

(/)

[Home \(/\)](#) [About the PCIJ \(/about/\)](#) [Stories \(/list/stories/\)](#) [Blog \(/blog/\)](#) [Multimedia \(/list/multimedia/\)](#)
[Books \(/list/books/\)](#) [Disaster Aid \(/yolanda\)](#) [MoneyPolitics \(http://moneypolitics.pcij.org/\)](http://moneypolitics.pcij.org/)

 **iREPORT**

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Himig Pinoy

The business of making music

by Prime Sarmiento

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JAL TAGUIBAO has a very simple way of telling just when a song can be called a hit. “When your song is being played in jeepneys,” he says, “that’s when it’s gone big time.

Taguibao should know. As the bass player of the popular pop-rock trio Sugarfree, he has shared in the success of chart-toppers such as “Mariposa (Butterfly),” “Telepono (Telephone),” and “Hari ng Sablay (King of Mishaps).” His five-year-old band has sold thousands of CDs, with its second venture, the album “Dramachine,” even turning gold.

Taguibao and the rest of Sugarfree are among the many artists who are keeping the cash registers ringing for the local recording industry, which has never really had any problems with finding and cultivating musical talents. Unfortunately, since the 1980s, it has been having the opposite experience when it comes to marketing songs — and making money.

“It’s not the way it used to be when a musician just gives a single to the radio DJ, (who) then plays that song on air,” says Karin Araneta, an independent record producer who has also managed bands like Eraserheads and Mojofly. “(And then if) listeners like your song, they will always call the DJ and request for that song. Continuous airplay will make that song popular. Now, it’s different because there are other media aside from radio.”

For sure, these new avenues have been a boon to talents who may otherwise have had a harder time being noticed. A case in point is 15-year-old Charice Pempengco, whose YouTube *birit* performance has earned her spots in at least four popular shows abroad — plus a contract with Star Records. Some artists, meanwhile, offer free downloads of selected songs from their websites as a way of enticing listeners to try their music.

But the rise of digital media has also given consumers a myriad of options, making it more difficult for any recording executive to market a song. While it’s easy to get any form of exposure, given the many choices available, the flipside is that it has become harder to choose which venue will encourage the most number of listeners not only to listen, but to actually buy an album. And in a country where household budgets are perennially tight, that could be quite a challenge, which is partly why the recording industry has found itself struggling to keep afloat.

“Everybody spreads their money really thin,” says Araneta. “If I’m a fan and I want my favorite band’s song to prosper, where do I spend my money? Do I text radio stations? But which radio station? Do I make a request at ASAP or MYX?”

Record companies also know there are already many music lovers like corporate executive Justine Castellon who simply surf the Net whenever they feel a hankering for their favorite type of tunes. A classical music aficionado, Castellon says she bypasses the radio and CD player and goes straight to her laptop, which she uses to download songs. She then slaps on her earplugs, and listens to the soothing tunes while she works.

“I can’t concentrate on what I’m working on if I’m not listening to music,” she says. But that music has to be something that she likes, which is why she hasn’t been tuning in to any local FM station for years. Explains Castellon: “If I like a certain song, I want to listen to it the whole day. But with radio, sometimes you like what’s on, but it’s soon followed by something you don’t like.”

STILL, UNLIKE what an ‘80s song claimed, video did not kill the radio star — at least not in the Philippines. Neither did the Net. True, radio is no longer the first destination of a producer trying to make a hit, but it remains a major means of promoting a certain type of song or genre. By its sheer reach, nothing beats radio in the Philippines. And unlike downloading many songs from the Internet, listening to radio is still free.

Radio is such a powerful marketing tool that people will resort to any means — some of which are unethical — to get the much coveted airplay. The more unscrupulous ones still hand out payola or bribes to some DJs and radio station managers, say industry insiders. But there are also musicians or record company executives who create an artificial demand for a song by

In this issue

- Make (beautiful) noise (/stories/make-beautiful-noise/)
- Soundtrack of a nation (/stories/soundtrack-of-a-nation/)
- Video: The season of protest songs (/stories/video-the-season-of-protest-songs/)
- Music and the machines (/stories/music-and-the-machines/)
- Living rhythms (/stories/living-rhythms/)
- Conquered by videoke (/stories/conquered-by-videoke/)
- The business of making music (/stories/the-business-of-making-music/)
- Name that tune’s price (stories/name-that-tunes-price/)
- PERSPECTIVE
Executive privilege versus public interest (/stories/executive-privilege-versus-public-interest/)

pretending they are fans and calling or texting radio stations to ask the DJ to play whatever song they are pushing at the moment over and over again. Says one industry observer who declines to be named: “Everyone does it. In some major recording studios, members of the staff call up the radio station or text a song request whenever they have time.”

The local recording industry actually grew in tandem with radio. An article published on the Philippine Association of the Record Industry (PARI) website puts the start of the Philippine recording industry in 1913. That was the year, says the article’s writer, historian Danny Yson, that two U.S.-based recording companies, Victor Talking Machine Company and Columbia Records, set up offices here and began recording Filipino talents. Victor and Columbia also put up their own radio stations to promote the songs they churned out and to persuade listeners to buy the records.

The first recorded songs — in 78 rpm, eight-inch single — were the then very popular zarzuela solos and duets. Stage performers Victorino Carrion and Maria Carpena were among the first local recording artists. Zarzuela would later give way to other types of songs, and vinyl records, which would be joined by cassette tapes, would be replaced by CDs. Other forms of entertainment, such as nightclubs and television, would also help in promoting songs. But radio has stood the test of time. As late as the 1990s, it was still doing its fair share of boosting record (read: CD) sales, which by then were estimated to be hitting over P400 million.

Indeed, the local recording industry has also proved resilient. Unlike their counterparts in the Philippine film industry, which seems to be in its death throes, several record companies here have managed to survive almost a century of political upheavals and economic ups and downs. That can only be because the industry has yet to lose access to the music lover’s pockets, even if the contents of these keep on getting smaller each day.

ELSEWHERE, BUSINESS experts talk of “niche marketing,” of addressing the needs and wants of a small albeit affluent market segment. But the strategy doesn’t seem to work in the Philippine music market, which is neither as big nor as wealthy as that in the United States, where musicians can afford to just cater to a certain niche. This is why a Filipino musician who wants to attain commercial success needs to address the majority of the music-loving Pinoys. That song, therefore, has to appeal to the *masa*, which brings us back to Taguibao’s way of pinpointing a hit.

Kristine Fonacier, former editor in chief of *Burn*, a bi-monthly magazine on the Philippine music industry, does put it a bit differently. She says that the clearest indication that a song is a hit is that it appeals across various demographics. In other words, if everyone — from the *tambay* to the *colegiala*, to the corporate executive — is singing the song, then it’s definitely a hit. And one song that Fonacier believes has cut across class, age, gender and personal preferences is Kitchie Nadal’s “Wag na ‘Wag Mong Sasabihin (Don’t Ever Say It).”

“Wag na ‘Wag” was so popular that it practically launched the solo career of Nadal, who was previously the lead vocalist of Mojofly. Not only did her debut album turn platinum (30,000 units sold) in three months on the strength of “Wag na ‘Wag,” the song also brought awards and endorsement contracts to Nadal.

Industry observers say that “Wag na ‘Wag” topped the charts because it served as the theme song of the dubbed version of the Korean telenovela “Lovers in Paris.” The exposure did help, but “Wag na ‘Wag” would have remained just another background music for an evening melodrama had it not contained the elements essential to a Pinoy hit song.

The first of these elements, says Fonacier, is that the song has to be “easy to sing.” That means not only should the melody be relatively simple, one should also not keep consulting the dictionary to understand the lyrics. (Sugarfree’s Taguibao says that if a child can memorize the lyrics and sing the song, chances are anyone can also sing it and love it enough to buy the album or troop to one of your gigs.)

There are also certain themes that have universal appeal. Songs that speak of love, for example, have the edge because just about anyone can relate to the topic. “Everybody undergoes heartbreak, everybody falls in love,” says Almond Aguila, lecturer at the UP College of Mass Communication. “Love songs speak to you because falling in love is very human.” But Filipinos also happen to be incurable romantics, which is why songs like “Dahil sa Iyo (Because of You),” “Bakit Labis Kitang Mahal (Why Do I Love You So Much),” “Kung Umuulan at Kapiling Ka (When It Rains and I’m with You)” and “Beautiful Girl” have never really left the airwaves and have been played and revived again and again.

Humor is another ingredient that can make a song appealing to Filipinos. This explains the popularity behind hits like Andrew E's "Humanap Ka ng Panget (Look for Someone Ugly)" and novelty songs such as "Buchikik," Yoyoy Villame's nonsensical homage to Chinoys.

The song must also be relevant to the times. Some types of songs, like food and fashion, are "in" during a specific season. Whenever there's a political crisis, trust that "Bayan Ko" would be sung. Christmas also would not be complete without a caroler singing "Ang Pasko ay Sumapit (Christmas Is Here)" or that staple of OFW families, "Pasko Na, Sinta Ko (It's Christmas, My Love)."

But more than all these, a hit song must have that "x" factor — that certain something that will make people like it, no matter what. "When you hear it you just know it's a hit," says EMI Philippines managing director and PARI chairperson Chris Sy. "It's always total *dating* (appeal). You're looking for a hook, something that gets to you. You can't explain what you really like in it."

THE COMMERCIAL fate of an album rests on its carrier single. A hit song can bring in gold (15,000 units sold), platinum, or in some cases, even multi-platinum sales. Most music consumers, after all, do not buy an album so they could appreciate a musician's body of work. Rather, they buy an album because it contains their favorite song. And while many fans do buy any album produced by their favorite singers/rock bands, that happens only after the singer/band is already popular and has come up with numerous hits. To a fan, that lessens the chances that he or she will not like majority of the songs on the album.

Government employee Thelma Villaroel-Fernandez, for one, sets aside money for CDs — but only those of her idols Sitti Navarro, Sharon Cuneta, and Lea Salonga. She says that even if she hears a song she likes on a TV show, she would not rush out to buy the album, unless the singer happens to be one of her three favorite singers; she would go to an Internet café and download the song on her MP3 player. Fernandez says she once made the mistake of buying an album by another artist all because she liked one of the songs. "But when I listened to the album," she recounts, "it turned out just one song was nice. I just wasted my money."

There are, of course, artists who say they cannot guarantee the quality of all the songs in their own album because record label executives are usually the ones who have the final say on what gets to be in it. The label bosses, for their part, have argued that they have every right to see to it that they recoup their investment, which is by no means small.

Araneta herself estimates that an independent record producer like her still needs at least P200,000 just to produce a CD. That amount covers only rent for the studio and fees for the mastering of the song and for back-up musicians. More money has to be forked over for things like the album cover artwork, as well as for marketing and distribution.

Sy says major labels spend at least P2 million, not only to produce the records themselves, but also to launch a sustained marketing campaign — through print and TV advertising, radio pluggings, and live performances. For the labels to break even, he says, at least 10,000 units of an album must be sold.

Fonacier says that anyone who is serious about pursuing a music career needs the support of a major label. As for the view that big recording companies have become the de facto gatekeepers of the music industry and thus have undue influence in shaping the taste of music consumers, Fonacier remarks, "The recording industry can limit your range of choice. It can just present a menu of items from which you make your choice."

Yet the audience is not necessarily made up of passive consumers who would just accept whatever the recording industry presses onto CDs. Sy notes that it is the consumers who "dictate" what they want. "You can't keep an 'uso' (something hip) down," he says, "*Pag 'di 'yan hit, 'di 'yan hit* (If it's not a hit, it's not a hit)."

Taguibao echoes this and adds, "The influence is not just one way. There are cases where people just don't take to a song, despite its being promoted every which way."

Castellon, for one, has never just taken whatever the local recording industry was offering at the moment. She says she was still in college when she ditched local radio in favor of the piped-in classical music that serenaded her whenever she visited the Goethe Institute library. "I'm a skinflint so I didn't buy tapes," says Castellon. "I'd borrow cassette tapes from Goethe, then copy

these using a double cassette player and recorder.” These days, she has taken to the Net, where she avails, for free, music that range from the classical to the blues, to the Christian genre.

SO WHAT’S a record label to do? And this is even as it battles another major problem that has hurt the company bottom line: piracy.

In 2000, sales of Philippine records hit over P1 billion. But the succeeding years saw annual record sales go down to roughly P900 million as many consumers opted to buy P25 pirated CDs instead of paying P250 to as much as P600 each for the legitimate versions. Some industry insiders estimate that audio CD pirates have been raking in as much as P1 billion a year. By contrast, hundreds of record bars and some record companies have been forced to close down.

Piracy has even forced the record industry to lower its standards in judging which CD should be gold and which should be platinum. Previously, a gold record meant at least 20,000 units sold, while a platinum one had to sell twice that.

To keep financially viable, the recording industry has thus expanded its revenue streams. Some major labels, for example, have branched out to managing artists (much like what the major broadcast networks have done). This means their investment on the development of the artists they signed on would not only net them earnings in terms of record sales, but also a substantial commission from live performances or gigs.

A popular band can earn a low P60,000 to a high of P375,000 in just one gig, and managers usually pocket between 10 percent to 30 percent of these earnings. Fonacier says that gigs are so lucrative that for most artists nowadays, recording an album has become just a way to beef up their resumé so that they can snag more live performances not only in the Philippines portfolio but overseas as well.

Aside from managing talents, recording companies have also begun earning extra revenue from opportunities in new and popular forms of entertainment. Acting as music publishers, some recording companies offer the songs they own to videoke firms like Magic Sing. The arrangement usually doesn’t bring in big bucks, say industry insiders, but added income is added income. Besides, it helps popularize the songs, thereby helping promote the albums.

In more recent years, though, the music industry has stumbled upon a major income generator: the cell phone. With just about everyone and his mother owning a cell phone, it did not take long before telecommunications companies began developing all sorts of peripheral “services” for the gadgets – all of which came with a price tag. One of these services was the ringtone, which for some reason caught the imagination of Pinoys. Soon enough, recording companies were selling songs as ringtones, which fans have been downloading for an average of P5 a pop.

There are currently no data available on just how much recording firms – and some very lucky composers – are raking in from the ringtone business. There is no doubt, however, that serious money is involved; according to Araneta, one of her composer-friends managed to buy a brand-new car after one of his songs became among the most downloaded ringtones of the day.

It may not be a stretch to say then that the recording industry was saved by the ring tone. Sy himself says that this is one of the “bright spots” in the music business. But he also points out the earnings generated by ring tones won’t compensate for the huge decline in record sales. Ringtones can also be pirated, prompting Sy to comment that while ringtones offer hope, it’s not a cure-all for the problems piracy has brought the industry.

As it is, Sy has all but given up on ever getting rid of piracy. “We must learn to live with it (piracy), and find a way to make technology work for us,” he says. “It requires a paradigm shift on the way we monetize music.”

Failing that, Sy says, the local recording industry may just go the way of the dodo.

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