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Panayotis League

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Article abstract

Michael League (Snarky Puppy), here interviewed by Panayotis League, offers a frank assessment of the new economic realities for working musicians. He notes that even before the pandemic, digital streaming services such as Spotify had all but eliminated recordings as an income source for musicians. COVID-19 has now decimated their other primary revenue stream: live shows.

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From the Ground Up, Again: An Interview with Michael League

Panayotis League

On May 3, 2020, I spoke with my brother Michael—leader of the jazz fusion collective Snarky Puppy and founder of GroundUp Music—as he sheltered in place with his partner in Cádiz, Spain. Our conversation focused on how the already precarious economic situation of improvising musicians vis-à-vis the recording industry has been exacerbated by the pandemic, and some of the strategies GroundUp is employing in order to find both short and longer-term solutions to this new crisis. The transcript has been edited for length and thematic continuity. All monetary amounts refer to USD.

Panayotis League (PL): How would you characterize your and your colleagues' situation right now?

Michael League (ML): Even though Snarky Puppy has been relatively successful, we're living hand to mouth. For audiences, services like Spotify and Apple Music have been the best Christmas present ever, but for artists, they're a poorly administered band-aid. Since the Napster revolution, artists in my scene have largely been relying on live performance to fund their livelihoods, because gigging is pay-for-play, it's labour. Songwriters and pop producers make residual income, but most of us aren't writing on a scale where royalties are going to be significant. Now that live performance has paused globally, there are varying degrees of concern and worry and stress and optimism and pessimism. Some people expect things to be cool in the fall; there are others, like me, who don't expect to be touring like we used to for another three to five years. That's not to say that at some point soon we won't be playing two thousand seat clubs where they only let in four hundred people, but the problem is that for a large group like ours, the economics don't make sense. Snarky Puppy sells between one thousand and three thousand tickets per show, so we can't play for four hundred people without firing half the staff, spending a third of what we normally do on hotels, and so on. So I'm trying to find new initiatives that could make some money for musicians—real money, not Spotify money. I have to think about the livelihoods of forty-five different people.

PL: So, what are you working on in order to address that?

ML: For one, we started a live masterclass-via-videoconference series, of which we've now done thirty; those will likely continue after quarantine because people have been loving them. It started as just the guys in the band doing workshops, and now we're pairing one of our guys with an outside musician, like Victor Wooten, Laura Mvula, David Crosby, Lianne LaHavas, and Wayne Krantz. The idea was to involve other artists to get them paid and bring their fans to us. It was very low maintenance because the platform, Crowdcast, was already there. So that's a short-term solution to get our musicians and crew paid. Participants donate on a sliding scale of one to a hundred dollars, and clinicians have been making between three hundred to four thousand dollars per session.

PL: I'm sure that's welcome, even if, on the lower end, it doesn't compete with what they're used to getting on gigs at this point.

ML: Well, for the first ten years of Snarky Puppy, we were making, literally, almost nothing. And I think the guys in the band would be happy going back to a lower salary in order to keep their families fed. I'm committed to paying my musicians the absolute maximum that I can in order for the business to stay solvent. But the reality is that most likely we'll be playing for fewer people

because of venue rules, and therefore making less money, so we have to invest more in digital platforms.

PL: YouTube was the thing that drew attention to Snarky Puppy, particularly the live recording videos with a live audience. How do you think that relates to moving forward?

ML: Visual media being spread through social media is what made us profitable, period. It's always been the largest part of our marketing strategy. But there is a conflict for me personally; I love to create digital media on a project basis—films and visually-based artistic works—but not really the marketing. We had a big record planned for next year that was going to be filmed all over the world, and now we're playing that by ear, of course . . . I personally would like to combine multiple forms of media in one place in order to give people different options in terms of interacting with us, and that's the kind of platform I'm working on creating right now.

PL: Are there any specific inequities in the business that you think have been exacerbated by the current situation, and do you have any ideas or hunches about what a more equitable recovery strategy might look like—especially considering that musicians themselves subscribe to the services that are screwing them over?

ML: Absolutely. I don't think that Spotify is taking advantage of musicians any more right now than they were when they started, but it's magnified because we have no non-digital way of making money. Our two main sources of income are music sales and ticket sales. Music sales have been gone for a while, and now live shows are gone, so it's just that much more obvious that what we're being paid is unfair. The first thing I'd say is that ten dollars a month is just not enough for someone to pay to have access to the entire history of recorded music. I love that people who aren't wealthy have access, but the bottom line is that music costs money to make. I wouldn't be so upset at streaming services if they paid for my records to be made. I mean, record companies have been writing unfair contracts forever—but they paid for those records to be made. So if Atlantic pays seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars for Led Zeppelin to make a record, and Zeppelin makes a profit of a hundred thousand dollars while the label makes ten million dollars, OK, that's not particularly fair, but at least the band didn't lose money on it. Now that the inequity of the system is magnified by live touring disappearing, it would be a really wonderful time for artists to stand up and say: "This is our only form of income right now, so you need to pay us more, and if you have to, raise the price"—rather than just doing what Spotify did, which is allowing listeners to donate directly to artists through the service. Why not just pay a lump sum to your artists rather than asking your listeners, who are already paying to subscribe, to make donations? It's insulting.

PL: Would you take all your records off Spotify to make a point?

ML: I left our best-selling record off streaming for years when the rights came back to us, and we still sold seventeen times more copies of that record than any other one. But long-term it makes more sense to just reach more people, because they're going to buy your t-shirts, come to your gigs, and be lifetime fans who will continue to support you forever. So eventually I just caved, because quite frankly, the war is over, and we lost. I don't see a point. Spotify is the law of the land. If you don't put your thing up there, you're invisible. It's gathered too much momentum and is too ubiquitous for a little indie artist to fight it. And even if Kanye and Taylor Swift and Drake all got together and tried to pull their music, they'd fail. They'd have to get their labels to do that, and their labels are shareholders in the streaming services.

PL: Do you see any real opportunities to change the inequitable power relations between

individual artists and the brokers who run the streaming services and major labels?

ML: No. You could organize a general strike, but the problem is that musicians don't own the licenses to their masters and, since the labels are shareholders, the streaming services are making them money twice over. There's no incentive for the people at the top to change anything. I think the more realistic solution would be that those streaming companies, out of the kindness of their hearts, raise the amount that they pay musicians. Right now, we get three tenths of a cent per play, so you make about three dollars every thousand plays. That means I need seven thousand people to listen on Spotify in order to make the twenty dollars that one person pays for my CD at a show. Those companies know that artists are always going to make music no matter what, so the system is working perfectly. The people who want music are getting music, the companies who are all about making money are making their money, the general public is getting the deal of the century—it's a perfect system for everyone but the serfs in the feudal structure: the artists.

PL: Finally, with all that in mind, what do you say to young musicians who are just starting out, who are staring into this blank space of a future that's even less predictable than it always has been?

ML: Figure out what you have that people will pay money for and work your ass off on it. The upside of digital consumption is that you don't need a booking agent, manager, or publicist: all you need is a product, PayPal, and a Wi-Fi connection. So, work on your art, and figure out how to get it out there. There's no other way.