

The Independent Music Conversation: Creating a network to support independent grassroots music

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Our world needs the things that bring us together, that help our physical and mental wellbeing, that give communities a voice, that support us in coping with our changing environment. Music has the capacity to do all these things while also making a valuable contribution to economic wealth.

Yet, participating in the music industry remains one of the most vulnerable and precarious occupations and independent grassroots artists and those who support them are particularly vulnerable in an industry subject to significant technological change.

In theory, the ability to be a DIY musician creates a more level playing field and today there are a diversity of approaches and models for artists to pursue. Artists of all ages, genres and at all stages of their careers, are able to benefit from wider support for new music as the industry is forced to be less ageist and understand how the audience for music has changed and diversified. However, DIY artists also need to be successful DIY enterprises.

Many of the issues independent artists face are similar to those of other precarious occupations in the gig economy and the self-employed, such as lack of a pension, sick pay, low and variable earnings requiring more than one form of employment. However, some are very specific, such as getting music heard in an oversaturated market; playing live is increasingly important for profitability but an issue for those with mental and physical health issues or artists unable to live close to each other; marketing and selling merchandise requires money up front; legal contracts associated with their work are complicated and confusing and they often have no or limited access to good legal advice, gatekeepers and influential networks within the industry.

In addition, much self-learning is required, to know how to run a successful music enterprise and to keep up-to-date with new technological developments in a constantly evolving industry. While, there is no shortage of books and internet information on how to 'make it' in the music industry, much of this information is scattered across the internet, not necessarily updated, can be of questionable value and quality and is frequently behind a pay wall.

That help is needed is broadly recognised. Key members of the industry already work together to bring issues they face to the attention of policy makers and government, for example, through Music UK. Organisations such as PRS, Help Musicians and AIM provide practical support and music conferences provide expert advice. Yet the music industry still struggles to address the career needs of grassroots artists and particularly those struggling to get to grips with the new music environment.

Increasingly artists are forming their own networks and collaborating freely across continents through the internet. As a result, recent years has seen a rise in more experienced independent artists taking matters into their own hands, mentoring and supporting the next generation of grassroots artists. They do so mostly on their own, using their own resources and while also trying to forge their own viable music careers. So the question is not just about how to help grassroots independent musicians, particularly those disadvantaged in some way, but also how to support the environment in which they sit.

There is a need to think more systemically and this has led us to consider practical questions around helping those starting out or struggling to get to grips with the industry. For

example, how to support those with little financial means or family support; those who lack access to music networks; who live remotely; who have not had the advantage of a music college or university education; who have mental or physical disabilities? How to help older artists update their industry knowledge? How to make information more accessible? How to help people identify, understand and utilise the skills and roles of others (artists, labels, managers, publishers, booking agents, promoters, radio producers, bloggers, journalists, BBC Introducing etc.).

Our thinking has been associated with practical action. Eighteen months ago Neil started a monthly live event in south-east London to showcase, through Demerara records, emerging independent artists from Fresh on the Net and BBC Radio 6 Music. He has also written a book aimed at anyone starting out (currently being updated) and more recently was successful in attracting Arts Council and Lottery funding to support the establishment of a community of independent artists through festivals and gigs. However, there is only so much that can be done without the support of a wider network.

By bringing together RSA fellows who have a common interest in these concerns we would like to start a wider conversation. Not just in the UK but also elsewhere in the world, as many of these issues are faced by grassroots independent artists and their networks globally. The RSA already has a network of educators and artists in the performing arts, we are proposing to compliment this with a more specific network for those interested in nurturing the independent grassroots music environment.

We envision this as an ongoing network of practice that can think through issues of concern and potentially draw in others from the industry. We aim to find practical ways to help and support grassroots music as new innovations emerge and so impinge on their practice.