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Artists Shout "I'm with the Brand" as Fashion Labels Take on Role of Record Label

From Sgt. Pepper's psychedelic costumes to Run DMC's love of Adidas and Kanye West's shutter shades, fashion and music have visibly influenced one another for decades. The global recession has only strengthened this bond by leading fashion brands to take on roles once exclusively reserved for major record labels. As a result, labels and artists have begun to view fashion brands as a lucrative and logical business partner while brands' increasing ability to work with musicians has allowed them new and unique means of attracting customers, increasing consumer goodwill, and maintaining their distinctiveness.

Major Endorsements at Knock-Off Prices!

As record sales continue their precipitous decline and record stores close down, artists are left with very few brick and mortar venues through which they can distribute physical CDs. As a result, major artists have become increasingly amenable to co-endorsement deals and alliances. In the past few months alone, big-name acts like Lily Allen, Wil.I.am, N.E.R.D., Kris Allen, and Miley Cyrus signed potentially lucrative deals with major fashion brands and retailers. In one such deal, Latin pop star Paulina Rubio entered a partnership with Wal-Mart to promote her new album. In exchange for a few in-store appearances and a performance at the annual stockholder's meeting, Wal-Mart agreed to show exclusive concert footage of Rubio and to display her CDs in close proximity to her new perfume line—in the store's beauty department.

A few years ago, stores like Wal-Mart (the second-largest music retailer in the country) would be unlikely to place CD racks anywhere but their music department, while co-promotions were either out of the question for major acts or solely controlled by the labels. Now, as cross-promotions and partnerships become increasingly common, retailers and artists are forced to consider new strategic partnerships. While Rubio's in-store ads should boost perfume sales, they are really a calculated promotional campaign for her CD. Additionally, Rubio's endorsement of Wal-Mart will help the brand connect with Rubio's primarily Latin-American fanbase and her in-store performances should prove invaluable. Not only does her presence attract a huge number of shoppers, it provides the in-store audience with a brand-affinity that would not otherwise have been possible. At the same time, by displaying Rubio's concert video and CDs in its beauty department, Wal-Mart introduces her music to shoppers who may not otherwise have heard it and encourages the purchase of both fragrance and CD—especially if the retailer discounts combo purchases.

If planned correctly, strategic partnerships with established acts are also an extremely valuable way for high-fashion brands to remain sexy, young, and culturally relevant. In the 1990s, hip-hop artists helped make Ralph Lauren ubiquitous in both country clubs and high school hallways. Now, when Jay-Z shouts-out Burberry, Marc Jacobs, and Vera Wang, he reinforces the allure of the brands among a youthful audience that might have overlooked such high-fashion designers. Gucci's recent endorsement deal with Rihanna helped the 80-year old brand connect with the singer's young female fans. Meanwhile, Kanye

West has agreed to design an exclusive shoe for Louis Vuitton and taken to calling himself "the Louis Vuitton Don" in recent singles. These alliances work to reinforce the brand's luxury cachet and ensure their relevance.

Exclusivity, Distinctiveness, and Lesser-Known Bands

Some of the most interesting synergies between fashion and music have come from retailers working with unsigned or lesser-known bands because, unlike major artists, lesser-known musicians have exhibited a willingness to focus on audience access and public exposure rather than compensation. Thus, undiscovered or lesser-known musicians present fashion brands with a huge upside and low costs.

For example, Claire's—an accessories retailer which targets girls and young women—recently began a promotional campaign with teen pop singer Alex Roots. Although some financial consideration was reportedly exchanged, the deal's primary focus was exposure for Roots in exchange for her endorsement of Claire's products. Claire's publicizes her music via in-store radio in 400 U.K. stores and includes with every purchase a postcard directing customers to a Claire's micro site featuring Alex Roots' music. Finally, Claire's plans to release a line of Alex Roots sunglasses to coincide with the release of her next single.

Since its inception, the micro site (which includes links to Roots' own promotional site) has reported over 35,000 hits each month—a tremendous source of exposure for Roots and a great way to strengthen affinity for and awareness of the Claire's brand. Further, Roots is a huge online-traffic driver. Since Claire's website is one of the best means of downloading, viewing, or listening to Roots' music, fans and their friends may find themselves inadvertently buying a shirt or some earrings while they listen to a favorite new song. In addition, among some consumers and Roots' fans Claire's is likely to become inextricably linked with the artist—a phenomenon some industry experts have taken to calling "ownership." Since Roots' fanbase coincides neatly with Claire's target-customer, "ownership" translates into increased brand exposure and improved credibility with consumers. Meanwhile, Claire's endorsements, advertisements, and promotional materials have essentially replaced the role of traditional record label.

The allure of "ownership" also works in musicians' favor by providing incentives to actively promote artists in all possible venues. For example, in a recent alliance with the Thomas Pink shirt company, musician Gary Go agreed to appear in Pink advertisements, to provide Pink customers with an exclusive download, and to provide his music for in-store radio. In exchange, Pink agreed to display Go's video online and promote his music. Now, due to the promotion's success in UK stores, Pink plans to unroll it internationally. In so doing, the company will provide Go (who released his first CD in May) with international promotions and advertising well beyond anything he could have reasonably expected from a cash-strapped record label.

The Best is Yet to Come:

As CD sales continue to fall, fashion brands are becoming increasingly entwined in areas which were once the exclusive domain of major labels. In the brave new world of music, fashion brands provide artists with a promotions, exposure, and audience access that might not otherwise be possible. In exchange, artists provide fashion brands and retailers with inexpensive endorsements, a means of distinguishing or reinvigorating their brand, and a direct connection to consumers through music. Music and fashion have always gone hand-in-hand, now a difficult market environment has brought the two even closer together and forced both parties to seek out new and creative partnerships.