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Work-For-Hire Websites Give New Life to Songwriters, Producers and Beatmakers

5/3/2018 by [Andy Hermann](#)



Steven Gunter of Pearlsnap Photography

BeatStars founder Abe Batshon

Want to hire the drummer from [OK Go](#) to play on your next record? Or get the man who engineered *Abbey Road* to mix it? Maybe you'd like to buy a beat from the guy who helped create [Future's](#) platinum-selling single "Selfish."

A few years ago, for any amateur or unsigned musician making such connections sounded like a pipe dream. But now — for those who can afford it — it's within the realm of possibility, thanks to a growing number of online marketplaces and work-for-hire Websites on which musicians, songwriters, producers and beatmakers are selling their talents and wares. For music professionals offering their services on such sites, they are increasingly becoming a legitimate revenue source — even if their credits don't include working with [the Beatles](#) or a top rapper.

Marcello Vieira, a rock singer-songwriter based in Portugal, signed up for one such website, SoundBetter, in 2014. Four years later, he earns a full-time living providing vocals, lyrics, top-line melodies and other services for various musical projects in a variety of styles from around the world.

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Speaking via Skype from his home just outside Lisbon, he rattles off the list of countries his clients hail from: "Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Kenya, South Africa. ... Lots of jobs in Spain, a lot of jobs in United States, Canada. But not a single job in Portugal — go figure."

Marcello, who goes professionally by his first name, still writes and performs his own music, traveling on weekends to gigs across Europe. But now, he's never without his laptop, so he can stay in touch with his SoundBetter clients. He says he averages about 20 jobs a month — which, given that his fees start at \$250 per song — not including vocals, mixing or mastering — can add up to more than \$5,000 per month. "The last couple years is the first time in my life that I'm earning a living full-time from music," he says. "It's crazy."

Just as services like Uber and TaskRabbit have turned anyone with a car and a cellphone into an independent contractor, SoundBetter and its competitors — BeatStars, Airgigs, SoundClick and Airbit among them — are giving independent musicians, producers and songwriters new opportunities to market their talents in non-traditional ways. "This is really where the industry's going," says SoundBetter founder Shachar Gilad.

A Boston native and musician turned recording engineer, Gilad launched SoundBetter in New York in 2012 as a directory for fellow studio pros. Since then, it has grown into a full-service marketplace with not just producers and engineers, but singers, songwriters and studio musicians offering their services. He describes the clients for these providers as "serious independent musicians," ranging from enthusiastic amateurs with enough money to spend for a professional-sounding demo all the way up to established EDM producers looking for vocalists.

"More music's being created than ever before," he notes. "But at the same time, a lot of [independent artists] can't get to a good enough-sounding finished product to feel comfortable

putting it on Spotify or Apple Music. They might need a singer or they might need a professional mix.”

Anyone can sign up on SoundBetter and create a provider profile for free, but to get maximum visibility on the site, providers must join a “premium” tier and pay a \$59 monthly fee. Gilad and his team screen all applicants for the premium program and only accept those with high user reviews and a strong work ethic. “It’s only people who are serious about it, and of those, we accept less than 5 percent,” Gilad says. He declines to say how many of SoundBetter’s roughly 100,000 provider accounts are at the premium tier, but says the number is “in the hundreds.” “So we’re actually leaving quite a bit of money on the table. But we want the platform to be curated.”

Marcello confirms that when he applied for premium membership, the process involved a long Skype interview and took several months. “They don’t let just anyone in their premium program — and that’s a good thing. That’s the problem with other Websites, I think.”

In practice, this means that most non-premium providers will get far less work, or possibly none at all. But Glad says that’s the nature of the business. “It’s like any marketplace. If you have an apartment and you throw it on Airbnb, but you don’t have good photos or a good description, you’re not necessarily going to rent your apartment.”

SoundBetter’s business model is based on collaborations, offering services like a “virtual workspace” where providers and clients can share files and track their work. (In addition to revenue from premium memberships, the service takes a 5 percent commission from every transaction; Gilad says SoundBetter currently facilitates about \$500,000 worth of projects each month.)

BeatStars, an Austin-based company launched in 2008 by songwriter-turned-entrepreneur Abe Batshon, offers similar services, but its model is primarily based on a more novel concept — enabling songwriters, producers and beatmakers to “lease” a single work through a non-exclusive license to multiple clients.

Batshon hit on the leasing concept back in the ‘90s, when he would hit up hip-hop producers for beats in AOL chatrooms. At the time, he couldn’t afford to purchase a beat outright, so he began offering producers a few bucks to let him use their productions non-exclusively. On BeatStars, the process is similar, but far more formal. “The transactions are intended to be as identical as possible to a traditional producer deal,” he explains, “with the only — of course, big — difference that the transactions can be duplicated for the same beat over and over again.”

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When a user leases a track on BeatStars, which began as a hip-hop site but now covers all genres, they are taken to a checkout page that presents a license agreement. The terms vary, but

typically cover mechanical, performance and synchronization rights and limit the number of times the licensee can use the track on various platforms — for example, up to 50,000 monetized streams on Spotify, Tidal and Apple Music — as well as when and how the composer should be credited (“in writing where possible and vocally otherwise,” reads one agreement). Licensors on BeatStars typically waive all royalties in exchange for that one-time lease fee, but will sometimes demand them in the event of more high-profile placements — if the licensee’s version of the track winds up used in television or film, for example.

Most tracks on BeatStars can also be purchased outright, and the licensee can always do this at a later date if a leased beat turns into the basis for a hit single. For the best producers on the service, says Batshon, it’s the leasing model that can be the most lucrative. “We have a dancehall producer in Albania generating \$30,000-to \$40,000 a month.”

“Freemium” BeatStars users pay a 30 percent commission on all their leases and sales. Paying members at the “pro” and “premium” tiers keep all of their sales and get additional perks like more storage for uploaded tracks in exchange for monthly fees ranging from \$9.99 to \$19.99. Batshon says the site currently has “close to 200,000 registered sellers” of music and another 500,000 licensee accounts, but declines to say how many are at the paid tiers.

“Without BeatStars we would’ve never been able to live off beats this quick,” **The Cratez**, a hip-hop production duo from Berlin, report via email. They credit the exposure they’ve gotten through their BeatStars tracks, including several licensed by recent Atlantic Records signee **Joyner Lucas**, with getting the attention of BMG, which offered them a publishing deal earlier this year.

As SoundBetter, BeatStars and other work-for-hire sites grow in popularity and legitimacy, the boundaries between them and the traditional music industry grow fuzzier. In addition to aforementioned OK Go drummer Dan Konopka and veteran Beatles engineer Geoff Emerick (who joined unsolicited, according to Gilad), among the musicians, producers and engineers offering their services on SoundBetter is former **Morrissey** and **Robbie Williams** guitarist Neil Taylor and engineer Jeff Ellis, who won a Grammy for his work on **Frank Ocean’s** *Channel Orange*.

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While some big names are hiring themselves out on SoundBetter, others are surfing BeatStars, looking for fresh sounds. It was a BeatStars connection that led a Las Vegas-based producer **Mantra** to land two tracks on Future’s *HNDRXX* album — including one, “Selfish,” that featured **Rihanna** and became a Top 40 hit. (Mantra declined to comment for this article, so the terms under which “Selfish” were licensed are unclear. Mantra received co-writing and co-production credit on the track, alongside producers Detail and Major Seven.) Batshon also points out that

6ix9ine's *Day69* mixtape, which was distributed through Interscope, featured multiple beats licensed from BeatStars — and he thinks more and more established rappers will follow suit.

"Who has time to sit around waiting for managers and A&Rs to send you beats when you can go right to the Internet and find what you're looking for?" Batshon says. "At the end of the day all artists care about is, 'Does this sound fit my project?' It's not about name recognition any more."

While sites like BeatStars and SoundBetter have created new opportunities for music professionals around the world, their success has also made them increasingly competitive — even for established users like Marcello, who checks his SoundBetter account every day, even when he's on vacation. "Online, people want everything immediately," he says. "So you have to be on top of your game. But it's something that I never imagined in a million years I would be doing. I don't know if it will last, but I think it will."

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