



By John McGlasson These days, artists get a lot of solicitation from people and companies who want to consolidate “indie” artists and labels into a more powerful force for licensing and such. Like union organizers, they operate on the “strength in numbers” philosophy to convince artists and labels to pay them and/or sign over their rights in exchange for the promise of equal footing with the major labels, but what’s to be gained by grouping yourself in with others who are likely in the same situation; without a label and therefore without distribution? Do you really want to be classified as “indie?” Aren’t most established-yet-unsigned artists sub-par, or at least suffering from sub-par production? Aren’t most labels without distribution suffering from a sub-par catalog?

“Independent” labels make up 30% of global music sales, Nowadays anyone can be “indie” as long as they’re not on a big label, from the 15 year old in his room recording with a laptop, to labels like Sub-Pop Records, who sell hundreds of thousands, even millions, of high-budget, slickly-produced cds per year. Many labels use the “indie” description to hide the fact that they’re distributed by a major label, with the major-label promo budgets. Sony and other majors have bought many smaller labels, allowing them to operate “independently” so they can maintain their “little guy” status to combat the anti-major label feeling that grows year after year.

One such organizer claims to be creating the “5th major” in consolidating all artists who aren’t under the umbrella of the “big-4” major music conglomerates. This guy claims to be able to strong-arm the same rates for “indie” artists and labels as the majors get, based on the usual “strength-in-numbers” sales pitch, but in my opinion, the buyers will be even more likely to take the easy way out and use established, bigger-label artists for projects rather than deal with arm-twisters who will be selling largely under or poorly produced music, and demanding unreasonable rates for lesser work. Again, do you really want to be grouped in with every so-called “indie” artist?

So while the industry changes, one thing doesn’t, you’ve got to be above average at your craft to get noticed and break free of the masses. Labels, distributors, and the various retail and digital outlets still rule the industry, so even if all the unsigned artists in the world band together, I don’t see how to break away from the old model. The biggest labels with the biggest budgets will always sell the most music by reaching the most people, regardless of whether or not they refer to themselves, or are referred to by others, as “indie.” If you can’t get the attention of a

label, you can't break out of the "unsigned" category, and all the consolidation in the world can't save you from that.

*[John McGlasson](#) is a life-long guitarist, producer, and founder of [o.i.e. Records, Ltd](#) ., a musician-oriented independent record label based in central Illinois.*