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## MUSIC

12/27/2007

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Review of Work: DIY or Die: How to Survive as an Independent Artist

### SAME OL' COUNTERCULTURE

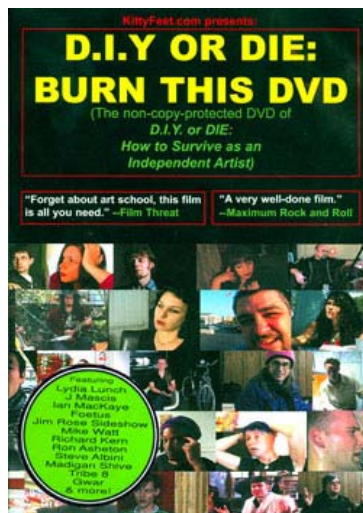
Slogans but no answers on indie how-to



By [Jason Ferguson](#)

Who would have ever thought that self-righteousness would one day turn out to be *right*? That all those sanctimonious punk-rock pricks – *we don't need major labels to get our music out, maaannn* – were actually smarter than the professionals the whole time?

Witness the collapsing corporate music biz today and it's hard to argue that they weren't. Every day the trade papers are filled with headlines about clueless Doug Morris types struggling to comprehend (and compensate for) the user-generated zeitgeist that was formed on their watch. Unable to understand why the kids don't appreciate the pabulum being force-fed to them the way they used to, the major labels have shown how ill-equipped they are to streamline their business models to react to the cultural and technological changes of the past few years. Instead of right-sizing budgets and expectations, the major labels have turned both punitive (RIAA lawsuits) and more exploitative of their artists ("360" deals). They no longer need the strident anarcho-punk to call them evil and impotent: It's common knowledge.



#### Album Information

Album: DIY or Die: How to Survive as an Independent Artist  
Desc: DVD REVIEW  
Release Date: 12/27/2007

suspects go on about creative and financial independence may be somewhat inspiring, but it's the definition of redundancy. Even MacKaye looks bored as he prattles on about the "parallel community" that his bands (Fugazi, Minor Threat) and business ventures (Dischord Records) have existed within. MacKaye's been banging the pulpit for more than 20 years now, and he knows that the message has gone far beyond his small church and into the bigger consciousness. When Radiohead and Prince are on your team, you're no longer the underdog.

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To be sure, the many interviews that director Michael W. Dean gathered serve their purpose. Whether it's comic artist Keith Knight or Craigslist founder Craig Newmark laughing off the clumsy corporate advances that were made on their creations, or J.G. Thirlwell (Foetus) calling bullshit on Napster and the concept of "free" music, Dean smartly defers to the stable of quotables he's amassed.

Even listening to Jim Rose, J Mascis and Dave Brockie (of GWAR) acting as if they never cashed a major-label check is amusing in its own way, although it would have been nice to hear a little more detail on exactly *why* those scenarios didn't work out. Brockie gives the literal middle finger to major labels, but glosses over the nuts-and-bolts of independent musicianship that could have made his platitudes more effective.

The fact remains that a not-insubstantial number of high-quality bands made their reputations on indie labels but sustained their careers with the help of majors: From Sonic Youth and Nirvana to the Flaming Lips, there's an impressive history of bands large and small who made increasingly more provocative and interesting art with the assistance of corporate money. As Wayne Coyne once said to me, "What kind of freedom do I have if I don't have any money?"

The financial aspects of the indie life that are dealt with in Dean's film are pretty fair: Lydia Lunch talks about how she has to plan six months into the future to ensure she can pay her rent, while Jim Rose breaks down the basic inequity of 10-percenters who parasitically chip away at an artist's wealth. And then, of course, there's musician-engineer Steve Albini, who drops the grumpy science one always expects him to.

Had *D.I.Y. or Die* focused more on the practical tools needed to make a successful go of independent artistic life rather than the predictable sloganeering it too often falls back on, it would have been a more useful tool for aspiring artists. The subjects here have been complaining for years over the corruption of art by commerce, but increasingly every year, we're seeing more cultural control being wrested from corporations and put back into the hands of artists.

So how is that best achieved? How is it that Ian MacKaye is living a comfortable – and ethical – life because of punk rock? How can a band enter a mutually beneficial arrangement with a label, whether it's an indie or a major? How can a visual artist exist outside the gallery system? How does a writer feed his kids without scrambling for a publishing advance? As rousing as these tales intend to be, they're also somewhat defeatist, as they still place the corporate culture-mongers in a power position that's fun to spit at, but also takes a digital revolution to defeat. Ultimately, according to the film, *only* the most dedicated and ethically fastidious artists can hope to exist without *some* help, and the weaklings will sell out to the power structure.

Things just aren't that black and white, however, and of all the people interviewed in *D.I.Y. or Die*, it shouldn't be surprising that the most do-it-yourself motherfucker on the planet sets it as straight as it can be set. Mike Watt not only pioneered the modern D.I.Y. era with the Minutemen's relentless tour/release/tour/release assault, but also released a few major-label albums and even played bass on a Kelly Clarkson record. According to Watt, preaching and proselytizing will only get you so far, and at the end of the day, it's really about doing the right thing for your art. In his inimitable fashion, he says, "You get a kink in your neck looking down at people, and you get a kink in your neck looking up at people."

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