

CRAFTING A BRANDED SOUND:

HOW MUSIC IS
CHOSEN FOR THE WORLD'S
FAVORITE BRANDS







A Peek Behind the Curtain

A wild kaleidoscope of talented DJs, musicians, producers, and record label veterans with a combined 525 years in the music industry. A virtual Mount Everest of music knowledge, experience, and obsession— unrivaled in the music curation biz. From DJ gigs in cow fields, to winning GRAMMYS, to live-on-the-air radio disc jockeys, to selling wax at record stores, we've seen it ALL and lived the true music fanatic's lifestyle. This piece is a peek behind the magic and the madness, and offers some insight into how a branded sound is developed.



WHERE WE BEGIN

Written by John Crooke

Creative discovery often begins from a place that might appear random and disconnected. A path that, from the outside, can feel more like guesswork than real work.

Our Methodology

Every initial discovery phase is unique. Some almost immediately take shape, coalesce, and become real and interesting. Others may need more digging and struggle to find the heart. But what we believe is that this level of unbounded exploration is an initial path worth taking. It's critical to our creative process. The fearlessness and confidence that comes with exploring those outer edges often reveals something unexpected, meaningful, and executable.

We then follow up on these early theories, ideation, and instinctual feelings with a series of more targeted and tactical questions. Followed by more questions. And even more questions. We guide our brands through a dialogue of intelligence gathering that taps into their beliefs, design vision, color, aesthetics, mood, typography, media, technology, and a range of other emotional vehicles that will inform what we do.

But before we make any definitive statements, or curatorial choices, or produce one frame or pixel of content, we embrace that creative freedom. The art and craft of our process coming together. Inspiration finding balance with method. Like a conductor unifying a 30-piece orchestra around A440 perfect pitch, our passion is to bring all the brand elements together to reveal the truth from a musical perspective.

And when those truths are finally discovered, it's a beautiful thing.

The music profile begins to come into focus.



The brand pillars and musical attributes start to flow naturally.



The personas begin to have a voice, a tone, a point of view around music.



The digital platforms, vehicles, and channels start to take shape.



The experiential extensions become a natural next step to creating a comprehensive music ecosystem that connects those emotional spaces where brands and people exist together.



And when you stack it all together with the right process, deep music knowledge, and real insights, the foundation for architecting a unique identity and point of view around music for a brand comes alive.



This is where we begin.



DECODING THE BRAND

Written by Nicole Maroutsos

All major brands carefully craft their image; they spend millions of dollars on the interior design of their stores, merchandising, advertising, digital properties—anything and everything to shape the way shoppers experience and feel. Music is a powerful tool that evokes emotions and influences perception in both physical and digital spaces.

Successful companies realize how important it is to have a well-defined brand sound that reflects the characteristics and values of their business.

The role of a music supervisor is to capture a brand's essence in a playlist. This goes well beyond listening, researching, and experiencing as much new music as possible. The difference between a music supervisor and a music fan is the depth and breadth of music knowledge across all genres, marketing savvy, and a clear understanding of the customer. The most successful branded music programs are created by those who **understand a client's marketing strategy and the type of music most likely to attract the targeted demographics.**



How do we get to know a brand and their target customers? Here are a few ways:

✔ **Reviewing the brand assets.**
Our first glimpse into a brand lies in the documentation about their architecture and audience: business goals, brand guidelines, buyer personas, look books, message maps, campaign calendars, and more. This info gives us a sense of their feel and voice, their audience, and what they're trying to communicate.

✔ **Listening on social media.**
Social media is a great place to find a brand's current customers, and review what this audience is saying, define their interests, and understand their demographics.

✔ **Visiting corporate offices.**
Typically, at the corporate offices, we're able to get a deep dive into the company culture and values, as well as gain insight into some of the new projects they're working on that may impact the music strategy.

✔ **Visiting physical locations.**
It's important for us to understand the store layout, merchandising, décor, and the feel of the retail space so we can anticipate how the music will pair with the physical space.

✔ **Talking with employees.**
The employees of a company have amazing insights into their customers. Whether they work in a corporate office or are on a sales floor, we spend much of our time communicating with various members of the team.


And Then Comes Data

What else goes into aligning a music strategy with a brand? A mountain of data.



Every song that we program for a brand has been thoroughly reviewed by a member of our team, has been assessed for the sound and lyrical content, and meta-tagged with more than 170 attributes—a proprietary process we call Distinctive Featuring. When we curate playlists, we use this data to find the best tracks for the people we're trying to touch. For example, this information can help us track down alternative songs for an audience that favors an edgy sound, or a bright, accessible sound for a shopper that leans more mainstream. Likewise, we use this info to avoid anything that a shopper might find offensive, or doesn't fit with brand or campaign themes based on lyrical content.

Crafting the perfect brand sound isn't just about making great playlists. It's the combination of knowing the customer and then combining music expertise, programming skills and analysis, marketing knowledge, and instinct to truly enhance the brand experience.



SOURCING THE PERFECT SONG

Written by Alex Espinosa

Creating the perfect sound for each of our brands doesn't magically occur in an instant, or through an algorithm. It requires a team of people who work with labels to source new music, listen to tracks to identify their distinguishing features, and collaborate with each brand to curate their perfect sound.

Direct from the Source: Label Relations

Some members of our team focus on sourcing the right content for our brands, and work with thousands of record labels all over the world (and cull through even more songs) to cultivate our music library.

The most important aspect of building this library is our relationship with labels. These relationships enable us to be one step ahead—learning about new releases and up-and-coming artists.

We often have the unique opportunity to have label visits, where representatives stop by our office to play samples of an album (sometimes even sharing work that hasn't yet been mastered) or to provide us with pre-releases months in advance of street-date.

And the labels appreciate sharing this information with us as well. When their artists are included in a branded playlist, it provides them with worldwide exposure.

Live Performances

Our partnerships with labels also enable us to bring artists into our offices, see them perform, and learn more about their music. Having the ability to meet artists in this environment allows us to get a much better feel for their music and the brand experiences they fit best, whether that be music overhead, a live in-store event, or sync licensing for a marketing campaign.

Events and Beyond

There are many other resources available to us as we work to stay on top of the trends in the music industry. With music blogs like Stereogum, Indie Shuffle, Remezcla, Pitchfork, and countless others, searching for songs from around the globe is made a bit easier, and we are able to source better content for our clients.

We review radio charts and industry periodicals to see what is trending. Some of our clients want to be on the forefront of the trends, playing the songs that are topping the charts, while others want to ensure that they have their own unique sound—enabling music discovery in their locations. This means it's just as important for us to know what's on the charts, as what isn't on them.

The most fun research we do happens at music seminars and festivals. You will often find members of our team at seminars like CMJ, SXSW, and LAMC to find the next artist who will make an impact in today's music world. Other times, we're attending music festivals like Outside Lands, Primavera Sound, and Glastonbury, and even sponsor festivals such as Decibel to get real-time insight into the audiences and performers themselves.

The Power of a Team

In addition to their individual insights, music supervisors collaborate on ideas and share their knowledge when needed. The collective wealth of experience and knowledge available across the music supervision team is an asset that benefits each brand.

Let's say you're up against a deadline to deliver a customized playlist for a store opening. And the rotation not only needs to align with the store's brand identity but also contain 300+ songs and 100+ unique artists, multiple genres and more music than many of today's radio stations have in rotation altogether. What do you do? This is where the power of a team comes in to help round out that branded sound—with touches of Spanish-language pop, or down-tempo ethereal electronica—for this request.

Why It Matters

When you're helping determine a global brand sound, the care taken to curate should be the same as you have put into the other aspects of the brand.



A true, branded sonic identity goes further than popularity, and music supervisors sift through even the most obscure artists to find the perfect fit. Our team at PlayNetwork has the relationships, methods, and depth and breadth of experience to perfect a brand sound, with expertise in all genres of music—from Latin to jazz, classical to electronica, country to rock, and everything in between.

WHY ALGORITHMS AREN'T ENOUGH

Written by Blake Kirpes



These days we're bombarded with articles about new technology that will supposedly change our lives: self-driving cars, wearable tech, and even hover boards. However, the reality is that it's been over 25 years since the release of *Back to the Future Part II*, and all we have to show for it are "hover boards" that don't hover but *do* catch fire.



In the music industry it's not much different. Just as with the promise of hover boards, we've been promised for years that technology—specifically algorithms—would free us from the need for human curation. If you're just looking for decent music to clean the kitchen to, you may find the new technology works well enough. But if you're hoping to use strictly algorithmic data to build, maintain, and constantly evolve the complex musical expression of your brand's identity over many years, you're going to get burned.

Brand Complexity: Too Hot for Algorithms to Handle

So why isn't an algorithmic playlist the best choice for a brand? Brands, by nature, are far more complex than a single person and constantly evolve. Their existing and potential customers are made up of millions of unique individuals, with a wide variety of styles, tastes, and musical preferences. It takes an expert who's in continual lock-step with the brand, the music industry, new bands and old bands, past trends and new, to know the exact types of songs, artists, and genres (and the amount of each) to bring a brand's complex identity to life.

Take the band Death Cab for Cutie, whose most popular song on Spotify, by almost 40 million streams, "I Will Follow You Into the Dark," is a beautiful, yet tragic and rather depressing song revolving around death. Needless to say, it's not ideal for most brands or brand campaigns. If you truly want to impress a Death Cab fan visiting your business, you'd need to know that all die-hard Death Cab fans love the early, but much less known albums, *We Have the Facts*, *Photo Album*, and *Something About Airplanes*. None of which have a single song appearing in the "Most Played" list on Spotify, or any other platform for that matter.

Algorithms...

will only get you so far toward a brand sound.

When consumers interact with a brand, they have expectations of what they would hear—whether they are in-store, online, or viewing a commercial. And in most cases, the music they expect to hear in a commercial environment is different than what they would listen to in their personal time. Algorithms, however, are monitoring listening patterns and trends when people are listening to music for personal use. Current streaming data and algorithms can identify the artists and songs people are listening to, but not which artists or songs related to their personal favorites match up with the identity of a brand. So, they will only get you so far toward a brand sound.



TURNING SONGS INTO PLAYLISTS

Written by Mark Campbell

On a typical 16-hour operating day at Disneyland, “It’s A Small World After All” plays 1,200 times—day after day, month after month, year after year. Although this is an extreme example, it illustrates that, when a song is right for a brand, heavy repetition is not always the enemy. In the case of “Small World,” the song is as essential to the attraction as the flat-bottomed boats and the audio-animatronic dolls. Most likely the song will remain in place for another 52 years due to its importance in upholding and defining the ride experience.

Now let’s translate that scenario to a retail setting. In almost all cases a location doesn’t want the same song looping incessantly day after day. But there are circumstances that dictate when certain songs and artists should be featured more prominently on a brand’s soundtrack. If you’re a sports bar with a strong late night scene, it’s probably a good choice to hear “Roadhouse Blues” by The Doors on a regular basis.

If you’re a tween fashion retailer, “Style” by Taylor Swift may be a good track to feature in a more frequent rotation. If a particular song is a perfect match for a brand—exemplifying their attributes, connecting with their target audience, or speaking to a certain season or promotion—it should be heard as often as possible.

Playlist Size

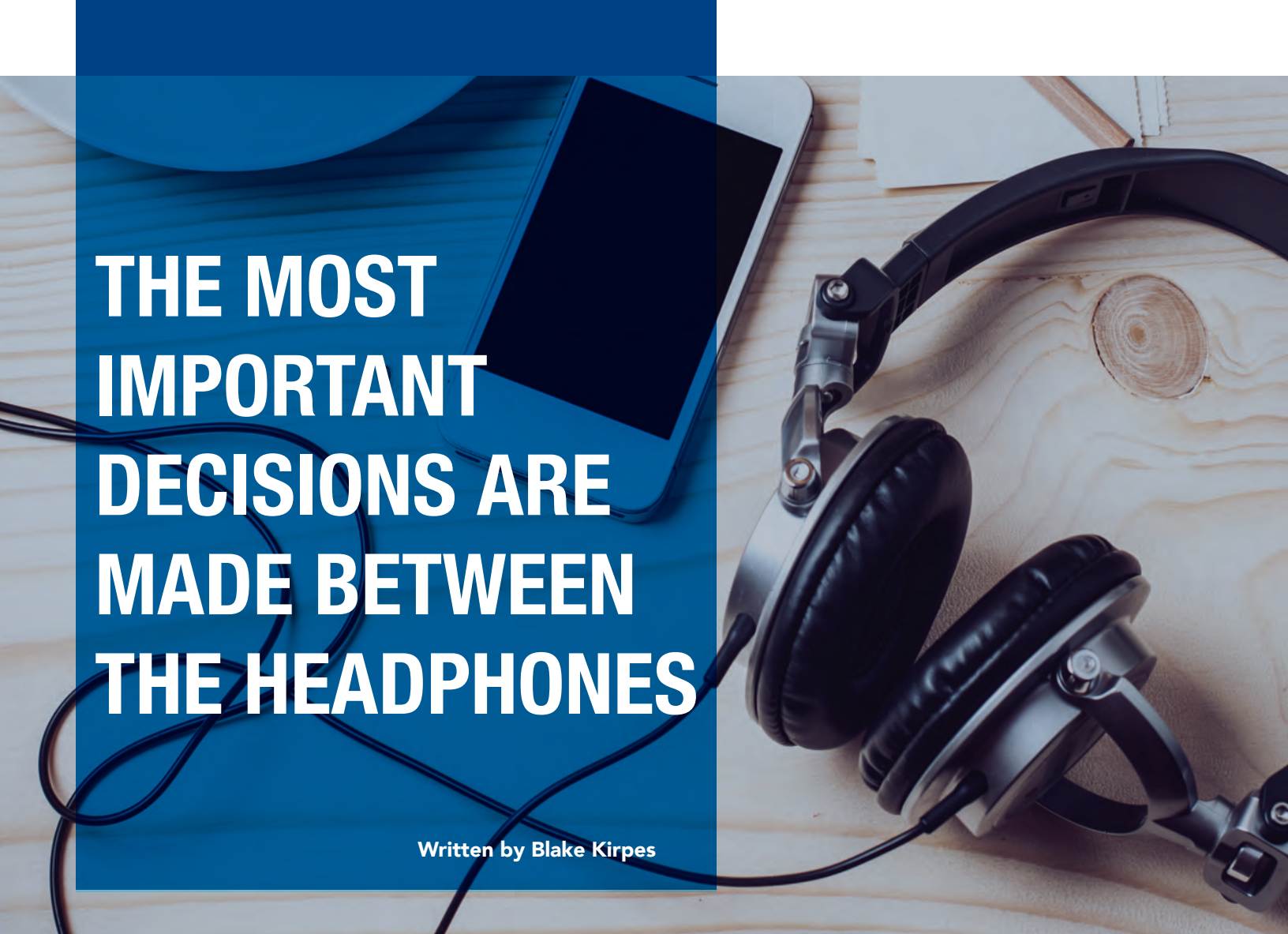
The dwell time of a customer can also influence the size and rotation of the playlist. In a restaurant setting where customers are sitting for a meal that lasts an hour or so, more variety and content may be needed to prevent repetition. In other settings where the dwell time is shorter there’s a much smaller window of time to musically represent the brand. Therefore a smaller, more focused playlist featuring on-brand content in a high rotation can be effective and have the most impact during a relatively short visit.

Updates

Another consideration in building and maintaining a branded soundtrack is how often to update the playlist. Some brands are on a tight update schedule, while others refresh their playlist more infrequently or time updates with events or promotions. Often, it's not the new songs that make the most impact—it's the tracks that are removed. Novelty songs and overplayed songs tend to reach their shelf life much sooner than others. Removing this type of stale or polarizing content from rotation helps keep the playlist fresh.

Whether it's a playlist of new and emerging artists, a nostalgic pool of throwback, sing-along tunes that recall timeless memories, or a combination of both, an experienced music supervisor will help a brand get the most out of its sound.





THE MOST IMPORTANT DECISIONS ARE MADE BETWEEN THE HEADPHONES

Written by Blake Kirpes

It may seem unnecessary for brands to dedicate a person or team to curate their music, as opposed to an algorithm. But it's surprising how much a brand sound differs when created by an expert music supervisor. Although the possibilities for a brand's musical expression are indeed endless, doing it effectively is no small feat because, despite the unbelievable amount of information at our fingertips, **search results work to produce consensus favorites—not uniqueness.**


Let's consider Halloween music. Suppose a trendy brand wants a fun, unique music program for the Halloween season. Ever tried Googling "cool Halloween music" or "indie Halloween"? The results are disappointing. You'll probably come up with the same 20–30 songs, most of which are already part of every Halloween program in existence.

But how about searching for "unique and hip Halloween-sounding music from 2016, that appeals to a female and male demographic between 20 and 30, for a company whose brand personas include Individualist, Cutting Edge, and Trend Setter, and whose customers look to their brand for the latest trends in fashion and music"? Google that and you may come up with an article about a "One Way Ticket to Bombay" and "#53 Dogs" from the site stuffwhitepeoplelike.com. (By the way, the correct songs that you'd be looking for are, "Black Fly On The White Wall," "Strange Brush," and "Lafayette" by indie electronic artist Pillar Point.)

Not only can you not “Google” for something like this, these are the exact type of songs that even the best technology could only reveal after the fact, after a human has listened to the song, taking into account the vibe, lyrics, and the current cutting-edge and trend-setting nature of an indie artist like Pillar Point—only then deciding that the songs are fitting for a particular brand and theme.

Curating in the Information Age

As it stands today, the slate has essentially been wiped clean by the abundance of information and the fact that most everyone has access to most everything, including most of the recorded history of music. This information is much like paint: we have access to all the tools and colors, but we can’t all be Salvador Dali.



Netflix makes programming decisions based 70% on data and 30% on human judgment—but the 30% IS MOST IMPORTANT.

Now imagine doing this for each brand’s unique versions of floor-sets, themes, and campaigns, which are far subtler, fluid, and less straightforward than “Halloween.” For instance, what does “autumn” sound like? And not just the season alone, but autumn for restaurants, men’s retail, bakeries, coffee shops, teen fashion brands, sports retailers, and the numerous individual brands that make up these categories? Here the seemingly endless amount of information and algorithmic data may be of some, but likely very little, help.

Many record labels are using data and algorithms to help them find the next Adele, but the keyword is “help.” To paraphrase Ted Sarandos, Chief Content Officer at Netflix, Netflix makes programming decisions based 70% on data and 30% on human judgment—but the 30% is most important. If all it took to produce a hit song or chart-topping artist or record-breaking TV show was following the numbers, then the industry’s batting average would be 100%.

It’s what one is able to do with the tools that is the real craft. Similarly, a music supervisor uses data and technology to research songs and artists, but many of their decisions are based on the human experience—can this song move me, and can it move a specific brand’s customers? Does this song or artist have that unquantifiable “it” quality? At the end of the day, we’re back to the essence of what all music and art are about: an unquantifiable spectrum of humans, their experiences, and their emotions.

It’s about what algorithms and data lack.

IT’S ABOUT SOUL.



PlayNetwork is a consumer engagement company that helps brands use music and other forms of entertainment media to connect with customers, in-store and beyond. We partner with over 400 brands across 100,000 locations in 125 countries, reaching more than 100 million people every day. For more information, visit www.playnetwork.com.

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