

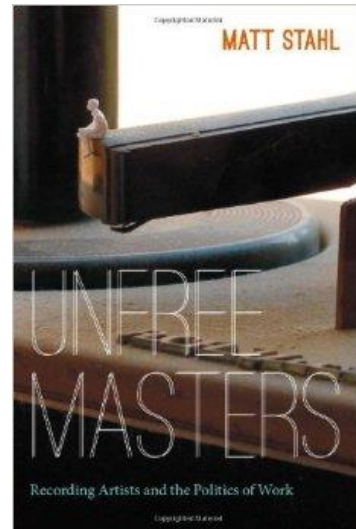
Matt Stahl, **Unfree Masters: Recording Artists and the Politics of Work (Refiguring American Music)**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012, 312 pp., \$73.47 (hardcover), \$22.46 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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Anyone who doubts the resilience of pop idol worship in the digital age should download the iPad app Planetary, a visual music player in which artists are represented as suns, albums as planets, and tracks as moons. A musical universe is conjured with the inflated agency of pop stars projected onto the stars of the cosmos. Romantic notions of creative freedom have always loomed large in the music industry; recording artists function as icons of freedom, holding out hope for our own freedom. In other respects, though, even top recording artists appear as all too prosaic economic actors. Most of them work under highly restrictive long-term contracts with a few major music companies. The Recording Industry Association of America, originally formed to combat piracy, has come to serve as a powerful political force in advancing the interests of major labels over those of all others, including their own artists.



In *Unfree Masters*, Matt Stahl offers a rigorous and illuminating study of how the conflicts of recording industry employment play out culturally and politically. The book's eclectic case studies share a concern with how the realities of contracts and intellectual property challenge common assumptions of worker autonomy in the music industry and beyond and how current economic trends move us further from democratic ideals in the workplace. At a time when policymakers tout "creative industries" as a panacea for flagging economies, Stahl argues, the contradictions of recording industry work prefigure those increasingly experienced by all workers. His study takes its lead from critics of neoliberal transformations of work, such as David Harvey and Richard Sennett, as well as from political theorist Carole Pateman, who argues that contracts negotiated between unequally empowered parties necessarily blur the lines between employment and servitude, making the capitalist workplace a bastion for the sort of subjection (enforced as much by hunger as law) that democracies outlaw in public life. Stahl brings his materialist perspective to bear to reveal the everyday discursive work through which music industry labor is rendered alienable—that is, separated from its agents and transformed into something that can be quantified, bought, and sold. It is in the record industry where the agency of workers (i.e., pop stars) is most stubbornly promoted, that the strains on agency posed by employment and contracts come most clearly into view.

Unfree Masters comprises a diverse group of essays, its first part focusing on mediated representations of the record business, its second on contexts of record industry regulation. Stahl's first substantive chapter on *American Idol* builds on the work of James Hay and Laurie Ouellette, who located in

reality TV's parade of charity, intervention, and makeover shows a coherent ideology defining the limits of neoliberal citizenship in lifestyle and consumer choice. Stahl sees *Idol* repurposing this ideology in its definition of an ideal pop career. Audiences and aspirants are taught the value of adapting oneself to recording industry institutions. The show's narratives of authentication and humiliation dramatize the recording career as a series of auditions, teaching competitors to approach industry gatekeepers with humility and gratitude and to understand their own preparedness or lack thereof as the result of their own choices.

Stahl's standout second chapter takes on the 2004 rockumentary *Dig!* Directed by Ondi Timoner, the film follows the rocky friendships and diverging career paths of two West Coast indie bands: the Brian Jonestown Massacre and the Dandy Warhols, as the BJM crashes and burns in a haze of drugs and paranoia and the Dandys achieve semistardom with their hipster anthem "Bohemian like You." What makes this chapter an analytical tour de force is that on its face the film seems no less familiar and indeed formulaic than does *American Idol*. Dwelling at length on BJM lead singer Anton Newcombe's free fall, *Dig!'s* dominant narrative appears as little more than the first two-thirds of a VH-1 *Behind the Music* episode (indeed, Newcombe's big complaint about the film is that it neglected to include his recovery from heroin and return to productivity). Yet Stahl brings a formidable assortment of analytical tools to bear—including Sennett's critique of the new capitalism, Thomas Frank's history of the marketing of cool, Robert Allen's social history of documentary, and a bit of auteurism informed by Bourdieu—in building a trenchant analysis of *Dig!'s* evocation of "the new model worker." Under the film's layers of rockist discourse, Stahl finds buried not just the detritus of self-actualizing consumerism from the 1960s but also a model of productive cultural workers coping with and even ushering in a neoliberal regime of deinstitutionalization and declining support systems.

The second section of the book offers case studies examining how music labels' famously exploitative relationship with talent is managed legally and discursively. Much of the section deals with a California law stating that contracts to render personal services cannot be enforced beyond seven years. This law assures that film and television talent are able to move on from contracts signed early in their careers. Up until recently, the law also applied to recording artists for whom it was crucial due to the asymmetrical demands of recording contracts. Contracts typically give labels the option to order multiple additional albums from artists regardless of management changes, creative differences, or artists' ability to get a better deal elsewhere. Yet a contractual dispute in the late 1970s involving pop star Olivia Newton-John revealed a loophole in the law: An artist dissatisfied with her contract need only go idle for a few years and wait out its term. The majors thus fought for and won an exception for record companies to the seven-year rule. Stahl analyzes the California State Senate's hearings on the matter, which offered a discursive space for the faceoff between musicians' advocates who compared long-term contracts to indentured servitude and industry advocates who opposed any time limits on contracts. The author effectively traces how the conflict emphasized tensions of labor in the record industry while throwing into relief more common workplace realities.

Aside from artists' contractual obligations, the other main component of a music label's worth is the recordings for which it owns copyrights, and this is the focus of Stahl's other industry case study. Like the first, this case originates in a legal inconsistency that betrays conflicts in how labor is defined in the

industry. Contracts typically define recordings as works for hire, meaning that contracting companies own the recordings. The financial stakes of this arrangement increased in 1971 after Congress established a copyright in recordings separate from compositions. Yet the Copyright Law of 1976 suggested that commissioned works created by contractors did not qualify as works for hire (exceptions were included for the motion picture and publishing industries but not for the music industry). The upshot was that although contracts might assign copyright in recordings to music labels, after 35 years, copyright would revert to recordings' "featured artists." In 1999, music industry lobbyists got an amendment defining sound recordings as works for hire affixed to an unrelated Congressional bill. Once artists and their supporters caught on, they successfully lobbied for the amendment's repeal, leaving another round of hearings for Stahl to mine. What's compelling in these hearings is the struggle to affix simple formulas of legal authorship to the collaborative process of music making. The author gives a nice account of how artists managed to represent the recording process in romantic terms of creativity to fend off labels' claims that they were workers for hire while falling back on legal arguments of employers as owners to discount the creative input of their own support personnel.

Unfree Masters takes in an impressive range of materials and methods in shedding light on sites of ideological tension within recording industry work. It will be of interest not only to students of the music industry but also to those who seek a more general understanding of how neoliberal ideology plays out in everyday culture and politics. The book's eclecticism will recommend it to different audiences: Its first section will be of special interest to cultural studies scholars, its second to scholars of media law and policy. I would have liked to have seen more discussion in the book's conclusion of how issues surrounding recording artists' labor have played out over the past decade, particularly as Stahl, himself, has dealt with these later developments effectively elsewhere. On one hand, new technologies threaten to marginalize music labels, along with traditional media in the production, distribution, and marketing of new music (as illustrated, for instance, by the popularity of self-released mix tapes among hip hop audiences). On the other hand, major labels have sought to consolidate their role as gatekeepers and validators of superstar talent, even grabbing a piece of artists' nonrecording income through multiple-rights deals. This reservation aside, *Unfree Masters* effectively demonstrates how developments in recording industry work have reflected and prefigured movements toward less secure and humane systems of labor and employment.