LIFE IN THE POP LANE

U2 is smart to bite into this Apple

By Renee Graham, Globe Staff | November 9, 2004

Ever since Apple Computer last month announced its unique marketing deal with U2, one that, among other things, will have the rock band's upcoming album preloaded on special-edition black-and-red iPods, Bono and his bandmates have been hit with a rain of invective claiming they've sold their souls to the corporate devils.

Truth be told, I initially felt the same way the first time I saw the U2 iPod ads. Some rock stations were already playing "Vertigo," the first single from the album "How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb," but it's likely that far more people first discovered the track in a very unlikely place for a U2 song -- a television commercial. There was Bono's unmistakable voice counting off -- "Uno, dos, tres, catorce" -- and quick cuts of guitarist the Edge, bassist Adam Clayton, and drummer Larry Mullen among those signature dancing silhouettes with the white iPod as their only distinguishable element. The 30-second spot hit TV even before a video for the song.

I've been a fan of the band for more than 20 years, but watching the group shill for Apple's popular digital music player (and yes, I have one) somehow made me feel queasy. Clanking with integrity, U2 always came across as the kind of band above lending its music to sell someone else's product. At times, it seems there are so few artists who haven't been bought -- R.E.M. comes to mind -- that it was disheartening to see U2 go the way of the Who and Jay-Z, to name a few.

Then it hit me. Why shouldn't U2 make every legitimate attempt to get its music out to as many people as possible?

After all, commercial radio and MTV can't be trusted to do the job. Formats and playlists are so tightly regimented there's no reason for U2 to assume it will receive the kind of promotional push it's enjoyed in the past. And with all of its members in their 40s, U2 isn't exactly the face of MTV's targeted demographic. So, even after selling more than 100 million albums worldwide, U2 is smart enough not to take anything for granted.

What U2 has done is adopt the new playbook for pop-music success. Moby changed the rules several years ago when, realizing that his 1999 album "Play" would never garner radio support, he licensed each of its 18 tracks for use in movies, commercials, and television shows. An album that might otherwise have disappeared without a ripple went on to sell 10 million copies worldwide. And ultimately, once people connected with Moby's affecting electronica blended with gospel and blues vocal samples, it hardly mattered if they'd first heard his songs in a car commercial.

In addition to producing what is being called the "iPod U2," Apple will have exclusive online rights to sell songs from the new CD through iTunes for the first few weeks after its release. iTunes will also offer "The Complete U2," a download package featuring more than 400 songs.

So far, it seems U2's deal with Apple hasn't hurt the group -- "Vertigo" is currently No. 1 on Billboard's Modern Rock Tracks chart. Nor does it mark the band's only foray into alternative means of album promotion. The song "Sometimes You Can't Make It On Your Own," from the new album, will be featured in the Dec. 2 episode of Fox's popular show "The O.C.," and "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation" will reportedly use two songs in upcoming episodes.

Perhaps because U2 has always used celebrity in admirable ways -- it supported famine relief and antiapartheid efforts in the 1980s, and Bono has been active in the global AIDS fight as well as trying to reduce Third World debt -- some forget the band is just as focused on sustaining its career as Hilary Duff. Aligning with Apple and shows like "The O.C. " might allow the band to reach an audience that may know
little about its classic "The Joshua Tree," or even 2000's "All That You Can't Leave Behind."

So detractors should cut U2 some slack. Members of the band haven't prostituted themselves or become indentured servants to Apple. Given what some stars are willing to do, U2 appearing in a snazzy iPod commercial isn't really objectionable, especially when one considers that a less thoughtful band might have long ago launched its own "Achtung Baby” sneaker line or sold the song "The Unforgettable Fire" for use in a hemorrhoid commercial.

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