

A product positioning or re-positioning dilemma?... the cross-genre marketing of a roots/blues musician as also an alt.country artist”

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Abstract

The music industry , like many others, has been traditionally categorised and labeled into product-market elements such as brand categories, SKUs, SICs, store departments, and music genres. For products and services that are stereotypical of their category, this situation is ideal. For those that cross genres, this creates both serious problems and opportunities. This paper examines this through a case study of a multi cross-genre artist, and discusses this in terms of its implications for his product positioning dilemma and choice.

Keywords: product, positioning, music, marketing, genre, artist

Introduction.

The music industry , like many others, has been traditionally categorised and labeled into product-market elements such as brand categories, SKUs, SICs, store departments, and music genres. For products and services that are stereotypical of their category, this situation is ideal for both their product image and positioning. For those that cross genres, this creates both serious problems and opportunities. This paper examines this through a case study of a multi cross-genre artist, and discusses this in terms of its implications for his choice of product positioning.

Queensland roots musician 8 Ball Aitken grew up on farming properties, listening to country and folk music in Far North Queensland. When he moved to Brisbane in 2000, he commenced a career as a “trad blues” artist. As he developed his original repertoire, he began to compose, record and perform country-influenced material, an organic musical development for a young rural Queenslander. The strategic marketing plan required to re-position and re-brand 8 Ball Aitken as an ‘alt.country’ artist as well has up to now included significant costume and instrumental changes. This cross-genre marketing strategy would appear to have had some initial success, with 8 Ball’s appearance at the Gympie Muster, winning trophies at country music

festivals, and prime-time airplay on Brisbane country radio station 98.9 and ABC Radio National. However, it is clear that there are significant cultural, musical, and industry- political forces that are not necessarily comfortable with this, especially from the traditional country music side, but also generally. As Belch and Belch (2004:55) have said: "Re-positioning is often difficult to accomplish because of entrenched perceptions about and attitudes towards the product or brand. Many companies' attempts to change their positioning have met with little or no success".

The Music Industry

Music marketing strategies have traditionally been determined by the needs and requirements of major record companies, retailers and media, all of whom have naturally preferred tidy product categorization that suited them. Controlled by corporate interests, these companies have defined the accepted genres within popular music for the past fifty years or more. Consequently, music consumers largely adopted these tightly-defined genres as their own (Lathrop, 2003), including the frequent formation of fiercely loyal sub-cultures and clubs which emphasized and actually thrived on "them vs us" differences rather than a common love of music. This is not of course unique to music, and applies in sport, theatre etc.

With the advent of the internet as a marketing tool, however, music genre boundaries have become increasingly both entrenched through 'searching by genre' as well as blurred through greater choice and other search engine options. Websites such as MySpace have encouraged music consumers to sample music outside of their traditional genre boundaries. Within the past five years, some people believe that Australian music in particular has begun to emerge as a possible world leader in cross-genre re-definition and marketing. Specifically, the emerging genre of Australian roots music has included elements of blues, folk and country, delivered

with a uniquely Australian twist. Some mainstream pop audiences are accepting Australian country artists such as Keith Urban and Kasey Chambers, certain country audiences are listening to folk/pop musicians such as Paul Kelly, and pop-rock audiences are paying attention to blues-influenced artist John Butler. Yet overall music marketing is genre-based. This is a serious strategic product and positioning dilemma for cross-genre artists like Aitken; to look at this flamboyant and colourful musician, and to hear his repertoire, it is clear that this act would never fit neatly into 1 genre, and that some traditionalists would resent or oppose this. As said by the judges in the movie 'Strictly Ballroom'..." No new steps!"

Methodology

This paper uses the case research method (Yin 2002), based on depth interviewing of the artist and his management team, and participant observation. Because of this, the paper lends itself well to the narrative style.

Some background on the nature of 'authentic Australian' genres in music

Coyle's research states that "music and sound elements...are used to suggest the land (as 'the outback') and to highlight issues of cultural identity." She also concludes that "the sound-scapes of rural Australia – what is heard in the country as well as what is seen – contribute immeasurably to experiences of location and place." (Coyle, 2003) However, Douglas, in his article "Identity Through Sound and Image: This is Australia?" indicates that a specifically Australian sound may be difficult to pin down in the face of the globalisation of the local music industry: "...while some forms of music might be easier to recognise as having an Australian sound because of particular lyrical content or style (such as bush music, folk) it was difficult to define an Australian sound in all genres of music." (Douglas, 2000)

According to Beal, "Rather than being a single style of music such as Dixieland jazz, house, minimalist music, or acid rock, whose development is in the hands of creators, alternative country is more a congeries of music that fans find sounds well together and express much the same sentiments. We will return to this point below. Acceptance among alt.country fans involves a commitment to reviving and melding earlier forms of music that are defined as spontaneous and home-made, rather than contrived and polished. While some alt.country artists work in just one style, most perform several different styles and mix them freely. In years to come, new bands embracing alternative country may play in a more delimited range." eclectic brew noted, but there seems to be no evidence of this happening to date, and there are several reasons why no single alt.country sound has emerged. First, there has been no single source of orthodoxy, as there was in bluegrass, jazz, or Western swing. Likewise, the music industry has not shaped people's understandings of the music by creating a radio format, dedicated labels, or trade-paper columns. To be sure, a format called 'Americana' has been formulated, but it has not caught on with radio audiences, perhaps because its range includes the sorts of soft country that is such an anathema to alternative country aficionados. Finally, music critics are the only element of the established music industry which has given continuous attention to alternative country music. Critics seek innovation, and at a time when so little is apparently going on, alternative country groups make interesting copy." (Beal, 2001)

The product , positioning and then re-positioning strategy

Irrespective of traditional industry categorization processes, Queensland roots musician 8 Ball Aitken has begun the process of re-defining his career with the blending of these genre boundaries in mind. Formerly a blues covers musician, he creates original Australian roots music, inclusive of blues influences, but also encompassing the country and folk music influences he grew up with in the rural

town of Mareeba. With this musical evolution has come the need for a new marketing strategy. 8 Ball Aitken has started to re-brand himself primarily as a contemporary roots musician, which is how he is marketed to his more mainstream audiences of roots music fans – primarily people who listen to him on the ABC's Triple J Radio and Radio National, or who see him perform at major cross-genre events such as the Woodford Folk Festival. However, in order to reach the 'alt.country' side of the musical spectrum, he has implemented costuming and musical changes in order to achieve a stronger product positioning for this segment of the market. While this is sensible in live performances when the different genre markets are separate, it is problematic when the segments overlap and when traditionalists communicate with others and 'de-market' him or this approach.

Because Aitken is not an orthodox/strictly traditional mainstream country music artist, but comes from a genuinely rural Australian country music background (including country music's requisite working-class social origins and a previous career as a farm labourer), there are genuine cultural and musicological country elements within his music – part of his transition from his adopted genre of blues, back into the alt.country genre. (Smith, 2005). Clearly, while some accept this, others do not.

8 Ball Aitken opens the case study discussion with an explanation of his perception of genre differences within a contemporary roots music context. "The acoustic guitar, without effects, is a blank palette. An Australian singer/songwriter could perform the same song as either country, blues, folk, soft rock, roots, acoustic ballad, or any one of the many 'rootsy' styles that are a big part of contemporary music these days in Australia. The only difference in how audiences perceive of its genre is in how you choose to present that song to them. Your choice of delivery will determine the genre people 'hear' it in. It depends on how you sing it, how you pronounce the words, what rhythm you choose, what kind of solo you choose to play, how you voice the chords,

and – most importantly, believe it or not – what you’re wearing.” Musicians would like to agree with this, but marketing theorists might not, reminding Aitken that positioning is in the mind of the consumer, not the producer or the product.(Kotler et al 2005).

For Aitken and his team, image development has been one of the most significant starting points for their alt.country positioning plan. “The country image is a massive part of country music. Throughout the decades, the code of dress has developed as a fairly orthodox standard, and is expected of the performers. This is enforced by most of the smaller, country-music club-run country music festivals held in Australia today. There are strict rules for performers’ dress standards, and indeed, many other strictly-enforced rules that determine if a performer is sufficiently ‘country’ to participate in these events. Some of the club-run festivals have clauses that allow the organising committee to exclude any performer for any reason – without stating the reason. This acceptance at club level is important, bearing in mind the goal of winning prizes which can lead to the Queensland ‘Champion of Champions’ festival, which in turn can lead to a scholarship to the Country Music College and a gig at the Tamworth Country Music Festival. You have to ‘sound country’, that’s for sure. And even more importantly, you have to ‘look country’. Because I have long hair and a beard, despite it being 2006, I often get some backlash from country musicians who think my music may be too liberal and ‘rocky’, and that I am more like a hippie than a fair-dinkum country boy. Therefore, the three main cultural signifiers are essential in communicating the style and intent of my music to an alt.country audience. I call them the ‘hat trick’. I consider these to be the bolo tie, Akubra hat, and cowboy boots, or Blundstones. To a lesser extent, these can also include collar points, leather vest, cowboy shirt, cowboy belt and a belt buckle with the right iconography. Most of these

are included in my appearances at country festivals and shows, but the bolo, boots, and hat are by far the most important to my audiences.”

However, the clothes he chooses to wear for alt.country events and audiences are definitely not ‘one size fits all’. Aitken has discovered that what represents high fashion in some circles may alienate others. “Conversely, I find country clothes are too confronting for many urban ‘trendies’ -- people who see them to be ‘old style’ and square. So when playing for these alt.country audiences, which I call the ‘Triple J demographic’ (as that is often their radio station of choice) I wear colourful suits or traditional African clothes, which are considered wild and cool by this audience. Each demographic constantly wants to put me in a box, so I find that I am always shifting modes in order to ensure that my music reaches the maximum audience without alienating any of them due to the band’s visual image. I see myself as a roots musician who reaches diverse audiences with the same, inclusive, music. I’m hoping that in time, these audiences may be able to come together and enjoy more of each other’s music. I’m finding that audiences who are accessing me on the internet, or at festivals that include several genres, such as Woodford, are increasingly more open to listening to different styles of music.”

Aitken is adamant that attaining country music credibility is not a simple matter of wearing the right hat – although the clothes definitely do help to facilitate this process. Having a genuine background in, and appropriate ‘feel’ for country music, is essential for a blues/country crossover artist. “Many musicians that live in the city originally come from country towns. Any sort of ‘country credibility’ helps to make the country music people feel like you are one of them, and are part of the country culture, even if the music sits on the boundary. Localisms including songs about country towns, Australian regional landmarks, and anything that shows the artist has

lived in the bush, been to the bush or toured to the regional places helps to build the country story to a level of respectability in the country music market. This is an important part of an artist's story, which media are always interested in. On-stage references to Mareeba, my hometown, help me connect with the country fans, as it is a genuine place in rural Queensland that many country people know about. Rodeo references are an important part of my localism as Mareeba hosts one of Australia's most famous rodeos. The people who work the land doing primary production and farm laboring are more often than not country music listeners. They are hard-working people who live blue-collar lives, whether they own property and assets or not. They are people who wake up early and work. References to 'hard work' or agricultural references in any song will identify with these listeners. A musician can write a song with these references and hit the heart of that demographic."

Aitken's manager believes that creating a cross-genre marketing campaign that can help to re-define a blues artist as an alt-country performer includes an awareness of the similarities and differences between the two genres in strictly musical and thematic terms. Aitken himself elaborates. "Blues and country music have many of the same characteristics in common, including songs with a story, or even songs with comedy value; a message to people that is funny. Blues and country audiences tend to love songs about people and places. They respond to themes to do with everyday life and existence, including relationships and work. Songs about feelings, including depression and loneliness, also work well for both audiences. There can be some basic stylistic differences between blues music and country music. Many times blues music will have extended instrument solos, whereas country music is less likely to feature such solos. Instrumentation is very important. Banjo, mandolin, fiddle, and pedal steel guitar are uncommon in blues, but very common in country music. Different drum rhythms, including country's use of $\frac{3}{4}$ time, are sometimes used in the different genres, too."

With a steady career progressing in the Australian blues scene, Aitken did not feel artistically satisfied by limiting himself to just one tightly-defined traditional genre. He found that his 'trad blues' fans were not as accepting of his other influences as his emerging roots music audience-base. "Growing up in Mareeba, Far North Queensland, I was surrounded by country music. My dad also played a lot of folk music, and the indigenous people I worked with on the banana plantations mainly listened to reggae. I played in quite a few country bands, playing classic country covers, before I moved to the Big Smoke. Once I commenced my professional career in Brisbane, I was badged as a blues artist, starting out in blues venues, playing 'trad blues' – traditional blues, playing cover songs of Chicago blues (electric) and Delta blues (acoustic), which was material originally written and performed by African-American musicians over fifty years ago. I then progressed to playing a mixture of blues covers and original blues compositions of my own. The only things that have changed in order to make my music accessible to the country market is some image redevelopment (including the country clothing), and a small amount of song tailoring and instrumentation changes, including additional mandolin, steel guitar and lyric adjustment to hit the demographic's thematic touch-stones. Only original songs are part of the new set. I'm still playing my own songs the way I want to play them."

Although contemporary Australian roots music, with its blending of boundaries, is being accepted by younger audiences, Aitken knows well that there are still firmly-entrenched champions of 20th century genres who are less inclined to listen to music from other genres, no matter how similar they may be. "It is still sometimes a bit like 'us and them' with blues and country music, even though the styles are so similar. As a blues musician who 'went country', I often encounter resistance from the traditionalists in both camps – blues traditionalists as well as country traditionalists. But then again, traditionalists don't buy much new original music anyway – they only

listen to music from the classic country era, or the golden years of blues, that is long gone. There is no market for original music with these people. The evolution of blues and country music is entwined together, with many traditional blues and country songs originating in the southern USA actually being the very same songs. The country and bluegrass styles leaned more towards their Scots-Irish heritage, and the blues built upon its African traditions. These two styles evolved in the southern American states at the same time, and neither would have happened without the other. They are inseparable. Both styles are basically rural folk music. Country music came out of Celtic folk music, and blues is basically African-American folk music. Many musicians embrace both styles, but only play in one market, because that's the way the music industry works, or used to work, anyway. You basically couldn't play both, and be taken seriously in the biz. Still -- how many country musicians sing about feeling blue, and how many blues musicians sing about country themes? Most of the shared themes are very strong."

Music theory elements account for some of these perceived differences, according to Aitken. He states that these have been culturally derived through the distinctly different ethnic origins of country music and blues music. However, he contends that awareness of these small musical differences on the part of the performers can lead to a facilitation of a pan-roots music format. "In regard to music theory and the traditional blues and country styles -- there are a few simple rules and traits that country and blues musicians tended to stick to , which separated the styles somewhat. I think, in a lot of cases, the record companies, and the producers they hired, made the performers stick with these conventions. The twenty-first century is seeing these lines blurred more and more, as artists are breaking down genres and writing three-minute songs with radio airplay as a goal, rather than orthodox adherence to one specific genre. In these 'old style' genre-specific terms, blues leans to the minor third (flattened third) note, and the flattened blues seventh note, when

playing the major scale in the songs' riffs and solos. In contrast, country leans more towards the major third note, and often uses both major seventh and flattened seventh notes when playing riffs and chords. As a general rule, country music is usually in a major key, whilst blues also explores minor keys more. Contemporary country, blues, and rock 'n' roll all use the 16 bar, 12 bar, & 8 bar blues progressions as their basis. Many beats like the shuffle, the train and the standard rock beat are now common to both country and blues contemporary styles."

Aitken concludes that his music is still the most important element within the larger context of his own career satisfaction, artistic integrity, and success within the music industry. However, he acknowledges that his image development is also significant. Above all, Aitken values his authenticity as his greatest cross-genre marketing tool. "In the end, it is only really the music that matters. But the image is such a big part of the show, and it is too much of an 'old way' to just play one strictly defined, cut and dried music form, and to look exactly like something or someone that has already gone before me. The fact is that right now, there are thousands of musicians in generic jeans and t-shirts out there playing all kinds of music, and to be that bit more unique and special, and to be treated as if you are a credible artist, you must develop some level of artistic and creative credibility. You need a true story in your art. Authenticity is everything in the struggle to be heard over all the other bands and forms of entertainment that are available in the global marketplace."

Linking to Self-congruency theory

Fashion marketing authors Banister and Hogg (2001:193) comment on how important this theory has been found to be in most fashion markets: " consumers make judgments and consumption decisions regarding fashion products and brands based on their stereotypical opinions about products and the 'typical consumers' of those products...Consumers have less difficulty talking about products that they dislike and would not consume (the " so not me" and " just not me" categories) than

they do in expressing their desires and preferences. It seems apparent that certain fans of single-genre 'pure' country music, or whichever, not only experience self-congruency difficulties with cross-genre music, but will be more likely to be vocal about this. On a positive note for 8 Ball Aitken and his management team is the finding by Kaiser et al in 1991 (Reported in Banister and Hogg, 2001:194) that " self-congruency theory supports the existence of a system of appearance management, whereby individuals use clothing as a flexible means to negotiate their identity". While they are talking about the consumers here, it is probable that such clothing works similarly with the artist as well, and 8 Ball Aitken has given a lot of attention to this .

Linking to Positioning Theory

"Positioning refers to how customers regard proposed and/or present brands in a market...But there must also be a clear understanding of how the marketing manager wants the target market to view the marketing mix (Quester et al, 2004:167). We have been told the latter, but up to now have little objective evidence of the former. When a business wants or needs to change this, it is called re-positioning. In this case it is not clear whether this artist is not presently definitively positioned in a single- or a cross-genre sense, or whether he is actually already clearly positioned in the minds of the customers/fans in each genre sector but that the artist wants to re-position himself so that all these (and new) fans should see him as a distinctively 'cross-genre Australian roots/blues/folk/alt. country artist', and give up his image within those genres as a single-genre act? In other words, does he want to keep his existing single genre positioning separately in roots, and in blues, and in folk , and in country, but then also try to position himself to a new composite, or different, sector of cross-genre fans and industry people? These are difficult but important decisions. While we know that the history and musicology of these styles of music have much in common, we also know that fans, their clubs and venues, and other industry practices are not necessarily linked to this, and we also know that people are easily confused with what they see as conflicting or dissonant messages. Quester et al

(2004:171) recommend that “ marketers should avoid re-positioning too often or too dramatically...It must be consistent with the old one to avoid creating dissonance in people’s minds”. Ries and Trout (1998) seem to argue against this, and what 8 Ball Aitken has been doing. Their stance is that positioning requires the ultimate in focus, even to the point of adopting a short phrase or (preferably) one word to embody one’s positioning. They argue that this has the greatest emphasis, is not as hard or expensive to defend, and if done well it enables one to ‘own’ that word or phrase (e.g. Nike’s ‘Just do it”).

Solomon(2007) and Belch and Belch (2004) remind us that positioning and re-positioning are usually done on the basis of either lifestyle, price leadership, salient attributes, product class, competition, cultural symbols, occasion, users, or quality. Logically, the main alternatives here that need to be evaluated by and for 8 Ball Aitken might be:-

Product class...’ The best/coolest/original cross-genre Aussie roots/alt. Country etc ‘ Lifestyle/Users...’ If your lifestyle and music tastes are eclectic and unconstrained by outside categorizations, 8 Ball is the Aussie blues/alt.country etc act for you’.

Salient attributes/ Competitors...’ Nobody interprets the mix of Aussie roots/alt. country /blues music like 8 Ball Aitken’.

Occasion... Horses for courses. ‘When the occasion calls for Aussie blues/roots/alt.country variety , call for 8 Ball Aitken’ .

Conclusion

The marketing strategy employed by 8 Ball Aitken to transition his positioning as a multi cross-genre artist in the marketplace reflects in part a possible larger transition taking place within the music industry itself. The strictly categorised, genre-driven marketing practices of retailers and large industry corporations are becoming more

counter-balanced by the greater flexibility of the independent ('indie') sector. Contemporary consumers are faced with greater music choice, but this also means that while they are exposed to many more musical styles and genres, they often rely on genre-specific search engines, media and reference groups to screen out and classify what they like or are likely to like. The advent of a potential world audience of digitally-connected pan-genre marketing opportunities increases via the possible 'level playing-field' provided by the internet, and this even includes opportunities for the creation of new and/or broader genre concepts and categories. In the case of the emerging genre of Australian roots and alt.country music, this opportunity presents a possible way to gain a significantly larger market-share across the existing genres of blues, roots, country, and folk.

By analysing and implementing the necessary costume and other subtle changes required to assist in his branding transition from the traditional blues genre to the much broader alt.country/roots genre, and by integrating minor musical adaptations within this transition, Aitken has increased his audience base through more mainstream radio airplay, appearances at larger festivals, and a genre identity which is possibly more accessible to a larger aggregate population. It is probable that he has alienated a sizable number of traditional genre-specific consumers and industry people along the way, but he and his management team feel the net effect, both financially and musically, has been greater.

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