

Virginia Slims Gets Its Own Record Label

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For years a soap-opera actress named Martha Byrne dreamed of hitting it big in the music business. Then an unlikely backer scooped her up and gave her a start worthy of a major superstar.

She was sent into a studio with top producer Nile Rodgers and some of the best backup musicians in the business. Plans were made to flood stores with a million copies of her CD next month, and a heavily promoted tour of 10 U.S. cities was scheduled for the spring.

The identity of the backer? Philip Morris Cos., the world's biggest cigarette company. Facing the threat of mounting regulations on conventional advertising, it's quietly preparing a major push into the record business, developing some novel tactics to market its ailing Virginia Slims brand to young women.

Philip Morris Marketers have been huddling for the past year to prepare the introduction of the company's own recording label, Woman Thing Music, a name based on the new Virginia Slims ad slogan, "It's a Woman Thing." The company plans an ambitious series of CDs in pop, rhythm and blues, country and other genres, all showcasing undiscovered women artists.

But fans won't be able to buy the CDs at record stores. They'll come free with the purchase of two packs of Virginia Slims in a special package available at supermarkets, convenience stores and other outlets where cigarettes are sold. The promotion will be advertised in newspapers and magazines and through direct mail.

To drum up interest in the CDs - and Virginia Slims cigarettes - Philip Morris will stage auditions in each town on Ms. Byrne's tour to select a local woman rocker or woman-led band as the opening act. It's all part of the Virginia Slims "tradition of providing opportunities for women to showcase their talents and interests," says Mary Jo Gennaro, Philip Morris's manager of event marketing.

Virginia Slims did create the first professional women's tennis tour in 1970 and sponsored it for more than two decades. But public-health advocates criticize the motives of Philip Morris executives. "They gain a good product association but also buy loyalty and allies in a culturally influential field," says Michael Pertschuk, former chairman of the Federal Trade Commission and co-director of the anti-tobacco Advocacy Institute. By linking cigarettes to rock musicians, he says, "they are trying to make a product attractive to the very person who is the role model of the younger kids."

Adds Regina Penna of Women and Girls Against Tobacco in Berkeley, Calif.: "It's horrendous on two counts. It changes the environment to support tobacco and cigarettes as a community norm, and secondly it exploits the artists too."

Linking Virginia Slims with pop music is just the latest effort by Philip Morris to end-run traditional advertising as President Clinton and other government officials push for a crackdown on cigarette ads aimed at kids. The company has also created clothing, a magazine and even a cross-country train trip aboard the Marlboro Unlimited as a way to promote upbeat images for its brands.

The company has also been using musical events to promote its cigarettes, It is about to start the second year of "Club Benson & Hedges," a live-music series at R&B clubs in Los Angeles, Chicago, New Orleans, Houston, Dallas and Atlanta. The Marlboro Music tour is a three-day music festival at U.S. military bases organized by Philip Morris. And Marlboro sponsors concerts at several state fairs, outdoor festivals and Hispanic music concerts.

The company's plunge into the recording business began when Virginia Slims was looking for another high-profile promotion for women. Last year, Philip Morris approved an idea for a new record label developed by a Stamford, Conn., company called Entertainment Marketing & Communications International. That company had previously teamed Michael Jackson with Pepsi, drawn corporate sponsors to the Live Aid concerts, and persuaded Sears to sponsor its first pop concert tour, which featured Phil Collins.

After a nationwide search and auditions of more than 30 women artists, Philip Morris picked Ms. Byrne as its kickoff act. The 27-year-old once played Annie on Broadway and stars on the soap opera "As the World Turns." She has wanted to be a rock Star ever since she was a teenager playing local New York clubs with a band. But her demo tape and a self-produced record didn't stir any interest.

Now Philip Morris is whisking her into the major leagues. "We had a budget that was appropriate for what a record label would give an established artist. They treated it like they had a platinum selling artist," says Jay Coleman, president and chief executive officer of Entertainment Marketing. "From day one, it was so first class," agrees Ms. Byrne, "They were very giving. They let me have my input with Nile," the musician who has produced platinum-selling records for such performers as Madonna, David Bowie and Diana Ross.

Ms. Byrne's CD is a slick-sounding soft-rock record that includes four original romantic songs co-written by Jennifer Marks, a song-writing friend of Ms. Byrne's. Also on the CD is Ms. Byrne's version of John Lennon's "Imagine" and a song with the same name as the new Virginia Slims ad line, "It's a Woman Thing."

Ms. Byrne, who isn't a smoker, says she doesn't have any qualms about her role in a project designed to sell cigarettes to women. "I don't feel I am being used. I feel I am being elevated to the next step by Philip Morris," she says. "They are helping me 100 times more than I might be helping them."

She believes local performers auditioning to be her opening act will think: "It's a great opportunity. We are all individuals, and we all have personal choices. The goal of the label is to bring women into a positive light, period."

Philip Morris says its taking steps to keep Woman Thing Music in the hands of adults. The company's auditions for opening acts are limited to musicians 21 years and over, Philip Morris spokeswoman Tara Carraro says that the music really is meant only to be sold with cigarettes and that Philip Morris has no interest in being

in the entertainment business. "If we offered it on radio and TV to everyone," she says, "we are eliminating the added value for smokers. This is a promotion for smokers."

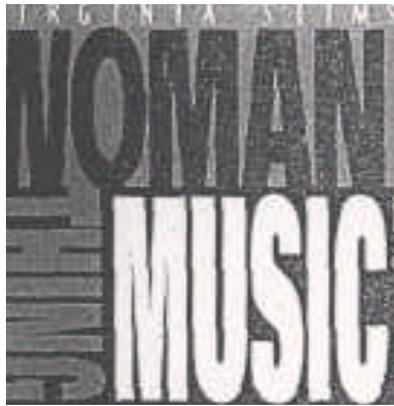
Teens' View of Tobacco Ads

Teenagers believe tobacco ads are aimed at them, according to a new survey from the Washington-based Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

The anti-tobacco group, which supports proposed Food and Drug Administration rules restricting tobacco advertising, says 76% of U.S. teens say cigarette advertising intentionally targets them.

The national survey of 513 kids between the ages of 12 and 17 asked respondents why they think teenagers choose to smoke certain brands of cigarettes. More than a quarter of the kids answered, without prompting, that advertising dictated the brand choice. When asked why teens would choose to smoke Camel cigarettes, almost 40% named advertising as the reason.

However, the teens weren't asked whether advertising had any influence over their decision to start smoking. Tobacco companies say their advertising doesn't target children or nonsmokers but only adults who already smoke. Critics of proposed federal regulations restricting tobacco ads say that existing regulations already prohibit the marketing of tobacco to children. The survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.4%.



The cover of Martha Byrne's now CD