

NEW MUSIC STRATEGIES

PDF BOOKLET - FREE TO DISTRIBUTE

While a good deal has changed about the way we make, distribute and consume music, there are some things that seem to always remain the same. Here are five of them...



Five things that are still true about music

By Andrew Dubber

Music online is different. It's not just 'new format' different — it's 'new ballgame' different. But some rules still apply.

It's a whole new world. You know that and I know that. Digital music is not like the change from records to CDs. It's the change from printed sheet music to recorded music.

But it's not all robots and lasers. People have a tendency to do many of the same things in many of the same ways, and no amount of technological innovation will change people from doing some of the things they're hard-wired to keep on doing.

I've been thinking about some of the things that *aren't* different

about music business online, and I thought I'd make this little PDF just so we can bear these things in mind. I think it's important.

1) More distribution is better than less distribution

Doesn't matter whether you're selling shellac 78rpm records or house tracks as 320kbps mp3s. The more places your music is available, the more chances people are going to have to stumble over it. That's not job done, of course — making something available is not the same as marketing it — but it's the other half of the equation.

There are choices in the world of digital 'aggregation'. You might want to check and compare their services. Independents tend to have nice things to say about [CD Baby](#) and [TuneCore](#) in my

experience, but there are thousands of other services. These people will save you the trouble of dealing with individual retailers, just as distributors do in the offline world.

It's absolutely right and proper that your music should be available on your website. But it should also be available on *everybody else's*.

2) Songs travel in packs

When people say that the album is dead, you can smile to yourself and have that nice feeling you get when you know you're smarter than somebody else.

While it's undeniable that iTunes sells a lot of single tracks, I think it's fair to say that the stronger cultural force is the fact that

artists want to present their songs in a themed and curated collection.

Whether that's an EP of 5 songs, an album, a symphony or a song cycle — or even the A-side / B-side partnership of the 7" record — music is best consumed and understood in the context of other music.

Thankfully, that's also the way that people prefer to buy music — but not how they like to buy digital files. Multiple downloads equals complexity.

Why not make your album (song cycle, etc) available for download as a single ZIP file? People understand those, and it's a lot less complex and bothersome than multiple individual tracks.

Let's assume for the sake of argument that people are 10 times more likely to give you £5 for an album that they can download in one click than they are to give you £5 for 5 tracks that they have to download individually.

You do the maths on that.

They're not cherry picking the hits because they don't want albums. They just don't want to have to pay for and then manually download individual songs that they don't know they want yet.

I wouldn't buy *Fitter Happier* as an individual track, but Radiohead's *OK Computer* doesn't work without it.

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3) Music is both an immersive and a companionable experience

We like to have music on while we [insert verb]. It's a secondary and companionable experience that accompanies our daily lives.

Radio's quite good for that, as is streaming.

When it's on in the background, we're not too fussed about quality. It's uninterrupted ease of continual service that we're after.

But we also like to sit down with the headphones on or the speakers up loud (I argue that there is no music that cannot be improved with the addition of volume). While not everyone has the ears of a record producer, quality counts. We like to be immersed in our music, enveloped in it and transported — whether it's hard rock or big band jazz, country or synth pop. The quality has to be good — on all fronts.

Having said that, there are of course people who listen to music out of the speaker of their mobile phones, and there are people who bought SACD players — and everything in between.

How we listen

While technology has transformed the ways in which we consume music, the tension between portability and convenience on the one hand, and high-fidelity and an immersive experience on the other remains.



So don't get dragged into arguments about acceptable quality and preferable formats. Make sure you cater for convenience AND quality. Neither refuse to make your music available as a 'degraded' mp3 nor neglect to offer it at 320kbps or as a WAV file.

4) Musicians like to play music / Audiences like to hear music

This might seem a rather stupidly obvious thing to say — but the more I investigate the online music environment, the more I realise it's about promotion and distribution on the one hand, and about discovering, downloading, storing, organising and sharing on the other.

While we're busy doing all this, we sometimes overlook the important bit, which is to put the laptop down and go to a gig — or to sit on the couch, pick up a guitar and play — or turn on the stereo, relax with a cup of tea and just listen.

As consumers and producers of music, it's quite refreshing to just step back and remind ourselves what it is we like about the stuff so much. Even better when those types of people are in the same room together and that thing is happening unmediated by tubes and wires.

Like the record, the mp3 is not the music. It's just a souvenir of the music that you can buy and sell. The music is the experience — whether a recorded one or a live performance. It's sound moving through the air.

We spend so much time working on the mechanics that we often forget about the simple pleasure of playing and listening to music.

5) The charts are rubbish

While there is a certain degree of cultural significance accorded to the fact that Michael Jackson had the most number one singles off one album — or (let's say) that Madonna was the only woman to ever knock herself out of the top ten on a Thursday, or that songs by George Michael occupied all of the prime numbers for 3 months in 1987 — the charts themselves have always been meaningless in almost every important respect.

This has not only always been true — it's now *especially* true.

There was, at least, a marketing purpose to it in the past: you could maybe get seen on Top of the Pops, or played on Casey Kasem's show (though arguably it's the broadcast rather than the chart position that's important here).

It's also often true that a lot of people like things because they are popular, rather than the (far more sensible) other way around. And certainly there's a dwindling number of music retailers who use charts to make decisions about stocking and purchasing.

But, for the most part, being number 18 for a week has never had any real genuine value.

I know people who have appeared on Top of the Pops, and who do not in any way consider themselves to be successful musicians. Nor are they rich or famous.

Chart success (particularly of the far more common 'fleeting' variety) has little or no bearing on the income of the label or the artist in question. A song that sells 5000 copies in a week makes no more money than a song that sells 1000 copies a week for 5 weeks — but only one of them will get in the charts.

Statistically speaking, charting is no guarantee of fame either. You might be in the charts and you might be famous.

You want music industry success? Aim for longevity and a lasting relationship with your fans. You may get into the charts and you may not. Celebrate when you do, but understand that it's not the point of the game, just one of many measures — and not an especially meaningful one.

Music has changed - but it's the same.

To experience music industry success, it's crucial to remember that the fundamentals of music remain the same no matter what. It's the media environment that's changed. And while the digital environment absolutely transforms the ways in which we compose, produce, distribute, consume and promote music - the purpose, effect and basic human pleasure of music remains.

Enjoy your music - and all the best success with it.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit <http://newmusicstrategies.com> for ideas, information and strategies for independent music business.

Andrew Dubber is available for consultancies, seminars, workshops and individual coaching.

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