

From Quality to Quantity: How Education, Creative, and Business Trends Influence a Lack of Black Bands Signed to Major Record Labels

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxARIKiihmk>

Abstract

The R&B landscape of the 1970s and 1980s prominently featured bands alongside solo artists and vocal groups. Parliament Funkadelic, Earth, Wind & Fire, The Gap Band, The Dazz Band, Kool & the Gang, Atlantic Starr, Sly and the Family Stone, Midnight Star, DeBarge, The Time, The Isley Brothers, Cameo, War, The Deele, Prince and the Revolution, and The Ohio Players were all constituted as bands that featured Black members or leads and performed traditionally Black music. It wasn't uncommon to find that some successful solo R&B artists originally started in bands, such as the cases when Lionel Richie emerged from The Commodores, and Philip Bailey recorded separately from the aforementioned Earth, Wind & Fire.

All of these bands recorded on major record labels at some point during their careers, with some even releasing records across multiple labels. Their collective radio and live performances imbued America, and the world, with the brilliance of musical collaboration and the genius of collective improvisation through jazz-infused funk and gospel-inspired R&B, the sounds of Blackness. A review of today's major record label rosters reveals that there are few Black bands currently being developed or promoted.

I will review and describe political, technology, and business trends and occurrences that have gradually steered recording artists, and labels alike, away from the band as artist concept. The reduction of arts education funding has resulted in fewer Black students having the opportunity to study traditional musical instruments that typically require lessons and ensemble practice. The proliferation and cost-effectiveness of music production technology has given rise to producer and DJ-oriented genres that don't en-

courage traditional collaborative performance. The lower costs of developing and promoting solo artists and vocal groups have prompted some labels to keep their rosters lean of bands in certain genres of music. The standard record contract provisions of artist and mechanical royalties provide little incentive to join or remain in a band once a singer attains modest levels of notoriety.

For the purposes of my research, I've defined a Black band as one that is comprised primarily of members who identify as Black or features a lead or leads who identify as Black. I defined a major label as one that receives top-line distribution of its releases through Warner Music Group, Sony Music, or Universal Music Group. The scope and findings of the presentation are not limited in terms of musical genre, but I pay particular attention to those genres which are currently most associated with Black artists, such as R&B and hip-hop.

Keywords: Black bands, Black music, major record labels, music promotion, artist development

Marcus Thomas is an educator and entertainment attorney who is also trained as a screenwriter and publicist. During his twenty-five-year career, he has maintained a boutique entertainment law practice and held several in-house positions with entertainment companies including a major record label, major-affiliated music publisher, and the nation's largest education music print publisher.

Thomas co-authored "The Commercial Music Industry in Atlanta and the State of Georgia – An Economic Impact



Study.” His study served as support for passing the Georgia Entertainment Industry Act of 2005. Thomas holds a Juris Doctor from Georgia State University, a Master of Fine Arts from Full Sail University, and a Master of Mass Communication from the University of Georgia.

Thomas serves as Associate Professor, Chair of Music Industry at the Hartt School, University of Hartford. He previously served as Associate Director of The Los Angeles Film School’s Entertainment Business program, where he was an instructor and faculty training developer for five and a half years. Thomas also served five years as Assistant Professor and Coordinator of Georgia State University’s Music Management program.



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