

Making Music as Social Action: The Non-Profit Paradigm

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Music is liberating. We will always make music; it's what separates us from the monkeys. We create music to share a part of ourselves that is completely unique. We participate in it emotionally, whether we are creating it, performing it, or hearing it. There are untapped reserves of talent in the underground scene where unsigned artists have complete creative license to do anything and everything. That's where the medium and the message is most vibrant. How then can we justify the continuing dominance of major record labels to determine what music gets heard?

As it stands, music and the music industry is stagnant, churning out "pop" music that by definition lacks any substantial cultural context or social message and where similarity to the last big thing is a prerequisite to being the next big thing. It is the business of marketing to the lowest common denominator and selling as many records as possible before moving on to the next banality.

This leaves the masses of independent artists struggling to climb an increasingly narrow ladder of traditionally defined success – where everyone's individual dream of "making it" is in competition with everyone else's. It is music as a commodity and selling it as success. In this climate, there is no scene, no community, and no way for a grassroots artist to be heard as a distinct voice.

What we are suggesting is an inversion of that pyramid. Instead of the masses of independent artists climbing over each other's bones to be the one band on top, we are offering cooperation over competition. Consider the individual artist as the point at the bottom of an inverted pyramid, and at each stage progressing upwards the pyramid broadens out as the individual comes in contact with a wider network of like-minded musicians: a local, regional, and eventually national scene.

The key is to take the profit motive out of the equation by donating the proceeds generated from live music events to charity. Our experience organizing live events under the aegis of

AlternativeFuelSource.net has shown us that a community naturally coalesces around a music scene once the ego and the money are removed. That is why the non-profit model is so revolutionary. It appeals to it's own built in core demographic of socially conscious individuals who are agitating for greater participation in their community. It provides a forum for emerging artists to reach out with their music. It allows us as organizers of live events to cross-promote among different interest groups: musicians, activists, and fans, etc.

By shifting the focus from the promoting individual artists to the live charity event sponsoring the artists, we are redefining success as a cooperative rather than competitive goal. We are inverting the pyramid and providing the avenue for the individual to access a higher network and be heard by more people while simultaneously contributing to the success of the non-profit model.

In our work with the Common Ground Collective, we used the 501(c)3 status of their fiscal sponsor, Community Futures Collective, to purchase supplies destined for Hurricane Katrina relief directly from our supplier, A. W. Meyer, Co., at the retailer's cost. This saved us more than one hundred dollars and increased the effectiveness of each individual's donation by more than 20%. As such, we have decided that the best way to replicate the success of our Solidarity w/New Orleans project is to incorporate into our own 501(c)3 entity. This will allow us to negotiate with suppliers under our own tax-exempt status, accept larger donations, issue grant proposals, and resolve any unexpected liability issues. Foremost, it allows us to operate as an umbrella group for anyone who wishes to replicate our non-profit model to

create their own live events, increasing our success and the success of the greater community.

The music industry is a colossus - a bureaucratic, centralized arbiter deciding which sounds get integrated into our culture, and which sounds don't. When money and the profit motive determine our cultural priorities, is it any wonder that the diversity of our culture suffers? The social standard in which music is distributed is changing. It is becoming increasingly socially acceptable to pirate music, allowing fans access to more and more diverse music, simply by stealing it. While record companies are struggling to adjust to this new reality, the non-profit paradigm has already addressed it.

A record company derives revenues from album sales which it uses to promote a relatively few nationally touring acts, and as technology undermines the monopoly of record companies on the recording and distribution of music it undercuts their revenues. We see this trend as progressing indefinitely. However, our non-profit model derives revenues from a source that cannot be infringed upon, the live event. At the grassroots level, stealing the music is more like free advertising. If you are Virgin Records and 1,000,000 people steal your music, you are out of business. If you are an independent artist and 1,000,000 steal your music, congratulations, you're famous.

As modern home studio technology empowers artists to create and distribute their own music, we can begin to exploit the space made by the increasing obsolescence of record companies. What is essential in this newly leveled playing field is a network to overcome the initial distrust and disinterest that separates individuals, both as musicians or fans of music. The non-profit model allows a grassroots music scene to germinate by connecting like-minded people through a common interest in charitable endeavors.

This new paradigm relies upon the generosity of individuals and their willingness to accomplish together what they cannot accomplish alone. It seeks to establish a counter-culture peer group that takes the place of the ubiquitous consumer. It returns music to its role as art for art's sake. It is a powerfully redeeming statement of human goodwill, and a forceful rejection of the winner-take-all for-profit model where, in the end, everyone loses.

by David Chege - Co-founder Executive Administrator of the Alternative Fuel Source