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Are Indie Artist Better Off?

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It's the year 2004 and Geminelle Rollins spent her days dreaming of doing what Jennifer Hudson, Destiny's Child, and Usher were doing. Rollins, then 16, had been singing since she was eight, performing at track meet and auditioning for plays in her hometown of San Diego. A manager had agreed to manage her when she was 12 and had been a part of a girl group called MISS. She realized quickly things wouldn't work out and went solo at 13.

"I realize they weren't a compatible match. Not that they weren't good; they just weren't compatible for me," Rollins said.

In the three years that she was away from her former group, she became laser-focused her craft.

"I got really intense in vocal training then I started writing my own music," said Rollins.

During that time recorded her first full-length album titled *For Once in My Life* with her producer, Piermid.

"That was a really fast-paced time. I was meeting with A&Rs [Artist and Repertoire representatives] and producers and I was in LA every other week," said Rollins.

More artists are rejecting the traditional model of being professional musical artists and being signed to major labels. Now, artists are either sign to independent labels or they are self-releasing their music. Chance the Rapper, who is signed to his own label, Chance the Rapper LLC, said in an interview with Rolling Stone that he can do whatever he wants and "flex the unlimited capacity of an independent artist."

The independent route has gained popularity in recent years. Myspace, and Youtube allow musicians and artists to self-release music without the help of a major label. Justin Bieber found fame through his YouTube channel and guitarist Andy McKee signed to CandyRat Records after being discovered on his YouTube page. Panic! At The Disco also signed to a deal after being on Myspace.

"Indie labels are experiencing a resurgence of visibility within the marketplace, mostly due to a successful recipe of mixing a clear vision, likeminded artistry, and a tight geographic radius," said Jeff Rabhan, Chair of the Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, in Reverbnation, an online music platform for musicians to share their music.

During that time, Rollins was approached by producer, Battlecat, to sign a deal with Warner Bros. She said it was like six degrees of separation. The producers that she was working with had connections and it was through those connections that she found herself in Battlecat's office singing for a contract with Warner Bros. She was sixteen at the time, a junior at Morse High School. She was happy about singing for Battlecat and possibly signing to a major label, a dream that is being realized, but

what would be dashed as quickly as it came. They thought that she could be another Ciara.

“They asked me if I could dance and I said ‘Yeah, but...’” she trails off giving the impression that dancing was not what she wanted to do.

According to Rollins, the record label felt the words she wrote were too mature and not for them. She was writing soul songs about love and teenage life, a genre Rollins said belongs to older adults like Jill Scott, but according to Rollins her voice and style was not on par with the Ciaras of the time.

But she didn’t feel bad about her decision.

“I felt good about it,” she said, “I felt like I made a good decision for myself.”

She left that venture behind and has been pursuing music on her terms ever since.

According to Nielson SoundScan, independent labels had 32.6 percent of the album sales in 2012, more than any of the other major labels (EMI, SONY, Universal, and Warner Bros.).

But there are artists like Rollins who are not necessarily trying to get signed by indie labels.

Rollins is currently part of a “creative label” called 55nineteen. A creative label, as described by one of the founders, James Malone, it’s a collective that does similarly what a music label does, but involves ventures other than music. They have a health and wellness sector, and photography sector, and a music sector. It’s a collection of friends that help and sponsor themselves to get to the goals they want to achieve.

Rollins has gone back to San Diego for three weeks in December to record her new album *Audiobook*. She’s taken time off from her job at Harlem Children’s Zone, which she is not getting paid for.

She recently performed at a one-hour gig in Detroit, for which she was paid \$1,500 for, about the same amount she would have gotten if she were working for those three weeks.

Getting signed to a label is not the easiest feat in the world. In fact some may argue that it’s one of the hardest things to do.

When an artist gets signed to a label, the sales department decides how much money an artist will get to produce their album, which includes all the marketing,

promotion, and studio time. The amount depends on the artist's sales potential or how quickly the label can earn back what it has advanced to the artist.

But signing to a label is the kiss of death for some. It seems like signed artists are having the time of their lives and some are living their dream. The reality is these musical artists are one in a million that are obscenely successful in the music industry. The music industry is not as it was 20 years ago. Labels don't want to lose money on an investment. A&R representatives' necks are ever on the guillotine, searching for artists that can be the next Katy Perry or Rhianna.

Fred Mollin, a former A&R representative at Walt Disney Records, says that 30 percent of all artists are good, but out of that 30 percent, only one percent gets signed to a major label. And out of that one percent and even smaller percentage of artist reach the ranks of Maroon 5 or the Foo Fighters and have longevity. The onus is not on the artist to be great and have all the embedded features that make superstars. The onus is on the A&R reps.

"Their job is on the line everyday," said Mollin.

They discover these artists and then cultivate their talent, but today A&R reps don't want to deal with developing an artist according to Mollin because that's money that could potentially be wasted, according to Mollin.

But everyone has their own way of discovering artists. John Anthony, president of independent label Banner Records, has an A&R representative, Bob Dellposta, as most record labels do. Bob goes out and finds artists and delivers his pickings to Anthony. Then Anthony goes through the batch and decides which artists will potentially be a good fit for his label.

Other A&Rs will find the artist, get them signed to label, and do whatever they can do make sure that the artist is fully developed. However, A&Rs are not like managers. Managers travel with the band, find labels for the band, and find agents for the band. The A&Rs are around to make sure all of that goes well.

There are several ways that underground musical artists are getting their music out there. Some are traditional and some not so traditional. Traditionally, artists make demos tapes and perform at shows to get their music out there, but with the advent of social media, things have changed. Artists have turned to Soundcloud, Bandcamp, and even Myspace to get their music out.

If artists aren't taking a slightly non-traditional route to releasing music, they are now releasing music themselves in mediums that have some to be the norm. Soundcloud, Bandcamp, CD Baby, and Myspace are a few of the platforms that artists are using to self-release music. Hilliard uses Soundcloud to release her music, and

Geminelle uses Bandcamp. You can purchase her album by giving whatever dollar amount you would like to give.

Tamar-Kali, a DIY artist, sells her music using Bandcamp, but she insists that buying an artist's music is an important way to support the artist. Naturally, if one is a fan of an artist, that financial support will allow him or her to keep doing what he or she is doing.

The biggest difference between independent labels and major labels is simple: money according to Anthony. He says it's a very different climate. Indie labels take the time to get to know their artist and vet them to see if they are a good fit for the record label.

"You can't sign everybody," he said.

At a major label, if an album makes \$30,000 then it has to split that between production costs, the songwriter, the publisher, and the label and you get whatever is left. At an indie label, the profits get split 50/50 between the artist and the label. The label then splits their 50 percent amongst themselves.

But Ebonie Smith, a music producer and audio engineer for Atlantic Records says that all labels are different and that no one label signs artists the same.

"Like, at Atlantic, we only sign development deals," she said to crowd at the Apollo Theatre's Career Panel: Behind the Scene: Independent Music. Development deals are deals where the artists is shelved for a number of years while the label polishes them to be the type of artist that can make a profit.

But underground artists see them as one in the same.

"I would have to say some [record labels] are lazy now," says Devin Tracy, an underground artist, "they don't want to develop an artist anymore. They want you to have everything."

For Dana Hilliard, creating and writing music runs in her blood. Her father, Greg Hilliard, was a poet and her mother was singer. She started getting into music when she was eight years old, singing in her church with her cousins. Their grandfather, who they called the 'nice Joe Jackson', formed a band with his five grandchildren and sing at churches. Sometimes she would sing at churches without much notice or knowledge of the song she was singing.

"My grandfather was very big on getting us all together when we were little and just making us sing and do silly things and tape us," she said.

Her father always passed books her way about musical artists and music history.

“If you don’t know the past, how can you know the future,” her dad told her.

Greg would play music from different artists, including Michael Jackson, Luther Vandross, The Doors and Sam Cooke, around the house, which explains her eclectic taste now.

She’s 24 years old and is still a student at Molloy College. She has a job at Lord and Taylor and makes her music on the side. She doesn’t pay for studio time. She bought a Blue microphone and set up in her friend’s basement in Long Island and that’s how she recorded her latest project, *Kickback Sessions*.

Hilliard only started getting serious about her craft two years ago when she met up with her producer friend, Rodrick White, who she met in middle school.

He was banging and making beats on the cafeteria table to Busta Rhymes’ song “Put Your Hands Where My Eyes Can See” when Dana first noticed him.

She thought he was a good producer. They talked about getting together to make music. They kept promising to do so until they reconnected again in high school, but they didn’t start working together until 2012.

Before she started taking music seriously, she imagined just being a songwriter. Her and her cousin Lewis (also her manager) would write music together when they both went to Molloy College. They even wrote a song for Chris Brown when they were 18 years old.

Her father told her uncle about the song she wrote for Chris Brown. She sent the song to her uncle who is a promoter for a record label and he said “Oh well, I actually know Chris Brown’s mom so I’ll get it to her.” The song got to Chris Brown, but the producer that worked on the song started acting odd.

“I don’t know if he was afraid of success or what, but he pretty much slowed around and the project fell through,” she said, “We didn’t have a goal in mind of what we wanted to do, it was just something we wanted to do.”

Devin Tracy started singing when he was 10 years old. He was always singing as a toddler, but didn’t get serious until his father gave him a push when he was 11 years old and that’s when he started writing his own music. His father played jazz around his Jacksonville, Florida home, which piqued his interest.

He decided that after spending a year at Bethune-Cookman University pursuing a degree in music technology to give up that venture and pursue his music career in New York City in 2012.

He's an artist that does everything by himself. He books his own studio time, he does all his own marketing, he does all his own networking, he does all his own emailing and he does all his own promotion. He even met his accompanying guitarist, Zach, on Craigslist.

"It's a lot going on. Especially, like, work and trying to book studio time and trying to book gigs for myself. It's just a lot going on."

Although it's a lot of responsibility to take on, Devin says that it's still fun. He gets to network with people who are just like him and beyond that he has control over everything that happens in his career.

"I get to control everything on my side instead of having to run to a manager," said Devin.

Neil Harris, manager for the indie rock band, Cut Copy, maintains that great music and working hard has given Cut Copy the success they have. They have spent 10 years touring in different countries, with Mexico City being their biggest market. They had no "genius plan" when the band first recorded their hit "Hearts on Fire". They recorded music and then let the rest grow organically.

"You create your own luck," said Harris but Fred Mollin says that it's not that easy.

"Luck of the draw is way too kind," Mollin said.

Cut Copy succeeds in handling all aspects of the band's business and creative affairs, but Mollin says it can be hard juggling all parts of the business alone: "You can't write good music if you're worrying about marketing, etc."

They do things the "old fashion" way, by touring and selling merchandise. They have an e-mail list with 70,000 people on it. Harris says that they get more spins by promoting to their email list than having an outside publication showcase their music. Harris gives an example: if the publication Pitchfork was to promote their music, they would get about 3,000 plays, but if they promote to their own email list, they'll get 9,000 plays.

Cut Copy doesn't make a lot of money from selling records, however, they do make money by playing shows and licensing their music to be used in commercials and other promotional materials.

Rollins is running late for her gig at Dinosaur BBQ in Harlem. It's 6:19 pm and she's just now leaving her home in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn. Sound check was at 6:15 pm, doors opens at 7 pm and the show starts at 8 pm, but before she can even get to the venue, she needs to pick up her photographer boyfriend, James Malone.

"I don't even want to do this show."

She's worked a full day at Harlem Children's Zone where she works on a project for her job that she hasn't even completed. She rushed from work to get her ukulele and loop pedal, an integral part of her act.

It takes her an hour and a half to get to the venue and in that hour and half she begins to stress.

Right after 8:00 p.m. Rollins rushes to do her hair and makeup. She emerges from the bathroom moments later with her face made up and her short curly hair pinned up at the sides. She runs around to try and do a sound check amidst the blaring soul music.

She learns that she is opening the show, but nervousness doesn't show. She sits down in the front row where her belongings are placed and she gets on her phone, checking her Instagram and messages.

"I could be working right now [on my project]." She chuckles.

The emcee gets on stage and announces Rollins after singing her praises. Then Rollins takes command of the small stage.

She sang a cover of Gnarls Barkley's *Crazy* just using her voice as the background instrumental. Her voice was confident, slightly airy, but throaty. With ease, her voice goes through a succession of notes in a run.

Next she sings an original song, *Newness*, with the attention on her still.

She comes off stage and gets a rousing applause. She smiles and lets the crowd know if they are interested in her music to come and meet her.

She makes her way to her seat.

"It's hot up there, yo."

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