NEWMUSICBOX

WRITTEN BY
Alex Shapiro

JAN 27, 2010

ARTICLES

SHARE THIS

The Economy of Exposure: Publicity as Payment?

Few things are more valuable to the careers of composers and performers than the sonic proof of our inspiration's existence. We spend a great deal of time and money producing high quality recordings of our music. We must. They are our artistic legacy, and our best promotional tool. Yet in this digital age, these recordings, regardless of how precious they are to us or how much we've invested in musicians, engineers, and studio time to create them, are no longer especially financially remunerative. The millionth copy is virtually identical to the master file, and as either physical objects, or endlessly duplicable audio tracks, these recordings have little intrinsic worth.

But there does exist something uniquely valuable and not reproducible: the artists themselves. This is particularly true for any performer, because nothing can duplicate the experience of a live concert: feeling the sound waves travel though physical air to your body, seeing the interplay between the musicians, and watching beads of sweat flung sensuously off the brow of a beautiful performer while hoping she'll have an unexpected wardrobe malfunction and bare all at the height of the cadenza's crescendo. Oh yes, live concerts are unrivaled. But this uniqueness is also the case for those of us who are not performers, because we can find ways to interact with our fans and clients, offering a value-added aspect to what we do (usually with our clothes on). If something can't be digitized and widely distributed, it remains special. That, in turn, is worth far more than an iTunes download or a (soon to be obsolete) CD.

The New Sonic Paradigm

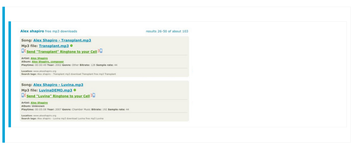
This is an era in which artists must evaluate each of their creations with a heightened awareness of how the public will experience it. Years ago we listened to scratchy LPs, much of the time hearing Side A in its entirety and, after expending some physical effort to put down the beer and walk across the room to flip the record, then enjoying Side B. Recording standards were not examined under today's digital microscope, and the order of tracks mattered a great deal as they took the listener on a carefully planned journey. Today's journey through individual digital files is as likely to take listeners from our track to the second movement of a Brahms trio to the beginning of some West African drumming, until they suddenly click over to U2's latest hit. And like it or not, unless we're doing a low-fidelity bedroom podcast for raw promotional purposes, our track needs to sound as well mixed and mastered as U2's, in this new world of instant comparative listening.

Along with the expectation of higher production values, the way people hear has also been significantly affected by the way they see what they're hearing. Most of us spend many hours peering at video monitors stimulating our eyes with brightly lit content from computers, mobile devices, and televisions. Audience's brains have been trained to expect something to see, and music artists know that pairing their work with video may not only enhance live performances, but will give them further exposure on YouTube and social networking platforms that will in turn broaden their concert attendance.

Is It Theft or Promotion?

On one hand, technology has given artists welcome control over their product and their careers. On the other hand, it has taken much of the control away and granted it to the user. One gain *and* loss of control is over the distribution of our work. We have the tools to bring anything we do to anyone within reach of a computer. Conversely, anyone within reach of a computer can choose to make a digital copy of our work—including that for which we expect to be paid— and upload it to a server from which an endless parade of visitors can choose to download our music for free.

There is no preventing digital piracy if the culprits are ripping tracks off of commercially released discs. But one way to thwart theft and wrest at least some control over the free distribution of our work, is that when we are the ones posting our music to our website, blog, and social networking presences, we are best protected if we only upload lower quality MP3 excerpts of our pieces, rather than full-length, uncompressed tracks. Sure, these short clips of our music will show up on many free MP3 download sites hosted on servers around the world. But the people grabbing the illegal downloads will be disappointed once they hear what they've got, since just as the music gets interesting, it fades out. Other download sites simply link back to the artist's own server, in which case they act as a free promotional tool, since the artist posted the files themselves with the expectation of people hearing them.



If someone is determined to download music for free, they will find a way. They cannot be stopped. Complaining to the owners of the illegal sites, or placing an anti-theft notice on ours (apart from a general copyright indication) will rarely get us anywhere, as the perpetrators are unlikely to respond with cookies and a friendly apology. This is illegal behavior that we simply cannot control. It is global and currently not policeable. But in the spirit of making lemonade out of lemons, there is much we can do to exploit the very act of being exploited, and can in fact benefit by taking an entrepreneurial attitude.

The Economy of Exposure

We've entered an entirely new paradigm, in which it is not only money but distribution that is the payment which leads to...money. I've coined this phenomenon "the economy of exposure." I've come to view freebies—be they my own offerings or, more often, the unintentional ones taken from my server or others and proffered by the gazillions of MP3 download sites out there—as promotion. I treat these instances of unexpected charity as part of my advertising expenses. Department stores have what they refer to as "loss leaders": items that they sell at cost or less, in order to get shoppers in the door and, usually, buying other things as well. Since I receive my commissions from the act of people hearing my music, I need the advertising! All it takes is someone hearing a few clips of my work and loving it, to lead to them giving me thousands of dollars to compose a new piece. If they hear my music via an illegal site, it ultimately doesn't matter if I can then say a new commission was the end result. Two of my most recent five-figure commissions have come from the web, out of the blue through my MySpace page, from people who had never met me nor bought a CD of my music. I posted only excerpts of my work, but I posted them in as many places as I could, where people could hear them free of charge. The response has been as effective for me as any promotional campaign.

A sense of perspective is important. In the concert music world, the uncomfortable concept of file sharing is easier to absorb because our sales numbers are so much smaller than those common in the commercial pop music realm. I would not be as relaxed in my attitude were I making my living in that field. But in my case as a composer in a genre that, optimistically, represents three percent of the market, I just can't tremble at the thought of people...uh, all eleven of them... stealing my music for contrabass flute or bassoon duo. Nonetheless, I sell my music aggressively on my own sites and through many distributors and record companies, and almost never give anything away, so if something slips through the cracks in my happy little micro-cache of music that the vast majority of the population doesn't care about to begin with, well then, perhaps that will do me some good and create some new fans who are then willing to pay for more. The economy of exposure, without the wardrobe malfunction!

Speaking as a composer, publisher, and owner of many copyrights, let me be clear: the fact that the world's new digital paradigm often results in unauthorized uses of intellectual property does not mean that those uses are acceptable. They are a symptom of a problem that needs fixing. Just like electricians, teachers, and attorneys, artists must be paid for their professional efforts; their copyrights must be honored. Likewise, just because we now have the tools to engage in a manner of digital bartering whereby we benefit from viral networking, in no way does that negate the importance of also being paid real money for the real work we do. I view the two aspects of payment as working seamlessly with each other, not against each other.

I am keenly aware of the new world in which we operate, and believe that every artist should be encouraged to examine this rapidly evolving frontier of art, commerce, and technology, and their place in such an unfamiliar landscape. To best protect ourselves we must absorb the truths of how things are, and not allow our thinking to be clouded by how we think things should be. If we do not view a problem from all possible angles—including those that uncomfortably contort our beliefs—then we only do ourselves a disservice.

Mash-Ups and Downs

The work of a remix artist from Israel named **Kutiman** offers a fascinating example for this "economy of exposure" concept. Kutiman chooses videos others have uploaded onto YouTube and creates **new pieces of art** with them. Juxtaposing the offerings of music-makers around the world who have neither met nor tuned their instruments together, he makes an additive recipe that can be quite compelling in its unexpected grace. It's interesting to use one of Kutiman's videos titled "**I'm New**" as an example of the new digital paradigm, because it blurs the contextual distinction between the amateur and the professional, and deeply challenges our assumptions of copyright.

Kutiman's video mash-ups are filled with fresh faces, open to the world, wanting very much to share their talent and appearing eager to please. Just like me, on my MyFace and SpaceBook pages. Except in this case, probably also a bit unlike me: I'll assume for the sake of argument that most of these art-makers do not make a living from their art. At least, not yet. Some may in the near future, while others...well...probably not. Regardless of professional aspirations, however, they each took the initiative to post their videos and share something that mattered to them with complete strangers. But they did not have a proactive hand in ending up as part of Kutiman's art. He happened upon them, and happened to them.

And by happening to them with a multimedia vehicle that viewers enjoy (his video mash-ups, which are as much about the visuals as they are about the music he derives from these sources), and most significantly, by including links to each one of these amateurs' YouTube pages, Kutiman set the laws of viral marketing in motion for them all.

Take one person in the credits: Elexis Trinity. She has gone from being relatively unknown to having almost 70,000 YouTube views of her video, and over 200 very encouraging and complimentary comments posted underneath it. By the time you finish reading this sentence, those numbers will be even greater. (As of April 2016, that number has indeed increased, to nearly 1.5 million views.) Not only is this an inspiring example of how the web works at its best, but if Ms. Trinity can figure out how to use this platform to interact with her new fans, and if she devotes the necessary effort to following up on this unexpected break, paying opportunities may very well arise for her if that's what she seeks.

In the view of copyright, Kutiman is using material he does not own, using it without explicit permission, and using it without paying for it. Instead, he offers his human source material the carrot of 15 seconds of e-fame. I am assuming that he is not making money directly from these creations (I see no ads), but that premise is a slippery slope, if indeed exposure is the new economy. Just as his work provides his sources a springboard from the dry land of anonymity into the inviting pool of recognition, so it provides for him, as well.

Kutiman makes it clear on his site that should anyone ever request to be removed from his artwork, he would oblige (no doubt, while gritting his teeth and thinking of all the work he will have to do to fill the slot with another suitable video in order to preserve the creation). His site includes a disclaimer that reads:

> "THROUGH-YOU IS A VENUE FOR MUSIC AND ART APPRECIATION. THE VIDEOS AND MUSIC IS [sic] SHARED OUT OF LOVE AND RESPECT, AND IS ONLY MEANT TO HELP EXPOSE AND PROMOTE THE FEATURED ARTISTS. IF YOU WISH TO REMOVE OR HAVE CONCERNS, QUESTIONS, THOUGHTS, OR IDEAS PLEASE EMAIL US."

So Kutiman's sources are tacitly agreeing to have their material used without remuneration. Some may not care one way or the other, because they're quite happy with their job as a dental technician, thank you very much. But surely, a few others may well see this as a potential big break that could launch a professional career.

The Freedom to Expose Yourself

It's easy to be conflicted about the attractiveness of viral marketing vs. the serious ramifications of unlawful use of copyrighted material. In this Kutiman mash-up scenario, no money is exchanging hands, but the artist is crediting his sources, giving them as much of a chance to be discovered as he gives himself. And yet in the eyes of the law, Kutiman is considered a digital thief. It can be argued, however, that Kutiman is operating on a traditional barter system of sorts: in exchange for the material, he pays with the currency of global exposure. This, I must tell you, can be powerful compensation even in the worst recession. As a professional composer with a noticeable web presence, I experience the positive reality of this kind of economy every single day. It works.

On one hand, when anyone tells an artist that doing something for free is an "opportunity," it smacks of the same insult as when a gigging musician is asked to play a wedding gratis and is baited with the "there will be some important people at the function who could be good for your career" line. Yech. Yet we all know that there is also some truth to this: 80 percent of success is just showing up, as Woody Allen is credited with saying. As for the other twenty percent? We'd like to think it's mainly talent, but it's probably...a lot of pure luck.

The point that many among us discussing the future of intellectual property and artists' livelihoods are making is that no longer is the specific creative product the thing with intrinsic worth, it is not. What is of worth is the buzz, the vibe, the doing of the art and the collecting of the fans who dig our doing of it. What is of worth is the person doing it. I can speak to all this directly: my web presence, which offers a good glimpse of my personality, is my largest portal of income. It makes me and my work available 24/7 to people around the world who broadcast, perform, and record my music, purchase my scores and CDs, and yes, commission me. I spend a fair amount of time speaking around the country and encouraging my peers to take a page from my e-book, because I believe in the power these new tools directly give artists.

So what am I doing to achieve this positive result? The exact same thing that the YouTube amateurs featured in Kutiman's videos have done: I posted material for the world to stumble upon. For free. In my case, excerpts of my music rather than entire tracks, but the upshot is the same. And just like the amateurs, I am ever hopeful that just maybe, someone will like me.

Amateurs and professionals are using the new tools the same way. Neither group needs to be vetted by PR agents or record company gatekeepers. Pro or non-pro, we have a similar probability of experiencing positive results. The difference, whether we are raw or honed at our craft, lies in the experience we are offering. But each one of us has the chance to find a unique fan base that resonates with what we do. This is why the **concept of net neutrality** and **an open and accessible internet** is so crucial to artists: equal access gives us complete access. It allows us to compete with anyone, be they an amateur, an indie artist, or a mega-company. I find this exciting and a very good thing for art in general. The more people who are able to create and share, the better for art. And the better for society's aesthetic health.

Taking and Giving Control

Many of us who are creators of music, visual art, writings, and other contributions to society create as professionals, with an eye to earning money from our efforts. In some cases, that money is the bulk of our income. We are deeply invested in the current system of ownership and remuneration because we either already benefit from it, or eagerly hope to. We believe that what we create has worth, and is worth others paying for in order to experience. The concept of copyright matters very much.

However, a static interpretation of copyright as it pertained to creators before the digital age is a vestige of a previous era in which the end result of our creation—and in this case, we are talking about recorded media—was unique. It is no longer unique. But take heart, and remember that there is something unique we offer: ourselves.

We may think that we're in the music-making business, but ultimately—if we intend to make money from our art—we are in the relationship-making business. This has been a truth since the first artist ever sought the first paying patron. Now this truth is under a bright spotlight, brought to the fore by the advent of digital media. Our recordings and videos are advertisements for us, because we are the product. The tail is wagging the dog. Take a moment and feel your brain squirm as it tries to process this. Then take a deep breath, and know that to be able to reach the world with a single click of a "send" or "upload" button is a very wonderful thing. And that yes, it can directly lead to real income.

Look around at the new technologies. Physical CDs, and perhaps books as well, will eventually become obsolete as internet speeds increase and connection points become ubiquitous, accessing media that easily streams. Landlines will soon be nonexistent because everyone will use cell phones. Laptops will become irrelevant because the cell phone/PDA/MP3 player device in your hand will do everything your computer can. Already, to many people email is quaint, because they're instantly sharing information on a mobile platform in 140-character increments via Twitter. And all of this just captures the trends of this moment. In another year or two these tools, too, will be quaint, replaced by new and different ones.

Copyright distinctions are blurred to the extreme because everything is published. Everything, from your cute kitty pix to your third symphony. And if it's floating out there in any digitized form, it is instantly obtainable by anyone in the world, 24/7, as fodder for his or her next mash-up or to be enjoyed, unaltered, by someone who's a pure fan of what you do. Everyone who participates in online media is living what I call "the published life." So it is our duty as artists to wake up to this not-so-new-anymore reality and use it to our advantage.

Rethinking Everything

Rather than delineate between delivery methods, perhaps we should force ourselves to think holistically about how information is shared. The money may no longer be found in having control of the owned information (i.e., a specific MP3 file), but instead be amassed through the exploitation and use of it (the posting of the MP3 to garner fans willing to pay for other things). How can we track individual usages for payments, when everything that's ever been recorded can be flung around the world from phone to phone? Zeroes and ones–the plasma of digital life–present challenges to piracy prevention because they are indistinguishable from each other: the binary digits that comprise a sweet .jpg of your grandmother are the same digits that comprise a stream of unlawfully obtained music. Copyright protection groups and performing rights organizations are avidly addressing this by developing watermarking techniques and tracking systems, but as of this date these are regrettably imperfect technologies with notable gaps in the swath of their reach. With a billion or more internet users around the planet, has the scale exceeded the capacities of our old system of protecting intellectual property? Rather than try to expand the scope of the same historic methods—created eons before anyone could say "file sharing"—might we need to entirely reconsider the way media is used, and how best to now remunerate content owners whose ball is in play on a vastly different field? And while doing so, might we also need to examine what the currency of the exchange really is?

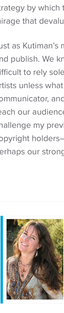
The web is where serendipity meets initiative, especially for copyright holders. Doing business in the digital age means being highly proactive about every opportunity because we now have the ability to be so, from the comfort of our desk in our pajamas. It is currently impossible to prevent the spread of digital files. Period. No matter what kind of copy protection can be applied, the next morning a brilliant 13-year-old will have devised a way around it. But we can aid and abet the spread of the buzz about our digital files. It stands to reason that the more popular a file is, the more fans its creator has gained— and that many of those fans will be inclined to participate in some financial way in the creator's future output.

If we want to succeed in the open market, we need to proceed with an open mind. I enjoy the succinct advice of Seth Godin, who appears to have a clear view into many businesses, including ours. In his essay, "**Music Lessons**," Seth observes, "You used to sell plastic and vinyl. Now, you can sell interactivity and souvenirs." That's right. It's the experience of what we create that compels people, not just what we create.

When we play through a piece of music, we don't focus on every 16th note in a measure, we express the sweep of the arcing phrase, and that can often be several measures long. The new paradigm of digital uses is not dissimilar. Unless the copyright infringement could result in a significant financial claim, rather than bolting off in a desperate chase after individual files, might it be wiser to adopt a broader perch perspective? We could consider what the digital-era worth of that file might be: an attractive phrase that draws in the listeners. The very thing we would like to be paid for is the very thing we give away in order to be paid for it. Becoming a successful music entrepreneur in this new era requires the same Escher-esque savvy that long has had restaurateurs giving away free hors d'oeuvres, liquor companies hosting free drink promotions at popular night spots, and perfume counters offering free dabs of their choicest scents from tester bottles. Can this become a viable strategy by which to exploit creative content? Or is this economy of exposure merely a mirage that devalues something we view as precious?

Just as Kutiman's mash-ups are art and publicity rolled into one, so is what any of us create and publish. We know that we can't buy groceries with publicity alone. But it is increasingly difficult to rely solely on the inherent worth of our art to generate income. We wouldn't be artists unless what we created was intensely important to us. But to be an artist is to be a communicator, and the tools of the 21st century have forever altered the way in which we reach our audiences. I'm compelled to keep asking myself uncomfortable questions that challenge my previous assumptions. Whether or not artists—a.k.a. content providers and copyright holders—are ready for it, the revolution is upon us. In the economy of exposure, perhaps our strongest currency is not our creations, but rather, we, the creators.

...



Composer Alex Shapiro aligns note after note with the hope that a few of them might sound good next to each other. Through her website, her MySpace and Facebook pages, and her blog, she experiences the rewarding results from the advice she shares. In early 2007 she moved from Los Angeles to live amidst nature on remote San Juan Island off the coast of Washington State, and thanks to the internet, her musical life has never been busier. Alex currently serves on the board of directors of the American Music Center.

You might also like ...

EVENT

An Urban Archive as an English Garden

EVENT

Queens Jazz Orchestra: "Bird Flight" Honoring Phil Schaap and The Genius of Charlie Parker

EVENT

I Give You My Home: The Rose Standish Nichols Story

EVENT

Eunbi Kim in Residence: It Feels Like

Looking for more content like this?

SUBSCRIBE

Support Our Work

New Music USA is the leading national resource for the whole new music community.

DONATE

Subscribe to our newsletter and never miss a beat!

Name | Email | Zip | SUBSCRIBE

New Music USA
116 John Street, #908
New York, NY 10038
EMAIL US

About Contact Staff

© 2021 New Music USA. All rights reserved. TOS/Privacy Statement