



## TRACK STAR

**Lia Vollack, Sony's soundtrack guru, is the shrewdest music executive in Hollywood. Can the record labels keep her happy long enough to hold onto their last cash cow?**

By Arianne Cohen

**LIA VOLLACK IS RUNNING** late. Jonathan Palmer, a licensing executive for Columbia Records, sits in the waiting area outside her corner office on the top floor of a converted soundstage on the Sony lot in Culver City, California. He has been there for 40 minutes.

Vollack is the president of worldwide music for Sony Pictures Entertainment; she oversees all music in all Sony films: Screen Gems, Columbia Pictures, Sony Pictures Animation, and Sony Classics. In the past five years, in the face of a little glitch called the Failure of the Music Industry—you know, the near-40% drop in CD sales since 2000—Vollack's power has grown immensely. Why? Because soundtracks—often purchased as a keepsake of a movie—reliably sell CDs.

Finally, she appears, a youthful 43-year-old in tight jeans, a low-cut blouse, purple nail polish, and purple Prada heels, who, in that Los Angeles way, looks more like she's about to go clubbing than negotiate licensing deals. She tells Palmer, "I'm sorry I'm so difficult," then turns her back on him and waves for him to follow.

Palmer sits across from her and

plays three new songs from the upcoming AC/DC album that he hopes Vollaack will use in a future movie. "We're talking to ESPN about featuring a song, and we're seeking other promotional opportunities," he says.

Vollaack is pleasant but unmoved. She ends the meeting by telling Palmer that she likes one of the new songs. "It sounds like their classic stuff, without the hefty licensing fees," she says. She agrees to keep her eyes open for a good trailer. Basically, the booby prize.

Why does Vollaack toy with record executives like that? Because she can. "People like Lia have become more important to labels," says Paul Kremen, a former marketing executive at two major recording companies. "A movie company is going to spend infinitely more money on marketing than a label will on a new album, so labels try to toe their artists onto the movie and also sell the soundtrack." The labels would certainly suffer if Vollaack follows through with a plan that she's been flirting with: Cut out the middleman and be the first studio to self-release a major soundtrack.

"She's in the middle of this vortex," says Raúl Pérez, Vollaack's colleague for the last decade and Sony's senior VP of music administration. "You have the filmmaker and producer and composer who want their dreams to happen. Then you have the labels and artists who have their own priorities. And you have the studio and the budget, which she needs to serve." What better way to alleviate some of that "hurricane of mixed interests" than to go it alone?

**VOLLACK'S BUSINESS** motivation is quite simple: She wants soundtracks that will generate hype and draw audiences into a movie. That means that she skips song soundtracks on approximately 80% of the 30 movies that Sony releases annually (she releases far more film-score soundtracks). "It's impossible to judge exactly how much one single affects a movie," Kremen says, "but when you're reaching an audience of 100 million, it's got to have an effect." For example, a

## THE SOUND OF MONEY

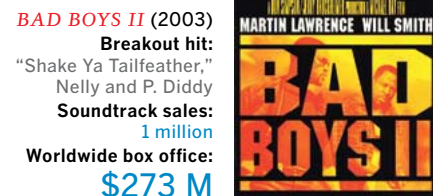
Lia Vollaack and Sony look for song soundtracks that can not only sell CDs but drive people to the theaters. Here are some of their greatest hits.



**CHARLIE'S ANGELS** (2000)  
**Breakout hit:** "Independent Women Part I," Destiny's Child  
**Soundtrack sales:** 3 million  
**Worldwide box office:** \$264 M



**A KNIGHT'S TALE** (2001)  
**Breakout hit:** "We Are the Champions," Robbie Williams and Queen  
**Soundtrack sales:** 1 million  
**Worldwide box office:** \$117 M



**BAD BOYS II** (2003)  
**Breakout hit:** "Shake Ya Tailfeather," Nelly and P. Diddy  
**Soundtrack sales:** 1 million  
**Worldwide box office:** \$273 M



**50 FIRST DATES** (2004)  
**Breakout hit:** "Forgetful Lucy," Adam Sandler  
**Soundtrack sales:** 500,000  
**Worldwide box office:** \$196 M

mediocre movie such as *A Knight's Tale*, the medieval flick starring a very young Heath Ledger and a '70s-rock soundtrack, grossed more than \$117 million worldwide—and sold 1 million CDs. That might sound like a lot, but Sony's profit on CD sales is a pittance compared with a blockbuster movie's take. If a Vollaack soundtrack sells 2 million copies, then after licensing, royalties to producers and artists, and market-



**SPIDER-MAN 2** (2004)  
**Breakout hit:** "Vindicated," Dashboard Confessional  
**Soundtrack sales:** 1 million  
**Worldwide box office:** \$784 M

**SPIDER-MAN** (2002)  
**Breakout hit:** "Hero," Chad Kroeger featuring Josey Scott  
**Soundtrack sales:** 2 million  
**Worldwide box office:** \$822 M

ing fees, Sony might clear between \$6 million and \$9 million.

"We actually have two divergent agendas," Vollaack says. "Labels sometimes spend money on things that don't reach our audience or encourage people to see the film." Her complaint is that record labels ride the movie studio's coattails (they usually view the whole movie—and the studio's marketing plan—before committing



## LICENSE TO SELL

After considering Amy Winehouse to sing the theme to this November's James Bond film, *Quantum of Solace*, starring Daniel Craig, Vollack instead signed Jack White, of the White Stripes, and Alicia Keys to perform "Another Way to Die."

Johnny Thunders (of New York Dolls fame) and the Ramones. She moved to Manhattan at age 19 to work in theater-sound design on Broadway shows such as *On the Waterfront* and *The Heidi Chronicles*. She later worked in sound effects and freelanced in music editing until 1997, when Sony hired her as its point person for studios, directors, composers, and artists.

In 2000, Sony launched an exhaustive search for a new president of worldwide music. "If there was a gardener out there with a Walkman, they talked to him," she jokes. "They told me I had a zero in 1 million chance." But no one else could run a soundboard and talk

studio budgets at the same time. She proved herself quickly. The *Charlie's Angels* soundtrack—featuring Destiny's Child's single "Independent Women Part I," which topped charts for 11 weeks—sold 3 million copies, and the movie grossed \$264 million worldwide.

As if inspired by Beyoncé's departure from Destiny's Child, Vollack has been prepping for her solo debut. Last year, she released a Pearl Jam single, a cover of the Who's "Love, Reign O'er Me," directly to iTunes for the 2007 Adam Sandler flick *Reign Over Me*. The song promptly hit No. 8 on the charts,

with no physical-distribution costs or profit sharing with the label. That enabled her to bring in closer to 50 cents per dollar rather than about a dime. She has also stealthily retained the services of marketing consultants, expertise that she previously depended on the labels for. She identified *Nick & Norah's Infinite Playlist*—a music-driven film starring Michael Cera (*Juno*) and Kat Dennings (*The 40-Year-Old Virgin*) looking for their favorite band—as the ideal film to self-release a soundtrack.

In July, Vollack began to put her plans in place for the October release. She would launch the soundtrack directly to iTunes and promote it only in film-centric ways. Any music videos would tie into the movie plot, not the artists, and marketing materials for the soundtrack would advertise the movie.

And then a funny thing happened on the way to nirvana: The record companies promised to change. Vollack found herself deluged with calls from labels, offering money, marketing, and pretty much whatever Vollack wanted to do. Atlantic Records was particularly aggressive. "We told her that we would release the soundtrack two weeks ahead of the movie, with heavy online viral marketing," says Kevin Weaver, Atlantic Records Group executive VP. "When you walk into Wal-Mart, Best Buy, or Target, you'll see the posters. And that'll help drive people into the theater."

Vollack was torn. She hedged for a while. Then she signed Atlantic Records to release the *Nick & Norah* soundtrack. "All the things I said about the difficulty of working with labels and our diverging interests are still accurate," she says, explaining her decision. "But Atlantic made us a really good deal, and it wouldn't have been smart for me not to consider it."

The record labels shouldn't get complacent, Vollack says, perhaps realizing that threatening revolution may be more powerful than actually doing it. "If soundtracks are going to be done with labels, there's going to have to be a different understanding of each other's needs. I don't doubt I will self-distribute a record." **FC**

to distribute the soundtrack). Vollack points, with a hint of contempt, to two recent soundtrack hits from rival Fox: *Juno* and *Garden State*. *Juno* sold 250,000 digital albums and 500,000 hard copies, all in the months following the studio's significant advertising expenditure, including its Oscar campaign, to promote the movie. The implication is that the label got the better of the movie studio.

**VOLLACK DOESN'T** let anyone get the jump on her. She graduated high school at 15, and at 16 became a roadie for