

Berklee College of Music

**Building the New Label:  
Family First Records, LLC**

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and Innovation

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyzes the current state of the record label in hopes of building the foundations for a new one. The project focuses on the present structure of the label and current innovations in the music space that have disrupted some of the historic strengths of the record label. The first part of the paper gives a brief overview of the organization structure, different types of labels, and current “pain points”. The second part highlights ways The New Label (aka Family First Records, LLC) seeks to offer healthy change to the space. The final section of the paper reflects on the year spent at Berklee Valencia and future implications of the label, Family First Records, LLC.

## Acknowledgements

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## 1. Introduction

The Family First Record's goal is to empower the 21<sup>st</sup> century musician to take full advantage of all the opportunities available in maximizing her/his career. Today, artists have unprecedented access to millions of people and tremendous amounts of information every day. Through technological disruptions (e.g., streaming, social media, data, etc.), we live in a unique moment in musical history in which the tools to steer one's career have never been so accessible. Thus, with such unique access to pools of information, one might imagine that a record label could serve as the perfect environment for artists to thrive holistically. Nevertheless, for many, this is not the case.

Historically record labels have had turbulent relationship with creatives, especially amongst major labels. While some helped artists significantly, many and arguably the majority have been predatory, abusive, and destructive toward the long-term success of artists, valuing monetary gain over equity and fairness, disenfranchisement over empowerment, and power over humility. So much so, that artists made conscious efforts to steer clear of the major label in its entirety, with some choosing independent channels of success instead.

However, with this shift/resurgence of independence, many artists still struggle to find the success that they need to thrive in today's ecosystem. Hence why even today, many of the most prominent artists sign deals with major labels (or seek to) as majors still provide stronger monetary incentives, structural support, experience, access, fame, and "life-changing" opportunities.

Family First's goal is to bridge the gap between major and independent by building a prominent independent label that structurally has the working power and capabilities of a major

label, but is functionally independent in nature. Most importantly, the goal is to build a music company focused on the following principles:

- Empowerment
- Equity
- Education
- & Empathy

The goal is not to make money. The goal is to establish careers. The goal is not to change the artist. The goal is to enhance the incredible attributes seen in artists signed to the label. The goal is not to thrive at the expense of the artist. The goal is to care for the person at the expense of the music. At Family First Records, the person is the priority, and the rest will take care of itself.

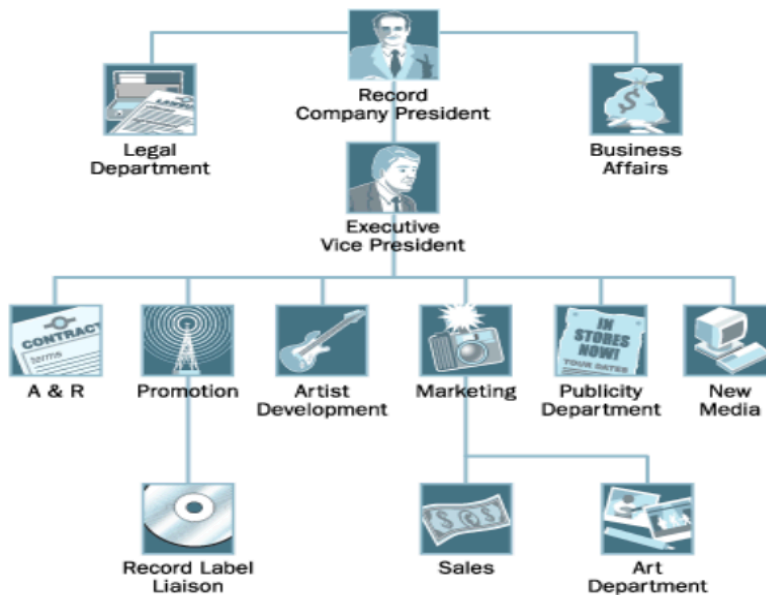


## 2. Review of the State of the Art

### 2.1 General Structure of the Record Label & Role(s)

The below graphic by *howstuffworks* illustrates the general organization of a record label:

## Organization of a Record Label



Klein, Allison. "How Record Labels Work." *HowStuffWorks*. May 25, 2003. Accessed October 31, 2018. <https://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/record-label1.htm>.

There are other ways for a record label to be structured, but this template provides a broad enough overview. Below are descriptions of each role from *howstuffworks*<sup>1</sup>:

- A&R (artists and repertoire)—in charge of discovering new talent, working hands-on with the artists that are “signed”. They assist with song selection, to selection of producers, and more or less serve as the link between the recording artist and the rest of the departments of the record label

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<sup>1</sup> Klein, Allison. "How Record Labels Work." *HowStuffWorks*. May 25, 2003. Accessed October 31, 2018. <https://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/record-label1.htm>.

- Art Department—in charge of all the artwork going along with producing an album
- Artist Development—somewhat of a “product development” role with a focus on promoting and publicizing artists as well
- Business Affairs—largely deals with bookkeeping, payroll and general finances
- Label Liaison—serve as a liaison between the record company’s distribution company and the record company
- Legal Department—responsible for all the contracts that are made between the artist, label, and other companies involved. Also serve as counsel
- Marketing Department—creates overall marketing plan for each album, promotion, sales and publicity departments
- New Media—handles music videos for the artists and new technologies to use
- Promotion Department—main purpose is to make sure artist is played on the radio and other prominent services
- Publicity—coordination of consistent publicity efforts across platforms
- Sales—Works with store chains and distributors to get albums on shelves

Overall, the record label’s main role historically was to find talent, develop talent, and market that talent into the next musical sensation, and the above channels are all interrelated towards the success of the next, current, or former artists signed to the label. Record labels are generally split into two categories: major and independent, which is the focus of the next section.

## **2.2 The Big Three “Major” Record Labels**

The big three record labels are Sony BMG, Universal Music Group, and Warner Music. Amongst the three of them, they made up almost 70% of the entire music market in 2016.<sup>2</sup> Together, they are considered the “majors” as they are the primary controllers of the majority of the music market. Artists signed to a major record label are signed to the central label or a subsidiary of the major, with the “main” company setting up the overall budget and staff numbers.<sup>2</sup> A few major subsidiaries of each are listed as follows:

- Universal Music Group<sup>3</sup>
  - Interscope
  - Geffen
  - Motown
  - Def Jam
- Sony BMG<sup>4</sup>
  - Epic
  - Jive
  - Columbia
  - RCA
- Warner Music Group<sup>5</sup>
  - Atlantic

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<sup>2</sup> McDonald, Heather. "How the Big Four Record Labels Became the Big Three." *The Balance Careers*. Accessed October 31, 2018. <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/big-three-record-labels-2460743>.

<sup>3</sup> McDonald, Heather. "Universal Music Group - Careers." *The Balance Careers*. Accessed October 31, 2018. <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/universal-music-group-2460426>.

<sup>4</sup> McDonald, Heather. "Profile of Sony BMG Music Including It's Past and Present Artists." *The Balance Careers*. Accessed October 31, 2018. <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/sony-bmg-profile-2460425>.

<sup>5</sup> "Warner Music Group." *Wikipedia*. October 30, 2018. Accessed October 31, 2018. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warner\\_Music\\_Group](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warner_Music_Group).

- Warner Bros.
- Parlophone

### 2.3 Independent Labels

The independent label, also known as “indie”, is a record label that is independently funded and not connected to one of the major labels.<sup>6</sup> Generally, indie labels have a lot of freedom to pick and choose their artists based on their own musical tastes rather than popularity. They are also generally smaller in nature, and foster much more intimate relationships with artists due to the limited size. Structurally, they are still similar to the prior discussed organization, but there may be less role specialization, as the size often leads to staff wearing several different hats rather than one.

#### *Pros & Cons of Major and Independent Labels*<sup>7, 8, 9</sup>

- Majors
  - Complaints
    - More corporate
    - Less favorable artists deals
    - More competition from other artists on same label

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<sup>6</sup> McDonald, Heather. "Here Is a Look at How Indie Record Labels Work." *The Balance Careers*. Accessed October 31, 2018. <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/signing-with-an-indie-label-2460744>.

<sup>7</sup> "Indie Vs. Major: Which Record Label Contract Is Right For You? - MTT Open." *Music Think Tank*. Accessed October 31, 2018. <http://www.musicthinktank.com/mtt-open/indie-vs-major-which-record-label-contract-is-right-for-you.html>.

<sup>8</sup> McDonald, Heather. "The Pros and Cons of Independent Record Label Deals." *The Balance Careers*. Accessed October 31, 2018. <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/indie-record-deals-assesing-the-pros-and-cons-2460376>.

<sup>9</sup> McDonald, Heather. "Here Is a Look at How Indie Record Labels Work." *The Balance Careers*. Accessed October 31, 2018. <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/signing-with-an-indie-label-2460744>.

- May not actually believe in your artistry
  - Pros
    - Funding
    - Networking and access to connections
    - Size, brand, and reputation
- Independents
  - Complaints
    - Limited funding—so less money for marketing, promotion, and distribution
    - Possible disorganization due to limited size
  - Pros
    - More intimate
    - More honest desires and enjoyment of artists music
    - Artist own music rights
    - Pro Artist contracts

## **2.4 Key Independent Label Influencers**

### *Top Dawg Entertainment*

Top Dawg Entertainment (TDE) is an independent record label based in California. Founded by Anthony “Top Dawg” Tiffith and co-founded by Terrence “Punch” Henderson in 2004, Tiffith began recruiting the what would become his “all-star” line-up (feat. Kendrick

Lamar & Ab-Soul).<sup>10</sup> Over the past 10 years, the label rose from the undergrounds of hip hop to one of the most premier artist rosters in music today including Kendrick Lamar, Schoolboy Q, Jay Rock, and SZA, amongst others. As of September 2017, TDE captured 4.72% of the overall market share in R&B/hip-hop, quite a feat for a small indie label.<sup>11</sup> Within the scope of this proposal, there are a few key elements necessary to focus on within TDE's model. First is strategic partnership.

TDE's growth catapulted by acknowledging its need for wise alliances. Early on, the label partnered with Strange Music, which significantly helped to strengthen their business model and their understanding of the industry through collaborations with Tech N9ne, E-40, Glasses Malone, and Kurt Calhoun.<sup>12</sup> After this partnership, TDE went on to form a joint venture deal with Interscope Records and Aftermath Entertainment, home of Dr. Dre.<sup>12</sup> However, TDE and its artists retained creative control over the music, while still receiving the financial backing of Aftermath and Interscope, which allowed them to market more broadly and to distribute to a wider base of consumers.<sup>12</sup>

TDE's initial projects were not the most chart successful, but they were imperative toward building its core fanbase that would steer the momentum of hip-hop for years to come.<sup>12</sup> Thus, TDE's focus was not on immediate record sales, but on long-term, sustainable growth,

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<sup>10</sup> "How Anthony Tiffith Built Top Dawg Entertainment into a Powerhouse Label – Stop The Breaks | Independent Music Grind." *Stop The Breaks | Independent Music Grind* -. Accessed October 31, 2018. <https://www.stopthebreaks.com/independent-case-studies/how-anthony-tiffith-built-top-dawg-entertainment-powerhouse-label/>.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas, Datwon. "Kendrick Lamar and Anthony 'Top Dawg' Tiffith on How They Built Hip-Hop's Greatest Indie Label." *Billboard*. September 14, 2017. Accessed October 31, 2018. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/magazine-feature/7964649/kendrick-lamar-anthony-tiffith-interview-billboard-cover-story-2017>.

<sup>12</sup> "How Anthony Tiffith Built Top Dawg Entertainment into a Powerhouse Label – Stop The Breaks | Independent Music Grind." *Stop The Breaks | Independent Music Grind* -. Accessed October 31, 2018. <https://www.stopthebreaks.com/independent-case-studies/how-anthony-tiffith-built-top-dawg-entertainment-powerhouse-label/>.

centered on music that they actually enjoyed and believed in that would be built around the consumers/fans that initially lit the fire for them.

TDE is just one example of how partnerships and long-term growth mindsets are imperative for the success of any artist but especially for an indie label. If a partnership goes sour for an indie label, there may be more ramifications on its survival than a major due to limited capital. But also, independent labels must find a balance between quick monetary gain and long-term development based on the opportunities presented, positioning of the artists, finances, etc.

### *XL Recordings*

XL Recordings has one of the most successful independent rosters to date. In 2017, despite only releasing 9 new albums, the label turned over \$67m for an operating profit of over \$12m.<sup>13</sup> With a heavy hitting roster that includes The White Stripes, Sampha, Vampire Weekend, and most notably, Adele, the independent label is poised to continue its strong position. In 2011, *The Guardian* released a thorough analysis on the strengths of this label. For one, XL, similar to TDE, focuses on music that is usually not what “mainstream” consumers are listening to, rather the sounds they tend to gravitate toward often become the next wave of mainstream sounds.<sup>13</sup> However, they also are hyper focused on who they sign and how many projects they release per year.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jonze, Tim. "XL Recordings, the Record Label That's Tearing up the Rule Book." *The Guardian*. February 16, 2011. Accessed October 31, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2011/feb/16/richard-russell-xl-recordings-dizzee-rascal-prodigy>.

*“We get offered 200,000 unsolicited demos a year and yet only sign about one artist a year. We’re basically saying no to everything, lots of big artists as well. You need an element of fearlessness to do that. It’s basically an anti-business philosophy”—Richard Russell, Owner of XL Recordings (2011)<sup>13</sup>*

Russell, clearly highly values being able to fully invest in artists that are part of the label, hence their selectivity and their small release schedule per year.

Nonetheless, interwoven into the culture of XL, seems to be an artist first mentality, as XL gives their artists incredible control as they firmly believe the artists know how to make and market their music better than anyone else.<sup>13</sup> Russell firmly believes this as he is an artist in his own right, and for most of his career sees himself as a creative in an executive function.<sup>14</sup>

For the scope of this proposal, Russell’s knowledge of the needs of mainstream artists to have an indie label feel with mainstream power and access is a key staple of XL. With a roster full of headliners, he understood that having the capabilities of a major, while being focused was critical to XL’s success:

*“As an artist, what you want is a record label with the musical integrity and the aesthetics of those small indies, but with the drive and ambition of those big labels. They were not typically found in one place. You were getting one thing or the other. But, for the type of artist who was going to be the **best** type of artist, you didn’t really want to*

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<sup>14</sup> Trammell, Matthew. “Richard Russell’s XL Recordings Empire.” *The New Yorker*. October 25, 2017. Accessed October 31, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/05/15/richard-russells-xl-recordings-empire>.



*compromise on either of those things.” --Richard Russell, The New Yorker Interview (2017)<sup>14</sup>*

In conclusion, the key takeaways from XL Recording for the sake of The New Label, are as follows<sup>13,14</sup>:

- The Hybrid Label Model: Major abilities, but indie feel and culture
- Artists 1<sup>st</sup> Mentality
- Sit on what is coming next, not on what is
- Be selective on one’s commitments

## **2.5 Current Music Industry Pain Points: Labels**

Today, music is on the verge of constant disruption. There’s unprecedented access to one’s fans, a huge influx of creatives competing for one’s time, less development from record labels, arguably serious devaluation of music through streaming, and several other issues. This section aims to solely touch on a few of them briefly as they relate to the label.

Labels have a series of issues to tackle but they center around a consistent theme; how does the label position itself to capitalize on the technological advancements in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Where does the label find its place amongst tech companies like Soundcloud, Spotify, Apple Music, & Google? And how does the label maintain its relevance when it no longer holds the keys to music distribution (streaming)?

### **3. Description**

The following project contains three elements: a business plan, a demo mix of songs, and front end of a website.

The business plan is an outline of what The New Label “Family First” will focus on. It details the mission, vision, principles, projected growth models, strengths and weaknesses and other details core to the business. The technology used for it was Google Slides for easy access and to work on it regardless of the hardware. Some parts utilized Microsoft Office Suite’s Excel/Word and were then integrated into Slides once complete.

The demo mix of songs includes a 3-minute master mix of the type of music the label seeks to work with. The song mix highlights tracks in R&B, Hip Hop, & Pop. A 3 minute mix served as enough time to showcase the sounds and the initial artists featured on Family First (Joshua and Matt Maxx). The music was produced in Ableton and recorded across both Ableton and Pro Tools due to producer preferences. The tracks are split between Joshua and Matt Maxx to showcase the general sound and to highlight their versatility as artists.

The third piece is the website front end. As the 3<sup>rd</sup> portion of this Culminating Experience project, it displays what the front end of a label website will look like upon outsourcing to developers. Because coding is not yet a primary skillset, it seemed best to focus on the design of the website.

### **4. Innovative Aspects**

This project is innovative as the sum of all its parts create a unique whole. It is an artist ran label, solely working with artists on a *net monies* basis, which is not standard in

label/management deals. Most almost always take monies on the gross. It is also a label starting with two brothers as the core solo artists for initial development.

An empowerment focus may be the strongest innovative principle of the set because in many ways, it's counter intuitive. When referencing empowerment, the goal of The New Label is to provide such a level of strategic advisory, management, and direction for artists that eventually, they are able to manage and run their own careers apart from the label. The hope is for the label to function as an accelerator for their development as artists, business folk, entrepreneurs, strategists, and thinkers, such that in time they have full autonomy. This could look like their own small label, better management structure, full creative control and discretion. In many ways, it depends on the skills of the artists as some are better positioned to handle their business affairs than others, but the end goal is for each artist to be much farther along in their own autonomy year over year as they work with The New Label to grow in the aforementioned areas.

Last but not least, there are many labels that have a faith focus, especially amongst gospel or Christian contemporary circuits. However, in this context, faith is a language more than anything else. It's a way of seeing the world and understanding that to do well in this industry, an individual has to have faith as statistically the percentage chances of certain opportunities falling one's way are quite low. Even now, the likelihood of certain artists pairing at certain times to create certain monumental works is a level of statistical analysis that is outside the scope of this proposal, but the principle remains.

As a Christian, it's imperative that within the context of this label that faith is as core to the label as it is to daily life, and unlike most Christian labels, The New Label is not constrained to stereotypical artists associated with Christianity or genres, or the assumption of it being a faith

based label, though faith is at the crux of the culture as that's the language, so in that way it is very much so faith based.

## **5. New Skills Acquired**

There were several new skills acquired during the course of this project. Each one will be helpful towards future goals. There is no particular ranking in the listing of these skills or their descriptions.

Musically, there were many skills gained. Expertise in Ableton and extensive production experience were essential for the musical success of this endeavor. The mega mixes were done in Ableton and all music was produced in the software. Comfort in Ableton is essential for future music production and general creative expression as an artist/producer. There were skills gained in mixing, as each of Matt Maxx's songs had to be mixed individually and then again for the mega mix. As a producer, the line between production and mixing continually blurs, so it is of the utmost importance to be skilled in both for artistic needs.

Video production is another skill learned during the Culminating Experience journey, and video production is important for several reasons as a business person and artist: social media, music videos, general brand awareness, etc. Along with video production, front end website design and ideation was a regularly exercised skill with long term usage as the label grows and needs different forms of online presence.

Last, but not least, business plan writing is a fundamental skill as one seeks to launch a new business or expand an old one. Much time was spent working on the thought process around business plan writing, determining what was essential vs. what was non-essential but important.

This is an ongoing skill to work on as more endeavors are initiated in the music space as well as in other industries.

## **6. Challenges**

There were several challenges over the course of the project. The biggest deterrent of success was self-doubt. Many times, there was not security in whether this was a quality idea or initiative worthy of such effort. There were many vacillations due to insecurity in aspects of the business plan, ability to execute it post grad, and confidence as an artist/executive. To overcome, one simply trudged ahead trusting in God that this idea was worth the time and investment. Engaging with community, e.g., family, friends, and advisors, also allowed one to express fears/concerns, while providing space for affirmation, course correction, and prayer. Though a few times, there were thoughts of switching to a more “feasible project”; the final project remained the same. This was largely due to desires to not quit when running into obstacles and believing that this activity will lead to opportunities in the future.

Another big challenge both expected and unexpected was bandwidth and project scope. As a three-part project, each required time but none necessarily overlapped, so each portion was very separate in identity, which caused fatigue and expenditure of more time than anticipated. The only way around this was to manage time more effectively and focus on what was essential to the success of this endeavor, followed by what is the most efficient way to arrive there.

Musical challenges included production and mixing, largely because these were “firsts” as an artist. However, with advice from professors, feedback from peers, and focusing on mixing rap vocals rather than singing vocals, the process was much easier. Mixing and production are

required in today's music ecosystem and the more improvements made in these areas the more cost effective an operation as an artist with more skills done in-house rather than outsourced.

Business plan writing and execution proved to be an unexpected challenge. With a business background, one may not expect that actually putting concepts and ideas on paper both legitimizes and destroys them simultaneously. It becomes easier to visualize what works vs. what still needs improvement. It is a great skill to have as no matter what space is being occupied (e.g., artist, executive, producer).

## **7. Future Ramifications**

The long term plan is for Family First Records to become an independent label with the strength of a major. This is a 10-15 year plan executed with diligence and patience, so there is no sacrifice of culture for growth or community for profit. Upon returning to the United States, Family First Records will begin its launch. The plan is to spend the remainder of 2019 focusing on building a catalogue of music between Joshua and Matt Maxx, and officially launching in the spring of 2020. Within the business plan itself is a full-scale plan for future development and scaling, but in the short term, the focus is on establishing two artists as heavy hitters in the music industry. 2019 will also have a focus on filling out the proper filing and business administrative needs in order to operate in the United States.

After initial steps, it is a matter of hard work and God's grace, which includes, the developing the right team, having strong music, building a brand/presence, and dedication to excellence.

## **8. Conclusion**

Family First Record's goal is to add to the legacy of strong independent artists that focused on artists above themselves. The hope is to utilize the current state of the industry (more opportunities but more competition and need for infrastructure) to help artists launch and sustain their careers over time. In times of more supply (artists), there is inherently more demand for those built to help them, and the New Label, Family First Records, aims to be that place.

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