



Book Review

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David Arditi, *Getting Signed: Record Contracts, Musicians, and Power in Society*. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, 2020; 256 pp.; ISBN: 9783030445867, €26.49

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“As human beings, Marx explains, we need to meet our basic and social needs, and the way we fulfill those needs is determined by the mode of production. Under capitalism, we meet our needs by earning a wage and paying for our needs with that wage” (p. 187). Nowadays, this quote should read like a truism: the parties involved in the signing of job contracts know that they can produce and sell value through their labor in order to provide for their needs. Yet, in the United States, this is not the case when the parties involved are musicians and established record label companies. In *Getting Signed*, sociologist David Arditi unveils how record labels use recording contracts to exploit the work of musicians, maximizing the value extracted from their labor, while minimizing the costs involved. While much has been written about inequalities in the production and consumption of music, and of cultural products more generally (Brook et al., 2020), the book offers a much-needed perspective about the very foundations of such inequalities, critically examining the exploitation of creative workers for the maximization of corporate profit.

To describe, disentangle, and critically reflect upon the ideology of getting signed, Arditi presents his argument combining theoretical reflections (part I) with ethnographic material (part II) in nine tightly knit chapters. Adopting a critical theoretical approach, the first part of the book takes the reader into a theoretical examination of the very conditions of the ideology of getting signed. The main theoretical argumentation unfolds in three acts:

Act 1: Alienation. Under capitalism, workers are alienated from the products of their labor as soon as they sell it to third parties, specifically to those who own the means of production, in exchange for a wage. Most musicians own the means of music production (e.g. their voice) and, as such, the only value that can be commodified and

sold from their labor is the legal property of their own products, namely the copyrights of their music.

Act 2: copyright enclosure. By signing away their copyrights, musicians gamble their labor for the promise of future success. The gambling nature of this exchange relies on the unpredictability of the music market, the unpredictability of the label's decisions, and the inverse relationship between demand of work and cost of labor. In other words, the oversupply of demand makes it statistically unlikely for artists to break through, giving labels a higher bargaining power over artists' careers, which is used to create contractual conditions that are much more favorable to labels than artists.

Act 3: cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony manifests when individuals give consent to their subordination because represented as natural and desirable (Althusser, 1971). To continue benefit from this exploitative system, record labels need to perpetuate the ideology of getting signed as desirable, natural, and inevitable. To do so, they rely on the broad endorsement of meritocracy and the omnipresence of social media platforms. Academic research has documented the wide support for meritocratic ideals (Mijs, 2018). The meritocratic appeal that enchants musicians and non-musicians alike draws from the romanticization of hardships and self-reliance as necessary conditions to express creativity and to reach success. Departing from the ideas of equality of opportunities and economic survival of the fittest (i.e. economic Darwinism), meritocracy praises collective competition and individual hard work as the best way to accomplish progress and freedom. By adhering to these principles, artists accept the hardships that come along their artistic path (e.g. unpaid gigs) as necessary bumps in their road toward success. Together with meritocracy, social media platforms have a central role in normalizing the ideology of getting signed. On one hand, Artist & Repertoire representatives of record labels scout unsigned artists who are viral and trending on popular social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok. By signing these artists, record labels maximize the probability of their success, reinstating the importance of getting signed to break through. On the other hand, social media are used to take advantage of the potential virality and reach of famous influencers to promote the music of signed artists. In a self-fulfilling cycle, "labels drive streams for their music and advertise the music to a broad audience" (p. 106), circulating widely the ideology that getting signed equals success.

After a presentation of the main thesis and concepts behind the ideology of getting signed, the second part of the book provides ethnographic material to show where and how such ideology becomes manifest. In particular, Arditi explores three places where this ideology is enacted, namely bands, talent shows, and live showcases. Bands are the most evident expressions of horizontal division of labor in the music industry. Arditi builds on the Durkheimian concept of organic solidarity to argue that with a greater division of labor comes stronger social bonds. When faced with the obligations of a record contract, such organic solidarity mutates into a strained solidarity, defined as "the tumultuous situation where band members feel a part of something larger, but still ultimately

fail to meet their needs” (p. 166). In other words, Arditi argues that, when getting signed, the glue that binds band members together is eroded by the unfulfillable promises of record labels, frequently leading to the breakup of the band.

While music bands represent a case of social alienation prompted by record contracts, talent shows epitomize the exploitative mechanism that is behind copyright enclosure, at the same time, naturalizing and reproducing the ideology of getting signed. Shows like *The Voice* follow a relatively simple script. Upon participation, contestants are asked to sign the “Participant Agreement, Release and Arbitration Provision,” a contract that forbids to record an album, perform concerts, arrange a tour, and use one’s image to promote other products while on the show. These restrictions come with a lack of salary for the whole duration of the show, creating a condition of full dependency and precarity. With this gamble, participants hope to win a US\$100,000 prize and, importantly, a *record contract*. The parallel between record contracts and the contracts signed in talent shows is clear: both allow to extract as much value as possible from the signees through a creation of dependency and precarity. Talent shows reproduce the ideology of getting signed, as success is represented by the signature of a record contract, while hardships are hidden, naturalized, and romanticized.

Another way in which the ideology of getting signed becomes manifest is during live showcases. Live showcases are live performances of artists who want to be “seen, heard, and noticed by industry professionals” (p. 221). In these shows, artists pay a participation fee to compete in the hope to win prizes that range from featuring in dedicated Spotify playlists to a place in the World Championship of a specific show. In the showcases presented in the book, though, hardly ever there was someone in the crowd who could do anything for these artists to connect them to record labels. Once again, artists are asked to gamble their time and money for the (most likely) unfulfillable promise of getting signed. With the examples of bands, talent shows, and live showcases, Arditi unearths the paradox that is at the very core of this book: “record contracts are ideology because they represent success at the same time that they limit the vast majority of signees’ capacity to earn a living” (p. 31).

Getting Signed is a book that builds a powerful critique of one of the biggest and most influential music industries worldwide, unveiling how the ideological motive of getting signed brings individuals to sign their own exploitation in the promise of economic success. By tackling fundamental issues in contemporary capitalistic societies, the book brings to the fore additional questions, such as “How do social inequalities, in terms of class, race, and gender, intersect with power unbalances between labels and artists in the signing of record contracts?” “Does the ideology of getting signed trickle down into the cultural products of signed and independent artists, such as in music videos and lyrics?” “Will new technologies, such as NFTs, challenge or reinforce the current power structure between labels and artists?” These questions manifest the potential interest that this book can spark in audiences from different fields, including cultural and media studies, sociology, and communication science. By providing a toolkit of concepts, theories, and empirical evidence, *Getting Signed* is an important contribution to tackle fundamental questions about the unequal relationships of power that lie behind many of our daily cultural consumptions.

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