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No. 1 With a Bullet: Madonna Opens Big, and She'd Better

By ROB TANNENBAUM

Two weeks ago, Madonna was so ubiquitous, it almost felt like 1985 again.

With her interview on "Dateline," a special on MTV, a feature role on the sitcom "Will and Grace" and an appearance on "Live With Regis and Kelly," the 44-year-old singer was suddenly on more channels than Donald H. Rumsfeld. She hadn't developed an affection for television (which she says she doesn't watch); her appearances were planned to promote a new album, "American Life," released that week.

The strategy succeeded. "American Life" sold 241,000 copies in its first week, the third-largest weekly total Madonna has tallied in the 12-year history of the Nielsen SoundScan charts, and she grabbed the top chart position, a remarkable achievement for a singer twice as old as most of her rivals. Still, not everyone called the record a success. "Madonna Album Is Flopping," read one headline.

The discrepancy between objectively impressive numbers and the subjective evaluation of a "flop" reveals more than just another episode of Madonna-bashing. More than ever, first-week sales have become a focus in the music business, a cause for speculating, handicapping and second-guessing.

"The music business has become like the film business," said Ron Baldwin, a manager and producer. "If a record doesn't do well the opening week, people say it's dead."

In the race for first-week supremacy, labels coordinate an attack on four fronts: radio airplay, video exposure, media coverage and placement at retail stores. But radio and MTV often wait to evaluate first-week sales before committing to airplay. Yet, strong opening sales are difficult to build without radio and video exposure.

So labels increasingly emphasize retail placement, which is more pliable. They often offer initial discounts to stores, which draw higher profits in Week 1.

The first-week strategy has been a rare area of success in a depressed business. After 18 years of growth, overall CD sales dropped in 2001, and are down 7.3 percent this year; by contrast, sales for weekly chart-toppers are up more than 40 percent this year, compared with those in the same period last year. "The labels are doing a better job of getting records to debut large," concludes Geoff Mayfield, director of charts at Billboard magazine.

To create big first weeks, labels use "smoke and mirrors," says a manager who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"It's a well-known dirty secret," he said. "Some labels buy their own records. It's part of the marketing
plan, to buy CD's wholesale at $6 a pop, and Sound-Scan them."

Two years ago, a Los Angeles Times article reported that record companies hired "independent consultants" to generate falsely high sales, and although all five record groups denied engaging in such duplicitous behavior, SoundScan eliminated some stores from its tallies because of what it called anomalies in the reporting system.

Because a strong first week creates self-fulfilling momentum, leading to more airplay, press and touring opportunities, most blockbuster records have big debuts. Of the top 10 albums of 2002, eight had first-week sales of 220,000 or higher. One exception was the "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" soundtrack, a sleeper analogous to the surprise hit film "My Big Fat Greek Wedding."

There are several other gradual-success stories: John Mayer has sold 2.7 million CD's, after a first week of only 2,200, and Norah Jones has totaled 5.7 million sales after opening with fewer than 10,000.

Even for superstar releases, first-week sales usually account for only 5 percent to 25 percent of total sales. So why emphasize the debut? "It has become an ego-driven thing for labels and artists," said Jeff Rabhan, a manager at the Firm, a management agency. "It used to not be like this at all."

The change began in 1991, when Billboard converted its charts from an estimated system to the SoundScan computerized tally. "Records rarely used to debut at No. 1," Mr. Mayfield said. The race for No. 1 escalated, he said, during the heyday of 'N Sync and the Backstreet Boys, when fans bought multiple copies of a CD so their favorite band could set sales records.

In older days, when labels were often ruled by mavericks, an artist could win prolonged support despite commercial struggles. But after the consolidation of the business into five companies, record executives can keep their jobs only by delivering regular quarterly profits to impatient bosses and trigger-fingered shareholders.

Stressing first-week sales "hurts young bands tremendously, because it puts undue pressure on them," Mr. Rabhan said. One of his clients, the singer Michelle Branch, had a modest 15,000 opening, then sold 1.8 million CD's through steady sales. But now, Mr. Rabhan admits, he hopes for a big start when Ms. Branch's second album is released next month.

"If she doesn't do six figures in the first week," he said, "it would be considered a disappointment, because of how people are being trained to think."