

SYNC INCOME FROM TV

The Irish acts getting themselves in sync on US television

Songs by Irish musicians such as James Vincent McMorrow and Hozier are all over TV at the moment. What's the business behind it?

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It's been a good month in TV sync land for Irish artists, with James Vincent McMorrow's cover of Wicked Game soundtracking the Game of Thrones trailer, and Hozier's Arsonist's Lullaby breaking Shazam's record for "most tags for a TV song sync" according to Billboard, when it popped up in The Walking Dead.

For many artists, a TV sync can expose them to a far larger fan base and get some cash in the bank.

So how much money can artists make? It's not an exact science and varies wildly depending on multiple factors: how big the artist is; the show's profile and budget; and what kind of budget the music supervisor is playing with. There's also the factor of who's chasing who: obviously, an artist is in a better position if the music supervisor is dead-set on using their track as opposed to an act banging down the door of a screen production or a sync agency.

A reasonably well known artist landing a song in the finale of, for example, a big network show with a reputation for tentpole songs such as Grey's Anatomy, is probably looking at €25,000 to €30,000 minimum for placement of their track. But a decade ago, you could multiply that figure a few of times over.

As in many areas of the music industry, artists are getting paid less for TV and film syncs these days. Production companies know that artists are making less money across the board, and therefore the premium rates for syncs have also gone down. The relationship when it comes to the power balance has flipped from film, TV and ad production companies chasing acts, to artists and their management doing the chasing.

While the music supervisors are the gatekeepers to track placement – especially in film – sync agencies also play a role in negotiating track placement, especially in commercials if they have a large corporate client across multiple brands. Like any opportunity, there's also a lot to be said for "right place right time".

Artists can do all the pushing they can with management, major publishing companies, and sync agencies hawking their wares, but there's also a lot resting on the personal choice of a music supervisor, whether a particular song has struck them as being essential to a scene, or whether they're looking for a track with a particular tone.

When it comes to commercials, the impact of repetition is essentially free radio/TV play. The “song from the ad” effect can do wonders for a band, not just financially but also in terms of exposure to a more substantial audience. This feedback loop then increases radio play while the ad is still ongoing on radio, which has a doubling-up benefit, as well as potentially alerting bookers to an act’s new reach. An ad agency is also going to have to crack the cheque book a good bit wider than a small indie film.

But an act’s song or sound being “syncable” in terms of its tone, atmosphere, and melody, also has a down side. Once a song seeps into the popular consciousness, there’s a tendency for commercials and films to follow its lead: suddenly, several films all have something that sounds like Sweet Disposition over the opening scene, every TV show is going for a Chasing Cars vibe, and every ad is gagging for something that gets them a Grimes/M83 flavour. In some cases, advertisers have been accused of commissioning “soundalike” tracks to get around paying larger fees to artists. Kelloggs removed a track from one of its ads that sounded remarkably like All I Want by Kodakone, but perhaps the most imitated track in the last seven years has been The xx’s Intro (and yes, we’re looking at you, Hugo Boss ad).

Locally, one of the biggest placements Irish acts can get is on a Fáilte Ireland Discover Ireland TV, radio and cinema ad campaign. It has done wonders for the profile of Heathers’ Remember When and Riptide Movement’s All Works Out. It’s nearly two years since the Riptide Movement was chosen for the most recent campaign, so it’s worth keeping an eye on which Irish act scores that local prize next. Una Mullally

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