

Independent Music Publicists Grapple With a Shrinking Media Landscape

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As publications fold and coverage narrows, once tried-and-true approaches to the job no longer yield the same results.

Like a lot of music publicists, **Nathan Walker** keeps a spreadsheet of the media outlets he pitches to. Recently, while updating it, he came to a startling realization: "I'd say over a third of the outlets that were there in 2014 have now folded."

Much has been written about the struggles of music journalists in an ever-shrinking media landscape. A recent *Longreads* article called "Where Have All the Music Magazines Gone?" offered a typically grim roll call of publications that have either discontinued their print edition or shuttered entirely: *Blender*, *Harp*, *Spin*, *URB*, *Paste*, to name a few. At the local level, the outlook is even bleaker, with major alt-weeklies closing up shop and others gutting their staffs, budgets and page counts. And the ranks of music blogs, once major voices in new music coverage, have thinned since their mid-2000s peak.

"I suppose *Stereogum* is one of the few 'music blogs' left," says **Scott Lapatine**, who founded *Stereogum* -- which he now prefers to call a music website rather than a blog -- in 2002. Even those fellow music sites that have survived, he notes, rarely stay focused on their original subject. "So many other music publications now report on TV, movies, tech, et cetera."

While music journalists are faced with fewer outlets and assignments, so too are music publicists scrambling to adapt to the new landscape. And they're doing it just as the music industry is finally emerging from its own 15-year slump, during which publicity budgets were slashed. There's one silver lining to that period of nosediving sales: It created more opportunities for independent publicists, as fewer labels could afford to retain full-time PR specialists in-house. Many independent PR firms, like Walker's Riot Act Media,

were founded during this period. But all those publicists are now competing for diminishing coverage -- with budgets that, in many cases, have yet to rebound from the industry's lean years.

"It's a double-sided coin of labels having less money because of streaming and media outlets having less money because of ad sales," says Walker, who joined Riot Act in 2009 and took over the company from its founder, **Joan Hiller**, in 2015. Being caught between those two realities, he admits, has made his job tougher, especially when it comes to breaking new and emerging artists. "It just seems more challenging now."

Publicist **Talia Miller** agrees. "The dwindling amount of music publications and outlets that value music coverage beyond pop stars in the past five years has created an entirely different landscape," says Miller, who recently made the decision to close her independent PR company, Brixton Agency, to accept a position as in-house publicist for ATO Records.

Part of the problem, Walker believes, is the decimation of regionally focused media outlets: alt-weeklies, zines, city-specific blogs and websites. The loss of publications like Baltimore's *City Paper*, the *Boston Phoenix* and *The Village Voice* took a valuable rung out of the ladder many bands in those markets used on their way to landing national coverage. "There's something to be said for organic growth that is fostered by local music writers," he says.

A music editor for one national publication, who spoke on condition of anonymity, acknowledges that coverage of new artists has become a tougher sell not just at more mainstream national publications, but industry-wide. "Obviously I love the idea of trying to give publicity to an artist we really enjoy, but in the end it kinda comes down, unfortunately, to traffic," the editor says.

For online publications, those traffic numbers are hard to ignore -- even for the types of content once considered low-hanging fruit, like song and album premieres. "Premieres just don't perform that well for our audience," says the anonymous editor. **Amy Phillips**, news director at *Pitchfork*, agrees. "The days of the *Pitchfork News* premiere are mostly over," she says, though she cites the rise of streaming services, rather than declining page views, as the culprit.

"Half my job used to be chasing down premieres," says Phillips, "but that was back when, if you posted an MP3 or even a stream, it only lived on your website." Now, she says, it's more difficult to get a true exclusive, especially when artists and labels are increasingly reluctant to sacrifice monetizable plays on YouTube, Spotify or Apple Music in exchange for some short-lived media hype.

Walker notes that streaming services have also largely supplanted the role the press once played in enabling music discovery. "I started out buying Magnet and Spin," says Walker, who is 42. "If I didn't have [those] magazines, all I would be listening to is Top 40. I lived in rural Michigan, so I had no access to touring bands, or an older brother in college with hip tastes. I just had those outlets. And now a kid can just listen to 'My Daily Mix' from Spotify and here's six new bands that they'd never heard of before."

Because of this, music publicists are aware that song premieres don't have the impact they once did, and no one contacted for this story lamented their slow demise. "I want to say that as little as three or four years ago, a *Stereogum* premiere would be something like 3,000 streams on SoundCloud by the end of the day," says Walker. "And now it's like a few hundred." **Michelle McDevitt**, president and co-founder of PR agency Audible Treats, cites similar numbers. "Most people would be surprised to find out that some of the cooler, most coveted premieres have yielded 30 to 60 views in three to six hours," she says.

Despite this, publicists continue to push track premieres -- and a handful of publications, like *Stereogum*, still run them. "Premieres are a way for us to endorse an artist early on and I think that's a service to our readers," says Lapatine. "That said, we are drowning in premiere request emails -- we get hundreds each week -- and some *Stereogum* staffers would be happy if we never arranged another."

As ineffective as premieres now are, it appears that the music PR industry has yet to find an easy replacement for them -- or for the kind of quick-hit news items, like album release dates and tour announcements, that were once the meat and potatoes of the music blogosphere. Instead, according to the music editors interviewed for this story, far too many publicists seem to be replacing quality with quantity --

blasting more and more press releases to an ever-shrinking pool of outlets whose music coverage, especially of independent and emerging artists, is reaching fewer readers.

"I probably get like 300 pitches or something a day," says the anonymous music editor. "It seems to me that there are either a) way more publicists pitching things, b) way fewer outlets and/or music journalists accepting pitches or c) a little bit of both."

Despite the obvious challenges, it's not all bad news for indie music publicists. Every publicist interviewed could cite recent success stories. Walker pointed to Detroit singer-songwriter Anna Burch: "When we first started working together, I think she had 20 Twitter followers," he says. "And she wound up being on the NPR reader's poll, number nine best new artist of 2018." McDevitt singled out Houston rapper Maxo Kream, with whom she's been working since 2015 and who recently inked a deal with RCA Records: "He is now regularly covered by A-list publications such as *Pitchfork*, *Fader*, *Billboard*, *Noisey*, *Stereogum*, *Genius*," she notes.

Audible Treats, which McDevitt co-founded in 2004, specializes in hip-hop, one of a handful of genres (along with EDM and *música urbana*) that's booming enough to sustain a healthy ecosystem of genre-specific publications and the publicists that cater to them. Even Americana, once the niche-iest of niche genres, is having a moment thanks to the crossover success of artists like Brandi Carlile, Chris Stapleton and Jason Isbell. Publicists specializing in these genres predictably have a brighter outlook than their counterparts in the worlds of punk and indie rock, whose audiences have shrunk in the streaming era.

With success, of course, comes more competition. "I was one of maybe three publicists at the first Americana Conference," says **Cary Baker**, whose publicity agency Conqueroo has long been a leader in the genre. "Now I'm one of 50." Still, he says he doesn't mind the company. "It's really made me step up my game." **Charlotte Wilson**, head of North American press for the EDM-focused promotional company Listen Up, agrees. "Publicists are having to become much more creative," she says, pointing to "content with a potential to go viral" as the key to getting her clients' names in the press.

There's no magic formula for "going viral" and most publicists interviewed agreed that, no matter how much the media landscape changes or contracts, their number-one job is still to help their artists tell their story in a way that will compel journalists and fans alike. "EDM artists are the new pop stars," says Wilson, "so it's our job to not only publicize their music, but to also create a recognizable profile and personality behind the act." Adds Miller: "I've found the most helpful way to promote new tracks from less well-established artists is to develop the story behind those songs."

In that way, despite all the changes to the media that covers music, maybe the art of publicizing that music hasn't changed much at all. Riot Act's Walker certainly thinks so. Asked if he still takes on "passion projects" that don't have an obvious niche, he laughs and says, "I feel like that's most of my roster."

"Most of the success stories I know come from people who write great songs, record them well and put on a great show," says Walker. From there, it all comes back to the publicist's most basic role: building relationships with journalists and knowing their tastes. "I mean, maybe I'm stuck in an old way of doing my job, but my thing is to always find fans," he says. "You're only as good as your contacts. And you're only as good as your worst band."

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