



New Policy in Maryland

(June 2012) If you drive in Maryland you better read this... [Learn More »](#)

Comparisons.org

THE STRAIGHT DOPE

Fighting Ignorance Since 1973
(It's taking longer than we thought)

LEARN about Cecil Adams, world's smartest human
READ a random Straight Dope column
ASK Cecil a question

- HOME
- MESSAGE BOARDS
- ASK THE MASTER
- WHO IS CECIL ADAMS?
- ARCHIVE

Like Tweet

A STAFF REPORT FROM THE STRAIGHT DOPE SCIENCE ADVISORY BOARD

What's the story on the radio payola scandal of the 1950s?

August 31, 2004

Dear Straight Dope:

Would you please explain what happened during the "payola" radio scam in the 1950s? --Nimah Mazaheri

— Nimah Mazaheri

Robin Cartwright replies:

I knew there was a reason I kept my *Introduction to Mass Communication* textbook! Prepare for a look at the seamy underbelly of the music industry.

Paying somebody to place a song before the public dates to the early days of the modern popular music industry. At the height of the scandal *Billboard* magazine claimed that payola in various forms had been common during the big band era of the 1930s and 40s and in the vaudeville business in the 1920s. Be that as it may, payola on the scale that became apparent during the 50s was the product of a unique conjunction of circumstances--the emergence of rock 'n' roll, the introduction of the inexpensive 45 RPM single, radio's shift to Top 40 music once TV commandeered drama, postwar prosperity, and the arrival of teenagers as an economic force. In the 50s, records were taking over from live performance as the principle way to hear--and sell--music. Record industry moguls were well aware that teenagers had cash, loved rock 'n' roll, listened to the radio, and were easily stampeded into buying hit records by popular deejays.

The question was how best to exploit that fickle market. At the time, a major record company might release upwards of a hundred singles a week. Then as now, maybe 10 percent of those would become hits, or at least make a profit for the label. Radio airplay was the easiest way for an artist to get exposure and sell records, but with singles pouring into the stations at such a fast clip, labels needed a way to distinguish their songs from those of their competitors. Since this was before the era of MTV and slick promotions, bribery seemed the way to go. Record labels hired promoters who paid deejays to feature songs by favored artists.

In November 1959, on the heels of the quiz-show scandal, in which it was revealed that the shows were often rigged so that popular contestants would return week after week, Congress announced that it would hold hearings on payola. Fearing the taint of scandal, radio stations across the country held a housecleaning of sorts and fired many disc jockeys. Others quit before the axe could fall.

Before the hearings, deejay Phil Lind of WAIT in Chicago disclosed that he

Music Download Site

Stream or Download Over 16 Million Songs. 14 Day Trial Then \$9.99/Mo!
[Rhapsody.com](#)

Unsigned Artists radio

whotune radio is looking for new Independent artists to promote Now
[WhoTune.com](#)

Obama vs. Romney?

Should Obama Be Re-elected Vote in Poll Here!
[www.newsmax.com/m/surveys](#)

Do You Have a Hit Song?

License deals & label signings Major artists seeking next hit.
[www.musicxray.com](#)

AdChoices

Recent Additions:

What's the international language of business, French or English?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

How do I go about starting my own country?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

What's up with obnoxiously loud TV shows and commercials?

By Cecil Adams

Why are those red balloon things on overhead wires? How are area codes assigned?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

Why is Peggy the nickname for Margaret?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

Why don't freight trains have cabooses anymore?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

Why are pound and ounce abbreviated "lb." and "oz."?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

What's the difference between a boat and a ship?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

Why do some water fountains produce two streams of water that merge into one?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

If you shove a potato in a car's tailpipe, will the car explode?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

What's the likeliest doomsday scenario?

By Cecil Adams

Why is "Fido" a common name for a dog?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

What's the origin of "honky"?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

What is the meaning of PEZ?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

What are the three English words ending in -gry?

FULL SAIL UNIVERSITY
CREATIVE WRITING FOR ENTERTAINMENT
BFA ONLINE
LEARN MORE

Threadspotting:

This is a real zombie thread.

Submitted by Musicat

BEST OF THE STRAIGHT DOPE MESSAGE BOARD

Send your nominations for Threadspotting and Weird Earl's to TubaDiva@aol.com. Do it today!

Phone the FBI or phone home?

Submitted by Musicat, who also wrote the tag, thanks!

Our dear Eve is gone with the wind.

Submitted by Annie-Xmas, who also wrote the tag, thanks!

A priest, a rabbi, and a preacher walk into a bar. It's a prayer breakfast.

Submitted by twickster

Pardon my Southern accent.

[VISIT THE STRAIGHT DOPE MESSAGE BOARD](#)

had taken \$22,000 to play a record. He got death threats and had to get police protection. Another legendary deejay, Alan Freed, the man who popularized the term **rock 'n' roll**, saw his career end after he testified at the hearings that he, too, had accepted payola. Artists like Les Paul and Bobby Darin had to defend themselves against charges that they had paid to perform on Freed's popular TV show. Freed was subsequently arrested and pleaded guilty to accepting payments. He was blacklisted from broadcasting and died broke and bitter in 1965. Even Dick Clark was touched as the hearings committee chastised him for his questionable business dealings, although committee chair Oren Harris called him a "fine young man" after his testimony before the committee. Clark had brought a statistician, Bernard Goldstein, who explained that Clark was spinning records because they were popular, not because he stood to gain financially. Just before he testified, however, Clark divested himself of interests in several record companies, and it seems clear his hands weren't entirely clean.

Why did payola become such a big scandal? The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) accused Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI), a performers' rights organization, of using payola to ensure airplay for BMI artists. BMI at the time represented most of the black and Southern musicians who were the leading force behind rock 'n' roll. So one could make the argument that there was some racial animus involved, at least at the outset. An alternative explanation is that the scandal wasn't about race so much as power and money. Some contend that payola helped smaller labels break the majors' stranglehold on the market, and the scandal offered a way to fight back.

Others think rock 'n' roll, which had emerged as a music industry force only a few years previously, was being made a scapegoat. The 1950s were a time of rising concern about juvenile delinquency, and rock 'n' roll was suspected of contributing to it. Partisans of the new music felt the hearings were motivated partly by a desire to blame rock 'n' roll disc jockeys and thus rock 'n' roll itself for what was seen as a moral decline in teenagers. Remember the Parents' Music Resource Center hearings in the 1980s? Same general idea. We don't like how our kids are behaving, so let's blame an outside influence.

Still, there's little question that radio needed to be cleaned up. Disc jockeys took thousands of dollars in payola in exchange for airtime. Airplay decisions were based not on whether a record was any good but on the wad of cash that came with it. Even if you accept the idea that it's OK for radio stations to sell spots on their playlists, keeping the public in the dark about the practice was deceptive.

In 1960, as a result of the congressional hearings, Congress amended the Federal Communications Act, specifically sections 317 and 507, to outlaw under-the-table payments and require broadcasters to disclose if airplay for a song has been purchased. The FCC takes this seriously; in 2000, it fined a Texas radio station \$4,000 for accepting money for playing a Bryan Adams song without telling anyone (although you can understand why Bryan Adams's promoters would be driven to payola).

"Pay-for-play," in which airtime is bought but the payments are disclosed, is still around. In January 1998, Flip/Interscope Records paid a Portland, Oregon radio station \$5,000 to play one Limp Bizkit song 50 times over a five-week period. The band was able to generate enough interest to play a successful concert there. Other stations showed interest in their music, and Limp Bizkit broke into the music biz in a big way--a great argument for free enterprise if you're a Limp Bizkit fan. However, the argument against pay-for-play, even if the parties are upfront about it, is that it allows big labels to buy their artists' way onto the charts.

Will the practice continue? It's debatable. It's not common now, and with so many radio stations owned by conglomerates, there's less opportunity for the local market dealmaking that was so prevalent in payola's heyday. That's not to say that market manipulation is a thing of the past. Given that most major labels are owned by the same media conglomerates that own radio stations, "synergy"-type relationships are likely to be popular, with (say) Clear

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

Did the creator of the Schmidt Sting Pain Index volunteer to get stung by everything on earth?

By Cecil Adams

What does "callipygian" mean?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

Where did the name "Dixie" come from?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

Is there a gender-neutral substitute for "his or her"?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

Shouldn't the expression "head over heels" be "heels over head"?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

What purpose do allergies serve?

By Cecil Adams

What's the origin of the phrase, "the birds and the bees"?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

How do they get the sperm used in artificial insemination of animals?

A Straight Dope Classic by Cecil Adams

[SEARCH THE STRAIGHT DOPE ARCHIVE](#)

Send questions for Cecil Adams to: cecil@chicagoreader.com

Send comments about this website to: webmaster@straightdope.com

[Terms of Use / Privacy Policy](#)

Advertise on the Straight Dope! Your direct line to thousands of the smartest, hippest people on the planet, plus a few total dipsticks.

Publishers - interested in subscribing to the Straight Dope? Write to: sdscriptions@chicagoreader.com.

Copyright © 2012 Sun-Times Media, LLC.

Channel-promoted concerts featured on Clear Channel-owned stations. I'm sure that the FCC will have to change the rules as media ownership evolves.

—Robin Cartwright
Straight Dope Science Advisory Board

Sources

"The History of Boston Rock n' Roll," a look at the payola scandal from a local perspective. <http://www.dirtywater.com/museum/original/chapter5.html>.

"The Payola Scandal," another good history of the scandal. <http://members.madasafish.com/~redhotnrockin/payola.htm>

The current FCC regulations on payola can be found at <http://www.fcc.gov/eb/broadcast/sponsid.html>.

The FCC decision on the Denton, Texas radio station can be found at <http://www.fcc.gov/eb/Orders/da002315.html>.

Neil Strauss, "Pay-for-Play on the Air But This Rendition Is Legal," *New York Times*, March 31, 1998

Richard Campbell et al, *Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication*, 2004

STAFF REPORTS ARE WRITTEN BY THE STRAIGHT DOPE SCIENCE ADVISORY BOARD, CECIL'S ONLINE AUXILIARY. THOUGH THE SDSAB DOES ITS BEST, THESE COLUMNS ARE EDITED BY ED ZOTTI, NOT CECIL, SO ACCURACYWISE YOU'D BETTER KEEP YOUR FINGERS CROSSED.

[COMMENT ON THIS ANSWER](#)
