
NASHVILLE CITY PAPER OP-ED: "WHEN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY SUFFERS, WE ALL SUFFER"

Opinion: A music industry for the Internet age

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By U.S. Rep. Jim Cooper

Last week, a nearly 50-year-old Scottish woman named Susan Boyle became the world's latest YouTube sensation. Her heartwarming appearance on Britain's Got Talent was posted online, and it has been viewed millions of times by people around the globe.

Boyle is frumpy and awkward and, when she talks in her thick brogue, the audience laughs at her. Notoriously hard-to-impress judge Simon Cowell rolls his eyes. But then Boyle opens her mouth and sings a moving rendition of "I Dreamed a Dream" from Les Miserables. The crowd leaps to its feet, many with tears in their eyes.

Afterward, the judges give her unanimous approval. A record deal is already rumored to be in the works.

Susan's story shows us how much the world of music and entertainment has changed in the Internet age. One day, a woman lives in a small Scottish town with only her cat to keep her company. The next, she is a worldwide star with a recording contract and tour dates. (Her dream, she told one newspaper, is to see her name in lights.)

None of this would be possible without the Internet. Even if Susan had wowed the British television audience, her celebrity would have ended at the water's edge. Instead, Susan has built a global fan base. If people remain impressed by her singing, and not just her one-time television appearance, she can sell music, concert tickets and merchandise around the world.

But as we know in Nashville, the Internet has been a double-edged sword for the music industry. It builds audiences, but it also makes it easier for people to download and share music illegally, cheating the many people who work hard to create it.

In the last 10 years, CD sales have dropped 50 percent. Unfortunately, online revenue from legally downloaded music hasn't come anywhere close to making up the difference.

When the music industry suffers, we all suffer. Songwriters and recording artists don't get paid their fair share for the art they create. Retail music stores close. (Remember Tower Records?) People who make and sell microphones, speakers and mixing boards lose jobs. Restaurants lose business. We all have a stake in keeping Nashville's music industry strong.

One way to ensure the industry's vibrancy is to modernize our laws to suit the times. That's why I co-sponsored the Performance Rights Act, which ensures that artists are paid a fair royalty when their music is played on terrestrial radio. This requires striking a delicate balance of interests, because we don't want to cheat songwriters or hurt small radio stations. And I'm sure there is room for further improvement in the bill.

But the music industry's problems won't be solved in Washington. The iPod is here to stay, and digital music won't be going away either.

Nashville is a vibrant city full of smart, innovative artists and businesspeople. Our music industry should be able to lead the way into a future of streaming digital music delivery, and should be able to do it fairly and profitably.

The Internet has transformed human existence, and it is transforming Music Row, too. We can't afford to be threatened by YouTube sensations or digital downloads. We should be structuring profitable deals to bring the next undiscovered star from Mt. Juliet — or Mt. Kilimanjaro — to worldwide fame.

The next Susan Boyle's story still can start in Music City U.S.A.

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