

BALANCING BUSINESS AND ART IN MUSIC: GAZING INTO THE STAR TEXTS  
OF MICHELLE BRANCH AND REGINA SPEKTOR

by

Max Neibaur

A Thesis Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in Media Studies

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2015

## ABSTRACT

### BALANCING BUSINESS AND ART IN MUSIC: GAZING INTO THE STAR TEXTS OF MICHELLE BRANCH AND REGINA SPEKTOR

by

Max Neibaur

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2015  
Under the Supervision of Professor Michael Newman

This research builds on literature presenting ideas on the tension between business and art in the music industry and literature defining what a star is by analyzing star texts.

Specifically, it looks at how business and art is balanced in the star texts of Michelle Branch and Regina Spektor and what tension this balancing creates. As the analysis follows the careers of these two case studies along their star texts, it reveals the tension created in relation to the record label, press, and fans of the music artists. The analysis discovers that music artists rely on social media to self-brand and create a star image similarly to how the public self-brands on social media. These findings suggest further research and analysis be done on the convergence of how celebrities self-brand and the consequences, and how the public self-brands and the potential consequences. This thesis also suggests that selling star images is more important than selling the music itself and further study should be done on that.

© Copyright by Max Neibaur, 2015  
All Rights Reserved

To  
Dad

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I: Introduction .....	1
Overview.....	1
Literature Review.....	7
Methods & Sources.....	18
Chapter Outline.....	20
Conclusion.....	21
Endnotes.....	22
II: Michelle Branch’s Star Text: The Struggle of a Pop Star.....	24
Michelle Branch Bio: Story and Stats of a Star.....	25
Branch – Label.....	27
Branch – Press.....	35
Branch – Fans.....	41
Conclusion.....	48
Endnotes.....	49
III: Regina Spektor’s Star Text: Balancing the Quirky Tension.....	53
Regina Spektor Bio: The American Dream.....	55
Spektor – Label.....	58
Spektor – Press.....	64
Spektor – Fans.....	73
Conclusion.....	78
Endnotes.....	80
IV: Conclusion.....	84

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I offer ample thanks to my advisor, Michael Newman, for giving me the perfect balance of positive comments and constructive criticism to motivate me during the process of composing this thesis. I extend special thanks to the late Donna Decker for being an inspiration and the most influential person during my time as a graduate student. Thank you thesis committee: Thanks to Elana Levine for suggesting not just a good way, but the RIGHT way to organize my chapters. Thanks to Richard Pop for working with me on a previous project that schooled me in how to research and write the type of paper this thesis turned out to be.

Thank you Maddie for being a friend and roommate for the majority of the time I was writing this thing. Whether you know it or not, your positivity had an effect on me. Intensities of the thankfulness to my friend Carolyn for crying at Brewers games, eating at State Fair, throwing tantrums over little things, riding to the tax lady, appreciating fine beds in Chicago, claiming to dislike the Marx Brothers but love Woody Allen, being the goofiest smart person on the planet, and every single other miniscule detail that makes you who you are. I NEEDED that during grad school and I will NEED it for the rest of my life.

Thank you Uncle Mark for pelican jokes. Our pelican conversations during my childhood are oddly some of my most happy and enduring memories. Big thanks to my Uncle John and my Uncle Pat for proving to me that getting a Master's Degree is in my genes. Thank you Aunt Terri for talks. I know it doesn't sound like much, but if I had to pick one person in the family to just talk to, it would be you. Thank you Aunt Mary for

Chucky Cheese, handfuls of coins, being the most inspirational person I know, and having the sneakiest sense of humor in the family. Thanks just for being you, Aunt Carmen. I think we have the most similar personalities on my Mom's side of the family and your mere presence at family gatherings makes me feel good. Thank you Aunt Kathy and Uncle Jim for letting me live with you and your two baby girls during my first year of college. I appreciated that a lot more than I was ever able to convey at the time. Also, a special extra thanks to my Aunt Kathy for all those weekends of time you gave that added to my happy childhood. I looked forward to and had more fun spending time with you than I can explain in words...and, as this thesis proves, I'm pretty good at this whole "words" thing. Know that I feel every drop of emotion you feel for me and my Mom.

Thank you, Grandma Liz, for everything. Pointing out random details here feels inadequate. You filled a hole. Thank you, Grandpa Matt. I'm a fan of sports because of you and nobody else. We argued during games all the time, and that's what made sports fun to me. It wasn't the mundane act of watching sports that got me interested, it was the intellectual and yet comically sophomoric banter about "why" games played out the way they did that made me a sports fan. Baseball is my favorite thing in the world, and, believe it or not, that's because of you, Grandpa.

Thank you, Grandma Honey, for caring so intensely. The size of your heart is something I've noticed, appreciated and tried to emulate more as I've gotten older. I wish my Grandpa Bob was here to see this. He wasn't the loudest or funniest one in my family, but I think his sense of humor made me laugh harder than anyone else's. He always seemed happy and made everyone around him better. He made me feel like the

smartest kid in the world. I hope I'm just like him when I'm older. I guess that's the best thing anyone can say about another person.

Only pet lovers will understand why I would feel remiss not to include something about my childhood dog Moe. I had no human siblings, but I had Moe.

My most purposeful thanks go to Dad. This thesis is dedicated to you. Everything I do is an extension of you. You raised me all alone. As I've written here, you had a terrific family of support, but you were (and still are) the one who is there day-in and day-out. You gave me a lot of liberties as I grew up. You carefully exposed me to a lot of "entertainment media" at younger ages than parents that were your peers. Many would have disagreed with most of your approach and decisions.

But look at me now!

Mom would be just as proud of you as she would be of me.

## Chapter 1

### Overview

“The bigger a company gets, the less it gives a shit about you.”<sup>1</sup> David Crosby told this to Rosanna Arquette in an interview for her documentary *All We Are Saying*, which asks a variety of musicians how they balance life and art. Much of Arquette’s documentary draws out interesting perspectives from musicians, old and young, about balancing not just life and art, but business and art as well. Most of the musicians who have been around for a while, like Crosby, express dreary outlooks on what has gone on in the music industry during their time as professional musicians. Legendary rocker Tom Petty compares modern rock and roll to professional wrestling and follows that up by saying people “know it’s fake, but they don’t really care.”<sup>2</sup> Professional musicians have had to balance business and art to maintain careers in the music industry for a long time. That is nothing new. Opinions such as Crosby’s and Petty’s represent a pocket of musicians that believe the art side of the music industry has suffered as the business side has grown.

In *All We Are Saying*, Fleetwood Mac’s Stevie Nicks complains that young female musicians think they have to sexualize themselves to sell records: “I think it’s making a lot of really great artists scared...and run away. Because what they really want to do is be a song writer.”<sup>3</sup> Joni Mitchell’s comments are similar. She claims the music industry can “make more money out of a non-talented person who looks good...get one hit out of them and cast them off.”<sup>4</sup> Stevie Nicks and Joni Mitchell are idols of contemporary female singer-songwriter Michelle Branch. Although this thesis does not

specifically look at gender and sexuality in music, it shows up in how female artists such as Branch are viewed. More than male artists, female artists are sexualized to sell their art. Branch represented a new brand of female artist who was supposed to be more conservative with her sexuality. This caused tension in Branch's star text when she would wear revealing clothing or model for a sexy photo shoot. Branch's genre expectations would collide with her brand expectations and cause waves in her fan base.

Branch, once a very commercially successful pop musician, saw her career wane after two platinum-selling albums. One could argue that Branch got caught up in the shuffle of the business side of the music industry. Applying a G.W.F. Hegel theory to music shows what can happen to artists such as Branch who represent the "antithesis": "The Absolute unfolds by a dialectical process: every state of affairs (thesis) gives rise to its opposite (antithesis), and then a synthesis of the two is formed, which becomes the new thesis, and the process starts all over again."<sup>5</sup> Britney Spears became a lucrative commodity for the music industry in 1999, but the public eventually wanted something different. As an answer to sexy Spears, the thesis, the music industry promoted Michelle Branch as an antithesis in 2001. Branch got branded as an Anti-Britney—she was sold more as a strong female role model who makes and plays her own music. Branch became a lucrative commodity sold to all the girls who felt Spears was shallow and phony. Branch, however, posed a problem to the music industry. She had her own goals in mind, and she fought against being commoditized. This led the music industry to step three of The Absolute; they quickly created a synthesis of Spears and Branch, Avril Lavigne. This cycle illustrates how an artist such as Michelle Branch can be made expendable by the

music industry by creating a hybrid of the antithesis' popular traits and the thesis' useful traits.

The craftsmanship of an artist's image has become increasingly important to creating a star product. Paul Théberge explains that major record labels have even started to include "image rights" into contract negotiations with artists.<sup>6</sup> This importance on and struggle over image is nothing new. As far back as the 1920s, stars such as Rudolph Valentino would use the media in a "maneuver calculated to wrest his image from the control of the industry."<sup>7</sup> This exemplifies the tension between business and art in the music industry. Image, be it that of Rudolph Valentino in the 1920s or Michelle Branch in the 2000s is an important element in selling art.

Music is art, but the music industry is also a business. Music scholar Keith Negus writes, "The industry needs to be understood both as a commercial business driven by the pursuit of profit and a site of creative human activity from which some very great popular music has come."<sup>8</sup> Fellow music scholar Simon Frith gives historical perspective to music as art and its eventual relation to business:

The rise of Tin Pan Alley and the emergence of the mass medium involved an increasingly centralized and commercialized control of what could be heard: as fewer people made music for themselves, public taste was easier to control. The 'innocence' of musical fun was now irrevocably tainted by the terms of commercial exploitation and manipulation. Popular music emerged from the processes of commodity production; its cultural effect was one of the new forms of 'mass consumption.'<sup>9</sup>

To be clear, for this work, the creation process and the music itself are considered art and everything done to sell this art relates to business.

To help sell the music, sometimes the creation process can be affected. Frith writes, “The relationship between making music and making money remains the musicians’ central problem. They experience tensions in their dealings not only with the industry that packages their music, but also with the audiences that consume it.”<sup>10</sup> Thinking about art and business as completely incompatible partners like oil and water is reductive, but trying to balance the two in the music industry does create tension.

This tension between business and art in the music industry is a popular topic in music studies. Scholars have difficulty being sure of exactly what goes on behind closed doors, whether it relates to the business and art tension or anything else, because the people involved have to protect their careers. Artists do not want to bite the hand that feeds them and record labels do not want to tarnish the image of their artists. Even former insiders, now out of the business, who write tell-all books or autobiographies could have an agenda and that has to be considered before taking their words as fact. Therefore, my project will focus on the tension between business and art in the music industry by looking at how it is reflected in the star texts instead of trying to sort through what is real and what is fabricated coming from the mouths of people in music. What is reflected in artists’ star texts might not always be accurate, but it will show what the public sees in terms of how artists handle the tension of balancing business and art in music. My case studies will be Michelle Branch and Regina Spektor. Star texts are everything that influences the public’s perceptions of the artists. The range of material I will analyze that make up star texts include: songs and music videos, trade press, popular press, blogs, message board posts and social media such as Twitter and Facebook.

My research provides insight into how the balance between business and art is available to the public through star texts. Professional artists use star texts to brand themselves in order to sell records. It is important to study how business and art is balanced through star texts because it is similar to how people brand themselves on social media. P. David Marshall explains this link: “Self-production is the very core of celebrity activity and it now serves as a rubric and template for organization and production of the on-line self which has become at the very least an important component of our presentation of ourselves to the world.”<sup>11</sup> My research and analysis in this study shows that commercial culture and social culture are now overlapping more. The Internet has become a medium in which artists use the same platforms to sell themselves and their music as the average person is using to sell themselves to other people. Artists *brand* themselves/create their *star images* by producing a set of social values that get communicated to the public just like other people essentially brand themselves on social media. In both cases, musicians and other people hope their branding leads to popularity.

My goal is not so far reaching that I aim to argue what is art and what is business or what the right balance should be. What my thesis provides is a research of the star texts of Michelle Branch and Regina Spektor to show how the tension between business and art is being presented to the public. I do not offer my opinion on how the public perceives this tension, either. I found a great deal of literature presenting ideas on the tension between business and art in the music industry, and I found a great deal of literature defining what a star is by analyzing star texts; however, there is little that combined these studies. By combining these studies, my thesis provides unique insight and perspective on a significantly researched idea in music studies. Furthermore, my

thesis lays the groundwork for someone to take the next step in addressing how musicians balancing business and art in their star texts can tell us something about how people balance their own *brands* and true selves on social media.

I chose Michelle Branch and Regina Spektor for my case studies because they represent two very different paths one can take to become a professional musician. Branch signed to a major label as a teenager and became a famous pop star while Spektor bided her time before making a more artist-friendly deal with a major label. Branch and Spektor are both female pop musicians from the same era in music. Choosing two female pop musicians keeps my thesis within a reasonable scope. This decision eliminates any differences in how the media might handle Branch or Spektor differently if one was a male, a group, belonged to a different genre or belonged to a different time period. Branch and Spektor have both been outspoken at times on balancing business and art in the music industry. Branch sometimes struggled with her record label. Spektor waited until a record label offered her a deal that gave her a considerable amount of power over her creative choices. Spektor is happy with the path she took and defends her choice to sign with a major record label when confronted by some of her skeptical fans. Branch represents the young female pop star who rose to fame very fast and eventually ran into differences with her label. Conversely, Spektor represents the pop singer-songwriter who never achieved sensational commercial success but is relatively happy with her balance of business and art in the music industry. Branch and Spektor took different paths to becoming career musicians and, as a result, they have different perspectives represented in their star texts. This gives me a broader frame of reference as I study how the tension between business and art is reflected through the star texts of two pop musicians.

## Literature Review

My thesis will look at the tension resulting from balancing business and art in the music industry by examining Michelle Branch's and Regina Spektor's star texts because I noticed in past research that artists tend to voice their frustration with said tension through the media frequently enough to make it a good source for research. To understand how the tension between business and art in music gets communicated by various sources and perspectives to the public through star texts, there are two important things to look at: 1) the scholarly work addressing the tension between business and art in music, and 2) the scholarly work addressing star texts (defined in the overview; in short: discourse that plays a role in shaping who performers are in the eyes of the public). Scholars have researched and written about the tension between business and art in music and other entertainment media from different perspectives and with different focuses. Studying this research gives me a better frame of reference on the tension between business and art in music before delving into specific case studies. The popular press, trade press, blogs and social media analyzed in my case studies are star texts, so having a frame of reference on the scholarly discourse of how to read star texts is important as well. It is not my goal to argue a specific point about the tension between business and art in the music industry. My goal is to show how the tension between business and art in music is conveyed through star texts to the public.

Theodor W. Adorno discussed the tension between business and art in music as far back as the 1940s. An early member of the Frankfurt School, his use of the music industry to argue his points led to ideas that continue to influence the modern discourse of the tension. Adorno's "A Social Critique of Radio Music" maintains that people

started consuming music in a way that made it merely a distraction from important matters in life. This article argues that we live in a society of commodities and that “human needs are satisfied only incidentally.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, it says the masses do not participate in music culture and commercial culture creates “forced consumers of musical commodities.”<sup>13</sup> Adorno’s work focuses primarily on two ends of the spectrum of music culture. The commercial culture and the consumers fill most of Adorno’s pages. He does not focus on the people caught in the middle—the artists. My thesis focuses on how the tension between business and art in the music industry is portrayed through artist-related media texts. Adorno’s ideas are old, but they are a useful perspective to have for my research because it gives me a frame of reference. I do not have to agree with the *amount* of overwhelming power Adorno attributes to the commercial music system to respect some of the arguments he makes. Some of his individual explanations for why the commercial system limits the options of the artists because that is in the company’s better interest make sense. Profit, control, and power remain priorities of modern major record labels. Modern major record labels’ decision to prefer and often demand ironclad contracts support this notion.

Shane Gunster wrote an article that reevaluates Adorno’s writings on music. He blames Adorno for “mourning the death of autonomy”<sup>14</sup> too much. Gunster writes that Adorno should have spent more time studying and explaining why things were the way he saw them instead of wasting so much space lamenting what he saw as a dire reality. In this piece, Gunster weighs Adorno’s views with the views of Adorno’s critics. Gunster argues that most scholars either lament the loss of autonomy or celebrate consumer agency. He concludes that we should spend more time analyzing why this is the case

instead of picking a side and continuing that argument. I think Gunster makes a good point, and my thesis is a step in that direction because analyzing how the tension between business and art shows up in artist-related media texts provides some context of how music industry business people, artists, and consumers create and/or are subjected to said tension.

Jack Bishop's article about the media conglomerates mostly echoes Adorno's view of a dominant commercial system controlling the masses.<sup>15</sup> Bishop explains how the music industry is concentrated (as of his writing) into a "Big Four." In other words, he shows through statistics and charts that four companies control most of the music industry. Bishop goes on to contend that this concentration of ownership is bad for music because it inhibits creativity. He writes at length on technology and piracy, but he also writes about controlling consumer habits to maintain control of the music market.<sup>16</sup> For the most part, Bishop relegates art and artists as simply a tool by which companies make money; I explore the artists in more detail. This article does, however, provide a good view of the business perspective of the tension between business and art in music. The article presents a background of the inner-workings of the conglomerates and record labels, which gave me an important perspective while analyzing my case studies.

Eileen Meehan's "Holy Commodity Fetish, Batman!": The Political Economy of Commercial Intertext"<sup>17</sup> shows more specifically how a company uses a specific entity—her case study is Batman—to make money by taking advantage of all of the company's media assets. Jennifer M. Profit, Djung Yune Tchoi, and Matthew P. McAllister take Meehan's study a step further in their article "Plugging Back Into The Matrix: The Intertextual Flow of Corporate Media Commodities"<sup>18</sup> by using an updated case study

(The Matrix) and assert that habit and fan loyalty are even more important than product quality. That argument is debatable, but it goes to the heart of the business vs. art tension that exists in any entertainment medium. Both of these articles show how a big company takes advantage of its many assets to sell its products through vertical and horizontal integration to create more interest in products and create more fan interest and devotion. This strategy of promotion appears in the star texts of my case studies so it was good to understand it and see examples of it. It helped me to recognize this business practice and whether there was any tension created with it and the artists.

One of the most important developments in music since Adorno's early critique of radio music is the music video. The music video helps a record label brand an artist not only by sound, but by image as well. The better a record label can brand an artist, the easier/more efficiently it can promote and profit from that artist through multiple media and assets owned by its parent company. MTV made the music video an important part of the music industry in the 1980s. The music video started having an influential role in the branding of artists and the selling of music. Music videos also added another dimension to the art of the song. As music videos and MTV evolved, the tension between business and art in this medium became evident.

In "Music Video Cartel: A Survey of Anti-Competitive Practices by MTV and Major Record Companies," Jack Banks describes how MTV worked with record labels to get exclusive rights to almost every music video by major artists to form a near monopoly on the medium.<sup>19</sup> But, Steve Jones's article "MTV: The Medium was the Message" explains how MTV decided to alter its programming in different countries as it became global to appeal to different audiences.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that MTV is not completely

controlling artists and programming; rather, it is altering its content based on the creative desires of the artists and the content desires of the audience. I have noticed in past research that the popular press clearly framed musicians such as Michelle Branch, Vanessa Carlton, and Avril Lavigne as “Anti-Britneys” to separate them from Britney Spears who some in the popular press insinuated was a bad role model for young girls because of the risqué images in Spears videos. Furthermore, those Anti-Britney artists played a more pop-rock, instrument-driven music that filled a different role in the pop music market. Branch, Carlton, and Lavigne appeared in their first music videos playing musical instruments. The popular press labeled Spears as being more about looks than art, and it glorified the three others as being more about the art. Discourse in star texts on music videos with Britney Spears and the Anti-Britneys appeared in the early 2000s, which is the era that the artists in my case studies started releasing albums.

The female sexuality exhibited in music videos is an important gender distinction that is part of the business of selling music. Many scholars have done various content analyses showing that females are overwhelmingly more likely to be sexualized in music videos than males. One 2006 study showed there were more than ten times as many instances of females in sexual attire than males and more than three times as many instances of females being involved in sexual behavior than males.<sup>21</sup> This trend shows that females are more sexualized in music and, perhaps, more expected to be sexualized. However, it also affects their authenticity with fans. The Anti-Britneys were branded to create more authentic artists for girls and young women to look up to. Therefore, they created a tension between gender expectations for their specific branding and the genre norm for pop stars. Understanding the music video and how it ties into gender, sexuality,

and authenticity relates to the tension between business and art in the music industry during this time period.

Two of the most notable scholars to directly address the tension between business and art in the music industry are Simon Frith and Keith Negus. They both recognize that the tension is real and important, but they see more of a give-and-take relationship between record labels and artists. I found that Negus in particular was a good source of research for me and my project. Negus' writing style is clear, detailed and concise, which is preferable to me over the more academic, thicker style of some scholars. I also like that Negus was an artist himself and has that extra, unique perspective laced in his research and analysis. Frith's writing is also very accessible, but his approach is more historical.

Simon Frith's 1981 book *Sound Effects*<sup>22</sup> might be skewed to British Rock, but the groundwork he lays in this book about the tension between business and art in the music industry is still useful and important. Frith uses a historical approach to frame the context of his arguments, which shows trends over time that are helpful to anyone writing about the subject regardless of when. Frith focuses on how business and art work together in the music industry, and he shows how artists actually have tense relationships with their audience as well as their record labels. He explores how the music business works and how artists fit within it. Although Frith uses excerpts from the popular press to highlight his points, he does not specifically analyze it the way I do in my thesis. The way Frith focuses on the position of the artists between record labels and the public in his analysis of the tension between business and art in the music industry does, however, provide me with important knowledge and perspective as I analyze the star texts of my case studies because these start texts represent the tension of that position.

Like Frith, Keith Negus studies and writes about the tension between business and art in much of his work. Negus, however, focuses more on the creative autonomy of the artist. In his book *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*,<sup>23</sup> Negus shares that he was once in a band and dealt with business/art tensions to build his credibility on the issue and then cites many scholars in making his points. While he provides several examples of how artists have to bend their visions to maintain careers in music, he does not go so far as to declare that artists are merely puppets of their record labels. Unlike Frith, who mostly studies the business perspective of the tension between business and art in the music industry in *Sound Effects*, Negus concentrates on the artistic perspective in *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*. Negus writes about the creative process of artists and how that is influenced by the record labels. Negus's own experiences combined with his abundance of citations and perspectives on the topic gives this book the outlook of an artist who really cares about his own art combined with a diligent scholar who has done thorough research on a topic. Negus explains how the entire creative process includes more than just the artist, and that was a good thing to keep in mind while I studied star texts for my thesis—even the texts that seemingly come straight from the artists could very well be a product of what the artist and a group of other people in that artist's camp decide is in the best interest for the artist to say or write.

Keith Negus's book *Creativity, Communication and Cultural Value*<sup>24</sup> also looks at the creative autonomy of artists; however, like Frith's *Sound Effects*, it focuses more on the business side of things. In this book, Negus takes a stronger stance and makes his voice heard more. He argues against the assertion that people representing record labels hold an overwhelming majority of the power in the creative process. Scholars studying

the tension between business and art in the music industry have come a long way since Theodor Adorno's belief in the overwhelming power of the commercial culture and the systems it spawned. Frith and Negus in particular do not entirely discount Adorno's argument, but they also recognize that the public has agency and artists have say in what gets produced.

Despite the works of Frith and Negus, some scholars and pockets of the public continue to believe that the music industry is ultimately run by power-hungry bullies. Perhaps 'paranoid' is too strong of a word, but David Sanjek articulates his concerns about the music industry in his article "Funkentelechy vs. the Stockholm Syndrome: The Place of Industrial Analysis in Popular Music Studies."<sup>25</sup> He warns readers to be careful about what they hear and read because the conglomerates that own and control music and artists only care about making profits and they will manipulate the public in any way necessary to maximize those profits. Sanjek certainly acknowledges the tension between business and art in the music industry, but he never really explains the artist's role in it other than when he insinuates that they either willingly or involuntarily have to do the bidding of the companies for which they work. It is hard for anyone to concretely say what goes on behind closed doors in the music industry, and that is why there are so many opinions and well researched, well thought-out arguments. By analyzing star texts and focusing on the tension between business and art, I hope to shed more light on two important links that will provide insight into the tension. The stars (artists) are the link between the companies and the public, and the star texts are the links between the artists and public perception of the artists and their art.

In 1979, Richard Dyer wrote *Stars*. That book is still considered a seminal book on reading star texts.<sup>26</sup> In it, Dyer explains that “a star image is made out of media texts that can be grouped together as ‘promotion,’ ‘publicity,’ ‘films,’ and ‘criticism and commentaries.’”<sup>27</sup> Dyer elaborates on each by saying *promotion* is a deliberate creation of an image, *publicity* does not ‘appear’ to be deliberate (e.g. popular press), *films* represents the performance, and *criticism and commentaries* are what others write/analyze about the stars.<sup>28</sup> I like this general breakdown of what makes a star. For my purposes, I substitute “films” with “music,” but Dyer’s explanation of the category maintains its meaning and purpose. Others such as Michael Frontani have done the same.<sup>29</sup> I used this as a broad guide when considering the star texts of my own case studies.

Dyer also talks about stars as “novelistic characters.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, the public follows the lives of stars in the same way they follow the stars’ characters in a movie or song. David Sanjek in particular warns about the potential of stars using the press to perpetuate their star image.<sup>31</sup> In my research, I hope to provide a clear study of how the tension between business and art is reflected in star texts, and Dyer’s work gave me an example by which I focused and organized my observations.

Su Holmes uses Dyer’s *Stars* as a lens to examine the relationship between the history of celebrity studies and contemporary celebrity culture in an article titled “Starring... Dyer??: Revisiting Star Studies and Contemporary Celebrity Culture.” Holmes combines academic discourse and media commentary to study the phenomenon of celebrity. Instead of framing the focus of her study on the tension between business and art, she notes the tension between “achieved celebrity” and “attributed celebrity.”<sup>32</sup> Holmes defines achieved celebrity as something earned with talent, and she defines

attributed celebrity as something that is created by “concentrated media representation.”<sup>33</sup> In short, Holmes is interested in recognizing the difference between authenticity and performance. My thesis is not concerned with determining authenticity, which is why I focus more generally on the tension between business and art. However, the term *authenticity* frequently comes up in contemporary star studies<sup>34</sup> and I would be remiss to overlook it.

Erin Meyers comments on and feeds off of many of the texts and themes I used to build a frame of reference for my study. Meyers rejects Adorno’s idea of celebrity as a commodity and an ideological tool within a commercial culture. She writes that celebrity is “a site of tension and ambiguity in which an active audience has the space to make meaning of their world by accepting or rejecting the social values embodied by celebrity image.”<sup>35</sup> Meyers supports the idea of consumer agency when exposed to star texts, but she sounds less open-minded when it comes to star texts themselves. Like David Sanjek, Meyers warns that celebrity media texts are just as constructed as a celebrity’s public performance. Therefore, in reading star texts for my case studies, I was conscious of how authenticity plays a part in the way the artists brand themselves or get branded because this appears to be an integral part in selling modern artists and right in the middle of the tension between business and art.

A reason authenticity plays such an important role in star texts is due to the emergence of social media. P. David Marshall comments on this in his article “The Promotion and Presentation of the Self: Celebrity as Marker of Presentational Media.”<sup>36</sup> In this article, Marshall investigates the similarities between how a celebrity brands himself or herself through social media and how an average user does the same thing. He

argues that it is important to study social media star texts because that will show us something about the production of our own selves through social media. Not only does Marshall's article provide me with an example of how to examine social media as star texts, but it also shows the significance of my project because, as Marshall contends, star texts also teach us something about how we function in society. Social media did not exist when Dyer wrote *Stars* back in 1979, but I believe it still falls within his categories of star texts. Social media fits Dyer's categories of *promotion* and *publicity* because it sometimes looks like a deliberate creation of image (Facebook profiles) and it sometimes works more like a non-deliberate creation of image (Facebook, Twitter and blog posts) depending on how the public reads the text. I believe that what an artist posts on social media can many times be a deliberate creation of image. By keeping the perspective of the artist, a random social media post can be publicity but it can also be non-deliberate and authentic-sounding to the public. Dyer explains that "what the star lets slip in an interview"<sup>37</sup> does not appear to most of the public to be a "deliberate" creation of image. I believe this same case can be made for social media posts that fans think come straight from the artist. Interview questions can be set up ahead of time and artists can be coached on what to say so that they would technically be deliberate image creation. But, Dyer argues that most of the public derives more authenticity from direct interviews.

As I have stated, my project analyzes how the tension between business and art is reflected in star texts. Simon Frith and Keith Negus provide a detailed look at the tension and suggest that both sides hold weight. Others such as Jack Bishop argue that big business controls the art. I do not intend to make an argument about how much power

record labels have or how much creative autonomy artists have; rather, I will look at star texts to determine how the tension is presented to the public.

### **Methods and Sources**

My thesis utilizes discourse and textual analysis to look at how the tension between business and art in music is reflected in star texts. More specifically, I study the career paths of different artists as case studies. I use Michelle Branch and Regina Spektor as case studies to narrow the scope of my research. I chose contemporary female singer-songwriters because I already have experience researching them from previous studies. I chose contemporary artists because there have been many recent, significant developments in the music industry due to the Internet that make this time period especially interesting to explore. Star texts have expanded with the advent of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram and YouTube. Fans have the ability to interact with each other and the artists on these sites, which gives them a bigger role in the creation of star texts than in the past because their posts become part of the star's text.

My thesis provides a biography of each case study subject before delving into analysis. The biographical information gives readers context about the lives and the careers of the artists. To determine how the star texts of Michelle Branch and Regina Spektor reflect the tension of balancing business and art in music, my thesis analysis roots itself in Richard Dyer's technique mentioned in the literature review. My case study analyses are organized into three sections: Artist – Label, Artist – Press, and Artist – Fans.

### Artist – Label

This section focuses on how the case study's record label comes up in the star text. Many label record labels as bullies who take advantage of young musicians by forcing them to ironclad contracts and suppressing artistic freedom to accommodate their economic goals. That common characterization is the background for how the label is mentioned in a star text; it influences how various sources perceive the artist-label relationship. Record labels also come up relating to how they help brand and advertise the artist. Sometimes, this can become news in and of itself, thereby making it part of the star text. To maintain a working relationship, artists and record labels have to balance business and art, and evidence of that shows up in an artist's star text.

### Artist – Press

For my purposes, I consider trade press and popular press for this section. Artists talk about the tension of balancing business and art in their careers in these spaces. In previous research, I have found that music critics assess the authenticity of female pop stars as much or more than the artistic merits of the music. Reviews in the press provide my thesis with interesting comments and perspectives on how the critic thinks the artists balance business and art. I used search engines such as Lexis Nexis and Google News to find press on Michelle Branch and Regina Spektor. Both of these search engines allowed me to focus my searches on specific dates, which helped me narrow down times when Branch and Spektor released new material that would be accompanied by many reviews. Along with reviews, the press also writes features on the artists, which influences an artist's star image. The way writers present the artists and tag them with social values

turned out to be particularly important. Furthermore, artists have a big hand in influencing perceptions of themselves through comments in press interviews.

### Artists – Fans

I analyze the comments people make on social media and message boards about my case studies because this information is viewed by masses on the Internet. Furthermore, I chose to analyze social media because I found in previous research that artists will occasionally post something very revealing about their frustrations with their record labels on the Internet in a spontaneous bout of aggravation before erasing the post. Most of these bouts of aggravation get documented despite the artist's or label's attempt to erase it. Music artists do not always talk about only their music on social media. Because they talk about many things, it is mostly the image of the artist that gets battered on social media, and this affects how the artist's star image is perceived.

### Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 begins my analysis of my case studies. This chapter focuses on Michelle Branch. Branch had commercial success at a young age with a major record label. Her first two albums with a major record label went platinum. Over the course of her music career, Branch had multiple disagreements with her record label that appeared in her star text. Many of these issues relate to the tension artists face when trying to balance business and art in the music industry. This provides important insight into how the tension between business and art in music shows up in the star texts read by the public.

Chapter 3 focuses on Regina Spektor. Regina Spektor's career shows a different perspective on how balancing the tension between business and art is reflected in a star text. This chapter looks at Regina Spektor's provocative answers to interview questions about her views on the music industry. Spektor is often asked about her refusal to sign a record deal until a label was willing to grant her considerable creative control. She talked about how she was worried about signing with a label and losing control of the balance of business and art in her career. Unlike Branch's, Spektor's issues relating to balancing business and art in the music industry often put her in the position of defending herself against fans who think she sold out when she signed with a major record label.

### **Conclusion**

In choosing to study the star texts of Michelle Branch and Regina Spektor for my thesis, my research shows the difference between an artist who signed a deal to the record label's terms at a young age and an artist who waited cautiously and signed a more artist-friendly deal with a record label. Michelle Branch became more immediately commercially successful, but she butted heads with her label over the balance of business and art in her career. Regina Spektor has not had any public issues with her record label, but has had to defend herself against some fans who claim she sold out when she signed to a major record label. Despite different career paths, the star texts of Michelle Branch and Regina Spektor both show a struggle with the tension of balancing business and art in music. By studying the tension through star texts, my thesis does not attempt to discover what is really going on behind closed doors in the music industry; rather, it takes the safer approach of showing more concretely how the tension of balancing business and art plays out in the public eye through various media.

As P. David Marshall argues, star texts such as social media provide insight on how the public makes sense of itself both internally and externally. Just as artists such as Michelle Branch and Regina Spektor have to balance doing what they want and doing things in a way that is commercially advantageous, people want to balance staying true to themselves and seeming like the type of person that would fit into an in-group of friends. My thesis could set groundwork for a future study into how commercial culture and social culture are overlapping in new ways, and how studying the ways artists use the Internet to brand themselves could reveal something about how people are creating special images of themselves on social media.

---

<sup>1</sup> *All We Are Saying*. directed by Rosanna Arquette (De Mann Entertainment Company, 2005), DVD.

<sup>2</sup> Arquette.

<sup>3</sup> Arquette.

<sup>4</sup> Arquette.

<sup>5</sup> Sandra LaFave, "The Marxist Critique of Consumer Culture," last accessed 3/11/2013, [http://instruct.westvalley.edu/lafave/marxism\\_and\\_culture.html](http://instruct.westvalley.edu/lafave/marxism_and_culture.html).

<sup>6</sup> Paul Théberge, "Everyday Fandom: Fan Clubs, Blogging, and the Quotidian Rhythms of Internet," *Canadian Journal of Communication* (2005): 493.

<sup>7</sup> Théberge, "Everyday Fandom," 490.

<sup>8</sup> Keith Negus, *Popular Music in Theory* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997), 36.

<sup>9</sup> Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock*, (London: Constable, 1983), 40.

<sup>10</sup> Frith, *Sound Effects*, 64.

<sup>11</sup> P. David Marshall, "The Promotion and Presentation of the Self: Celebrity as Marker of Presentational Media," *Celebrity Studies* (2010): 39.

<sup>12</sup> T.W. Adorno, "A Social Critique of Radio Music," *The Kenyon Review* (1945): 210.

<sup>13</sup> Adorno, "A Social Critique of Radio Music," 213.

<sup>14</sup> Shane Gunster, "Revisiting the Culture Industry Thesis: Mass Culture and the Commodity Form," *Cultural Critique* (2000): 40.

<sup>15</sup> Jack Bishop, "Building International Empires of Sound: Concentrations of Power and Property in the 'Global' Music Market," *Popular Music and Society* (2005).

- 
- <sup>16</sup> Bishop, "Building International Empires of Sound," 467.
- <sup>17</sup> Eileen R. Meehan, "Holy Commodity Fetish, Batman!": The Political Economy of Commercial Intertext" (1991).
- <sup>18</sup> Jennifer M. Proffitt, Djung Yune Tchoi and Matthew P. McAllister, "Plugging Back Into The Matrix: The Intertextual Flow of Corporate Media Commodities," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* (2007).
- <sup>19</sup> Jack Banks, "Music Video Cartel: A Survey of Anti-Competitive Practices by MTV and Major Record Companies," *Popular Music and Society* (1996).
- <sup>20</sup> Steve Jones, "MTV: The Medium was the Message," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (2005).
- <sup>21</sup> Keith A. King, Rebecca A. Laake and Amy L. Bernard, "Do the Depictions of Sexual Attire and Sexual Behavior in Music Videos Differ Based on Video Network and Character Gender?" *American Journal of Health Education* (2006).
- <sup>22</sup> Frith, *Sound Effects*.
- <sup>23</sup> Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, (New York: Routledge, 1999).
- <sup>24</sup> Keith Negus and Michael Pickering, *Creativity, Communication and Cultural Value*, (Thousand Oakes, California: SAGE, 2004).
- <sup>25</sup> David Sanjek, "Funkentelechy vs. the Stockholm Syndrome: The Place of Industrial Analysis in Popular Music Studies," *Popular Music and Society* (1997).
- <sup>26</sup> Su Holmes, "Starring... Dyer?": Revisiting Star Studies and Contemporary Celebrity Culture," *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* (2005).
- <sup>27</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars*, (London: British Film Institute, 1979).
- <sup>28</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, 60-63.
- <sup>29</sup> Michael R. Frontani, *The Beatles: Image and the Media*, (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).
- <sup>30</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, 97.
- <sup>31</sup> Sanjek, "Funkentelechy vs. the Stockholm Syndrome."
- <sup>32</sup> Holmes, "Starring Dyer," 10.
- <sup>33</sup> Holmes, "Starring Dyer," 10.
- <sup>34</sup> Erin Meyers, "Authenticity and the Celebrity Star Image," *The Journal of Popular Culture* (2009): 896.
- <sup>35</sup> Meyers, "Authenticity and the Celebrity Star Image," 891.
- <sup>36</sup> P. David Marshall, "The Promotion and Presentation of the Self: Celebrity as Marker of Presentational Media," *Celebrity Studies* (2010).
- <sup>37</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, 61.

## Chapter 2

### Michelle Branch's Star Text: the Struggle of a Pop Star

Many young girls dream about being a pop star, but not all dreams are what they appear. Girl-with-a-guitar pop stars such as Sheryl Crow and Alanis Morissette, made headway on the Billboard charts in the mid-1990s. But, by the late 1990s, a more electronic/dance style of pop led by Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera dominated the charts. While artists such as Crow and Morissette aged, their demographic aged as well. The music business was ready for a new crop of female, girl-with-a-guitar pop stars to fill the void left by the aging stars of the mid-1990s. A greased track to stardom was laid out for artists such as Michelle Branch and Avril Lavigne, and they quickly became successful pop stars. Lavigne has done a relatively good job maintaining her spot as a successful pop star over time; however, Branch's star has faded. Michelle Branch began her career much like a young girl would dream. Hard work and dedication paid off. Branch became an award-winning pop star with strong record sales.

Over time, however, she would encounter several roadblocks and detours during her music career as she struggled to maintain star status and put out music. Richard Dyer writes that "Stars are, like characters in stories, representations of people."<sup>38</sup> Michelle Branch is a musician, but she is also a star. And, she does her best to maintain a certain "representation" of herself to keep her star status by remaining popular to as large of an audience as she can. Musicians can have careers without being stars; however, star musicians are very valuable to record labels. Record labels try to make and maintain stars because stars are more likely to earn a return on the record label's investment. When Branch successfully became a star by gaining fame and turning a large profit with her

first album, it became in her best interest to maintain her star status because that would ensure that her record label would help her maintain her goal of career longevity.

By analyzing Branch's star text (everything available to the public that builds her star image), I will show an example of how fragile the star image is and how difficult it is to maintain it. Furthermore, as explained in Chapter 1, the significance of analyzing Branch's star text goes beyond music because it could help shine a light on the relatively new way the average American tries to create and maintain a popular image through social media.<sup>39</sup> Branch's star text shows an interesting journey, one that has been affected by her decisions on how to balance business (by maintaining her star image) and art (release music she is happy with). This chapter takes a detailed look at Michelle Branch's star text relating to how record labels treat her, how the media frame her, and how her fans affect her. In Branch's case, these are the three main categories that affect her star text and are crucial to her maintaining a star image and longevity as a career musician.

### **Michelle Branch Bio: Story and Stats of a Star**

This background information on the career of Michelle Branch will provide a context for understanding the analysis of Branch's star text that follows. These facts were collected from several sources including interviews, reviews, and various websites. All of the information that follows has been cross-checked with multiple sources.

Michelle Branch, born on July 2, 1983, started singing at age three and her parents enrolled her into private voice lessons at Northern Arizona University when she was eight years old. Branch received a guitar for her fourteenth birthday, and she claims

to be mostly self-taught on that instrument. She also plays piano, accordion, cello, harmonica, mandolin, bass, flute, and drums.

Branch signed a recording contract with Maverick Records in 2001 and released her first major label album, *The Spirit Room*, in August of that same year. During the promotion for that album, the then 18 year-old singer-songwriter described her music as pop-rock with a touch of folk. Furthermore, she most frequently cited her musical influences as The Beatles, Led Zeppelin and Jimi Hendrix. When pressed to name a female musician, Branch usually mentioned Joni Mitchell's name first.

*The Spirit Room* peaked at 28 on the U.S. Billboard 200 in 2001 and has gone 2x platinum as of July 2013. The album's first single, "Everywhere," peaked at 12 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100. The second single, "All You Wanted," climbed all the way to number six on that chart. "All You Wanted" also garnered Branch nominations for Best Pop Video and Best Female Video at the 2002 MTV Music Video Awards. Branch's "Everywhere" won the Viewer's Choice Award at that same ceremony.

Between *The Spirit Room* and her follow-up album, *Hotel Paper* (2003), the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences of the United States nominated Branch for the 2003 Best New Artist Grammy, and awarded her a 2003 Grammy for Best Pop Collaboration ("The Game of Love" with Santana), which peaked on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 at number five. *Hotel Paper* debuted and peaked on the Billboard 200 at number two in June of 2003. The album earned platinum status, although its singles did not fare as well on the Billboard charts as her singles from *The Spirit Room*. *Hotel*

*Paper*'s first single, "Are You Happy Now?" did, however, get nominated for Best Female Rock Vocal Performance at the 2004 Grammys.

From there, Branch's career took a turn. She formed a country duo with friend and fellow musician Jessica Harp, and moved to Nashville. The duo called themselves The Wreckers, an abbreviation of Homewreckers. In 2006, The Wreckers released their debut album *Stand Still, Look Pretty*, which peaked at 14 on the U.S. Billboard 200 chart, four on the U.S. Billboard Top Country albums chart, and number one on the U.K. Top Country Albums chart. The album went Gold and produced two top ten U.S. Country singles. The first single, "Leave the Pieces," got a 2007 Grammy nomination for Best Country Performance by a Duo or Group with Vocal.

Michelle Branch and Jessica Harp split up The Wreckers in 2007 and went their separate ways. Harp's first solo album with a major label did not have the kind of success *Stand Still, Look Pretty* did, and she decided to retire as a performer and become strictly a songwriter. Branch struggled to put out new music after The Wreckers. In 2008, she announced a new album called *Everything Comes and Goes*, but it encountered several delays. It finally got released in 2010 as a 6-track EP. Branch's next album, *West Coast Time*, has also been delayed. This album was scheduled to be released September of 2011 and then Spring of 2013. As of April, 2015, the album still has not been distributed.

### **Branch - Label**

Using that biographical information as the framework for Michelle Branch's career, now I will transition into the analysis of Branch's star text, how that displays the balance between business and art in music, and what tension arises in the process.

Branch's star text most noticeably represents tension of balancing business and art in relation to her dealings with her record label. This comes up in the straight-forward discussion of how her image and career is built, the sound of her music, the delays to the release of music due to marketing issues, and more.

Early in Branch's career, the press spotlights her image in its articles about the new pop star. This makes sense because the artist was new and still in the process of being branded. In other words, the press was looking at Branch's characteristics and printing interviews with her to create and/or reveal her identity to the world. The press often refers to Branch as the Anti-Britney, or as this study describes it, the anti-thesis of Britney Spears's thesis. According to Richard Dyer, stars have a "novelistic character"<sup>40</sup> to keep an audience engaged. By "novelistic character," Dyer means that they are "particular and interesting," but also dependably consistent in a comforting way.<sup>41</sup> Branch's novelistic character is that she "mark[ed] a return to musical, not image-driven stardom."<sup>42</sup> This is an attempt to distance Branch from Spears. Ironically, image is prominently used to show how Branch is more about her music than her image. The video for Branch's first single "Everywhere" (2001)<sup>43</sup> is an example of where the press got this identity for her. This music video portrays Branch as independent. In it, Branch appears to live alone in a metropolitan apartment. Music video directors commonly surrounded young women with a clique of friends or a band or back-up dancers in most pop music videos (including that of Spears) during this time. Branch, however, appears to be making it on her own in the video for "Everywhere." She plays a guitar and performs at a show in it.

This Anti-Britney image frequently appeared on America Online (AOL) websites. Branch's record label, Maverick, was part of Warner Music Group, which was part of the media conglomerate AOL Time Warner. People did not even have to put these pieces together on their own. The press used Michelle Branch and her situation to show how major record labels employ horizontal integration: "By early August, Branch was being plugged across AOL, including on the service's welcome screen, where she was billed as the 'Anti-Britney.'"<sup>44</sup> This article goes on to say, "AOL and Maverick contend that the early push helped the track ["Everywhere"] debut Aug. 10 on MTV's TRL, shortly after the video was picked up by the channel."<sup>45</sup> Readers could also note that Kevin Conroy, head of AOL Music, thought "Branch benefited from being presented on Maverick's terms as opposed to anyone else's."<sup>46</sup> The way Maverick used its partnerships to promote Branch does not, however, necessarily mean Branch's image was contrived like some might argue.

According to Jack Bishop, concentration of media comes "at the expense of [...] cultural creativity"<sup>47</sup>, but Keith Negus has a different point of view. According to Negus, "If commercially driven industries undoubtedly mould creativity, we also have to realize that creativity has influenced, and continues to influence, industrial production."<sup>48</sup> Negus sees a give-and-take in the music industry. Negus would oppose the idea that Maverick was creating a pop star because he claims that a label like Maverick lets artists such as Branch be herself and does its best to bring that out in its promotion of her. Furthermore, according to Simon Frith, "Record companies by nature don't much care what forms music takes as long as they can be organized and controlled to ensure profit—musics and musicians can be packaged and sold, whatever their styles."<sup>49</sup> Maverick's packaging of

Michelle Branch as an Anti-Britney was part of the story told in the press when Branch was first being branded at the beginning of her career. Although Branch did not particularly like being put into categories such as being an Anti-Britney, the characteristics of this category: being independent, writing her own music and lyrics, playing her own instruments etc., were not things that Branch actively denied or disapproved of. Thus, all of these things became part of Branch's star image. This, however, is just the start of how Maverick and Branch would be joined in the artist's star text. And, tension would slowly intensify over time.

Popular men's magazine *Maxim* made Branch their cover girl and interviewed her in January, 2004 during the promotion of her second album, *Hotel Paper*. The interviewer asked Branch if she was ever pressured to be a Britney clone. Branch remembered being "really lucky"<sup>50</sup> and said that after hearing her song "Everywhere," the record executives exclaimed, "Don't change a thing. Don't tell her what to wear, don't tell her what to do, just let her be," and Branch felt like that was unique for a young, contemporary female pop singer.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, Branch was beginning to notice some things that she had a hard time explaining. She often expressed her distaste for contemporary pop radio: "It's hard as a music fan to listen to it."<sup>52</sup> And yet, her own music played on these very stations that she critiqued: "I generally don't listen to any radio station that plays my music! I don't know if that's a bad thing, but..."<sup>53</sup> In this article, Branch conveyed that she feels differently from other pop artists because the record executives let her be herself and gave her considerable freedom recording her music. However, when asked to host a radio show, Branch said, "They handed me this list of 30 songs and asked me to pick 14 from the list. I couldn't even pick two!"<sup>54</sup> This

*Maxim* interview isn't the only instance in her star text that Branch sounds perplexed about simultaneously feeling creatively liberated, but also the same as any ordinary pop star. Branch told *Spin* magazine in July of 2003 that she felt "really special" because famous rock guitarist Dave Navarro played on her first single for *Hotel Paper* until her manager informed her that Navarro is also in the new Mariah Carey video. Branch recalled to *Spin* that she thought, "Fuck! He's just whoring himself onto everybody's thing."<sup>55</sup>

At this point, Branch's star text is interesting because she always sounds reasonably positive—even in the aforementioned *Spin* article, she backtracked and glossed up her Dave Navarro comment—but a reader could see she had questions about how she fit in with other pop stars. Was she becoming the very thing she despised? Branch's brand seemed to be at odds with what she ultimately wanted based on her star text. What she ultimately wanted is a bit ambiguous. She sounded positive about her own music and happy about how it turned out on her albums; however, she seemed frustrated at times with where and how she fit into a pop scene that she largely disliked. In *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, Negus reflects about his band's experience with music: "If the responses and expectations of audiences were influencing our performances, then the assumptions about genre codes also had an impact upon my own songwriting and style of playing."<sup>56</sup> Perhaps, as Negus suggests, Branch was being influenced by existing genre codes and that is why her music sounds so similar to other pop music at the time—at least, similar enough to be put on the same stations as the other pop music she did not like. Nevertheless, Branch's confusion is what sticks in the mind of a reader of her star text.

After *Hotel Paper*, Branch went in a different direction. She formed a country duo with aforementioned friend and fellow singer-songwriter Jessica Harp. A close reader of Branch's star text would not be surprised by this move based on her aversion to the pop scene; however, that same close reader might question whether this move was in line with her musical ambition because she mostly sounded happy and fulfilled when talking about her pop-rock songs and albums.

Maverick had a problem with Branch's decision to make a country album from the start, and it created tension. Branch told *billboard.com*, "When we first made our record [*Stand Still, Look Pretty*], we were still on Maverick Records [...] and everyone was still kind of holding the reigns back and were secretly terrified of us making a country record because they really just didn't know what to do with it, so they were constantly coming in kind of pulling us back a little bit."<sup>57</sup> The problems with Maverick persisted after Branch and Harp finally finished the album. The record label delayed the release of the album and sent The Wreckers on a tour before anyone had heard their songs. The resulting tension between Branch and her label led to a blowup on Branch's own message board in which she told off Maverick. She wrote of embarking on the tour that "Maverick wanted to make a quick buck, and unfortunately, we were obligated by contract to do so."<sup>58</sup> Branch went on, "As far as 'biting the hand that feeds you,'... This isn't fun for me anymore. I'm sick of sucking dicks to get my music heard, putting on a fake smile, and saying things that are acceptable."<sup>59</sup> This is rather strong language and a forceful opinion coming from Branch. She could be sarcastic and revealing at times, but nothing to this level. Since her message board rant, Branch has been more outspoken

about her label and the business goings-on regarding her music; however, she has never again exploded quite like this.

As things got worse with Maverick, Branch became more transparent about her tension with the record label. She mentioned getting held back creatively in numerous press articles. Furthermore, Branch often played different versions of her songs live than appeared on her album. At an August 29, 2003 concert in Allentown, Pennsylvania, Branch asked fans if they wanted the “regular” version of “All You Wanted” or the “super, fabulous, fun, Allentown version.”<sup>60</sup> The recording of this concert spread on the Internet and became part of Branch’s star text. Whether Branch was just having fun and playing songs differently to shake things up for fans, or if she was playing songs in a way that she wished they appeared on her albums is something only she knows. However, people can certainly interpret the former based on Branch’s other issues with her label.

Negus has written that artists tend to gain negotiating power with a label when it comes to their creative liberty after they have become “established star performers.”<sup>61</sup> Based on her attributes through *Hotel Paper*, Branch certainly qualifies as an established star; however, Maverick does not appear open to the star’s creative desires based on Branch’s star text. She spoke openly about the difficulty getting her country duo record made with Jessica Harp. Branch told *Country Standard Time*, “We told them (Maverick) that we wanted it to be an organic country instrumentation record [...] In their mind, it was the ugly ‘C’ word (country) and they didn’t really understand.”<sup>62</sup> Branch admitted in a separate interview that she believed Maverick “would have just released the record and thrown it out there and not paid too much attention to it, and it would have probably just flopped.”<sup>63</sup>

Branch's experience with Maverick contradicts Negus's statements about established artists gaining bargaining power pertaining to their music in one way; however, Branch and Maverick's situation could be ruled out as an anomaly because of Maverick's financial problems at the time. The record label was struggling and Branch was one of its few bankable artists. Logically, it makes business sense that Maverick would be hesitant of letting Branch switch genres and potentially lose some of her audience who enjoyed her consistent sound.

Furthermore, Branch did get her country duo album made after switching to Maverick's sister label, Warner Nashville. Through *Stand Still, Look Pretty*, Branch's star text continues to play out like a story about her journey in the music industry fighting for what she believes in as a musician, and it continues to reflect her novelistic character as an Anti-Britney. Media surrounding Britney Spears often focused on who she was dating and her social life, whereas Branch's focused much more on the performer's music and work-related dealings.

After *Stand Still, Look Pretty*, Branch decided she wanted to return to her roots and make another pop-rock album. By now, Branch was removed enough from the pop scene and did not have as much pressure on her to carry a dying label like she did during her first two albums with Maverick. To Branch's chagrin, she has had much difficulty getting a full-length solo album released. Branch now has a tense, love-hate relationship with her record label. In 2010, Branch wrote another long rant on her message board; however, this one was not as violently worded. She apologized to her fans about the lack of music coming out from her and explained, "I have my good days when I'm excited and creative and looking forward to what this album can accomplish and I have my bad

when I feel like I'm being held hostage by WB and I wanna give up."<sup>64</sup> This time around, Branch's star text did not portray her struggle as one of her artistic demands versus a record label's apprehension towards those demands such as it was when she wanted to make a country album and Maverick took issue with that. This time, Branch's problem with the record label was that "people started getting fired left and right, and once some new person would get hired finally, they'd come in and give their two cents on my record. Somehow, it just halted the process entirely."<sup>65</sup> Branch remembered at one point, when she was still trying to make a solo country album to follow up *Stand Still, Look Pretty*, she had a meeting with the Warner Bros. CEO Tom Whalley and explained, "I'm feeling so creatively stifled, I need to get away from all this [...] I just wanna be inspired by something else and maybe make a pop record.' It was a long meeting and at the end of the day, I got Tom's blessing to go ahead. That was a Thursday; on Monday morning, he was fired."<sup>66</sup>

Branch is an interesting case because a business vs. art tension has played out in two different ways pertaining to her record labels at various times. Her star text weaves a story about Maverick not letting her release the country album she wanted. However, it also portrays a story of how Branch's music choices are not the problem, but rather it is her label's inability to properly help her release an album while it struggles internally. Both situations lead to a tension in Branch's star text regarding business and art.

### **Branch – Press**

Another way Branch's star text represents the tension of balancing business and art in music is how the media frame her. This section will focus more specifically on how

media writers communicate and manipulate Branch's star image through their own creative decisions in the popular press such as descriptions, interview questions, and anything else that could influence a reader's perception of Branch. Press such as magazines, websites, and newspapers can frame an artist very subtly by using key words that stick out to an audience and/or by introducing/describing the artist or art to its audience in a more direct manner. This project already discussed how AOL Time Warner (which owned Branch's label) used horizontal integration to brand Branch as an Anti-Britney on its media platforms and how that was repeated by other media sources. This section takes a more detailed look at Branch's star text and how the media influences her brand by creating a tension between Branch the commercial image and Branch the music artist. This tension appears because of specific questions the press asks Branch in interviews as well as how it frames Branch in reviews and features.

The press plays a big part in branding and selling a music artist. This part is bigger for new artists in the pop music genre because, to be highly successful in this genre, an artist has to hang in there with some of the top selling albums at the given time. That being said, music labels rely on stars and have to keep churning them out. According to Richard Dyer, stars are of vital importance in the entertainment industry because they are a bankable asset—a guaranteed investment.<sup>67</sup> AOL Time Warner invested a lot into Michelle Branch to launch her as a pop star. Branch was not meant to have a mere niche audience in the pop scene. Erin Myers writes about a trend towards the appeal of a “real” or “authentic” celebrity<sup>68</sup> after artists such as Branch made a mark. Warner Music and its label Maverick signed Branch to fill an opening in the pop music market that they termed Anti-Britney; however, even though AOL Time Warner was a

powerful media conglomerate during Branch's album debut, it did not have the power to control every single entity that wrote about its new artist. The press contributes to Branch's star text in two divergent ways: it either credits her as an authentic artist and a breath of fresh air for contemporary, mainstream pop music; or it bashes her as just another pop tart in a crowd of young female pop artists that will never accomplish anything artistically impactful.

I found no specific trend in what source would write positive pieces about Branch and what source would write negative pieces about Branch; however, there are some logical connections and gender stereotypes based on the target demographics of certain magazines. For instance, *Elle Girl* (a magazine for young women) portrayed Branch as a "tomboy" and role model,<sup>69</sup> whereas *Maxim* (a magazine for young men) illustrated Branch as a sexy "pervert."<sup>70</sup> Despite the lack of trend based on source, there is definitely a difference in the definition of Branch in the press that influences the singer's star text and creates more tension between business and art. Some of the articles frame Branch as an artist and some of them paint her as just another pretty girl that a record label is using to make money. Branch even wrote a song about this dichotomy in which the chorus goes, "I am slowly falling apart/ I wish you'd take a walk in my shoes for a start/You might think it's easy being me/You just stand still, look pretty."<sup>71</sup> This song, "Stand Still, Look Pretty," appears on the CD of the same name that she released after a battle with her label(s) to form a country duo and put out a country album. Despite her battle behind closed doors for what appears to be artistic ambition, Branch realized many people still saw her as just some attractive young woman whose only job and ambition is to "stand still, look pretty" and make money.

Why might Branch have thought people viewed her this way? The negative articles in the press did not come from just small newspapers and magazines. *SPIN* and *Pitchfork* did not review Branch's second album, but *Rolling Stone* did. Popular music journalist Rob Sheffield's review groups Branch with Vanessa Carlton and multi-Grammy winner Norah Jones and refers to them as "Girls Who Like to Sing" as opposed to stars such as Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera who are "Girl[s] Who Need to Perform."<sup>72</sup> This sounds like a somewhat favorable comparison for Branch; however, the majority of Sheffield's article is less positive. He wrote that she is merely "trying hard to project maturity and sincerity."<sup>73</sup> The word "trying" insinuates that she is failing, and the word "project" insinuates that she is not authentic and only acting like she is mature and sincere. These are small things that go a long way in influencing a reader of Branch's star text. Sheffield went on to write that Branch is a below-average songwriter and particularly pokes her for a song she did with Santana called "Game of Love" which he called "one of the most excruciating hits of the past few years."<sup>74</sup> It does not matter that Sheffield failed to do the proper research and note that Branch did not write that particular song. People can still be influenced by his words if they have no desire to confirm whether Branch actually wrote her duet with Santana or not. Sheffield, a skilled wordsmith who writes for a prestigious and widely distributed magazine, has more impact on Branch's star text than most other writers and articles in the press.

Just seven months before Sheffield's article in *Rolling Stone*, Steve Baltin wrote an article about the star in the same magazine that was more favorable. He previewed Branch's second album and made no mention of other pop artists that Branch often gets clumped together with. Instead, Baltin chose to write about Branch collaborating with

credible names such as Sheryl Crow and Dave Navarro, and how she hung out with Jane's Addiction and The Eagles while in the studio.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, just two months before Baltin's article, Branch's name appeared in the pages of *Rolling Stone* in its Women in Rock issue. This article refers to her as a "bohemian girl" whose heroes are Cat Stevens and The Beatles.<sup>76</sup> It frames Branch as being more mature which makes her sound more "real" and "authentic" like Meyers described as a trend at this time. When the interviewer led Branch, "You started to obsess about music when you were pretty young," she responded, "Yeah. I was, like, this strange kid, because when I'd go to a sleepover, I would pack up my Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons tapes or my Beatles or Led Zeppelin or Aerosmith tapes, and everyone was like, 'No, we just want to listen to Salt-n-Pepa.'<sup>77</sup> This interview shows Branch's mature taste in music and reveals a confidence and sense of humor that contradicts Sheffield's article that asserts she is just "trying to project maturity."<sup>78</sup>

An individual reader of Branch's star text could still look at interviews like this one as an attempt to project maturity or claim that Branch was simply coached to say the things that she did. Music scholar David Sanjek warns "us not [to] minimize stars by our unquenchable fascination with their self-definitions, epitomized by the first-person interview."<sup>79</sup> However, this can be said about any artist at any time. What makes Branch's case so interesting is that there is such a balance between positive articles such as this one and negative articles such as Sheffield's. Supporters can cite a wide array of sources celebrating Branch. Many articles picked up on the Anti-Britney theme started by Branch's label through its parent company's other media holdings. *Billboard* magazine said Branch "spits out the notion of youthful bubble gum and instead tightly grips a

plugged-in guitar and sings with a kind of grit that is the rare exception these days.”<sup>80</sup> Billboard’s website called Branch’s music “alternative pop” and “alternative country,”<sup>81</sup> that word “alternative” has a more credible connotation to it than simply “pop.” *The Denver Post* called her the “antidote to the teen pop invasion” and wrote that there was an “authenticity to *The Spirit Room*.”<sup>82</sup> Popular young men’s magazine *Maxim* declares, “This Arizona native is no pop tart.”<sup>83</sup> Some college papers also echoed the Anti-Britney call. For example, this appeared in Harvard’s *The Crimson*,

Bubblegum pop seems to have momentarily burst. From its ashes, a new breed of artists has risen [...] with more poise, more maturity, more substance and certainly more fully clothed than the vocalists who have dominated music charts over the past two years. They’re the latest incarnation of singer-songwriters, talented more in voice than in measurements. Michelle Branch is one such shining example in the musical firmament.<sup>84</sup>

At the same time, detractors could back up Sheffield’s article in *Rolling Stone* by citing an international source such as *The Ottawa Citizen* who clumped Branch with names such as Hilary Duff, Lindsay Lohan, and Ashlee and Jessica Simpson in an article designed to attack the maturity and authenticity of these artists.<sup>85</sup> They could also point to popular music magazine *Slant* who called Branch’s venture into the country music genre as a “credibility maneuver” and suggested Branch was only “playing country star dress-up.”<sup>86</sup>

As this paper shows, a reader can get contradicting perspectives on Branch within the pages of *Rolling Stone* alone. This is how the press creates a tension between business and art for Michelle Branch. Sometimes, she is defined as a sincere artist and sometimes she is framed as a record label’s puppet to make guaranteed money off of her carefully

crafted star image. Despite the natural overlapping of art and commerce in the music business, Branch's star text in the press creates grounds for an argument to be had between her supporters and detractors.

### **Branch – Fans**

Michelle Branch's fans have the most interest in her star text, and, to a certain degree, they get to become a part of it. To be a successful artist, the fans have to be pleased. They have to like the art of an artist, and/or they have to be interested in the image of an artist. Paul Théberge convincingly explains the importance of image in his "Everyday Fandom" article.<sup>87</sup> Judging by Branch's star text, she wants people to recognize her as a credible artist as much as anything. She boldly and consistently stands by her own art and all decisions relating to her music, but she understands that her image matters as much to her longevity in the music business as does anything. Therefore, she will occasionally backtrack on things she reveals about herself if they receive a negative reaction from fans. For instance, when Branch talks about politics or religion, she has sometimes backtracked to ease the vitriol it raises with some of her loyal fan base. On other occasions, it is difficult for Branch to backtrack on a decision that leads to fan fury so she explains it the best she can and hopes that it works out. The best example of this is the fallout from her risqué photo shoot for *Maxim* magazine.

Michelle Branch's record label and the press mostly get caught up in the battle over her authenticity in her star text, and that does not change when it comes to how her fans get incorporated into it. The most noticeable aspect of fans joining in is when they are reacting to something that they deem unfitting of their conceived notions of her image

and credibility as an artist. They argue on message boards about whether Branch has sold out. People dispute whether she is only in the music business for glamour, prestige, and riches, or if she is just a regular girl making music that other girls can relate to. The fans, and Branch herself at times, also spit fire through Branch's star text when the release of her music takes too long because of business issues behind the scenes.

Michelle Branch's fans got incorporated into her star text in one of the early autobiographies she wrote for a website. Instead of a dry, this is who I am, this is where I came from style, Branch wrote this autobiography as a kind of letter to her supporters and prospective supporters. In this piece, she related to fans by writing about herself as a fan: "I won tickets to a New Kids on the Block concert. I was so excited! After all, I would sing and dance along to their tape every day. (Just for your info, that was probably the last time I've ever been seen dancing)." <sup>88</sup> In this passage, she described her feelings, which could be similar to the feelings that one of her own fans might enjoy when going to one of her shows. Furthermore, her joke about never being seen dancing again is humorous in an open, conversational way, and it also helps craft her image as an Anti-Britney—whether she knows it or not. In this same autobiography, Branch wrote that "Math class was the time when I would write most of my songs (one example is "Sweet Misery", I wrote it in Algebra 1)." <sup>89</sup> Here, Branch uses detail by citing a specific song and class to draw readers into her story and make it relatable to her child/young adult demographic. Algebra 1 is a class that her demographic has probably taken, is taking or will take. It is also a class that young people, especially those who are right-brained and more focused on the arts like music probably do not enjoy. When they read that Branch ignored that class to write music, it is cool and relatable to them.

Branch also uses the social media platform Twitter to talk directly to fans. Nancy Baym states that through social media, “Artists can keep audiences up to date on everything that matters and keep them engaged with them even when they’re not making music.”<sup>90</sup> Branch relates to fans on Twitter by talking about her own celebrity crushes, what recent music she likes, and other day-to-day observations she makes. Her humor is evident, and she mostly sounds like just another person as opposed to a relatively rich musician. When Branch tweets about politics or religion, however, it becomes divisive. One such tweet like this was actually a re-tweet: “RT@KeithOlbermann Maybe if we had a National Day of Science instead of Prayer we’d know how to stop a deep sea oil disaster.”<sup>91</sup> This was tweeted during the BP oil disaster. The very next morning, Branch tweeted, “About the Science vs. Prayer comment: Was merely forwarding on a comment that made me stop and think for a moment-Not meaning to offend.”<sup>92</sup> Branch realizes that what she says on Twitter can affect peoples’ perception of her identity thereby causing a loss of fans. If an artist does not talk about politics and religion, most fans probably assume their idol is likeminded with them. When an artist breaches that assumption, it can be a problem.

A good example of this appeared on the Catholic forum FishEaters. One fan who went by the name “Petertherock” explained that Branch participated in a Twitter game that challenges people to change regular movie titles into pornographic movie titles. This enraged fan said about her participation in this game, “I have tolerated a lot of her liberal left wing propaganda and even accepted some of her lame excuses at some anti-religious statements she made...but the straw that broke the camel’s back is what I saw when I read her tweets from last night.” Petertherock then quoted Michelle Branch as having tweeted,

“I’ve just lost over 30 followers. \*gasp\* No, come back!” This fan went on to boast on the Catholic message board that he sent Branch a message on her message board stating, “Going to hell is nothing to joke about or take lightly. You are disgusting and lost another follower/fan.” Petertherock said Branch replied with the apology, “Sorry you feel that way. While I don’t believe in it personally, my aim wasn’t to offend.” That apology, however, was not good enough for this fan. Branch can try to sound relatable through her star text by talking directly to her fans, but sometimes it works in reverse by affecting the image people have of her, which, in turn, can lose her fans and hurt her from a business perspective. Furthermore, the fewer fans she has, the less star power and bargaining power she has with a record label when it comes to her artistic liberty as Negus discusses.<sup>93</sup> This tension between business and art all comes out in the portion of Branch’s star text that relates to her interactions with fans.

Even more pressure is put on Branch’s image when she has no new music coming out. As of 2015, it has been 12 years since Branch released her last solo album and nine years since her country duo album came out. Branch addressed this in her star text by claiming that she was still writing new music, but there have been a lot of problems behind closed doors at her label. This, she assured, is what was keeping new music from being released. Branch’s frustration with the process will sometimes lead her to launch tweets out that rip into her label: “I’d give you all the release date but WB [Warner Bros. Records] won’t tell me! No one ever tells me anything. #imsooverrecordlabels”<sup>94</sup>, and even more pointed, “I wonder if I died in a car accident or checked myself into rehab if WB would finally release my record. What? Oops. Not my inside voice.”<sup>95</sup> Branch will also speak positively about certain people on her label that get behind her, so what she

says in her star text about Warner Bros. Music is not always bad, but it does affect the fans.

The reaction to no new music breaks two ways in Branch's star text. Some fans sound like they give up on Branch because they see her going in a different direction. This was posted on [michellebranchfan.net](http://michellebranchfan.net) in November of 2012: "[...] I am second guessing if I should keep the site since Michelle is now mainly focusing on her 'food' career."<sup>96</sup> Branch, who loves cooking, had recently appeared on some popular chef shows while her music career was dormant. This fan, apparently, did not think that Branch was doing enough to get out new music and took it out on what appeared to be Branch's Plan B while her music career was on hiatus. Other fans remained loyal to Branch and targeted their anger at Branch's record label. When Warner Bros. Records posted a note of support on Facebook, some fans thought it was inauthentic and made comments on Branch's message board. SteveDBT posted, "They [WB] have zero faith in Michelle and have ruined her career. That can't be covered up with a posting pretending that they support her." The lack of new music caused some fans to think Branch is not an artist worth being patient for, while others joined Branch and attacked her record label. Either way, their voices are heard in Branch's star text, and they contribute to how it shows the difficulty of balancing business and art in the music industry. Fans want the art, but they cannot get it because of business reasons.

The long block of time with no new album presents significant tension in Branch's star text, especially with the fans; however, perhaps the most tension among fans is created by her decision to do a risqué photo shoot for *Maxim* magazine. Branch had never personally attacked other musicians for doing sexy photo shoots, but her Anti-

Britney image led some fans to think Branch was more conservative with what she would wear for a photographer. According to Dyer, “A change in physical style is also always a change in social meaning.”<sup>97</sup> With this one decision to alter her physical style, Branch causes fans to question her entire social meaning. Their trust and comfort in her brand/image gets broken with just a few pictures.

A momentous argument erupted between fans on various message boards. What fans say about Branch on these message boards also represent part of Branch’s star text. The following series of posts popped up on Pulse Music Board on December 4, 2003. The naysayers attacked Branch’s credibility. TheJakes wrote, “I thought that posing topless for a men’s mag was not something a “serious artistic” play-your-own-instrument, dancing is the devil’s tool musician would do.” jimmy74747 chimed in, “She [Branch] really could have established herself as a serious artist. [...] This does no benefit to Michelle’s career, and will cause her to lose some credibility.” Branch’s defenders mostly echoed George Tropicana’s words, “don’t think she’s doing it for the sales” and agreed with mbfan who said Branch just wants to “feel sexy.” Many responses on the message board claimed they would no longer be fans of Branch because of this photo shoot. Branch’s music had not changed, but people decided to stop buying her albums because of a decision she made that conflicted with the image they had of her. The intense discussion about whether Branch sold out out by posing near-nude in *Maxim* magazine further forced fans to take a side on the issue.

“Art and business don’t mix.”<sup>98</sup> Perhaps, if pressed, Branch would follow that up with “but they have to.” Branch does not neglect the business side of maintaining a career in music. She contributes to her own branding by trying to convince people she is an

authentic musician who deserves credibility as an artist, and she must have recognized how much non-music decisions can have on her fan base as she observed the fallout from her photo shoot with *Maxim* magazine. Branch frequently commented that she wants people to think of her as a credible artist, and she hopes she inspires others. Perhaps this balances other setbacks in her branding as an Anti-Britney. Branch focuses on her hopes to be seen as credible and inspiring most when she talks to publications for young women.

Branch told *Elle Girl* that with *Hotel Paper*, “I’ll get a little bit more credibility since I was so young when my last CD came out and people kind of wrote me off because of my age. I don’t care if you like this record or not, I just want people to see me as more as an artist.”<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, Branch said to *YM Magazine*, “The most inspiring thing for [fans] is that usually they are around the same age as I am. They get inspired that I went after something that I love doing. I have gotten letters from people that are like, [...] ‘I love your music and it gives me a reason to wake up in the morning, and gets me through some really hard times.’ So that is really amazing that you can have an effect on someone like that.”<sup>100</sup> Branch’s words to fans and her fans’ words for/about her play a role in her star text as it relates to balancing business and art because of how much their interaction contributes to her identity as a credible artist. Therefore, this is another way Branch’s star text shows the tension of balancing business and art in music. Branch wants to be seen as a credible musician, but it is not just her music that convinces the public. Anything from a lack of music due to problems with her record label to a decision to participate in a risqué photo shoot can affect her career as a musician.

## Conclusion

Investigating what goes on behind closed doors in the music industry is difficult. A researcher has to communicate with people who have agendas and might be reluctant to provide all the truths and information a writer wants. To examine how business and art are balanced in the music industry, I decided to look at the star text of artists. The information is not necessarily all true, but it is the information the public has access to. The star text is the starting point where the public makes its interpretation about artists and the music business in general. Michelle Branch's often revolves around how she balances business and art. Analysis of this star text shows how balancing business and art in music creates tension for Branch and sometimes others.

Michelle Branch's biographical information gives a reader some context on the artist. She plays multiple instruments, has older, mature influences, and has had considerable success on the charts and at the Grammy Awards. Further exploration reveals a tension that develops in her star narrative. Branch's first major record label sells/defines her as an Anti-Britney and uses horizontal integration to introduce her to the public. She is described as being more independent than other pop stars and as a better role model for girls and young women. One who reads between the lines recognizes some differences between Michelle Branch the person and Michelle Branch's star image because of how some of the artist's decisions contradict her branding such as her decision to pose near-nude for *Maxim* magazine. Branch's star text exposes conflicts with her label, with the press, and with her fans. All of these conflicts relate to the effort to balance business and art in the music business. Branch herself even tweets "Art and business don't mix"<sup>101</sup> at one point. Branch has an interesting star text to research and

analyze for how an artist balances business and art because it shows several perspectives of how an artist deals with this balance and the resulting tension.

---

<sup>38</sup> Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 20.

<sup>39</sup> P. David Marshall, "The Promotion and Presentation of the Self: Celebrity as Marker of Presentational Media," *Celebrity Studies* (2010).

<sup>40</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, 97.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-98.

<sup>42</sup> James Crawford, "Maverick's New Shining Star," *The Crimson*, September 28, 2001, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2001/9/28/michelle-branch-p-pable-to-perform/>.

<sup>43</sup> Michelle Branch, *Everywhere*, music video, (2001).

<sup>44</sup> Brian Garrity, "AOL, Maverick Partnership Pays off for New Artists," *Billboard*, Volume 79, 11-17 (2001).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Jack Bishop, "Building International Empires of Sound: Concentrations of Power and Property in the 'Global' Music Market," *Popular Music and Society* (2005): 467.

<sup>48</sup> Keith Negus and Michael Pickering, *Creativity, Communication and Cultural Value*, (London: SAGE Publications, 2004), 48.

<sup>49</sup> Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock*, (London: Constable, 1983), 32.

<sup>50</sup> "Michelle Branch Dressed To Grill," *Maxim*, January 2004, 74.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Sarah Lewitinn, "Good-bye to Youth: Michelle Branch Grows Up, Grows Hair," *Spin*, July 10, 2003, <http://www.spin.com/articles/good-bye-youth/>.

<sup>56</sup> Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 5.

<sup>57</sup> John Benson, "Wreckers Earning Their Keep with Country Fans," *Billboard*, October 13, 2006, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/56962/wreckers-earning-their-keep-with-country-fans>.

- 
- <sup>58</sup> Tim Cashmere, "Michelle Branch Closes Down Message Board and Tells Off Fans," *Undercover*, December 2005, last accessed March 14, 2007, [http://www.undercover.com.au/news/2005/dec05/20051209\\_michellebranch.html](http://www.undercover.com.au/news/2005/dec05/20051209_michellebranch.html).
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>60</sup> Michelle Branch, *All You Wanted*, live song: Allentown, Pennsylvania (August 29, 2003), mp3.
- <sup>61</sup> Negus and Pickering, *Creativity, Communication and Cultural Value*, 58-59.
- <sup>62</sup> Phyllis Stark, "The Wreckers Branch Out," *Billboard*, May 24, 2006, 39.
- <sup>63</sup> Jeffrey B. Remz, "The Wreckers Clean Up," *Country Standard Time*, November 2006, <http://www.countrystandardtime.com/d/article.asp?xid=994>.
- <sup>64</sup> Michelle Branch, "Golf Clubs Anyone?," *Michelle Branch Message Board*, March 29, 2010, <http://board.michellebranch.com/index.php?showtopic=2590>.
- <sup>65</sup> Shirley Halperin, "Why Michelle Branch Almost Quit Music," *Hollywood Reporter*, June 27, 2011, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/why-michelle-branch-almost-quit-205953>.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, 10-11.
- <sup>68</sup> Erin Meyers, "Authenticity and the Celebrity Star Image," *The Journal of Popular Culture* (2009): 896.
- <sup>69</sup> Maria Neuman, "Keeping It Real," *Elle Girl*, September-October 2003, 114.
- <sup>70</sup> "Dressed To Grill," 74.
- <sup>71</sup> Michelle Branch, "Stand Still, Look Pretty," mp3, Warner Bros. Nashville, 2003.
- <sup>72</sup> Rob Sheffield, "Hotel Paper," *Rolling Stone*, July 10, 2003, last accessed 2013, [www.rollingstone.com/artists/michellebranch/albums/album/288465/review/5945965/hotel\\_paper](http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/michellebranch/albums/album/288465/review/5945965/hotel_paper).
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>75</sup> Steve Baltin, "Michelle Branch Finds Freedom: Nineteen-year-old hanging with Eagles, Jane's Addiction," *Rolling Stone*, December 17, 2002, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/michelle-branch-finds-freedom-20021217>.
- <sup>76</sup> "RS Woman in Rock," *Rolling Stone*, October 10, 2002, <http://michellebranchfan.net/library/2002-rs-woman-in-rock-michelle-branch-interview/>.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>78</sup> Sheffield, "Hotel Paper."
- <sup>79</sup> David Sanjek, "Funkentelechy vs. the Stockholm Syndrome: The Place of Industrial Analysis in Popular Music Studies," *Popular Music and Society* (1997).

- 
- <sup>80</sup> Chuck Taylor, "Spotlights," *Billboard*, July 28, 2001, 24.
- <sup>81</sup> John Benson, "Wreckers Earning Their Keep With Country Fans," *Billboard*, October 13, 2006, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/56962/wreckers-earning-their-keep-with-country-fans>.
- <sup>82</sup> G. Brown, "Michelle Branch Singer-songwriter charts a distinctly different career path," *The Denver Post* (Denver, Colorado), May 16, 2003.
- <sup>83</sup> "Dressed To Grill," 74.
- <sup>84</sup> James Crawford, "Maverick's New Shining Star," *The Harvard Crimson*, September 28, 2001, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2001/9/28/michelle-branch-p-pable-to-perform/>.
- <sup>85</sup> Mark Lepage, "For many drama pop queens, the songs remain the same," *The Ottawa Citizen* (Ottawa, Ontario), February 2, 2006.
- <sup>86</sup> Jonathan Keefe, "Stand Still, Look Pretty," *Slant Magazine*, May 30, 2006, <http://www.slantmagazine.com/music/review/the-wreckers-stand-still-look-pretty>.
- <sup>87</sup> Paul Théberge, "Everyday Fandom: Fan Clubs, Blogging, and the Quotidian Rhythms of Internet," *Canadian Journal of Communication* (2005): 490-493.
- <sup>88</sup> Michelle Branch, "Old Auto-biography," *Angelfire.com*, last accessed November 5, 2014, [http://www.angelfire.com/folk/m\\_j\\_b/oldautobiography.htm](http://www.angelfire.com/folk/m_j_b/oldautobiography.htm).
- <sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>90</sup> Dave Cool, "Fans or Friends? How Social Media is Changing the Artist-Fan Relationship," *The Band Zoogle Blog*, June 13, 2011, [https://bandzoogle.com/blog/blog\\_posts/fans-or-friends-how-social-media-is-changing-the-artist-fan-relationship-part-1](https://bandzoogle.com/blog/blog_posts/fans-or-friends-how-social-media-is-changing-the-artist-fan-relationship-part-1).
- <sup>91</sup> Michelle Branch, Twitter post (Retweet of Keith Olbermann), June 30, 2010, 9:46 p.m., <https://twitter.com/michellebranch/status/17468974995>.
- <sup>92</sup> Michelle Branch, Twitter post, July 1, 2010, 9:03 a.m., <https://twitter.com/michellebranch/status/17494403765>.
- <sup>93</sup> Negus and Pickering, *Creativity, Communication and Cultural Value*, 58-59.
- <sup>94</sup> Michelle Branch, Twitter post, July 11, 2010, 12:36 p.m., <https://twitter.com/michellebranch/status/18294761219>.
- <sup>95</sup> Michelle Branch, Twitter post, December 9, 2009, 1:10 p.m., <https://twitter.com/michellebranch/status/6673410945>.
- <sup>96</sup> "Site Update," last modified November 10, 2012, <http://michellebranchfan.net/page/3/>.
- <sup>97</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, 14.
- <sup>98</sup> Michelle Branch, Twitter post, December 13, 2009, 11:40 p.m., <https://twitter.com/michellebranch/status/6655643245>.

---

<sup>99</sup> Neuman, “Keeping It Real,” 114.

<sup>100</sup> “2003 – YM Magazine: Songwriting with Michelle Branch,” published May 23, 2003, accessed November 5, 2014, *michellebranchfan.net*, <http://michellebranchfan.net/library/2003-ym-magazine-songwriting-with-michelle-branch/>.

<sup>101</sup> Branch, Twitter post, <https://twitter.com/michellebranch/status/6655643245>.

## Chapter 3

### Regina Spektor: Balancing the Quirky Tension

Regina Spektor is different. That is why her label signed her, that is how the press describes her, and that is why her fans say they love her. Artists that want to maintain long-term careers in music have to be different in some way; or, at the very least, all artists have to market themselves as being different in some way. A keystone to marketing and advertising is to have a unique selling proposition. Artists, like any products being prepared for public sale, are better off when there is something unique about them that will entice a consumer to choose that particular product or artist over any number of other products or artists. When Michelle Branch debuted, her major competition in pop music was Britney Spears and a handful of what sometimes got called Britney clones; therefore, Maverick Records branded Branch “Anti-Britney” and the marketing campaign went from there.

Regina Spektor also makes pop music, but she is not in the same category as Michelle Branch. Spektor is more of an indie pop performer because of all the years she spent making music while not being signed to a label. Furthermore, Spektor’s sound and style can at times be edgy enough to qualify her as different from the mainstream. She remembers talking to her record label about picking her first single and thinking, “Even the most ‘accessible’ I can be is still a fucking trip for them to try to put out there. [...] Like, ‘That song sounds like it could be on the radio, but it’s got that line about cocaine.’”<sup>102</sup> Because Spektor fit outside the mainstream to begin with, marketers had to figure out how she was different from the group of artists who were different.

The press and fans have often called Regina Spektor *quirky*. This term is commonly seen beside the term *indie* when referring to a specific category of film and music. Film Studies Scholar James MacDowell began the process of defining quirky as a category and trend in cinema in his essay “Notes on Quirky.” In the article, he admits, “Defining such a seemingly intangible thing as a sensibility is difficult.”<sup>103</sup> After defining the term based on trends he sees in films that are often referred to as quirky, MacDowell concludes, “I see the quirky as offering a sliding scale of representational possibilities.”<sup>104</sup> Two of MacDowell’s most recurring possibilities that overlap with Spektor’s star image are comedic and childlike. In this chapter, I explain the characteristics of Spektor that seem to earn her the tag of quirky and reinforce those observations by showing how some of those characteristics relate to MacDowell’s description of what quirky is in film.

Spektor is branded as quirky just like Michelle Branch was branded as the Anti-Britney; however, Spektor’s story of being a Russian immigrant who made it big in America is the note that the press includes in the majority of its articles on Spektor. Branch’s unique selling proposition of being the Anti-Britney faded in importance entirely as that generation of pop star faded in popularity. Similarly, Spektor’s brand of being the quirky one has faded over time as she has aged and her music has become more produced. While Branch’s career has faded with her unique selling proposition, Spektor’s has maintained and possibly even grown over time because she will always be the Russian immigrant who accomplished the American Dream. Those fading quirky traits have led the press and Spektor’s fans to change their perception of her. Everyone has a different idea of Spektor’s star image and what it means to define her as quirky. Some

have allowed room for the evolution of this music quality and persona while others have claimed Spektor sold out when she signed to a major record label and worked with producers to expand her sound. This tension over Spektor's star image and the argument about the authenticity of her quirkiness becomes the major theme of Spektor's star text. In this chapter, I take a detailed look at her star text and analyze how Spektor's major record label accepts Spektor and grants her considerable artistic liberty, how the press defines her quirkiness in different ways, and how her fans react to the different perspectives relating to her quirkiness which creates an overall tension that relates to her commercially and artistically.

### **Regina Spektor Bio: The American Dream**

Regina Spektor's biography is told a little differently than Michelle Branch's or, for that matter, most singer-songwriters. Spektor, a Russian immigrant, so conveniently represents the American Dream that her story almost always accompanies her music biography regardless of source. This will be analyzed more in-depth in the coming sections, however, I think it is important to learn her whole background upfront to better understand the image people have of her who are participating in the composition of and reacting to her star image. Like the Michelle Branch biography, this information has been cross-checked with a plethora of sources.

Spektor was born in Moscow in 1980. There, her father was a photographer and amateur violinist and her mother was a piano teacher and professor at a Soviet college of music. Growing up in Russia, Spektor listened to her mother play piano and started taking lessons around the age of six or seven. Russia has a rich piano tradition and the

teachings of it in that country are often rigorous. Non-Russian music was mostly banned in the Soviet Union when Spektor lived there. Spektor remembers listening to a lot of Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich, and Prokofiev; however, her father also collected bootleg tapes of The Beatles, Wings, The Moody Blues, and Queen for her. Spektor had more hardships than just her lack of access to certain music; she and her family were also outcast because of their Jewish faith. For that reason, Spektor's family left Russia with the help of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society in 1989 when Regina was nine-and-a-half years old. They arrived in the Bronx, New York via Italy and Austria. Of course, the Spektors could not bring a piano for Regina.

At first, Spektor would make believe she was practicing piano by rattling her fingers on tables and windowsills. After initially arriving in America, the Spektors could not afford a piano or lessons for their daughter. Furthermore, Regina's mother, a piano teacher herself, would not teach her daughter. To Russians, a piano teacher has to be an important, outside relationship. By happenstance, her father met someone on the New York subway whose wife was a piano teacher and went to the same synagogue as the Spektors. That woman, Sonia Vargas, would give young Spektor free lessons for the years to come. Although Spektor never developed into the classical pianist she dreamed of becoming (her hands were too small<sup>105</sup>), those old rock n' roll tapes her father got her and her new home of New York started to have a greater influence. Spektor began writing her own songs. Andrew Slater, a friend of a bar owner at the time and future President of Capitol Records, discovered her first. Slater would later try to sign Spektor to his label, but creative differences led Spektor to pass on the opportunity and wait seven more years for the right deal. In the meantime, she played clubs in downtown New York

and composed 30-40 songs per year. Spektor graduated a four year program from the Conservatory of Music at Purchase College with honors in just three years. She also made two self-released records, *11:11* (2001) and *Songs* (2002).

During a showcase at the Knitting Factory, Spektor's song "Poor Little Rich Boy" caught the attention of The Strokes producer Gordon Raphael. Several record labels started courting Spektor after she began touring with that band. She signed with Sire Records in 2003. The album *Soviet Kitsch* was released in 2004 and, upon Spektor's demand, was promoted with a word-of-mouth approach instead of a wave of advertising and hype. Spektor toured relentlessly to promote the album. In 2006, Spektor released her next album, *Begin to Hope*. Possibly due to the work put in promoting *Soviet Kitsch*, *Begin to Hope* was a hit. The album was number one on the iTunes Alternative Album chart, and Spektor was the only female in the top 50. *Begin to Hope* also cracked the Billboard Top 20 and the video for the first single from the album, "Fidelity," got 200,000 hits on YouTube in two days. For her next album, *Far* (2009), Spektor enlisted the help of multiple mega-producers and it debuted at number three on the Billboard 200. Three years later, Spektor released *What We Saw from the Cheap Seats* (2012), and that album also debuted on the Billboard 200 chart at number three. While she was releasing these records, Spektor had two songs showcased in the popular film *500 Days of Summer* (2009), released a live album (*Live in London* - 2010), wrote the theme song to the hit Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*, wrote the music for Tina Landau's Broadway interpretation of *Sleeping Beauty* called "Beauty," and was invited to play for President Barack Obama twice—once by special request of the Obamas.

Regina Spektor started out in Moscow as a girl with aspirations of being another in a long list of great Russian pianists. At nine-and-a-half, she came to America, picked up more influences from American rock and folk music, and turned herself into a career pop musician who twice played for the President of the United States of America; it is a fine example of the American Dream. While Spektor's American Dream story/background is not unprecedented, it is unique—especially for this day and age. It is this uniqueness that is the heart of Spektor's star image. Most of her star text revolves around Spektor's "quirkiness." Unlike popstar Michelle Branch, Spektor's star text reveals more tension with fans and press than with her record label.

### **Spektor – Label**

Contrary to Michelle Branch, Regina Spektor had a strong and particular personality and image to sell when she first signed with a major record label; therefore, Spektor's label could allow her history to brand her instead of having to create a star image for her from scratch. Spektor's star text provides a different perspective of business and art and the tension that arises between artist, label, press, and fans. Unlike Branch, Spektor has nothing but good things to say about her major record label, however, the press and fans infuse a tension between the business and art of Regina Spektor by questioning the ongoing legitimacy of her image. As stated in the biography section, Spektor's American Dream story defines the artist as unique—a term that many would say defines her musical style. Instead of unique, the less pretty word "quirky" gets used with regularity to describe Spektor. Spektor rarely sounds agitated or defensive in her star text, but she occasionally goes out of her way to slap aside this term in much the same manner Branch occasionally sounded peeved when referred to as an Anti-Britney.

Also, like most would argue that Branch is indeed an Anti-Britney, most would that argue that Spektor is indeed quirky by definition—she has a peculiarity of action, behavior, or personality (a more nuanced explanation of why the press and fans define Spektor as quirky will be addressed throughout the chapter). Because this uniqueness/quirkiness is already part of Spektor’s background, her record label does not need to worry as much about hyping her itself. Therefore, Spektor’s relationship with her label is very different than Michelle Branch’s. Spektor’s label does not need to exert as much influence on her to make sure her star image turns out the way they want it because it already exists.

Spektor revealed to *The A.V. Club* that she “heard all the horror stories [...] And the school freaked us out so much about the corporate art situation in general [...] We left school absolutely terrified of them.”<sup>106</sup> Because of this intense warning, Spektor waited a long time before settling down and signing to a major label. Even though Spektor consistently defends her label and all experiences with it, the paranoia of corporate culture still presents itself in Spektor’s star text because it is part of who she is. She is part of a community that fears what major labels can do to artists.

Spektor does not champion a campaign in favor of major labels, but she will go into detail as to why her major label works for her. Based on her image, some think of Spektor as an anti-corporate hero of the art community. They look at her praising a major record label and adding slick production to her newer songs as selling out. On the contrary, others are fine with the way her star text reads because she maintained what they perceive as complete creative control and is using the extra resources provided by her major label to fully create the art in her mind. Furthermore, perhaps being a champion

of the art scene and having a favorable relationship with a major record label is something that makes her even more unique/quirky in and of itself.

Keith Negus writes that “The businesses involved in cultural production don’t possess any single set of criteria or uniform guidelines for harassing creative practices to the requirements of their owners or shareholders.”<sup>107</sup> With this, Negus argues that a major record label would logically handle artists on a case-by-case basis and are not some kind of evil machine that suppresses artistic expression. David Sanjek provides another perspective in an article in which he quotes author and media critic Herbert I. Schiller who believes corporate power “is the main threat to free expression.”<sup>108</sup> Spektor’s star text supports Negus’ argument, but many artists, including Michelle Branch’s star text, show that there could be something to what Schiller has to say. Certainly, major record labels are owned by corporations. Money is the bottom line to these corporations; however, Negus argues it is more complicated than just accumulating a bunch of stars and silencing their artistic freedom to make a few extra bucks. Why would a major record label such as Sire be so eager to sign Regina Spektor and give her so much control when she does not fit the model of *logic of safety*—avoiding risk by making the same product over and over that has been successful in the past? Negus argues, “Record companies are not just being judged according to ‘commercial’ criteria by shareholders. The company’s roster of artists and way of working with these artists is being assessed ‘creatively’ by key opinion formers (Djs, journalists, broadcasters) who influence fans, and also by successful artists who might be thinking about signing a new record contract, hence bringing both revenue and prestige to the company.”<sup>109</sup>

Spektor's star text also supports Negus's assertions that working with artists is part of what major record labels do and limiting their artistic expression is not always the plan. Spektor commented on her deal with Sire Records in an interview with a reporter for the Brown University newspaper saying, "It was just the right situation and the right people at the right time. I am so happy there [Sire Records] right now."<sup>110</sup> Spektor went on, "I was very careful to retain my creative rights; I wasn't going to sign to any label if it would compromise my music and what I was trying to do."<sup>111</sup> *Billboard Magazine* explained, "Spektor has been involved in every aspect of her presentation in the market place—from the music itself to imaging."<sup>112</sup> It is worth pointing out that the article brings up "music" and "imaging." In the same article, Sire President Michael Goldstone said, "You won't find a whole lot of new acts being signed within any of the major labels that are being given this level of control."<sup>113</sup> So, Spektor and the President of Sire Records do not shy away from sharing their comfy relationship. According to them, neither Spektor's free expression nor the major label's shareholders have a problem with her situation as a Sire talent under contract.

Readers of star texts have agency, however, and some of them might look at the Spektor/label relationship as all part of a big act. Some might argue that Spektor has to say nice things now that she has signed to the label, and the President of Sire Records is just saying what he knows Spektor's fans want to hear. Therefore, it is necessary to push further into the star text of Spektor to see how much more it has to say about her and the so-called control she has been given by Sire.

If Spektor is indeed in charge of her imaging, how is she deciding to promote herself? Su Holmes pointed out the difference between artists that achieve popular status

by talent, which she called “achieved celebrity,” and artists that achieve popularity through concentrated media representation, which she called “attributed celebrity.”<sup>114</sup> Spektor’s promotional plan more represents the former than the latter. In the previous chapter, I noted how Maverick Records used vertical integration to hype Michelle Branch and brand her as an Anti-Britney all over the media landscape. Spektor, on the other hand, decided to use word-of-mouth promotion. This is the term that most often came up when Spektor or a reporter described her promotional strategy. Goldstone himself called it an “old-school, word-of-mouth” campaign driven by “hard work and belief.”<sup>115</sup> Spektor has called it “intense”<sup>116</sup> and “dizzying”<sup>117</sup> but “a privilege.”<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, *The Courier*, from way out in Australia, got wind of Spektor’s drive and related, “Spektor says the anti-hype, anti-image campaign was at her instigation rather than the music industry’s inability to market a young woman who refuses to play the game.”<sup>119</sup> All of this evidence in Spektor’s star text further shows how Spektor and her major label have worked in harmony to achieve her goals. Her star text also sometimes insinuates how it could be addressing Sire’s goals. Beyond the obvious, that other artists would enjoy the freedoms that Spektor has been given, there are more positives that have come out of Spektor’s choice of promotion. Even without the extra support from Sire, Spektor has landed songs on popular television shows<sup>120</sup> just like Michelle Branch. Furthermore, *Billboard Magazine* recognized that Spektor’s digital sales and iTunes chart numbers were impressive for *Begin to Hope*, the album that came after one of Spektor’s big word-of-mouth promotional efforts. Perhaps, part of Sire’s plan was to see how Spektor’s promotional ideas worked in conjunction with sales in new media.

Further sifting through Spektor's star text shows another piece of evidence that backs up Negus's point that artists and labels can and do work together for common goals. When Sire President Goldstone granted Spektor so much creative control, *Billboard* reported it allowed her to promote and to make her music her way.<sup>121</sup> After signing with Sire, Spektor found herself equipped with more time and resources to make her music exactly the way she always wanted to instead of being forced to quickly throw together songs with minimal production due to lack of money. Spektor told Michael Dwyer, "My other records I had to speed-record. You know, you have a couple of days and no budget and no players and then you get three string players and you have four hours with them. This record [*Begin to Hope*], I had more of a chance to really learn about sounds and arranging. It was a really mind-opening experience."<sup>122</sup> Sire afforded Spektor as much studio time and musical resources she wanted. Spektor told *The A.V. Club*, "I'd always wanted to work in the studio and experiment with sounds [...] It's about building a world for each song and being able to fulfill it. Before, I had to imply a lot of stuff, and now I can fulfill it."<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, when asked if she would have been making records with a more produced sound all along if she had the resources to do so, Spektor acknowledged that she would have.<sup>124</sup>

While it does not prove anything about artists and record companies, Spektor's star text shows a trend of an artist working harmoniously with a major label. Although Spektor's star text mostly echoes Negus's sentiments that "The recording industry has been misleadingly characterized as mechanical and factory-like,"<sup>125</sup> many of the press and fans still refuse to let go of this characterization of the industry and their idea of a definite chasm between business and art. Simon Frith writes, "musicians [...] are under

constant pressure to confirm their status, to provide their audience with more of the music that gave them that status in the first place.”<sup>126</sup> Some of the press hack at Spektor’s image of unique/quirky and accuse it of being more forced after time, and Spektor’s fans react harshly to Spektor’s decision to sign with Sire and accuse her of abandoning her original image and selling out. According to Frith’s aforementioned belief, the tension in Spektor’s star text between business and art centers on her fight to maintain credibility amongst some of the press and her fans that question her authenticity.

### **Spektor – Press**

This section focuses on how the press contributes to the branding of Spektor. The press contributes to Spektor’s branding in two ways: writers frame her in their own words, and they set her up to frame herself based on their choice of interview questions. Specifically, this section explores how the press takes different approaches to branding her *quirky*. Some use this word with positive connotations and some use it with negative connotations; furthermore, some use it in referring to Spektor’s art, some referring to her personality, and some both. Whether it comes off as positive or negative usually depends on how authentic the press thinks Spektor’s quirkiness is. In other words, some members of the press believe Spektor overemphasizes her quirkiness by forcing idiosyncrasies in her music and personality while others believe Spektor remains true to herself and gives a voice and direction to similar people that might feel outcast because of their own quirkiness or uniqueness. The press’s influence on Spektor’s star text shows another way an artist has to face the tension of business (branding yourself for positive appeal to sell music) and art (the music). A label can take away an artist’s creative freedom, but the

press can call into question an artist's identity. Spektor's music/art is identified as quirky by the press, so she has to deal with being branded along those lines.

Most press articles on Regina Spektor focus on her background because journalists seem to enjoy telling her immigrant, American Dream story. Some of these articles are done in long-form interview format and some are just straight feature stories that have more influence by the journalist. Regardless, they all start out with an introduction that tells Spektor's story and defines her character as unique or quirky in the individual journalist's preferred manner. The press have used the word *quirky* to define Spektor so often that some writers have called attention to it and even have asked Spektor about it: "If you take what Spektor does to be bold and beautiful, 'quirky' comes across as coolly contemptuous. 'It's a dismissive word to certain people, but I understand what people mean' says Spektor calmly."<sup>127</sup> Quirky can have different meanings depending on the person reading the word. From the plethora of press articles I've read that use the word quirky to describe Spektor's star image, I would say that the press uses the word to refer to Spektor's artistic nature and her combination of mature intelligence and cute, kid sister-like silliness.

By artistic nature, I mean someone who respects art and thinks outside the box. I see the press defining Spektor's artistic nature in several ways. In one article, Spektor remembers her parents exposing her to high art by taking her to museums, opera, and ballet.<sup>128</sup> She also reminisces on classmates thinking she was crazy when she was young: "I was like, I'm not f\*\*\*ing weird, but don't you think it's cool that there's a balloon floating away over there? Shouldn't we all look at that and take a moment to think about it?"<sup>129</sup> Furthermore, Spektor's YouTube page includes playful music videos with specific

style nods to artists such as M.C. Escher, Salvador Dalí and René Magritte. Journalists also create this artistic nature portrait of Spektor's star image by including her quotes on art-making: "I still feel that art comes from a bigger place than just your own experiences and your own daily struggles or thoughts. A lot of it comes from a place of feeling rather than conscious thought."<sup>130</sup> One writer called Spektor "a musical Franz Kafka: [teller of] ordinary/surreal stories"<sup>131</sup> Spektor has said in interviews, "None of the songs are really in my voice. It's too boring for me. Usually I make people up, make characters up. Make stuff up."<sup>132</sup> Furthermore, BBC News remarked, "Spektor shuns the 'confessional' lyrics of her contemporaries, preferring to write miniature works of fiction."<sup>133</sup> All of these examples of artistic personality traits and her unique approach to contemporary pop music give Spektor a certain artistic nature that adds to her quirky image in her star text.

The press also portrays Spektor with a divergent personality. Sometimes, she sounds like a mature, intelligent woman and sometimes she sounds like a girl with a cute, kid sister-like silliness. Spektor's silliness is a trait that comes right from MacDowell's sliding scale of quirky: "The quirky is closely related to the comedic."<sup>134</sup> Furthermore, Spektor's cute, kid sister-like trait is something MacDowell includes on his sliding scale of quirky as well. He writes, "The language of 'naïveté,' 'simplicity,' and 'purity' that I feel compelled to employ in describing the visual and musical styles of the quirky hints that underlying much of the sensibility are the themes of childhood and 'innocence.'<sup>135</sup> These characteristics, along with a mature intelligence, are exhibited in convincing style in the press's words and in Spektor's own words during press interviews. Many times, she even pivots from one to the other while answering the same question. Even this quality of shifting from funny to serious is touched on by MacDowell: "This attachment

to an essentially comedic mode, however heavily qualified by melodramatic elements is undoubtedly one of the reasons why quirky has proved one of the more popular sensibilities.”<sup>136</sup>

A 2012 article in the *New York Times* quoted Spektor explaining in detail her thoughts about modern music falling into a rut because it all seems to follow a “very simple formula” and lacks the ‘adventurous’ style of past greats.”<sup>137</sup> The writer pivoted from that quote with, “Out of the spotlight, Spektor looks less like a successful Chanteuse than your cute kid sister.”<sup>138</sup> While describing the experiences she had with museums, opera and ballet as a kid, Spektor added, “I remember going with my mum to museums. They made you take off your shoes and gave you slippers because a lot of the museums were in old mansions. I remember sliding through these giant rooms, because you could go really fast, then wiping out next to some giant work of art.” Spektor rarely remains serious in interviews for very long. She almost always has something silly to add. Even when talking politics, she pivots to something silly or some kind of joke. After an intense discussion on Russian politics and being Jewish in 1980s Russia with the *Sunday Herald*, Spektor said, “When I got to New York, I was very aware that now we were free to be Jews. I didn’t have to worry that I wouldn’t get into university because I was a Jew. I had to worry that I wouldn’t get into university because I sucked at maths.”<sup>139</sup> Ending that conversation with a mild joke is one thing, but adding the extra “s” to the word “math” adds a kind of cute sensibility to the joke that really encompasses Spektor’s divergent personality of intelligent woman to silly, kid sister-like personality and is one of the building blocks in Spektor’s star text that creates the construct of *quirky*.

Press writers use the word quirky in varying contexts to define Spektor's star image and star text. Sometimes, quirky is accompanied by positive words and takes on positive connotations. In 2009, a writer for *Spin* magazine used the word quirky to define Spektor's art and personality: "Fidelity" is quirky, heartfelt, and spontaneous. And, as we are quickly discovering, so is her conversational style."<sup>140</sup> In this case, it matters less what the writer specifically means by "quirky." A reader can pick up that it is meant to be positive because it is surrounded by the positive words "heartfelt" and "spontaneous." Furthermore, the writer attaches the word to Spektor's art ("Fidelity") and her personality ("conversational style").

English press *The Guardian* also described Spektor's art and personality using quirky in a positive manner, however, this writer only inferred the word showing Spektor's personality in this light. The writer said of the music, "No one makes quirky, literate pop quite like Regina Spektor."<sup>141</sup> After a positive interview mostly talking intellectually about art and politics, the writer added, "This is someone who says her favourite novel [...] is Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* – but at the moment she's lapping up *Bossypants*, the essentially autobiographical book of comedian Tina Fey. It's a very Regina Spektor combination." The *Guardian* writer purposely added this nugget about the books Spektor reads and, even though he did not specifically use the word quirky, he did call attention to Spektor's combination of mature intelligence and cute, kid sister-like silliness within her taste. Although some might consider a Tina Fey autobiography to more of an intellectual read, Tina Fey's identity as a comedian and the funny, immature title of the book, *Bossypants*, lends it to be perceived as cute and silly.

Perception is key in how a writer defines Spektor as quirky. Many in the press, as exemplified above, use the word quirky in a positive light to describe Spektor's art and star image; however, there are writers who hold Spektor's quirky traits against her. Joshua Love wrote a negative review of Spektor's album, *Far*, in which he stated, "Spektor's quirky "personality" (which belongs in scare quotes because god knows being quirky doesn't guarantee you have an interesting personality)." <sup>142</sup> Love perceives Spektor's quiriness as forced. He wrote, "She's displayed an unstinting weakness for intensely self-regarding cuteness and overplayed naïveté." <sup>143</sup> He concluded by declaring that all of Spektor's forced quiriness just ends up sounding immature by comparing Spektor unfavorably to a teenage pop star: "I like to imagine that somewhere 19 year-old Taylor Swift hears this song and shakes her head, wondering when Regina Spektor is ever going to grow up." <sup>144</sup> What some in the press perceive as authentically cute and silly, this writer perceives as forced and immature.

Love seems to be insinuating that Spektor's quiriness is something that she overrepresents in her image and music to sell to a niche audience. This relates to what Simon Frith writes about African-American music: "As black music became part of the pop business, its vocal qualities were subordinated to the star system. Record companies had to control expression, to package passion, to sell emotion. The performers' 'soul' was marketed as a gimmick." <sup>145</sup> While Frith's comments sound more like an industry buying in, that is, the music industry took something that African-Americans were doing and found a way to promote it on a mass scale, Love's comments about Spektor sound more like she is just piggybacking on a market that is already there. While this process is certainly more complex and grey, Love makes Spektor sound like a kid on a pony ride—

the pony is not hers, but it is taking her to where she needs to go and she is enjoying the ride. Love's bleak analysis of Spektor's brand and art is not widely echoed.

There are some in the press that agree Spektor's image and art is a bit put-on, but believe she fits more into Frith's example of an industry buying in. *Spin* magazine's 2012 review of Spektor's *What We Saw From the Cheap Seats* brought up the word quirky and said that it is overused both when referring to Spektor and in general. But, the *Spin* writer Keith Harris agreed it fits Spektor and even began to agree with Love that she started to perpetuate this image on her previous album, *Far*. However, Harris claimed Spektor grew from being the one with all the quirks to the leader of the ones with quirks. He wrote, "The 32 year-old has grown deeper into a role that becomes her: the chin-up elder sister to an avid cult, offering non-frivolous advice on adjusting to life in a world with little patience for your adorable crochets."<sup>146</sup> Harris agrees with Love that being quirky in 2012 is usually just an attempt to fit into some kind of niche group to maintain a career in music. However, he ended his review by writing, "A quirk used to be a good thing, the sort of unique, often endearing fillip of personality that marked an individual as worth knowing better. Regina Spektor offers up loads of those, and she makes good on them."<sup>147</sup> Harris insinuates that Spektor might have been authentically quirky during some of her first albums, but her art and image has evolved. Instead of being simply that cute, kid sister type, Spektor is now the grown up, big sister role model to this audience. According to Harris, the quiriness may be a little more forced by 2012, but it comes from authentic roots and holds a distinct purpose. The music industry, Sire Records in this case, bought into Spektor's music and American Dream story. It sold the "expression, passion and emotion" that was called "soul" when referring to early African-

American pop performers and was called “quirky” when referring to Spektor. Although Spektor does not sound like she is much of a fan of being defined as quirky, she goes along with it as part of her brand. If that is what people see in her music, she is willing to accept that.

This role-model, “I can be and do anything” persona and message Harris wrote about is in fact something that shows up numerous times in Spektor’s star text. It came across in a more conventional manner such as when BBC News spoke of Spektor’s “determination” and “desire” and how she “spent several years living on the bread line, having quit her day job to pursue her musical career.”<sup>148</sup> With this, the writer used Spektor’s story to influence other musicians and, in the same breath, cast Spektor as a role model because she inevitably *makes it*. Other writers in the press focus on Spektor’s message that people can be and do anything as well. The press often asks Spektor what individual songs mean. A conventional answer to one of these questions from Spektor is, “I don’t want to destroy someone’s relationship with my songs by talking about them – why limit something that could be so limitless.”<sup>149</sup> Spektor believes that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and consistently empowers her audience to join the creation of the art she makes by interpreting her songs themselves without any influence from Spektor herself.

As far as leading by example goes, the press never concretely defines Spektor’s style, allowing for the fact that Spektor is open to doing and has at least dabbled in pretty much everything. *New York Times* writer Ben Sisario wrote, “Ms. Spektor’s style is not so easy to pin down.”<sup>150</sup> Later in the article, Spektor is quoted as saying, “The way I write is influenced by the way a classical composer would write, but the aesthetics that I love

are pop and punk and hip-hop.”<sup>151</sup> This is part of what the press uses to define Spektor as quirky, but it also lends to her role as role model. Through the press and her music, Spektor represents someone who can and will do anything that sparks an artistic interest in her despite what others might think. Spektor said to the *New York Times*, “I just think there shouldn’t be a song I can’t write, ever, in any aesthetic.” Likewise, a bootleg of a concert in Tennessee on June 16, 2007 has audio of Spektor saying to the crowd before performing her next song “Love, You’re a Whore,” “This is a little country song I wrote, and I’m in totally the wrong territory. It’s probably an insult, but I tried. I’m from Moscow and then the Bronx so I’m allowed to do whatever the fuck I want (laughs, applause).”<sup>152</sup> Spektor confirms her role model status and message of doing anything as an artist by saying it through the press and then showing it to fans while on tour.

Furthermore, being a role model is something that fits into Richard Dyer’s four category criteria of star/audience relationship. Based on the positive reaction in the aforementioned sound bite of Spektor describing her lack of self-censorship and willingness to try to do anything that she desires artistically, her audience loves her for these traits. Dyer writes that “*imitation* is apparently commonest among the young and takes the star/audience beyond [concert]-going, with the star acting as some sort of model for the audience.”<sup>153</sup> As analyzed in this section, Spektor and writers brand her as a model for her audience through the press. The press uses the word *quirky* to define the Spektor’s brand, and tension arises because this term and/or its traits are conveyed as being a positive or negative thing depending on the writer’s perception of Spektor. Some use the word *quirky* to define Spektor’s star image in a positive light, some use it to define her in a negative light by concluding that it is forced and immature, and some say

it is all part of Spektor's positive message as a role model. The press then, as a whole, is presenting a complex message of Spektor's star image and whether her brand and art is authentic or not. Spektor makes the music (art) but then has to balance that with the *brand of quirky* that gets a plethora of perceptions and affects her marketability (business). Largely, that tension is the press's contribution to Spektor's star text.

### **Spektor – Fans**

Spektor's fans are the ones most influenced by Spektor's star text; however, they also play a role in creating part of her star text largely due to what Paul Théberge refers to as "Internet-based fan clubs."<sup>154</sup> Through Internet communication, fans can communicate with Spektor as well as other fans of Spektor. The opinions and arguments that fans have on message boards, Facebook, comments on online articles and other platforms are becoming just as influential to an artist's star text as a writer for the press. Internet researcher and fan studies scholar Nancy Baym agreed in an interview about social media that "fans are gaining more power and influence."<sup>155</sup> In Regina Spektor's case, fan influence mostly echoes the press influence. The fans call into question Spektor's identity and authenticity. Some fans remain loyal to Spektor while others claim she is a sellout. Spektor has always been aware of the influence of outside factors on the success of her music: "You don't know if everyone's going to like it, if everyone's going to hate it, if it's going to be like you're a media darling, or all of a sudden you're a sellout. You have no idea. It has very little to do with the actual content."<sup>156</sup> Nowhere was the tension between loyal fans and fans paranoid about a Spektor sellout more evident than when Spektor signed a deal with major record label Sire Records and produced and released her first album under this label, *Begin to Hope*.

A good example of the ensuing argument that became part of Spektor's star text appeared in Spektor's message forum on her website. Under the topic of "the sound of *Begin to Hope*," forum member ghost of small change wrote, "where's the old regina? the company is sucking the life out of my new favorite artist." To understand where ghost of small change and others are coming from, one needs to have an idea of what the word "life" would mean in the context used by that fan. For diehard Spektor fans on her message board, Spektor's "life" began when she started playing shows for them in New York at establishments such as the Sidewalk Café and Bowery Ballroom. Artists and fans that frequent these spots often self-affiliate themselves with the anti-folk scene. *The Village Voice* explains, "What 'antifolk' means around these parts is a specific scene, based in the East Village, that's been percolating for the past 20 years or so."<sup>157</sup> The writer adds that, "[The scene] attract[ed] like-minded troubadours who equally admired the Sex Pistols and Woody Guthrie. Over the years, people like Beck [and] Ani DiFranco [...] showed up [...] when they were poor and unknown."<sup>158</sup> The existence of this scene relating to an artist branded quirky such as Spektor is not a surprise. MacDowell includes in his article that "a term like 'quirky' may help provide fans with 'a sense of belonging to a particular kind of interpretive community."<sup>159</sup> Although Spektor has always been hesitant to categorize herself as anti-folk, she agrees that she played music within this community.<sup>160</sup> In an article on anti-folk, it is described ironically by one member of the community as being "the closest thing we've got to modern-day folk music."<sup>161</sup> Spektor became popular within this anti-folk crowd with her piano and songs.

When *Begin to Hope* got released with the extra bells and whistles of added production put onto the more familiar, broken-down piano and vocal Spektor songs, some

fans such as ghost of small change reacted similarly to when Bob Dylan went electric and upset many of his fans that were used to his acoustic folk sound.<sup>162</sup> Spektor kept her eye on her message board and would occasionally comment on fans who had a problem with her more heavily produced album: “But I’ve also had some really interesting responses from my fans, who I really care about and keep in touch with as best as I can through the Internet. I like paying attention to their comments. And some of them are really freaked out by the new record. They want what they had. Me, I’m very unimpressed by purists. I’m like, “Would you be the person in the room that would boo when Dylan went electric? I know I wouldn’t.”<sup>163</sup>

Fans more loyal to Spektor would come to her defense on the message board as well. Forum member andreseng wrote, “reg has said on many occasions that she fought for and received the exact artistic control she was after [...] So what does that mean? It means reg decided how much production went into [*Begin to Hope*]. If you don’t like it, that’s fine, you’re entitled to your opinion. But don’t mislead yourself or others by stating it’s the record label’s fault.” What this fan says is true. Spektor said about *Begin to Hope*, “Before I even started I knew I was going to experiment with things I’ve only thought about [...] I really wanted to play with electronic instruments and bigger arrangements.”<sup>164</sup> Simon Frith writes that “rock musicians [...] are under constant pressure to confirm their status, to provide their audience with more of the music that gave them that status in the first place.”<sup>165</sup> Some of Spektor’s fans felt like she was not “confirming her status” to them and they felt as if this change was a sellout despite her own words. Frith also writes, “The problem for [...] fans became one of explaining how their chosen musician-artists could sustain their individual impulses in the face of these

market pressures.”<sup>166</sup> Other fans of Spektor’s believed in her words that the extra production was something she imagined from the outset and was not a result of selling out.

Forum member PilingAndTwisting contributed this to the conversation: “I know the music industry pretty well and...part of Regina HAS to go commercial if she doesn’t want to get kicked off her major label. That’s just the way it is.” This fan has a belief that the music industry has overwhelming power that it uses to commercialize artists such as Spektor. Negus wrote of this perspective, “The idea of a conflict between creativity and commerce has also been used to illustrate the power of the music industry and has informed numerous everyday claims about how musicians ‘sell out’ to the system. On one side are the heroes – the musicians, producers and performers (the creative artists); opposing them are the villains – record companies and entertainment corporations (the commercial corrupters and manipulators).”<sup>167</sup> After some counter-argument asserting that Spektor has said she always wanted to experiment with her small sound the way she did on *Begin to Hope*, PilingAndTwisting responded with, “It sounds like I’m just ‘being negative’ but I’m not, I’ve studied this and I know people who have worked in the music industry. This is what they know, and they tell me.” This fan believed that Spektor was just saying whatever her label wanted her to say. The Spektor follower would not budge from this stance. Perhaps, this perspective is not completely right or wrong.

Michelle Branch’s star text tends to show an artist that is often held hostage by a major record label; whereas, despite PilingAndTwisting’s opinion, Spektor’s star text shows a much more favorable working relationship between artist and major record label. Based on the star texts of Branch and Spektor, the amount of tension created between

artist and label must be defined in a case-by-case basis at the very least. What is interesting in Spektor's case is that her star text does not show a rift between her and her major record label, however, it does still reveal how an artist faces a tension while having to maintain a balance between business and art. For Spektor, the narrative comes out more through the opinions of the press and her fans.

Another example of how influential Internet fan clubs can be on an artist's star text comes from a thread on Spektor's Facebook page. Nancy Baym states "[Social media] has made online fandom much more visible and important to content creators and marketers."<sup>168</sup> This increase in visibility can be a double-edged sword, however. In 2011, Spektor posted, "I'm very grateful to everyone who recorded my shows... and then shared them online... yup. I wouldn't remember about so many of my songs if you hadn't... thank you for that gift!!!!"<sup>169</sup> Fans reacted immediately with, "Am I the first to spot sarcasm though??" and "sounds sarcastic to me" along with other similar sentiment. One fan left a longer note: "Do you honestly have an issue with people who like you so much that they want to share your performances with those that might be unable to attend? I understand you might not enjoy the fact that some people do so, but to come out and sarcastically berate your fans? I expected something like this from, say, Kanye West, but you? Shame."

Other fans took to Spektor's defense, commenting, "Guys, I'm pretty sure she's NOT being sarcastic," and "why is everyone saying this is sarcasm?? relax ppl." One fan even laughed off the response of people claiming sarcasm: "haha... not sarcastic, you guyzz! she's said this in interviews before!" That last fan is right. I found at least one occasion when Spektor spoke specifically about this. She said to the *Sunday Herald*, "It's

lucky there's the Internet. People will transcribe a song I've only played once years ago, or even record it from a show, and put it on a website and I can go there myself and remember how to play it." Later, presumably after reading the argument that broke out in the comments, Spektor cleared things up with a follow-up post: "that was not sarcastic you worriers and warriors... that was a sincere thank you... I have always been pro taping, and believe in sharing art... can't I write anything other than cute animal links? sheesh..."

The comments to that follow-up post actually took it in another direction: "wow, I can't believe Regina actually reads this stuff. I love her ☺ she rocks." The press has called Spektor's fanbase "loyal" and "intense."<sup>170</sup> Each individual fan seems to have his or her own image of Spektor's identity based on his or her own reading of her star text, thus he or she also has a personal and unique opinion of everything Spektor says and does. This leads fans to argue about the tension between business and art in the music industry as it relates to Spektor even if she herself explains she has a good relationship with her major record label.

### **Conclusion**

Whether it is a record label with problems behind the scenes holding an artist back like in Michelle Branch's case or the varying perceptions of an artist's star image like in Regina Spektor's case, the star texts of artists provide interesting insight on how artists balance business and art in the contemporary music industry.

Spektor seems to understand the image vs. reality part of being a pop star: "It's interesting, because I don't have a stage name; I'm not a band. When people write about

me, they write about ‘Regina Spektor’—which is me. A lot of the time, they write misinformation or stuff that I never said, or something that they’re assuming is true.”<sup>171</sup>

There is a difference between Regina Spektor and ‘Regina Spektor.’ I have been referring to it as the star image of an artist or the brand of an artist. Just as Spektor does not like to explain the meaning behind her songs, she also does not seem to be comfortable concretely branding herself. Her interviews are largely consistent as far as her identity goes. The press and fans (and Spektor, through the press and her fan sites) manipulate Spektor’s star text more than anything else, but that star text is what ultimately defines both Regina Spektor and ‘Regina Spektor.’ In the fan section, I have shown two examples of how fans create a business vs. art tension in Spektor’s star text (Spektor message board comments and Facebook comments).

With the advent of the Internet, people have access to more press about Spektor and they also have access to more opinions of regular fans. Analysis of the star texts of my case studies has shown me that building a social identity is becoming increasingly important. Promoting an artist is not just about the music. Of course, it never entirely was, but the identity of the artist seems more important now than ever before. This new dynamic in the commercial culture of artists is closely linked to social culture. The difference between artists and their star images are more blurred than ever before because there are so many more sources to create a frame of reference since the Internet. Furthermore, people become confused what is the real artist what is the star image. Are Michelle Branch’s tweets representing herself personally or an artist or both? The same can be said with Spektor’s Facebook posts. This line is getting more and more blurred because the artists are entering the social world that is familiar to their fans. Many people

have a Twitter or Facebook account in which they present the version of their identities that they wish others will perceive them as. Sometimes, it is authentic, and sometimes, maybe it is not. Understanding how artists such as Michelle Branch and Regina Spektor navigate and react to this identity shaping terrain on a large scale might help us understand how and why people do this in their own social context on a smaller scale.

---

<sup>102</sup> Noel Murray, "Regina Spektor," *The Onion*, June 21, 2006, accessed February 9, 2015, <http://www.avclub.com/article/regina-spektor-13994>.

<sup>103</sup> James MacDowell, "Notes on Quirky," *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, (2010), 2.

<sup>104</sup> MacDowell, "Notes on Quirky," 13.

<sup>105</sup> Wyatt Mason, "Regina Has Piano, Will Travel," *New York Times*, May 17, 2012, accessed February 9, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/20/magazine/regina-spektor-has-piano-will-travel.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/20/magazine/regina-spektor-has-piano-will-travel.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

<sup>106</sup> Murray, "Regina Spektor."

<sup>107</sup> Keith Negus and Michael Pickering, *Creativity, Communication and Cultural Value*, (London: SAGE Publications, 2004), 48.

<sup>108</sup> David Sanjek, "Funkentelechy vs. the Stockholm Syndrome: The Place of Industrial Analysis in Popular Music Studies," *Popular Music and Society* (1997).

<sup>109</sup> Keith Negus, *Popular Music in Theory* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997), 49.

<sup>110</sup> Alexandra de Jesus, "Respekt Her," *The College Hill Independent*, March 10, 2005, accessed February 9, 2015, [http://students.brown.edu/College\\_Hill\\_Independent/?p=1365](http://students.brown.edu/College_Hill_Independent/?p=1365).

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Susan Visakowitz, "Spectacular Spektor" *Billboard Magazine*, January 13, 2007, 31.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Su Holmes, "Starring... Dyer?": Re-visiting Star Studies and Contemporary Celebrity Culture," *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* (2005), 10.

<sup>115</sup> Visakowitz, "Spectacular Spektor," 31.

<sup>116</sup> de Jesus, "Respekt Her."

<sup>117</sup> Barry Didcock, "From Russia with Love," *Sunday Herald*, June 6, 2009, accessed February 9, 2015, <http://www.heraldscotland.com/from-russia-with-love-1.836391>.

- 
- <sup>118</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>119</sup> Kathy McCabe, "A Distinct Lack of Hype," *The Courier Mail*, June 21, 2007, 55.
- <sup>120</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>121</sup> Visakowitz, "Spectacular Spektor," 31.
- <sup>122</sup> Michael Dwyer, "The Girl Who Told Stories," *The Age*, December 8, 2006, accessed February 9, 2015, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/music/the-girl-who-told-stories/2006/12/07/1165081054237.html>.
- <sup>123</sup> Murray, "Regina Spektor."
- <sup>124</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>125</sup> Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 17.
- <sup>126</sup> Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock*, (London: Constable, 1983), 53.
- <sup>127</sup> A.D. Amorsi, "So FAR, So There," *Blurt*, accessed February 2015, <http://blurtonline.com/feature/so-far-so-there-regina-spektor-2/>.
- <sup>128</sup> Didcock, "From Russia with Love."
- <sup>129</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>130</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>131</sup> Dwyer, "The Girl Who Told Stories."
- <sup>132</sup> Murray, "Regina Spektor."
- <sup>133</sup> Mark Savage, "Spektor's Word-of-Mouth Success," *BBC*, March 19, 2007, accessed February 9, 2015, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/6434563.stm>.
- <sup>134</sup> MacDowell, "Notes on Quirky," 3.
- <sup>135</sup> MacDowell, "Notes on Quirky," 9.
- <sup>136</sup> MacDowell, "Notes on Quirky," 3.
- <sup>137</sup> Mason, "Regina Has Piano."
- <sup>138</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>139</sup> Didcock, "From Russia with Love."
- <sup>140</sup> William Goodman, "Q&A: Regina Spektor," *Spin*, May 18, 2009, accessed February 9, 2015, <http://www.spin.com/articles/qa-regina-spektor/>.
- <sup>141</sup> Caspar Llewellyn Smith, "Regina Spektor: 'Art comes from a different place'," *The Guardian*, May 12, 2012, accessed February 9, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/may/12/regina-spektor-obama-cheap-seats-feature>.

- 
- <sup>142</sup> Joshua Love, "Far," *Pitchfork*, June 23, 2009, accessed February 9, 2015, <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/13184-far/>.
- <sup>143</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>144</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>145</sup> Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock*, 18.
- <sup>146</sup> Keith Harris, "Regina Spektor: What We Saw From the Cheap Seats," *Spin*, May 27, 2012, accessed February 9, 2015, <http://www.spin.com/reviews/regina-spektor-what-we-saw-cheap-seats-sire/>.
- <sup>147</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>148</sup> Savage, "Word-of-Mouth Success."
- <sup>149</sup> Goodman, "Q&A Regina Spektor."
- <sup>150</sup> Ben Sisario, "Moscow on the Major Deegan," *New York Times*, August 15, 2004, accessed February 9, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/15/arts/music/15SISA.html>.
- <sup>151</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>152</sup> Regina Spektor, "Love You're a Whore," live song: Manchester, Tennessee (June 16, 2007), mp3.
- <sup>153</sup> Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 18.
- <sup>154</sup> Paul Théberge, "Everyday Fandom: Fan Clubs, Blogging, and the Quotidian Rhythms of Internet," *Canadian Journal of Communication* (2005): 490-493.
- <sup>155</sup> Dave Cool, "Fans or Friends? How Social Media is Changing the Artist-Fan Relationship," *The Band Zoogole Blog*, June 13, 2011, accessed February 9, 2015, [https://bandzoogole.com/blog/blog\\_posts/fans-or-friends-how-social-media-is-changing-the-artist-fan-relationship-part-1](https://bandzoogole.com/blog/blog_posts/fans-or-friends-how-social-media-is-changing-the-artist-fan-relationship-part-1).
- <sup>156</sup> Murray, "Regina Spektor."
- <sup>157</sup> Amy Phillips, "Folk the Pain Away," *The Village Voice*, January 28, 2003, accessed February 9, 2015, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2003-01-28/music/folk-the-pain-away/>.
- <sup>158</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>159</sup> MacDowell, "Notes on Quirky," 1.
- <sup>160</sup> Ricardo Baca, "Pop Recipe Finally Comes Together," *Denver Post*, October 19, 2006, accessed February 9, 2015, [http://www.denverpost.com/entertainmentheadlines/ci\\_4512069](http://www.denverpost.com/entertainmentheadlines/ci_4512069).
- <sup>161</sup> Chris Parkin, "Secret Scenes: Antifolk," *Time Out London*, September 12, 2006, accessed February 9, 2015, <http://www.timeout.com/london/things-to-do/secret-scenes-antifolk-1>.
- <sup>162</sup> Negus and Pickering, *Creativity, Communication and Cultural Value*, 72.
- <sup>163</sup> Murray, "Regina Spektor."

---

<sup>164</sup> de Jesus, "Respekt Her."

<sup>165</sup> Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock*, 53.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Keith Negus, *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction*, 45-46.

<sup>168</sup> Cool, "Fans or Friends?"

<sup>169</sup> Regina Spektor's Facebook page, June 4, 2011, accessed February 2015,  
<http://www.facebook.com/reginaspektor>.

<sup>170</sup> Smith, "Art comes from a different place."

<sup>171</sup> Leslie Simon, "Regina Spektor," *Alternative Press*, June 1, 2006, accessed May 12, 2010,  
<http://www.altpress.com/recommends/46.htm>.

## Thesis Conclusion

Way back in the 1940s, Theodore Adorno pointed out that when popular music went from being played in the home to being purchased, it was a catalyst for commercial culture's role in the music industry. Since then, the art of music and the business of selling it have had to be managed together, which often has created a tension for musicians and songwriters who want to strike a balance of commercial success and artistic autonomy. I came of age during the late 1990s and early 2000s during an era that put increasing importance on perceived authenticity. I watched "alternative" bands get bashed by "indie" music magazines such as *Spin* when they signed to big labels because that was considered selling out. I watched artists in hip-hop attempt to brand themselves as authentic by convincing audiences that they had "street cred." And, I watched artists such as Michelle Branch distinguish themselves by playing musical instruments and writing songs as opposed to just singing and dancing. But, how much branding is needed to be commercially successful? How much, if any, artistic autonomy and authenticity is real and how much is fabricated? Do image-creating and music-making collide? It seemed that they did, so what kind of tension did that create?

I gained a keen interest in this tension and balance of business and art when I first read about hegemonic theories as an undergrad. I found my early research about how much power corporations have in music output to be frustrating and futile because it is hard to know what really happens behind closed doors in the music industry. Everybody from record label presidents to contemporary artists to people retired from the business have an agenda that potentially influences their credibility when speaking on the record. I became more interested in the more manageable approach of how artists get branded as

opposed to how much power corporations have over music and music patrons when I realized that the branding and star images of most musicians was and is laced with the same tension between business and art that intrigued me in the first place.

As shown in Chapter 1 of this study, some popular older musicians believe that the music industry has changed for the worse and that music is somehow more manufactured during the time of their interviews in the early 2000s than it was during their primes decades before. This sentiment is echoed in some press and is shown in Chapter 3 of this study to be echoed by some music fans (PilingAndTwisting's comments). The overall narrative is that the music industry is the evil bad guy who bullies the good-guy artist into making music that is commercially relevant and keeps down potential artistic breakthroughs that have a higher economic risk factor. I found that some music scholarship agrees with this, but most considers it more complicated than bad guy vs. good guy.

I used these different perspectives on the tension of business and art in the music industry to create a frame of reference for what my case studies of star texts would reveal. I combined that with the strategies used by Richard Dyer in *Stars* to analyze the creation and branding of my case studies through their star texts.

Chapter 2 shows Michelle Branch's struggle to release new music after two successful pop-rock albums because of problems with her record label. Her star text reveals issues with her label over her decision to form a duo and make a country album, and it reveals issues with fans that arise when her words and/or behavior do not match up with her perceived star image. Gender plays a role in this when Branch is caught between

the conservative expectations of her Anti-Britney brand and the pop star expectations of a more sexualized image. The narrative of “bad guy” big business and “good guy/girl” little artist plays out in Branch’s star text, but what becomes more noticeable in the research is the importance of Branch’s star image. Branch and Vanessa Carlton became big stars at about the same time period in music and even used to get mistaken for each other by casual pop music fans. Carlton has kept making music; however, she has not had a hit since her first album when she represented one of the Anti-Britneys. Branch, on the other hand, who has kept a higher profile with fans on social media such as Twitter (Branch: 15.9K Tweets & 297K Followers, Carlton: 2,392 Tweets & 46.4K Followers as of 3/27/15), has had much more music sales success than Carlton since her first album even as she struggles to get new music released. The revelation of this case study is how Branch has kept herself popular by Tweeting and interacting with fans on social media.

Chapter 3 of my study also reveals a strong connection between my case study’s star image and her commercial success. The business vs. art narrative plays out less in Regina Spektor’s star text, but her authenticity as a person based on her music decisions and personality is emphasized even more. Spektor relies more on word-of-mouth promotion than on advertising so fan connection is more important. She does not have a marketing machine to clean up missteps in image handling. Her unique background and music got her branded as “quirky” and the positive and negative connotations that word spreads through Spektor’s star text have a vital impact on Spektor and her authenticity. And, as discussed earlier, authenticity plays a distinct part in artists’ commercial value during this era in music.

With this thesis, I sought to show how the branding of artists through their star texts reflects the balance of business and art in the music industry. My research and analysis of my case studies found that social media has developed a significant role in the business of music due to the rise of the Internet. Artists depend more on their social values (mostly developed and/or posted through social media) to sell their music. This trend has coincided with how we as a society have begun to brand ourselves with our own micro star images through social media. Therefore, the findings in this thesis lead to questions for further research such as: To what degree are people becoming more like products in a social market due to the rise of social media? And, how much more are music artists' star images important than their songs as social values become more important to commercial success? David Hesmondhalgh's studies on culture industries could provide theoretical framework for this next research.

As stated, my studies conclude that people are living lives more similar to a pop star as the growth and importance of social media causes them to create their own personal brands. College professors and career experts often warn people entering the job market that their social media identity can indeed influence their hireability. Therefore, people have to be conscious about how they project themselves on social media just like pop stars do. Perhaps, by studying how pop stars deal with the tension of balancing business and art, people can learn strategies for dealing with the tension of projecting themselves to their social circle as well as their potential employers while creating their personal brands on social media.

My findings also show cause for further study on how music is sold. My thesis suggests that star image is talked about more in the star texts of artists than the music

itself. A future study that looks at perceived authenticity in star image as opposed to musical performance and how that correlates with music sales would be interesting. The landscape of music sales and consumption is shifting. More people are acquiring music digitally and one song at a time than are buying physical albums. Furthermore, more people are listening to music because of the easy portability of MP3 players and the ability to store so many songs on one unit. This means that music consumption is playing a bigger role in culture and society so studying the changes in how it is marketed is significant. My thesis indicates that there are indeed changes in how music is marketed taking place in music during this digital transition.