

Leveling the Playing Field: An Examination of How College Students Can Independently
Pursue Music Production and Artistry in the Digital Age

By

Dakota Carver

A thesis presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State University in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the University Honors College

Spring 2026

Thesis Committee:

Bess Rogers, Thesis Director

Dr. Joan McRae, Thesis Committee Chair

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By Dakota Carver

APPROVED

Bess Rogers, Thesis Director

Assistant Professor, College of Media and
Entertainment

Dr. Joan McRae, Thesis Committee Chair

Professor, World Languages

Acknowledgements:

In concluding this thesis project, I must first properly extend my sincerest thanks toward all the individuals involved at all stages of this project—from initial formulations to the final presentation.

I would like to extend my utmost gratitude to all of the recording industry students that were involved in the focus group discussions, as well as all the MTSU faculty that provided instrumental advice and insight regarding the music industry and this project, including this project's thesis director Prof. Bess Rogers, who was instrumental in guiding the thesis' goal, arranging interviews, and providing feedback on overall thesis delivery.

Furthermore, I thank Dr. Joan McRae for acting as Thesis Committee Chair to this project and providing extensive and articulate feedback on better streamlining and formatting this thesis.

Additionally, I must not forget to thank the MTSU Recording Industry faculty with whom I conversed with and gained advice from early on in the project's stages, including professors Adam Caress, Tammy Donham, and Jerome Kimbrough.

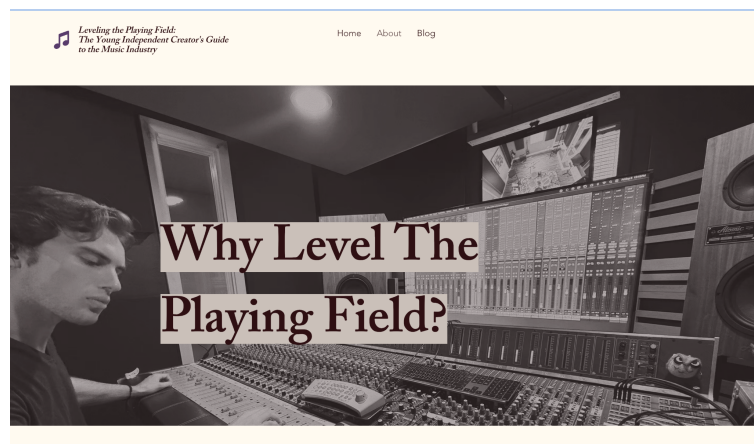
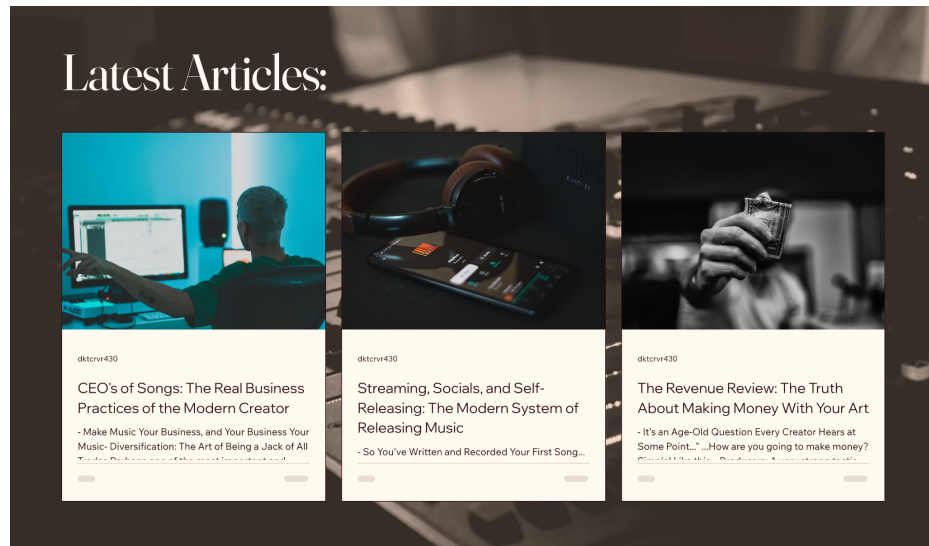
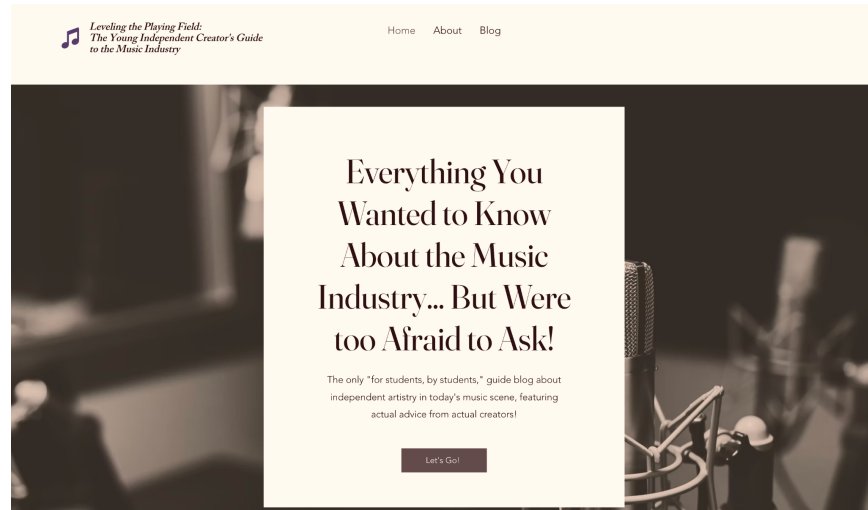
Finally, I extend a great thanks to all the recording industry professionals who agreed to converse with me and graciously share their insights and advice for the next generation of musical creators, with the full list being Matt Kass, Aaron Shafer-Haiss, Mark Zellimer, Kira Scheid, and Chase Alan.

Abstract:

This thesis examines the business model of the independent creator within the scope of the modern recording industry, specifically for those graduating from college and entering legitimate musical careers. Modern advancements within the recording industry have both provided more opportunities than ever to independently-operating musical creators, as well as having created brand new difficulties in establishing oneself in an already competitive and crowded industry. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to provide advice to music industry upstarts through insight gained from interviews with a variety of active music industry professionals, and guided by the needs identified during student focus groups. Discussions centered around technology, creative process, entrepreneurial practices, and revenue collection. The resulting information from these interviews is presented in the form of an online, interactive guide in which recording industry students can access and utilize in their own creative and professional pursuits.

Leveling The Playing Field:

[Website Link](#)



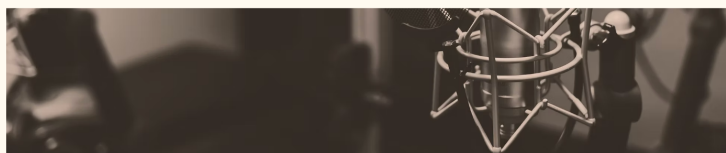
A Study in Independent Artistry

The music industry is now more accessible than ever: the core tenets of recording, consumption, and promotion have long evolved past limited analog technology to the point where digital recording software, streaming, and social media have become indispensable tools available to anyone with a song and a modest allowance. In an industry traditionally dominated by large-scale companies such as record labels that dictated all processes relating to commercially-available music, a once rare career model existing outside this paradigm has quickly become more viable than ever: the independent creator. Songwriters, artists, and producers are increasingly operating and making a full living off of their music with little to no record label interference by utilizing technology now available to practically everyone.

Alas, therein lies the issue...

The music industry is essentially experiencing inflation in the fact that EVERYONE is now recording, releasing and promoting music. Thus, the already competitive business is now even harder for those serious about a successful, independent music career to break into. With literal thousands of songs released everyday, many young musical upstarts are unsure of how to get started and how to hold down a legitimate career- especially in the face of ever-encroaching new technologies such as artificial intelligence.

Therefore, the purpose of this guide is to address the confusion and concerns faced by many young creators approaching potential careers in the recording industry and thus provide experience-backed advice: all information presented is informed by actual concerns recorded from actual aspiring creators attending Middle Tennessee State University- a prominent recording industry school- and obtained from actual conversations with active professionals actively making a living in the recording industry.



Methodology and Approach

Step 1: Focus Groups

- Actual students in MTSU's recording industry program were asked what they understand about today's music industry- and more importantly, what they don't.

Step 2: Research

- A deep dive into scholarly articles, journals, and publications focused on the recording industry, digital technology, and entrepreneurship.

Step 3: Interviews

- Recorded conversations with active professionals in the recording industry, including songwriters, artists, producers, engineers, and managers- with questions informed by the earlier focus group responses.

 @ktzhr430 · Mar 21 · 3 min read

Talking Tech: The Modern Age of Creating and Collabing... and What's Up with AI?

Updated: Mar 23



The website linked and displayed in the photos above is the cumulative, practical result of this thesis. It features the findings from the interviews and research of this project in the form of blog-based articles accessible to students or others looking for practical advice on various aspects of starting, sustaining, or diversifying a career in the recording industry, specifically from an independently-operating standpoint. This website, *Leveling the Playing Field*, was entirely constructed by myself, and features an interactive landing page that features links to the featured articles, an “About,” section detailing the project’s goal and backstory, and dedicated articles to specific areas of information. Students or other upstarts can access and read these articles to gain insight from these recorded interviews; and going forward, may also access the website’s email feature to potentially suggest more areas of research and subsequent interview topics for future articles.

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Introduction

New advances in technology have constantly been a primary driver of continued evolution and advancement in creating and distributing recorded music. From the invention of the gramophone and forward, burgeoning new technologies and practices in creating, recording and disseminating music have consistently presented both new challenges, but perhaps also more importantly, new opportunities for expansion (Darvish and Bick 10; Murphy and Hume 4; Tribulski 19). In recent history, the rise of digital services has best exemplified this trend. The introduction of early streaming services such as Napster were initially a major loss of revenue, with a decrease of \$25.2 billion to \$14.2 billion from 1999-2014 (Pizzolitto 2; Murphy and Hume 3). However, as exemplified in iterations past, the recording industry was able to adapt, with streaming in particular becoming a massive point of growth. In the years spanning 2014-2021, the recorded music industry was reported to have almost doubled in networth, rising from \$14.2 billion to \$25.9 billion, following the previous decrease of \$25.2 billion to \$14.2 from 1999 to 2014 (Murphy and Hume 3; Pizzolito 2; Aguiar 3; Seifert et al. 1). To this day, said growth has only continued.

In conjunction with streaming, another driving force in the industry's digital growth is the introduction and subsequent utilization of digital recording technologies, such as digital recording softwares and workstations. Central to this growth is the gradual, industry-wide adaptation to digital technologies that have taken precedence over older, analog methods of music consumption and creation. This has not only allowed for the recording industry to recover, but for an interesting sub-space to bloom: independent artistry (Walzer 4; Murphy and Hume 5). Driven by the variety of relatively new

technologies to the recording industry, independent creators have become a rising, irrefutable force within the modern music industry, evolving into thriving, self-driven businesses. Musicians, producers, engineers, and songwriters now have relatively inexpensive access to products and services that in years previous would have only been accessible in large-budget, corporate or label-owned recording studio settings, thus allowing for polished, high-quality recordings to be made and distributed from any space or place as dictated by the creator (Keith et al 5; Walzer 5). Paired with the availability of streaming services, not only does one have the ability to create music independently of any record label interference, they can also release it independently to streaming platforms, potentially reaching a wide audience (Tribulski 22). While independent creators have existed in previous decades, the tonal quality of such artistic endeavors were often limited by the availability—or lack thereof—of professional-grade recording equipment, and without label assistance, releases were often difficult to disperse on a large scale (Murphy and Hume 4) . From these new circumstances has arisen a new, verifiable potential business model of the modern music creator, one that is able to operate and generate revenue successfully in a myriad of career opportunities.

On par with the creation and wider consumption of music, the field of music promotion and marketing has also been widely democratized by online resources in recent years. Social media has evolved into a major driver of modern promotion in the arena of music, and because of its ubiquitous, accessible-to-anyone usage, it has proven to be a potentially valuable asset for the modern independent creator (Tribulski 19). For some background information, marketing and promotion of recorded music was/is primarily conducted via the means available to record labels, this being a highly-funded,

highly detailed endeavor that involves little to no input or direction from the artist(s) or other associated creators. Marketing in an independent manner was, while not unheard of, often characterized by a “lack of access to traditional media channels for distribution and promotion,” as cited by a Creative Industries article (Murphy and Hume 4). However, social media’s rise in the 2010’s and onward with platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Youtube has only furthered this, introducing some very key statistics and functionality that offer significant marketing potential to the modern music creator. (Murphy and Hume 4; Wares et al 3). For one, most social media platforms are completely free for usage and are reported to have a combined user base of 4.8 billion, which is almost 60% of the entire world’s population (Wares et al 4). Average daily usage of popular platforms rounds out to almost 2.5 hours per day, which when paired with the high volume of regular users, indicates a very wide base of potential consumers who might notice or otherwise interact with a good or service’s online presence- and thus be more inclined to utilize, buy, or support said service (So and Li; Wares et al). Due to these combined facts, thousands of small businesses and entrepreneurs- about 85%- have utilized social media-based content in some capacity as an inexpensive means of modern, online promotion- one that is able to extend far beyond their physical locale, and potentially net a wide base of possibly translated capital in the form of online followers or supporters (So and Li; Young and Cheng). In the context of the recording industry, this is lent even more credence by the fact that among the most recurrent users of music streaming services are also reported to be one of the most active categories of regular social media users (Wares et al 5). Thus, this creates an ecosystem that has the potential

to foster an independent music career when paired with the previously discussed capabilities of independently recording and releasing music.

With this new, incredibly widespread accessibility to once-exclusive practices does come some notable and important challenges. The major concern is that with the influx of independent, home recording practices and self-released music, effects akin to inflation have now taken root in the recording industry. The mass-availability of such capabilities and devices has resulted in staggeringly large amounts of music being released to streaming services every single day, thus oversaturating the modern, stream-based, recorded music market, causing difficulty for many creators trying to establish a concrete audience, and potentially affecting their ability to earn revenue from their musical projects (Murphy and Hume 5; Keith et al 8). Additionally, the rate at which even more digital technological advances such as artificial intelligence have arrived to the industry has left many within the current musical scene confused or concerned with how to anticipate or properly navigate such changes (Darvish and Bick 10).

Another key area of importance is the influx of young, college-aged creatives nearing graduation and entry into the recording industry as these changes are unfolding. MTSU, in particular, is renowned for its recording industry program, with over 1,400 students currently enrolled in this program and over 8,000 having graduated to date (US Official News 1). As later reported in focus group discussions, many students almost completed with programs such as that at MTSU report having concerns and questions about the industry beyond what is taught in the classroom, citing a curiosity in how modern day professionals actively making a living in today's industry are effectively doing so.

Therefore, it is my goal to create a useful, interactive, online guide for up-and-coming student music producers and independently-produced artists that will feature the most up-to-date information on how to best navigate the modern recording industry presented by accessible virtual modules and content, and in conjunction, a social media page featuring key portions of this content. This project features information gained from scholarly articles, print sources, and most notably, focused interviews with modern day industry professionals that primarily specialize in music production, either for themselves as artists or for other creators. Additionally, two professionals from the administration and management side of the recording industry were also interviewed to gain a broader understanding of the industry's business practices. I hope to facilitate further understanding and provide advice for the next generation of musical artists leaving college and entering the professional music scene, allowing for them to be better equipped and more knowledgeable as they establish themselves and their musical careers in today's recorded music industry.

Methodology/Approach

The methodology for this assignment featured a distinct combination of academic research, focused discussion with recording industry professionals and experts, and student focus groups. A portion of the research was gained through scholarly, peer-reviewed articles and publications, accessed through online academic search engines such as MTSU's JEWL Search and Google Scholar, and through books such as *The Economics of Music* or print documents obtained through the MTSU library. The information gained from these sources was intended to provide background and insight on the modern state of the recording industry before and during the interview stage of the

research. Following the initial research, I began to gather information from recorded discussions and interviews to understand the experiences of industry professionals and students entering the field. As such, this stage was divided into two distinct phases: the student focus group phase, and the interview phase.

The student focus group was structured to feature discussion with current MTSU students pursuing degrees—and subsequently, careers—within the recording industry program. My goal was to gain input from those actively learning about and perhaps starting to work with the modern conditions of today’s music industry, specifically gauging what future creators currently understand about their prospective industry, and—perhaps more importantly—what they do not understand or need more information about. I drafted my focus group questions based on the commonly-used focus group template of *Engagement*, *Exploration*, and *Exit* (DoveTail 1). This three-part structure contains a variety of questions that introduce the discussion at hand and warm up participants (*Engage*), explore the discussion topic (*Explore*), and wrap up the conversation with concluding thoughts or insights (*Exit*). The questions I chose related to modern music production and business, and were intended to prompt discussion amongst students that would highlight the key areas of understanding and misunderstanding. Various focuses included musical creation and collaboration, recording and production, releasing music, promotion and digital marketing, and independent practices/self-entrepreneurship. For example, participants were asked about their desired music career and professional experience as a student artist or producer.

After this initial engagement, my exploration questions were drafted to delve into the distinct facets unique to the digital recording industry, ranging from recording,

writing, and production capabilities, releasing music, revenue collection, and promotion. Participants were asked about their immediate impression of digital technology in the context of music, whether it has helped or presented challenges in their endeavors, and how they understood the roles of social media digital releases .

I drafted applications to the focus group that were designed to be sent out to the entire RIM student body, with the initial goal being about 8-10 participants chosen at random. The application included inquiries on the student's major, career goals, preferred music genres, and which meeting date would work best for them. After there had been some time for the applications to circulate and for students to sign up, I chose participants and emailed them a confirmation of their selection and a link to Google Calendar to remind them of the event. The subsequent Focus Group was held twice in Bragg 101, 7:00 pm, featuring the same questions but different participants, on April 15th and April 22nd, 2025. This way, I was able to include everyone who signed up, as well as gain a variety of different answers and perspectives on the questions provided. As aforementioned, my initial goal was 8-10 participants, however, the final turnout of each focus group was about 3-4 students per group. In my opinion, this ended up being more ideal as conversation topics were able to stay fresh without redundant, repetitive answers, and the meetings did not need to be longer than 1 hour.

During the meetings, I recorded all discussions with microphones—courtesy of the Recording Industry department—hooked up to my computer, thus allowing me to reference the discussions after they had been completed. Following the focus groups, I used the recorded discussions for analysis and review, taking special notice of where student understanding is limited. This was the foundational cornerstone of the questions I

went on to draft for the interview stage, with the ultimate goal being to gain critical advice and perspectives on professional music production that was lesser-known or understood by students. In concluding the student focus group phase of the project, I found that it was absolutely instrumental in revealing where student understanding can be improved and therefore guiding my conversations with industry professionals.

Additionally, I also found it to be a success for student networking, as it allowed several students from MTSU's Recording Industry department to meet like-minded fellow creators and to thus establish future creative connections or opportunities.

Amongst the key takeaways in the focus group's *Exploration* stage was the diversity in recording industry aspirations held by MTSU students—something that, in a way, would mirror the diverse career choices and specializations as reported by my interviewed professionals. Some students were independent artists that also specialized in their own songwriting and engineering, some were instrumentalists with additional interest in production, while others were primarily engineers also interested in some artistry. Several of these students had experience in releasing recordings to the commercial music market via streaming and distribution services, already beginning a career portfolio of credited projects and contributions. My takeaway with this was that the current generation of musical creatives increasingly have the tools and means necessary to become proficient in several potential career fields of the music industry, and would benefit from hearing how professionals were able to narrow their focus to specific career paths. Thus, my very first questions for interviewees were to determine their musical profession and their main focus within their career.

Another key area of questioning the focus groups inspired was how the established professionals were able to begin building career repertoire/credit themselves, and how they essentially were able to effectively start their career. Questions included “What might be some important actions you’d advise college students to begin acting on now?” and “What might be your advice on building a repertoire/portfolio, making connections, or just in general taking your craft to the next level?”

Another key takeaway from the student responses was what areas the students were particularly knowledgeable on, and conversely, what they were less knowledgeable about. Students were specifically knowledgeable on many of the basic tenets of the independent recording industry. For example, many students were already well aware of how digital recording technology works and how to utilize it—several students in fact have already recorded, mixed, and released music independently. Some students who were songwriters reported having already registered with PRO’s such as BMI, and several engineering-oriented students have already had smaller gigs in live sound applications. Additionally, some have even conducted remote, online-based collaborations on recorded songs that either they or one of their collaborators have released. This points to a great overall understanding of several important and increasingly universal concepts and steps one takes in starting their career in the recording industry. For my project in particular, this established an important foundation of information in which I knew not to ask professionals about, but rather expand upon in ways that were perhaps more specific towards distinct areas of professional growth.

Conversely, many students were also either completely unsure of or confused about certain other areas within the industry, such as the process of releasing and

promoting music. Some students reported having issues with moderately successfully releasing or promoting, some have not had any experience with doing such, and some reported not even having an idea on how to start doing so. Several students also expressed frustration or confusion towards earning revenue from creative projects, most citing past experiences of projects that have either failed to generate money. Additionally, several also mentioned maintaining a day job that distracted from their pursuits, and wondering at what point they would be able to pursue music full-time.

From these responses, I moved on to the interview phase, where I recorded conversations with several individuals currently working in the recording industry and specializing in music production, including record producers, independent artists, songwriter-producers, engineers, and artist managers. Additionally, some MTSU faculty within the Recording Industry department were consulted on either the topic at hand or on the basis of further connections.

From summer of 2025 to early spring 2026, I contacted and interviewed several professionals mostly based in the Nashville area. Contacting these individuals was primarily through means of recommendation through Recording Industry faculty and other mutual connections. Like the focus groups, interviews were recorded for future reference and accurate quotation in the project. The questions for these interviews, somewhat like the focus group questions, were structured to *Engage*, *Explore*, and *Exit*, with phrasing being geared for the interviewees to openly interpret and elaborate in their own manner as they pleased (DoveTail 1). As such, the *Engage* set of questions were intended to open up the conversation between myself and the professional I was interviewing, often by getting some background information on who they are, what they

do as a profession, and their backstory. *Engagement* featured the questions such as “What is your musical profession? If you were to give a “job description,” what would it be and why, how might you describe your profession yourself?” “How did you get your start doing what you love as a career and making connections/start working with others?”

The *Explore* phase expanded upon this, with questions that, similar to the focus group section, explored specific areas of the recording industry: “From a creative standpoint, what might be some important actions you’d advise college students to begin acting on now? What might be your advice on building a repertoire/portfolio, making connections, or just in general taking your craft to the next level?” “How have you been able to capitalize on technological advancements in your projects?” “What is your approach to professionally releasing music in a manner that best navigates the nuances of streaming with regards to online promotion and revenue collection?”

Finally, the last category of questions was the *Exit* questions, which again were structured to encourage any last minute, additional comments or thoughts regarding the subject matter, but this time was specifically geared to self-entrepreneurship- a key, recurring element of independent creatorship that had been a recurring idea throughout my focus group discussions and early research. The questions are as follows: “From an overall standpoint, how have you taken advantage of the current technological and creative/professional landscape to stay self-driven and operating essentially as your own business? What is your advice for doing so much of this as a one-person operation?”

This information was recorded and used for quotation and/or reference in the final project. The medium of the final project is that of an interactive, online platform with modules that provide specific information collected from the research and interviews.

After considering which platforms offer the most appropriate services for the most ideal price, the website creator service WIX.com proved to be the best candidate, offering a free website plan that was compatible with the project's foreseen requirements.

The website was constructed with a central landing page for the user to get an idea of the guide's intention and to then navigate the different modules presenting information on different areas of the recording industry. For example, one section of the website may be accessed for information on innovative uses of recording technology, while another may be accessed for navigating self-release and promotion practices. In addition to its submission to the Honors College, the project is also in plans to be possibly presented to the student organizations such as MT Songwriters, although the date of this is currently to be decided.

In terms of finalization, my criteria for the project's completion was: "Does the research provide a current and up-to-date assessment of the recording industry and modern production?", "Does the research provide specific insight on areas of professional music production previously found to be less understood or unknown by recording industry students?", and "Does the project convey this information in a way that is accessible to students while also maintaining its focus?"

The Independent Creator in Context:

On par with the creation and wider consumption of music, the field of music promotion and marketing has also been widely democratized by online resources in recent years. Social media, in particular, has evolved into a major driver of modern promotion in the arena of music, and because of its ubiquitous, accessible-to-anyone usage, it has proven to be a potentially valuable asset for the modern independent creator

(Tribulski 19). For some background information, marketing and promotion of recorded music was/is primarily conducted via record labels that would utilize marketing teams to formulate campaigns and direct promotional efforts for released music. All of this is a highly-funded, highly detailed endeavor that involves little to no input or direction from the artist(s) or other associated creators, thus creating a potential discordance in how an artist would choose to present or promote their music. Marketing in an independent manner was, while not unheard of, often characterized by a “lack of access to traditional media channels for distribution and promotion,” as cited by a Creative Industries article (Murphy and Hume 4). However, with the introduction of the internet at the turn of the millenia, marketing efforts for practically all business and goods quickly found a new medium by which to be dispersed to a wider base of consumers. Social media’s rise in the 2010’s and onward with the usage of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Youtube has only furthered this, introducing some very key statistics and functionality that offer significant marketing potential to the modern music creator. (Murphy and Hume 4; Wares et al 3). For one, most social media platforms are completely free for usage and are reported to have a combined user base of 4.8 billion, which is almost 60% of the entire world’s population (Wares et al 4). Such advances are undoubtedly revolutionary for the opportunities available to the modern music creator, however there are new challenges that have arisen as a direct result. The recording industry has now seen a massive, over-abundance of music being made available to the market. As stated in an article from Creative Industries Journal, a staggering 100,000 recorded songs are reported to be released every single day- that same article goes on to point out that this is up from 2018’s 20,000 new songs per day, thus pointing to the incredibly widespread

adaptation and technological accessibility advancement of such technologies in the years since (Murphy and Hume 4). Social media promotion is also a point of concern in the fact that like the high volume of released music, an incredibly high volume of creators are already using these platforms at varying levels of success and professionalism. For example, a study on social media marketing by independent musical artists highlighted several key concerns held by such artists, many of which relating to the high traffic of other users and creators utilizing social media-based marketing, such as pressure to constantly formulate and create promotional content in efforts to maintain relevance and properly support new or upcoming releases (Wares et al 14). These factors have resulted in an increasingly competitive industry where creators are faced with intense difficulty in “rising above the noise,” and establishing a reliable audience, and/or confusion in approaching an industry wherein the combined opportunities and challenges are so prevalent.

The Interviews: An Examination of Independent Artistry

Aaron Shafer-Haiss

Aaron Shafer-Haiss is a music producer, songwriter, and audio engineer, a self-described “jack-of-all-trades,” who graduated from playing as a touring sideman to a full-fledged producer for other artists, and a writer/producer for sync licensing as well. In response to my *Engagement* questions, Haiss explained that his early experience took root in early endeavors touring as a musician in bands and engineering live sound—experiences that would lend their way into learning about essential production techniques such as microphone placement and acoustics, and would thus lead Haiss into early studio work helping out friends and associates, while continuing to tour. Following

his move to Nashville from New York City in 2014, Haiss was able to both expand his clientele and take his craft to the next level by building his own studio and beginning work in sync as well—both instances he cited as turning points where he was able to devote more time to in-studio production and songwriting and lessen his touring responsibilities. From the very start of the interview, Haiss states that one of the key elements that has remained central to his career has been this diversification of work and the fulfilling of multiple roles. Haiss goes on to offer a very interesting, holistic perspective on the early process of making connections within the music industry: start small and focus on genuine connections, and let the results from such endeavors fuel larger opportunities and connections. “The whole kind of networking thing has always kind of felt like a square peg around me, you know? So it's always been hard, and it's just been like, the more I focus on who's right around me, and what's in my circle of influence, the better it is. Rather than, the times I felt like, oh, I need to meet that person, or I need to meet that person, or I need to meet this person—and that kind of reaching thing has never worked out for me,” Haiss states, pointing out this fosters a strong creative rapport between collaborators that leads to strong, creatively potent results that can offer far more potential than scattered attempts at trying to meet a large number of industry-important individuals at one time.

Something often believed by many college students looking to enter the recording industry is that they must be acquainted with the “right people” to begin with, and as such many spend significant time and energy looking to gain connections to individuals with significant power or experience within recording industry circles. Haiss does not discredit this, but draws from his own experiences of instead connecting with an immediate circle

of active fellow creators based on shared interests and creative ideals, of which can thus naturally lead to more hands-on experience and genuine connections. And, as Haiss explains, “give 150% to the project you’re doing,” no matter its stature, is essential. “It’s not like, ‘I’m not working with Post Malone. So, I’ll get there, it’ll be there.’ Treat every record like you’re working with Post Malone, or whoever, you know, ideal person,” Haiss states, “Because—especially now with the way the music industry is—any record could be as big as a Post Malone record, right?”

As a producer, Haiss also points out the artistic inevitability of new recording technology, citing that at some point or another musical creators have always been able to take technological advancements in instruments, effects, and tools to new areas of artistic expression within a recording. Specifically regarding the rise of artificial intelligence, Haiss not only believes that musical creators will be able to utilize it in creatively-safe ways, but he also emphasizes a key point that perhaps alleviates the worries shared by many regarding AI use in music. Haiss states, “First off, it’s called generative AI, not creative AI. So, it’s only going to generate things that are already out there. It needs to ingest all the music that’s ever been made.” Haiss continues by noting that AI is fundamentally “backwards-looking,” in the fact that it relies on pre-existing musical inputs to create, concluding, “There’s something that is intangible about art and about music, and I don’t think you’re gonna get that from anything that AI makes.”

In regards to the modern era of musical collaboration and the creation of records, Haiss explains the modern duality: with new technologies of file-sharing and home recording comes the possibility of non-geographically limited creation and writing as never seen before, wherein entire songs and albums can be created by two or more

individuals in completely different states or countries in roughly the same amount of time it can be created in an in-person environment. “A positive of [online collaboration] is I'm able to produce songs for people in Korea and upstate New York, places that are not where I'm producing the whole song; they're not here, you know,” Haiss notes, “And then there was Audiomovers and all of that. I can listen in and produce their vocals from afar, which I wasn't able to do. They just send me a track, and I'd give them notes and they'd send it back, and I give them notes and send it back. So, there's that, you know, which opens up a whole new revenue stream: People don't have to travel here, it keeps their budget lower.” However, much of the in-person magic of human imperfections within a recording studio are lost in this method of creation, thus ensuring the continued viability of classic, in-person collaboration. “I love making music in a room with people, because there are more happy accidents. So often something happens, where it's like, ‘Oh, what was that? Oh, that feels, that moment feels really cool,’” Haiss states, citing that the often imperfect nature of human experimentation can lead to some of the most memorable moments in a recording.

Following this, Haiss offers his insight on the current landscape of releasing music and streaming, something he refers to as being in its “Wild West,” phase. On a very basic level is the utilization of distribution services such as DistroKid, a method of self-releasing music in a manner that widely publishes the creator’s music to streaming services such as Spotify. However, Haiss elaborates that some successful, young, independent musical artists have utilized both the ability to self-release and the algorithmic reach of streaming services to spur listenership and thus potential streaming revenue in a unique manner—a manner likened by Haiss to posting on social media.

“One cool thing I'm starting to see with people your age, your generation, is almost viewing releases like Instagram posts. In that I mean that, you have every artist involved as a featured artist on the song, so it hits all of their algorithms on Spotify,” Haiss describes, “It's like, it's kind of like tagging somebody in a post, or collabing on a post on Instagram, right? Releasing a song, and everybody grows together, and that's kind of cool.” As Haiss further explains, what this does is not only grant the possibility of garnering high streaming numbers for the creators involved, but also grants them a sort of new leveraging power against larger labels and companies. Haiss cites rising singer-songwriter Evan Honer as an example of this, who has featured smaller artists on his tracks in this way. In essence, this allows for the other artists to be exposed to Honer’s much larger audience, thus creating more streams for the smaller artist.

In collecting revenue from musical projects and releases, Haiss likens each song as a new “net” to collect revenue when registered, especially in the world of sync licensing, which he highlights as a key area in which one can start making money in the music industry. He notes that although a tedious process, this is a major step in ensuring the proper collection of royalties. “I make sure all my songs are registered with a PRO and with international, like SoundScan International, neighboring rights, stuff, which sucks. It's a big process,” says Haiss, “It's a lot of like registering the same song like 15 times. But just think of it as like nets. You know, every time you register, you're putting up another net to try and catch whatever few dollars come through.” Additionally, he points out the other options that the world of sync licensing offers to those looking to begin profiting off their early music career. He cites catalog sale as a massive opportunity for income, while also making sure to note, “They do a buyout, so you don't own the

master anymore. And the only thing is that you don't own the master, you don't own the publishing, but you still own all the writing credit. So like, even now, I get a random BMI statement that has like, a couple grand on it because some song I sold to a library 10 years ago was used in an insurance commercial in the UK.”

In the present day, Haiss continues to find sync licensing an especially lucrative area, stressing, “even now, I have a sync rep that has my songs, pitches it for TV and film. They handle getting me the payment, getting me the fee, administering all of that.” To continue, Haiss and I also touched on another key aspect of the independent landscape promotion. Haiss’s observations on the idea of social media promotion in one way echoed some of the earlier concerns of my focus group attendees—its algorithmic volatility, its massive usership, and its tendency to cause stress. Haiss noted that virality does not exactly equate or guarantee widespread listenership or promotional success, and as such is not something that should be emphasized over the music. “You're subject to an algorithm, you know what I mean, so just because you have 3 million followers, it doesn't mean 3 million people are going to hear it. It doesn't even mean that 1000 people are going to hear it. It just all depends on the algorithm” he relates, often stressing to artists he has worked with that social media success comes not at the worth of one’s music, but rather their prowess-or luck with algorithms.

However, he does also offer a unique perspective on social media unlike those previously offered by students or others. While the majority of those self-promoting are widely concerned with platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, Haiss emphasizes that YouTube is much more often an artist friendly-platform, one that even presents new revenue opportunities in certain circumstances: “The one platform I've seen where the

algorithm wants your stuff to be seen is YouTube. Actually, it's like the YouTube algorithm is pretty dialed to understand your content as quickly as it can and put it in front of the people that want to see that content. It's definitely less glamorous than Tiktok or Instagram, but that can work...and there's a way to...if you get enough subscribers, you can directly monetize your stuff that's on YouTube.”

In closing our interview, Haiss went back and elaborated on a very crucial idea first introduced at the beginning of our discussion: diversification of skills, something described as a potentially crucial area of creating multiple, simultaneous streams of revenue tied into one’s own “micro-business.” “Diversification I think is great. You know, one thing that's really worked for me is having a balance between upfront paid work,” Haiss says, “Whether it's getting paid to produce a record with no points or minimal points, but still a fee for the work that I'm doing right then and there; or mixing a record, for instance, or being a session musician and playing on somebody's record...that's immediate pay for what I'm doing: mixing that with back end, long term like, royalties, whether that's for sync...that's like, no guaranteed money, but if it comes in you get royalties... So just having a diverse range of diverse sources of income is gonna be more sustainable.” In doing such things, Haiss notes that a significant degree of bookkeeping and organization is required, and as tedious and grueling it may be, it is absolutely crucial to sustaining a self-run, self-organized musical career that is able to continuously generate profits and foster further opportunities across various positions. “The faster you can realize that you're running a business, the better. So by that, keep records. You know, I have a spreadsheet of every song I've ever written- who it was, what my splits are, if it's released, if it's registered [...] I track all of my time, my hours, as if I

was, like, working for an employer in a spreadsheet that has, like, every single thing I can I do. So it's like production, sync, mixing, sideman work- just like office work,” Haiss exemplifies, continuing that his tracking of income informs what business decisions are to be made next. In closing, while such a career can be demanding and complicated, Haiss points out that the ultimate result of creative freedom makes it all worth the effort :“It's like the ability to chase what's working and what feels good, and what excites me. Creative freedom translates into just life, and the ability—and the fortune—to be able to just make every day what I want it to be, and chase the things that excite me and make me feel the most alive.”

Matt Kass

Following my conversation with Aaron Shafer-Haiss, I was again fortunate to speak with another successfully independent Nashville-based producer: Matt Kass. Like Haiss, Kass is a multi-specialized producer, engineer, songwriter, and musician, as well as a music educator/coach. Kass’s early career started as a member of a band that got significant local traction in his hometown of Philadelphia, PA, of which translated into the group eventually gaining sync placements in advertisements for companies such as HR Block and touring nationally for the next 10 years. Following the dissolution of this band, Kass’s friend Josh Benus—then a member of fellow Philadelphia band South Mountain Pass—encouraged Kass to begin production work, and the two subsequently formed the band Modern Inventors. They moved to Nashville in 2015 and saw significant success for a period of time, as characterized by film scoring commissioned by HBO and appearances at SXSW. As Modern Inventors disbanded, Kass pivoted into exclusively producing and writing for other musical artists, as well as venturing back into sync when

this faced challenges at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, Kass was also teaching music production to aspiring producers and mixers, something that has continued into the present day alongside Kass's other ventures (including the reunion of Modern Inventors). As Kass describes this, he notes that it has provided an effective balance and a certain sense of integrity-based stability: "Being able to produce, teach, get sync stuff has made it so that I don't really need to like take on every project that comes my way, which is really important, because a lot of people are kind of you know, scrapping for everything, and it ends up spinning their wheels, because busy and productive are not the same things in our industry, yeah, especially in Nashville."

Much of Kass's early connections came from being active in music early on through playing in a successful band, something that allowed him access to rising opportunities within the local music scene, as well as taught him several key lessons about connecting with individuals in a healthy manner. "I would say people will ride you as hard as you let them ride you. This industry is full of people who are habitual boundary pushers, and everybody is so concerned with the next gig and the next project that people will like basically do things that are outside of their comfort zone or outside of their like moral compass to really get things going and you can, you can really work hard and be successful and not compromise on who you are as a person, and create and enact serious boundaries," Kass says, citing his own experience in dealing with such individuals and situations early on.

Therefore, Kass's advice lies in a concept known as the 80/20 Rule- in his own words, "You spend 80% of your effort on the 20% most interested people. So, people who are really interested in working—put your effort there. Don't try and chase getting

into rooms where you don't belong, or with people who don't care about you. Being a good person, enacting boundaries and allocating your efforts towards the people who are actually interested in working with you.”

Kass then explains that the perfect approach to an independent scenario like his is through operating as if one is the CEO of their own business, carefully plotting out one's ultimate musical goal and “working backward,” as Kass puts it. “I work backwards from my goal. I'm saying ‘This is what I want to do. I want to be able to produce and write for a living.’ ‘Well, how do I do that? I have to get a bunch of clients. How do I get a bunch of clients? I got to put myself out there. How do I put myself out there? I got to work for free and get portfolio stuff that is good enough that people want to do that,’” Kass continues. While a long, multi-layered process this may be, Kass concludes, “I was able to create a portfolio of writing session demos and whatever that I was really proud of. And then I went to my PRO, went to BMI, and my writers, and I was like, ‘Hey, I think that I have my portfolio together. Can you send this out to people and see if anybody is interested?’ And then that's how I got signed.”

A very important component to this is commitment, Kass states, as the process took him about 2-3 years of free, unpaid work as a producer and writer for others. While these efforts were building, Kass first began remotely teaching music as means of employment to support his production and writing endeavors, and thus creating a pointed lesson for rising creators. Kass emphasizes that this was something that he was able to direct as his own small pseudo-business, as well as something that was fulfilling, related to his other pursuits, and sustainable for long periods of time. “There's this website called ThumbTack that I was using for lessons and stuff. So, I dove right into just teaching and

getting my clientele, and then I was able to concentrate on other stuff,” Kass notes, “Through my teaching, I was able to bring in enough money where I could save some time for myself to do the creative stuff. And it's still like that today, like, I think diversifying my income has allowed me to not have to be really desperate.”

In the current day, Kass describes how his workflow has adapted to the ever-evolving and increasingly advanced digital recording technology, streamlining the necessary writing and production elements so that the client/artist/cowriter is never waiting and that the session is never delayed. This involves utilizing a custom digital template consisting of folders of digital presets, instruments, and other settings that essentially replicate all the necessities of a physical studio setting. “I think that there's almost like a decision paralysis when you have unlimited takes, unlimited plugins, and it's like, ‘what I do, right?’” he relates. “So one thing I do is I get a great Favorites folder, and I just know that here's the snare. And if I'm in a writing session, this is the snare I'm using, this is the synth, this is the piano. And I have a template that opens up when I open the session up, so I'm the writer and the artist is never waiting on me.”

Kass’s take on artificial intelligence is very unique—that of practical use beneficial to the independent creator in an entrepreneurial fashion, not for creating music. Kass notes that he has found use for AI in accomplishing business-related tasks that would otherwise be tedious or distracting from his work projects. For example, AI automation is utilized for scheduling appointments with students or clients, essentially doing the job that other individuals in a larger business would be doing.

Conversely, Kass does also voice some notable concerns about AI in the world of music made for sync licensing, speaking as someone who has worked in such a sector for

a significant period of time. He cites concerns that large corporations may use AI to cut production costs of commissioning music from another party. As Kass relates, he has already seen AI generated music used as reference tracks, thus causing concern. He explains, “So what I think is going to happen there is all of the low hanging fruit—like the Production Music and the trailer music and commercial music—is all going to go away, and all those people are going to flood the market, and the prices are going to just bottom out. But I've consciously pivoted to working on more humanistic stuff—like working with artists who have a vision, working with people who have an interesting voice, using organic instruments. Because I think that's one thing that the machines can't do.”

Collaboration and creating records, to Kass, has become a very flexible and adaptive process, echoing Haiss's earlier points that in-person collaboration is something that will always be viable thanks to the organic element of human interaction. At the same time it is undeniable that remote, online collaboration has brought important new capabilities to musical creation, despite some smaller technical limitations such as latency and connectivity. In Kass's case, he cites the Covid-19 pandemic as a particularly crucial moment where remote collaboration was able to shine, having given Kass and his collaborator the ability to create remotely at previously unseen capabilities: “I've done an entire record over Zoom, where I, like, controlled the dude's screen from like, 700 miles away.”

As the interview moved onto the topic of releases and streaming, Kass introduced and explained an interesting concept of approaching musical releases: waterfall releases. “It's basically one single, every six to eight weeks, and then, at the end they become an

EP or an album. So, you're releasing one song, instead of all 12 songs at a time,” Kass elaborates, “you can release one and then the other and then the other, so that you're constantly have something new to talk about... so, 30 pieces of content for each song for TikTok and for Instagram and stuff like that.” Kass notes that this method of releasing music to streaming services essentially creates a schedule by which interest for a larger project can continuously be generated through planned, smaller releases and the dissemination of promotional content associated with each one.

Specifically regarding streaming such as Spotify, Kass also describes the concept of playlisting, and creating a “pitch deck,” of soon-to-be-released music in a manner that resembles a CEO pitching a startup project. “Say what we're doing is we have an album of 12 songs that we're working on, and three of them are done, and another three are pretty much ready to be mixed. And so, getting a playlist, we do this,” Kass explains, “There's a website called Disco which does playlists for unreleased music, and you can brand it...it's like putting together, like a pitch deck, basically... or an EPK of sorts.” From there, this can be essentially pitched to another intermediary, such as a distribution partner, wherein further funding for the project or playlist placements could potentially be secured.

Regarding revenue collection, Kass continues by defining his different roles within a project and introducing the idea of a “safety fund,”. When producing a project, Kass typically charges a production fee that may be compounded by a mixing fee (if he is also mixing/engineering the project). After this, Kass cites the concept of revenue sharing: “I'll take what's called revenue sharing, which means that the artist still owns the copyright to the recording, which means that they don't have to ask me if they want to do

something with it.” “But, after they recoup the \$1,000 or two or \$3,000 I'm charging them to produce the song, then they give me 20% of the gross revenue of the streaming,” he explains, “But here's the thing, you don't recoup \$3,000 unless you had 750,000 streams, right? So it's really just a hedge.” This essentially means that if the project fails to live up to streaming expectations, the producer still profits to some degree from the project.

Kass points out that most young, upstart producers may be unable to command a high working rate until their portfolio has increased to a notable size; so, he recommends leaning into the concept of revenue share early on. “When you first start out, you can't really command a really high rate, so you have to really get your portfolio together before you can start charging the amount of money that you think you're worth. But, what you can do is you can mitigate that by taking more revenue share,” Kass illustrates, going on to illustrate a scenario in which a producer would charge less upfront, but with a higher revenue share rate. What this is able to accomplish is, in Kass's description, a foolproof plan in ensuring one is not only paid, but able to approach production in a way that operates like a business and can be expanded upon for future, higher earnings.

Another key aspect Kass wanted to emphasize was the idea of being paid in thirds, a very similar concept to the safety fund in that it can be used to ensure the producer still receives a significant portion of revenue even if the sessions fail. “I get paid a third of the production fee to start, a third of the production fee after tracking and before mixing, and a third of the production fee after mastering, before delivery masters,” Kass says, “What that does is that if I have to walk from a project because the person is a dick or like they're not paying me, I'm never more than a third of the money out of the amount

of work that I've done.”

Kass also provided sound, long-term advice in regards to money: “The back end can come in two different forms; It can come in as producer royalty, which means off of dollar one, so they don't recoup it. Or it can come in as you owning part of the Masters, which means you get the revenue, and you also have ownership of the copyright. So, if you're building your catalog and you want to sell your catalog at some point, then you can use that as leverage to say this is part of my cut, because that's really the end game for all these people. There's no retirement fund for producers and artists. What it is is to build your catalog up over 20 years, and hopefully you're making 50 to \$100,000 a year on publishing and masters royalties, and then sell your catalog for, you know, five to 10 times yearly multiple.”

In addition to breaking down how one is able to ensure getting paid as a producer in today's environment, Kass also states that young creators must absolutely be aware of another interesting concept: the “Good, Fast, and Cheap Triangle,” an idea used to ascertain a project's specific metrics of quality, duration, and overall cost. “Imagine a triangle, and on each corner is the word good, fast and cheap, and you can only pick two. So if you want something done good and fast, it's going to be expensive. And so if you want something done good and cheap, it's going to take a long time. And if you want something done fast and cheap, it's going to suck,” he remarks, “when I get on the phone with a client, I'm quickly trying to ascertain all three points. Do you have a budget? What's your budget? Do you have a timeline? Are you willing to cut corners? [...] if they're like, ‘I don't really have a timeline, but I have this amount of money,’ then I'm like, ‘okay, I have a lot of other projects going on. So, let's do it when we can.’ And the

only thing that I won't do is I won't do fast and cheap, because if it's fast and cheap, and it's gonna suck, and I don't want to put my name on it.” This is something Kass believes is incredibly important for independent creators due to the fact that it can give them a great deal of information about what will be required for a project upon starting and whether or not a project is worth taking. As such, he cites it as part of every pre-project interview he has done for almost his entire career. Kass cites this as part of the idea that having an “uncomfortable conversation upfront is worth a lot more than a really big headache on the back end,” as in one must be willing to clearly define their professional goals and boundaries for a project or collaboration—something Kass acknowledges is difficult, but ultimately necessary for one’s business to thrive. In the end, however, Kass’s ultimate message to creators is simple: find the ultimate expression of oneself and pursue it to its fullest capacity. “It's like, if I really concentrate, and I visualize, and I close my eyes, and I imagine being successful, what does that look like? And that'll tell you what you want to do.”

Mark Zellimer

Mark “Z” Zellimer is an audio engineer and producer who also independently owns and runs The Owl recording studio, located in the Berry Hill neighborhood of Nashville. Z’s origins as an engineer and producer actually owe a great deal to MTSU. An alumni, he attended MTSU from 2007 to graduation in 2009 after transferring from a community college from his native Pennsylvania. Zellimer’s time at MTSU followed an early introduction to audio engineering in the form of manning the analog live sound console at a local church growing up, with his time at MTSU educating him as an Audio Production Major and setting him up for an internship at the famed Castle Recording

Studios in Franklin. As Zellimer admits, his first sessions at Castle were less-than-idyllic: “The first, first big session I had there was horrible. I hated everyone that was there. The engineer was a jerk. Band members were a jerk. I ended up working with that guy numerous times later, throughout the years, and I don't think he ever realized it was me.” Alas this is a sharp, pointed reality of recording—one must accept the inevitability of highly disagreeable and rude clients and colleagues. However, Zellimer illustrates that this was merely a prelude to a much greater opportunity at the next session that would inform many of his future connections in the audio scene.

“The second guy (veteran Nashville engineer Russ Long) was a dream, it was just like, ‘wow, this is the kind of guy that I want to work with when I grow up.’ And I was talking with his assistant for a bit, and they're like, ‘Hey, we're starting a studio. We need help. Why don't you come out?’” Zellimer recalls, “And so I finished my internship with the Castle, and then immediately came on board at this place called...well, we hadn't really even sort of named it yet...but it was The Brown Owl, and it was four of us. It was Chris Kimmer, Conrad Snyder, Mark Sebelia and myself.”

From then on, Zellimer has been successfully operating The Owl (as renamed from The Brown Owl), even following a particularly rough period in 2020 as staggering, pandemic-fueled landlord rates forced a brief closure of the studio before a chance discovery of its current location allowed for its well-fated reopening. Additionally, Zellimer—like the previously interviewed Haiss and Kass—keeps a diverse stream of opportunities, ranging from in-studio production and engineering for recordings to live sound reinforcement as a touring engineer, to post-production for advertisements of various companies. Zellimer points to his early experience at the Castle—specifically that

second session—as a keystone moment in the rest of his recording industry career, citing his meeting of several future friends and professional partners at said session as being a significant motivator from that point onward.

For those entering these situations, Zellimer emphasizes that personal presentation is paramount, and thus offers some clear advice : “Always be professional. That doesn’t mean you need to wear a suit, but it means don’t wear offensive clothing. Don’t smell bad... One of my biggest pet peeves for interns is if they shake their leg, you know, they have a nervous tic. I know you’ve got nervous energy, but that is not the vibe.” As Zellimer points out, the recording studio is a creative space, yes, but it is also a professional space, so those beginning work must approach it as such. Furthermore, as he also explains, one must seek opportunity everywhere: “Know that if you’re not doing anything, the studio is a very boring place to be. If you’re not doing anything, it’s just ‘I’m gonna sit back in the corner and twiddle my thumbs,’ you can do that. But also, if there’s opportunity, be present. [...] I try to give (interns) as much to do as possible- we’re not a big studio so there’s not always a ton.” This is a very key point of trust for Zellimer, as he believes this shows that one is legitimately dedicated to keeping the studio running at full efficiency whenever possible and thus maintaining the professionalism of the space.

For those first entering the recording industry and needing to support themselves, Zellimer advises that young creators work in a way that still allows them to devote as much time as possible in the studio or be otherwise involved in recording to refine one’s craft and build opportunities as much as needed in the early stages of their career. “The biggest thing I suggest at this point, at this point, is just be involved. And the hardest part about that is, is time management, okay, especially if you’re living in Murfreesboro and

doing something up here (Nashville),” states Zellimer, “So, whatever you do, do whatever you can to spend as much time as possible in the studio...or learning audio anyway. Sure, it could be on the road too...but if you're on the road, you're probably making a decent amount of money.”

The latter example of live music Zellimer notes as a strong first employment option for those first entering audio. Zellimer points to Michael Zuso, another engineer and good friend of Zellimer's, who instantly entered the recording industry as a live sound engineer, thus finding a suitable, early source of income that also provided entry to increasingly larger opportunities. Today, as Zellimer points out, Zuso is engineering for the popular country artist Luke Combs, a direct result of his earlier activity from the beginning of his career, and, as Zellimer emphasizes, his early experience as a student. Zuso, also an MTSU alum, was able to get extensive hands-on experience while still a student at MTSU's Production Services organization, something that thus made it much easier for him to obtain his live sound job after graduation. So, Zellimer advises students to do a thorough search for specific, well-paying organizations that apply well to their desired career as an easy, logical first step in laying the early foundations of their career at a campus level. Then, use that experience to aid in landing an early gig either in or adjacent to the field of said career.

In regards to technology, Zellimer highlights the flexibility of modern recording sessions as being a key benefit. Zellimer cites a recent instance in which an artist was recording vocals at the Owl with Zellimer engineering the session. The producer of the project was able to be present via Zoom from California, thanks to the adaptability of both recording and communication technology. “I did a session with an artist. She drove

in from Alabama to sing, but the producer's in Los Angeles, so I had him on a zoom call, going through audio movers," he recalls, "She was in the (tracking room). I patched her. I patched the audio out of the tablet into the console so that it was routed back and forth. And we did four hours of tracking vocals together."

In describing this event, Zellimer also details his ideas of successfully utilizing artificial intelligence in a beneficial way. In the session, the project's producer had composed several backing vocal lines that he wanted Mark and the singer to layer into the song. "He had pre-selected harmonies and rendered them with AI. So she was able to hear instantly what he wanted, and was able to be like, 'oh, yeah, I can do that. No problem.'" Zellimer continues, "We didn't have to fight time, he put the notes in and just rendered it as, as a female voice, you know, right? So he was like, 'This is what I want' just drawing the notes in, like you would with auto-tune or something like that." As such, the singer was able to listen to these guidelines when recording the final vocal takes—essentially assisting the work flow of the recording session in a way that does not bypass any of the creators' creative input.

Another AI usage Zellimer cited was that of audio enhancement. When describing his post-production work for large companies such as Home Depot and Chick-Fil-A, Zellimer noted that a significant degree of the on-location recording for such projects may have unwanted background noise or interference. "It's usually horrible on-location recording audio. And I'm like, 'Hey, can you make sure that you don't have a generator running four feet behind you?' Yeah, they made sure that the generator wasn't going but they didn't bother to turn off this semi truck that was just idling you know... You want this to sound like, what?" To meet expectations, Zellimer has found AI to be the perfect

tool in eliminating unwanted artifacts in the audio.

Additionally, Zellimer points out that these tools can also assist production and mixing workflows by acting as a benchmark for audio quality. For example, Zellimer explains that he may send a rough mix through one of these AI tools to, “See where it started, where it's going, and then I can look at it and be like, ‘Okay, this is what AI thinks. So let me back off the AI work and render it again.’ See if that's better or worse, and then if it's better, okay, let's start there.” From there, it is a matter of comparison-utilizing AI to measure timbral quality and thus making the necessary adjustments.

In regards to functioning as a one-man business, Zellimer has some clear, familiar advice: diversify one’s income stream, but do it in a way that stays true to one’s interests. “It’s tough, and I’ve learned it’s actually kind of why I ended up out on the road a little bit more, because I realized that that there was a revenue stream that I wasn't touching, and I realized that there was, in fact, a way that I could do it that I enjoyed,” Zellimer explains, “Because that's another thing: like, man, there's some stuff that I would have done 10 years ago to make the buck that today I'm like, ‘it's not worth a hassle.’ But really, it’s just finding what you like, focusing on that, and then from there, figuring out how you can do things close to that.” He elaborates further, with his live sound work as an example: “For instance, I don’t like doing front-of-house audio. I just don’t. So, I realized that in the monitor world, I am not making 1,000 people, 10,000 people happy, I’m making five or six people happy. I can do whatever I need to make the band happy, and that makes me happy. That’s what I really love about that, and that’s the same thing here in the studio. When those six people are here, I’m making each one of them happy by being able to dial in the best sounds possible.”

Kira Scheid

Following my interviews with the producers, songwriters, and engineers discussed prior, I was also fortunate for the opportunity to discuss the inner workings of the modern recording industry with managers Kira Scheid and Chase Alan, in effort to further explore the business-oriented aspects of the industry that could be valuable to those approaching their career in an independent manner.

Kira Scheid is a Nashville based business manager specializing in financial direction and accounting for several artists, musicians, songwriters, and tour opportunities. In Kira's own words, "I'm making sure money is coming in and being accounted for: commissions being paid, artists being paid, everything like that. [...] We are registering businesses, for whether it's the music side of things, touring side of things, making sure they have the proper insurance for gear, for touring liability, everything like that. We're also managing their personal finances and just making sure all they have to worry about is creating art."

Scheid explains that her work in the music business goes back to some very key opportunities very early on in high school, specifically working with a label that she helped gain radio placements. "And basically, when I graduated, they asked me, 'Hey, would you want to, like, intern with us and help reach out to college and high school radio stations and just kind of do some radio promotion for us, just whenever you have free time? And that was kind of the start of like, oh, I can really do things professionally and make connections by just offering to do stuff or just having opportunities from whatever I'm doing,'" she concludes. When Scheid, a Northern California native, moved to Nashville to attend Belmont University, she had the breakthrough opportunity of

working on the 2018 Vans Warped Tour— something she remembers as, “The best experience ever: would do it 100 times over again... also the hardest six weeks of work in my life. Touring is not for the faint of heart, but specifically, that tour was not for the faint of heart,” citing the long hours and fast pace of the lifestyle.

As such, Scheid’s early aspirations were specifically geared towards touring; however, with the onset of the 2020 pandemic, Shield points out that many tour opportunities disappeared for a significant period of time—and it was in this time she found herself applying her interests and experiences to business management. “I graduated in December of 2021, there wasn't really too much available. So, I kind of ended up falling into the business management side of things, and just realizing, “Oh, this is a really secure job in the music industry, which I would say is the one job that is secure—everybody always needs business management,” Scheid explains, “It's also just a great starting point, whether you're like an artist or anything, because if you understand how the business works, you're going to do way better and everything.” Looking back, Scheid also reflects on making connections in today’s ecosystem, and provides some specific guidance for those within the college space: “put yourself out there, and then also do stuff on your own.” She also notes, “And it's also great to put on your resume, to be like, ‘yeah, I got 300 people to this DIY show that I did,’ and everybody made money.” She also explains the power of utilizing the very diverse pool of resources one can find across the board in these situations, utilizing one’s immediate circle- similarly advised earlier by Haiss: “You have so many people that are wanting to do the same thing. You have audio engineering majors who need experience running sound, you have music business people that need experience promoting a show and stuff. So just get with your

friends, work together, and put something together.”

Being from the world of business management and having extensive experience in handling revenue streams, Scheid then explained the modern process of creators receiving payment very clearly, and made sure to include some unique advice for new creators. “So we kind of use a lot of third party companies for processing the income. Sound exchange is kind of the big one that we'll use for a lot of digital streaming. Obviously, DistroKid, Tunecore, CDBaby, they're all processing royalty income as well. And then same thing with the pros. So you know, ASCAP, BMI, SESAC, all those guys, they're all going to be tracking your digital income as well,” Scheid explains the process from her end noting that business managers such as her will then review this information and make sure the necessary amount of money is awarded to the artist.

In regards to those releasing music- either independently or on a label - Scheid has an important piece of advice: “It's super awesome if you can have metadata embedded into your song to track that. There's also third party services that will embed that and track that for you, so that you can report back to your PRO's, being like, ‘Hey, my these are my numbers from such and such,’ tracking and kind of cross reference. Make sure that's accurate, that they're getting payments and stuff in terms of digital release [...] even what I've seen on the label side, everybody really uses stuff like TuneCore, Distro, CDBaby.” Conversely, Scheid also notes where one must have caution and be vigilant: “I definitely have heard of and seen problems with music getting applied to wrong profiles and stuff—especially with the rise of AI music, people are saying that they're somebody and applying it to that profile. So I'm sure there's going to be more security coming from those companies to stop that.”

“The way to really make money as an artist is to own your masters. That's the biggest thing, that's the thing a label wants to own, though. So that's where labels own the Masters, but they also have a huge marketing budget and tour support and other things they can give you. So that's the trade off,” she explains, noting that she’s worked with artists with full ownership, as well as those who have negotiated partial ownership or buyouts. Scheid concedes that when one understands how revenue is generated and dispersed in the recording industry, there are a variety of options and plans by which one can model their “business.”

Scheid’s closing advice to those entering the industry is to remain open minded to different opportunities, and to, “not turn your nose up at the admin side,” of the industry, noting the merit of such even extends to creators looking to support themselves at any point with a position that can actively aid their creative pursuits. Scheid notes that positions such as business management and administration are, “A great starting point, whether you're an artist or anything, because if you understand how the business works, you're going to do way better and everything [...] We're communicating with management, sometimes with the label, but typically management and artists. So, if you want to work with these artists with no degrees of separation, business management is the way to do it.”

Chase Alan

Chase Alan is an artist manager based in Brooklyn, NY, and Birmingham, AL with almost 18 years of experience working with musical artists- several of which are independent creators. Chase likens his profession to that of a quarterback on a football team- “all their team members, agents and lawyers, publicists and labels, or non

musicians—whatever their situations are, networks and stuff for podcast—everything kind of feeds to me, and then I kind of turn around and hand it off to my client behind me. And you're kind of like running everything and kind of keeping things moving. Most of my day is spent making sure that my client feels taken care of, or their business is running and happy.”

Interestingly enough, Alan’s career started off rather similarly to that of Matt Kass and Aaron Shafer-Haiss in the form as a touring band member. After committing to touring both nationally and internationally for several years, Alan eventually returned home to Chicago, IL and began applying for internships at several record labels and agencies- something that was initially difficult due to Alan not being an enrolled University student. Alas, a chance opportunity arose when Alan was offered an internship to a rising management firm in Los Angeles, CA. “So I just got on a plane. I sold all my stuff in Chicago and bought a plane ticket and moved to California. And, yeah, I just stayed with a friend for a couple months and worked for free for a while, but I learned so much as a day to day manager and assistant and, was in this office with a bunch of really great creatives who are now kind of all over the place,” Alan recalls. He continues, “And so that started there, and I interned there for quite a while. And then I started tour managing the bands on the management roster, in a way to make more money [...] And five years later or so, I had a roster, and I was running my own thing, and it's gone in wave,” citing times in which he’s had more or less artists to work with, but always some kind of opportunity.

Looking back on his career, Alan offered some insight on the process of making connections within the music industry, and highlighted the contrast between older

methods of doing so with the modern music scene. “Back then it was a lot of showing up to places and going to shows and getting introduced to people working with one label and then them introducing me to somebody. You know, it was a lot. L.A. was really hard to do that. I ended up moving to New York, and that's when it really took off for me,” he relates, stating, “But now there's so many more resources. I mean, you can find everybody's contacts on the internet now, and you can reach out and have conversations.” Alan also emphasizes, from a management standpoint, the continued relevance of live music and tour-related opportunities in the scope of forging connections, building a network, and beginning one's revenue stream- while also pointing out the challenges one should be aware of. “It's like, go on the road if you can. Because I think that not only is the work something that you're learning, -like learning how to sell merch on tour- it's huge for when you're a manager, and learning how to balance your sheets. What's your orders, what's selling in different markets? What do people want? At the mercy of what's so important, right? I still reference all that stuff,” Alan states, “You know, when you're managing you're knowing how to settle deals. What do the deals look like? You're looking at the contract so as a manager later, I know what people are being paid. I know what deal structures work for the artists. I know how to deal with their tour budget, as I deal with our budgets every day. You know, you learn so much just being there.”

Following this, Alan and I discussed the current ecosystem in regards to digital dispersion and the current landscape of functioning as an artist. “I can only speak from my side, but management-wise, we're doing more than we've ever done, unfortunately, and we're making less money than we ever made. So it's a deterrent, probably, because everything is so independent, labels are signing less,” Alan notes, stating that labels are

signing less as a result of more independent activity. Conversely, he points out, “I feel like so much falls on the artist now to be- especially if you don't have a team -these artists have to be graphic designers, and marketing people, and social media people and talk to camera; they're not able to be musicians anymore. I feel like that's like, kind of, maybe the issue I have, like nowadays is that like, you have to do so you're expected to do so much as an artist that, like, not everybody's set up for that, right?” Alan continues, “Nowadays, it's like the artists have to be so aware of their businesses and stuff. So, I think a lot of my job is I'm sharing that workload with them and trying to be like, ‘Wow, find a designer to do this. I'll do it if I have to’. I'm helping post social media- running social media schedules and plans [...] So, yeah, I think it's hard out there right now, but I think that, like this is where managers become maybe the most valuable team members you can have now.”

However, Alan points out that there are a lot of new opportunities in terms of what artists can do early on in their career that were not available in years past. The accessibility of self-release platforms such as DistroKid and Bandcamp, Alan notes, offers independent artists a lot of flexibility in being able to, in his words, “build leverage,” for later situations in which the artist can exploit their ownership- including label and distribution deals, wherein an artist can use their self-released amassed catalog to negotiate for better deals and ownership stakes. “My motto is, ‘build and build your leverage’. Because once you get into a situation where a label comes calling and you don't have leverage, you're going to get a bad deal, you're going to be underpaid, and you're going to be unhappy when you're stuck there later. Now there are obviously things that work, and people do actually succeed in those situations,” Alan relates, later stating,

“I have friends who have been touring musicians for 15 years and are now, like, golfing on Saturdays and like, own a catalog. They're so happy, and they make a ton of money because they kept ownership, or they worked out good deals over those years, and they make mortgage money. They don't have to go play shows anymore.” Practices like these are part of what Alan refers to as an artist's “direct to consumer,” base to create the foundation of a long-term career, of which he emphasizes above overreliance on fast-track methods of volatile digital fame. He says, “Because, I think what artists need to do now is build. You can build your own direct fan, consumer kind of base. You can have your newsletter, your website, your socials. You can reach your people: ‘I'm coming to Birmingham, Alabama, or Murfreesboro, Tennessee.’” Alan concludes, “You can reach them direct now, which I think you never were able to do before. You know, you had to use a label, or you had a publicist, you had to do so much of that on your own.”

In the midst of all this, Alan offers a very valuable piece of mind: take your time, find creative drive, and take the business aspect of a recording career seriously—but not too seriously early on, and not to the point of stifling future collaborations. “We compare so much now because of socials; for me, it's like, find your community, put your music out, play shows, figure it out. There are 21 year old artists that are playing in arenas, and there are 21 year olds playing the Ryman, and there are 21 year olds still figuring out what their voice is and who they are as a person- let alone a Creator as a musician, as a songwriter, whatever, and you should be given the room to figure that out,” Alan explains, “As an artist, your business should be taken more seriously earlier. There is an element of, I think there's a point where you go, ‘Okay, this is a job.’ I also mean, before that point, it shouldn't be treated as such. Like, I get, like, being professional, like, don't

screw your friends and like, work out good deals just for yourself... Pay your friends to have fun with you. If you're gonna play the show, split the guarantees with your friends. Make art and don't focus so much on the business until that transition point of, like, okay, I can maybe leave my job, or there's five of us, and really we need to iron out some finer details.”

Discussion

In compiling said information from all interviews, one can absolutely notice several key, common points of information and advice perhaps crucial to one’s entry to the recording industry as an independent creator. To begin, the newfound flexibility of recording and recording-adjacent technology and the question of artificial intelligence was a very common thread found in my discussions with producer-songwriters and engineers. These specific points include the usage of modern recording technology to initiate musical collaborations remotely in a very effective manner, utilization of artificial intelligence large language models (LLM’s) for completing business assistant tasks, and utilization of AI in production work-flows. The collaborative capabilities of modern recording technology has been cited by creators as an entryway into collaborations and work opportunities that otherwise may not have been present, and as such eliminates constraints such as budgets on travel and recording. At the hands of these creators, artificial intelligence has also found effective use within the creative space in a manner that does not replace or negate the human creative element. Instead, it is used to complete non-creative tasks and chores that may otherwise be done by a team member, or it is used

to assist in production efficiency through common means like audio clean up and illustration of ideas during production.

To continue, the next category of information to be presented on the guide is that of reliably securing revenue. This category was unique in the fact that responses varied depending on the creative role being fulfilled by the creator in question, thus providing a wide range of revenue practice and techniques. For producers and engineers, a very strong point was the practice of revenue sharing, payment in thirds, and safety funds to ensure payment even in the case of underperforming tracks or aborted recording sessions. Essentially, these are techniques in which rising producers can profit to some degree on any project, and can command higher rates from as one's repertoire grows. For artists, the interviewees stressed retaining the copyright ownership of master recordings and written songs. One can either self-exploit their recordings, or eventually amass their catalog to negotiate a beneficial co-ownership deal or catalog buyout with a label or publisher for further revenue support. Songwriters are advised to register any and all compositions with a PRO and take advantage of potentially high-return opportunities such as synchronization licensing to efficiently start any and all opportunities of income—while it may not be instantaneous, it can create a highly exploitable source of long-term income that may additionally be used for leverage in buyout or deal negotiations in a similar manner to recordings.

The next category of focus is that of releasing music and promotion, a particularly important section due to its ambiguity among students and the unique approaches detailed by the interviewees. To start, the technique of “waterfall releases,” allows for each song within a larger recorded project to create consistent consumer interest and effective

promotional content spacing, thus potentially creating a much wider base of listeners for the larger, ultimate release. Streaming service algorithms can also be exploited by creators “viewing releases like Instagram posts,” and listing collaborators on one track to spur streams from both fanbases, essentially targeting a consumer base at least two times larger than usual upon the song’s release. Lastly, the perhaps most simple common point is that of uploading tracks to distribution programs such as Distrokid- with the key twist of embedding metadata within the track(s). Therefore, this not only distributes one’s music to all streaming services for wider distribution, but it also far more accurately tracks all streaming numbers.

Finally, the last category of information will be that of the business and entrepreneurial practices used by independent creators to essentially position themselves as CEO’s of their own microbusiness. A massively important point emphasized is establishing a self-supplementing revenue stream by diversifying employment opportunities. In essence, creators are able to fulfill multiple positions- as an example, songwriter-producer-engineer-session musician -that will thus create a larger, cohesive income that stays consistent. Additionally, one should utilize immediate connections and opportunities, and potentially support oneself financially with a position that is either connected to or can foster career opportunities for one’s creative pursuits. Starting with the immediate circle around one’s early pursuits will encourage stronger creative collaboration for all those involved, and can thus foster stronger chances for further opportunities that will eventually build a strong portfolio that can be used for professional leverage. Discussing payments, splits, and project specifics with collaborators clearly and early in the project’s lifecycle has also been cited as highly important, with interviewees

emphasizing that doing so can not only demonstrate strong business ethics, but also eliminate costly discrepancies regarding payment. Digital services like playlisting and pitch decks are also recommended by professionals. These are used to potentially secure placements and funding for recording projects, with websites, socials, and newsletters also being strong tools to reach fans/consumers directly ahead of key events such as song or album releases or live appearances. Lastly, the utilization of bookkeeping and spreadsheets is a massively important business tactic used by independent creators. It is necessary to effectively track all revenue and income, registered and released music, budgets and expenses, and employment opportunities- all of which are very important metrics in maintaining one's creative business.

Closing Statements

Having completed this project, I am very hopeful that young creators beginning their entry into the music industry will find significant value in the findings and presentation of this thesis. Being a creator trying to navigate a music career myself, this project was a great opportunity to learn invaluable lessons from those who have been successful in the same field of work that I hope to enter in the future. Such conversations were great expansions from what has already been taught in university coursework to students at MTSU, due to the fact that they contain lessons and advice shaped by the personal experience of those actively navigating the recording industry in its most current state. From this project's findings, one can see that independent creators are a very versatile class of creatives: in the midst of a rapidly-disrupted industry, they are able to utilize new technology in ways that boost musical workflow, enact income models that ensure employment security and consistent revenue streams, formulate effective release

and promotional plans for recorded projects, and implement effective entrepreneurial practices that allow them to function as efficient one-person businesses.

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Appendix

Focus Group Questions:

Engagement:

- What is your desired musical career? Are you an independent, self-produced artist, or do you produce for others? Do you take a stronger engineer or beatmaker role, do you take a more traditional record producer role, do you assist in or handle songwriting? Perhaps none of those?
- What is your professional experience so far as a student artist or producer? Have you made recordings, overseen or directed recording sessions, released music, collaborated with new or established artists? What have you done so far in terms of your career goals, and do you have areas you want to improve in?

Exploration

- What is your immediate impression of digital technology in the context of music? What is the first thing that comes to mind, or, does it perhaps hold a negative or positive connotation to you?
- Has digital recording capability helped you in your endeavors, and if so, how? How has it maybe proved helpful or convenient, but also, how has it perhaps brought challenges or inconveniences?
- How do you see the role you wish to fill being affected by digital practices? How might digital recording or creative technologies affect your career, if at all?
- Is there more space for musical collaboration and/or idea exchange? Has digital technology allowed for more or less opportunities in collaborating and working with others, and do you have experience with such?

- What are your feelings about releasing music within today's digital environment?
How do you approach releasing music? Do you have experience in navigating streaming platforms?
- What are your feelings on social media and online promotion and marketing? Is this something you use, or have knowledge of, in raising awareness of you, your music or your collaborations?

Exit:

- Do you have any more reflections, ideas, suggestions on the modern digital recording industry? Is there anything you might want to add to any points made previously?

Interview Questions:

Engagement

- What is your musical profession? If you were to give a "job description," what would it be and why, how might you describe your profession yourself?
- How did you get your start doing what you love as a career? Can you take us back to the beginning, and walk us through?
- How did you begin to make connections/start working with others/fuel collabs?
How did you first start and what's your opinions on such?

Exploration

- From a creative standpoint, what might be some important actions you'd advise college students to begin acting on now?
- Many college-aged creators note having to work full-time or part-time occupations to support their career in its early stages. What did your

profession/life look like before you were able to pursue music full-time, and how did you manage to keep your focus?

- How have you been able to capitalize on technological advancements in your projects, and where might you see the greatest artistic potential of increasingly capable digital recording platforms?
- Do you have any opinions or ideas on the rise of artificial intelligence in the music industry? Do you think it is something that can be used for good, or is it something that young creators should be cautious of?
- What does creative and professional collaboration look like to you in today's modern environment, in light of modern advancements? Do you see a shift in creative energy, in perhaps an increased use of digital technology?
- Most students note a lack of understanding or a lack of a release "game plan," if you will. What is your approach to professionally releasing music in a manner that best navigates the nuances of streaming? What's your advice on promotion?
- How do you approach royalty and revenue collection?

Exit

- From an overall standpoint, how have you taken advantage of the new technologies available to you to stay self-driven? What is your advice to stay motivated, energized, efficient doing so much of this stuff as a one-person operation?

