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Even before Covid, music was broken. Let's use this moment to hit reset

Tim Burgess

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The entire world is in crisis, so you could be forgiven if your first thought is not for the welfare of professional musicians. The image of the pampered rock star sashaying around the grounds of their mansion clutching a bottle of vintage champagne isn't one that would elicit much sympathy. But that cliché, though true for a tiny few, disguises the reality of life for the vast majority. For years, so many musicians have had to have more than one job to pay their rent - and I'm not just talking about young upstarts in bands that aren't on the general public's radar, but familiar names that you'll know if you listen to BBC 6 Music or read any music magazines or websites.

Even so, things were kind of OK: live shows were thriving, and that meant the chance to head out and play – not just in the dozens of venues here in the UK but also on legendary stages such as Paradiso in Amsterdam, the Bataclan in Paris and at some of the best festivals in the world, like Benicàssim and Primavera in Spain. The excitement of leaving home to play gigs in Europe is still with me after more than 30 years.

So this year has been a double whammy. Not only did gigs and festivals just shut down after March 2020, but as that year limped into this one, British artists found out that the Brexit deal didn't carve out **protection** for us. Any shows in the EU will require visas, carnets, paperwork and general red tape, cutting off this amazing experience for all but the biggest acts. And then there's the flipside: many venues across Europe rely on British artists to sell tickets and keep them going.

It's been bad news all round, then. But there's a third ingredient to our woes, and it's the reason why we are potentially so vulnerable to the end of touring. Yes, experiencing the beautiful world of live performances, being satisfied each night by the adulation, applause and associated merchandise sales, has its own strong appeal. And it's an industry that supports more than just the musicians: there are the lighting techs who make us look as good as possible, sound engineers helping us impress our audiences and tour managers who literally keep the show on the road. But for most of the history of pop music, it hasn't been the whole story. Recorded music was what helped keep artists afloat – giving people the opportunity to listen in the comfort of their own home, or on the dancefloor, or out for a walk with their headphones on.

These days, some of the tinfoil-hat brigade are referring to a “**great reset**”. It's something to do with a cabal of world leaders and a dastardly plan to reshape the economy, I believe. And while I don't favour their headgear or their appetite for badly made YouTube videos, I'm not averse to the idea of a musical reset: using the pandemic as an opportunity to look again at how things are working in the industry. To take this moment and this strange landscape we find ourselves in, and just switch things off and back on again. They say, “If it's not broken, don't fix it.” Have they also considered, “If you're busy and you don't look too closely, it might seem to be working fine, but actually it's not”?

Not as catchy, admittedly, but bear with me. I think I need to point out at this stage that this is not for me or my bandmates; it isn't a selfish act of demanding more for ourselves. It's about tidying up the mess so that musicians have a chance in the future, so that their work can be valued and more names can be added to the list of artists that this country has proudly produced since the very first recordings were made.

The basic point is that the UK music industry contributed an estimated £5.8bn to the economy in 2019, but artists are maybe not seeing as much of that as they should. Almost 5m vinyl albums were sold in 2020, the most since way back when we released our debut LP in the early 90s. There's hope and excitement in the gloom, but there's also an elephant in the gloom. That elephant's name is streaming. To understand the issues better, it might help if we imagined trying to explain the way it works to someone back in 1995.

“OK, so for a penny under a tenner a month, you'll have access to pretty much every record ever made, to listen to whenever you want. It's like you own the music but you kind of don't.” I'm guessing our person in 1995 would be mightily impressed.

There is much made of the sums paid to artists as a result of all this - yes, they get a cut, and millions of people stream every day, right? - right, but these sums usually go to 26 decimal places, and the first four digits are often 0.000.

Gary Numan recently said that he made £37 from a million streams of one of his songs. Again, he wasn't griping about the money due to him, but painting a picture of what it's like for a new artist who couldn't hope to get a fraction of those plays. Let's say 25,000 people streamed that artist's latest track. As popular as that might make them seem, it wouldn't buy them a coffee in the shop where they had to work a second job because their income from music was so meagre.

The thing is, streaming has taught us that people *are* willing to pay for music. Spotify had total revenues of \$7.4bn in 2019. A lot of that money goes to major labels rather than directly to artists, so they're part of the equation too. Tom Gray and the Broken Record campaign (pretty sure they supported us at the Rayleigh Pink Toothbrush in 1992) have done some sterling work in holding the platforms and labels to account, but it's an uphill struggle.

Julian Knight MP, chair of the digital, culture, media and sport committee, recently called in the major record labels to discuss streaming. He asked one of them whether they had cut royalty rates to artists after a deal with Spotify. He wasn't happy with the answer. “You are in front of a parliamentary select committee now,” he said. “In the past, with the likes of Google, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, we have found them to be frankly dissembling and not being in any way [clear]. So far I have to say you are beating them to the prize in terms of lack of clarity and lack of actual openness to a parliamentary committee.” I don't know about you, but that doesn't give me a lot of faith that they're going to be open to changing things.

But now, with everything else on hold, we have time to sort it, right? If a whole generation of musicians goes to the wall, no one wins. And let me tell you, when we fix it there'll be quite a lineup willing to play at the party to celebrate.

Tim Burgess is lead singer of the Charlatans

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Tim Burgess has been instrumental in bringing people together, both musicians and fans, with his nightly #timstwitterlisteningparties during lockdown. And he still finds time to campaign for all musicians and techs who have been hit by the double whammy of Covid and Brexit. In a time of such sadness, stress and nastiness, we need more Tim Burgesses.

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Guardian Pick

The bottom line is that like many who choose to work in the arts, 95%+ of people will never make a living out of it. I mean I think Birmingham had a thriving live music scene in the late 60s, and out of that came half of Led Zeppelin, Slade, Black Sabbath etc. But you can bet your life there are thousands more who spent their lives pounding round the live music venues at the same time but spent their careers as accountants, bin men etc. etc. N...

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