

Few Musicians are Getting Rich on Digital Distribution

I've started working on my obituary. I feel fine, but this is not a document I want to trust to whoever happens to be standing around when the time comes.

Not only am I picky about usage, grammar and capitalization, but I'm pretty sure anyone but I would forget to include the phrase "international-selling recording artist."

It's true, in a lame way. I belong to a number of musical groups that few people have heard of, one of them being Sweet Cacophony - a folk/blues (mostly) quartet. We're hot stuff on the Farmer's Market and coffee shop circuit. We released a CD in February 2016, selecting one of the largest music distribution companies - CD Baby - to produce and distribute it.

Our CD, "Wind, Sand and Stars," can be played or downloaded on iTunes, Apple Music, Amazon, Google Play and others. We get plays on Spotify, Pandora and other streaming platforms I've never heard of. One of our members even heard one of our songs being played on Iowa Public Radio while he was driving a few weeks ago. He about went off the road, he was so surprised.

In all honesty, there's nothing extra-special about our CD. It was a fun, self-indulgent project that we recorded and mixed ourselves in a spare bedroom. Full disclosure - I receive significant financial benefit every time a song from our album is played or downloaded. CD Baby has a web site that tracks the activity worldwide and remits a check to us once in a blue moon.

That's because there's very little money in digital music, at least for the musicians. Over the last three years, tracks on our album had over 550 different streams and numerous downloads in a fair number of countries. In the last 90 days that included Australia, the United Kingdom, Israel, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Norway. Payments vary significantly between downloads versus streams, original compositions versus public domain versus covers, plus some mysterious variable I haven't yet divined.

For example, I sang lead on "He's in the Jailhouse Now" which was streamed on Spotify five different times on January 9 this year for individual payments ranging

from \$0.00155883 to \$0.00596778. As one of four band members, I receive 25% of this windfall. I'm making significant progress toward being able to afford an extra cup of coffee (and a scone!) at Java House.

All this activity has resulted in a grand total payment to us of \$29.91. It's all itemized on massive online spreadsheets, and I noticed one payment was for the princely sum of \$0.00008207. It's easy to see why it's darn near impossible to make a living on digital music sales, unless your name happens to be Rihanna or Taylor Swift.

To be fair (why start now), for the over \$1,000 we paid CD Baby we also received 100 CDs to sell ourselves in addition to all this international exposure. They made great Christmas presents for family and friends, which I'm pretty sure only my mother really appreciated.

Music pretty much dominates my non-working life (just ask LuAnn). I play four different instruments in six active bands, which regularly results in six two-hour rehearsals in four weekdays. In some parallel universe there's probably a version of me with no 401K or savings, trying to make a living full-time doing something I enjoy. And failing.

For no reason other than solidarity, a few years ago I joined Local 450 of the American Federation of Musicians. Every now and then I have occasion to announce that I'm a "card-carrying union member" to impress my liberal friends. That's one more obscure achievement anyone else would forget to add to my obit.

Writers Group Member Dave Parsons has a number of CDs gathering dust, but Christmas is right around the corner.