

The economics, politics and biology of the music industry

 By [Rachel Reynolds](#)

9 Nov 2022

I was driving home when I tuned into Smile FM and happened upon a man speaking about a conference this coming weekend at which industry 'heavy weights' were going to be present. The incredulity in his voice as he spoke, unable to believe that so many artists were passing up this opportunity to attend the conference, made me listen more closely - what was the catch?



Source: www.unsplash.com

He spoke of Trevor Jones, a composer who scored *Notting Hill*, being one of the keynote speakers, and mentioned that the conference would be an intimate gathering of no more than 50 people. "The tickets must be astronomical" —I thought.

When I got home, I immediately checked the price: R250. Just a little more than I would pay to see a modern-day *Notting Hill* in the cinema, for a two-day experience and a chance to meet Trevor Jones as well as Marc Marot, former MD of Island Records who signed bands like Massive Attack, PJ Harvey, and The Cranberries.

I spent this small amount to attend what turned out to be one of the most inspiring and insightful weekends of my year—this coming from a woman who has travelled to six countries in the past six months.

Though I can't possibly translate the experience of the weekend onto paper for you (though an amazingly successful poet – Siphokazi Jonas – who also featured at the conference probably could), I will try my best to deliver the most important

points of contention to artists who couldn't, but should've, made it.

It is not for the public to know what they want

Marot is adamant that this is the truth. The public doesn't know what they want—you must show them what they want. Steve Jobs was used as a case in point, as he knew the only reason the public didn't say they wanted a choice between 50 font types was because they didn't know that such a thing was possible.

This was in sharp contrast to how Eb Inglis, KFM host, described radio's operational structure; rather than playing what they deem the public should be listening to, stations survey their listeners and play what is on demand instead.

The room breathed a collective sigh of relief when Inglis clarified that this didn't necessarily mean artists should pander to society's current craze, but rather keep making unique art and work hard on promoting themselves. He made a point of informing the listeners that radio wasn't the platform to do this.

“ *It might not be your art that is unsuccessful, but the platform you use to justify its success needs to change.* ”

Many people think the radio can make or break an artist, and musicians will send their tracks to a station with high hopes, only to be ghosted.

The reason for this is found in people's misunderstanding of the age-old question that plagues us all: Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Or in this case, radio or success? Inglis makes it clear that, while radio used to play a pivotal role in initiating the popularity of songs, the advent of social media has meant its role has changed.

Rather, the radio plays what has already been made popular through other platforms, such as TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, and even Facebook. Here the answer is sometimes the chicken comes first, and sometimes the egg—depending on the decade you're farming in. Or, in this case, making music.

Caveat subscriptor

Woven between the economics of the entertainment industry, is of course law and politics.

My music producer friend sat next to me, mouth agape, as Nick Matzukis explained more than 15 types of royalties that can be earned from a single piece of music.

He insisted, “There is money in art folks – if only everyone knew!” This led to a discussion of contracts and the bad things that happen when you don't know what you're signing (another case in point is Jared Leto's Thirty Seconds to Mars).

Samro isn't (that) bad...

For a bit of an outsider to the industry, I did not know what the Southern African Music Rights Organisation (Samro) was. But I could tell from the comments and questions it is an organisation whose relationship with musicians is akin to that of Jacob Zuma with South Africans.

“Where is my money?” was the audience's collective question, which CEO Mark Rosin attempted to answer, using the operational structure and logistical challenges Samro faces in a third-world country to justify its reputation.



#Mex22 set to welcome former managing director of Island Records

18 Oct 2022



The crowd seemed only semi-convinced of Rosin's effort to acquit Samro. One of these was an attendee whose suggestion for Samro to adopt blockchain technology to track artists and their earnings more accurately, was taken a little too lightly by Rosin for the guest's taste. The attendee happens to work for a company that uses this technology for sustainability.

Connective tissue

Since we have touched on all the other subjects of life, why not Biology?

This is my own analogy to characterise what I think may be the biggest takeaway from the conference: South Africa lacks connective tissue, which is the lifeblood of a high-functioning art industry.

We need to collaborate more, understand our strengths, and join forces to become more powerful. Instead of using idealistic phrases like these with no backing, the conference showed attendees what the anatomy of collaboration looks like on the ground, using Trevor Jones and Siphokazi Jonas as, yet another, case in point.



#MusicExchange: A catch-up with global composer Trevor Jones

Martin Myers 1 Nov 2022



We got to hear Jonas read her poetry, before hearing it a second time with music that Jones had chosen to accompany it.

He explains "I walk into walls while walking, I leave food to burn all while I am thinking about your poetry and how to make it work with my music".

The experience was heightened, and the tone of the poem changed dramatically with the London Symphony Orchestra booming out the speakers in synch with Jonas' empowering voice. Both pieces of work are brilliant alone, but unforgettable together.

Coming from an economics background, I have written a lot here about the prospects in the industry for South African artists, perhaps at the expense of replicating the inspirational tone of the conference.

But rest assured, it could be felt through each anecdote, laugh and conversation that undoubtedly involved a cross-pollination of ideas. There really is no other opportunity that I know of that offers this level of engagement, advice, inside knowledge and look into the lives and careers of some of the world's most phenomenal creatives.



Senegal to host All Africa Music Awards

8 Nov 2022



Luckily, Music Exchange (Mex22) is travelling to Johannesburg this coming weekend on 12 and 13 November.

If you are an artist, go. If for some reason you can't, take this notion with you: There is money in art. There is also money in information, whether it's how the industry is regulated or how two South Africans successfully collaborated. Scoring *Notting Hill* and paying bills are not mutually exclusive.

ABOUT RACHEL REYNOLDS

Rachel Reynolds is currently based in Cape Town and writes both in her personal capacity and for an online education company where she designs technical courses that are presented to working professionals. Prior to this, she worked as a writer, editor and production assistant. Reynolds holds an undergraduate degree from the University of Cape Town in Economics and Statistics, as well as an Honours degree in Finance from the same institution.

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