

U2 go from rock legends to accused spammers

October 11 2014, by Shaun Tandon



Apple CEO Tim Cook (L) greets the crowd with U2 singer Bono (R) during an Apple special event at the Flint Center for the Performing Arts on September 9, 2014 in Cupertino, California

U2 and Apple planned the gesture for maximum publicity—a concert by the Irish megastars at the tech giant's latest product launch, with the surprise that their new album had just been released for free to the world's half-billion iTunes customers.

As physical copies of the [album](#), "Songs of Innocence," go on sale Monday, the band that earned global critical acclaim three decades ago has faced a backlash with some accusing U2 of turning music into spam.

The September 9 free release will still pay off handsomely for the already-wealthy rockers, with several reports saying that Apple has committed \$100 million to distribute the album as part of its promotion campaign for the iPhone 6.

But few predict that U2 has created a new model, with lesser-known bands unlikely to survive by giving away their music. So many people found it presumptuous that the entire world would want U2's album that Apple offered special advice on its website on how to delete it.

"I don't think it was very good marketing. I think that's been proven out by the commentary and the backlash. It was very heavy-handed and inappropriate," said Eric Levin, owner of the independent store Criminal Records in Atlanta.

Levin, who co-founded the annual Record Store Day aimed at promoting local shops, expected little effect from the iTunes giveaway on his sales of "Songs of Innocence." Collectors who seek physical albums, he said, were distinct from casual digital listeners who can easily find free music through streaming services.

"The first major artist that makes a mistake as grand as not providing a physical artifact will be the laughing stock that, in some circles, U2 is today," he said.

The Entertainment Retailers Association, which represents Britain's music sellers, said U2 devalued music and hurt the industry's future.

"U2 have had their career, but if one of the biggest rock bands in the

world are prepared to give away their new album for free, how can we really expect the public to spend 10 pounds (16 dollars) on an album by a newcomer?" the group's chairman, Paul Quirk, said in a statement.



Apple CEO Tim Cook (L) announces the free download of the new U2 album on iTunes as members of U2 look on in Cupertino, California, September 9, 2014

Heavy metal godfather Ozzy Osbourne made a similar argument but was more blunt, telling Britain's Shortlist weekly of U2's move: "It's fucking selfish, really."

Reaching the masses

Clearly many fans enjoyed receiving a free album. Some 26 million people downloaded "Songs of Innocence" in its entirety and another 81

million "experienced" part of it, an Apple executive was quoted as telling Billboard magazine.

U2's frontman Bono described the release as an innovative way to bring a mass audience to his album, which he described as his most personal to date with songs about his late mother and boyhood home.

Bono pointed out that more people had already listened to "Songs of Innocence" than had bought the band's top-selling album, 1987's "The Joshua Tree."

"Just remember this: a lot of Irish blood, sweat and tears went into your junk mail," he said sarcastically in an interview with San Francisco radio station KITS.

Bono, known in recent years for his campaign against global poverty, said that U2 started with an in-your-face punk spirit and that the album release was part of that.



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"You want to be part of the zeitgeist, sometimes you have to smash and grab," said Bono, who dedicated the first song on the album to late punk icon Joey Ramone.

Music industry in flux

U2 is not the first band to experiment with free releases amid the rapid changes in the music industry.

Radiohead in 2007 let fans pay whatever they wanted for album "In Rainbows." But the move by the acclaimed experimental rockers, who

eschew corporate sponsorship, triggered more curiosity than criticism.



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Beyonce last year released her self-titled album without warning on iTunes, causing a public sensation but angering major US retailers Amazon and Target, which initially refused to stock the physical version as it was not out simultaneously. Both are selling "Songs of Innocence."

For the physical edition of "Songs of Innocence," which goes on sale Monday in Europe and Tuesday in the United States, U2 is also releasing a deluxe edition with four additional songs.

In a move that drew even more snickers from critics, U2's label sent out a limited edition on vinyl in late September—just in time to meet the

deadline for Grammy nominations.

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Citation: U2 go from rock legends to accused spammers (2014, October 11) retrieved 12 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-10-u2-legends-accused-spammers.html>

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