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Cut out the middlemouse: how Disney pop stars took control of their careers

With Disney-championed stars including Olivia Rodrigo and Sabrina Carpenter moving on from the company's own record label, it seems the house of mouse's power is waning



📷 From left: Selena Gomez in 2010 at a Wizards of Waverly Place fashion show, Olivia Rodrigo at the SiriusXM studios in 2023, and Miley Cyrus as Hannah Montana in 2006. Composite: Getty Images/Disney Channel

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When [Disney Channel](#) star Hilary Duff released her debut album *Metamorphosis* in 2003, it marked a key shift in pop. Before her, the corporation's TV teen talent - Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera and Justin Timberlake - had left Disney behind when they signed with major record labels en route to becoming superstars. But with Duff, who played her show's titular Lizzie McGuire, Disney saw an opportunity: instead of letting one of their biggest names find success elsewhere, they wanted to monetise whatever pop stardom their latest ingenue could deliver, and signed Duff to Disney's own Hollywood Records, reviving a label that had never really managed to get off the ground.

Hollywood could promote Disney pop stars across the Disney Channel, Radio Disney and ABC, also owned by the corporation. Soon, a 360-business model was in full operation, and the next generation of Disney Channel stars - the Jonas Brothers, Demi Lovato, Miley Cyrus and [Selena Gomez](#) all helmed shows and released music through the in-house label. To keep parents and preteens on side, Disney would supply the sound, the songs and

producers, and potentially even dictate what artists wore and how they presented themselves.

The draconian control, though, led to even more dramatic rejections of Disney than those from Timberlake et al. When these teen stars reached adulthood, they would inevitably part ways with Disney and catapult into careers of emancipated, hyper-sexualised superstardom. Cyrus twerked in PVC underwear with a giant foam finger and rode a wrecking ball naked; Joe Jonas made beach-side coitus metaphors with wacky band Dnce and Gomez embraced brittle, silk-sheeted erotics with songs like Good for You.

By the start of this decade, Disney's stars couldn't wait to break out and seize independence on their own terms. In January 2021 [Olivia Rodrigo](#), the star of Disney's meta show *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*, released the blockbuster single *Drivers License*. Tellingly, it wasn't on Hollywood but Interscope, and was framed as her debut, despite having previously released the song *All I Want*, sung from the perspective of her Disney character, on Hollywood.

Olivia Rodrigo - drivers license (Official Video)



Rodrigo cut out the middlemouse and went straight to adulthood: unlike the sanitised debut offerings by Gomez, Cyrus and Lovato, her debut album, [Sour](#), was filled with bullish, brilliant songs the then 18-year-old had written herself. They contained swearing and came with edgy music videos shot by Petra Collins. Rodrigo's recent comeback single continues in the same vein: [Vampire](#), the first taste of her upcoming second album *Guts*, is rage-filled and candid, with a chorus where she snaps: "Bloodsucker, fame fucker / Bleeding me dry like a goddamn vampire."

One music industry executive who worked on the release of Sour says that “the messaging was very much ‘she’s an artist, she’s a songwriter, she writes the songs herself’”. At Hollywood, the stars were “seen as talent who were already associated with Disney. It’s not taken as seriously.”

US music critic Quinn Moreland suggests that the sense that Selena Gomez and [Miley Cyrus](#) found creative emancipation – and critical acclaim – once they had left Disney likely set a precedent that appealed to Rodrigo: why wait to earn what she could just claim now? “What’s also not lost on me is the Taylor Swift of it all,” Moreland adds, noting that following Swift’s campaign to own her masters, Rodrigo had that ownership written into her contract. “The re-emergence of the female songwriter is something that young musicians look up to. They want to use their music as a platform to reach people and portray a deeper truth. I don’t think you would go to Hollywood Records for that.”

This clear establishing of authenticity is a sign of Rodrigo’s priorities – and a savvy move given the appetites of young pop fans who crave more “authenticity and access” than listeners in the 2000s and early 2010s expected, says Charlie Harding, the co-host of Switched on Pop, a podcast about the making and meaning of popular music. “There was a time when going from being a Disney star into Hollywood Records worked within pop music media: when a place like MTV, TRL and other large gatekeepers were dictating youth culture,” he says. “Now, because young people become super famous overnight on social media and can build up loyal audiences themselves, the consumer expectation about the presentation of the pop star has changed.”



📷 Singer Billie Eilish built her own audience through social media. Photograph: Axelle/Bauer-Griffin/FilmMagic

It goes hand in hand with Disney's loosening dominance over teen audiences. "As with all mass media, there's a fragmentation," says Harding. "There just isn't the same kind of monoculture as there used to be. That doesn't mean that these companies are unimportant. But they are just one out of a number of options for star-building and consumption." He points to [Billie Eilish](#) as an artist who eschewed traditional Disney kid stardom to pursue music and music alone, building her own audience through social media.

As Disney's power has waned, young musicians have grasped far more control than they used to have when the industry was run in more of a top-down fashion, with adult executives adjudicating what was and wasn't appropriate for teenagers. (And arguably inconsistently, often burdening them with the expectation to remain morally pure while sexualising their images.) "On Hollywood Records, artists aren't going to be able to do certain things," says the music industry exec. "I remember doing campaigns where they scrutinised why we had suggested doing interviews at certain publications. And those publications tended to be LGBTQ+ ones."

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This relative newfound freedom, including the ability to speak directly to fans, has allowed post-Disney artists to be transparent about their experiences operating within such a vast corporate system: [Selena Gomez](#) and Demi Lovato have both spoken out about the mental health struggles, body image issues and press scrutiny they experienced while under the Disney umbrella. “I think that would definitely be a huge warning sign and supports the notion that there is a path to be avoided,” says Moreland.

Arguably, Rodrigo’s opening shot, *Drivers License*, was a comment straight out of the gate on her time within the house of mouse, a bitter account of a love triangle she experienced during her time there. It quickly precipitated what sounded a lot like response songs from the other two allegedly connected parties and fellow Disney stars: Joshua Bassett, making his musical debut on Warners, and Sabrina Carpenter, whose new music marked her breaking away from Hollywood Records after four albums to sign to Island. While Bassett has struggled to escape the Disney intrigue, Carpenter has followed Rodrigo in having a true pop breakout and thoroughly rejecting her former employer: her recent UK dates almost entirely ignored material from her four Hollywood-released albums, instead focusing on the grown-up pop of her 2022 Island debut, *Emails I Can’t Send*. She has duly enjoyed an uptick in credibility, with Taylor Swift selecting her for support slots on the blockbuster Eras tour.

Today Hollywood Records is still a going concern, though its remit has shifted: while there are still a couple of Disney Channel stars releasing music through the label, the emphasis is on glossy alt-pop bands like JoyWave and newcomers Daisy the Great, as well as, rather surprisingly, 2018 Eurovision winner Netta. “Hollywood is not going away,” says Harding, “but they are now just one player in a whole sea of pop music.” Whether the label can amass enough credibility to keep pop fans interested after they put away childish things, though, remains to be seen.
