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**Crap's Last Tape: Review of *Ripped: How the Wired Generation Revolutionized Music***

Halfway through *Ripped: How the Wired Generation Revolutionized Music*, Jack Rabid, editor of the fanzine *The Big Takeover*, blurts out author Greg Kot's thesis: "What's dying is the idea of only the crappiest crap, made with the crappiest intentions, with the crappiest production, to entice the most airtime on the crappiest giant chains of radio stations, bought and paid for by crappy labels, and dictated by some crappy, contemptuous, lowest-common-denominator-projecting programming exec from his crappy polling printouts in some crappy office somewhere, to ensure we all swallow the same crap all over the country at..."
the same crappy time, and then placing that one slice of crap on a longer disc with a bunch of even crappier crap. That is the concept that is dying. Amen."

The music critic of The Chicago Tribune, Kot agrees. In Ripped, an informative and entertaining state-of-play piece on contemporary music, he suggests that technology may well be making it possible for a new generation of artists and fans to mess with the mean, money-grubbing, mediocrities in the record business and usher in a revolution of sound and fury.

In over a dozen deliciously detailed profiles, ranging from Prince to Pitchfork, from Bright Eyes to Danger Mouse, from Radiohead to Reznor, Kot cites -- and celebrates -- musicians and entrepreneurs who refuse to bow to tradition. File-sharing, sampling, downloading, blogs, ezines, and the iPod, he claims, are beginning to allow artists to break down the unholy hegemony between the majors and corporate radio, take control of the "products" they have created and get a fairer share of the profits.

Kot knows his stuff. His book is never better than when it is in the music. But Ripped is about what is happening to music, and Kot stands with the T shirts and not the suits. Sometimes he is ready to declare victory: right now, he writes, musicians are connecting with fans through social network websites, alerting them to concerts and TV and radio appearances, selling merchandising and CD's, and booking tour dates. Sometimes he declares that the promised land is in sight: reminding readers that there will be 750 million new wireless broadband subscribers in the next decade in the U.S. and Western Europe alone. And sometimes he isn't sure: worrying, along with one veteran music observer, that "once the paradise of infinite storage is entered it will represent the end of all intellectual property rights."

In many ways, Ripped is a wish that wants to give birth to a fact. Some artists, of course, do have a knack for entrepreneurship. They're taking the initiative -- taking up the pitchforks, if you will -- while many others are hoping for a utopia where no middlemen take more than they deserve, the artists reach the audiences directly, and fans buy the best stuff available.

Unfortunately, the truth may well be that it is (the aptly named) Jack Rabid who is full of crap. Even if radio, the dinosaur, is dying, there is substantial evidence that mass sales in music -- like any other business -- will continue to depend upon someone with lots of money to drive audiences to artists.

Part of the problem is that finding a commentator with something good to say about the music industry is about as easy as finding a politician who'll admit she's an atheist. If you start with fifty dollars and subtract a buck for every partisan of the record business, you'll have enough left to download the $47.95 Danger Mouse Essentials from iTunes.

Nonetheless, even for those who say they want a revolution, after the Thermidor, summer gives way to fall, all the leaves are brown, and the realities of show business set in. While Kot's artists may be exceptions that prove the rule, the case Ripped makes that the business has -- or will -- change permanently, is not compelling. The truth is, artists need infrastructure. Sure, bands like Death Cab for Cutie will utilize the tools of the Digital Age differently, and younger artists are taking advantage of ever-newer technologies. But even the Grateful Dead had fifty employees.

Most artists, as Kot acknowledges, don't want to be businessmen. As John Mellencamp said of Prince, "I think it's more work than he wants it to be. It has to be. You gotta do it yourself. Who wants that?"

Finally, Kot doesn't always make clear where "acceptable" commercialism starts, subverts, or stops. Death Cab for Cutie, it's important to remember, took off when one of the characters on The O.C said he loved the band. But it's hard to imagine John Lennon agreeing to launch his career on Fox. Lauded by Kot as allowing the customer to be a "coconspirator" and "creative partner," moreover, Trent Reznor's five-tiered pricing system got traction after the Reznor-produced Saul Williams' song "List of Demands" appeared in a Nike commercial. And, in perhaps the greatest misdirection in music history, U2's flogging of the iPod was disguised by Bono as support for the "most beautiful art object in musical culture since the electric guitar..."

Bono understands the game better than anyone and nails the point that Kot pokes at. The world's biggest rock star was associating his band with a product (the iPod), but he might as well have been talking about the perpetual relationship between artists and commerce. In the fast-moving technological age, he declared, "you've got to deal with the devil."