

For Those About To Rock

June 13, 2010

Justin Bieber, The National and the great divide in modern music

Earlier this year, "[I Need That Record!](#)" was posted on [Pitchfork.com](#) for a week.

It's an hour-long indie documentary about the climate of the independent music merchant during the last decade.



The film has some sad moments as it details the decline and shuttering of a few indie stores.

One of them is Trash American Style, a Connecticut record store which closed in February 2007 after 18 years.

Interviewing customers in the store's final days, the camera finds John. He is unafraid about voicing his displeasure at the state of the music industry and the divide between big box stores and the Trash's of the world.

"All you've to do is go to the mall and get the top 50 spoon-fed garbage that the mass media corporate America record industry shoves down the throat of consumers and nobody even realizes that they're being suckered into this (expletive) that they call music," [he tells the camera](#).

His tone is casual, but his message is an angry one. His words suggest a Them vs. Us battle royale, pitting the weak, powerless music public against the big, bad evil corporations.

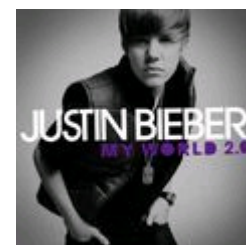
It gives the impression that there are two cultures in music, a deep chasm between what the industry wants to sell and want the store owners and customers say they want to buy.

To certain extent, I do think such a divide exists. Like any business with a vested interest in self-preservation and perpetuating itself, the major labels want to know where their cash is coming from. Building a business model on artists requiring patience and grooming doesn't allow for that, especially at a time when sales are stumbling.

To see how diminished sales have become, look no further than the results for a mid-May week, which was one of the worst weeks for album sales since Nielsen Soundscan, which keeps track of the figures for Billboard, started records in 1991.

In that week, the divide between the so-called underground acts and the spoon-fed musicians was apparent.

Topping the charts was Justin Bieber, whose "My World 2.0" moved 60,000 copies. At No. 3 was The National, a rock group whose fifth and latest record, "High Violet," was 9,000 copies behind.



The differences between the two artists couldn't be clearer. Bieber's a 16-year-old Canadian pop musician whose had six hits in Billboard's Top 100 already this year and also makes [3 year olds cry out of love for him in YouTube videos](#).

The National is a five-piece rock group from Brooklyn, N.Y., formed in 1999. You might've heard "Fake Empire," "Bloodbuzz Ohio" or saw that [Google commercial with "Apartment Story" in it](#).

Along the way, the band's Dessner twins, Bryce and Aaron, formed their own label, Brassland Records, and used it to release The National's first two records.

They're the definition of integrity, a hard-working band that has had to fight to get everything its earned. It's hard to make the case that an artist who just had the No. 3 record in the nation is anything other than a success, but they've been at this for more than 10 years and only just cracked the top 10 for the first time.



I try not to be an elitist snob, although I'm sure a few will read this column and think that I'm unequivocally stating that I think The National is better and deserves more success than Bieber.

I'm not saying that. I prefer one to the other, but that's not the same thing.

Everyone likes something different. I'm not the audience for teenage pop sensations from the Great White North, and, impossible as it seems to me, there are people who will never like The National, too.

Bieber would seem to exemplify exactly what John from "I Need That Record!" decries, and The National his opposite.

People are going to buy what they like and what sounds good to them. It's clear that there is a market for The Nationals of the world, especially when their debut trailed Bieber's by only 9,000 copies.

So, yes, the Them vs. Us divide exists, but it's not intentionally conspiratorial.

The record industry isn't out to destroy music. It's the music business, with the emphasis on the latter word. I doubt there's a purposeful villainy on their part.

There is no common denominator like the bottom line. From that vantage point, the big labels are going to pick the Biebers of the world over The National every time.

Even if the divide exists, I'm glad there is a choice.

So let Justin Bieber have the crying 3-year-old demographic.

I'll show my opinion the only way the major labels seem to understand — with my wallet.

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