

HOW TO BE A
TROUBADOUR
IN THE AGE OF
CROWDSOURCING

BY
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Introduction

I wrote a pamphlet for PM Press that was published in 2008, titled *Sing For Your Supper: A DIY Guide to Playing Music, Writing Songs and Booking Your Own Gigs*. To be frank, I'm sure I never would have written such a pamphlet if Ramsey Kanaan at PM Press hadn't asked me to. The thing is, like most musicians at all levels of the “professionalism” spectrum, whether they're busking on the sidewalk or packing stadiums, I was too busy keeping up with everything involved with writing songs, recording, booking tours, and touring (along with having a family, etc.) to take the time to explain to other people how to do these things.

But find the time to write the pamphlet I did, in the hope that it would be useful to some people, which of course is the main motivation for writing such a thing in the first place. (Or at least it should be. As opposed to having the ulterior motive of trying to get readers to sign up to some paid service that you run, that will make everything better...) Now it's 2017, and nine years after the publication of *Sing For Your Supper*, Ramsey asked me if I'd write a book on this subject, rather than just a pamphlet. Actually he asked me to do that other times, too, but I ignored these requests, for the same reason that I almost ignored the first one. I already wrote that pamphlet, I said.

Upon re-reading it, however, I realized that at least half of it is now irrelevant. Seismic changes continue within what they call the music industry. This is true for big corporate labels and artists, but the ones who especially feel the impact of these changes are the more economically marginal, independent artists. The impact is global, but most devastating in countries like the United States, where essentially no one is there to help artists weather the storms, at least in terms of government entities, laws, programs, institutions, etc.

So when Ramsey again asked me to write this book, and I re-read what I had written before, I realized that now was a good time to do this.

Back when I wrote *Sing For Your Supper*, there had already been massive changes for anyone trying to make a living as a musician. Up until that time, the impact of the internet had largely been positive, for indie musicians. For decades, we had been effectively locked out of the corporate music industry. But then, still locked out, there was this other avenue for sharing our music – the internet – through which we could gain a bigger audience, and then potentially use that to get more gigs, tour further afield, and make a better living.

That was then, this is now. Since writing that pamphlet, the internet has become dominated by a handful of corporate platforms that make it much more difficult to be heard. Along with that development has come the near-death of the physical recording, and the rise of streaming services like Spotify. So for indie musicians these days, as opposed to just nine years ago, we have almost entirely lost a major part of our collective income – CD sales – and gained insignificant income from streaming in return, while at the same time, our ability to promote our music and our tours has been drastically curtailed by Facebook's algorithms and the corporate social network's quest for the next billion dollars.

As a result of these kinds of developments, most of the people I know who used to make a living as musicians no longer do. They may still be recording and playing at the occasional festival, so unless you're a friend or a very attentive fan, you might or might not know that they are no longer making a living as musicians, but they're not.

I am, however, still making a living as a musician. A few years ago, I was very uncertain about whether I would join ranks of so many of my colleagues, and look for alternate forms of employment. But I figured out how to make it work in the modern era of streaming and crowdsourcing, and I'm

absolutely certain that if other people follow my *modus operandi*, other people can do it, too. Though there definitely aren't any guarantees, there are ways to go about doing this that can work, and work much better than more traditional methods that, in fact, no longer work, no matter how much you bang your head on that wall.

Overview

I'm completely convinced that all of the folks I know who aren't making a living as musicians anymore would benefit from reading this book, and diligently following some of my advice. But my intention is for this book to be an essential resource for any indie musician, including those who are just starting out on this path.

As with so many other things in life, there is no truly step-by-step guide for someone wanting to pay the rent as a singer/songwriter or other form of performing artist. There are always lots of exceptions to what you might call my rules, in every aspect to this profession, from the songwriting to the tour booking. But I've divided the book roughly into the basic order of affairs.

The first Section of the book is dedicated to the art of making music – playing, performing, writing. This is the essential first step – you have to have stellar material and a captivating stage presence first. Of course these things will hopefully improve even more over time, but there's no point trying to promote music or a musician who isn't very good. That's a lot of wasted effort right there.

The second Section is about sharing your music. That is, you've got this body of great work, say at least an album's worth of great songs, so then what? This Section is about different ways to get your music out there, live in the flesh and via the internet.

Getting your music out there into the world is of course another of those ongoing processes. But once you have managed to garner an audience, whether it's mostly local, mostly online in some other part of the world perhaps, or mostly from the audience that you might have gained from touring with a more established artist – however that audience came into existence, once it exists, according to my model, the third Section is dedicated to the art of developing the kind of relationship with your fans such that some select few of them also become the people who organize your gigs, fund your recording projects, and support your career in other vitally important ways.

If you have consumed advice columns, books, podcasts, etc. meant to guide indie musicians toward indie musician success and their advice already flies in the face of mine, this is not an accident. I'm familiar with their advice, and while some of the more technical advice you can find out there can be very useful, the general operating model they're working with sounds great in theory, but doesn't jibe at all with my own experience. What's in this book is mainly about what has worked for me, my best guess at why it has worked, and my best effort at explaining how it works.

From my experience, what works well, or at all, isn't necessarily how you might like it to work. But how you might like it to work isn't how it actually works, much of the time. For example, it might be nice if you could become a great songwriter without first learning lots of other people's songs, but you can't. It might be nice if venues you book shows at could promote the shows so you'll have an audience, but they won't. It might be nice if you didn't have to beg your fans to help you do everything, but unless you're living in a country where the government supports the artists, if you're not on a major label with a huge publicity budget, there's no way around that anymore – not in the post-CD reality.

A big part of the problem in terms of the advice that's generally out there is that it's based on a lot of mythology. It may be indie music mythology rather than corporate music mythology, but it's still based on the same myths, that generally have their origins with the corporate music industry. I'm not interested in exposing who is promoting which false myth, but I try in this book to bring to light the

various myths that surround different aspects of being a musician, and talk about how reality differs from the mythology in essential ways. After debunking each myth, I then lay out my case for how it really works.

SECTION A

MAKING MUSIC

Chapter 1: Playing Music

There are a fair number of touring musicians out there who aren't very good, but still manage to make a living. There are also a lot of great musicians who can't manage to make a living at it at all. But for the most part, if you want to have a chance of being able to make some kind of a living as a singer/songwriter, you have to be really good at what you do.

(I'll just note here that my assumption in this book, when I'm making such assumptions, is that you are a solo performer, a troubadour, or some kind of singer/songwriter. If you're playing with one or more other musicians, the vast majority of my advice throughout this book applies to you, too. There are, however, many additional aspects involved with touring with bands that I don't address in this book. I've toured with bands before, but it's not my area of expertise, and the extra challenges involved with that kind of touring are worth coming to terms with if that's where you're going. Good luck with that! OK, back to the program...)

A brief survey of the myths around playing music is indicated first. There are the music industry myths that certain artists, like the ones they're turning into stars, are geniuses, several cuts above normal musicians, which is why they're so great. In response to this corporate myth, those participating in the cultural renaissance we call the Sixties (the folk revival and the garage band movement of the period among the more electrically-inclined) said “three chords and the truth” – everybody can play music, it's easy, it's simple. And furthermore, if you get too good at what you're doing, you're an elitist.

There was and is a similar ethic in the punk music scene, itself to some extent a reaction to glitzy stadium rock bands and pop stars of the era, among other things. While it makes good sense where these attitudes came from, I would say that neither the music industry propaganda nor the response to this propaganda that came out of these musical movements are very helpful, for different reasons.

The music industry is in the business of making lots of money by creating an elite club of stars (and the machinery needed to create, record and promote them), and excluding all the rest, essentially. There's no need to have too many stars, if you want to maximize your profits. You certainly don't want to admit that there are thousands of other musicians in any given genre who are just as good as your stars, otherwise they wouldn't be legitimate stars. So they manufacture the myth of genius and exceptionalism around their artists.

In reality, being a mind-blowingly awesome musician does not require genius, or talent that you're born with. It requires a lot of time and effort – not just any effort, but the right kinds of effort. And then, if you're not one of the tiny percentage of people who are actually, truly tone deaf – and from my experience this phenomenon is real, and seems like it can't be unlearned, but it's very rare – then you can become a great musician.

The problem with the “three chords and the truth” myth is that for a lot of people it is understood to mean that there's no need to become really good at what you're doing, because anybody can do it and it's more cool and proletarian to play your instrument slightly out of tune.

Whether you are a fan of Bob Dylan or not – indeed, whether you have ever even heard of Bob Dylan – he has inevitably had a profound impact on your life. Especially if you're a musician. So while I don't mean to elevate the status of Dylan any more than it's already been elevated, I'll return to Dylan periodically here. Dylan has spent most of his career cultivating the air of the genius who channels brilliance from some mysterious place without effort, plays and sings sloppily and doesn't let his band rehearse before making an album with them in the studio.

While it's true that Dylan generally didn't let his bands rehearse before making some of the worst recordings of the era (with some of the best songs), this was part of his cultivated sloppiness strategy.

For him it worked just great, but part of the reason why it worked so well is that it was complete bullshit. In reality, any real musician looking Dylan in 1960 could see that this teenager had obviously spent much of his childhood steeped in various musical and literary traditions. He was a total geek who hardly ever left his closet until he eventually left Hibbing, Minnesota and became world-famous. By the age of 18 he was clearly a very accomplished guitarist, singer and songwriter. And he developed a sloppy style of playing and singing and putting words together that was and is brilliant, but it's not actually sloppy – it's meant to sound sloppy, but in fact it's highly cultivated. If it were just plain sloppy, it would suck, and he wouldn't be Dylan.

So, don't believe the hype. Don't believe Dylan, don't believe Pete Seeger, and don't believe the music industry either. Genius is bullshit, and so is the idea that anybody can do anything without too much effort.

No, what is required is lots and lots and lots of effort. What is required is for you to be a person who likes to spend a lot of time alone. There are certainly aspects of performing and touring that are very social, but becoming a great musician is mostly a very solitary activity.

Maybe you already know this, and you're already someone who has spent lots of time and effort at mastering an instrument, developing your craft, and what you mainly need is advice on how to organize the kinds of tours that involve audiences showing up at your gigs on a predictable basis. In that case, this Section might not be for you.

But if you're not there yet, then my first advice to you is to forget about the myths promoted by the music industry as well as the Seegers and Dylans of the world. It's OK to be a virtuoso. In fact, this should be your goal.

There is little room for great singers who can't play their instruments well, or great instrumentalists who don't like to sing. You need to be great at both singing and playing an instrument. You need to have the kind of ability that makes people gasp with delight at what you're doing. Fine if you like to have a sloppy air around how you play your instrument, how you sing, how you dress, etc. That's not a problem. But it's just an air – in reality, beneath the sloppy exterior, you're a serious artist.

What does the right kind of effort entail? Mainly imitation and repetition.

Now, if you're reacting badly to those last two words, you really need to internalize this. Great musicians are never original. They may seem very original, and that's natural – but fundamentally, great musicians are always people who came out of some kind of musical tradition. They may have grown up in a society or subculture with a rich musical tradition, or they may have more purposefully chosen a tradition and then systematically went about steeping themselves in it “artificially.” Either way works great, but you have to be steeped in a tradition before you're going to get anywhere really interesting.

If this bit of information rubs you the wrong way, it is probably because you have inadvertently swallowed one of the other myths created by the music industry in the early twentieth century and actively promulgated up til the present time. The myth of originality. The myth of originality is rooted in the fact that the music industry has always been about taking musical ideas and genres that already exist and are already popular, and then employing artists to work with these already-established musical ideas in order to change them enough that they can be copyrighted and sold at an immense profit (mainly at a profit to the industry, occasionally to the recording artists, never to the societies and subcultures that gave birth to the musical styles from which the industry derived their very existence).

You can write songs, copyright them, maybe even make a few bucks from doing that, but don't fool yourself into thinking what you're doing is so original. People will tell you how unique your music is, if you're good. Maybe even “important people” will say the same thing about your music. And that's

natural. Perhaps they're not familiar with the obscure musical genre you're into, and so it sounds very original to them. Or conversely, maybe they're very familiar with your genre, so they're attuned to the little differences between what you're doing and what similar artists have done. But fundamentally, you are not going to invent an entirely new musical style. If you work hard at it, you may contribute meaningfully to a style or styles that already exist, and you may add to them to such an extent that people say you're doing something new. But if you're ever going to get anywhere at this, you need to know that you're not really doing something new. You didn't invent the instrument you're playing, in all likelihood. You probably didn't invent any of the chord patterns or riffs you've ever used in a song. Probably every phrase you've ever used has been used before, and certainly every rhyme. And that's OK!

If you're particularly moved by certain kinds of music, the first thing to do is to listen to that stuff a lot. Preferably both live and recorded. And while you're listening to that music lots, you're also playing it lots. Be methodical about it. Spend a year with the intention of mastering 100 songs. Spend at least an hour or two every day figuring out how to play those songs, working on them in groups – I find bigger groups, like twenty at a time can be nice, so that the songs stay fresh, even though I'm working on the same ones repeatedly.

Compile (in a spiral notebook or an iPad or whatever) the lyrics to the 100 songs you've set out to learn this year. For each song, figure out the key that works for your voice, write the chords down along with the lyrics you've got, and learn to play and sing the song as closely as possible to the way your favorite recorded version of the song goes. You can of course change it later, do it “your own” way, but first learn how to do it the way someone else did.

Once you've worked out how to play each of the songs, that's just the first bit. Next, practice them – at least 20 or 30 of them each day – and systematically go about memorizing each and all of these songs. Next year, do it all again with another batch of 100 songs. Do this for three years in a row. By the end of those three years, you'll be really good.

That is, if you play your instrument and sing the right way in the first place. Yes, there are right and wrong ways to play an instrument. If you didn't know that, it's probably because of the residual effect in your mind of the originality myth.

The right way to sing, also the right way to play any musical instrument, is in a relaxed state. Ultimately, everything you do with your voice and your hands should look and feel effortless. It won't be like that in the beginning, but know that that's where you need to be heading. This effortless delivery is born out of a combination of a mastery of your material and relaxation.

The main problem here is if you learned to play or sing with tension in the first place. These are very difficult habits to unlearn. It's much easier if you don't learn bad habits in the first place. But they can be unlearned, with enough effort.

A few one-on-one lessons can be handy with this particular step in the process. Or at least, I don't entirely trust myself to be able to explain this in writing in a way that I'm confident will be fully understood.

There should never be tension in your throat when you're singing. Unless you're just starting out with a new instrument and you haven't built up the muscles and callouses necessary to play that instrument yet, singing and playing an instrument for an hour or two should not be tiring for your throat or hands. You should never tense up in order to do a fast riff or hit a note on either your instrument or with your voice. You need to learn to nail the notes effortlessly.

This kind of grace is born out of sloppiness. This is fundamental. You learn to play and sing without tension by being sloppy. The sloppiness turns into grace over time. This is something that happens

over seconds, minutes, as well as over years. You keep on practicing hitting that note with no tension. If you're not an advanced player/singer already, what will happen is you will miss that note more often than you will hit it. For various reasons, many people will tend to tense up in an effort to accurately hit the note. What this does is allows you to hit the note more often in the short term, but in the long term it will never sound good or effortless, because it's not effortless, it's tense, and it will sound tense. The trick is to allow yourself to be sloppy, to miss those notes, with the intention of ultimately hitting them pretty much all the time, gracefully, effortlessly.

But if you learned, for example, to fingerpick your guitar while holding your picking hand firmly against the body of your guitar, that's tension, and you need to unlearn how to do that. You need to start playing with a floppy hand, loose, without grounding it on the guitar like that.

If holding your pick makes your wrist tired after a while, you're definitely holding it too tight and you're going to end up with repetitive strain injury if you don't change your ways. The pick should generally be held so loosely between your fingers that you occasionally drop it on the floor.

If it hurts your voice to hit high or low notes, you're doing it wrong. Singing, at any volume, is basically shouting (or yawning) on pitch. Think about being in the countryside, and calling someone on the other side of the field to tell them dinner is ready. That's your singing voice. You don't hurt your voice when you shout like that, hopefully, if you're doing it the way most people do. You don't tense your throat up and then push air through it when you're calling someone across the field. You open your throat wide, naturally, and make a couple pitches that really carry.

I should add a caveat here that if the style of music you're into involves having a really raspy, hoarse voice like hardcore punk or death metal, the above advice may not apply. Good luck keeping the health problems at bay with your throat, hardcore punk and death metal singers. It sounds rough to me, but all the more power to you. But the advice here applies to many styles of singing, for sure, not just the kind of stuff I'm into, I promise.

There are very few really good musicians who got that way through tension. They all got where they are through a lot of hard work, but not through tension. If the things I've said about tension sound familiar to you, and you think you're playing or singing with tension, you should probably seek help from a teacher to unlearn those habits. Not that you have to take lots of lessons in order to get really good – mostly it's about practice. But you need to know how to practice the right way, and for that, you may benefit from having a good teacher, at least at the beginning.

If you're playing pretty much any instrument that I'm aware of, the fingers that are fingering – such as your fingers on the fretboard of a guitar or the neck of a cello (your left hand, typically), or any of your fingers on a keyboard, piano, etc. – are hammers. And like the way you swing a hammer, you get the best accuracy, speed and impact if your hand, arm, and body are all involved with the motion, and are all almost completely relaxed, right up until the point of impact, where your hand needs to grip the hammer a little harder so it doesn't fall or get thrown. Same with an instrument – the only brief moment of tension in your fingers on the fretboard or neck or keyboard is just the tension necessary to keep the note going for as long as you want to keep it going.

For what it's worth, these principles of relaxation and tension apply equally to many other things, including martial arts, badminton, or good sex.

When you're working on learning your first 100 songs, be patient with yourself, but also be ruthless. Have fun, but don't settle for mediocrity. Learn to play the songs as close as possible to the way the artists you like are playing them. Figure out what they're doing with their instruments. If they're fingerpicking, fingerpick. If they're flatpicking, flatpick. (My default instrument example will be the guitar. Apologies to everybody else.) If they're playing interesting little instrumental riffs in between

verses, learn how to play them, note by note. Then learn how to play it gracefully.

You must do more than strumming or just banging out chords. I mean, maybe some of your songs are just about strumming or banging chords, but they can't all be like that. If you're not sure where to start in terms of expanding your playing beyond strumming basic chords, try picking out the individual note that's in the bass of each chord – the root -- on the “1” of each measure, before you then strum the rest of the chord on one or more other beats within that measure.

Once you've gotten somewhere with adding in individual bass notes as part of your picking-and-strumming pattern, add a second bass note, say, on the “3” of each measure – an alternating bass line. Once you've gotten somewhere with alternating bass lines mixed in with your picking-and-strumming patterns, then try picking out the melody of the song on your guitar, without losing the rhythm of the song. That is, play individual melody notes on your instrument in between strumming a chord. Whether your main instrument is keyboard, guitar, ukelele, banjo, cello or whatever else, these same principles and techniques apply. (Just replace the terms “picking” and “strumming” with whatever words you use to describe playing an individual note as opposed to playing an entire chord on your instrument.)

How I Did It

OK, so I said that this book is not about theory, but is about what has worked for me. (Of course, in most cases these are also techniques that have worked for many other people that I know – at every point throughout the book, some more than others.) I am loathe to come across as some kind of typically narcissistic musician, but at the risk of this possibility I'll conclude with a little sketch of how I first learned how to play guitar and sing the kinds of songs that I wanted to learn how to sing and play, in the way that I wanted to learn how to play them.

In my late teens I wrote a whole bunch of not very good songs. The music was really predictable, a lot of the rhymes weren't very good, I couldn't sustain a note with my voice very well without going off pitch – the songs were basically boring at best, cringe-worthy at worst. I thought I was too brilliant and original to bother starting out by learning other people's songs, for the most part.

Then in my early twenties, due if I recall to the advice of Utah Phillips that I ran across somewhere, I became convinced (correctly, as it turned out) that if I wanted to become a good songwriter or a good musician, I had to backtrack and do it the old-fashioned way, by first immersing myself in the musical traditions that especially interested me, and getting really good at them.

Having this realization was actually pretty depressing. I just wanted to be a good songwriter and performer right then. But I realized it didn't work that way, and I resigned myself to the woodshedding process involved with becoming really good at something.

Earlier I recommended spending at least an hour or two a day on this, but personally, I spent many more hours than that on most days, for many years, before I ever wrote a good song. I had the benefit of arranging my life so that I only worked part-time and could still eat and pay rent (just barely, and usually in a room that I shared with someone, and on a diet of stir-fried vegetables and pasta). So I dedicated most of the rest of my waking hours to playing music.

As a teenager I had discovered lots of music, and listened to lots of music, but I learned that that wasn't enough training to become a good writer of such music. I needed to have it in my bones, and in order to do that I needed to learn – memorize – lots of songs, and really develop versions of each song that were memorable.

I did play classical cello as a kid for five years, and I grew up in a family of classical musicians. The

fact that I had this experience was helpful in knowing how to play in a relaxed way, how to finger an instrument well, and how to read music. Though reading music is generally not necessary for most non-classical forms of music, and good playing habits can be learned without classical lessons as well. In any case, that beginning in classical cello was only a beginning, and I still had a hell of a lot of work to do to become a good guitarist and singer, and to really become a musician of a different sort, immersed in a different sort of music. In my case, what is often called “folk” music – traditional Irish, Scottish, English and Appalachian songs, bluegrass, as well as singer/songwriters like Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Jim Page and Buffy Sainte-Marie.

I was able to quit my part-time day jobs when I injured myself on the job and got onto worker's comp for 18 months or so. During that time, I spent several hours most days in my room, at that time in Seattle, learning new songs. Then, if it wasn't raining out too hard, I'd walk from my tiny apartment on Capitol Hill to the Pike Place Market and play songs that I had already learned there on the sidewalk, to earn a little money, and to get yet more practice.

I'm a bit of a list-keeper at times, and I kept a list of all the songs I had worked out parts for, and another list for all the ones which I had memorized. My fairly random goal was to have 300 such songs in my repertoire. I don't think I ever had more than 150 memorized at any one time, however.

During the time I was doing all this woodshedding, I didn't write any songs for a long time. When I got back into songwriting, my songwriting was on a whole other level. There was still lots of room for improvement, but it was easy to tell that the way I was putting words together and the way I was coming up with guitar parts was much more sophisticated and interesting. Less musically involved people generally wouldn't have known what had happened by listening to the evolution of my songwriting, but they'd definitely notice the improvement. I knew where the improvement came from, primarily. Nobody else needed to know, though it was no secret.

Chapter 2: Writing Songs

If you have no desire to write songs, and just want to interpret and perform the songs of other people, that's fine. But in that case I would encourage you to ask yourself why you don't want to write songs. Because if you are a good musician and you are steeped in some kind of musical tradition, then you've done much of the work already that should allow you to start writing good songs – maybe not right away, but if you work at it.

I've already talked about the genius myth, and this applies just as much to songwriting as to playing music. Anybody can do this. Writing well – any kind of writing, not just songwriting – requires being steeped in the musical (or literary) traditions you're into, and then working at it. Like getting good at playing music, writing is a very solitary activity. As with playing music, writing is something you really have to want to do very much, or you'll probably never take the time to do it enough to get really good at it.

Aside from the genius myth, there are various other myths that tend to get in the way of becoming a good songwriter. One of the myths is the idea that everything is subjective – that you might be writing brilliant songs, but only you and your immediate family members can appreciate them. If that's the case, there's about a 99% chance that your songs suck. It's OK though – they can improve! But first you need to accept that these things are not really that subjective – they are more or less objective. That is, if you write a sad song and you're performing it under optimal listening-room conditions, you should hear people sniffing by the end of it. You should see people reaching for their handkerchiefs. Walking out of the room because they can't hold back their sobs – that kind of thing. This is an indication that your sad song is in fact a sad song. If this doesn't happen on a regular basis, it's not a sad song, it's a flop. Same goes for funny songs – people should laugh when you sing it. Not nervous laughter, but guffaw-type laughter.

Among politically-oriented artists in particular there is a pervasive idea that as long as you have something important to sing about, it's not so important how well you write the song. That is, the “content is more important than style” myth. Wrong – how you say it is just as important as what you say.

In a song – as in other forms of writing but more so – every word counts. Every word needs to belong. There is no room in a song for a line that doesn't fit perfectly in every way. Every rhyme must be graceful, effortless. No rhyme should ever sound like it's there because you couldn't think of a better word to rhyme with. Each line, each rhyme, needs to say exactly what you wanted to say. As soon as you deviate from perfection, the spell is broken and the song sucks. One line in a song can do that to a song that might otherwise be brilliant – that's all it takes. One line can be the difference between a diamond and a piece of shit.

Particularly among politically-oriented songwriters, another big mistake that's very common is trying to say too much. Don't do that. There's time to say it all – in many different songs. For this song, just tell one story, and stick to that story. That's what will tend to work best, the vast majority of the time. Just tell a story.

To tell a story well, you need to use the descriptions and details within your story to tell the whole story, without at any point telling us what you think or what you feel. As soon as you tell us how you feel about this story, as soon as you try to “wrap it up” with a patronizing “moral of the story” at the end, you have ruined the song and its potential impact. Nobody needs to know what you feel or what you think so directly in order to get what you hope we get out of your song. We'll get it – and if some of us don't, that's OK. Better than ruining your song by making it all too obvious.

In sum, as soon as you tell us how you feel, you take from your audience the capacity to feel themselves. As soon as you tell us what you think, you rob us of our ability to draw our own conclusions.

Probably the most pervasive, obnoxious myth about songwriting has been propagated by Bob Dylan, once again. That is the myth that you should write about what you know. When Dylan drifted away from writing overtly political songs to writing more surreal, flowery stuff, he famously told Phil Ochs that he was “just a journalist,” which was evidently an insult of some kind.

While there's certainly nothing wrong with writing songs about things you personally know well and have lived through, etc. – such as songs about your childhood, your relationships, your travels, etc. – you can also write songs about subjects that you have no direct experience with. The methodology here is the same as method acting. That is, if your dog died when you were ten years old, and if that's the only time you experienced losing someone close to you, I guarantee that you are equipped with all the emotional baggage you need to be able to write a song about a person who has experienced a far greater loss, such as their parents being gunned down in front of their eyes, for example.

You doubt me? I can prove I'm right. This is because this is not a subjective statement. If you grew up in a privileged white suburb somewhere, and you write a song from the perspective of, say, a Palestinian refugee who grew up in a squalid camp in Lebanon that you've never been to, you may very legitimately wonder whether your song really captures anything meaningful, or if people will be able to tell that it was clearly not written by anyone who understands the subject material they're writing about. So how do you know if the song worked then? You play it for an audience of Palestinians. If your sad song about a refugee makes them cry, then you succeeded in writing a song they can viscerally identify with, and therefore you know you wrote a good song. If they look uncomfortable and they don't cry, the song sucks. Objectively.

The biggest challenge with writing a song about a subject with which you are not personally familiar, such as the example above, aside from managing to emotionally get into the right space and identify with the subject effectively, is the challenge of accuracy. If you've never been to Lebanon and you're writing about Lebanon, it's possible to do, but then you must stick to the facts as presented by someone who is or was there on the ground. Use a journalist's description of the story you're telling, including references to the sights, sounds, and smells of the place in question. Don't stray from these details, and you'll be OK. Stray from them, make stuff up, improvise, and your song will probably come across as inauthentic and otherwise not good.

So to recap, in terms of the big picture, to write good songs you need to be steeped in a musical tradition, you need to tell a story, every bit of the song needs to belong there, you need to stick to the facts (if it's that kind of song) – which sometimes means doing a lot of research – and you need to not tell us what you feel or think, but rather let the story do that.

OK, moving on then to more specific tricks of the trade... From my experience, the hardest part of writing a good song is coming up with a good hook line. That is, one line – or maybe two or even four lines, but usually just one essential line – that very succinctly and eloquently sums up the main point of the song. The best hook lines are often so simple that after you come up with it, it will seem obvious, like anybody could have come up with that.

Once I have come up with a good hook line – or, as is often the case, once someone has provided me with a good hook line – it's all much easier from there. But there's still no room for imperfection in this very sparse, succinct art form. Each verse that you build around your hook line needs to have a clear reason for existing. Each verse needs to tell part of your story, and take the song to the next level.

Sometimes, once you write all the verses, you might want to get rid of the hook line entirely. It's

always worth experimenting with this possibility. If the hook line – or any other line – doesn't need to be there, get rid of it or replace it with something that does need to be there. Always err on the side of brevity.

When you're telling a story, try to use imagery that most people can easily relate to. Make the unfamiliar familiar that way. Appeal to the common humanity of your audience that way. Most people don't know what it's like to be a refugee, but they know what it's like to miss home. Most people don't know what it's like to be a victim of police brutality, but they know what it's like to be bullied in school. Most people don't know what it's like to be homeless, but they probably know what it's like to be cold, tired and hungry all at the same time, in a situation where they can't immediately do anything about the fact that they're cold, tired and hungry.

One of the most common questions songwriters get asked is whether they write the music first or the lyrics first. For me, the answer usually lies somewhere in between. It's possible to write a good song where you really do one or the other of these things first, in a concrete order. But much more often, it's a process. What I find works best is to have a general idea of the meter and feel of the song first. Then I work on writing lyrics. Once I have a pretty good idea of the lyrics, I start working on the music more, and make changes to both the lyrics and the music as this process evolves.

One trick that I use often that I find is very effective is that of the surprise ending. For me this generally means telling a story that seems very familiar, that everybody can relate to because it appeals to the kinds of feelings and experiences that everybody has had. And then at the end it becomes clear that the story I'm telling is very unfamiliar, and might seem very alien to most listeners, if it weren't for the fact that I have prepped them by first sharing the aspects of the story that everybody can relate to. (Examples of my own songs that use this technique include “The Dying Firefighter” and “Jenin.”)

As with becoming a good musician, becoming a good writer requires that you think of yourself as a writer, and prioritize writing. When you have an idea for a song, you need as much as possible to be able to drop everything else you're doing and sit somewhere with a notebook and no other distractions. You might just sit there, lost in thought, for hours before you start writing. Don't look at your phone or distract yourself with anything else. Just sit there. Or walk or engage in other physical activities that don't require your brain, if that works better for you. You may feel like you're “wasting time” when you do this. You need to overcome this negative thinking and treat yourself as an artist, in order to become one.

As you may have gleaned, if you want to become a good musician, a good songwriter, you need time. If you're working full-time, this time can probably only come at the cost of your social life. If you give up on sleeping enough, you probably won't be able to write well, from my experience.

How I Did It

I think it's worth sharing a bit of my own experience with the process of becoming a good songwriter here. Although I know all my advice to be very good advice, I also didn't entirely follow the kind of process that I'm recommending you follow here.

The iconic image of the suffering artist is only part myth. That is, you don't need to suffer to be a good artist, but it sure can help. It was through my own suffering that I learned that we are all human beings, that we all are possessed of common humanity, and that it's possible to write effectively about just about anything if you allow yourself to feel those feelings, and if you think of yourself as a full-fledged human being – rather than putting yourself in some kind of artificial box, whether that box be one of gender, race, class, nationality, region, age, etc.

After the years of woodshedding I described in the last chapter, I was primed to start writing better songs, and my songwriting was improving, to be sure. But then I had an experience that put my songwriting into high gear, and accelerated my development as a songwriter. This experience was the murder of my best friend, Eric Mark, in the wee hours of May 1st, 1993, when we were in the Mission District of San Francisco together.

The profound grief I experienced for years after Eric was killed had an unexpected “side-effect.” That is, it was only after Eric was killed that I realized that I was a human being, just like all these refugees from Central America that then populated the Mission District. I looked in their faces and for the first time, I saw the grief that they were trying to cope with, after the violent deaths of one or more of their loved ones. It was a sudden, visceral realization that we were all human, and that grief was grief, whether it was “only” your best friend who just got shot, or your entire extended family.

I then realized that the grief I felt after Eric's death was the same grief I felt when my dog died when I was a teenager. In the societies with which I am familiar, there is a tendency to discount the intensity of our relationship with animals. And because almost everybody has the experience of, say, their grandparents dying of old age, the intense grief that can be associated with this experience is often discounted.

It took Eric being murdered for me to realize that these other forms of grief that I had also experienced were completely legitimate. That I was human all along, and I just didn't realize it. That's when I realized that a privileged white male from the suburbs of New York is at least potentially capable of writing a great song about a war orphan in Afghanistan. We have at least as much shared experience as we have experiences that separate us.

Eric's death is what really allowed me to tap into that. But I'm completely convinced that it was not an experience I (or anyone else) needed to have in order to start writing really good songs. The woodshedding was essential. And the other thing that was essential was allowing myself to feel fully human – allow your own suffering in life to be legitimate in your own mind. That's easy to do when you have had a profoundly traumatic experience that just smashes all the walls you had unconsciously erected around your own identity. But it's not necessary, if you can just accept that what I'm telling you is true.

SECTION B

SHARING YOUR MUSIC

Chapter 3: Performing

So you've spent years working on your music, you play, sing, and write really well. The next step (which you may have already started with in various forms, for better or for worse) is getting your music out there into the world.

Sharing your music is how you will develop a fan base. Once you've developed a fan base, you can then focus on networking with those fans and supporters to take things to the next level, and start touring and potentially making a living as a touring musician. But that's for Section C...

There are various methods for getting your music out there to the ears of your potential fans. Note that in this Section, as with the next Section, the chapters are in no particular order (though the Sections are). These are all things you will want to do at the same time (more or less).

So, I'll start with performing – as in, live performance in front of audiences. First of all, another myth. Well, it's a myth at least 99% of the time, anyway – for that tiny fraction of musicians who get really good at their craft and then immediately get swooped up by a major record label with a million-dollar publicity budget, the myth applies. For the rest of us, it doesn't.

There are all kinds of organizations, individuals, services, apps, books, websites, etc., that will try to make you spend lots of money on learning how to network with venues, radio stations, promoters, booking agents, etc., in order to take your game to the next level, once you think you've got good material to share with the world. While following their advice diligently may get you somewhere, it's very unlikely to get you very far, because it's all based on a model that doesn't generally work these days, if it ever really did.

In Section C I'll talk lots about how to organize tours and such, but we're not there yet. According to my model, that's not how it works. You can get a copy of the “Indie Bible” and network with venues to set up a tour. Very few people will come to your gigs, which of course will then make the gigs really depressing for you, you'll lose lots of money that you probably can't afford to lose, and it will all really suck. Why do that?

The fact is, venues almost never promote gigs. You can hire promoters and publicists, but unless you are independently wealthy and can sink way more money into publicity than you'll possibly make on this tour, their promotional efforts will not be sufficiently targeted to actually garner you real audiences anywhere. Of course they won't tell you that, or else they wouldn't be making lots of money off of people like us.

No, you need fans first, and you need to know how to work with them effectively, in order to have successful tours.

The one exception to this rule (aside from landing a major record deal or being independently wealthy) is if you know musicians who are well-established and who do music very similar to what you are doing, who are willing to have you travel with them and open for them. This is your ideal audience – a niche crowd that is in the same niche as the kinds of folks who would potentially like your stuff. This is the ultimate in targeted marketing for a musician who is just starting out with getting their music out there.

Doing this early on was a very significant factor in my success as a touring musician, but it's a very tricky thing. There are many obstacles with this concept. Ask yourself, what's in it for the act I want to tour with and open for? And what do they have to lose?

First of all, they have a lot to lose, in the form of money. If you're just starting out and have no significant fan base, you won't draw additional people to the shows, and unless you're paying the act

you're touring with for the privilege of opening for them, then someone is paying for your food and other expenses on the road, and that would probably be the person or band you're opening for. But this act, if they're like the vast majority of indie musicians, is living close to the edge financially, and probably can't afford to do that.

They might like to take you on the road with them because you guys are friends and they want to help your career. But if they're going to lose money on the deal, it's unlikely that friendship and altruism is enough. So what can you offer? With all the different acts I toured with during my first few years as a touring musician, they let me open for them as a sort of afterthought. To be sure, opening for them was what really helped my career, but what helped them was the fact that I learned all of their songs and backed them up on vocals and one or more instruments. I became part of their bands. Or in the case of two solo artists I toured with, I became their band.

If you can't play that kind of role and you can't pay them to offset their expenses in taking you on the road and you're not lovers with one of the musicians you want to tour with, it's unlikely they'll want to take you on the road with them. And, I'd add, you can just take my advice and not ask this very awkward question in the first place – “can I go on tour with you and open for you” – because the musician(s) in question will then know that you're very naive and pushy at the same time, which is not a helpful combination for your career. Unless you have something really useful to offer, in which case you should first establish that what you're offering is something they'd find useful, and then, after that, ask them if you can open for them at the shows, too. As an afterthought, more or less.

But whether or not you're lucky enough to manage to tour with an act that's very similar to what you do as a solo artist, there are lots of other ways to get your music out there, to share your music with the world at large, and probably the most vital of these ways is live performance.

Whether or not you manage to go on tour with a more established artist, you can attend the local shows of artists you like. Become a known fan of them, and a friend – hopefully a real one, not for nakedly opportunistic reasons! At some point, share a song with them – just one song. If – and only if – they tell you in no uncertain terms that the song is really, really great, ask them if they wouldn't mind you doing an opening set for them sometime. In your next sentence, make sure they understand that you don't expect to be paid anything for this.

Most cities have a network of open mikes and jam sessions. Figure out which are the ones that tend to attract folks who are into similar kinds of music to what you do, and then become a regular participant in these open mikes. Be a model participant – listen to all the other artists, even if they really suck. Stay til the end, even if you did your little set near the beginning of the evening, or didn't get on the bill at all.

Of course you already know your material well or you hopefully wouldn't be getting on a stage, but in case I haven't hammered that point home hard enough, this is essential. Don't get on the stage and forget your lyrics on a regular basis. Don't get on the stage with your instrument badly out of tune. Change your strings frequently if you play a guitar. If you hate to change your strings frequently, invest in coated strings like Elixirs, that last much longer than normal strings.

In spite of the popularity of certain jam bands known for spending most of their concerts “shoe-gazing,” as the phrase goes, don't do that. Engage with your audience. Look at them. Smile now and then. Even if you're just doing a one-song set at an open mike, break the ice with your audience by telling them a joke, a very short anecdote, or something along those lines. Humanize yourself as much as you can – they like that.

Don't ramble on about nothing in particular, however. Your song introductions don't need to be directly related to the songs – but they do need to be entertaining or interesting or preferably both. Don't

explain what your song is about before you sing it, unless you're performing for an audience that mostly doesn't speak your language.

It's best to memorize all your material, but if you don't memorize it all, do your gigs with a large tablet and a stand for the tablet. Keep your lyrics on the tablet, and set them up so they're easy to read from several feet away. For me, that means at least 18 point text. If you must use sheets of paper or a spiral notebook or something, have the well-organized, in alphabetical order, so you can easily find what you're looking for quickly, and again, make sure the lyrics are large enough that you can easily see them without bending over, squinting, pausing, etc.

Never play a minute longer than you are supposed to. Be nice, be helpful, act like a professional, whether or not are you one yet. If you're supposed to do a two-song set, don't try to squeeze in a third song because your two songs are short. Just do two short songs. If they want you to go back and do a third one, they'll tell you when you're done with the second one.

Never ask the MC, organizer, audience, or other artists whether you have more time to play. If you were supposed to do a 20-minute set, do that. Don't do a 22-minute set or a 15-minute set if you're supposed to do a 20-minute set. Wear a watch or other time-keeping device so that you can keep track of the time yourself, so you never need to ask awkward questions into a microphone that nobody wants to answer.

Try not to undermine professional musicians by offering to play for free when it's the sort of gig where other musicians would tend to expect to make money. But having said that, when you're first trying to get your music out there, your goal should be to play to audiences – preferably large, attentive ones – regardless of money. When you have a chance to get in front of a hundred people in most any situation, do it.

If you are an acoustic music purist of some kind, overcome your elitism right now, and stop being that way. If you're going to play for audiences of more than fifty people, you're going to need to use a sound system. Embrace that completely. The sound system is your friend, if it's not a piece of shit. Learn how to do sound for yourself and others.

Learn how to use a sound system as another instrument. That is, the sound system (or any electrified instrument) allows you to have much more dynamic range than you are probably capable of without it. Use that to your advantage. You can play and sing more quietly than you could without the sound system – and you can get much louder, too. This can be really cool. What's really not cool are musicians getting on stage who look and feel uncomfortable with the sound system, and struggle with it.

Your instrument should have a pickup in it, in most cases. It will sound better and be easier for sound people to work with than if you insist on using an instrument mike. Mikes are great in recording studios – not on stages. Except for vocal mikes, which are very problematic themselves, too, but it's a problem that's unavoidable, since you can't install a pickup in your throat (as far as I know).

If you play obscure original music, this will tend to go over best with niche audiences who are into that kind of thing. It will tend not to work very well for street music. But if you do some kind of music that lends itself to street music – busking, as it's called in many places – that can be another way to gain an audience (and make a bit of money, too).

With busking, in many cases your potential audience is not going to be walking or standing in front of you for very long. It's usually very helpful if what you do is immediately impressive to passersby. So if you're doing a really great song, telling a story that people might really like if they stick around for it, that might not work so well for busking. If, on the other hand, you're doing really flashy things on your instrument, and it's an unusual instrument (not a guitar), or you're playing it upside-down, and you're a

really eye-catchingly interesting-looking or very sexy person, and you have very little clothing on, these are the kinds of things that tend to make for better busking.

One of the biggest problems with busking in many places is the tendency for buskers to develop a very loud playing style, which can work well under those circumstances, but tend to be a real problem for indoor gigs. You don't want to do that. If there aren't nice quiet places to busk and/or if amplification is illegal in your city, busking is probably a pointless thing to get into, or even counterproductive for your development as a musician.

Whatever kind of live performance you're doing, live performance is your #1 method of self-promotion, to put this in marketing terms. Your best advertising is yourself, live in concert, or even at an open mike, on the sidewalk, or wherever. And to make optimal use of each live gig, whenever possible you should have an email list on a nice-looking clipboard of some kind, with a pen attached to it. If you can get someone to pass it around the audience, that's best, but if it's on a table somewhere, the key is mention it and tell people where it is.

In fact, before your last song, whether it's a two-song set or a whole concert, make a brief, humble, succinct plug for yourself and your music – plug your email list, your website. If your music is up on streaming services, mention that it's there. If you have a CSA – if people can subscribe to you on Bandcamp, Patreon, your website or on another platform – plug that. Lots more on your web presence in future chapters – but plugging these things live in concert is your best advertising, and doing it just before your last song is a good time to remember to do the plug.

How I Did It

After spending the aforementioned years woodshedding and busking and learning my craft, when I first started writing decent songs, I also started touring with other musical acts, busking lots more, participating in lots of open mikes, running open mikes, and playing the occasional concert, generally not more than 100 miles or so from my home.

I toured for a couple months in 1994 as bass player and harmony singer with a fun hippie band called Aunt Betsy, usually doing one of my own songs in the set, though it was otherwise not “my” band. (An excellent singer/songwriter from Saskatchewan named Dave Faro was the band leader, such as it was.) Doing this tour with Aunt Betsy had no discernible impact on my musical career, but I had a good time.

In 1997 I toured as backup band for Robert Hoyt as well as Chris Chandler. On Robert's tour I also did opening sets at every gig. This is the tour that had a huge impact on broadening my audience throughout the parts of the US where Robert and I toured.

The other types of live gigs that had an easily measurable impact on my career were whenever I had a chance to play in front of a large number of like-minded people – which for me meant singing at protest rallies of one kind or another. If your music isn't so political, it might work better for you at festivals, I don't know. For a long time in the late 1990's and early 2000's I sang every year at the School of the Americas protests in Columbus, Georgia, for several thousand (or more) people. Each time, there would be lots of email afterwards from people who had heard me sing there and were wondering when I'd next be coming to Ohio or New York, etc.

As for plugging the email list, as I'll talk about in future chapters, I have personally found true what conventional wisdom holds true as well – that even in the age of social media, my email list is still my best way to communicate with my fans. The fact that I have always organized my email list according to geography has helped immensely. More on that later...

Chapter 4: Recording An Album

In Chapter 5 I'll talk about the many good strategies for sharing your music on the web. One of those things you'll want to have to share in various ways is a professionally-recorded album.

OK, you might be thinking, but this is 2017 and albums are pretty much a thing of the past, aren't they? To which I would say they are definitely less important than they used to be – certainly physical albums of any kind are (CD's, etc.). What's just as important as ever, however, is having a whole bunch of your songs in a very high-quality recorded form. If you have at least a dozen of them, which is a good idea, then you might as well call it an album.

While it's true that you can make better-sounding home recordings than ever before these days with a smartphone and an external microphone, there are still a lot of very important reasons why it's much better to make a professional-quality recording. That can include making a recording in a home studio, to be sure – but whether it's a home studio or a studio studio, the difference is an experienced audio engineer and an experienced producer.

Maybe the engineer and producer in question is you. If you're an experienced engineer and/or producer, you would know that. If you're not, then you need to find someone who is, unless you really want to put in the time and effort involved with becoming a really good engineer and producer yourself.

The importance of having a high-quality recording is that higher-quality recordings get shared a lot more, especially in the long term. The songs from your albums are the ones that will end up on Spotify and other streaming platforms (more on that in Chapter 5). Most of the other albums on there are high-quality studio recordings, so it's no good if suddenly the volume drops out and it sounds in comparison like you're singing in a tin can. Same principle applies with community radio, public radio, and of course commercial radio (not that you're likely to get on commercial radio). Not to mention platforms like Bandcamp.

By the way, I'm not saying that everything you record should be album-quality. There's lots of room for recording lots of other things, and I'll talk about that in Chapter 5. This chapter is about making an album, which is also important.

With all your years of work on becoming a great musician and a great songwriter, unless you have also been putting in lots of hours in a recording studio in the capacity of studio musician or studio engineer or producer, you are not any of these things, and you shouldn't try to pretend that you are. These skill sets may be related, but they are definitely not the same.

If you don't have any kind of a budget for making a recording with other musicians over the course of days or weeks, it's still very worthwhile to work with a professional engineer in a real studio to make a “live” solo recording. In this case you probably don't need to work with a producer. If you're able to make a recording involving other musicians, you'll benefit tremendously from working with an experienced producer.

Great producers are often just musicians who have ended up spending a lot of time in recording studios over the years, and they've learned the things that work and the things that don't, in terms of making recordings that sound good and natural, and in terms of knowing how to work with singer/songwriters who don't have a background as regular studio musicians. If you're plugged in to your local music scene, you probably know people have made really good albums. Ask them who produced them, and then see if you can afford to hire that producer.

A good producer will try to work with your musical ideas and contribute their own, and work with your

budget to figure out how much time will approximately be required in a studio to make the recording, including how much time will be needed to work with each of the different musicians that may be involved with the project, how long it will take to mix everything, and where to get it mastered. (Even though most of us have no idea what mastering really is, what is very clear is that it makes everything sound better, and it's important.)

Even if your producer is also the engineer and owner of the studio – not an uncommon prospect – it can easily cost many hundreds of dollars per day to make a professional-quality album, over the course of a week or two. In Section C I'll be talking about strategies to fund albums and other endeavors. If you're making your first album and you don't have the social network to fund an album project, hopefully you can figure out some other way to do that. Common methods for funding your first album include savings, earnings from the day job you may not have quit yet, sympathetic, gainfully-employed relatives, and maxing out your credit card (not recommended).

Even if you mainly perform solo, there are reasons why it can be good to make an album with other musicians, aka “a band,” if – and only if – you can do it well, so it sounds real, natural, and not like a bunch of hacks attempting to play in time with each other, which is usually what happens when musicians who aren't very experienced studio players try to make a multi-tracked recording without the aid of an experienced producer.

As far as I can tell, there is a greater likelihood of songs being played more when they're high-quality recordings made with a band. But if you're used to playing solo and you're like me and many others, you will find it challenging to play in time and still sound like you mean it. If you practice in advance of your recording sessions with a metronome (there are great, free, metronome apps for your phone), that'll help a lot.

Things you don't do so well can be very difficult, and although you may eventually become an experienced studio player, if you're like many musicians who are more used to playing live, recording in a studio may be one of those challenging experiences. It's important to maintain both your humility and your sense of purpose here. Try to do everything your producer wants you to do. And then don't hesitate to say what you think about this idea – but not before you try it first.

Times have changed, and the way it is now, recording an album will probably not be a significant source of revenue for you, even if it is streamed by tens or hundreds of thousands of people. If you develop such an audience, it will be helpful for you in all kinds of other important ways, which I'll talk about in future chapters.

How I Did It

Usually I learn how to do things the right way by doing it the wrong way first. In the case of making albums with other musicians in a studio, I stumbled into doing it the right way first. However, the first album I made in a studio was a bit of a disaster, due mainly to me not yet being ready for the process. The producer was also probably not so good at working with someone as unable to follow instructions as I was then.

The next time I gave it a shot worked much better. I had a better idea of what I was trying to do musically with the album and I was working with a producer who had more experience working with relatively clueless singer/songwriters such as I was then.

If I had known what I was doing, I could have probably started using a different model for funding recordings, as I did start doing later. Out of the thirty or so albums I've made over the years, ten of them have been projects with multiple other musicians that generally involved two weeks or more in a studio. Of these ten, the first three were funded by my mother. One was funded by an indie record

label (with the costs paid for by me many times over from CD sales back then), one from my earnings as a touring musician, and the rest from crowdfunding campaigns.

Chapter 5: Sharing Your Music Online

The mythology used to be if you were a great musician, you'd get picked up by a record label, they'd fund and produce an album, and then they'd publicize it and your tour and everything else, and you just had to play your music and avoid becoming a drug addict. A more recent version of this myth is that with the wonder of the internet, if you record some great music yourself and get it online, it will magically go viral because it's so great, you'll get millions of views overnight, and the money and gig requests will start pouring in.

Far more likely, throughout the history of the music industry, the first myth will never come true for the overwhelming majority of otherwise qualified musicians out there. The second myth may come true slightly more often – but most of the time when you hear about a video or an indie artist suddenly becoming a “YouTube sensation,” there are major advertising dollars from the record company involved. The publicists use this “rags to riches” story because it's exciting – not because it's true.

Streaming platforms are rapidly replacing CD's completely. If there's any point to making a physical recording now, there won't be in the next few years. This has meant loads of record labels throwing in the towel, and it has meant loads of indie musicians doing the same. In Section C I'll talk about how to cope with this new reality and still make a living. But the point I'm making here for now is that the CD is dead, and as far as the situation is now, you can't expect to make much money from streaming or downloads – not anything close to what you would have made in CD sales if this were, say, 1999, or even 2009.

So although you should register your music with the appropriate agencies and collect the relatively small amounts of money you might get from Spotify, iTunes, terrestrial radio, etc., you are best off primarily looking at the internet as your second biggest source of publicity after live performance. Your music online is what in marketing speak they call a “freemium.” You give it away, but as much as possible you do that in a way that allows you to network with people who like your music, and keep in touch with them – because, as I'll explain in Section C, they will become your lifeline.

In order to pay the rent entirely from streaming, you'd need to get somewhere around a million plays each month – unlikely. But in order to make a living from your fans, I think if you're getting more like 10,000 plays a month then you've probably got a big enough fan base to make my business model work. And it doesn't matter if they are plays that pay anything or not. What matters is whether they are plays of the sort that allow you to keep in touch with them.

Most of them won't be. Mostly, they'll be anonymous plays from people you'll never know or have contact with. That's not ideal, but that's OK. What you need to focus on is finding ways to get in touch and stay in touch with as many people as possible – even if it's ultimately only like 1% of the people who regularly listen to your music online.

If you're going to make a living as an indie musician, you don't have the overhead to hire people to do day-to-day work for you like booking, publicity, maintaining your website and web presence on various platforms. You need to do all that. You're running a business, and that's how it is. No way around it other than inheritance or a major record deal.

It's not that you don't need people doing publicity and other things – you just need to learn how to network with your fans so that they will become the volunteers who will do that work. But this requires that you know how to organize yourself and them – no matter how much you're able to delegate responsibilities (and you'll need to delegate lots of them, continually, as long as you do this for a living), this is your job. Your job is playing music, writing songs, touring – and finding the folks who will organize your gigs, and organizing your gigs.

But before I get to how all of that works (in Section C), here's the drill for now: you need a solid web presence in various places, and you need to actively look after it. There is no short cut to doing this – cultivating your relationship with your fans is hopefully something you enjoy doing as a human being who likes other human beings, but it's also something you must do in order to do music for a living.

Rule #1 is maintain an email list, and divide your email list by state (or province or whatever that's called in your country) and by country.

Rule #2 is to always be looking for ways to get more people onto your email list.

Your email list will be your most powerful organizing tool – but much more powerful if it's divided geographically, and if you otherwise use it wisely, and if it's big. It's one of many tools, however, and many others are also important (especially the ones that end up getting more people on your email list).

I'll run through some of the most vital aspects of your presence on the web.

Your website. One that's like yourname.com, one that you control completely, not any corporate platform. You need to use many different corporate platforms, to be sure – but there are many things that can be done just as well or better through your own website if you are pretty good at using Wordpress or another such website-building platform.

From your website you can directly run crowdfunding and other crowdsourcing campaigns just as well as if you used another platform. You should also have prominent menu items or widgets that allow people to easily contact you by email and get on your email list. These are boring, static links, but otherwise your website should have more dynamic (frequently updated) widgets for your latest video on YouTube, your latest Soundcloud tracks, your latest Bandcamp album, your upcoming gigs (perhaps listed using Songkick's widget), your latest blog entry, and little icons taking people to your social media accounts.

Once you have your website designed by someone who is expert in this sort of thing – someone with serious Wordpress and graphic design skills, who you may have to pay for their services – you should learn enough Wordpress yourself to maintain it. Mainly, it will maintain itself, because it will consist largely of widgets that update themselves as you update YouTube, Soundcloud, your blog, etc.

One of the many companies that offer web hosting, including helpful technical support people, is Hostbaby. Hostbaby includes excellent email list services, called Listbaby. Hostbaby is an outgrowth originally of CDBaby, which is one of the most useful services out there, and has been for a long time now. CDBaby is the platform you can use, among other such platforms, for getting your album(s) onto all of the various streaming services. Through CDBaby you can also collect royalties for plays, and if you're not already registering your music through one of the agencies such as ASCAP or BMI, you can pay a little extra and do it all through CDBaby.

Now that so many people are getting their music through streaming services and not so much through other means, getting your album onto these services (whether you do this through a service like CDBaby, or do it yourself, one streaming service at a time) is probably more important than having your album available for streaming/download on other platforms. But at least for now, it's also worth having your album hosted on Bandcamp. Make sure you have simple, catchy graphics for it, too.

If you're getting nervous at this point and feeling like this is all too much information at once, let me reassure you that once you investigate each of the platforms and services I'm referring to here, you will learn how to navigate them. They are all well-designed for regular people to use. You don't need to be a techie for most of this stuff. I'm certainly not. Sometimes, like for the initial design of your website, to record an album, etc., you may need to hire people to do things, but most of this stuff you can learn to do yourself, if you're patient.

While it is true that the higher-quality recordings and videos tend to get more attention long-term, it's also true that your fans are interested in more than just a new album once a year. Anything that is about now, that has some immediacy to it, can be very popular. It's great if it's as high-quality as possible, too. But if you write a new song, and especially if it's related to something that just happened in your life or in the world somewhere, put your smartphone on a tripod, find somewhere not too cluttered, well-lit, and without a light shining behind you, and make a video of the song. Put it on your YouTube channel. Tell people about it via your email list and on Facebook, Twitter, and any other social media you use.

If someone who knows what they're doing can make a nice video of one of your concerts, somewhere where you're playing acoustic or where the sound is very good, and where the lighting is optimal, then if that video is split up into individual songs with no dialogue, they will tend to get more views over time. It's good to have stuff like that on YouTube. And to use that as an excuse to tell everybody on your email list about this new concert up on YouTube, and to tell your social media followers as well.

Same goes for music videos, except perhaps more so, if you can afford to hire someone to help you make something interesting, or have those kinds of skills yourself.

At the end of each of the videos you can have a message and/or a button that leads people to your email list, or your paid subscription scheme (more on that in Section C), or other things.

When you write a new song and make a YouTube video with your phone, also upload that file onto Soundcloud, with a spiffy graphic that you track down on the web that makes sense for that song.

If you use the Songkick platform to list your upcoming gigs, you can have the widget on your website (so you don't need to do anything else to keep that section of your website current), and you can link your Songkick account with Soundcloud, YouTube, Bandcamp and Spotify, so that whenever people are listening to your music on any of those platforms, there's at least some chance they'll notice that your upcoming gigs are listed there off to the side.

A very large portion of the population communicates almost exclusively on Facebook, so you need to have a presence on Facebook. It's a very problematic, very corporate platform, but it doesn't seem to be going anywhere, and because most people are on it, you kind of need to be part of that.

Facebook is constantly changing the way it does things, so it's impossible to offer truly current advice, but some general rules seem to be remaining fairly consistent.

It's good to have a personal account (where you're limited to 5,000 friends, FYI), and a Page. They behave differently, and have different pros and cons. Anything overtly self-promotional will tend to get little attention these days, unless it's on your Page, and you Boost the post. Boosting such posts a little bit can be the only way people who have Liked your page will see them.

When you put a video on YouTube, also host it directly on your Facebook Page – it will tend to get far more views that way. On your personal page, photos will tend to get noticed more. Generally, your posts will be most noticed more if you don't post to Facebook more than a few times a day – except for the self-promotional posts, which will tend to get little traction either way, unless they're well-veiled.

What works very well on your personal Facebook page is a post the length of a short paragraph that is a commentary on something in life or the news that other people can chime in on.

When you post photos on Facebook, it's helpful to do that through Instagram, because: it's very easy to do, Instagram is itself a very popular platform, and you can use the filters to make the photos look much better.

Although your email list is still your most powerful networking tool aside from one-on-one

communication and live gigs, you'll get communication from people on all kinds of different platforms, including in the comments section of your YouTube videos. It can be hard to keep track of it all, and the Social tab on Gmail helps with that effort, if you do Gmail.

Hopefully it goes without saying that for all the usefulness of your email list and other networking tools, the basis of all of this networking, in the case of your musical career, is your music. So the music needs to not only be really good and really well-recorded, but also nicely presented on platforms like Bandcamp and Spotify (via CDBaby or not, in the latter case).

How I Did It

Sometime near the turn of the century, many musicians at most every level of the spectrum were upset about file-sharing – the growing phenomenon of people making perfect digital copies of songs and sharing them online for free. Many musicians and record labels did not embrace this technology, until reluctantly entering the online music world “officially” by participating in legal streaming services in recent years.

I was one of the musicians who decided early on that given that people like me are basically locked out of things like radio airplay or record contracts in the first place, making music available for free online was at least some kind of alternative. I basically put everything I had ever recorded in a studio online for free download (except for older recordings that I didn't want to be associated with). Although the earlier platforms I was using kept on going out of business or proving unable to stay current with technological changes (MP3.com, Soundclick, MySpace), putting all my music online for free seemed to generate some buzz. On the sites where I was mainly putting my music, I was getting tens of thousands of downloads or streams every month, and this was undoubtedly helping to broaden and internationalize my audience.

The way things happen online keeps changing so fast that in this instance, much of what I'd have to say in terms of how I did things would be of little relevance now. For example, it used to be that downloading music had more advantages compared to streaming, and you could offer your music free to stream, but to download people would have to pay something or at least give you their email address. I was able to harvest a lot of emails this way for a while. Now that people tend to stream and not bother with downloading, this avenue of collecting emails is largely closed.

On the monetary front, registering my music with CDBaby's service has allowed me not only to get my music onto various platforms in a presentable form, but also to get the money owed me by many of those platforms. For years now, this has resulted in a steady \$120 or so in revenue from streaming each month. Which represents a very far cry from what I used to make from CD sales – at least ten times that amount on average – but it does represent a significant number of people to try to network with, and everything that that implies. Namely a lot of time and energy, and ultimately a lot of friends, comrades, and work as a musician (Section C for more on that).

Registering my music on BMI (a US artists' rights agency like ASCAP, GEMA, etc.) is how I have always gotten royalties for radio airplay. As I mentioned earlier, this can also be done via CDBaby now, too, depending on what country you're in. For me, most of the time the income from terrestrial radio play has been insignificant – often \$10 or \$20 each quarter, entirely for community radio play, with \$10 representing I think 1,000 songs played.

For a few years there was one radio programmer on BBC, Andy Kershaw, who used to play songs of mine on his weekly national music show in the UK regularly. During those years the checks from BMI multiplied in size to around \$400 a quarter. After Andy lost his job, they went back to the double digits, with occasional exceptions, like when I did a children's album and it got played on some

national program in Canada, resulting in an extra \$250 in the BMI check for that quarter. It's worth noting here that if I didn't have my music registered with an agency like BMI, I wouldn't have gotten that money, and I would never have known that my music was played on CBC, because I don't think I received a single email from anyone who heard my music on the program and felt compelled to write.

SECTION C

CROWDSOURCING YOUR MUSICAL CAREER

Chapter 6: Crowdsourcing Your Tours

First a bit about our terms and our times. I like the words “crowdsourcing” and “crowdfunding” because they're descriptive. I only started hearing them in recent years, but the concepts have existed for a long time, and have been used successfully and unsuccessfully for a long time.

Part of their growing popularity in recent years surely has to do with how much easier it is to network with people – including in ways that involve exchanges of funds, goods and services – via the internet. The other, perhaps less discussed reason for the growing popularity of crowdfunding and other forms of crowdsourcing is desperation, and the failure of previous models of doing things.

For example, why crowdsource a tour? There may be all kinds of nice practical and philosophical reasons to do it this way, but one of the reasons to do it this way is because other ways don't work now, or never have worked, or only worked for a few, depending on your vantage point. With lots of radioplay, front page features on local newspapers, and the many millions of followers on YouTube and Facebook that this kind of conventional media coverage will eventually garner, you can do a well-attended show promoted by paid, conventional forms of advertising. Your fans will hear about it and they will come to your shows, hopefully in sufficient numbers for the math to work out.

But this artist I'm describing isn't me, and if you're reading this book, it's probably not you, either. If you're not on a major record label and getting that kind of expensive exposure, the whole idea of “success” and promoting gigs this way falls into the category of mythology. So many artists try and fail to do it this way.

The fact is, in all likelihood, the amount of paid advertising you'd need to mainly get a good crowd from that is way more than you can afford. The amount of media exposure in a given market that you would need to get a big enough crowd to come to your show is not going to happen – you're not going to get on the front page of the local weekly and you're not going to get the kind of blanket coverage on any local radio station that would be necessary to generate a good crowd. If you pay someone to plaster the town with posters, that might be something you could afford, but if you don't have lots of immediate name recognition, this won't help you.

And what about the internet? What if you have 10,000 followers on Facebook, 5,000 on Twitter, 10,000 people on your email list, and tens of thousands of people playing your songs on Spotify every month, and maybe glancing at your upcoming gigs tab now and then? If you do have that kind of internet presence, there's a hell of a lot you can do with that, as I will explain. But unless all those friends and followers are in the same metropolitan area, when you do the math and figure out how few people in a given area are likely to open the email or see the post in the first place, and then subtract from that the 90% of them who will not be coming to the gig even if they know it's happening, then you don't have what it takes to attract a good crowd at a gig without the help of a local.

What's required to effectively promote a show is lots of very targeted publicity. One-on-one communication, flyering and announcing the show at specific sorts of events that attract the kind of crowd that likes your music. And you need this to be done by a local fan who wants to do it, who knows and loves your music, and has the time and attention span required to follow the very specific directions you will give them on how to organize a concert for you. (I direct them to a section of my website that contains the recipe for successful DIY concert organizing, which I have included in this book as Appendix A.)

You may not be able to organize the gigs on a tour from your computer at home, but with all those people that you've gathered together on your email list, all your followers on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc., folks you've come into contact with from doing local shows and from the networking

that happened every time you posted a new song, folks who gave you their email when they downloaded a song or an album on your Bandcamp page, and so on, you can do a lot.

The first step in crowdsourcing a successful tour is figuring out where you might have fans of the very special sort, the sort who would be willing to volunteer to organize a show for you in their town. I emphasize the volunteer aspect here because if you are going to be making a living at this, you can't afford to pay people to organize your shows. At the level we're talking about, there isn't the profit margin for that sort of thing. (The shows can still be benefit shows, and this is to be encouraged – see Appendix A for more on that.)

Figuring out where these people might be located at any given time is fairly straightforward. Send emails to your email list – separate emails to people in each state and/or country where you have a few people on the list. Something like this:

Hi folks in California,

I'm planning a tour in California in April [four months from now]. Would anyone anywhere there in California be up for organizing a gig for me, by chance? If you'd be willing to think about doing such a thing, please feel free to just reply to this email and we can talk about it. I can provide you with step-by-step instructions upon request...

Hope to see you soon in California!

David

Post similar messages on social media, several months in advance of your potential visit. You don't need to actually be planning to visit. You just need to sound like you're planning on doing that. Once you get one solid response from someone willing to organize a gig for you, at that point you need to stick to your plans. When at all possible, never cancel plans once you actually start to make them – by which I mean once one gig is confirmed, you need to follow up on your end and show up for that, and hopefully for other gigs that will soon also be confirmed. You do not want to develop a reputation for being a flake (among other reputations you don't want to develop).

The key to the process is regular, consistent, friendly (but not verbose) communication on your part. Don't disappear. Reply to emails and other forms of communication within 24 hours at the most – ideally much faster. Regular reminders are good, nagging is bad. Always remember they are doing you a favor, and treat them accordingly. Most gigs someone might organize for you will involve dozens of emails back and forth on the subject of this one gig they're organizing. Be prepared for that, be nice, prompt, helpful, appreciative (but not too over-the-top, especially when communicating with more reserved members of the species from places like, say, Germany, Norway or Japan).

If you're communicating with people you've never worked with before, make sure to emphasize the resources on your website (or via email attachments if they prefer) that explain how to organize a gig. People often don't realize how much time and effort is involved with getting a few dozen people to pay to hear a show by an obscure artist. If they were to be paid for their time at a reasonable rate, you'd make nothing, or next to nothing. Make sure they understand that, and if they're still willing to organize a gig, make sure they know how much you appreciate what they're doing.

If you're working with someone who seems to be an experienced organizer, still try to get them to read your section on organizing gigs. Some of the best organizers, I've found, have never done anything like this before, but they do a great job because they follow my instructions. Some of the experienced organizers often aren't the best organizers, because they think they know what they're doing so well that they don't need any advice, and it turns out not to be true that they're as good as they thought they were.

If you're working with someone you've never worked with before and you're not sure whether they are

really organizing a gig or just talking about it, there are certain things to look for in your regular communication with the person. If they tell you early on where the venue is that they've booked for the gig, that's a very good sign. If they say they're looking for a venue and they're still looking for a venue weeks later, that's a bad sign. It doesn't mean the gig isn't going to happen or isn't going to be good, necessarily, but it's an indication that this might be the case. Long lapses in communication can be a bad sign. (Or in the case of Europeans it might mean they're on vacation and not checking their emails – Europeans actually do that sort of thing, on a regular basis, and sometimes the vacations last for months.)

Once you've got a gig confirmed in a given state or country you'll be touring in, take the opportunity to tell everybody in that area once again that you are indeed planning a tour in their neck of the woods, and that you have a confirmed gig in x town. Every time another gig is confirmed, do that again. Hype it up to some degree by getting it up on Songkick, sharing the Facebook Event page whenever you or the organizer creates one, blogging about your upcoming tour, getting someone to design a tour poster and sharing it with everybody, sharing songs from other acts you may be on a bill with, and anything else like that that you can think of.

The point to you doing all this publicity for your tour is not because you are seriously hoping it's going to make a significant difference in terms of attendance at your gigs. In most cases, it won't. The point is that as time goes on and you plug the tour, you will hopefully get new gigs, as other people who have heard your music before see your posts about the tour and one in a hundred of them thinks, hm, maybe I'll organize a little gig for them in my town, it looks like a straightforward enough process...

When you're spreading the word via social media, it seems worth noting that the way Facebook's algorithms currently work, anything self-promotional barely gets noticed, while pictures of cats and babies will tend to get seen by far more people, as a general rule. Facebook wants us to Boost our tour-promoting posts in order for people who have Liked our page to see it. This one of the many problematic things about this corporate platform that we are all stuck with. But my experience has been that if your tour-promoting posts are very geographically specific, and you Boost the post to people from that geographical area, spending \$4 can go a long way. I have definitely gotten many good gigs from Boosting a Facebook post for \$4 that I probably wouldn't have gotten otherwise.

There are lots of challenging logistics involved with this kind of organizing. For example, you need to start organizing the tour several months' in advance, but you need to leave plenty of room for gigs that won't get confirmed until a month ahead of the time the tour will start. If it's a tour that involves flying, you'll probably want to buy the plane tickets more than a month in advance to get the best deal. So guessing how many dates might get taken with gigs and how long to plan to be away is one challenge.

Then there are challenges like lodging and transportation. Lodging is easy to crowdsource, but as with other things, your best off talking about it in advance, and politely explaining what you're looking for. If gig organizers understand that you would really appreciate a bed with bedding in a room with a door on it, in a house or apartment that has hot running water, they'll tend to get the idea, and not put you up on someone's flea-ridden couch (even if the organizer themselves are people who might not mind a flea-ridden couch themselves).

Transportation is also possible to crowdsource, but I find that doing that can be very stressful, and means having a constant dependency on each of the people who has organized a gig for you, if you're doing what some people have done, and getting a ride from each gig to the next one, via each gig organizer. In many countries this strategy is totally impractical because most people don't own cars.

Taking buses and trains as a means of touring is a very dubious prospect for a number of reasons. Your shoulders will fall off from carrying all that stuff around all the time. And you'll end up taking taxis late at night after the gigs in order to get to wherever you're staying, and ultimately you won't save any

money, relative to renting a car and driving everywhere in it.

The only country I know of where it is less practical to tour by rental car than by other forms of transportation is Norway, because of the combination of factors that the cities are all very far from each other, and the cost of renting a car is even more expensive than everything else.

What I'm saying about rental cars is assuming you know that you often need to organize your tours so that they start and end in the same city. This is generally true in the US, Canada, and Australia, but not in Great Britain or Germany, where there are no drop fees (extra fees for dropping the car off at a different location from the one where you rented it). And I suppose this is also assuming you know that buying insurance from the car rental companies is a scam. Most any credit card – and a credit card is unfortunately a necessity in this business – comes with rental car insurance, which automatically kicks in if you decline the rental company's insurance deal. (There are countries where this doesn't apply, however, such as Ireland.)

If you're touring internationally, some very general things to bear in mind is you need to get a work visa if you want to tour the US, Australia or New Zealand without getting deported. That used to be the case with Canada, but their work visa requirement for touring musicians was just nixed. If you go the UK or Ireland they will ask you what you're doing there. Technically you need a work visa, and you could get deported if you don't have one. In all the other countries in Europe I find they never ask you what you're doing there, if you're traveling on a US passport. (The world being as it is, this obviously may not be the case if you're traveling under another passport, depending on where you're from and other factors.)

The way I'm describing organizing a tour isn't entirely accurate – I don't rely entirely on emailing my email list and posting to social media when I'm organizing a tour. I also contact certain individuals that I know who book certain venues. On any given tour, however, those venues that I play at regularly that really do a good job of promoting gigs and paying performers make up less than 5% of my overall gigs. I'm absolutely certain that my experience that booking gigs directly through venues without a local promoter tends to result in very small audiences – though there are notable exceptions to this rule.

When you're nearing the time that the tour is actually starting, you can change your approach to the email list and social media from looking for gigs to promoting the tour, and encouraging other folks to spread the word about your gigs. Most people are mostly overwhelmed with information all the time, so unless your requests for help are aimed at individuals, or are very specific geographically, you're unlikely to get much response. Most people tend to assume that someone else is going to take care of it -- whatever it may be. Thus the importance of lining up one individual who volunteers to be responsible for promoting each gig.

But there are lots of useful things people can do to help spread the word, regardless of the efforts being made by your main organizer for a given gig. If you're asking people to help with that, it's helpful to give them specific suggestions. Appendix B covers the kinds of encouraging suggestions I give people who have offered to help promote a gig, when they're not the main organizers of it.

One of the biggest obstacles people seem to have with adopting my model of crowdsourcing gigs, albums and other things is they don't want to ask people to do favors for them. They think, rightly or wrongly, that it shouldn't be necessary, and it feels demeaning or selfish or something bad. And it's true that it's not necessary for some artists to ask anyone to volunteer to do anything – most everything is done by people who are being paid, for the big-time professional touring outfits. And it's also true that not long ago, a lot more indie artists were able to make a better living at touring, for many different reasons, including the fact that we used to sell large amounts of merch at shows. But those days are gone, and new strategies would seem to be required. Luckily they exist, the existence of the internet makes them easier to implement in various ways, and it's possible to implement them, if you fully

embrace them and put in a lot of continuous time and effort.

Another obstacle to overcome is the idea that we internalize from the music industry that if we just meet the right person, make the right connection, all kinds of doors will open for our careers. While it's true that good things can come of getting airplay on a national radio show, touring with a more established artist than yourself, or playing at a massive festival or protest rally, in the overall scheme of your career, these things will likely be virtually insignificant compared with your efforts to network with your fans. It's what your fans think of you and your music that's important, not what any famous person thinks.

How I Did It

There were many working, indie musicians crowdsourcing their tours to one degree or another before the internet. We were largely blocked out of the “normal” ways of doing these things ever since I have been on the scene in any capacity. The days when anything was different for indie musicians is the stuff of fantasy for me, not anything in living memory for me or my generation.

Since the internet, the challenge of making a living as a touring musician either using the approach involving booking agents, publicists, etc., or using the crowdsourcing method, has gotten harder. That's because, in my estimation, the increased ease of communication that the internet facilitates does not completely compensate for the precipitous decline in merch sales. But we can work with it.

I learned from artists like Robert Hoyt and Chris Chandler how to organize tours in a way that was largely a pre-internet version of crowdsourcing. We all spent a hell of a lot of time on the phone back then, mostly hanging out with the truckers in the truck stops, where there was a phone on every table.

I had some “lucky breaks” along the way that were helpful to one extent or another – the aforementioned airplay on BBC for a few years, appearing regularly on *Democracy Now!* for a few years, being adopted by Attila the Stockbroker and much of his audience in Britain, being a regular feature at some big antiwar protests for a few years. But most of the evolution of my network in all the countries I tour in has been a slow process of building a fan base through a combination of touring in these countries regularly, writing songs that speak to people in these countries, and networking with people involved in one way or another with the gigs and the songs.

It may be hard to be heard in a sea of singer/songwriters, but if you're appealing to very niche audiences, it's easier. Most of my contacts in the environmental movement came from writing songs about this movement's struggles, currently and historically. Most of my contacts with Palestinians and Palestine solidarity groups came from writing songs about the Palestinian struggle. The same is true with the antiwar, labor, socialist, anarchist and other movements I have been involved with in the bardic capacity.

With each movement, and with each country that I eventually started touring in, it's a different story, in terms of how I first started connecting with people in that movement or in that country. For all the reach of the internet across national borders (though limited along linguistic lines, depending on the language you sing in), I have found that different scenes are mostly formed within the lines of national borders. Once I get my foot in the door in a new country, the process of finding more gigs in that country usually speeds up dramatically. The exception to this rule is in countries where there isn't a high degree of English fluency. Which supports my thesis about the importance of the grassroots spreading of the music, rather than influential individuals who like you. For example, I have played for large audiences in Italy and was featured regularly for a time on Greek media, but neither of these things resulted in me developing a real following in either country.

One thing I have found doesn't work is trying to share contacts with other artists – whether I'm looking

for “theirs” or they're looking for “mine.” Whether someone regularly organizes gigs for touring musicians, or if they only do such a thing once in a blue moon, they're unlikely to want to organize anything just because of someone's recommendation of an artist – even if that recommendation comes from an artist they like a lot. Whether this seems counter-intuitive or not, it is certainly my experience. But if people hear you play live, it's a different story – like if you're on the bill in some form with the artist recommending you, then no recommendation is needed, for whoever organized that particular gig. They got to have the first-hand experience, which is what it's mostly about with touring and expanding your reach as an independent touring artist.

Chapter 7: Crowdfunding Your Albums

It used to be the case that if you were a regularly-touring artist capable of selling merch – which you were if you were regularly playing in front of audiences – any number of small indie record labels might be interested in “signing” you. Whether they did any actual promotion of your album, the label would know that they would soon make back the money they invested in funding the recording, since you'd be buying CDs from them for \$6 each, in order to sell them yourself for \$10 or \$15.

Or, for more entrepreneurial indie artists who gave up on indie labels before or at the time that they mostly ceased to exist, you could fund recordings yourself, even if you did it with a credit card, because you'd know that you'd be selling albums once they were ready to be sold, if you toured and played gigs with audiences at them. Then you could make a lot more money from the CDs, since once you covered the expenses involved, you were paying \$1 or so for each of those CDs, and selling them for \$10 or \$15.

Of course, that's all over. Since many of us in the US had at least a passing familiarity with the idea of the on-air fund drive conducted by all the NPR and Pacifica radio stations, public television, etc., adopting the idea ourselves seemed to be an idea that lots of musicians started implementing around the same time. Whether you were one of them or not, you probably know people who have done a fundraising campaign through Kickstarter, Indiegogo or another platform.

What's less noticeable than the fundraising campaigns are all the ones that aren't happening. There's the option of home recording, cutting corners with such expenses, hopefully without too much loss in quality. There's the option of not touring anymore, and getting a better-paying job that allows you to fund your music habit. And there's the option of throwing in the towel completely. All very popular options in the post-merch context.

Many people have very positive experiences with crowdfunding projects, while many others try to crowdfund an album project and it doesn't work. Since the bottom dropped out of merch sales, I embraced the method like so many others. Most of the time I've met or exceeded my fundraising goal, but not always.

Most of the advice I'd have for successfully crowdfunding an album could be heard from the folks pitching the on-air fund drive on your local NPR station. You need to be like them – believers in the mission of what you're doing, advocating for folk like yourself, emphasizing the fact that in the modern world your artistic output is all free online for anybody to listen to on Spotify or wherever else, but that in order to keep making great music, you need people to support your recording projects. It's really a slight variation on their standard pitch.

Where I notice things go wrong for people is when I get a sense that they don't fully believe in what they're doing. They're overly apologetic about it, or they're vague in terms of what their goal is and exactly what they plan to do with the money they raise.

Another problem is when they don't reply personally to each person who donates to their campaign. Whenever I donate to someone's campaign and they don't thank me personally I think, too bad, this campaign is going to fail, and it always does.

If you're good at Wordpress you can set up a campaign yourself on your website, or you can use a platform like Kickstarter or Indiegogo. There may be some small value to using certain platforms like these, to take advantage of folks out there looking for things to donate to, who you're not already connected with, but I doubt the amount of money you'll get from people like that will be equal to any more than the 5% of all your donations that will be going to the platform that you use, if you use one.

Whether you do it yourself or use a platform, you need to keep updating the status of the campaign, letting people know on the site how much it's raised, which happens automatically on the fundraising sites. Once people are personally thanked for their donations, they may donate again, whether immediately or later in the campaign, and/or in future campaigns.

Offer clear rewards for different amounts that people donate. Come up with things that might really interest people, and be prepared to follow through with them. If you take yourself and what you offer seriously, you may get some bigger contributions along with the many smaller ones. For \$25 they may get a t-shirt, for \$250 they could have a concert in their living room next time you're touring in their area.

My own experience has taught me that you should only do one campaign for one project at a time, and you shouldn't conduct more than one campaign per year.

How I Did It

I've recorded around 30 albums, most of which were low-budget, basically solo guitar and voice projects, some of them just slightly edited concert recordings. They were pretty much all self-funded, inexpensive affairs. Of the dozen or so bigger productions I've done, involving budgets of \$3,000-\$12,000 or so, the first several were funded almost entirely by my mother. The second bunch of them were funded by very small record labels.

Everything since 2009 has been crowdfunded – both small and large projects. I used Kickstarter for one of them, which was a successful one, but I've otherwise set up the campaigns myself on my website, which has worked just as well, as far as I can tell.

Chapter 8: Crowdfunding You – Starting A CSA

If you stop and do the math, the crowdfunding of your albums doesn't make up for the loss of income that you would have had if you could still make serious money from selling CDs. Great if you can cover the cost of making an album in a studio, but what about the profits from the sales of the CDs, too? That's more than I'd be able to crowdfund in one album crowdfunding campaign, I believe, and I'm sure that's also true for most indie musicians.

Which is presumably the main reason platforms like Patreon or Bandcamp's "Subscribe" option has started to become popular. As with crowdfunding albums, it was a thing born of desperation, after the failure of the previous model to function. As with crowdfunding albums, a lot of musicians just don't want to go there, and many who do, don't get very far.

Going back to the NPR/Pacifica model, the concept is simple: in addition to one-time donations for an album crowdfunding campaign, you are looking for "sustainers" or paid subscribers willing to support your work on a consistent basis. In return, as with album crowdfunding campaigns, they get things in return. Once again, they may be things that are mainly symbolic – such as the ability to download songs which anybody can already stream for free anyway – or they can be exclusive perks that only subscribers get, that are things that they might really value.

I call my subscription scheme a CSA, for Community-Supported Art. Most readers from the US will be familiar with the acronym in the context of small farmers and Community-Supported Agriculture. Regardless of how good the harvest is in a given season, CSA members get a certain amount of whatever the farm produces on a regular basis, but you pay the same monthly or annual fee for CSA membership.

The biggest obstacle to implementing this model of artistic subsistence is being willing to ask like you really mean it. Why should people give you money so you can avoid getting a day job? If you don't think they should, definitely don't bother asking, since it won't work.

But if you can honestly ask for this kind of support, and you do it in a clear way with a good setup on your website or via one of the aforementioned platforms made for this kind of thing, then it might be the best thing you ever did for your musical career. (It certainly has been for me.)

According to my math, here's the rub: if you're a reasonably successful indie artist touring (parts of) the world, and back home you have to cover rent or a mortgage, maybe support family members, food, medical care, etc., making this all work is still hugely challenging. If you subtract from the equation CD sales that don't exist anymore, and if we assume you only want to tour half the year and not 10 months out of the year, then unless you're very regularly attracting over 100 people at your gigs, it doesn't work.

So, your options are to tour more, get bigger crowds, or throw in the towel – or acknowledge the situation for what it is, and try forming a CSA.

With both album crowdfunding campaigns and CSA campaigns, you may be pleasantly surprised to find that other people have been thinking about the situation, too – not just us musicians. Other people are aware that lots of indie musicians are giving up on touring and recording, or struggling to survive as musicians if they haven't given up yet. Other people realize that they are not spending money on music anymore, or if they are, they're spending a small fraction of what they used to spend on it, back when buying a CD (or taking the time and effort to copy a friend's CD onto a blank cassette) was the main way you got to hear music, aside from radio programs, if you were lucky enough to live in a community with good, non-corporate radio options.

For a long-term project like a CSA, I'd be very hesitant to rely exclusively on platforms like Bandcamp or Patreon. The services they offer are fine for what they are, but they take a significant percentage of everything, and they can always change the way they do things, and then it might be hard to get everybody to switch to a different platform. You need to have some facility with Wordpress or something like that, with the ability to update a good-looking, user-friendly website. But if you can do that, this is the best way to go.

A key element to setting it up yourself are having a Paypal account (or an account with some other service that offers the kinds of tools they offer, but Paypal is the standard, and there are advantages to that, troubling as this may be), and learning how to set up a "Subscribe" button – a recurring payment, so that the subscriber is automatically billed on a monthly or annual basis, if they sign up to that.

You can set up different levels of support for different folks, with different potential perks involved at different levels of support. Of utmost importance is regular (but not too regular) one-on-one communication with each of your subscribers, as well as occasional emails directed only at your subscribers, as a group. They are very special and you darn well want to make sure they know that you feel that way, without getting too overly sappy about it.

You can entice people to subscribe in the first place by offering some kind of initial subscriber package of physical and/or digital goodies, such as your entire digital back catalog plus some physical items in the mail. My initial packet includes my entire back catalog in digital form, a selection of 5 CDs, a sticker, and a hard plastic membership card I had designed by a graphics-oriented friend, which gives people free access to most of my shows. I try to remember to tell concert organizers that these cards exist, and that someone may want to use one. It's rarely so many people at any given show that it becomes any kind of problem.

Whenever you come out with a new album on sale on Bandcamp, or in some kind of physical form as well, you send it to your subscribers. If it's a physical thing, you send it to them in the mail (though I always give them the option of not receiving physical merch in the mail, as many people don't have CD players or otherwise aren't interested in physical recordings). These perks you offer your subscribers don't need to be things you're sending out more than once or twice a year. Most of them are going to join because they like your music, want you to keep making more of it, and want to support you in that effort because they know that it can't really ultimately be free.

How I Did It

It was tax time again, and I was talking with my accountant about the dismal state of finances for musicians these days. She mentioned this paid subscription campaign that a musician was doing that she heard about. She said this musician's campaign was to achieve the goal of 1,000 supporters sending her \$50 each year. In exchange she'd keep making music, making recordings, and providing them to her supporters as part of the deal.

By the time of this conversation, in early 2013, the floor had already dropped out of CD sales in the United States for me, and was in the process of doing that everywhere else. I and many other artists were wondering how it might be possible to keep on being artists. I set up the web infrastructure for this, including Paypal "Subscribe" buttons and different levels of support with different perks, and I also set the goal of 1,000 subscribers.

I blogged about the state of affairs for musicians, set up the subscription page, posted on social media about it regularly and to my email list. It's been four years now, and while I haven't come close to my goal of 1,000 subscribers, it's staying fairly steady at around 300. While around 90% of them are doing the \$50 a year thing, others are in what I call the Concert Circle, which for \$250 a year includes the

possibility of an annual house concert, and the Song Circle, where for \$500 a year subscribers can assign me a topic to write a song about each year.

People also have the option of subscribing to me via Bandcamp, but most people use my website, given both options. Which is great for me, because that way I don't have to share a significant chunk of the proceeds with Bandcamp.

Appendix A: How to Organize A Show

It's of great importance that you work closely with the good folks who have volunteered to organize a show for you somewhere. This involves a lot of one-on-one communication, and it involves pointing them to sections of your website where you spell out with clarity how successful concert organizing works. Here is how that section looks on my website. You're welcome to use any or all of this for your website, making whatever changes are appropriate.

Overview

There is a recipe for organizing a good show. Follow the recipe and you are almost guaranteed success. Try a shortcut and failure is very likely... But it's really not complicated and just requires time, effort and a modicum of social skills. It's best if there are multiple people involved but a successful show can be organized by a single dedicated person. The key thing is generating a buzz about the event. My friend Ben Manski says he knows he's done a good job at organizing an event when he's hearing about the event from people who don't know he's the one organizing it.

Some of the points below are specifically relevant to politically-oriented performers like me, others are more generally applicable, but what is basically here in a nutshell are strategies for publicizing a good, political, and relatively unknown performer who is not working with professional agents and promoters and labels and such, but relies entirely on DIY, fan-based publicity (and really a fan-based existence without people like you I'd be pulling espresso shots for a living -- no offense intended to all the baristas out there).

As someone who has decided to organize a show, I encourage you to consider this an opportunity to support your community and, um, me. Hopefully you're doing this because you think organizing a concert in your community will help:

- bring people together help you and other people and groups network with each other
- inspire the progressive community to keep on keeping on
- educate people about new ideas and enrich their knowledge about social movement history
- build for future events coming up in the community or region
- perhaps even raise money for a cause (or at least keep me on the road)

Enthusiasm

You don't need to believe I'm the new messiah, but you need to be very enthusiastic about the event you're organizing. "This guy is pretty good" will not bring people to the event no matter how much publicity you do. No need for any wild exaggeration, but you need to think the performer in question (me) is really very good. He'll inspire you, make you laugh and cry, teach you fascinating new things, etc. If you can (honestly) do better than that, go to town...

Venue

If there's a university in town and you have contacts there, organizing a show on campus can be wonderful, provided there's a student group or other campus group with a budget involved. That way I can be paid by them and the show can be free, oftentimes. Free shows on campuses are great, but if there's no sponsorship from a student group it's always better to use an off-campus venue.

In that case, what we want, ideally, is a venue that regularly has good music, that everybody knows about, people know how to find it, it's easy to get to, and it does at least a little of its own publicity.

This can apply to a music venue, but also to a Unitarian (or other) church concert series, where they may have a loyal following from the congregation as well as other people in town.

If we're relying on what comes in the door to raise money, the venue needs to be one where we can charge a cover or in the case of a church it might be called a "suggested donation," but either way the idea is to have someone sitting at the entrance hitting up every person who walks in for a \$10-20 donation (or something along those lines).

It's preferable if the space has nice acoustics and nice lighting, but if the only room we can get for free or cheap involves fluorescent lights, *c'est la vie*. I don't travel with a sound system, so if the room is a noisy place or we're anticipating a large audience some kind of sound system may be needed. Usually what's built into the ceiling in a lecture hall or church is not adequate for music. Ask me if you have questions about this, but basically what we need is a stand-alone thing with a very small mixing board running into a vocal mike on a boom stand, a DI for my guitar (or I can plug in direct to the board if it's near the stage), and a couple of speakers on speaker stands.

Every Show a Benefit Show

It's a win-win to make every show a benefit show. What the general public doesn't need to know is that it's probably only really a benefit show if it's well-attended. Here's how it works: money logistics vary depending on the gig, where it is, what kind of travel is involved etc., but just for the sake of simplicity, say I aim to make \$500 to do the show and I'm not asking for a guarantee for this one, but just for show organizers to aim for \$500 or so. Advertise it as a benefit, charge \$10 at the door. At the end of the night, after taking out your expenses for organizing the show, the first \$500 gets split 80/20 between me and the cause (I get 80%), and then for anything over \$500 the cause gets 80% and I get 20%. This way if the gig is only modestly-attended I still make a living, and if it's well-attended then it can also be a good fundraiser for the cause. Other benefits to making the show a fundraiser below...

Finding Cosponsors

Especially if the show is a benefit, you'll find it's amazingly easy to find cosponsoring organizations. If you smile nicely and don't smell bad you may be shocked at how everybody other than your local NRA chapter will react positively to your personal appeal. Some people have told me that 100% of the organizations they asked said yes.

Here's how it works. You approach local nonprofits, activist groups, NGO's, religious institutions, small businesses and/or gainfully-employed individuals. Tell them you're organizing a benefit show for the local chapter of Iraq Veterans Against the War (or another group that's active in your community). Ask them if they want to be listed on the publicity materials (posters, emails, perhaps even a program booklet) as a cosponsor. Tell them you're asking cosponsors to help spread the word about the event through their networks and to donate \$50. For their contribution they get 5 advance tickets to the event, which they can either use themselves, give away to staff, volunteers, supporters, friends, etc., or sell to people who want to go to the show and make their money back (thus getting to cosponsor the event at no expense to themselves).

Advance Ticket Sales

In addition to selling advance tickets in packages to cosponsors, sell them to friends, comrades and coworkers. Especially if the event is being billed as a benefit people are usually happy to contribute to the cause, especially when the contribution is connected to a concert ticket -- even if they might not go to the show. Many people buying advance tickets will be doing so to support you, me, the cause or all

of the above (depending on the person), whether or not they show up to the event. This is a good thing! (Though of course it's ideal if they actually come to the show...)

Targeted Leafleting

Make little leaflets about the event and hand them out or leave them on everybody's chair (or both) at events in the weeks leading up to the concert that would tend to attract a sympathetic crowd.

Conventional Publicity

Event organizers often have the hope that if they reach out to the mainstream they'll attract the mainstream to come hear someone like me do a concert. It rarely works that way. It's more like you have to work outwards from the left, if you know what I mean. Just random publicity received by people who probably aren't into acoustic music and very probably have never heard of me will tend to have little impact. It's still nice to put up posters around town, get the event listed in the local papers, etc., but don't expect much to come of that. If the local paper can be convinced to do an article with my picture on the cover, that's another story -- that will help.

Community Radio

Encouraging local community radio programmers who have folk music shows or news shows to play my music and to have me on their shows as a telephone guest in the week leading up to the show is a good thing, and may help bring some people in. What really makes the difference, though, is if you can get folks at the local station to make a PSA (Public Service Announcement, sometimes called a "cart") and play it daily during Democracy Now (or another popular show if there is one) for a couple weeks leading up to the show. This will bring in people, but only if the PSA is played regularly and during a popular listening time for the station.

I can send CDs to radio programmers who'd like them no problem. They can also get lots of my songs for free download in high-quality MP3 form by going to www.soundcloud.com/davidrovics and other sites.

Email Lists

The vast majority of people don't open emails that come from a list, even if they signed on to the list in the first place. It's important to publicize the event through as many relevant local email lists as possible, but don't operate under the illusion (as many people do) that this will bring in the masses -- it won't. I don't know how many times I've heard a variation of "I don't know why only five people showed up. There are a thousand people in this city on our group's email list." If you have a really good email list that people like to read, maybe a hundred of those thousand bothered opening your email. Of those hundred maybe ten really read the thing. Of those ten, maybe five of them came to the show (which in a sense is quite good -- that's 50% of those who actually read the email!).

But if there are multiple relevant local lists, then it can eventually have an impact if the show is mentioned on various lists numerous times by different people. The key to that happening is to call or email people individually who you know have a good email list and ask them to help publicize the show. (Again, if it's a benefit they will be much more likely to want to do that.)

Facebook

I could mention other social networking sites, but at the time I'm writing this there is only one that's particularly relevant. And it's quite relevant. The way to take advantage of what Facebook has to offer

is to create an Event page, invite all your local friends, and keep posting that event page to the top of your Profile page regularly. Tag me, too, and I'll do the same on my page. With luck this can create a good viral effect and increase attendance a bit.

Aside from creating an Event page it's also nice to do new status updates and such in the weeks leading up to the concert where you connect people with a particular song I may have written that's relevant to a current story in the news or a current date in history, or to share a random song or essay I've written, anything new that gives you a decent excuse to plug the show again without just saying the same thing you said last time.

Using My Website

At www.davidrovics.com you will find links that can help in various ways. A brief overview: on the "media" link you'll find a brief bio, which along with a couple quotes from luminaries can work fine as a press release (along with info about the show). It's often best if you say it in your own words though. If you follow the link there for "posters" you'll find a spiffy generic David Rovics tour poster with a blank space on the bottom for filling in local details. Find a good printer for printing out the first copy, fill in the local details, then make some photocopies. Follow the "photos" link and you'll find high-res photos perfect for print media to use. Follow the "audio" link and you'll find loads of my songs available for free download.

Summary

Each one of the different publicity strategies I've gone through here will, by themselves, only bring in a limited number of people. In combination they are a nearly sure-fire guarantee of a successful, well-attended benefit concert that will most likely see me and the cause do well, and hopefully also help in your efforts to build your group and to invigorate the local progressive community a bit. I've pretty much organized this section with the most important publicity strategies closer to the beginning, but all of these publicity strategies have an important role to play, at least potentially. Hope to see you on the road and in the streets!

Appendix B: How Your Fans Can Help Promote Your Shows

Although you basically need a primary organizer for any successful show, there is a lot that any and all (preferably all) of your fans can do to help promote any gig. Here's how my suggestions went out to my blog, email list and social media for the current tour I'm organizing.

- Especially in the couple weeks leading up to a show in your town (or in a town where I'm playing where you know somebody) tell them why you think they'd like the show, and share the details with them in a personal email, phone call, over dinner somewhere, etc. Details about the tour and each gig on the tour are on this Punk Baroque World Tour blog post, among other places.
- Whether or not the main organizer of the show gets around to printing out flyers, you are very welcome to do so! You can just print out this tour flyer/poster, fill in the local gig details, make some copies, and put them up in locations where the sorts of people who might like to come to one of my shows might tend to frequent.
- You can carry around those flyers so that when you have occasion to mention the gig to someone in the physical world, you can hand them one. If you're going to a protest, a meeting, a concert or some other event where there might be folks who might want to go to my show, you can bring flyers and hand them out to folks.
- In the age of TMI people might not see most of your tweets or Facebook posts, but if you share a different song each day with your friends and followers accompanied by a message about the upcoming show, that might generate a bit of attention. You can find almost any of my songs by searching online for my name plus the song title plus either Soundcloud or Bandcamp. Also in alphabetical order at www.davidrovics.com/songbook.
- Usually there will be a Facebook Event page for most of my shows. Facebook makes it difficult to promote a lot of things without paying for the promotion, but if you live in an area where a show is happening, they still make it really easy for you to invite all the folks who live in that area. From the event page you just click "share," then "invite friends," then on the left side of the window that comes up, click where it says the name of your city. Then you'll see all those folks listed, at which point you "invite all" and finish.
- Encourage other folks in town to invite their friends on the Facebook Event page, too.
- If you or anyone you know is involved with community or activist groups oriented around issues that I've written a song about, share a specific song with them, and ask them if they wouldn't mind announcing to their local email list that I'll be doing a show and singing about the struggle they involved with. With most of my shows, folks are very welcome to make short announcements about upcoming local events -- cross-pollination is good for everybody.
- If there's a community radio program, whether it's a music program or a news/information show, call in and encourage them to mention that I'm doing a show in town coming up, give them the relevant information, and request that they play a song of mine. You could even suggest a specific song that's related to the subject of the show they're doing that day. Tell them that whether or not they have my CDs in their library, they can find most of my songs for free download on Soundcloud and elsewhere.

Appendix C: Advice from a Protest Singer on Protesting

Many, many people are hitting the streets lately in the United States. For most of them, my guess is they're doing it for the first time. I say this because every time I go to a major protest, I ask lots of random people if they have been to many other such protests. Most people, young and old, tell me this is their first one.

Since the recent upsurge in protest activity, a lot of long-time activist types have been writing helpful things about what kind of movement we need, and which way forward. Other people have been writing distinctly unhelpful things. And then whether their perspective is helpful or not, it can easily run the risk of seeming patronizing.

Those of us who have been involved with different social movements for a long time who have learned anything from the experience probably have a universal desire not to see mistakes we have made many times before get repeated again. Of course we know that many of these mistakes will be made again, and to no small extent we are now watching that happen -- and we're preaching condescendingly about it in some cases, or participating more usefully in ongoing developments in other cases (or some of both).

I do have a lot of opinions on what kind of movement we need to take on Trump and his cabinet of xenophobes, racists, and former Goldman Sachs employees. Namely, the same kind of movement we would have needed to take on the last cabinet full of former Goldman Sachs employees. The kind of movement that has brought governments and corporations to their knees in the past -- big, inclusive, militant, with lots of very frequent bouts of mass civil disobedience, which can take different forms at different points in history and in different societies.

But as a professional performer who specializes in singing at protest rallies for the past 25 years or so, I feel like the most useful thing for me to focus on in terms of any advice involves the nitty gritty -- the logistics of pulling off that oft-maligned aspect of pretty much all social movements known as the protest rally or demonstration.

I'll be the first to say that effective movements always involve a lot more than just holding rallies in some public square for an afternoon and then everybody goes home. If such rallies are all that a movement involves, you can be sure it won't go anywhere.

But as a part of a broader social movement, the spectacle of the protest rally can play an important role in movement-building, if it's done right. If not done right, it can have exactly the opposite effect, and play an important role in movement-killing. In the interest of building the movement rather than killing it, I offer the following thoughts.

First a question: in the act of holding a protest rally, exactly what are we trying to achieve? And then the obvious followup: how do we achieve that?

Well, there may be many things we're trying to achieve through having a protest rally -- and some of them may be at cross-currents with each other. We often must prioritize one thing over another.

For example, one goal may be to have a really big demo. Another may be to use the occasion to educate the public about the issues at hand. Another may be to make sure we have an occasion where someone from every organization that came together to make the rally happen gets a chance to address

the crowd.

While these are all sensible goals, they all risk losing the forest for the trees. It seems to me that the over-riding goal of this particular, small element of a social movement -- the protest rally -- should be to build the movement.

So the real question is, out of all the different strategies a social movement can employ to build itself, what role can a protest rally play in that?

My answer: it can foster a sense of community -- and with that, a sense of optimism. Optimism is the oxygen of social movements (and perhaps, to extend the metaphor, repression is the nitrogen). A social movement that is inclusive rather than cliquish, inspirational rather than preachy -- a movement with a culture, rather than an ad hoc collection of otherwise unrelated organizations coming together for a little while.

Most people attending the rally are already familiar with the situation. They don't need more people to tell them about it. That's depressing. They want people to talk about what plans they have for the near future in terms of future actions, protests, acts of civil disobedience, strikes, whatever is coming up.

Different people and organizations involved with the protest can find lots of ways of identifying themselves and their groups aside from taking up time on the stage telling us about their organizations. We need a movement that sees beyond that, and demonstrates this vision in many ways, including on the stages at the rallies, by prioritizing movement-building over station identification.

If movement-building requires optimism, and optimism requires a sense of inclusive community, then culture is the appropriate medium for the message. This can include really good speeches -- as long as the speakers are well aware that what they are doing, fundamentally, is theatrical in nature.

But it is music, poetry, skits, street theater, public art, giant puppets, marching bands that produce the oxygen at a rally.

These things don't all have to be political, but as long as the quality is there, it's usually better to prioritize politically relevant performers over performers who may be professional, or perhaps even really famous, but who don't have a powerful message that is related to the situation at hand.

The artists, musicians, comedians, actors, etc., are out there in huge numbers, all around you. If you don't know where to find them, where to connect with them, how to involve them in the rally you're organizing, then find out. Don't give up -- just go outside of your normal social circles and look in that cultural sphere. They'll be excited once you meet them -- they're already looking for you. They just don't know where to look for a protest organizer any more than you know where to find a horn player.

A bonus of protest organizers becoming well-connected with the cultural spheres is that stage hands know how to set up stages, musicians often know people who own sound systems, and they can teach you good microphone technique, which is essential for any speaker who wants to be taken seriously (and be heard).

In order to make this work well (that is, work), you need to think about things like whether you need to hire a sound company to run the stage (which obviously requires a budget of some kind), or whether this is something people with bits of equipment can cobble together themselves. If you're expecting

crowds in the thousands, you'll definitely need to have a budget of at least a few hundred dollars to hire a sound company. If you're organizing something smaller than that, you may be able to easily cultivate the connections within the music scene that come with sound equipment.

In terms of attracting this kind of talent to your protests, you should know that what the artists who can make the protest an inspiring, worthwhile occasion want from you is to be taken seriously. That's all, really. Taking an artist seriously means understanding that they have needs in this situation. They need a sound system that is adequate for whatever they're doing -- which can vary wildly depending on whether we're talking about a 10-piece band or a singer with a guitar -- and they need an audience. So don't put the band on before the rally starts or after it ends. Put them on during the rally. Ideally with great frequency, and for long periods of time.

Keep your rally short. Leave them wanting more. This is theater, and all performers know these maxims. You need to, too. Two hours is a good maximum. Even that is long. All rallies, in my humble opinion, should be mostly music and other forms of culture, in terms of what happens on the stage. This is doubly true of any rally that's longer than two hours. If you're doing something like that, then you should look at it more as a festival than a rally. Which, really, is equally appropriate for the shorter rallies, as well.

If a rally is really good, well-timed, well-executed, and mostly cultural in nature, it shouldn't lose people as it goes. It may even grow in size as it goes on. This is a sign that there is an energy being created by the confluence of successful factors you have brought together that day. The kind of energy that makes people want more, want to come back.

If you are losing lots of people as the rally is going, you need to face the reality that you have failed to organize a good rally. You need to ask yourself what went wrong -- because, to be sure, something did. If you lost half the crowd over the course of your two-hour rally, something went very wrong.

Maybe people in the back couldn't hear anything because the sound system was too small. Maybe the speakers were preachy. Maybe there were too many speakers. Maybe they didn't know how to use microphones and couldn't be heard, even though the sound system was adequate. Maybe they were reading their speeches from pieces of paper that they couldn't see very well. Maybe there was barely any music, or the music that you had wasn't any good, or lacked sufficient mass appeal. Maybe you were focusing too much on letting everybody say something, rather than focusing on how the overall rally should flow.

I have attended a few rallies like that very recently, in the interest of full disclosure, which is really what inspired me to write this, as a form of self-therapy. I feel a little better now. If anybody reads this, shares it with their friends and tells me they found something useful in it, I will feel even more better.

Appendix D: A Penny A Play Campaign

As far as I can tell there is no campaign happening anywhere in the US right now to drastically increase internet royalties for musicians. But it seems to me that the future of independent musicians (and perhaps the music industry in general, not that I give a shit) may very well depend on such a law being passed.

A law, you say? Yeah. The good kind -- one that a mass movement forces to get passed. It'd be very unlikely to happen otherwise, unless we had, like, a democracy or something. A law that says all online streaming services that are making money from advertising or subscriptions must pay at least one cent per song streamed, which would go to the artist or whoever holds the rights to the song.

OK, backing up slightly, it is laws that determine how much law-abiding streaming services such as Spotify or Google Play must pay artists for the use of their music. According to a recent article in Fortune magazine I just read, they basically have to pay the artist a little more than one-tenth of a cent per song streamed. And according to an article I read elsewhere, Spotify pays about what they legally must, and no more. Other services, like Google Play, pay much better -- seven-tenths of a cent per song streamed.

The problem is, it's still shit.

Why a penny? It's a good, round number, for one thing. It serves, I think, to highlight just how little musicians make from their music, when people discover that we're paid much less than a penny by streaming services today. My hope would be that it could become a meme as much as an organizing campaign, that works its way into everyday consciousness, like the \$15 minimum wage campaign, or the successful farmworker campaign a while back to make companies like Campbell's Soup pay one penny per pound more for tomatoes in order to allow the farmworkers that harvest them to make a living wage.

But also, it would make a huge practical difference in the lives of countless musicians in the world. I don't know how typical I am as an independent musician, but I can certainly say for me that it would make the difference between streaming royalties being financially significant for me and my family, as opposed to more something of a joke. Approximately the difference between \$120 as it is now, and something closer to \$800 if Spotify and the rest paid a penny per play. (And I'm not saying that \$120 as a number is a joke, but compared to the \$1,000+ per month in CD sales that streaming services have now replaced, it is.)

Why not just get more famous and solve your problem that way? In another article I read today, a mathematician calculated that in order for an artist to make the minimum wage solely through Spotify royalties, that artist would need to get 1.5 million plays per month. There are only so many people out there, even in the English-speaking world. The \$120 or so I get each month from the streaming services represents tens of thousands of plays each month, if I'm doing the math right. That seems like a significant number to me.

The pie is only so big. Only so many people are going to become pop stars, or become YouTube sensations with some outrageously viral video. In our celebrity-obsessed culture we can all feel terribly inadequate for not having millions of views on YouTube. And perhaps the "penny a play" formula should be adjusted for those who get more than a million plays per month, if that makes the math work

a lot better in one way or another. My concern are all of us who get a lot less than a million plays a month -- the 99% (or probably much more than that) of working musicians.

Technology is changing fast -- whole professions become obsolete overnight, or suddenly the bottom drops out of one. Like CD sales being replaced by streaming internet services. Of course, in between there was the "anything goes" period of sharing music, or stealing music, or both, or neither, depending on how you look at it. I gave away all my music, and why not? I never got on the radio to speak of, and here was a new way to get my music out there in a big way -- and perhaps undermine the broken music industry at the same time.

But now people mostly are getting their music from streaming services. I don't know how they'd have to adjust their business model if they were required to pay a penny a play to artists, but I'm pretty sure the consequences for the music consumers out there would ultimately be fairly minimal. (Especially if those who get more than a million plays a month continue to get much less than a penny per play.)

What saddens me is that there does not appear to be a campaign like this already in existence. Am I just a dreamer who needs to come back to his senses? Is what I'm proposing so impractical? If not, then why isn't such a campaign already happening, led by, say, the national branch of the American Federation of Musicians?

Maybe folks running the union just haven't thought of such a campaign yet, but it seems to me the explanation might be the same kind of reason why what's left of the labor movement has been so slow to embrace service workers and the \$15 an hour campaign. When I get the monthly AFM magazine, I get the impression that the musicians that matter to AFM are the ones that draw a steady paycheck -- symphony musicians working for film studios and whatnot.

And to be clear, I have no ill will towards either pop stars or symphony musicians. Some of my best friends and favorite cousins are symphony musicians. But any self-respecting union of musicians needs to represent the vast majority of working musicians, who would be affected by royalties paid by Spotify far more than they are affected by the local symphony's union contract.

As with the \$15 campaign, a campaign like this wouldn't be the sort of thing where the union would get more dues-paying members out of it, necessarily. But it would be huge for the actual musicians out there.

Whether such a campaign happens or not, and whoever leads it, it won't be me. But here's to the concept, anyway. Feedback, particularly from other working musicians, most welcome.