

YouTube, Freedom, and the Modern Musician

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“We’re not rock stars, and there’s no corporate machine hiding behind the curtain.”

– Lauren O’Connell, independent musician, 22 years old

For as long back as many living generations can remember, being a successful musician for any audience besides your family and close friends was a very exclusive occupation. The domination of corporate recording labels meant that music-making was never more than a spare-time hobby for virtually anyone but the select few those corporations had decided would make them large mountains of money. This profitability alone made them worth having their music recorded and distributed. Despite the obvious problems with this model from the perspectives of both musicians and audiences, it was sustained because the price of the tools for recording and distributing music was prohibitively high for anyone but those large companies.

But in the last couple of decades, with the rise of personal computers, affordable recording tools, and the participatory Internet, the ability to record and distribute music has become available to anyone with access to those much-more-affordable technologies. YouTube and the independent musicians that have taken great advantage of the distribution tools it provides are particularly strong examples of this trend back toward worth being decided not by corporations but by the people. Right now, 2011, is a ripe time for independent media creation, distribution, and consumption. Surveys, statistics, and common sense show that most musicians and audience members have benefitted from this shift in distribution control and would like it to stick around (Madden, 2004), while the old and ever-powerful media corporations have been hurt by this trend, at least in the short term (Moore, 2011), and therefore would like to get that control back as quickly as possible. Essential to understanding these changes is seeing how audiences,

musicians, and corporations each have reacted to them, and so in this paper each group has been examined to give the reader an idea of how they each feel. Of particular focus are independent YouTube musicians, who I feel are the very embodiment of this paradigm shift.

The world of music distribution has quickly developed in the past half-decade since the advent of YouTube and Web 2.0 into a world very different from the ones our grandparents, parents, older siblings, and younger selves knew. Even in the few years since it began, it has become very evident that this shift in distribution control has been very beneficial not just to musicians and audiences but to society as a whole. Digital culture scholar Henry Jenkins (2006) describes the shift in its historical context:

If, as some have argued, the emergence of modern mass media spelled doom for the vital folk culture traditions that thrived in nineteenth-century America, the current movement of media change is reaffirming the right of everyday people to actively contribute to their culture. Like the older folk culture of quilting bees and barn dances, this new vernacular culture encourages broad participation, grassroots creativity, and a bartering or gift economy. This is what happens when consumers take media into their own hands. (p. 136)

These folk culture traditions, a foreign concept to our parents and our pre-Web younger selves, have played a prominent role in most of human history. And for good reason. Jenkins writes, “To create is much more fun and meaningful if you can share what you can create with others” (p. 140), and that’s certainly true. But more importantly, this freedom of creation and distribution is essential for a strong and healthy culture. To our corporate-trained sensibilities that value professionalism and polish above all else, the idea that just any old Joe can make and distribute an “amateur” work seems somehow distasteful. Why would we want the work of an amateur,

with no guarantees in quality, when we can have something made by the experienced corporations, who clearly know what they're doing? But Jenkins argues such hit-and-miss amateur work that isn't a bad thing by any means:

Most of what amateurs create is gosh-awful bad, yet a thriving culture needs spaces where people can do bad art, get feedback, and get better. . . . Some of what amateurs create will be surprisingly good . . . Much of it will be good enough to engage the interest of some modest public, to inspire someone else to create, to provide new content which, when polished through many hands, may turn into something more valuable down the line. (p. 140-141)

This is the kind of mentality with which open-source software is developed, and any user of Mozilla Firefox or Ubuntu Linux can attest that it doesn't take a multimillion-dollar corporation to make a high-quality product—it just takes dedicated, knowledgeable people willing to give time and effort in collaboration with like-minded fellow humans. Music—indeed, any expressive art form or medium—is no different. The best things in the world can only be made through collaboration, by working with others in the present or building upon what's been done by those who came before. This is the very basis on which human civilization is based—large groups of people coming together through barriers of time and space to achieve what individuals or small groups alone could not. And so to allow creators to freely create, to collaborate, and to build upon what has come before is essential to allow cultures and societies to flourish and grow. To stifle creation and sharing is to stifle the very progress of human civilization.



Independent Musician: Lauren O’Connell

Lauren O’Connell (2010) performs “Maybe True Stories”, a song she also wrote.

Lauren O’Connell, a 22-year-old self-made musician from Rochester, NY, accidentally launched her music career in 2007 when she and high school musical friend Julia Nunes started putting self-recordings on YouTube to share with each other and other friends while off at college. “We didn’t want to put them on Facebook where like everyone we went to high school with was checkin’ ‘em out, so we made YouTube accounts, because *nobody* looks at music on YouTube, right?” (Mues, 2011). Lauren and Julia unintentionally caught the front-end of the YouTube music wave, and within a few months they had a very loyal following of fans they’d never met and had imagined would bother listening to and watching them perform.



Lauren O'Connell talks about her experience as an independent musician in an interview at Loudville Studio (2011).



Music has been an essential part of human civilization since its beginnings. Scholars like William Benzon (2001) and Steven Mithen (2007) argue that music has played an essential role in the development of human society from its evolutionary beginnings. Music developed alongside language, they argue, and possibly even before it, and appreciation of it is a universal human feature. Compared to societies throughout history, says Mithen, “the modern-day West is quite unusual in having significant numbers of people who do not actively participate and may even claim to be unmusical” (p. 1). Benzon describes music as “a medium through which individual brains are coupled together in a shared activity” (p. 23). It brings people together by

literally and figuratively bringing their thoughts and actions into sync, if only for the duration of a song. On both a practical, immediate level and a more abstract, metaphysical level, the continued proliferation of music helps to ensure that a society's people stay happy and healthy. This is as true today as it was in the days when we lived in caves and hunted with sticks.

Although I don't play a formal musical instrument and have never sung in a choir or a musical play, and I could hardly consider myself up-to-date on musical trends, I'd never pretend that music isn't an essential part of my life as a human being. I listen to it alone while I study and while I relax; I listen to it with friends or I listen to both talented and not-so-talented friends sing and play instruments; I sing in the shower and when I don't think anyone is around; I experience music by itself or as a part of works in mediums like movies and video games. Music is not some exclusive activity meant to be practiced by only an elite few. It is an act of the people, all people, both as individuals and as groups. It is not a privilege to be a music-maker, to be bestowed upon a lucky few by corporate gate-keepers, but a basic human necessity. And so to have access to the work of those among us with the most musical talent, with the most practice, and with which we connection or affinity (which can manifest itself, for example, in preference for certain genres or subject matter) is invaluable because it enhances our own musical lives and therefore our mental and physical health.

In the United States up to and during the 19th century, music-making was much as it had been in most societies for most of history: a community endeavor, with individuals and groups readily performing and writing music without any expectations of individual credit or monetary compensation. Jenkins (2006) paints a picture of free creation and sharing in nineteenth-century America:

Cultural production occurred mostly on the grassroots level; creative skills and artistic

traditions were passed down mother to daughter, father to son. Stories and songs circulated broadly, well beyond their point of origin, with little or no expectation of economic compensation; many of the best ballads or folktales come to us today with no clear marks of individual authorship. (p. 139)

Practical recording, playback, and transmission technologies did not yet exist, and so music was only ever performed and heard live. A widespread audience only heard a song you made up if it was repeated by those who heard it, and then repeated by those who'd heard the repeaters. You didn't expect any kind of kickback from that; just like your fellow citizens, you were simply contributing something valuable to present and future society in the same way that those before you had contributed to yours.



Lauren O'Connell (2010) performs her interpretation of traditional Appalachian folk song "O Death", the original creators of which are unknown.

But in the mid 20th century, things started to change. People discovered that distributing music through new electronic mediums like the radio and vinyl records could be very profitable. People wanted to hear music, and they wanted to be able to hear it in their living rooms and

bedrooms instead of having to go to a concert hall or learn how to play an instrument themselves. Because the technologies were so new, creating and distributing musical recordings with them was a great expense, only affordable by already-large companies with profits coming in from other industries. These companies could afford these tools, and so musicians had to come to them or be discovered by them in order to have their music distributed to any kind of a non-live audience. It's simply the way things were.

Unfortunately, the companies who controlled those technologies all also had the same goal: to make as much money as possible as quickly as possible. In order to maximize profits, the music industry was built to make big hits and to market them to as wide a variety of people as possible. Niche genres that held interest for only small parts of the consumer population weren't profitable, and so record companies neglected them. And once the companies started making money, they had more of it to spread around to assure their control over all electronic music distribution channels. For instance, starting in the late 1970's American record companies would semi-illegally pay thousands of dollars to radio stations to have them play the company's newest release as one of the supposed "Top 40" most popular in the country, regardless of whether it actually fit that definition or not (Dannen, 1991). As a result, any musician that didn't have the kind of monetary clout to record their music and buy radio time could never be heard by a widespread audience—unless a "generous" record company decided the musician was worth investing in and promoting.

For the most part, the mainstream music industry still operates in this way today. The record labels, now almost all owned by all-encompassing media megacorporations, use all of the resources at their disposal to push their widely-appealing millions-making musicians while still neglecting those whose potential profitability doesn't measure up. Predictably, this has frustrated

many musicians who want to get their music to an audience, especially since computers have made it easier than ever to record and assemble a “professional”-quality piece of music. *Why shouldn't my song be getting listened to when it's better than the crap The Black Eyed Peas put out?*, many wonder to themselves.

It also frustrates potential audiences who want different music than what their corporate overlords have decided should be popular. This animosity towards the record companies has manifested itself in a few ways, including widespread music piracy through file-sharing websites and programs—originally Napster, more recently BitTorrent. Independent musician Lauren O'Connell explains why she thinks so many people feel comfortable breaking the law in this way:

As I see it, piracy happens for two reasons: 1) Technology allows it. 2) Artists become distant, inhuman entities; and everyone knows how sleazy the record industry tends to be. We either feel like the artists don't need our money because they're Beyonce or Coldplay or some other untouchable figure, or we feel that the record label is going to take all of it anyway, so why would we put ten bucks toward that cause? (Grech, 2011)

As it turns out, musicians and audiences don't have to put up with the labels' dinosaur behavior any more, at least for now. The Internet, and particularly platforms like free-to-use video-sharing website YouTube, has presented these frustrated musicians and audiences with the perfect opportunity to get around the record companies' artificial barriers. Lauren continues:

I think it's been proven that this doesn't have to be the case, but you have to give people a reason to care. I've been using YouTube for the last three or four years to get my music out there and connect with the people who care about what I do. What's wonderful about YouTube is that people can witness exactly what goes into the production of a song.

We're not rock stars, and there's no corporate machine hiding behind the curtain. We don't want to sell our souls to the industry, and people don't want us to. So when we go to our fans and say that we're trying to make a record without a label, that actually means something, because these people have already seen what we can do without industry backing, and they've been an integral part of it. (Grech, 2011)

Platforms like YouTube allow media of any kind to be distributed to anyone who wants to consume it, whether it's popular or "big" or not. And in turn, any of those consumers can also be creators and distributors with the same tools on the same distribution channel as the creators whose work they enjoy. There is virtually no filter in place as to what kind of content can go up on sites like YouTube (beyond the usual discouragement of social taboos like nudity and excessive gore), which is in stark contrast to the tight-fisted, conservative policies of media corporations, who only let the widely-appealing profit-makers use the mediums they control. So a small-time musician like Lauren O'Connell or Hank Green can just as easily be seen on YouTube and featured on its front page (as both have been) as any mainstream, label-backed musician, while only a few years ago only the corporate-endorsed musician would have ever been heard on the radio, sold albums, or been able to book concert tours

Of course, there's no pretending that YouTube's not out to make money. But their business model is fundamentally different from the old record labels' model, and that's what has let small-time creators like independent musicians thrive. The labels rely on album sales to make their profit, and so have traditionally sought out musicians with the widest appeal to the widest paying audiences. By contrast, YouTube's site-wide advertising model generates the same amount of money for every view of a video whether the video's total views are one or one million. This makes niche content just as valuable to YouTube as the mainstream stuff, as every

bit of variety brings more viewers and thus more advertising value to the site.

And so YouTube has become a treasure trove of independent musicians, some with only a few fans, and some with millions, but all without needing any kind of help from the record companies. This is an exciting time for music. Just as in the golden days of our ancestors, it's the *people* who decide worth based on what they connect with, instead of the *corporations* deciding worth based on profitability. As one classmate put it, that shift "makes the field much more, I don't know, WONDERFUL, doesn't it?"



Independent Musician: Hank Green

In 2007, brothers Hank and John Green (an eco-technology blogger and award-winning young adult author, respectively) decided to use the Internet to reboot their own suffering brotherly relationship. The "Vlogbrothers" started a channel on YouTube, each brother taking a turn every other weekday that year making a video of himself talking to his sibling about a topic of his choosing. Though the "Brotherhood 2.0" project started just between the two of them, the two brothers left the YouTube channel open for public view and quickly gained a loyal fan following. It turned out that many fellow "nerds" worldwide identified with the intellectual brothers and found their videos worth watching.

Soon after starting the project, Hank challenged himself to pursue a lifelong passion and write and perform a new song for his brother and their viewers every other week. His songs, usually very nerdy and not exactly having what record labels would consider to be "wide appeal", nonetheless gained a sizable niche fan population.



The popularity of his music and the brothers' videos among their niche audiences eventually allowed Hank to start his own record label with some fellow YouTube musicians, letting make a living by selling their music. While only ten years before someone like Hank would never have been able to distribute his music to anything resembling a wide audience, with YouTube and the Internet he was able to connect with millions of fans quickly and relatively easily, and to even make a living off of it.



But this exciting time might not last for long, especially if the record companies have anything to say about it. Those labels are now owned by the same megacorporations that hold total control over just about every medium besides the Internet (film, TV, radio, newspapers,

magazines, even book publishing) (Free Press, 2011). These megacorporations have every interest in maximizing their own profits, regardless of what the expense to the rest of society may be—in fact, they're legally-obligated to do so as publicly-owned corporations (Story of Stuff Project, 2011).

This governmental goof could have dire consequences as the competitors to our independent musicians increasingly become the same entities that control the tubes over which the Internet runs. This year, Comcast, one of the largest Internet providers in the US, was allowed to merged with NBC, one of the largest creators of video content in the US (Stelter, 2011). Current rules stop Comcast from, say, restricting or slowing down access to YouTube to encourage viewers to flock to NBC's video sites instead (Stelter, 2011), but they're always tirelessly and successfully hammering away at the government with their more than 30 lobbying firms to get those rules dismantled (Stearns, 2010). When that happens, it'll be the same old story all over again, but worse: the megacorporations will be able to decide who gets to be seen and heard, and anyone they don't think will make them a profit won't stand a chance at being heard by an audience. YouTube celebrity and independent musician Hank Green realizes it, here answering a question about he achieved his Internet success:

The way we promoted Vlogbrothers is no longer applicable, as the world has changed so much in the three years since we started it up. But, in general, it's about finding an audience, finding what they like, and doing it well. It's the same as any other new media, making good content is orders of magnitude more important than having a good marketing strategy. That's changing now, of course, but we were lucky enough to get in early. (Kim, 2010)

He realizes that one of the only reasons he and his brother have been so successful on YouTube is

because they got in when Web 2.0 was young, before the corporations got their acts together as they have begun to, gathering up the control they need to make sure individuals on platforms like YouTube can't cut into their profits any more.

I have a few friends who are also very talented musicians. They've never done more than play and compose songs for themselves, for friends, for family, and for classmates at their schools' Open Mic Nights. Ten years ago, that's all they'd ever be able to do unless a record label swooped in and granted them the precious privilege of distribution. Now, or at least *right* now, they have a chance to find a wider audience on their own, using tools like YouTube. I'm certainly biased, but I certainly think they deserve that kind of recognition, and I believe the world would be a better and happier place the more people were to hear their music. But have they missed the open-distribution boat? It's only been a few years since YouTube launched and acts like Lauren and Hank took full advantage of the freedom of expression it provided, and already corporate powers are bringing all their resources to bear to make sure all of the money they've always gotten from media consumption keeps on flowing to them. I worry that my friends will never find an audience beyond those of us privileged enough to hear them in person, and while I am grateful for that opportunity, I'll be very sad to think that no one else in the world will ever hear their impressive guitar riffs and thought-provoking lyrics.

So where do things go from here? Have these few years just been a fluke, a wonderful but short-lived gift to those lucky enough to live through them? Or could things possibly go on like this, with independent musicians and big-time artists alike being able to freely share their work with people who want to hear it? The answer to that question is crucial not just to music and its place in our society, but to the structure of society as a whole. It depends on us. Let's not mess it up, for the sake of our musicians and the sake of our world. I don't know about you, but I want

my kids and grandkids to be able to enjoy and even have a chance to become their own Lauren O'Connells and Hank Greens. Let's give them that chance.

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