

Record labels play second fiddle to Internet music

What happens when one of the biggest bands in the world are left without a record label? The whole music industry changes. In 2004, Radiohead fulfilled their six-album obligation with EMI. Thom Yorke & Co were free. "It's both liberating and terrifying," said Yorke.

Work on the seventh Radiohead album began in February 2005. The sixth album, *Hail to the Thief*, was released June 2003 to widespread critical acclaim. Its successor, *In Rainbows*, has been one of the most eagerly-awaited albums of the decade, but the music itself is only the beginning.

On September 30, Radiohead's website www.inrainbows.com was updated to take orders for the new album. The band's other website (www.radiohead.com/deadairspace/) announced on October 1 that the album was finished.

In true non-conformist style, fans were presented two options: one, a limited-edition, UK£40 vinyl disc box; the other, a digital download of the full album – with no price.

The deal was, and still is, that the album is available for download and that when fans order it, they choose how much they want to pay, from nothing up to UK£100.

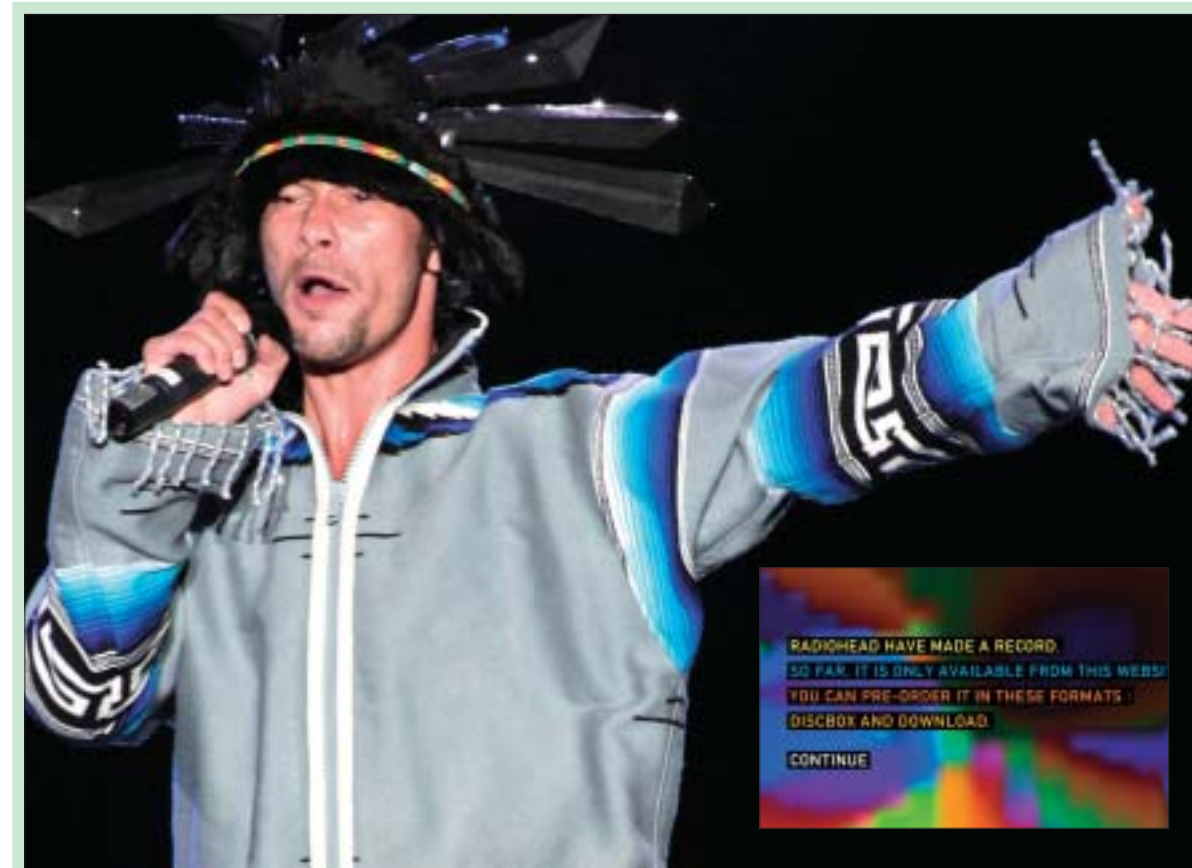
Radiohead have asked their fans to determine what they think the band's music is worth. The move throws the high price of CDs out the window and poses so many challenges to how people perceive the music business that record executives are beginning to panic.

Here are Radiohead, a band of 15 years and four number-one albums in the UK, asking how much music should be worth.

Not a single copy of *In Rainbows* was sent to the media and the album wasn't leaked online before its release.

Tracks from the album have been heard since mid-2006 during Radiohead's tours, but the band didn't finish it until June this year.

On October 10, anyone who had pre-ordered the album from www.inrainbows.com was sent a link by email through which the album could be downloaded. After the long wait, fans were



Above: Jamiroquai frontman Jason "Jay" Kay is one of many leading music artists to have voiced his dislike for the current music industry and vowed to release music without a record label.

Inset: Digital-music downloads have come to replace CD buying, but while record labels continue to lash out against illegal file sharing, bands such as Radiohead are shaking up the music industry by ditching their labels and making their music available only on the Internet.

itching to hear what the final version of the album sounded like. It could be described as a modern masterpiece.

The 10 tracks are somber, dark, moody and stirring. The collection revisits each of the previous six albums, but it's far more advanced than all combined. The opening track, *15 Step*, could have come from Thom Yorke's solo album *The Eraser*, with its familiar drum patterns.

Bodysnatchers is low-fi, strange rock hinting at the experimental period of their earlier *The Bends* album, with distorted drums and guitars.

The opening gambit of *In Rainbows* is ugly and unsettling, but it's when you get further into

the album with tracks such as *Nude* that you start feeling a little more comfortable with it.

Thom Yorke's vocals are what ultimately make a Radiohead album complete and here they will make you want to either weep or pull your hair out, or both.

Considering the media hype surrounding the album, it would be easy for the end product to fall short of fans' expectations. Instead, it encompasses everything that is Radiohead. *House of Cards* presents further experimentation, in an almost pop-ballad manner.

The highlight of the album is *Videotape*, which uses simple, repeated keys glistening beneath Yorke's sweet vocals with an awkward drum roll penetrating the sound. It's a tearjerker and live versions of the track have

already generated in excess of 100,000 views on YouTube.

The album is a worthy seventh studio offering. We won't be able to assess the impressiveness of the album until it's firmly settled itself in our minds. As with any Radiohead album, judging it takes time, but let's just say that this one is special.

With no one track being pushed as the lead single, radio stations are being forced to choose which songs they want to play.

The choices made by fans in their ordering of the album, by the media in how they react to the album, by the music industry in how it responds to the album, and by radio stations in what they play from the album – are all reshaping the music scene.

The tides are changing.

Rock band Nine Inch Nails have announced that their new LP will be released online and fans will choose what to pay for the album after the band dropped its latest record label TVT.

Nine Inch Nails' long-running dispute with record labels led frontman Trent Reznor, who pens all of the bands music, to tell fans "steal our music" at a show in Australia. Label bosses are terrified as major bands are following suit.

British bands Oasis and Jamiroquai are said to be considering offering their music for free. Jamiroquai frontman Jason "Jay" Kay has been very vocal about his distaste for the current music industry after a high-profile dispute with former label Sony Music over how marketing has come to take precedence over music.

The next Oasis single, *Lord Don't Slow Me Down*, will be available by download only from www.oasisinet.com

The way people get their music changed as soon as the Internet became widely available and CD burners affordable. The drive to download free music was a direct reaction to the high cost of buying CDs. Just walk through Patong to see this effect.

Online music stores such as iTunes and the newly-launched Amazon MP3 have also cut into CD sales, but the music industry is still reeling from how freely available music is.

In March, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that revenue generated by the music industry was down 25% compared with 2006, although download sales jumped 50%.

The industry recently hit back at music-sharing websites with the landmark ruling that American Jammie Thomas must pay US\$220,000 in compensation to six major record labels for sharing 24 songs on popular file-sharing service Kazaa.

But the question remains: with bands releasing music on their own, do we need record labels any more?

Good Vibes

By Matt Crook

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