

EDITORIAL

Beyond Exposure: Building Sustainable Careers for Independent Musicians

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Digital production and distribution have lowered some barriers to releasing music. An artist can record with modest equipment, distribute globally, communicate directly with listeners, and organize work without a conventional label. These possibilities are significant. Yet independence often means that one person becomes performer, producer, rights administrator, publicist, data analyst, designer, and customer-service worker.

The language of empowerment can conceal this transfer of labor. Musicians are told that persistence and authenticity will produce an audience, while the costs of equipment, rehearsal, travel, health, promotion, and unpaid preparation remain individualized. Research on creative labor has repeatedly identified the combination of strong personal commitment, uncertain income, and unequal access to opportunity. The issue is not that artists misunderstand the difficulty of their profession. It is that institutions benefit from cultural abundance while treating career continuity as a private problem.

Exposure can be valuable when it reaches relevant listeners under fair conditions. It becomes exploitative when used to replace payment or when artists bear costs for access to opportunities whose benefits are speculative. A clear distinction is needed among promotion, professional work, education, and community participation. Each can involve different forms of value, but the terms should be stated in advance.

Organizations inviting musicians to perform should disclose payment, expenses, recording rights, cancellation terms, technical responsibilities, and how the performance will be used. Competitions and showcases should explain selec-

tion criteria and avoid requiring broad rights as a condition of entry. Platforms should distinguish advertising from organic discovery and provide intelligible account statements.

Payment transparency is especially important in streaming, where revenue reaches artists through multiple contractual layers. A single universal payment rate cannot capture every licensing arrangement, but complexity should not be an excuse for opacity. Musicians need to know what was reported, which territories and uses were included, what deductions occurred, and how to challenge errors.

Direct-to-audience models are often described as replacing intermediaries. In practice, they create new intermediaries: mailing services, ticketing platforms, distributors, payment processors, social networks, and analytics providers. Baym's work on relational labor shows that maintaining connection with audiences is itself sustained work. It can be artistically meaningful, but constant availability may reduce the time needed to compose, practice, and reflect.

Sustainable careers require shared infrastructure that reduces duplication. Local rehearsal spaces, equipment libraries, cooperative studios, legal clinics, rights-education programs, childcare support, accessible venues, and collective marketing can benefit artists whose individual scale is too small to purchase each service. Public investment in these resources supports a musical ecosystem rather than selecting a few artists as exceptional beneficiaries.

Success in music policy is frequently measured by events, releases, attendance, exports, or aggregate economic contribution. These indicators reveal activity but

not whether artists can remain in the field. Evaluation should include payment delays, unpaid labor, access to insurance and pensions, career interruption, geographic concentration, and the affordability of workspaces.

Funding design also matters. Short project grants reward constant novelty and application writing. Multi-year support, small operating grants, and simplified reporting can create time for development. Selection panels should recognize work in languages, genres, and community contexts that may not produce conventional market signals.

No single institution can guarantee an artistic career. Platforms, venues, funders, educators, collecting societies, distributors, and governments nevertheless shape the conditions under which careers become possible. Their responsibilities include: clear contracts and timely, traceable payment; accessible rights and business education without implying that administration is the artist's only path to survival; portable social protections suited to intermittent and multi-source income; support for shared physical and digital infrastructure; and policy evaluation based on career continuity and diversity, not output alone.

Independent musicians do not need promises that every release can become a commercial success. They need institutions that do not treat artistic commitment as an unlimited subsidy to the music economy. Exposure may begin a relationship, but sustainability depends on compensation, infrastructure, protection, and time. A healthy music culture is not one in which anyone can upload a recording. It is one in which a wide range of musicians can continue making work under fair and intelligible conditions.