

Band, fans putting their Radioheads together to reshape music

With more artists getting music to fans in less expensive ways, the music industry's biggest labels are facing the apocalypse



PAUL
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After releasing *Hail to the Thief* in 2003, Radiohead found themselves in a strange limbo: they were one of the biggest bands in the world, but with their contract to Parlophone records fulfilled, they were as independent as your high school's platter of shitty metal bands.

The band could've easily signed a fresh contract with almost anyone; after having their last three albums debut in the top three on both the American and UK billboard charts, the thought of adding Radiohead to their roster most would cause most record company execs to start salivating uncontrollably. But instead

of big bucks and billboard charting, they've given execs the most terrifying thought of all: a drastic reshaping of the music industry into something that doesn't include them.

Ten days ago, Radiohead announced that their eagerly awaited new album, *In Rainbows*, would be released as a digital download, or special edition "discbox" through their website. While the discbox would set fans back a hefty 40 quid, the download would cost whatever the buyer felt inclined to pay for it. Could you pay nothing? You bet. One of the world's biggest acts decided to leave it to the consumer to dictate how much their new album was worth.

No record label is currently affiliated with the band, so no one's being intentionally screwed out of a paycheck. Radiohead are cutting out the record label—the usual middleman between fan and band—and getting their music to the fans in an inexpensive, effective fashion. Most bands only make

a few dollars off of every album sold, so if the pay-what-you-want method encourages even a small number of regular downloaders to chip in a few bucks, Radiohead should make just as much they would've through a major release, without costs to return to a record label—a fact that will get stingier fans to buy the album.

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This could cause major change in the music industry; for years they've

gotten away with promising to cut CD prices while doing nothing of the sort to make a dent in their prices, leading to a buildup of "Fuck the Man" sentiment that propelled downloading even when the first filesharing lawsuits began to fly.

By the early 2000s, the music industry was in a slump; dependent on the big hits that they could manufacture and control like the boybands of the '90s, they found more and more disappointing sales figures coming in. Suddenly, albums that cost \$20-plus were no longer flying off the shelves.

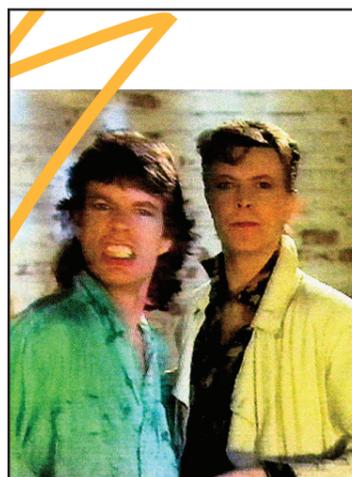
Meanwhile, iTunes, with its extensive, immediate database and low costs, started to force the hands of major retailers like HMV, who cut prices in response. But large amounts of fans would still rather download an album for free than pay even \$20, now that the technology was reliable and quick. The major retailers missed their chance to pre-empt downloading and

keep music buyers in their stores.

Radiohead's not the only act taking this direct-to-fans approach: Prince gave away copies his latest release, *Planet Earth*, with a Sunday newspaper, infuriating his record label and stores everywhere. But his payoff was an unprecedented 21-night stint in London, selling out every show. He gave the fans his music; they gladly paid to see his shows. Both parties profited, while the music industry sat uninvited on the sidelines.

If more large bands take similar paths as their contracts expire, major labels could die off altogether. Some labels will probably still exist—not every band's well-known enough to have fans to directly release music to, after all. But if all the big-bands make it easy on their fans, the "Man," so famous for corrupting music, will end up dethroned and penniless, looking for another job out on the street.

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Here at the Gateway, you could collaborate with just about anyone—except David Bowie, probably.

Or Mick Jagger, for that matter. But pretty much anyone else is fair game.

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