

## Musings on Music, Musicians, and the Metaverse

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Popping my favourite music compact disc (CD) into the player, the CD starts to skip, making intermittent deafening moments of silence. Finding a local repair technician specializing in CD player rebuilding was a surmountable task. Replacing it is challenging because consumer electronic stores have ceased selling CD players since CD stores have all but disappeared from the face of the island state of Singapore (although a single That CD store at the Shoppes at Marina Bay Sands still hangs on to this last vestiges of a digital dinosaur medium for sale). The gradual disappearance of music CDs with other compact disc formats for media and data storage is evident in music consumerism's decline using this type of digital media. As a result, selling one's creative musical output through sales of CDs has gradually disappeared in the last decade.

Music CDs were in the 1980s and 90s, a digitized format of music that replaced analogue music recordings on cassette tape and records. Through the sales of recorded music, especially CDs, musicians could sustain themselves (Botstein, 2019), apart from music performance tours (Swanson, 2013). A little later, the advent of the digitized music coding format called MPEG-3 or mp3 popularised by music piracy using peer-to-peer sharing networks like Napster and Kazaa. As music was shared amongst users and became inherently "free for the taking," it led to revenue decline through CD sales for musicians. As music digitization developed, new platforms to stream music, usually through a regular paid subscription or pay-per-song download on Apple Music, Spotify, Tidal, etc. Musicians who sold their music through these streaming platforms eventually realized that they were paid paltry monetary tokens from their music sales. Incredulously, Spotify's popular but controversial "freemium" subscription service only paid music creators' uploads on an average of \$0.004 per stream. After significant financial losses in the 2000s, record label companies now claim to earn substantial profits from music sales through streaming platforms. My personal experience of releasing a digital EP (extended play record) of 5 instrumental song covers only garners some USD\$25 every month in shared stream profits with another musician and an internet media agent. The agent streams music on various platforms, including YouTube, as playlists of song collections. Without the agent, getting sufficient plays would be even more dismal, much less to be sufficiently remunerated for the effort to record and produce the music. There appears to be no other alternative to make a living as a music

creative other than performing to a live audience. Only recently, some government bodies under pressure from music artistes like the British parliament began taking action. This is with the hope that music streaming business models will change and pay musicians' music uploads on streaming platforms more royalties (Sisario, 2021). Reports of paid and advertisement-supported streaming music subscriptions in 2020 had risen almost 20% to \$13.4 billion, with 433 million users of paid subscriptions in 2020 (Gumuchian, 2021). But the persisting question continues to prevail: how much did musicians receive from this increase in digital music streaming?

### **Impact of the global pandemic**

Then global pandemic hit. International music festivals ground to a halt. Global travel ceased as all international borders shut off tourists and external visitors. Within each country, lockdowns and restricted movements challenged the livelihood of all musicians. A few pre-COVID years ago, in my conversation with Jean-Paul "Bluey" Maunick, bandleader of renowned UK jazz-funk band - *Incognito*, he mentioned that the primary way to survive as a band was to continue touring performances in international festivals and venues. The pandemic arrested all of such live music performances. Closer to home, musician friends reminisce their performing experiences in China music tours with famous singers in the pre-COVID years. With the pandemic, such international tours and work for musicians almost completely dried up. The global COVID-19 situation also meant more people stayed and worked from home, encouraging people's reliance on video and audio recordings from home through the ease of online access (Botstein, 2019). Fans of regionally-popular local artistes like *Stephanie Sun* and *Kit Chan* were still able to watch their singing idols' online, restricted-pilot performances from Singapore during the past two years of lockdowns. Will international concert tours continue after the pandemic becomes endemic? When these tours restart, will it be the same before 2020?

### **Will things be the same again?**

The Singapore-based consumer online survey amid the pandemic in 2020 revealed the lack of public regard for arts practitioners compared to other professions. Arts practitioners like musicians top the list as non-essential workers because they do not "meet the basic needs of human survival and well-being, such as food, health, safety and cleaning" (Ang & Kiew, 2020). This foreboding survey seemed to ring the death knell of many involved in the arts industry in Singapore. Many musicians, sound engineers, and others in the arts field turned to other jobs as means of survival. Reports of the decline of live music from the pandemic were global, from

China (Gu et al., 2021) to the US (Botstein, 2019). At the time of writing, the Singapore government continues taking a cautious stance towards border reopening to foreign music performances, keeping to limited seating in the audience, and allowing only a measure of local restricted public performances. Unlike many countries which have begun permitting concerts and music tours, live music performances in Singapore in pubs, hotel ballrooms, and restaurants remain prohibited. The consequential effect led to the shuttering of established live music institutions in Singapore like *Crazy Elephant* and *Wala Wala Café Bar*, leaving regular band acts scrambling to look for alternative means of income.

### **Live streamed music performances**

In mid 2020 during the pandemic, I was among the first few musicians who joined in the initial onset of live-streamed music performances sponsored by a music agent through a local community club. The viewership for the first stream of Late Night Sax hit more than five thousand views, including post-stream views by the next day, including international viewers. The first lockdown attributed to the incredible viewership because of the fresh novelty of watching live performances through a social media platform. A year later, the plethora of streaming shows on various platforms led to the tumbling of viewership ratings for each stream. *Streaming does not appear to be a long-lasting answer for live music performances.* Currently, a small group of musicians, especially jazz musicians, still benefit from live streaming performances through generous funding from a handful of private sponsors. But for how long will these non-profitable performances last? Philanthropic organizations are not bottomless pits of funds to support the arts forever. While musicians get paid here to stream, it was painful to find out through social media the diametric lack of similar philanthropy for public performances in the US. Until today, many renowned jazz American musicians continue their live stream performances without sponsorship but appeal to public donations instead.

At the start of 2022, big-name bands and musicians have restarted their performance tours to make up for the lost COVID years. Everyone from *Coldplay* to the *Eagles*, *Katy Perry* to *Ed Sheeran*, has lined up performance tour dates in the US or Europe for the rest of the year, some even into 2023. For the big-name music artistes, the restoration of live music performances attempts to re-live pre-COVID days of global sell-out concerts, and perhaps to recoup financial losses from the two years of absence. But what about the masses of less famous local musicians? What will the future hold for these professional musicians to make a living without live music?

## **NFT and new performance platforms in the virtual world**

Two new growing areas seem to provide glimmers of hope for the musician - music NFT and new performance platforms in the online virtual world or metaverse. Non-fungible tokens or NFTs are unique digital files existing in a blockchain as a cryptocurrency asset with verifiable ownership that can also be sold. Kings of Leon's first-ever music NFT album launch last year paved the way for music NFT and was met with resounding success. Musicians may finally have a chance to be impartially compensated for their creative works and retain rights to them, find new ways to capitalize on the scarcity of their products, and collaborate with other artistes (Fatemi, 2022). Music NFT with these positive attributes may be the next big thing to revolutionize the music industry.

With the metaverse looking set to gradually explode, attending virtual reality concerts may be the rage in the near future. In these performances, musicians will perform as self-designed avatars on a ticketed global stage in a cyber world, attended avatars of a real audience. Within the metaverse, there is a fusion between real and digital environments; real-time interaction between virtual and other users. In 2021, Epic Games hosted Travis Scott in a first-ever virtual concert on their popular video game, Fortnite, where 12 million gamers stopped gaming to attend the concert. Concerts in the metaverse are not just virtual streams but "can deliver a curated immersive experience for the audience" (Roy, 2021). The virtual reality of live music in Second Life first released in 2003 may finally become the reality of tomorrow's future in live music performance and music creation.

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