

MUSIC

Cashing In

Indie musicians cozy up to commercials

By Kevin Chong

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The most ubiquitous piece of Canadian indie music this year is not a song by Juno award-winners Broken Social Machines or another critically garlanded group like Metric or Arcade Fire. It's an optimistic piece of bubblegum pop by [Jim Guthrie](#). Astute music fans know Guthrie's band Royal City or his solo work, which includes his 2003 Juno-nominated album [More Than Ever](#). There's an extremely good chance that those who *don't* recognize Guthrie by name will have heard [Hands in My Pocket](#).

The tune appears in a TV commercial for the multinational financial institution Capital One. The clip shows men in suits with their hands in the pockets of regular people. The suggestion: while most credit-card companies impose fees on their customers, Capital One is more *hands-off*. Much of the song's appeal is due to the fact that it's not a trademark. Instead of name-dropping the product (e.g. "Oh, I wish I was an Oscar Mayer wiener"), it's a catchy snippet of music. Through relentless airplay, the song has imprinted itself in the minds of millions of Canadians, to the point where it's become a parody by Rick Mercer ([Knee in My Package](#)) as well as [fan tributes](#). It even became political fodder, when it was spoofed during the last federal election campaign; through the magic of editing, the clip was altered to depict men not as bankers but corrupt Liberals with their hands in the pockets of Canadian taxpayers.

Guthrie's song is the latest example of the continuing relationship between popular music and advertising. Frank Sinatra plugged Old Gold cigarettes on the radio in the '40s; Elvis Presley appeared in a commercial for Southern Maid in 1954; in 1964, the Rolling Stones rocked out for [Rice Krispies](#). It was only later in the 1960s, when rock and roll was integrating the idealism of folk music and began aspiring to becoming art, that musicians started worrying about commercialism. While many indie musicians have distanced themselves from the bombast of hippie-era music, they still hold on to the idea that their songs should be free of any materialistic taint.

In Canada, album tracks by the Golden Dogs and the Deadly Snakes have recently appeared in commercials for Toyota, respectively. In the United States, an album track by freak-folk star [Devendra Banhart](#) was used to sell beer. *Hands in My Pocket*, however, is part of a growing trend of indie musicians *writing* songs for advertisers. Bruce Springsteen, who has indie roots and now does arena tours, wrote a [jingle](#) for Coca Cola in Britain; Yo La Tengo and the Dodos have also recorded original music for ads.

Some
observers

argue that writing new songs for commercials is the lesser evil, claiming that fans feel betrayed when their favorite bands recycle existing recordings — with which fans might have an emotional connection — to sell a product. The rise in commercial music signals not only a greater interest from advertisers, but also a growing acceptance of this practice by indie musicians and their notoriously snobbish fans.

"I was basically asked by a friend in the ad business if I would be interested in giving this Capital One ad a shot," Guthrie recalls. "I wrote the song in 10 minutes and recorded it in an hour. I wasn't thinking of banks or suits or any of that."

When platinum-selling acts appear in ads for Pepsi or Microsoft, they bring their image with them. But image-conscious Microsoft reportedly gave the Rolling Stones \$8 million US to use *Start Me Up* in a commercial launching its Windows operating system. While indie rockers can't offer that kind of star power, they're cheaper and usually hipper.

"It's target marketing," says Jim Southcott, the chief strategic officer at the Vancouver branch of advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather. "Rather than trying to find what appeals to everybody, let's zero in on one particular audience." Shows like *The OC* and *One Tree Hill* have proven that indie rock can resonate with younger audiences. Advertisers

taken note.

Nowadays, young consumers are so inundated with marketing that in-your-face brand placement can be a turn-off. Advertisers have responded with a more subtle, oblique approach. One of the best examples is a [1999 Volkswagen commercial](#) featuring Nick Drake's song *Pink Moon*. The clip depicts a carload of young people cruising along under the light of an enchanting moon. The ad doesn't alter the tragic singer's lyrics to include references to pop fuel injection; rather, Drake's music captures the wistful feeling of a summer night's drive with friends. A more recent example of such "perfect integration," as Southcott calls it, is [Hello, Tomorrow](#), a song written by Karen O of the Yeahs for Adidas. In combination with a clip directed by Spike Jonze, the tune confers hipster cachet on the Adidas. At the same time, the song, which hit Number 1 on the iTunes chart, can also be appreciated in its own right.

For bands that struggle to get radio airplay, a commercial is a gateway to greater exposure. The breakthrough success of Moby's 1999 album *Play* was largely attributed to the electronic musician's bold decision to license every one of its 18 tracks. Many people who heard Moby's music in TV ads for American Express or Bailey's Irish Cream went on to buy the album. Sites like [Adtunes.com](#) offer a database for music fans who want to know who performed a song in a particular commercial.

Many indie

musicians seem to recognize that, in the era of free downloading, they might need to tweak their business model to generate revenue streams beyond record and ticket sales. "I've never felt this was any more selling out than being on the Budweiser ads, or playing live behind a big Molson banner," says Marco DiFelice, whose band, Supergarage, has licensed its music to video games and TV shows. DiFelice now works for a company that places indie music in commercial spots.

Critics say the current generation of musicians are more cynical; I would suggest they're more sophisticated. In today's music business, it's nearly impossible to achieve even modest musical success without rubbing up against a conglomerate, and the act of selling out feels outdated. It's up to individual artists to set their own boundaries. Guthrie, for instance, insists he will not license a song from one of his albums. He'd sooner write original music for commercials, marketing his talents as a visual artist tackling a graphic-design project or a novelist working in corporate communications.

The question for an indie musician isn't whether you sell your song, but rather to *whom* you sell it. Some object to selling a song to a company that's linked with sweatshops or weapons manufacturing, or that's generally deemed uncool. Artists would be pleased to endorse a product they admire. Indie crooner Leslie Feist reportedly declined to license her song *Mushaboom* to McDonald's, but did allow LaCoste to use it to [promote](#) its new fragrance for men.

"LaCoste's brand has been through a rebirth and has a lot of credibility to it," Southcott speculates. "Whereas McDonald's would be seen as a grab for cash."

That said, artists know they might alienate fans who feel a song is cheapened when used to sell a product. Guthrie, for instance, has such idealism. "I think when I was 17 and lived in my parents' basement, I thought anything remotely 'commercial' or 'mainstream' was lame," says Guthrie. "As you get older, you learn the fine line between the art of business and the art of art."

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