



Coffee or lingerie with your music?

Non-traditional retailers getting into the CD business



The reunited Spice Girls (above, from left, Victoria Beckham, Melanie Chisholm, Geri Halliwell, Emma Bunton and Melanie Brown) will sell their CD at Victoria's Secret. (AP photo / June 28, 2007)

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October 28, 2007

The concept is not so strange anymore.

The same place where you can buy a cup of coffee, a pair of jeans or even undergarments is also where you can find the latest sounds by your favorite artists. It's music shopping made easy for those who have neither the time nor the interest to haunt out-of-the-way record shops or big boxes like Best Buy for new tunes.

In recent years, several traditionally non-music companies - Gap, Victoria's Secret and Starbucks chief among them - have thrived in lifestyle music marketing. Typically near the registers, customers find compilations or new albums by established acts. Tina Turner, Paul McCartney and the late Ray Charles - legendary artists whose latest releases ordinarily don't receive much attention from commercial radio - have recently stuck gold and platinum partnering with the coffeehouse chain Starbucks.

As record stores close and as the music industry struggles for relevance in the digital age, such music branding is becoming more ubiquitous.

"There's no doubt the [music] shopping experience has changed for consumers, and that's one of the reasons why traditional music retailers have all but ceased to exist," says Justin Jarvinen, founder of VerveLife, a digital media agency in Chicago. "But many brands have also been opportunistic in their approach."

While customers wait for lattes and muffins, Starbucks plays music overhead - generally amiable rock or warm soul-pop. And if you like what you hear, the CD is near the register. The same idea applies at a retailer like Gap or Victoria's Secret, which will exclusively sell the Spice Girls' greatest hits album in its stores next month. The CD, available nationwide January 14, will feature two new songs from the reunited British group.

It's appropriate that a perfume-scented store filled with lacy women's underwear would feature the cotton-candy sounds of the Spice Girls.

"Creating music for the shopping experience is really no different than creating a soundtrack for a film," says Joe Duffy, founder of Duffy & Partners, a Minnesota-based branding design firm. "There's a desired mood to be set that is appropriate for the personality of the brand. When the brand gets it right, the audience is not only in a more positive purchasing mood, they're also likely to want to add the music to the soundtrack of their life."

Perhaps Starbucks has been the most successful with this idea. The world's largest coffeehouse chain, with 13,168 stores in 40 countries, purchased Hear Music, a Massachusetts-based catalog company, in 1999. Today, the Hear Music brand has four components: the music played in stores and on XM radio, in-store sales, specially branded retail stores, and a label that distributes its own recordings.

The company's biggest success was 2004's surprise hit Genius Loves Company, a Ray Charles CD featuring several collaborations. The album, released the year the soul pioneer died, sold more than 5 million copies worldwide and won eight Grammys. Much of its success can be attributed to Starbucks' strong promotional muscle.

"This extension of music branding to empower companies to sell music directly to consumers is a natural evolution and truly establishes companies as arbiters of musical taste," says Tena Clark, chief creative

officer for DMI Music & Media Solutions, a music branding agency in Pasadena, Calif.

But some say such specialized music branding isn't going to completely change the way most music shoppers get the latest sounds.

"This type of marketing is targeted to a very specific and select group of shoppers who are definitely a minority among today's music consumers," says Diego Mazzoleni, vice president of artist development at Carbon Drum. The Utah-based company specializes in assisting independent artists with marketing, selling and distributing their music. "The person with the intent to buy music will not have Victoria's Secret, Gap or Starbucks as their intended destination. Music sold through these distribution lines will be sold to customers of those businesses who just happened to be tempted to buy a CD while there. These types of retail stores will likely only sell the music of very established bands and music acts."

Starbucks' latest hits come from none other than Sir Paul McCartney and Joni Mitchell, two of pop's most celebrated artists. *Memory Almost Full* - McCartney's debut for the company's Hear Music label, released in June - entered Billboard's pop album charts at No. 3. It was his highest-charting album since 1997's *Flaming Pie*, selling a million copies worldwide. After its release in September, Joni Mitchell's *Shine* entered Billboard's Top 20, her highest album debut in 30 years. It made perfect sense for McCartney and Mitchell to partner with Starbucks. With their albums and the company's other smash sellers, the coffeehouse chain mostly directed its promotion to baby boomers - the ones who still buy entire albums but usually don't haunt music shops for them. And they generally don't spend hours downloading singles from iTunes.

But some say that such music branding still can't compete with the Internet, the chief way many shoppers get the hits of today and yesterday.

"The Internet is quickly becoming and will continue to be the standard for music connoisseurs," says Carbon Drum's Mazzoleni. "It seems rather odd to me to walk into a [music] retail destination where you'd potentially get the question, 'Would you like a bra or a double cappuccino with that?' "