

# A different tune

## Major record labels bully the fans who made their bottom lines sing

By **Eddie Ashworth**

As a 20-year veteran of the music industry, I find the recent punitive tactics of the major record companies and the Recording Industry Association of America counterproductive at best and self-destructive at worst.

Yes, there are millions of audio files being traded daily without money changing hands. But is the music industry suffering as a result, as the RIAA claims? I believe a reality check is in order.

A look at the annual Nielsen SoundScan sales report for 2006 reveals that while CD sales were down 4.9 percent (and have fallen by similar percentages for several years), the recording industry is nonetheless experiencing healthy growth. Overall music purchases — defined as albums, singles, music videos and digital tracks — increased from 1 billion to 1.2 billion

including computer games, films, TV and advertising.

Rather than adversely affecting the industry, I believe file sharing has reinvigorated it, creating new pathways for artists to reach their fans. Given this, why would the RIAA adopt tactics of intimidation, such as threatening college students (including many at Ohio University) with legal action?

The answer is control. Throughout the 20th century, the major labels essentially dictated which artists were signed, how music was promoted and distributed, and what the consumer was exposed to and allowed to purchase. This limited the diversity of available music and, after the introduction of the CD format in the 1980s, allowed the majors to set inflated prices for the resulting product. Among the negative results were a

wobbly economic model, a lessening of label support for the very artists the majors were seeking to profit from, and — this is crucial — alienation of the consumer.

However, the advent of so-called “disruptive” technologies such as MP3s and the Internet turned the tables on corporate labels, empowering the consumer by providing access to a wide variety of music (free and paid) without the gatekeepers of the past.

We now see independent labels becoming the

fastest-growing market segment as they adroitly adapt to this sea change in the industry. The indies are, in the words of Nettwerk Group founder Terry McBride, creating innovative ways of “monetizing behavior” rather than demonizing consumers as the majors have done.

In the audio production and recording industry courses I teach, one question arises frequently: “Where the heck is the record business going?” My students are

### Our scrape with RIAA

The Recording Industry Association of America recently mounted a broad campaign to stem illegal file sharing on university campuses. It chose a few dozen institutions each month, twice targeting Ohio University.

The RIAA asked universities to forward to alleged violators letters that contained a network address, time and sample lists of downloads. Universities had to match the data to computer users, who could settle with the RIAA or risk lawsuits.

The RIAA followed through on the threat, aiming 10 lawsuits at campus users who did not settle. The university has since restricted file-sharing programs on its network.

understandably concerned about their own professional futures in the changing industry landscape. My honest response is that this is probably the best time in the past 40 years to enter the business.

Not since the late '60s and early '70s has there been such a vibrant popular music scene with such entrepreneurial opportunities for the well-prepared. In my opinion, we are on the verge of a new golden era in the music industry, where popular as well as niche artists can reach an audience directly and, along with the professions that support them, make a decent (if perhaps not extravagant) living. This is happening precisely because audiences can easily find and even distribute music that moves them.

If the major record companies lose market share, they have only themselves to blame. They would do well to spend their time figuring out how best to serve their potentially limitless client base rather than serve papers on a bunch of college students whose only real crime is insisting that the industry cater to their needs rather than the other way around.

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PHOTOS BY RICK FATICA

**Assistant Professor Eddie Ashworth thinks the music industry is heading into a new golden era.**

last year, with paid digital downloads posting a whopping 65 percent increase.

This is clearly not an ailing industry. It would be more accurate to say this is an industry in transition. The truth is that more people are buying, listening to and turning their friends on to music — new and old — than ever before. As a result, recorded music is playing an increasingly important and financially rewarding role in all facets of the media,