Twitter Thread by Ronen Landa



Ronen Landa
@ronenlanda

THREAD (long): Many fellow musicians posting their Spotify year-end numbers. I'll preface this by saying my numbers aren't that impressive, and it'd be easy to dismiss this thread as sour grapes. In fact, I *did* feel pretty badly about it, and that got me to thinking...

Why? I had a nice year professionally! A movie I scored was #1 on the Netflix Top Ten Movies List. I released two albums and my first vinyl LP. I scored an episodic series (yes, for Quibi, but still... I enjoyed it!) and composed cool music for some brilliant filmmakers.

As I reflected I realized that, of course, this is exactly what Spotify wants me to feel. It wants me to give in to the human urge to compare my success to others'. It wants me to blame myself for any perceived failings, and it wants me to redouble my efforts on their platform.

Posting our numbers promotes that cycle, and also serves to drive up traffic. Does it help us? Many pixels have been spilled on pathetic streaming royalites-- we know they are unlikely to help most of us achieve anything approaching a middle class lifestyle in a major city...

So what are independent artists really supporting by posting these wrap ups?

The first thing that comes to mind is the cottage industry of schemers advertising on our feeds with promises of more streams and playlists.

Spotify props them up: it remains a black box where we don't have access to our fans directly (unlike Bandcamp). This exposes us to the added exploitation by compelling us to chase the numbers- rather than actually reach humans- in hopes of leveraging their fandom *elsewhere*.

I have seen some pretty wild attempts to milk even more data from the data. Maybe it works? but it is truly inhumane to ask independent artists to jump through (expensive) hoops just to connect with the people who like their music.

Next we have podcasters. We are driving up Spotify's traffic so that they can sign massive deals. See @tedgioia for more context: https://t.co/XiGuBOiE3B

> A musician would need to generate 23 billion streams on Spotify to earn what they're paying Joe Rogan for his podcast rights (assuming a typical $.00437 payout per stream). In other words, Spotify values Rogan more than any musician in the history of the world. Sound fair to you? pic.twitter.com/zvMdY3mIQA
>
> — Ted Gioia (@tedgioia) May 20, 2020

And of course we know that major artists (and labels) can do well on Spotify too. In part, that's because the algorithm is designed to widen the gap between artists with significant corporate backing and the vast professional class.

It's worth reading analysis and criticism on the algorithm-- this is how your music actually reaches peoples' ears, so the details matter!

Pop artists also have corporate teams to work the playlists and the data and the stats across all the platforms. In the end its a wonder that independent musicians get to make music at all. The data rabbit hole sucked me in at times this past year-- I could've been composing!

Yes I've read the accounts of artists leveraging Spotify to success, but still the algorithm is stacked against us while allowing for a few breakthroughs (a solid PR move!)

Now I read that they are testing ways to let artists push the algorithm with selected tracks... in exchange for even less royalty income.

A few words on playlists. Spotify seems to treat our music much like financial institutions treated real estate before '08. Playlists take our albums and reorganized as tranches. Do listeners really discover artists this way? Yes, some, I'm sure...? but again the black box.

And all that work you put into organizing your album as a true listening experience for your fans is mostly wasted. Playlists aren't all bad, and I do love a good mix tape-- but when our music is reduced to an interchangeable bit in someone's "mood", we've really lost something.

Side note: this all really inspired me to work on a vinyl release this year. Arguments about sound quality aside, it amazes me how physical media creates a whole different (and healthier) relationship with the music. The response has been so heartening!

So the deck is stacked against us financially and even for much-touted artist discovery. Is this basket really deserving of your eggs?

For now I continue to use and publish on Spotify. Like I said, my numbers aren't great so I won't make a dent at this point. But I question what we all do with the year-end stats. Maybe they can reveal some strengths and weaknesses that we can use intelligently...

However let's name that the fancy graphics and shareable cumulative stats are 100% designed to get us to publicize our numbers and the platform itself. That is good marketing.

...but they are also designed to keep the focus squarely away from the platform's own failings. Even better marketing! Fan: "Hey if the artists are sharing it can't be all that bad!" Artist: "I'd better pump more time and money into Spotify so my numbers look better next year!"

When Daniel Ek said that indie musicians have to change what we're doing to continue to survive in the music industry he may have been right. Thanks to him it is a steeper mountain to climb.

But we absolutely do not have to accept that our success is related to our Spotify numbers. We do not have to succumb to the urge to compare ourselves to others in the business based on numbers it provides without any access to our own fans, or even decent royalties.

Most of all we do not have to pretend that Spotify is a neutral platform. We definitely do not have to act as a social media billboard for their algorithm.

Money is important, but I've always measured success in music by the artistic I've had. Yes, I want to be popular, but if I've stirred a few souls then I know I'm on track. Sour grapes? Maybe, but I will keep my eyes on the prize.

*artistic impact... :)