

Written evidence submitted by AJ Dean-Revington

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DCMS inquiry into music streaming AJ Dean

Introduction

My name is AJ (Alexander John) Dean- Revington, but I tend to go by AJ Dean in a professional/ performance capacity. I have been a self employed performer/musician for over a decade now and although I have featured on albums and compilations that have been released to the public through major labels (theatrical cast recordings etc) it has been in the past 5 years or so, that I found myself in a band signed to a major record label (The Wandering Hearts), where the importance of keeping track of my earnings through physical sales, downloads and streaming has become a crucial part of my career.

Clearly the evolution of digital music platforms has advanced greatly in the past few years and therefore this inquiry is a very welcome and essential step to gain greater insight into and understanding of the way that these services work, or do not work for writers, composers, musicians and artists.

What are the dominant business models of platforms that offer music streaming as a service?

To date I believe that the music my band releases on streaming platforms is available on **Apple music, Amazon, Deezer, Spotify and iTunes.**

As a relatively new band, having music available on many platforms is of course helpful as many people use different platforms to discover music these days to a greater degree than via physical sales. Spreading the word about our music is imperative as that is how you reach the greatest possible audience. This for me is the main appeal to using streaming services.

It has been evident since we began releasing music this way that it is more about spreading the reach rather than gaining any monetary recompense as touring and selling physical albums gives an instantly greater and quantifiable result.

As much as this has become a bit of a given within the music world, it raises the question of whether this assumption is the “right” thing, particularly at a time when touring and playing live shows and the income we receive from it, simply is not possible.

Whenever breakdowns of streaming royalties are received they are virtually negligible in terms of their actual level of income when compared to actual solid sales of vinyl or CDs.

This is a easily quantifiable difference and one that has been widely documented by many musicians, journalists, politicians etc. It is not new information.

It is clear that changes need to be made if music is to be a sustainable industry or career path for the many creatives that MAKE music possible.

If streaming is to continue it must be regulated, it has to be fair and completely transparent in the way that royalties are broken down and distributed by the streaming platforms and the major labels

that divide them. If that means that further checks and systems of regulations need to be introduced in order to create a level playing field for all then this MUST be done as we have seen that it is simply unsustainable within the current, existing models.

Have new features associated with streaming platforms, such as algorithmic curation of music or company playlists, influenced consumer habits, tastes, etc.?

In the past few years, my band has been fortunate enough to make it onto some Spotify playlists. These are usually genre specific relating to the music the band is most commonly associated i.e. Americana/country playlists etc.. In some cases it appears that tracks that have been playlisted in this way have brought about a wider audience to our music.

Although in some small way it feels almost complimentary to be selected and it provides a boost in terms of reach and plays where these playlists have a broader appeal, in terms of income, the gains are so negligible that it's never been something that really factors into my thought process from an accounting point of view, despite clocking up what would be considered by most people, to be a considerably large number of plays/streams. The way that tracks are selected for these playlists has also always seemed a bit of a mystery to me. From my own experience as a user of streaming platforms such as Spotify, I would say that algorithmic curation can undoubtedly lead to the discovery of new and interesting music, however as these rely upon learned preferences, it seems to remove the accidental 'human' aspect of completely random discovery in genres or fields that one would not usually or necessarily lean towards.

It is essential that there is transparency in the way that these algorithms work and how tracks are selected for playlisting. Some kind of oversight has to be employed so that EVERY contributor has equal and fair access to the streaming market whether they are an independent or signed artist/writer. Given the existing relationships between major labels, publishers and streaming platforms and how they work together, there MUST be full disclosure of these relationships and auditing on the full impact that they have upon agreements, revenues (licensed and non licensed) and marketing partnerships.

What has been the economic impact and long-term implications of streaming on the music industry, including for artists, record labels, record shops, etc.?

In the past ten years I have witnessed a large shift in the way that music is consumed. In my youth all music sales were physical and the entire business centred around that end. There were many MANY more music retailers and record stores. For successful bands, artists and musicians, the main income always seemed to come from the volume of record sales they could make and touring (in most cases) subsidised this. With the rise in downloadable music platforms such as iTunes, the number of physical sales diminished and therefore the number of high street record stores declined with them. At this point music could still be purchased for a similar price as it had been for physical albums/singles etc. albeit with a reduction in price due to the lack of cost in manufacturing and distribution. This has changed further now with the dawn of streaming whereby the value of music overall is so often completely overlooked, misrepresented and of course monetised in terms of the work that is put in from a creative point of view by writers and performers. Times have changed and the nature of the business has changed but can we really say that it is for the better when huge parts of an industry have been lost, jobs, income and taxes all dried up and the market cornered by a small section that seems to be trying it's hardest to put the breaks on any ambitions to forge a career in music.

It is evident that a new model is required in order to rebalance the value of music and those that create it. The current monopoly of major corporations and the way that licensing and distribution of royalties is arranged HAS to be addressed and balanced across the board. We also NEED to see much greater transparency with information regarding streaming in order to avoid any conflicts of

interest and so that there is better and clearer understanding of the way that performers and creators are paid and what for.

How can the government protect the industry from knock-on effects, such as increased piracy of music? Does the UK need an equivalent of the Copyright Directive?

I cannot really comment personally on the impact of piracy on mine own career/ music as I have no knowledge of or ability to quantify any pirated material. Given the age that we live in and the ease and speed at which any information can be sought and received, it would seem that the argument that those that wish to pirate content will find a way to do it. I cannot personally see how that would be particularly easy to do via streaming platforms but I am aware that platforms such as youtube often fall prey to ripping as there is such a plethora of content it must be difficult to police.

It would be good to see increased copyright protections for creators akin to the sort offered elsewhere such as Europe. Again transparency between labels, publishers, platforms and other licensing entities so that creators have the ability to audit the companies that administer their royalties to them for themselves.

Online platforms, including any that host user generated content must be enshrined in UK law so that they are liable for hosting unlicensed music. ALL contracts between creators and companies that exploit their music MUST ensure that creators are paid fairly and proportionally according to the success of their music.

Contracts should be open to renegotiation in case the agreed remuneration under license or rights transfer is disproportionately less than the revenues generated by the creators music.

There should be a maximum term for the assignment of rights to a music company, after which they are automatically returned to the creator in order to extend or transfer elsewhere as they see fit.

Do alternative business models exist? How can policy favour more equitable business models?

As mentioned previously, The current model is clearly unbalanced and in dire need of reform in order to save the fantastic and work class music and creative industry we have in the UK. There has to be complete transparency and greater opportunities for scrutiny in order to reform the current broken system. By ensuring there is a level playing field through regulation, we can enable more ethical and sustainable business models to become commonplace, as currently no two platforms or the models upon which they operate are equal. It would be wonderful to see creators that contribute to streaming platforms to be reclassified in a similar way to radio as "communication to the public" rather than content creators as it would allow for the generation of royalties that could be paid through collection societies such as PPL. This would not only help generate NEW royalties for unrecouped artists that they would otherwise not receive from labels and generate an income stream for session musicians that receive NOTHING from streaming royalties, but also would continue to encourage more and more generations to pursue music as a career and contribute to the fantastic and historic culture of music that the UK is famous for across the globe.