

By Alexandra Evans

BOSTON—A 20-something Boston musician walks down Newbury Street carrying two newly purchased vinyl records—each contains 10 tracks or fewer and both predate him by several decades.

The musician, Steve Knecht, prefers CDs and records but also values the convenience and musical connections fostered through digital music-streaming platforms, such as Spotify. This said, he objects to artists' low earnings.

“I like sitting down and having a physical, tangible thing to flip through or take out of a case,” he said. “[But] I’ve discovered a lot of cool people through Spotify. It’s a weird gray area for me.”

The music industry today relies mainly on technology, especially popular streaming platforms. Although digitalization has made music more accessible for consumers, artists get paid fractions of pennies for their content.

For example, an artist who receives \$0.006 for every stream will only earn \$100 after nearly 17,000 total streams.

Pat Hollenbeck, president of the Boston Music Association, said that technology jobs—including for digital streaming sites—are the most high-paying jobs today.

“[Because of technology positions,] digitalization creates sustainability in music livelihood,” said Hollenbeck. “In the digital world, anything is possible. Touring [for example] does not pay bills.”

Working *for* a company like Spotify promises reliable earnings (in six figures for the highest positions, according to Glassdoor), but it also shows that technology’s reign is inversely proportional to musicians’ earnings.

Spotify has been ranked by several news outlets as one of the overall best music-streaming services due to its global accessibility. However, this ranking primarily reflects consumer preferences.

Not every Spotify user is aware that only fractions of the dollars they spend on music go toward their favorite artists. Spotify pays content holders in low fractions of a penny—not just a dollar—every time a track is played.

A recent Berklee College of Music master’s graduate, Alex Yen, said music digitalization also includes the need for multimedia assets such as music videos and photography. Cultivating a self-image and touring are the primary money-making strategies for receiving any income through releasing music, he said.

“Music really isn’t about music anymore,” he said. “It’s about the image and having sponsorships... almost everything except the music. It is visual now.”

Berklee voice performance senior Yao Lu agreed, saying other approaches to music distribution enhance an artist’s image.

“[Multimedia] is more like a well-rounded artist thing,” Lu said. “You can just ‘compete’ [with other artists] on a different level.”

In an industry where people are trying to “make it” as a renowned musician, the goal is to become as successful as an A-list artist. Pop singer Lady Gaga is a strong example, Berklee singer/songwriter Blythe Schulte said in a February interview.

The way that an artist promotes their content is almost as significant as the number of times one of their tracks is played on Spotify, Lu said. With most of today’s global population relying on technological music streaming, Lu and Knecht both agreed that fans will be more drawn to visual releases such as music videos.

Like Knecht, however, Lu values the “personable” feeling of holding a physical copy of a CD or record—artists made more money from tangible music products in the 20th century.

“If the number of copies [of a CD sold] is limited, it feels more valuable,” she said.

Cities with high numbers of college students, such as Boston, give local musicians the opportunity to reach avid music listeners in their age range. This enhances the live music scene, but still does not support artists' personal income, whether they perform solo or in a group, Lu said.

Within bands, Yen said, the payment must be distributed to members based on their contribution. Equal pay is not always guaranteed; some members may work other jobs and not be able to commit regularly. The money is stretched further with more members.

By contrast, solo artists, according to Knecht, receive a higher compensation for their work whether it is a live performance or an album or music video release, especially if they have a smaller management team.

The pay for either dynamic, however, is still not high enough to rely on for income. Hollenbeck said that live show attendance, merchandise and any platform that requires people to pay for music are some of the best ways for artists to receive royalties.

But, the number of "hits" and streams matter; some artists will receive more than others. This reflects both consumer preference and mere luck.

A number of musicians—including those in Boston—work extra jobs to ensure financial stability, sometimes entirely unrelated to music, Yen said.

When asked what an artist might consider their “real job”—their music career or the position on which their income relies—Knecht emphasized the importance of balancing finances and leisure. Regardless of the unpredictable payment, he said that playing in a group allows him to “bring the songs to life.”

If one is passionate about music, they may integrate it into their “day job” the way one may do in a technology position, Hollenbeck said.

For example, Knecht is the manager, frontman and lead guitarist for the Boston punk-pop trio The Burning Lights and also works in sales at a local guitar school, where he plans to teach private lessons.

“Sometimes passion and finances clash a little, it’s hard to have them both,” he said. “But keep a level head, keep level expectations and try to do both with all your might.”