

â€œIâ€™m a whore this week. What can I say?â€

Contributed by Victor Tan Chen
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If you happen to be one of those doe-eyed, trusting readers who thought there was no need for alternative media (but why would you be, if youâ€™re reading such a cutting-edge, avant-garde magazine like ITF?) you ought to pay attention to the juicy details coming out of New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzerâ€™s investigation into the â€œpay-for-playâ€ shenanigans that are rife in Radioland. According to an article in the Los Angeles Times, emails unearthed from the inboxes of Sony BMG Music Entertainment execs reveal that the record company shelled out airplane tickets, vacation packages, TV sets, DVD players, laptop computers, cash â€” even, God forbid, blackjack games with Celine Dion â€” to radio station managers who spun the â€œrightâ€ songs.

Willing to play J-Loâ€™s â€œThis Is Me â€ Thenâ€ until your listenersâ€™ eardrums bleed? Help yourself to a 32-inch plasma? Wouldnâ€™t mind spinning Celine Dionâ€™s â€œI Drove All Nightâ€ a couple thousand times a day? Enjoy the travel package in Vegas. (But first, sign right here with your fictitious name and fictitious Social Security number for our fictitious listener contest.)

One station manager boiled it down in an email: â€œIâ€™m a whore this week. What can I say?â€

The folks at a mammoth record company like Sony BMG were not averse to begging and whining like a bunch of teenage groupies to get their songs on the radio. â€œWhat do I have to do to get Audioslave on WKSS this week?!?â€ wrote one employee who was trying to hawk Audioslave â€œLike a Stoneâ€ to a Clear Channel station in 2003. â€œWhatever you can dream up, I can make it happen!!!â€ (Which makes you wonder: How many exclamation points do you need to sell a Britney Spears song?)

But the most bizarre email has to be the one sent by an Epic promotions employee to the person in charge of the record labelâ€™s call-in campaign. What, you may ask, is a â€œcall-in campaignâ€? It seems that Epic would make its interns bombard radio stations with calls, posing as listeners and requesting their favorite songs â€” which happened to be the ones that the label was trying to promote. â€œYou need to rotate your people,â€ the promoter complained to the intern wrangler. â€œMy guess is the inside say that itâ€™s the same couple of girls calling in every week and that they are not inspired enough to be put on the air. Theyâ€™ve got to be excited. They need to be going out, or getting drunk, or going in the hot [tub], or going clubbing â€ You get the idea.â€

It takes two to play, of course. If the record companies were giving out bribes, it seems that some radio stations were more than happy to take â€ and then some. In some of the emails released this week, senior staff members at Sony BMGâ€™s Columbia Records expressed their fears that Clear Channel, the countryâ€™s largest radio station conglomerate, would boycott their labelâ€™s songs unless they ponied up more cash and gifts.

With the secret now out, will the music industry clean up its act? Judging from the amount of damage theyâ€™re taking so far, I wouldnâ€™t hold my breath. (In response to the allegations, Sony BMG has sacked an executive at one of its labels and paid a \$10 million settlement, an amount roughly equivalent to Gwen Stefaniâ€™s weekly dry cleaning bill.) That said, Spitzerâ€™s office is now sniffing into the inboxes of the countryâ€™s other mega-sized radio and record companies, and perhaps more heads will roll. In the meantime, I think Iâ€™ll stick to free streaming audio. Try WFUV.org or Novaplanet.com â€ the former is listener-supported public radio, the latter is French but plays mostly American tunes (added benefit: you wonâ€™t understand the ads).

Now Iâ€™ll go enjoy the plasma TV I got for telling you that.

â€Victor Tan Chen