

Abnormal

Distributions

San Francisco musician
Billy Gomberg wonders
how real communities can
flourish on online platforms
filling the vacuum left by
live performances

We fell into our screens. There was nowhere else to go.

Fortunately, independent musicians, labels and organisations have earned a reputation for being creative and resourceful, and are deploying tools that this mirror makes relatively easy to summon. The myriad disconnects thrown at us in the calendar year of 2020 are fought against by all available means.

Now, live performance of independent music persists, by turning online platforms into venues. Twitch – “the world’s leading live-streaming platform for gamers” – has revealed itself as a new place for broadcasting live performances from musicians in different geographies, on the same concert, including real-time collaboration across continents. Views into our gardens, apartments, bedrooms – unglamorous glimpses of musicians’ domestic lives, now repurposed as their stage – are sometimes populated by lazy or curious pets and irrepressible children. Available light frames performances in awkward webcam angles, splashed in browser windows against other performers’ feeds, with occasional creative digital backgrounds and overlays. The chatter of the audience is replaced by a chat window, real-time commentary on the music ticking by, the relative anonymity of account handles and emoji replies one of many ways we slip away from the past.

Bandcamp, remarkable for being a platform serving digital music that actually pays artists, has absorbed countless independent musicians into its eminently usable interface, with the promise of near immediate payment when a customer makes a purchase, all for clicking “I agree” with their straightforward fee structure. Soon, at the end of March, came the promise of the first Bandcamp fee waiving day. The service relinquishing its usual cut from record sales was welcomed as a way to encourage listeners to support musicians who have lost paying gigs, if not also other sources of income they had left stranded out in the world. PayPal, the monolithic global payment processor, has not waived their transaction fees, to

say nothing of the privilege of access to these services an artist needs in order to participate.

As Bandcamp Day came around again at the end of April, and then in May, independent digital music flocked to the platform. A day of benevolence turned out to be good business: releases are increasingly yoked to the first Friday of the month to line up with the waiving of fees, creating a wave of nearly identical promotional emails from artists and labels accounts.

Casting Bandcamp as the Good Guy for independent music is easy when there is little competition – streaming outlet Spotify continues to be awful for independent musicians. However, that Bandcamp has become a nearly untouchable bastion of independent music on the basis of musicians getting paid puts into sharp relief the broader, structural problems, namely that many musicians simply do not get compensated at all for their music, much less get enough (Bandcamp advertises its total payouts, but naturally does not break that figure down for each artist it has a business relationship with). It is little surprise that independent musicians and labels, given a single, easy portal to take direct control over selling their music, flock to it. I hope rents are made and bills are paid, and the many charities supported through sales this year benefited.

But with an endless procession of Bandcamp Days has come an inevitable flattening: how is this Bandcamp Day different from any other? The implied demand that a musician or label adhere to a monthly schedule is encouraging a set of release dates and promotional strategies around music. This new system produces casual formalisms across genres, music that needs to pop up from the hashtags with an aesthetic shorthand to fit a listener or, more accurately, a consumer’s expectations, and get them to “Add To Cart” before the next open browser tab beckons. An artist or label has to maximise engagement with their followers, with a social media hype ecosystem stuffed full by the lack of other retail options, the usual urgency of anticipation compounded and multiplied, breathless every day.

A lot of the language around online engagement, particularly through social platforms, suggests we are in a community, and that we are in distant touch with each other through our Likes, Shares and Purchases. We are also in relationships with these platforms, these mirrors. We perform our lifestyles in various ways – announcing creative intentions or accomplishments, displaying our retail acquisitions and letting those whose materials we have purchased know we are here. Here’s my records, here’s my gear, here’s the corner where it all goes. These are new uniforms: download codes and album art tiles, flat layouts of merch received or creative materials at the ready. This is how we present everything we can, to be seen, to be met, even if no one is here with us but the code turning our reflections into further reflections. The sly glint of keywords and tagged accounts are our new beacons, signalling our ongoing survivals.

Writing in November, Twitch has now issued its first Digital Millennium Copyright Act takedown warnings to users, as musicians and labels try to monetise the music played in video streams and performance. Bandcamp has now also launched a platform for ticketed live streams. This is not slowing down. These systems, these placeless venues, they aren’t ‘bad’ – they’ve been made to work in both typical and novel ways. Artists, labels and merchandise, all still exist, increasingly, as part of the presence of a monopoly. We are all there, yet absent from each other.

We have the means to promote and distribute digital music without relying on big business – peer to peer, BitTorrent and private hosting are all options. They are not as readymade, and don’t dangle the carrot of cash, but they work. Micro-forums assembled ad hoc on Slack and Discord (the latter another service for gamers finding great utility for artists) are growing communities for independent music and digital art, a delocalised hyperlocality of sorts. Paths and places are there – we have to be committed to looking for them. And making them. □