

Music & Theater Department Blog

Leapfrog

By Professor George Wurzbach

By the first decade of the 20th century musicians, inventors, and hucksters embraced an emerging technology. They leaped onto the scene and began to market audio recordings of songs and instrumental music on wax cylinders and discs. Soon a growing number of households owning phonograph players created a demand for a growing number of recordings to play. Eager to supply, a music industry was up and running with a technology that could bring concert hall performances into the parlor. Though not everyone was merry. The band leader and composer John Phillip Sousa feared this new technology and predicted a future population of passive listeners who's, "Vocal cord will be eliminated by a process of evolution." It was Maestro Sousa, however, who evolved to record much of his own music from which he profited nicely. The famed New Orleans Jazz trumpeter Freddie Keppard declined the offer to make the first Jazz record in 1917. He worried that other musicians would listen repeatedly to his recording and copy his style. The honor did go to The Original Dixieland Jazz Band who recorded, "Livery Stable Blues" and sold more than a million copies.

By the 1940's, with record labels in the lead position, commercial radio leaped into nearly every living-room in the nation. This technology broadcasted live music free to anyone with a receiver. What a bonanza for the consumer. They could listen to their favorite artists for free. What a wonderful promotional opportunity for the record labels. They could put their artists on the air enticing the public to buy their newest records. What a field day for the broadcasters. With a multitude of consumers listening to free broadcasts, the stations could negotiate profitably with paying advertisers. Though not everyone was merry. Bubbling beneath this bonanza was much anxiety.



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Would free radio eventually kill record sales? Would less people buy concert tickets choosing instead to enjoy broadcasts in the comfort of their home? Would composers be properly compensated for the broadcast performance of their music? Good questions surely. But was this the voice of paranoid pioneers or was it really time to circle the wagons? Yes and yes. Yes because radio did not kill record sales as feared rather eventually it propelled them. And yes because composers actually were being left out of the income stream necessitating rights protection organizations to keep vigil. Through much maneuvering the industry regained a lead position. Till again technology leaped from behind, and so on and so forth.

Seven decades and hundreds of billions of dollars in sales later, technology and the music industry share a history of playing leapfrog. Analog cassettes - leap - The Audio Home Recording Act - leap - compact discs - leap - Serial Copy Management System - leap - Napster - leap - lawsuits - leap - streaming - - streaming - -? Today, streaming technology is in the lead position offering consumers unprecedented access to free music. The industry is coiled to leap in response but in what form that response will be is still in the minds of students and innovators with stakes in a future livelihood. There will be more maneuvering but it will work out. It always has. Children play leapfrog with a passion even with the understanding that there will be no final score and no one will win. But the desire to play comes from the even more important understanding that no one will lose. Ribbit!

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