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**Reflection Paper**  
**June 15, 2019**

When I first applied to the Master of Arts in Global Entertainment & Music Business program, I thought I had it all figured out. There were so many signs that the barriers to entry were being drastically lowered for artists to put out and release their music. Previously unheard of artists were getting international fame just by independently putting their music up on Soundcloud. Companies like AWAL were giving artists access to the distribution pipelines of the industry without having to lose the rights to the work they were creating. Surely in this environment, there would be a huge uptick in artists who could make a living wage off their music, and I wanted to go to Berklee to figure out the best ways to help them.

That was the genesis for my thesis work. I had grand ambitions about the scope of the project, but ultimately I wanted to be able to provide a definition of a middle-class artist as it is understood in 2019. I wanted to interview artists across the spectrum, from completely DIY artists to those at more established independent and major labels, to understand the different aspects behind their success. I hoped to leverage relationships I had built at Berklee to dive deeper into the finances behind their success, and use data analysis to spot trends or interesting correlations. If I could, I wanted to set up a blueprint for how artists can get themselves to the point where they can earn enough to make a living off their music, and not be reliant on secondary jobs or side hustles.

Unfortunately, my wide-eyed goals for the project were not in line with the reality of the situation. The time constraints played a major factor, as I really did not have time to devote the full amount of effort required into the project until the beginning of the third semester, and from that point there was less than one month to put together a finished project. I was able to complete

a fair amount of research in the time before then, but I had hoped that there would be more structured time devoted to carving out my thesis work during the previous semesters, especially semester two. As the year progressed, it was clearly more important to address the mounting amount of work that the classes required, and it is always easier to focus on short-term deadlines rather than devote time to more abstract, longer term initiatives. Had this been a project I could focus on for an entire year, I do believe that there would have been more substantial findings.

Another issue is simply the expansiveness of the topic itself. Each artist's path to success is extremely divergent, and I wanted to make sure that was accounted for. A great deal of the struggle I faced was trying not to oversimplify the situation, while at the same point wanting to make sure that the important points were covered and I wasn't leaving any crucial information out of the final work. There is a lot of resignation about the idea that a middle-class path is even feasible as an artist, therefore a great deal of the available literature ends up discussing the futility or statistical unlikelihood of such paths. Success stories often are told at an anecdotal level, or at least about a very small handful of bands or songwriters.

Lastly, I don't think that the kind of work I wanted to do would have been possible without funding. I would have wanted to travel to meet with multiple artists across different geographic regions to understand how their environment and day-to-day work affects their creative process, and learn more about their personalities to understand on a personal level what contributes to their success. I also think that success would have required an academic partnership with either a major distributor or a label, in order to get anonymized access to thousands of different artists' datasets. Combined with extensive surveying direct to artists on a number of areas related to sustainability in the music industry, I think all of this data would have added up to a very robust and informative academic paper.

In the end, my project ended up being more consolidated. I conducted a literature review that tried to cover two main areas. The first was the revenue streams that exist in the industry, drawn upon the knowledge I have accumulated from my classes and resources at Berklee and the latest news and happenings in the industry, with a large amount of the articles being published in 2019. I also called out industry perspectives on the path of middle-class artists. I did this first by focusing on the top-down economic effects of the declining value of music, especially as it relates to digital streaming numbers. I also looked at the perspectives of independent artists, both positive and negative, about the potential for smaller artists to make a living off their music. I believe that it laid a solid groundwork for the subject at hand.

The latter section of the paper focused on one artist a particular, an up-and-coming jazz musician who has been studying at Berklee Valencia for the past year. I chose this artist because I strongly felt that he represented the key aspects of what it takes to succeed in the industry as an independent artist. Beyond his exceptional talent level, he is hard-working, skilled at self-promotion, and keen at engaging with his fans. He also has a strong desire to retain his independence as a musician, even as his star continues to rise.

I conducted several interviews with this artist over the course of 2019, discussing his approach to touring, his focus when it comes to streaming numbers, and how he approaches marketing as a musician, not just as it relates to his fans, but also how he approaches new venues or regions where he might be able to play his music. The artist also gave me access to his royalty and streaming data, along with tour revenue history, which provided unique insights into how he has performed over the past few years. I then conducted a data analysis to identify if there were any specific insights or trends I could ascertain, as well as provide a dashboard to the artist that he could use to further his reach at conferences and beyond.

While I do wish that I could have had a broader scope with this project, I am proud of the work I have done. There has not been a great deal of academic analysis focused on this issue, and a great deal of what exists today is not extensively analytical and instead focused on one-off stories or general artists opinions. I am of the opinion that as the digital economy opens up more and more paths to success in the industry, it will be important for artists to understand how to navigate the waters of the industry effectively.

For artists to succeed without the help of the traditional arms of the industry, they must think of themselves as more than musicians, but effectively as their own start-ups. Even with a manager in tow, artists still spend a fair amount of their time on areas other than music, whether it's self-promotion via social media and otherwise, formulating budgeting strategies, or making sure your music is registered appropriately with the respective copyright and administrative services. Luckily, there are many independent-minded services that have popped up in the industry in recent years, though my paper does not conduct an extensive survey of these companies.

I hope that the work that I have done can be seen as a good starting point for whatever future academic work I might want to do in this area. If I were ever to pursue a PhD in an area adjacent to the music business, I would be extremely interested in furthering this research. As I said before, I do believe that this would require some funding and a more significant chunk of time, and a PhD dissertation could provide an outlet to achieve this goal.

In the meantime, I intend to use this as a conversation point for how I would like to interact with the music industry. The topic of making a living off one's music does come up often at conferences -- there are even whole conferences devoted to DIY musicians, with one being held in Valencia just this past July. I am always interested in seeing new companies that

are focused on providing independent artists with the tools they need to succeed, like Songtrust which provides independent publishing administration<sup>1</sup>, to Create Music Group, which recently created a dashboard to show the projected royalty streams from many of the primary digital service providers that artists use to release their music.<sup>2</sup> When I first arrived at Berklee, I was concerned with the overabundance of middlemen that chip away from the total revenue owed to artists, but I have been surprised to find that some of the third party companies are actually the ones most focused on helping artists get the fairest share of money owed to them.

I am also encouraged to see that the major labels themselves are focused on providing tools for artists as well. They are not just focused on increased transparency, but also are willing to provide better ways to help artists get paid more regularly. Sony Music recently announced an upgrade to their royalty payment tool that would allow artists to cash out their payable balances on a monthly basis, something previously unheard of.<sup>3</sup> Labels in general are encouragingly stepping up their analytics efforts, both internally and externally, most likely in response to the outside competition they are seeing. Regardless, when I first came to Berklee, I had an inherent distrust of the major labels and believed that their goal was keeping the numbers side of the industry as opaque as possible for artists. I believe there are still significant improvements that can be made as it relates to the ownership artists and songwriters have over work, but these improvements show that the industry is moving in the right direction.

When all is said and done, the passion around equitable pay for artist that drove me to enroll in the Master's program at Berklee still exists in me today. I was able to synthesize the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://app.songtrust.com/about>.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Ingham, "Create Music Group Now Shows Daily YouTube, Spotify and Apple Music Revenues to Its Artists," Music Business Worldwide, January 28, 2019, <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/create-music-group-now-shows-daily-youtube-spotify-and-apple-music-revenues-to-its-artists/>.

<sup>3</sup> Marc Schneider, "Sony Music Making Upgrades to Royalty Payments Portal," Billboard, May 20, 2019, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/8512155/sony-music-artist-portal-real-time-royalties-cash-out>.

fundamentals of the industry that I learned in my Copyright Management and Publishing class with the extensive research that I have done around new payment models in ways that I know I could not have without the help of Berklee. I hope that as the industry continues to evolve, Berklee's graduate programs will reflect the changing themes and revenue models. The music industry, I believe, is undergoing a radical transformation, and while there are still plenty of kinks that need to be worked out, there is more and more potential for innovation and an increase in money pouring into the industry. Berklee would stand to gain from classes specifically focused on these newer models in the industry, alongside their courses on the more traditional outlets.

Regardless, I know that these are the issues I will continue to learn about and advocate for as I make my transition back into the working world. After my years of working in the advertising technology sector, I am excited at what awaits as I try to apply these skills to the key challenges facing the music industry today. I will also be curious about analyzing new datasets as it relates to artists and the economics of the industry, and it will be tough when I lose access to some of the amazing resources we have been able to have access to during our time at the campus.

I have been privileged not just to spend the time and learn during my classes, but also engage with high-level veterans of the industry at conferences, and most importantly, the soon-to-be leaders of the industry who were part of my program. The wide range of geographic backgrounds and career interests of my cohort has made for consistently interesting conversations and challenges to my priorly held beliefs. I am excited at the prospect of working with many of these talented individuals in the future, and I believe we will be at the forefront of the next big shifts in the music industry.

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