

Rebuilding the Music Industry through Community A Case Study of Bandcamp and Twitch during COVID

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Article abstract

Devon Léger is a music publicist (HearthPR) and music writer (Folk Alley, No Depression). In this piece, he describes how online music platforms Bandcamp and Twitch have supported musicians during the pandemic and provided new ways for artists to connect with fans, build community, and monetize their music.

Rebuilding the Music Industry through Community: A Case Study of Bandcamp and Twitch during COVID

Devon Léger

It's no secret that the COVID-19 pandemic has utterly decimated the music industry in the United States and Canada. Many industry jobs are no longer feasible, and artists who have come to rely on touring and live music to make a living wage now find themselves without income. Everyone involved in the music industry has had to pivot quickly to survive, adopting new ideas and trying out new models.

As an example, Nashville-based Americana songwriters Wild Ponies recently opened a food truck that doubles as a "mobile community center and creativity platform." "We're not leaving the music industry," Doug Williams of Wild Ponies said to me in conversation, "it just doesn't exactly exist right now." Wild Ponies are an exception in that they're creating a physical space for people to gather together. Instead, most artists have turned to digital spaces for their music making, as have festivals, music venues, and music conferences.

Though I freelance as a music writer for publications like *Folk Alley* and *No Depression*, my main work is as a music publicist for my company HearthPR. Publicists have been somewhat more insulated during the pandemic than other members of the music industry, since artists are still releasing albums and need support, but it has been necessary for us to pivot quickly to keep new work coming in and to help our clients. As part of my work to explore new avenues in a rapidly transforming industry, I started looking at two specific examples of how digital music outlets are providing new ways for musicians to monetize their art while building community: Twitch and Bandcamp. I interviewed representatives of both organizations and this article synthesizes information from these sources as well as from my recent experiences working extensively with these two platforms.

Most music venues closed down early on in the global pandemic under the direction of governors and premieres in the United States and Canada. They have stayed closed because, at the time of this writing in fall 2020, government leaders have yet to move to a phase of containment that would make indoor spaces safe for large numbers of people being served alcohol. As venues closed, artists saw a whole year of touring dates swept away almost overnight—a catastrophic loss for many. Livestreams of musical performances, mainly presented via Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, became the solution for many artists starved for connection and looking for a way to play for fans during quarantine. As livestreams became more plentiful, the music industry took notice and large corporations began moving into the field, creating new livestreaming platforms. Quoted in *Rolling Stone*, Live Nation CEO Michael Rapino said, "We are seeing the potential for livestreaming to become an additional long-term component of our concert business," and hinted at livestream tech developments to be rolled out by Live Nation in 2021. Sony's Japanese livestream platform "Stagecrowd" will likely come to the US by early 2021 as well (Ingham).

While livestreams can provide something of the live music experience lost because of COVID restrictions, the main issue is making them financially viable. As of Fall 2020, Facebook is allowing ticketing for their livestreams. Unfortunately, livestreams on Facebook usually play to few viewers thanks to the platform's inexplicably aggressive algorithm. In my experience, Facebook seems to squash viewer numbers on livestreams, though I've not been able to find out why. In mid 2020, I was streaming daily via the Recording Academy's Facebook page,

which has five million followers, yet we struggled to draw more than one hundred viewers per page, or 0.002%. I noticed similar numbers for streams on Facebook's official music page, which has six million followers. In my experience, Instagram, which is owned by Facebook, sees low viewership in its livestreams as well. As streams turn towards ticketing as the main form of monetizing live performances, it's not clear if audiences will pay to see music livestreamed in the same ways they'd pay for a live concert. What's needed now is a new model of livestreaming that creates a community built on funding artists.

Twitch is not an independent company; it was bought by Amazon in 2014 for almost a billion dollars in cash. This is big business, from one of the biggest corporations in the world, but Twitch still operates remarkably like an independent music community. Formed originally as a streaming outlet for video gamers—who continue to make up most of the streams today—Twitch has been pivoting more and more towards music. In an interview that I conducted with him, Will Farrell-Green, Head of Music Content at Twitch, said that music has been growing on Twitch in the past few years, but that recently Twitch has seen exponential growth with the number of music broadcasters tripling from the second quarter of 2019 to the second quarter of 2020. As Farrell-Green explained, “While it's true that our roots are in gaming, we've seen that the many reasons gaming took off on Twitch—the passionate and engaged community, real-time interactions, and top livestreaming technology—really resonate for other categories as well. Music on Twitch has been steadily gaining momentum over the past few years and has since expanded to include everyone from up-and-coming musicians to Grammy-winning artists and iconic music festivals.”

Twitch's video capabilities do seem to outstrip other streaming outlets, and the live chat on Twitch can be quite lively, but what makes Twitch unique is the complex system of monetization that's woven into the fabric of the platform itself. Twitch works based on a system of subscriptions. Viewers who like a specific streamer are encouraged to either buy subscriptions to that streamer's account, or to use their Amazon Prime account to subscribe. (Prime members get one free Twitch subscription per month.) Subscribers are allowed special benefits that differ for each streamer, creating a kind of shared identity based on the act of paying streamers for their streams. Benefits include ad-free stream viewing, access to the live chat (streamers often restrict the chat to subscribers only), emotes (stylized emojis that are unlocked upon subscription), and badges (symbols next to your name in the chat that denote how long you've been subscribed and at what tier). Most streamers offer three tiers of subscription based on price. Higher-priced subscriptions give the subscriber more exclusive benefits. By creating a hierarchy of interaction based around subscription, Twitch has baked the idea of monetization into their streaming culture.

The prospect of a livestreaming platform that delivers better video content and fan interactions that are driven towards constant monetization is powerful for artists. To succeed on Twitch, though, an artist needs to adapt to the culture, to build community *within* Twitch rather than trying to bring it from outside. Country star Kane Brown has 1.2 million likes on Facebook, 1.7 million followers on Twitter, and 2.7 million followers on Instagram, but draws only a couple hundred viewers on Twitch when he streams videogames. This is partially because he streams infrequently and his streams aren't very interactive, but Brown's case is a clear sign that Twitch success isn't a guarantee for even the most popular artists.

Farrell-Green agrees, saying, “It takes time and dedication to build up a following on Twitch.” He suggests three things to help build a Twitch following for artists: build your community, keep a consistent schedule, and set the stage. Farrell-Green shares the experience of Canadian pop singer Sereda, who now makes her living creating and performing on Twitch. Sereda's stream is

highly interactive, much of it open to suggestions from her chat and focused on the creation of music rather than the performance. It's music tailored to Twitch's community and, in turn, supported directly by that community.

Not all musical interactions on Twitch are positive, however, and recently Twitch has come under intense fire for bowing to the constraints of the music industry via Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) takedown requests. Copyright bots under the control of music licensors have made livestreaming difficult on all current platforms, but Twitch has seen the most aggressive backlash. Twitch has been warning users to refrain from using previously recorded copyrighted audio and has asked video game streamers to use music from Soundtrack, their own collection of rights-cleared music. This is an issue for music streamers on Twitch, especially DJs, who must either stream original music or work to get permissions for each track played—and even then, may still incur a DMCA takedown notice. This problem will hopefully be solved soon, since it is creating a major issue for Twitch streamers. For the moment, as long as streamers can work around this, they do still have free rein of Twitch's ecosystem of monetization.

While Twitch moves forward in new ways to monetize the livestreaming paradigm, Bandcamp offers an example of a company that's actually looking backwards in response to the COVID pandemic. Bandcamp is essentially a retail platform for music, rather than a streaming platform, and their success during COVID has come from their focus on album and merchandise sales. Early on, Bandcamp recognized that audiences were eager to support artists that they saw were struggling and offered audiences a way to do this that was more concrete (and financially viable) than just streaming the artists' music. Bandcamp does offer streaming via their website and mobile app, but the streaming is limited until the user buys the album. Once the purchase is made, the user can continue streaming at will. Users generally buy either an album for digital download or a physical product, like a CD or vinyl record, which the artist mails to them. Bandcamp also allows merchandise sales including T-shirts or other physical products.

Early on in the COVID pandemic, Bandcamp initiated their wildly popular "Bandcamp Fridays" program. On the first Friday of each month since March 2020, Bandcamp has waived all of their fees to artists and record labels (15% for digital, 10% for merch). In turn, many independent record labels also waive their fees on that day, and media outlets have delighted in writing roundups of favorite albums to pick up for each Bandcamp Friday. Artists have taken Bandcamp Fridays as an effective way to release new music created during COVID—or music held back by COVID—and to earn much needed money directly. The program has been powerfully successful, with fans spending four million dollars during March's Bandcamp Friday—fifteen times the usual amount spent on a Friday. The first four Bandcamp Fridays earned over twenty million dollars for artists.

Andrew Jervis, Director of Artists and Labels at Bandcamp, related to me in a recent interview that the Bandcamp Friday idea came out of an all-hands meeting around the start of the pandemic. "It was something that everyone was pleased that we were going to be helping out with," he says. "We could scramble to come up with new features or something, but the easiest and most direct way that we could help is to enable artists and labels to make some money during this time when they might normally be touring."

The success of Bandcamp Fridays is an impressive feat for any digital music company (Spotify has been consistently in the red since its inception), let alone a small, independent online music retailer (which has been profitable since 2012). Because Bandcamp offers a viable alternative to streaming, some have positioned them as a kind of savior to the music industry. The real issue

with digital streaming platforms like Spotify is not so much that they pay artists so little in terms of royalties, but that streaming has replaced physical album sales, which are much more profitable for artists. Even though most artists are able to sell CDs or vinyl directly online through their own websites or Amazon, the continuous push of the music industry over the past decade or so has been away from CD players, record players, or even music downloads, to a streaming-only digital music ecosystem. For example, most new cars now come with Bluetooth and without CD players, as do new computers. Though some artists can make a living purely from streaming revenue, this is rare. While Bandcamp can't bring us back to the days when artists easily moved thousands of physical copies of an album, it offers an ethical version of the old music industry (which was based on physical sales). Though streaming is part of the platform, it's not the focus and, indeed, Bandcamp's CEO has compared his site more to Etsy than to Spotify. "We're not a DSP [Digital Service Provider]," Jervis admits, "because about half of the sales on the site are physical. On Bandcamp, we think that streaming is a great technology, but we just have a different business model for how it fits into the life of artists and labels."

At its origin, Bandcamp was inspired more by websites like Blogger that provided templates and platforms to bloggers or artists for self-publishing. The initial idea, according to Jervis, was just figuring out a way for any artist to get their music out there and for sale, digitally. What set Bandcamp apart was not only that it put artists first, but that it understood that fans were willing to support artists directly and felt left out under what Jervis calls Spotify's "rental model" of music. Fans are even willing to pay more than the actual cost of the physical product if they feel it will help artists. "It's clear that the community of fans that use Bandcamp are the ones who want to support the artist in the most fun, meaningful, and sustainable way," says Jervis. "They're willing to open their wallets and they're willing to pay more than the artist asks for. They do that about 40% of the time, which is kind of crazy."

With Bandcamp Fridays, Bandcamp is building a community around their service. They're moving beyond a simple retail model and using each month's big event as a way to connect fans with artists and record labels directly, and to encourage artists and labels to connect with each other and with other organizations. Jervis relates that Bandcamp Friday has encouraged a spread of recording projects that donate their proceeds to charity, something that Bandcamp didn't anticipate as a response. Artists are also using Bandcamp Fridays as an excuse to talk up other artists and albums they love. Says Canadian folk musician Mike Kerr, "Bandcamp Friday is simply a time to share. I always make recommendations on my various socials, and so do so many other artists, and we all namecheck each other, and more than any other social media sharing event or hashtags or whatever I've encountered, this turns into real connections, real fans engaging with our music, and real payouts."

Both Bandcamp and Twitch have created communities based on encouraging and allowing fans to support artists directly. As most of the music industry has collapsed because of COVID-era restrictions, fans still want to connect with their favorite artists and with other fans of those artists. The music industry has always been a difficult place to make a living and has always been riven with inequity, but artists who can build a sustaining community around their music can find themselves sheltered from the vagaries of the industry. No matter how much artists may need to adapt to this new world, the one thing that will not change is that people need music in their lives and are willing to pay for it.

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