MEDIA & ENTERTAINMENT

I Feel the Earth Moving Under My Feet

Seismic Shifts in the Music Industry, From DIY Content to Artificial Intelligence

The music industry faces unprecedented disruption… again.

First, starting in the late 1990s with file sharing services, peer-to-peer piracy, the unbundling of the album, and the decline both of physical media and physical retail stores—and then in the 2010s, with Spotify and streaming platforms' "all-you-can-eat" offerings, which replaced purchases and collections. The next tectonic business shift is upon us, driven by the direct-to-consumer creator economy and their disintermediation of traditional music companies.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and its vast creative and publishing capabilities are further enabling independent and direct distribution but are also creating opportunities for established companies to drive transformation, operational strength, and profitability.

The advantage the music industry leaders today have is their tremendous resources to test, invest, and capture artificial intelligence and machine learning (ML)-assisted benefits in ways impossible even just a few quarters ago.

This paper will outline trends impacting the economics of the music industry today and provide a view of key actions the major labels and publishers can take, from **foundational readiness** to implementing AI-enabled **vision**, **strategy**, and **efficiency**, in order to position them to benefit from these seismic industry trends.

Areas of Opportunity in Music

Foundational Readiness

Getting the "house in order" to streamline operations and lay the necessary foundations for competitiveness, AI, and automation

Visionary Integrations

Rethinking AI-fueled business models, content sources, value chains, audience relationships, and partner ecosystems

Strategic Integrations

Optimizing data insights, finer marketing, and audience-building for new AI-enabled trendspotting and strategic IP exploitation

Efficiency Integrations

Driving cost-savings and speed-to-market benefits with AI tools across the business

Key Trends and a Changing Landscape

Market developments have changed how music companies launch content, brands, and ecosystems. When companies look at the imperatives for success for the coming AI era—from ***visionary*** to ***foundational***—they must address the larger context and challenges facing the wider industry.

Data Challenges and Opportunities

Long gone are the days of relatively limited data sets, consisting primarily of physical album retail sales, radio play, and chart rankings. Coupled with legacy metrics are now the vast troves of new data, the volume of which is almost unimaginable. Synchtank reported in 2021 that data created and processed by music labels and publishers had grown by 4,500% over the previous decade.[1] This includes millions, sometimes tens of millions, of daily data points from social media, streaming, radio, and retail, as well as performance tracking across millions of assets, albums, and songs from artists.

Creating a real-time view remains a considerable challenge across first- and third-party data sets, the various and proliferating social channels, as well as aggregated global platforms. In the era ahead, the companies that run toward their data strategy with thoughtfulness and disciple, rather than deferring it, will gain competitive advantage and, likely, outsized returns.

Legacy Systems

The music industry has consolidated over time and through a myriad of acquisitions, creating a complex web of often fragmented software, platforms, and legacy systems. Traditionally, many of the necessary workflows from editing to IP management have been disjointed and inefficient, and home-grown systems have struggled to keep pace. Persistent manual processes and paper-based workflows further slow operations and limit scalability.

Whether addressing interoperability across systems or outright modernization of fundamental solutions like royalty management or CRM, the time is now to fortify the building blocks upon which AI and ML will operate. The transition from patchwork legacy systems to AI-enhanced systems and workflows will define the next era of efficiency and innovation in music.

Indie and Technology M&A

In tandem with the rise of the creator economy has been the rise of independent labels. In fact, MIDiA reported that "non-major" labels and self-releasing artists expanded market share to 29.7% in 2024.[2] Further, Chartmetric reports that in 2024 artists that were self-published, independent, or on small labels accounted for 41% of the top 1,000 top artists, versus 13% five years ago.[3] Artists like Connor Price, with his "DIY approach" and "Spin the Globe" popular collaborations, are choosing to stay independent[4]—while others like Jelly Roll built up significant bargaining power as an independent artist to negotiate favorable terms with partners.[5]

In response, major labels and publishers have honed M&A on indie labels and their emerging talent. Examples of recent acquisitions by the Big Three (UMG, SMG, WMG) include [PIAS] Group, Downtown Music Holding, Supraphon, and Tempo Music Holdings, to name a few. While this is not a new phenomenon, the pace of new labels and their acquisitions by the majors have significantly increased with the thriving creator economy.

Further M&A activity has focused on building capabilities and modernizing systems in the emerging AI era. Major players are focusing more and more on technology-driven M&A for architecture, data analytics, automation, AI talent, and market extensions/adjacencies. For example, WMG invested in AI music generator Lifescore, avatar-led digital fashion company DRESSX, and an AI-enabled gaming platform Roblox. Likewise, SMG invested in the music creation platform Tully, the social platform Fave, and a mentorship and funding program for emerging talent called Techstars Music.[6]

In using M&A as a lever to protect and grow the capabilities with these industry-disrupting technologies, it is crucial that there is targeted focus, along with post-merger discipline to speed and smooth each M&A journey.

PE has its own playbook on profit-extraction, something the Majors would do well to consider moving forward

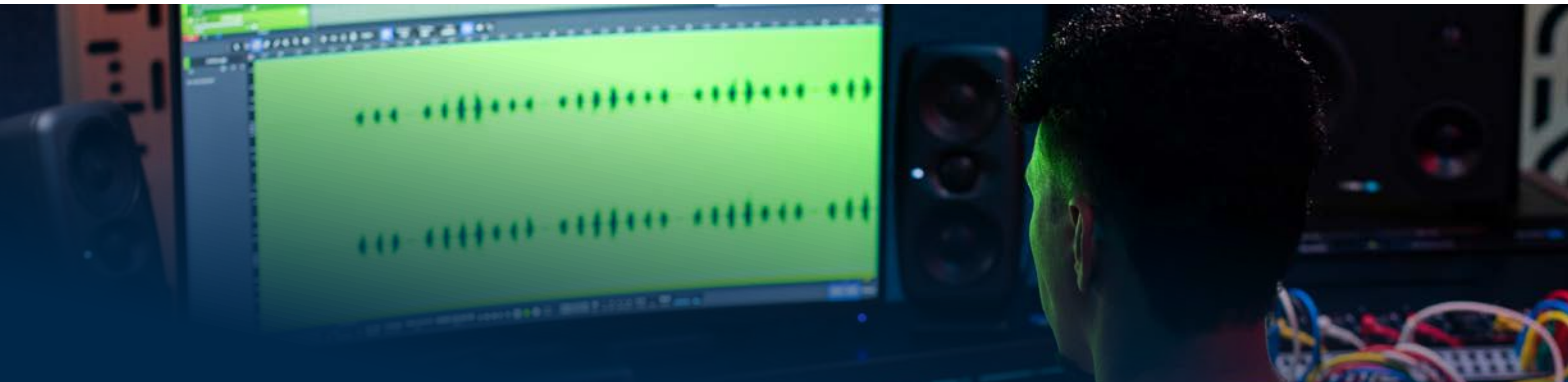
PE and Profit Focus

Like the Majors' M&A push, private equity has been moving at a record-breaking pace. In addition to deals with landmark music catalogs, many in the PE community have been investing in AI-enabled music workflow, royalty management, and other technology companies such as LANDR (AI mastering), Native Instruments (virtual studio software and hardware), and Splice (AI search and tools).[7] Others, like Providence Partners, are making placements across all facets of the industry, from live music and mega-tours for superstars (Global Critical Logistics) to venue operations (ATG Entertainment) and musical instrumentation (Sweetwater).[8]

PE has its own playbook on profit-extraction, something the Majors would do well to consider moving forward. In uncertain circumstances, it is paramount to make the most of acquisitions—rather than keeping them standalone or siloed.

Blockchain Early Days

With the proliferation of digital streaming and social media platforms, reconciling and managing rights has become exponentially more complex and costly. Ledger-based blockchain can play a key role in the future of IP and royalty management. Platforms like Ujo Music and Revelator use blockchain to register IP rights immutably, reducing downstream disputes and creating a single source of truth within their closed ecosystem. Upstarts without legacy system constraints will continue to integrate blockchain more fully than players with mature installed bases of IP management, royalty management, CRM, and other key solutions. Yet, as the technology moves from newcomers to more mainstream, it may be worth outlining incremental and pilot use cases for even the most established industry players.



Areas of Opportunity in Music

Against this backdrop of complexity and fast-paced change, a new AI-fueled model is emerging that can recast a company's top- and bottom-line. With AI-driven optimization and real-time decision-making, benefits for the music industry can range from renewed catalog exploitation and labor efficiencies to faster time-to-market and operational efficiencies. To exploit opportunities, A&M outlines key actions for the industry, from ***foundational readiness*** to ***visionary***, ***strategic***, and ***efficient*** AI-led integrations.

- Foundational Readiness
- Strategic Integrations
- Visionary Integrations
- Efficiency Integrations

> The usefulness and output of AI and ML training systems is only as good as the underlying data, metadata, and content.

Foundational Readiness

Content and Metadata Tagging and Mapping

AI and ML models can bring new business efficiencies, operational automation, and market expansion opportunities. However, the usefulness and output of AI and ML training systems is only as good as the underlying data, metadata, and content. For example, “dirty” data rife with errors, inconsistencies, and missing information can be omitted or skewed in AI and ML training models. And, if records, contracts, or content remain untagged, they may not be included in predictive analysis or automated tasks.

Thus, a key foundational step for any major music company needs to be to prioritize and fund its enterprisewide data strategy and ensure the comprehensiveness and accuracy of metadata and content. AI and automation can help in this transition and accelerate the pace of change. In the pre-AI revolution, data was often buried amidst diverse, siloed systems, or even manual spreadsheets. Now AI can be trained to identify, organize, and orchestrate metadata and content, even bridging the gulf between structured versus unstructured data.

The benefits of fully orchestrated content, metadata, and data can accrue quickly. Powered with a holistic view of content and data, top-line benefits include catalog optimization, deeper monetization of back catalogs, predictive content resurfacing, and automated licensing workflows. Bottom-line benefits include labor-efficiencies, better archival management, and rights reconciliation. With concerted and thoughtful attention, data and metadata in the AI-era become material corporate assets.

Cloud-Based Royalty Solutions

To move toward a verifiable single source of truth with IP, the music industry needs to move beyond legacy rights and royalty systems, which are often based on older technologies that lack automation and AI functionality. Cloud-based royalty solutions can address some of the most historically vexing problems as they synchronize and immediately make available licensing and contractual details to authorized users. There is no lag time from reconciling different systems or manual juggling of spreadsheets.

The benefits of cloud royalty solutions with AI features include faster ingested revenue data, reduced suspended revenue, as well as allowing interoperability needed for effective financial modeling, complex pricing, licensing, and distribution strategies. Further, with more real-time information, labels can better exploit zeitgeist moments, ancillary offerings, or influencer collaborations. Royalty management systems are arguably the lifeblood of the music industry. If hindered by outdated or patchwork solutions, labels and publishers will have limited access to AI benefits and likely leave sizeable money on the table.

State-of-the-Art CRM

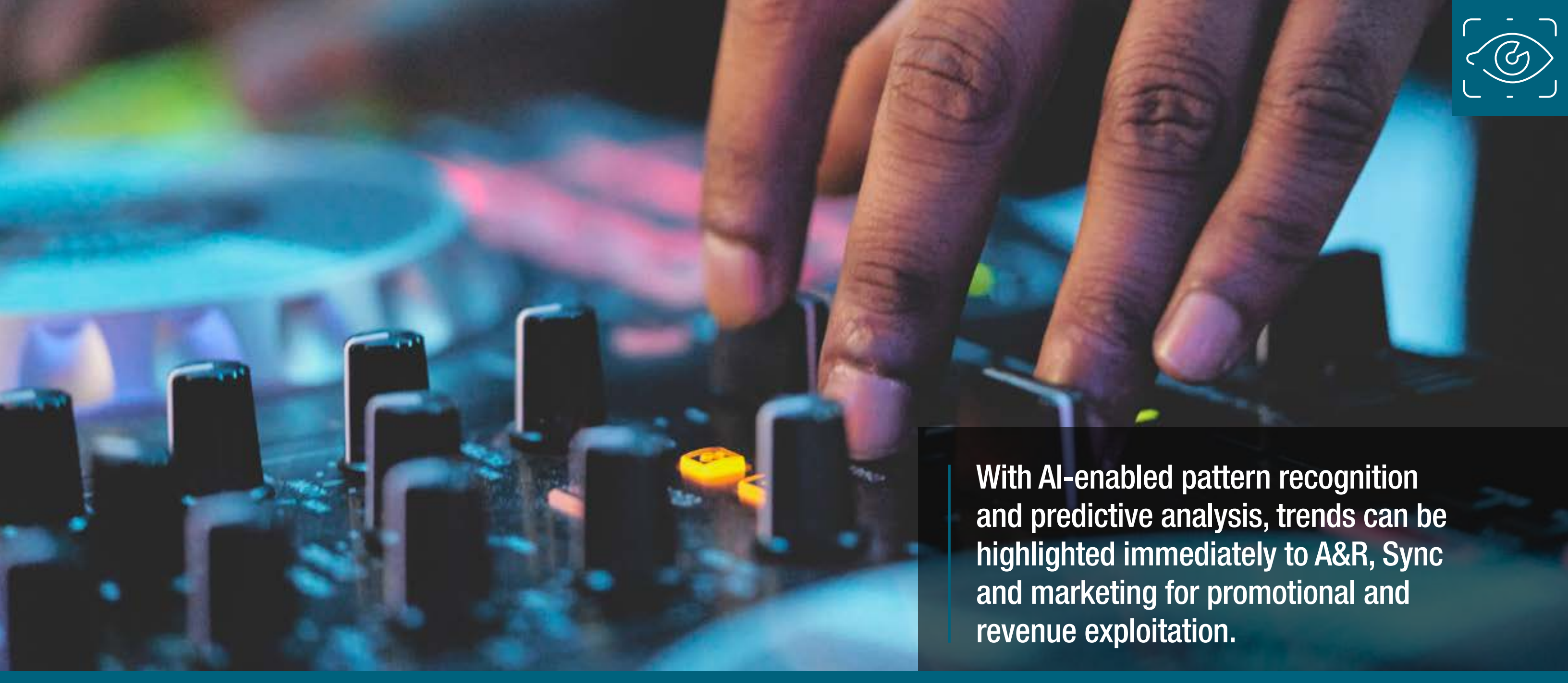
Customer relationship management (CRM) solutions are indispensable for tracking a myriad of interactions with artists, fans, partners, and clients. Assessing and migrating to a modernized CRM system must be an immediate imperative for major music companies, given the crucial first-party data that can underpin AI- and ML-driven commercialization programs.

The benefits of a modern music CRM system include better cross-department visibility, access to real-time trends, deal terms, artist interactions, and fan campaigns as well as decision-support for market expansion, long-tail catalog exploitation, collaborative partner marketing, and more. In addition, state-of-the-art CRM systems can support new business models such as a CRM-driven self-service portal for artists, offering transparency and trend information in support of more collaborative campaigns and content. Companies that prioritize state-of-the-art CRM will be best positioned for AI and ML revenue-optimization.

Foundational Readiness

Capturing the fullest value from AI and ML integrations requires getting the proverbial “house in order.” What is your *foundational readiness* with programs, budgets, and resources devoted to:

- Content and metadata tagging and mapping
- Cloud-based royalty solutions
- State-of-the-art CRM



With AI-enabled pattern recognition and predictive analysis, trends can be highlighted immediately to A&R, Sync and marketing for promotional and revenue exploitation.

Visionary Integrations

Trendspotting with AI

AI- and ML-optimized data models will allow music labels and publishers to spot and capitalize on trends in nearly real time, sourcing unstructured public data as never before from social media, diverse influencers, pop culture, global economic indicators, and more. For example, AI tools can do large-scale natural language programming and visual detection, allowing a company new ways to customize their direct-to-consumer (DTC) or partner marketing by finer slices, including by audience moods, emotions, and feelings.

For illustration, we can revisit the song “Dreams” by Fleetwood Mac, which garnered a multitude of new fans and millions of streams when Nathan Apodaca posted a video on TikTok singing along while skateboarding.[9] With AI-enabled behavioral pattern-recognition and predictive analytical tools, trends (big and niche alike) within social media can be highlighted immediately to Sync and other teams for promotional and revenue exploitation. Paired with executive decisioning dashboards and scenario rules, music companies can speed time to revenues.

The benefits of trendspotting remain manifold and include enabling early A&R signings, optimizing revenue through predictive audience modeling, aligning social sentiment tracking with targeted Sync promotions, faster fan activations, or activating on-point artist campaigns before a zeitgeist moment passes. Music labels and publishers who reimagine how AI can accelerate the market tracking and decision-making will see dividends to their top line well into the future.

Creativity-Enhancing AI

Music labels and publishers, like other creative sectors, are in an existential battle regarding AI-generated synthetic content. In this early era of the AI revolution, the creative community is charged with describing, defending, even quantifying, the value of human creativity over fully AI-generated content. The issue is exemplified by companies like Suno, which use AI to fully generate songs including lyrics, vocals, and instruments across multiple genres and moods. Not to mention the first AI-generated hit song Neon Dreams in 2024, which surprised music-lovers with its “nuance and layers”[10] or Billboard’s recent report that “at least six AI or AI-assisted artists” debuted on various charts.[11]

Against this fast-moving backdrop, major music companies and their AI boards must articulate clear use cases of AI-enabled content such as synthetic cloning, digital twins, automated music generation, and machine-led restoration of archives. Having AI ethics, operations, and governance in the C-suite will be commonplace in the years ahead to shepherd benefits, but this interim period will be fraught with conflicting positions and practices within each music company.

Parallel to these existential conversations, there can and should be immediate incorporation of practical production and human creativity-enhancing AI workflow tools. The benefits in the very near term will be faster production cycles, labor efficiencies, and automation support while offering novel options and intelligent sampling to mixing assistance and localization refinement. Human-led creativity will be enhanced, sped up, and made more efficient, all affecting the bottom line for the better. With new AI assistance and automation software, producers, editors, and business users can enhance output and quality across the value chain.

Results-Oriented M&A

In this era of change, music companies will continue to seek new markets, efficiencies, technologies, and talent through M&A. However, risks can be high if a company is without clear strategic intentions and well-coordinated integrations.

Systematic procedures along the M&A journey will be the key to success, whether the value of a transaction comes from cost savings, revenue enhancements, or operations improvements. For post-merger success, companies need to prepare and execute seamlessly against pre-close designed playbooks and resist leaving new acquisitions as standalone and siloed entities. The A&M post-merger playbook outlines key steps for results-oriented integrations, including a synergy realization plan and clear objectives, priorities, and ROI-driven initiatives.

A&M studies show that a successful post-merger integration will deliver 90% of the results in the first 12 months,[11] so clarity and speed will be a priority. AI can be a potent tool for recognizing and realizing ROI from M&A targets. For example, with the help of AI, identifying and profiling M&A candidates can become finer and faster. Further, AI-enabled tools can model the joint combinations and outcomes for sharper ROI and valuation estimates. The benefits to applied AI tools within M&A programs is more custom and actionable analyses, higher confidence in a merger combination, and clearer ROI. M&A stakes are high in the early AI era, and the benefits or failings accrue quickly.

> **M&A stakes are high in the early AI era, and the benefits or failings accrue quickly.**

AI-Driven Partnership Networks

In this nascent AI period, strategic partnerships—like M&A and organic experimentation—are an important lever. Partner networks are being reset across the board and the value of strategic partnerships, executed with clear goals and strong governance, can be compelling. Analysis on thousands of partnerships revealed organizations that actively pursue partnerships experience an average increase of 20% in revenue growth compared to more standalone counterparts.[13]

In A&M's white paper entitled "Choose Your Own Adventure: Five Partnerships Models Between Media & Entertainment and Artificial Intelligence Companies,"[14] five partnership archetypes are outlined between media and AI companies. Read the full paper to learn if you should be The Inventor, The Integrator, The Double Down, Feeding the Beast, or The Hedge.

Visionary Integrations

AI tools will be the key lever for music companies to supercharge their business models, value chains, audience relationships, and partner ecosystems. What is your readiness with *visionary* programs, budgets, and resources devoted to:

- Trendspotting with AI tools for A&R, Sync, marketing, and more
- Creativity-enhancing AI
- Results-oriented M&A
- AI-driven partnership networks

Strategic Integrations

Machine Learning for Data Insights

The ability to use AI and ML to parse and bring order to the data deluge can yield top- and bottom-line control and accretive value. Benefits can include unique trend and pattern recognition, actionable insights for market expansion, marketing spend optimization, identification of "super fans" for ancillary content offers, cross-promotion of artists to micro-communities, and much more.

With ML training solutions in mind, private first-party data may be architected to combine with public AI models for unique refinement of decisions, insights, and strategies. Of course, companies will have to risk-balance their tools and determine the correct integrations between safeguarded private models and open AI public systems. Each company will need to determine its comfort with any information inside open testing/training realms. Speed is on the side of publicly available tools, but the risks inherent include lack of custom firewalls, guardrails, and privacy controls. While privately controlled and customized tools are most ideal on the risk continuum, the delay in implementation can be costly in market standing and achievement of benefits.

Turning today's troves of data into actionable insights will be a defining—and perhaps the most important—characteristic of the AI era.

AI-Optimized Targeting

While traditional direct-to-consumer (DTC) marketing has taken a back seat to business-to-business (B2B) sales enablement, there is ongoing movement toward more DTC activations and artist campaigns with fans. Artists and labels are making fan engagement a priority, with examples including the high-profile Myles Smith virtual concerts in the video game Fortnite, enabled by SMG and RCA UK. In summarizing another DTC campaign for Tyler, the Creator, a SMG executive described their goal as "direct-to-consumer and one-to-one marketing in real time around the world."[15]

The top-line benefits of AI-powered marketing optimization will accrue from finer audience segmentation, look-alike testing, dynamic pricing, and more precise personalization. Further, new AI-enabled business models can be assessed and developed. For example, labels, publishers, and their streaming partners can use analytics to identify super fans of an artist for finer marketing, promotions, and upselling—for joint benefit through revenue splits.

> **Turning today's troves of data into actionable insights will be a defining—and perhaps the most important—characteristic of the AI era.**

Goldman Sachs forecasted that "super-premium" tiers that would provide exclusive access and additional content for the 20% of super-fans could drive $4.5 billion per year in additional flat fees, upselling, and exclusive offers.[16] Whether focused on developing new segments, personalization or cost-displacement, myriad AI-enabled marketing and targeting use cases bolster the bottom line.

AI-Enabled Monetization

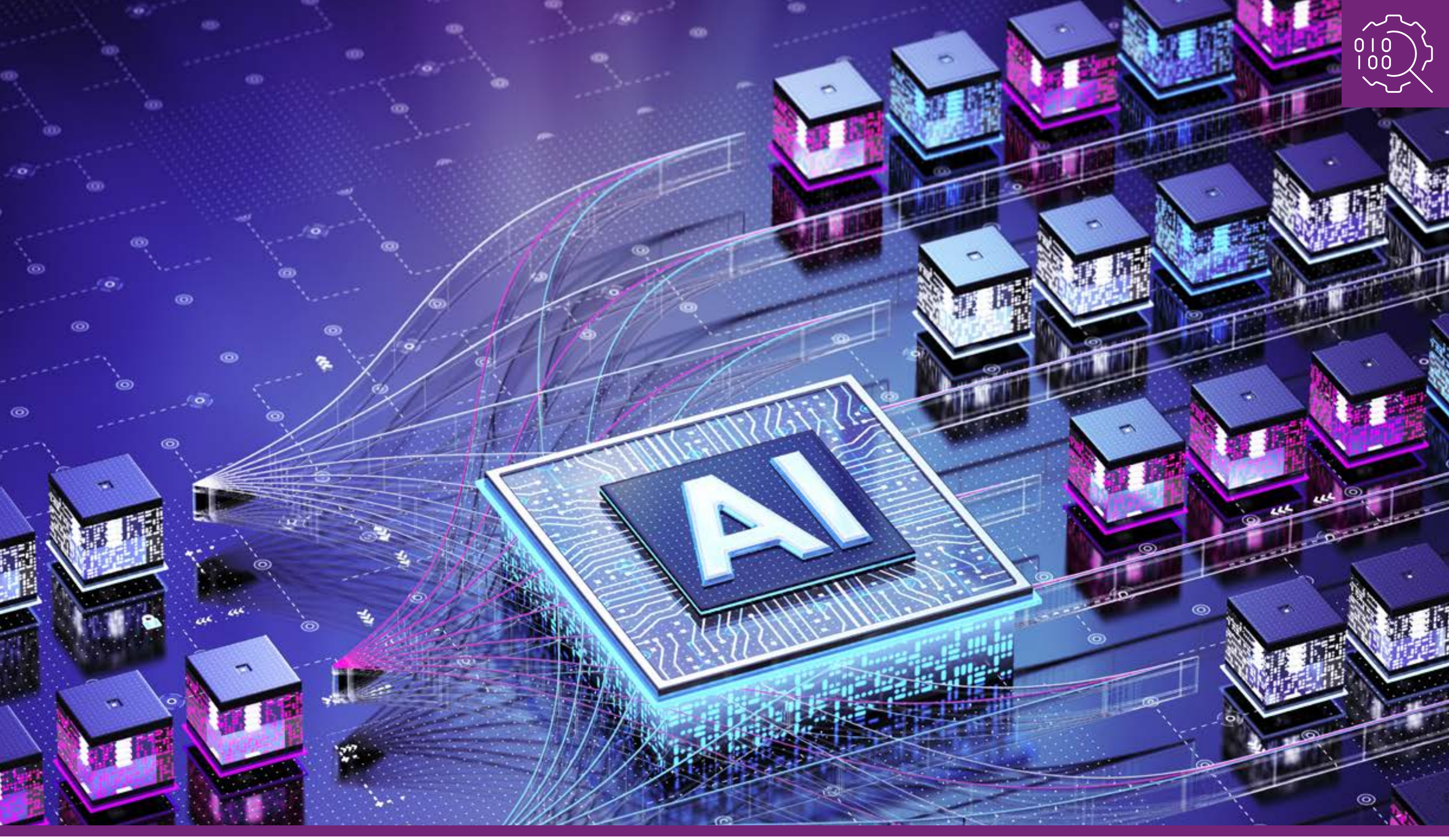
With AI, new possibilities arise for deep catalog, micro-licensing, and long-tail maximization—without incremental resources or cost. For example, Sync licensing can be improved with AI's ability to automatically tag and organize a back catalog of millions of songs and pieces of music. AI can magnify the richness of data and allow an advertiser, movie producer, or social influencer to find the right song for the right environment at the right time. Instead of relying on a sales team knowledge of the library, data can be added by AI and ML on emotions, sensibility, tempo, tone, message alignment, and so much more to find the perfect song or composition at the point of demand.

Further, AI can speed time to revenue by supporting the underpinning business processes. For example, AI and ML tools can be trained to support business affairs teams and reduce the time for contract-entry and rights reconciliation. A training model can read contracts and establish logic, as well as convert old code, build queries, generate reports, and do deep asset-tagging necessary for downstream distribution. In this and myriad other use cases, AI can identify source assets, generate key data, establish patterns, and tag content-ready for distribution and monetization. These illustrations all speed up A&R, licensing, and other time-sensitive paths to ROI.

Strategic Integrations

Music labels and publishers have a tremendous opportunity to utilize AI and machine learning for optimized data insights, finer marketing and audience-building, new forms of trendspotting, and strategic catalog exploitation. What is your readiness with strategic AI programs, budgets and resources devoted to:

- Machine learning for data insights
- AI-enabled targeting
- AI-enabled monetization and new business models



Efficiency Integrations

AI-Supported Production Workflows

Whether in finishing, editing, effects, asset transformation, mastering, or versioning, AI-assisted creative tools can enhance output and create cost savings throughout the production process. There are immediate entry paths for AI integration, including enterprise-grade technology partners who have added AI features within their installed solutions. For example, companies like FL Studio and Native Instruments have updated software offerings for digital audio workstations (DAW) with AI-enabled productivity tools that require little training.

Music companies can immediately leverage embedded partners while cultivating new internal team skills—for production, creative, and marketing teams. The far-ranging benefits include labor efficiency, production speed, long-tail restoration, localization, versioning, geographic expansion, and more.

> **AI has far-reaching benefits including labor efficiency, production speed, long-tail restoration, localization, versioning, geographic expansion, and more.**

Keeping an Eye on Blockchain

While decentralized ledger-based implementations and blockchain-driven approaches are not yet common with the major labels and publishers, these systems, boosted by AI, have the potential to address common systemic issues in the music industry, such as smart contracts, royalty distribution, and licensing audits. Even legacy companies ought to watch how blockchain may couple with AI to support use cases like automated licensing and real-time payments without human intervention and for added transparency and scale. Even if mass adoption of the Majors is delayed, the possibility of incremental use cases remains an open possibility.

Efficency Integrations

AI-enabled cost-efficiency and speed-to-market benefits for music span all areas of the workflow, from editing support and automated localization to long-tail catalog optimization. What is your readiness with *efficiency-oriented* AI deployments, budgets, and resources devoted to:

- AI-supported production workflows
- Keeping an eye on blockchain and new technologies

Conclusion

Music Is Rapidly Changing. Are You?

The music industry continues to change at what feels like accelerating speed. Consumers and artists alike are demanding new avenues for their musical journeys, in ways both challenging and opportunity-rich for the major players. While it might be more comfortable to take a "lean back" stance, at this inflection point the risks are simply too high.

Competitive advantage in this hyper-dynamic era will hinge on experimentation, investments, and integration of AI and ML across the business—from ***Foundational*** and ***Efficient*** to ***Visionary*** and ***Strategic***.

Major labels and publishers have the resources and relationships needed to exploit the top- and bottom-line benefits from AI—and the sooner action is taken, the sooner benefits are realized. The market leaders of tomorrow will be determined by which companies rigorously envision and build the AI landscape and their role within it. With "the earth moving under our feet," now is the time to fortify a market foothold.

A&M's Media and Entertainment Results

From ***Foundational*** performance improvements to ***Visionary*** scenario-planning, the M&E practice at Alvarez & Marsal is expert at delivering results for the music industry. In fact, Forbes Magazine writes that A&M holds exemplary strengths in turnaround management and performance improvement, benefiting all companies facing endemic and widespread change.[17]

Across the music industry, A&M's Media & Entertainment practice has worked with major media companies, including music labels and publishers, to enable operational effectiveness, explore new revenue models, adapt to fast-evolving industry trends, and optimize AI-led enterprise capabilities.

With projects ranging from large scale transformation, cost optimization, content enablement and creation, and supply chain modernization, to rethinking the fan relationship, catalog management, and new sources of IP monetization, A&M brings its unique bottom-line and result-oriented solutions.

	Imperatives for Music	A&M Client Implementations
Foundational Readiness	■ Content and metadata strategy ■ Cloud-based royalty solutions ■ State-of-the-art CRM	■ Content production strategy ■ IP analytics and advisory services ■ Technology platform modernization
Visionary Integrations	■ Trendspotting with AI ■ Creativity-enhancing AI ■ Results-oriented M&A ■ AI partnership networks	■ Marketing optimization services ■ Digital and technology services ■ Corporate M&A services ■ CFO services and post-merger integration
Strategic Integrations	■ Machine learning for data insights ■ AI-optimized targeting ■ AI-enabled monetization	■ AI implementation and ROI ■ User and consumer experiences ■ Corporate strategy services
Efficiency Integrations	■ AI-supported production workflows ■ Blockchain and automation	■ Content supply chain modernization ■ Finance, procurement and automation optimization ■ Media asset management and distribution

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