (2) the originality and quality of the songs, (3) the recorded performance and voice, (4) appearance and image, (5) level of commitment and motivation and (6) the achievements of the act so far. In other studies, personality and social context variables have been related to career success. For instance, family background, personality and motivation, as well as the social and professional context were found to influence career success (Corbin Sicoli, 1995; Howe and Davidson, 2003; Kogan, 2002; Soldz and Vaillant, 1999; Seibert et al., 2001; Stremikis, 2002). The selection process itself has attracted scant attention (Frith, 2000; Negus, 1992). Moreover, as studies outside the UK and the US are non-existent, it is important to investigate whether findings from earlier music industry research also apply to other national contexts. The Dutch music market is the 10th largest in the world (IFPI, 2008), and while it is relatively open to US and UK influences, Dutch music has a market share of about 25 percent. Acts are promoted by both major and smaller, independent Dutch record companies (NVPI, 2007, 2008). Studying the Dutch music industry context is interesting, inasmuch as music production cultures in other small or medium-sized countries, with a mix of music from international and local artists, may be similar to the Dutch situation. In sum, this study investigates A&R managers' selection process of artists they predict will become successful.

Method and respondents

Similar to Stratton (1981, 1983) and Negus (1992), we make use of A&R managers as informants. Our data consisted of 10 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with an average length of 60 minutes. Respondents were either A&R experts employed by a major record company[1] or who worked for an independent record label specializing in a specific genre. This selection of experts covers a substantial segment of the Dutch record industry. The Appendix provides an overview of the respondents' backgrounds.

The interview topic list included questions about respondents' definition of success and their practices in the selection process, as well as

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questions on musicians' personality, motivation and the importance of contextual factors. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were analysed using MAXqda software. The method of our analysis was based on methods described by Strauss and Corbin (1998) in their discussion of grounded theory and by Boeije (2002) in her approach to the constant comparative method.

During the first phase of our analysis, open coding, text fragments were given codes to identify the main theme. In the second phase, axial coding, the coded segments were compared both within and between interviews and connections between different codes were established. The third phase, selective coding, consisted of producing a full description of these connections and their implications for our research questions.

Results

What factors influence the economic career success of musicians?

There was strong agreement among the respondents that there were two dimensions to career success. First, being successful means earning enough money to become a professional artist, and, thus, to be profitable to the record company. As such, record sales, airplay and frequency of performing were seen as indicators of success. In addition, success was defined by intrinsic values such as artistic development, recognition by other musicians and, most important, a feeling of being successful. This second dimension is a far more subjective notion than the first, economic dimension of success. Though A&R managers are sympathetic to artists' subjective experience of success, their prime interest lies in economic success and its determinants. In the following, we describe the factors put forward by the respondents as influencing economic career success (see Table 1).

Family background refers to the musician's socioeconomic background. There was no agreement among the respondents on the preferred background. Some respondents argued that musicians from higher class backgrounds have better prospects, as they have access to economic and social capital, whereas other respondents argued that musicians from lower class backgrounds show more dedication. Musical socialization, including coming from a musical family and musical education, also led to divergent views. It was felt by all respondents that musicians should be 'touched' by music, but this interest in music could be 'triggered' in various ways: by their family, teachers, peers or the media. Also, the social context is important: artists should have support from their environment, though their peers and family should not be uncritical.

Table 1 Factors mentioned by respondents

	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10
Background										
Family background	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Musical family		X	X		X	X	X	X		
Musical socialization		X				X	X		X	X
Musical education	X	X					X			
Charisma	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Appearance/ looks		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Gender	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X
Personality										
Likeability	X	X			X				X	
Insecurity	X		X			X		X		
Perfectionism			X		X			X		
Self-criticism		X	X			X	X	X		
Willing to work hard	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Resilience		X	X		X					
Motivation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Egoism			X		X					X
Social context										
Critical environment	X	X	X		X	X		X		
Social support			X	X	X	X		X	X	
Help from others	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	

Notes: This table is based on the code matrix made in MAXqda. In this table, an X indicates that the respondents mentioned this topic. The order of the respondents is random, there is no connection to the order of the respondents used in the Appendix.

All respondents agreed on the importance of appearance and stated that it helps to be good-looking. Some respondents argued that women are judged by their looks more often than men. Most respondents distinguished between appearance and charisma, and found charisma even more important than looks.

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With regard to personality, a number of respondents said being likeable is an important personality trait. In particular, so-called 'star behaviour' is not appreciated: musicians should be 'ordinary', 'nice' and 'act normal'. One respondent stated that because Dutch musicians always have to deal with the same small group of people working in the media and music industries, they have to maintain good relationships with them.

It was striking that a set of connected personality traits including insecurity, perfectionism and self-criticism was ascribed to successful musicians. The respondents argued that it is important for musicians to remain perfectionist and self-critical throughout their careers. A lack of constructive criticism in their social environment was considered to negatively influence a musician's artistic development.

All respondents recognized that for musicians to start a professional career, it requires hard work, perseverance and resilience, that is, the ability to cope with setbacks and criticism. Musicians should sacrifice huge amounts of their time to the development of their musical and performance skills. Consequently, musicians should be highly motivated and show a willingness to work hard. Having a strong inner drive enables musicians to achieve their goals, but in some cases this may lead to egoism.

To sum up, the results in this section emphasize the importance of musical socialization. In addition, likeability, insecurity, perfectionism, self-criticism and motivation were said to be important personality traits for a musician to become successful. Finally, the musician's social environment should be supportive but critical.

The A&R manager's selection process

The factors described in the preceding section were considered to influence success. However, A&R managers do not make their decisions based on these characteristics alone. In this section we concentrate on how A&R managers search for new artists and the selection criteria they apply (see Table 2).

The selection source demos refers to sending in demonstration recordings (demos) to record companies. All respondents reported receiving dozens of demos every week, but they unanimously claimed that this was not a source for the selection of new artists. Sending in demos was found to be proof of a lack of knowledge of how the music industry works and showed poor marketing skills among musicians. Instead, the respondents tend to use their professional networks to locate new artists. Regarding this professional network, two important issues were mentioned: first, when different people

Table 2 Selection sources and selection criteria mentioned by respondents

	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10
Selection sources										
Demos	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Professional network	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	
Talent competitions		X		X	X	X			X	
Internet			X		X		X	X	X	
Selection criteria										
Quality of performance	X		X			X	X	X	X	X
Quality of music	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Composing skills	X	X	X			X				X
Instrument skills	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	
Performance skills	X		X			X	X	X	X	
Musical talent	X	X			X	X	X		X	
Audience appeal		X	X	X	X	X	X			X
Media appeal	X	X		X	X		X		X	
Appearance/ looks		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Charisma	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Likeability	X	X			X				X	
Marketing skills		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Knowledge of the record industry		X			X	X		X	X	X
Motivation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Innovative	X	X	X						X	X
Authenticity	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Intuition	X		X	X		X		X		
Experience			X			X		X	X	
Feelings during listening		X	X		X	X	X	X	X	

Notes: This table is based on the code matrix made in MAXqda. In this table, an X indicates that the respondents mentioned this topic. The order of the respondents is random, there is no connection to the order of the respondents used in the Appendix.

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notice a new artist, this indicates there is something unique about this artist. Second, when an artist is recommended through this professional network, their talent is legitimized and this information is valued more than information from an anonymous source.

We found that A&R managers have access to diverse professional networks, consisting of, for example, journalists, radio DJs, venue bookers, staff at other record companies, booking agencies, management agencies and pop organizations. The artist should try to get noticed throughout this professional network, which requires knowledge of the record industry and marketing skills.

Talent competitions and Internet forums were mentioned as alternative sources for selection. These are often a mixture of journalistic and audience input, where the quality of the music is legitimized by a combination of journalistic and audience appeal.

After getting noticed by the A&R manager, the actual selection process starts. There was strong consensus among the respondents that the quality of the music is the most important selection criterion. In addition, the A&R manager also evaluates the live performance and the artist's appearance. However, what makes good music remained vague, as respondents indicated that good music is 'innovative', 'authentic' and 'unique'. Instead of explaining these terms, the respondents referred to specific artists to illustrate their point. Some respondents explained how they use their intuition and experience or the feelings they get during listening.

Most importantly, the music should have the potential to be appreciated by a large audience. Thus, the A&R manager tries to assess how likely it is that radio and television stations will put it on their playlists. This also points to the selection processes that start after an artist is selected by the A&R manager. Both commercial and public radio stations select music to fit their profiles, which are based on reaching a certain demographic group of interest to advertisers. This also shows that before an artist reaches an audience, multiple selection processes are involved. First, artists have to attract attention, then they are either contracted or rejected and, after signing and having their music recorded onto a disc, new selection processes start, i.e., their music has to be exposed to media gatekeepers, and through the media they represent, to the general public.

All in all, the respondents indicated that the quality of the music and the live performance were the two most important selection criteria. Central to these selection criteria are the musician's composing, instrumental and performance skills and musical talent. Other important criteria were

potential audience and media appeal and the musician's appearance and motivation.

Conclusion

With regard to the A&R manager's selection process, our main conclusions are twofold. First and foremost, our findings indicate the importance of the A&R manager's professional network for the selection of new artists. Essentially, other music industry professionals within the A&R manager's network legitimize the quality of both artist and music. This reflects earlier findings on the importance for artists to have access to the professional network (Giuffre, 1999; Jones, 1998; Peterson and Ryan, 1983). Musicians with connections to this network have a better chance of becoming successful professionals.

Second, although our respondents identified a number of background, personality and contextual factors that they related to the career success of musicians, they did not consider these characteristics in the main to be the most important criteria for the selection of new artists. Our list of selection criteria is largely consistent with Negus's findings on the British record industry in the 1980s (Negus, 1992): that is, our respondents mentioned the importance of the live performance, quality of the music, musical skills, appearance, motivation as well as potential media and audience appeal.

Finally, a central finding is that A&R managers were straightforward in acknowledging the subjectivity of their evaluation of quality, and that they relied heavily on their assessment of the selling potential of artists. Our findings on the A&R manager's professional practices are consistent with earlier research on the British and American record industry (see Frith, 1996; Negus, 1992, 1999). This suggests that many conventions and practices in the record industry are persistent over time and that they are applicable to other, smaller European music markets.

A limitation of our study is the possible inconsistency between the selection criteria described by our respondents and their actual practice. This issue is relevant to similar research on selection processes in cultural production and is in need of further study. Also, because our study was limited to the A&R manager's perspective, it would be interesting to compare these findings to the perspectives of other decision-makers within the field of popular music production, such as the concert industry or the music media. Finally, to complement these views, the musician's perspective is also in need of further academic attention.

Appendix: respondent background information

Name (age[a]), interview date	Position[b] and name of company:	Has worked for or works for:
Niels Aalberts (33), 22 October 2004	A&R manager and owner of EHPO, an A&R consultancy company	Arcade, [PIAS], Universal, Sony/BMG
Wilbert Mutsaers (35), 23 November 2004	Marketing director[c] at Universal Music Netherlands	Sony Music, BMG, Mojo Concerts
Daan van Rijsbergen (42), 2 December 2004	A&R manager, producer and owner of B2Music, an A&R consultancy, artist management and publishing company	Talpa Music, Sony Music
Henkjan Smits (43), 11 January 2005	A&R manager and owner of Henkjan Smits producties, an A&R consultancy company	PolyGram, BMG, Idols, Yorin/RTL
Menno Timmerman (43), 17 November 2004	A&R manager and owner of TheMen-O, an A&R consultancy company	Polydor, BMG, Warner
Alain Verhave (40), 14 December 2004	A&R manager at CNR/Roadrunner	
Paul Zijlstra (44), 13 January 2005	A&R manager and owner of Bula Music, an A&R consultancy company	Phonogram, BMG, Island, Universal
Dick de Groot (30), 4 March 2005	A&R manager and owner of Be Yourself Music, a record company specialized in dance music	Basic Beat recordings, ID&T Music
Kees de Koning (34), 11 January 2005	A&R manager and owner of Top Notch, a record company specializing in hip-hop	Virgin/EMI, OOR, 3FM, VPRO
Ferry Roseboom (39), 4 November 2004	A&R manager and owner of Excelsior Recordings, a record company specialized in alternative rock	

[a]Age refers to the respondent's age at the time the interview was conducted.

[b]Most of the A&R managers in the table are also described as owners. In some cases, this ownership relates to their A&R consultancy companies and corresponds with a shift in outsourcing the A&R 'discipline'. In the case of the smaller, specialized record companies (Be Yourself Music, Excelsior and Top Notch), the owner is typically the one person involved with all aspects of the company, most notably the acquisition and development of new artists.

[c]Although Wilbert Mutsaers' official job description is marketing director, he is actively involved in the company's A&R management. Additionally he has worked as A&R manager with several record companies.

Acknowledgements

Note

1. The four major record companies are Sony/BMG, Universal, EMI and Warner. In 2006, the market share of these record companies was 70 percent in the Netherlands (NVPI, 2007).

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