

# Tweet To The Top

Rather than pushing a single to radio, labels are turning to social media to find which songs resonate first

BY TATIANA CIRISANO

**W**HEN BAY AREA RAPPER Saweetie released her *ICY* EP on March 29, her label, Warner Records, hadn't yet settled on which song to promote to radio as a single. So thousands of Twitter users helped.

Shortly after release night, Warner vp fan engagement Elissa Ayadi says that the raunchy track "My Type," which samples Petey Pablo's "Freek-a-Leek," took off on the platform, where fans were quoting the song's brash, catchy lyrics about exactly what the rapper is looking for in a date.

That persuaded the label to focus its promotional efforts on the track, which comes with a splashy music video that has over 45 million YouTube views, and pushing the #MyTypeChallenge on TikTok, which has inspired 50 million videos.

"We were like, 'Instead of forcing it, let's support what the fans are already doing,'" says Ayadi. It worked: The song has now spent 14 weeks on the Billboard Hot 100, peaking at No. 21, and for the chart dated Sept. 28, it reached No. 1 on the Rhythmic airplay chart, where it stayed for two weeks.

Ayadi and others in her field agree that, along with activity on other social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter conversa-

tions around a song are an increasingly important metric that decides whether a label will put resources behind a single.

"Now, people are dropping albums without having a set single," says Lisa Kasha, vp integrated marketing and digital strategy at Epic Records. On the nights the label releases a new project, Kasha's team sends a companywide report detailing which song titles, lyrics and features are trending, including key tweets and memes for reference. In the morning, she compares that data to the streaming numbers. "If a certain song is trending, and that's the song that streams the most that night," she says, "then it's a fan favorite."

When Camila Cabello released "Havana" and "OMG" at the same time in 2017, the label didn't know which would catch on more. But after the release of the former's telenovela-inspired video spawned dozens of GIFs, Epic knew which one to push. "As we started going, 'Havana' is the one that had more fan conversation online; you could see them being like, 'Oh, na, na,'" says Kasha. The label put its efforts behind it, and 17 months later, Cabello opened the 2019 Grammy Awards with the song, which was nominated for best pop solo performance.



From left: Gambino, Saweetie and Cabello.

But leaning on social media algorithms to "monitor fan sentiment" — a favored term among digital marketers — has its limits. With the band Disturbed, for example, data tools like CrowdTangle — which shows how content is performing on different platforms — automatically register tweets with the band's name as negative. And it's hard to identify mentions at all for artists like Future and THEY.

There's also trouble with slang. "There are a lot of things people say about music that, if they were saying it about toothpaste, would look very bad," says Tarek Al-Hamdouni, senior vp digital marketing at RCA. "If somebody says, 'This toothpaste is hard as fuck,' that is not going to be picked up as a positive sentiment. But if you say that about an A\$AP Rocky record, that's super positive."

Still, Twitter is in part responsible for one of Al-Hamdouni's biggest successes of the past few years: Childish Gambino's "This Is America." When the song and

music video dropped simultaneously in 2018, Al-Hamdouni predicted that it would make a splash. "We ended up with a tsunami," he says: There were 2.1 million tweets about Gambino in the first week of the song's release, according to Twitter.

With that data in mind, Al-Hamdouni says he realized that playing the song would give radio DJs a chance to talk about the online reaction, and maybe inspire call-ins. As a result, RCA shifted its marketing strategy for "This Is America" from that of a one-off to a high-priority radio single.

"This is a record that we wouldn't have thought pop stations were going to play," he says. "But we realized we had the ammunition to get it played on every station in the country." The song won four Grammys in February, including record and song of the year.

"We knew we had something great," he adds. "But you never know how things are going to react until they're in the world." **B**



## JAY FRANK 1971-2019

BY GLENN PEOPLES

**W**HEN UNIVERSAL MUSIC Group senior vp global streaming marketing Jay Frank died Oct. 13 after a battle with cancer, the industry lost a thought leader who for years encouraged executives to adapt to a music business shaped by technology.

"Stop caring about what the music business used to be," he would say, "and start appreciating how the business is transforming." In his first book, *Futurehit.DNA* — published in 2009, just as Spotify launched in Europe and well before streaming arrived in the United States — Frank argued passionately that streaming would require songwriters to shorten introductions because songs were no longer built for radio. A decade later, Frank's warnings of waning attention spans seem to have come true: Tracks on the Billboard Hot 100 in 2019 are, on average, 30

seconds shorter than in 2018.

Anyone who spoke with Frank came away a little smarter with a new perspective on a topic. To people who knew Frank well, he was much more than a brilliant thinker. His longtime friend, music publicist Ariel Hyatt, called him "a magical, irreplaceable, thoughtful and beautiful soul." He wanted his legacy to be one of a person who enjoyed his work immensely, she said, but also wanted his wife, Linda, and daughter, Alex, to be OK.

Frank wasn't the first person to discuss the notion of media becoming an "attention economy," where cost-free entertainment would be monetized by advertising. But he understood that advertising would be an integral part of music revenue. In 2011, he left a plum executive position at CMT to launch a record label, DigSin, with the belief that giving away free music would

attract an audience and then advertisers. That led to DigMark, a trailblazing company that promoted songs to independent playlist creators.

He was quick to understand that playlists weren't simply a collection of songs, but were replacing radio as an industry kingmaker. Single tracks and playlists are now what shape popular music. Frank saw it coming.

For music, having a mind like Frank's could be a competitive edge: In a global music business with trillions of streams, even slight improvements can influence who gets heard — and paid. He traveled the world to share his insights with Universal's labels and encourage them to follow the data, another of his cornerstone creeds.

His message to the industry, and Universal, was, "You can trust data. Here's what it tells us." His insights were worth trusting, too. **B**