WHEN Eliot Spitzer, New York's attorney general, announced this week that his office had settled payola allegations with Sony BMG Music Entertainment, he documented how record companies get songs on the radio as part of a corrupt system that few understand.

I certainly didn't understand it - until my band, Semisonic, found itself flying around the country in 1996, visiting radio stations and ingratiating ourselves to program directors, just as our debut single, "Down in Flames," was about to be released.

Knowing that our record company, MCA, would deduct our promotional expenses from the band's share of future record sales, I kept tabs on our costs - flights, meals, hotels. After visiting stations in a few cities across the country, I estimated we had spent close to $20,000. If that figure was accurate, we'd have to sell tens of thousands of records just to pay for this transcontinental jaunt. I called our manager. How much had we spent on promotion overall? Close to $500,000.

This was my introduction to the pay-for-play system, one element of which is broadly referred to as payola. As I learned, the bulk of our promotional dollars had gone to independent record promoters, gatekeepers who control access to the airwaves. The promoters pay commercial radio stations, putatively to look at their playlists, but in
reality, as those in the business know, to get their clients' songs on the air. Then they charge record companies for their efforts.

Thus, the cost of promoting a new song, nationwide, can be hundreds of thousands of dollars - money that is taken out of whatever the musicians earn from their recording. This standard method of getting airplay circumvents payola laws, which forbid a radio station from accepting a payment to play a song without disclosing that payment to its listeners. Because the promoters pay the stations up front and collect later from record companies, the lines are sufficiently blurred, making it hard to prove that any quid pro quo transaction took place between a label and a station.

We also played at radio-station festivals, where our appearance assured us at least a modest degree of airplay. (One executive referred to this practice as "Show-ola.")

Other shady methods were employed on our behalf - "You don't want to know," one person on the MCA promotion staff told me. The goal, of course, was to get a single on the radio and keep it there as long as possible to win over listeners. (The longer something new is on the air, the greater the chance that people will grow to like it.)

Thus, I was not surprised by the details from his investigation that Mr. Spitzer shared: memos outlining payments in return for spins; contests where a station flies lucky listeners to exotic destinations to hear a band perform, sponsored by a record label in return for airplay; a flat-screen television that was supposed to be given away on air finding a home in a program director's living room.

That's not to say there isn't another side to the story. One person I know, a man with a long history of taking unknown bands to platinum sales, does not look forward to the day when money can't buy airplay. "How will new bands get played?," he asked, talking to me on the condition that I not name him.

It's not an unreasonable question. I know from personal experience that most program directors are reluctant to find slots in their playlists for new artists.
That same person complains that payola is misunderstood: "You can't buy a hit. You can only buy a chance for a song to become a hit." Again, his point is valid. There are countless artists who have seen their future sales revenues eaten up by promotional costs for singles that went nowhere. In the case of my band, MCA spent more than $1 million in radio promotion on our behalf, and we had only one big hit.

In 1998, MCA released our song "Closing Time." As with our previous singles - which failed to win over the public's ears - the early research by radio stations seeking to gauge how listeners might react to the song was not promising. However, MCA's promotional efforts kept it on the air until listener responses swung in our favor. Once "Closing Time" took off, radio stations wouldn't let go of it. When MCA wanted to release our follow-up single, the promotion department asked program directors to ease "Closing Time" out of heavy rotation to make room for our next song. Many stations refused, citing its continued popularity.

Payola gets a song on the radio. If it becomes a hit, radio works it to death. In this day of consolidated radio ownership and programming, my friend suggests, eliminating payola could mean that commercial stations would become even more monotonous, if that can be imagined.

To my mind, however, the difficulty of picturing a world beyond payola is reason enough to cheer Eliot Spitzer along. Payola restricts access to the public airways; only artists whose labels are willing and able to pay get played. Listeners who might enjoy something else won't hear it from stations on the take. And when fans go to the record store, they'll find that payola has driven up the price of CD's.

By the end of our three-album run with MCA, Semisonic had sold close to two million records, but we were a long way from recouping the costs of radio promotion. Thus musicians, even some who have benefited from payola, will applaud Mr. Spitzer, even as they wonder what chance he has of bringing about vast structural reform. Knowing what
it takes to get their songs on the radio and watching their share of record sales swallowed up along the way, most recording artists would love to see the current system brought down, even if they can't imagine what would replace it.

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