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Progressive rock caught up with mercantile values: the unknown roots of a “quiet revolution”

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Abstract. The paper focuses on a historical phenomenon that has been little studied: the way in which the music industry, particularly the progressive rock movement that emerged from the counterculture in the 1960s, gradually became subject to the laws of marketing. The roots of this “quiet revolution” are studied starting from the sponsorship negotiated by the Pink Floyd, in 1974, with a famous brand of soft drinks called Gini. The band members agreed that a series of concerts would be partially financed by a multinational company, justifying this choice by the desire to reduce the price of tickets for the fans. While the justification is commendable, it is an essential step towards the triumph of the entertainment society dominated by mercantile values. From this point of view, the Pink Floyd/Gini “affair” can be seen as a key moment for the development of modern marketing.

Keywords. Gini soft drink, marketing, music industry, Pink Floyd, progressive rock, sponsorship.

1. Introduction

In the midst of an international crisis, following Russia’s attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Pink Floyd, or more precisely David Gilmour and Nick Mason, caught the attention of many fans by putting online a piece of music accompanied by a sumptuous guitar solo: “*Hey, Hey, Rise Up!*”. On this track, Pink Floyd use the beautiful voice of Andriy Khlyvnyuk, from the Ukrainian band Boombox, who was wounded on the front line following a mortar burst. In a few hours, hundreds of thousands of downloads on streaming platforms, and several millions after a few weeks, have put back in the center of the game a mythical band, which announced that it wanted to raise funds for humanitarian works (Petridis, 2022). If this selfless intervention has moved the new generations, it is unlikely that they know how much Pink Floyd were criticized almost fifty years earlier for their “compromise” with the marketing system. This “compromise” is undoubtedly the marker of a profound transformation of the cultural industries that will accelerate from the 2000s onwards, making Pink Floyd a precursor band without the members really knowing it.

The Pink Floyd story begins in 1965 in Cambridge, UK. A small underground band among many others, they gave their first major concert in 1967 at the Alexandra Palace in London. Their participation was of a charitable nature as the band members were involved in a fundraiser organized by the counterculture newspaper *International Times*. Pink Floyd then

made their first psychedelic album, *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn* (1967), composed largely by Syd Barrett, singer and guitarist. Adept of hallucinogenic substances, and gradually sinking into madness, Syd Barrett ends up being excluded from Pink Floyd and replaced by David Gilmour on January 26, 1968, during a concert in Southampton. The band then abandons the pure and hard psychedelia for the progressive rock, a movement where we find Genesis, Yes, King Crimson or Soft Machine, among others. Progressive rock is known to be based on the experimentation of new musical forms, in particular with pieces extending over relatively long durations (up to 20 minutes).

In March 1973, the members of the band, now Roger Waters, David Gilmour, Rick Wright and Nick Mason, took a new step with the release of the mythical *Dark Side of the Moon*. Recorded by the sound engineer Alan Parsons, who will later form the *Alan Parsons Project*, the Pink Floyd wanted to get rid of the esoteric lyrics –tainted with multiple symbolic references sometimes incomprehensible– of their previous albums and express themselves in a clear and direct way to reach a wider audience. These texts are mainly written by Roger Waters, who takes the leadership of the band. They deal with madness, politics or the power of finance, especially with the famous “Money”, themes that will remain recurrent in the discography of Pink Floyd. There is thus a clear change of trajectory, which moves the band away from its roots linked to the counterculture. It is at this precise moment that an “affair” will burst in the specialized press: the sponsorship negotiated between Pink Floyd and a well-known brand of soft drinks. For the first time, the world of rock, and particularly of progressive rock, is caught up in the lure of profit and the reign of mercantile values. The article proposes an analysis of this “affair”, largely forgotten and yet synonymous with a major change in the music industry.

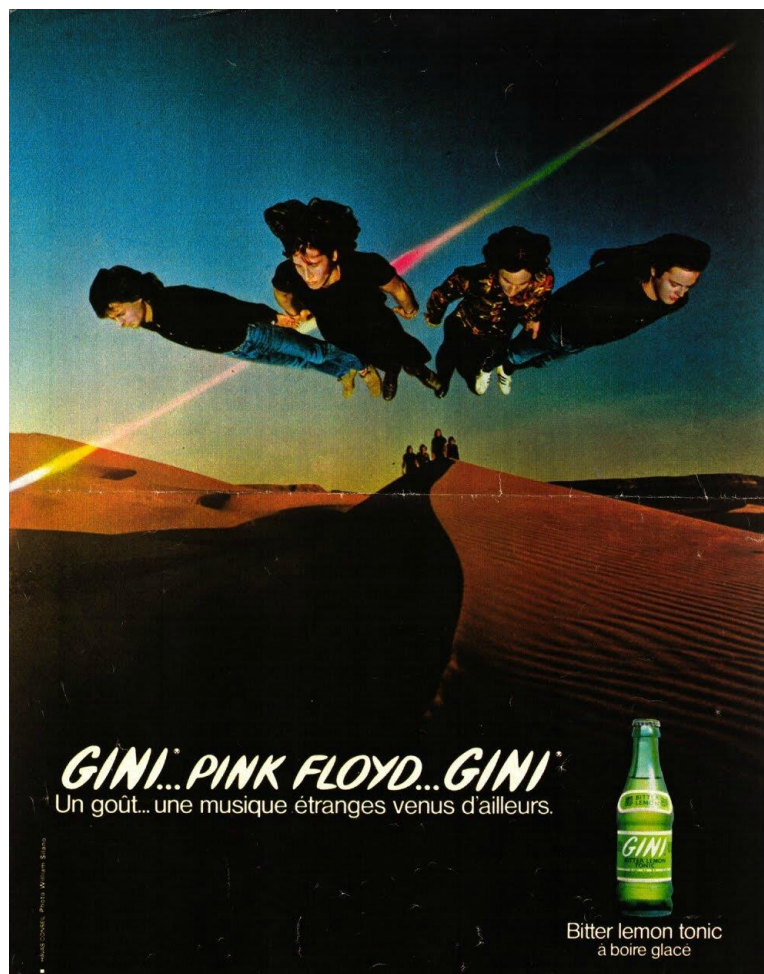
2. Key facts about the Pink Floyd/Gini “affair”

In 1974, Pink Floyd were on the verge of reaching their creative peak (Gonin, 2017), just after the previously mentioned release of *Dark Side of the Moon*. The band members were then contacted to participate in a communication campaign for a French soft drink called Gini, owned by the Compagnie d’Exploitation des Boissons Rafraîchissantes, a subsidiary of Perrier. At first, the Pink Floyd are strongly opposed to the idea of compromising with a symbol of capitalism. We are still in the post-revolutionary period after 1968 and its highly contentious spirit, and it is understood that artists must stay away from any commercial approach, and even more so from direct corporate sponsorship. Aware that they had now acquired the status of planetary “rock stars”, Roger Waters, David Gilmour, Rick Wright and Nick Mason then planned a brief tour in France, a country that had very early shown great enthusiasm for their music, which put forward an anti-consumerism (Albiez, 2003). The objective is to give the opportunity to the French public to hear some new titles in preparation, of which those which will lead to *Wish You Were Here* (1975). The tour has important ambitions in terms of staging, so it raises questions of financing, usually ensured by ticketing.

The agreement proposed by the Compagnie d’Exploitation des Boissons Rafraîchissantes foresees that Pink Floyd appear in a large-scale advertising campaign, that they be paid *intuitu personae*, and that the company also invests in the band’s tour, with a significant presence in the venues where the concerts take place, notably in the form of posters and commercial animations. The advertising campaign includes a number of messages in magazines showing the band, in a pseudo-futuristic style, wandering in a desert (see Picture 1). It is not too strong to speak of an earthquake in the fan communities, who see their band, once symbolizing the underground scene and whose members were writing lyrics

against the financial world, selling its soul to the devil for a contract of a derisory value (barely more than €500,000 of 2022). The Pink Floyd will then do their best to justify the whole operation and plead the unforgivable error to try to ease tensions, like Rick Wright's words in *Rock & Folk* of June 1974, taken up in Gonin's (2017:50) book:

"Gini almost forced us to do it, threatening us, contract and all. But you've got to go back to the beginning to understand it. Steve [O'Rourke, our manager] was sitting on the beach when a guy came and asked for a picture of the Floyd for advertising for Gini. Steve said: 'Ok, that'll be £50,000'. And with one thing leading to another we ended up with an advertising contract without being aware of it because we weren't there. Steve was our manager and was taking care of the financial aspect of the band. Did he make a mistake? Sure. Soon afterward, we realized it had tarnished our image and got people frustrated".



Picture 1. A Gini advertising featuring Pink Floyd
(Source: Compagnie d'Exploitation des Boissons Rafraîchissantes, 1974).

3. Pink Floyd's reply

The specific moment during which the Pink Floyd/Gini "affair" broke out is not the result of a coincidence of calendar, quite the contrary. The band released *Dark Side of the Moon*, which was an incredible phenomenal success (it stayed on the US Billboard album chart for 736 weeks in a row, from 1973 to 1988, and 950 weeks in total). English (2021:4)

sums up its power and beauty: “Just as the single beam of light enters the prism and exits as a rainbow of color on perhaps the most iconic record cover ever, Dark Side of the Moon illustrates how apparently simple things can contain much more than initially meets the eye”. As indicated, Pink Floyd must therefore consider a tour to satisfy fans eager for live performances. But the band members are convinced that the progressive universe they refer to requires a total show, in brief a memorable experience playing on several senses. This requires increasingly heavy technical investments, of which one of the most emblematic symbols is the circular screen, a true trademark of Pink Floyd’s shows from then on. The cost of a show became prohibitive, including logistics, especially since the fan base had greatly expanded, involving large-scale tours on one or more continents.

Roger Waters, David Gilmour, Rick Wright and Nick Mason are then aware of a major risk, the explosion of the price of the tickets, whereas their level is already one of the highest of the moment, at the beginning of the 1970s. With a thinly veiled threat, that of playing in half-empty concert halls. The proposal from the Compagnie d’Exploitation des Boissons Rafraîchissantes to build a Pink Floyd/Gini partnership came at the right time to cover part of the cost of the European tour, especially the French part which will lead the band to play in Colmar, Poitiers, Toulouse, Dijon and Paris (at the Palais des Sports). In other words, and this is the position that will be defended –more or less explicitly– by Pink Floyd at the worst hours of the “affair”, if Gini benefited from an obvious windfall effect, the band could not refuse the sponsorship because it would have been acting against the interest of the fans. This “societal” position will be reinforced by the wide communication made around the transfer of the personal remunerations received from the Compagnie d’Exploitation des Boissons Rafraîchissantes to charity organizations. No doubt in order to make up for this mistake, David Gilmour ostensibly wore a T-shirt bearing the effigy of Guinness beer during the 1974 tour.

4. The origins of a triumphant marketing

As major symbols of progressive rock, many works have emphasized how the Pink Floyd are the initiators of major musical innovations. As Melançon and Carpenter (2015) note, unlike popular music, which Theodor Adorno indicated is by nature formal, repetitive, and static, progressive rock introduces permanent and radical novelty in a break with convention, particularly from the “capitalism of the music industry”. From this point of view, Pink Floyd is an *avant-garde*, which is illustrated in particular through the creation of a total spectacle involving the fan in what is now called a memorable experience (Leppiman and Same, 2011), well before such a theme was widely addressed in marketing, especially in retailing (Boudlaie *et al.*, 2020). In a slightly provocative way, we could say that the Pink Floyd/Gini “affair” testifies to the same concern of the band to position itself at the forefront of the entertainment society penetrated by marketing, even if the accidental dimension of the thing is not contestable.

Indeed, at the time (1974), corporate commercial involvement in the rock universe was virtually unheard of. While the Beatles capitalized in the 1960s on every piece of content they could produce, which included at least one album and one movie per year, Pink Floyd’s obvious connection to the business world suddenly changes the game, just a few months after Led Zeppelin gave us a brilliant lesson in anti-marketing with their album *Led Zeppelin IV* (1971). An album, underlines Aggeri (2018), whose cover does not provide any indication on the band (the members are represented by cabalistic signs), nor on the songs contained, an album that will voluntarily give rise to no promotion... and yet will be sold to 40 million

copies! The Pink Floyd/Gini “affair” is a testimony of a radically different vision which will, at first, deeply disturb the band, before it accepts, in a second time, the new world in emergence. Thus, Roger Waters will compose the title “*Bitter Love*”, never released, in which is evoked a man who sells his soul in the desert, which will not prevent the band from participating in two other advertising campaigns, one for Nurofen, the other for the Volkswagen Golf.

Nick Mason, Pink Floyd’s drummer, involved in March 2022 in the protest song “*Hey, Hey, Rise Up!*”, offers a personal reading of the band’s history (Mason, 2004). For all the fans, it is finally a beautiful history, but which sometimes softens certain significant events. Nick Mason only devotes a few lines to the Pink Floyd/Gini “affair”, anecdotally evoking the mannequins displaying giant signs in Gini’s glory during the 1974 tour. However, without really knowing it, Pink Floyd opened the way to marketing practices that, far from only concerning the music industry, touch all branches of the entertainment society, including its most surprising excesses. The Picture 2 shows an advertisement for the Pink Floyd/Gini “caravan”, published in 1974 in a French magazine for teenagers (since disappeared), where a series of extravagant, not to say stupid, games and staging are proposed to the readers. In 1967, Pink Floyd were one of the pillars of the London underground scene, and seven years later, they are sold as simple soaps in reference to the famous “procterian” model.

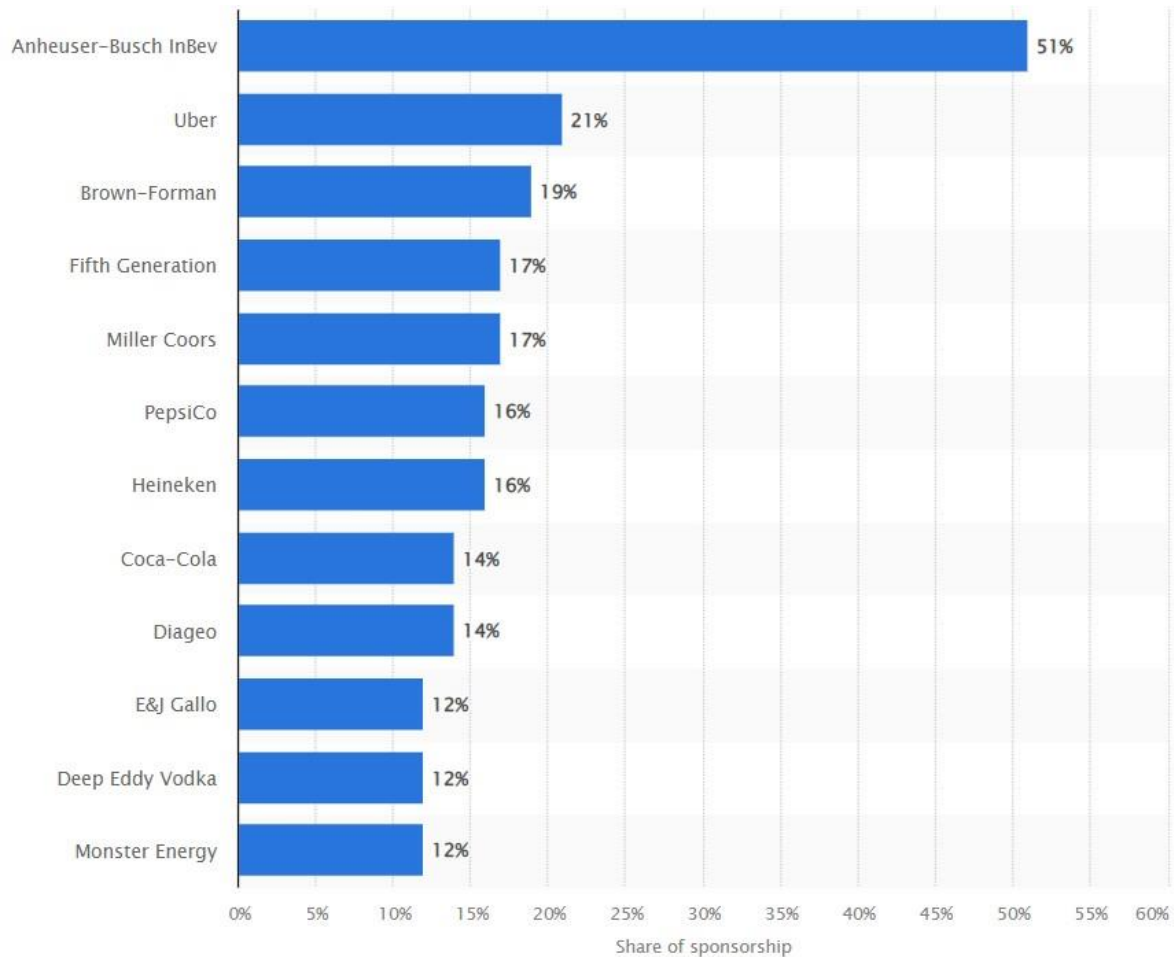


Picture 2. The Pink Floyd/Gini “caravan” during the 1974 tour: an awkward communication (Source: *Hit Magazine*, August 1974).

5. Discussion and conclusion

If we look at today’s rock bands and pop artists, it is hard to imagine that any of them would refuse a commercial contract with a manufacturing or retailing company with significant financial means. Examples have multiplied over the past 15 years, including Jay-Z’s sponsorship of Microsoft for the Windows Phone 8 advertising (a \$2 million contract); Madonna’s sponsorship of Smirnoff for the use of her pop star image (a \$10 million contract); and 50 Cent’s sponsorship of Reebok’s international advertising campaigns (a \$80 million contract). Similarly, sponsorship of music festivals has become a general rule, as shown in Picture 3. It would be easy to criticize Pink Floyd for “betraying the cause” in the context of their partnership with Gini. But it is incongruous to rewrite history after the fact. The music industry is now an essential component of the society of the spectacle, as Debord (1967/2002) anticipated. This society of the spectacle attracts masses of consumers, and to satisfy them,

major investments are indispensable. From this point of view, Pink Floyd understood very early on a “change of paradigm” and they accepted to put a finger in the gear. Should we condemn them for their prescience?



Picture 3. Most active sponsors of music festivals in North America as of August 2017, by share of sponsorship (Source: Statista, 2022).

From a theoretical and managerial point of view, the paper allows us to identify the roots of a form of financing of the music industry that has developed on the basis of new and now dominant business model. Until the early 2000s, rock stars earned about two-thirds of their income from CD sales, and one-third from touring, merchandising and sponsorship. The ratio has largely reversed, especially with the collapse of CD sales. Multinational companies are now positioning themselves as true financial partners in the face of the lack of interest in paid downloads on platforms. Like sportsmen, artists massively associate their image with powerful brands, which poses a major problem: the risk of cannibalization of the artist by the brand. In the middle of the 2000s, the singer Rihanna lent her image or her voice to a dozen products, such as Venus Gillette, LG Chocolate, or CoverGirl cosmetics, causing a feeling of “advertising overdose” of the worst effect.

On the other hand, if the fan recognizes a relevant association between the brand and his/her favorite artist or rock band, he/she will more readily identify with the brand. As

Gwinner and Swanson (2003) underline, the association will depend heavily on sponsor recognition, attitude toward the sponsor and satisfaction with the sponsor. The Pink Floyd's mistake was undoubtedly not to see the incoherence (dissonance) between a universe contesting the established order and that of a soft drink symbolizing financial capitalism. It must be said that Roger Waters, Nick Mason and Rick Wright met in the middle of the 1960s while studying architecture at the Regent Street Polytechnic in London. If they had attended the London School of Economics, like Mick Jagger, taking courses in marketing and communication, perhaps Pink Floyd would have avoided compromising themselves with a product and commercial values that were the antithesis of the worldview proposed to their early fans.

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