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Opinion



Pat Kane - The music industry is in 'meltdown' with downloads leaving artists struggling to make a living, but rather than make a hue and cry, it's time musicians gave something back to the fans...

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There's a Glasgow musician who is so freaked by the impact that the internet is having on music that he often threatens to stand at his open tenement window, screaming at passers-by: "Everyone stop it! You're stealing my art! You're destroying my livelihood!"

Other than a name change to "King Canute", there's nothing he can do about it. The meltdown started when music recordings went digital. It's difficult to press your own record: in theory, it's infinitely easy to copy a chunk of code. Broadband, social networks and powerful PCs put the final bomb under the biz.

As a result, there are some new topics to add to the list of embarrassed confessions you hear at a party: I've used private health, I have a share portfolio... and I downloaded your album from LimeWire last week. I can hear King Canute spluttering at his window now. But he does have a point. As we've been readying our new Hue And Cry album Open Soul, we've been trying to respond.

No one could say that the old record business – a profound rip-off for both artist and consumer – was an admirable model. If you were a bit lucky, as my brother Greg and I were, then your occasional chart hits at least justified the financial carnage. Yet although we can all happily distance ourselves from the bad old, sad old days, there's still an issue here for musicians.

Er, how is it we get paid, again? Current wisdom says that we make it as easy – or better, easier – for people to buy music, as it is for them to “steal” it. Then (fingers crossed) they won’t steal it. iTunes and the iPod have successfully realised that vision. Yet research shows there’s still a huge trade in free downloads across the internet’s increasing bandwidths, leading some figures in the industry to call for a “music tax” on internet service providers.

The ISPs are benefiting from all this uncontrolled downloading, so they should pay back something to those whose intellectual property rights are being twisted. You gotta laugh. Hunter S. Thompson once called the music business (only slightly unfairly) “a cruel and shallow money trench, a long plastic hallway where thieves and pimps run free and good men die like dogs. There’s also a negative side”. The idea of funding them like the dear old BBC should have the gun nut combusting in his funeral urn.

But in the meantime, what is a po’ boy – or at least an ‘80s band with a self-made, self-financed album, free of all corporate ties – to do? You realise there’s one place left a musician can almost entirely control, both artistically and commercially: playing live. If our music will now appear digitally – some of it free, some of it cheaply available, some of it appearing on mobile devices in strange forms – you use it to drive people to what is truly scarce and unique: seeing a musician perform.

So we’ve built the Hue And Cry Music Club, accessible from [www.hueandcry.co.uk](http://www.hueandcry.co.uk), which is a celebration of our music and performance in all its guises – prioritising the audience as much as the artist. When fans join up, they can see high-quality videos of gigs past, present and future; they can even vote on the favourite cover they’d love us to do as a piano-vocal, which we’ll then broadcast. There’s a social networking forum called History City, which gives every gig we’ve ever performed over the last 22 years its own website. We invite fans to upload memories, memorabilia and meet old friends in the process.

For those who want to see “under the hood” of our recorded music, we have the Music Lab and Lyrics Lab, where Greg and I show how we put our tracks together – and provide sound samples from those tracks available for download and remix.

This is all free at the moment, digitally hand crafted by Greg and I. It’s also, frankly, more labour (of love?) than I’ve ever put into anything. But the sense of control over one’s own destiny is amazing, and the interaction with the fans that are beginning to find us on the web is already rich and rewarding.

Will the cash come in? We’ll give everyone the chance to buy whatever they want, at

whatever level. But we know that bands these days can't just pout at the crowds and expect commercial adoration.

To get some, you have to give some. And given that the means whereby we'll do that in the Music Club is through our creativity, it's hardly an onerous task.

If it all works out, maybe that will persuade King Canute to gently and quietly lower his window. Or put some clothes on, at least. I

*Pat Kane's lecture at Glasgow's Urban Learning Space, Ourselves, Online: A Musician's Quest for a New Business Model is on June 27 at 10am*

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