

Payola



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Payola: The Scandalous Roots Simply uttering the word 'payola' can conjure up images of shadowy figures with a fist full of payoffs greasing the palms of corruption and greed. The word payola originated by combining the word payoff with Rock-ola, the jukebox that made rock and roll famous. It is portrayed as a period in rock history that was dominated by high rolling record companies and greedy disc jockeys willing to sell air-time to the highest bidder. The money was certainly a part of it, but payola did not originate with rock and roll. Rock and roll merely became a target for racist attitudes, a parental fear of adolescent rebellion, and a major music agency obsessed with controlling the recording industry.

Payola goes back to the 1920s and the days of vaudeville and continued through the 1940s with the big band era (Hornberger). Paying a station to play a record was legal as long as the disc jockey notified the listeners that the airtime was purchased. This was often overlooked for decades until the era of rock and roll. Up until 1950, the American Society of Composers Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) controlled nearly all the music in the dancehalls, hotels, radio, and theaters. Their offices were in New York City and the directors had total control of the content. They would not allow membership for 'black' or 'hillbilly' artists (DiMaggio 608). Several networks split from ASCAP due to their rates and racist policies and in 1939 they formed Broadcast Music Inc. (BMI).

After World War II BMI set about signing the black and hillbilly artists that ASCAP had refused to work with. This core of musical outcasts would form the genesis of rock and roll. Teenagers were hungry for rock and the 45-RPM record made it accessible. By the early 1950s major BMI labels were turning out 100 new singles a week (Cartwright). DJs, suffocated with new

recordings, would be paid by the record companies to promote a record. This was nothing new or unusual in the business. However, BMI was growing larger and politically correct ASCAP was losing market share. ASCAP despised the people that played rock and asked the Congress to investigate and enforce the rule on public notification of purchased airtime. Parental fear of rock and roll and the undercurrent of national racism made rock an easy target for Congress.

After a lengthy investigation, scores of DJs lost their jobs, their future, and their reputation. National figure Alan Freed refused to cooperate with the investigation and received a six-month suspended sentence. He never worked again and died of alcoholism in 1965 (Cartwright). Dick Clark was implicated but made a deal to testify and sell his interests in the music business in return for a lenient sentence.

Payola still exists and probably will as long as there is a profit in getting a song on the radio. In 1998, Limp Bizkit paid an Oregon station \$5, 000 to play its record 100 times in a 5-week period (Cartwright). This led to a sold out concert, wider coverage, and launched their national success. The payola scandal of the 50s was little more than business as usual. It was the racist attitudes of ASCAP and the fear of radical teen rebellion that brought the issue before the public.

Works Cited

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