

## Taylor Swift Vs. Scooter Braun: The Real Winner Is Delta Rae

For the members of Delta Rae—a female-fronted, bluesy, folksy, rootsy country rock band featured in the [30 Under 30 Music](#) Class of 2013—Independence Day came early in 2019.

Delta Rae hadn't released a new album after nearly three years with Big Machine Label Group, home to Taylor Swift until last year, prompting the bandmembers to wriggle out of their deal and plan a Kickstarter campaign for the first of July. A day before, they heard the news that Big Machine chief Scott Borchetta had sold his label, along with Swift's masters, to megamanager Scooter Braun. A day later, they watched in amazement as the superstar's fiery critique of the deal drove her "Swifties" to furiously fund her erstwhile labelmates—to such a degree that Delta Rae became the most-backed indie band in Kickstarter [history](#).

"The power of Taylor Swift fans is they believe in Taylor Swift; it felt amazing to feel the overflow of her fandom momentarily," says Brittany Holljes, the band's co-lead singer. "But the Delta Rae diehard fans are just as powerful. They have the same passion and heart as Swifties, just in smaller numbers. ... By far the greatest gift of the Kickstarter campaign, to me, has been trust—falling into the hands of our uniquely big-hearted fans."

Some 5,000 of those dedicated Delta Rae fans and staunch Swifties combined to [generate](#) over \$450,000 in funding on Kickstarter to support the band's next slate of projects. Boosted by the infusion, Delta Rae is working on a double album to be released in early 2020, as well as an acoustic album, a holiday album and "a Southern Gothic musical."

Representatives for Braun, Borchetta and Swift did not respond to requests for comment. But this fascinating chapter in the broader Big Machine saga, which continues to sprout [new controversy](#), is one worth knowing—though not necessarily replicable—for the vast middle class of independent musicians. Above all, it's a tale that illustrates the power of fandom and how its amplification in the digital age can transcend boundaries of genre and gender, defying labels of all sorts while elevating art that doesn't fit neatly into a mainstream box.

"It's not about how many followers you have—it's about how many engaged superfan customers you have," says Brittany Hodak, a *Forbes* contributor and cofounder of the Superfan Company. "Every superfan is worth hundreds, if not thousands, of followers."

Delta Rae's story begins, much as it continues, with superfans nurtured through Kickstarter. The group launched in Durham, North Carolina, about a decade ago starting with Holljes and her brothers, Ian and Eric, as well as their friend Elizabeth Hopkins ("Yes, they get into fights," the latter [told](#) *Forbes* of her sibling bandmates in 2012). Bassist Grant Emerson and drummer Mike McKee joined shortly thereafter to round out the lineup.

In 2011, Delta Rae—named after a mystical, fictional character dreamed up by the Holljes' mother—launched a Kickstarter campaign to fund its first full album, aiming to raise

\$20,000 for recording and production. The group ended up raising \$28,000, buoyed by the buzz generated by constant touring and the success of the rousing single “Bottom of the River.”

Before Delta Rae could release its album, Sire Records plucked the group from the independent world and released its first two albums: *Carry The Fire* (2015) and *After It All* (2015). But the first never made it to the Billboard 200, and the second [peaked](#) at only No. 152.

Big Machine’s Valory Music Co. was the next to give Delta Rae a shot, signing the band in early 2017. “The level of talent in Delta Rae goes to ‘11,’” Borchetta [said](#) at the time. “There are no better singers or musicians anywhere, and we’re so proud to add Delta Rae to the mighty Valory Music Co. artist roster.”

Delta Rae had been touring heavily—and extremely efficiently—for years. Playing three days on, one day off in front of crowds in the hundreds and occasionally thousands, their grosses rarely got beyond the low five figures. To make the math work for a band of six while keeping concert tickets around \$30, they shared cheap hotel rooms on the outskirts of the cities they played, loading their own gear in and out of a trailer hitched to their van.

The Big Machine signing signaled that both Borchetta and Delta Rae believed moving to Nashville and fully embracing the group’s country tendencies would take the band to the next level. With acts like Kacey Musgraves and Maren Morris on the rise, it seemed country was beginning to embrace more female voices, and Delta Rae seemed as good a candidate as any to capitalize.

“That gamble did not pay off ... country music doubled down on just whatever it was already doing, which is ‘bro’ country,” says Eric. “In 2017, I know it was 7.5% women were in the Top 40 of country. And just by contrast, in 2000 I think it was 33%. And now it’s hovering around 11%. I mean, country music is just not playing women. And Delta Rae was included in that.”

Though the band was still writing and recording music, the singles it churned out weren’t getting any traction, which caused Big Machine to keep pushing back Delta Rae’s Valory debut. That led to more time spent in the studio, and less time on the road—a major problem for a band that had been touring two albums for ten years. “You can only play the same 24 songs so many times before the demand starts running out,” says Eric.

Delta Rae huddled to plot its next step. With the members now in their 30s, and some of them starting families of their own, there was a real concern about keeping the band together. They ultimately decided to uncouple from Big Machine and go back to their Kickstarter roots, betting their careers on a modest but dedicated base.

Unbeknownst to Delta Rae, however, Borchetta was about to sell his company to Braun, and the news broke just as Delta Rae’s Kickstarter went live. Within 30 minutes, Delta Rae had fully funded its \$30,000 goal. The number soared to \$150,000 by the end of the first day.

“There is a lot of lip service and hype in the music industry,” says Brittany. “You are told to play ‘the game.’ But between us and our fans, there is no game. They put up their hard-earned money to crowdfund our albums because they love our music. ... It makes me feel unstoppable.”

The group's members quickly noticed their support wasn't just coming from the usual suspects. They were getting a big boost from accounts that seemed to belong to fans of Taylor Swift who flocked over in solidarity, drawing a connection between Delta Rae's situation with Big Machine and Swift's. So Delta Rae added a special Kickstarter pledge tier called SWIFT—short for Stand With Independent Female Trailblazers—for \$13, Swift's favorite number.

The Swifties' support eventually helped send Delta Rae's Kickstarter total toward its current tally in the neighborhood of half a million dollars, enough to comfortably bankroll the group's next album—and then some. However, as the Superfan Company's Hodak notes, it's not always a given that new fans will stick around in the long term.

"Delta Rae got super lucky with the timing of their announcement," she says. "While they certainly benefited from the initial influx of Kickstarter donations from Taylor stans, only time will tell how many of those Swifties are converted into Delta Rae superfans. ... The real challenge (and opportunity) for Delta Rae is to keep that attention they've captured and monetize it beyond this campaign."

The band's next act is something that probably would never have gotten support from a major label. In addition to releasing a huge batch of new music, Delta Rae is evoking the spirit of "Bottom of the River" for its Southern Gothic musical. Inspired by a 16-week stint last year in which the band transformed a Nashville venue into a chapel haunted by the ghost of a witch, Eric envisions the production as equal parts *Sleep No More* and *Phantom of the Opera*.

"We want to bring that here, and we want it to be a destination," he says. "So while you're coming for your bachelorette party, you've also got something creepy and bad-ass to see."

In the meantime, the band will continue to do what it does best: touring. Eric figures it's too early to tell how much Delta Rae's Kickstarter buzz has boosted the amount it can haul in on a nightly basis; he believes they'll find out when offers for next summer's festival season start rolling in. And though country music retains a woeful lack of diversity, [the 2019 list of the genre's highest earners](#) has a higher ratio of women than it has in years, offering some hope for the future.

What of Borchetta, Braun and Swift? Delta Rae seems unlikely to do any more business with the two former figures, but the band is holding out hope of collaborating with the latter (Eric suggests they'd be thrilled to perform at one of Swift's upcoming [Lover Fest stadium shows](#)).

Regardless, Delta Rae will be forever in debt—already recouped—to the Swifties, and to the group's own fans.

"It calls to mind the quote about small groups of dedicated people changing the world," says Brittany. "Our fans have changed our world forever, and we are going to carry that fire forward."

<https://forbesmiddleeast.com/taylor-swift-vs-scooter-braun-the-real-winner-is-delta-rae>