

TRUST The DOC

TTD
TRUSTTHEDOC MEDIA

Edition 111: 31st December 2025

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THE HOTTEST NEWS FROM THE GRASSROOTS SCENE:

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INTRODUCTION:

Usually we begin by commenting on the month just gone by. But it is New Year's Eve and time to contemplate a pretty strange and unprecedented year in so many ways. If ever a year has felt like a battle for us at Trust The Doc, it has been this one.

From the perspective of being artists and bandmates, we have had our most exciting year. We have had 7 singles out, played a headline tour, achieved consistent monthly listeners on Spotify and well over 130,000 streams. So we are especially grateful to our amazing label Monochrome Motif Records [and specifically therefore Andrew Hartshorn who is also a talented composer and artist] and to talented fellow artist and playlist prince Serge Wenus. Also YouGrow Promo have played their part.

December saw the final Brilliant Brent gig of 2025 at which we had two talented young female artists from Wales and India - Elli Glyn and Anahita Singh - performing. This gig series, supported with funding from Arts Council England, has delivered on our promise of involving Asian artists and audience members in Brent where they represent a significant part of the local population and yet are so under-represented in grassroots

live music. So we are pleased to have played some small part in shining a light on Asian talent as well as on grassroots talent in general over the past year.

It has been a year of fantastic new music, in our case usually discovered through our own radio show and this journal as well as Fresh on the Net. But we have also come across exciting artists through attending gigs and festivals and listening to other radio shows. Too many to mention individually but we have featured hundreds of artists in airplay and reviews. Not many tracks in December though so just 28 new releases reviewed this month

2025 has seen Trust The Doc evolve from a slightly cumbersome google doc into a more professionally organised and downloadable PDF format. The consensus seems to be 100% preference for this approach. So thanks everyone for sticking with us. And pray 2026 will be better for all of us.

NEIL MARCH & SHERRY SAHAYARAJ
31st December 2025

[Instagram](#); [BlueSky](#); [Facebook](#);
[Threads](#); [TikTok](#); [X](#)
(TTD Logos by [PaulFCook](#))

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PART ONE: NEWS AND INFORMATION: EDITION 111

LAUNCH OF OUR ONLINE MUSIC BUSINESS COURSE



TRUST THE DOC MEDIA: The UK Recorded Music Industry Stage One (Part 1)

After months of talking about this, we are ready to launch the first of our online courses. ***The UK Recorded Music Industry Stage One*** will consist of two slideshow-style PDF documents and a video that participants will need to go through in detail before submitting a 4,000 word written document on a subject of their own choice that is relevant to the course.

Successful applicants will receive a CPD-approved certificate but, more to the point, they will receive a wealth of information about how the industry works and how to navigate its various elements. In order to put affordability at the top of our priorities, we are only charging £150 to apply which is less than any other education providers we have come across. A lot of the material in the course mirrors what

we teach our MA and BA students. Once an individual has paid for the course, they will be sent the PDFs and video along with instructions on what they need to do. They will be able to contact us to seek advice and guidance and to check that their choice of subject is suitable for the course.

The course covers the current situation at global, national, intermediate and grassroots levels, placing the evolution of the recorded music industry in an historic context. It also looks into different areas of the business, what they do and how they function. It covers artist development, talent management, marketing, promotion and royalties collection. You can register your interest [here](#). And we can then email you with details of how to apply so you can decide whether this is something you want to do.

[THE] MUSIC OF SOUND: DYNAMIC DECEMBER !!!



L to R: Elena Trent (Flute)/Neil March (Keyboards & BVs)/Sherin (Vocals) @ The Belfry Centre, Redhill

For our band [\[The\] Music Of Sound](#), December saw us end on a little high with a third month running of encouraging stats, not just due to the level of streams but due to the numbers saving our music to libraries, adding us to personalised playlists and becoming repeat listeners. 2025 has been our most exciting year since the original line-up of the band first formed to play the BBC Introducing Stage at Latitude back

in 2017. 130,000+ streams is just one part of the story.

It is not easy to pinpoint who and where your genuine 'fans' are on Spotify but the emergence of some kind of fanbase that actually continues to follow the band is gratifying in a year where we have worked so hard and committed so much of our own money to working with external marketing and promo outlets to achieve this. We hope to build on this in 2026. You can read

about our activities and see links to reviews etc. by downloading our [**EPK**](#) (Electronic Press Kit).

2025 was also a year in which we played our first little headline tour of Surrey, Sussex, Herts and London in July and then headlined Brilliant Brent [at a gig where all the acts were Asian or Asian-fronted] in October. Again, we have to build on this in 2026.

Thanks to our wonderful label **Monochrome Motif Records**, owned by friend and talented Leicester-based composer **Andrew Hartshorn**, we released seven singles this year and are currently giving our most successful track to date, ***Cold Weather Man***, another little promotional push over the winter period, helped hugely by **Serge Wenus** and his fantastic playlists. In 2026, we are planning a slightly longer tour for June. So look out for news about that in the new year.

All of which just leaves us to say a massive thank you to everyone who has supported us by downloading/streaming our music, buying the limited edition **UK Roadtrip** CD EP that Monochrome

Motif Records created to coincide with our tour, coming to see us play live, putting us on at gigs and posting generously about us on social media.

Also our gratitude to all the people who have played us on their radio shows, written about us in journals and blogs, interviewed us or put us on their Spotify playlists. In these respects, we must single out **Del Owusu**, **Serge Wenus**, **Michelle Ward** and **John Serrano** for their amazing support. Happy New Year everyone and let's hope 2026 is an amazing year for everyone and for all the best reasons.



[The] Music Of Sound in *Butterfly Heart* Video

BRILLIANT BRENT: GREAT GIG, POOR ATTENDANCE



Elli Glyn @ Brilliant Brent



Anahita Singh @ Brilliant Brent

The final Brilliant Brent @ The North London Tavern of 2025, on Sunday 7th December, saw two very special performances by Welsh singer-songwriter and BBC Introducing artist **Elli Glyn** and up and coming Indian singer-songwriter **Anahita Singh** (accompanied for some of the set by pianist **Sid**). See the pics above.

Both wowed the audience with the quality of their voices and songs. The audience that did attend were wonderful and highly supportive. Also our versatile and talented sound engineer **Alex Laertis** decided to surprise the audience with an impromptu performance of a couple of his own songs to warm things up, demonstrating his talent too.

Sadly, the event and everyone involved were let down by poor ticket sales. Once again, a great many promises turned out to be hollow and ticket sales were the worst we have ever encountered in eight and a half years of putting on regular gigs. It will probably be the last one we put on there. At least, we will be able to remember those stunning performances. Elli singing a traditional Christmas song in Welsh is a highlight that will stay with us.

Big thanks also to **Tom Barry** who again helped out on the door and assisted Alex with setting everything up. Big thanks also to those who did buy tickets and were a lovely, supportive audience.

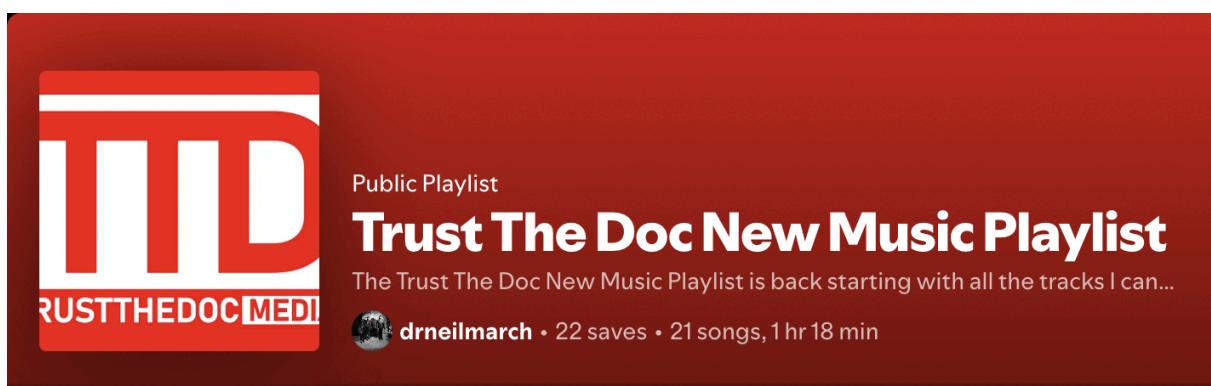
TRUST THE DOC RADIO: UPDATE



The [Trust The Doc Radio Show](#) goes out to a lovely, lively and engaged audience every Saturday at 5PM UK time and mixes the best current grassroots artists with the best established ones plus some fun features that get the audience involved and enable Neil to play some classics. The two hours always fly by.

If you aren't familiar with the show, come and check it out at 5PM UK

Time every Saturday on <https://exilefm> or catch the podcast over the ensuing 7 days on <https://exilefm.com/podcasts/trust-the-doc-radio-47>. Also please like, follow and stream the [Trust The Doc New Music Playlist](#) on Spotify which we keep updating with tracks that are on our radio show playlist (if available to stream) [here](#). Also join us live on Saturday 3rd January for Part 2 of the [Best Of 2025](#) show.



PART TWO: REVIEWS OF NEW MUSIC

December saw less new releases than usual so, after November's 66 reviews of new albums, EPs and singles, there are only 28 in this month's issue. But there are more

features and articles than usual as we focus not just on the month but the year in music and related topics. So do check out Part 3 for that extra material.

ALBUMS & EPs



The versatile Polish artist and champion of fellow independents [Serge Wenus](#) has a new album out called *Other Side Of The Mirror (Second Version)*. Serge has been impressing listeners to our radio show with recent releases, some of which can be found on this collection. It opens with the recent single **Funky Town** (with **Adrian Smith**) and no, this is not the Lipps Inc Disco classic but it *is* a punchy, danceable track with a big choppy beat, Prince-like cinematic backdrop and Serge's instantly recognisable voice in centre stage, semi-theatrical while the bass pops around him and some tasty lead guitar appears mid-track. Then we are into another recent single, the half-time, dreamy synthwave of **Bluebirds**. The beat is crisp while the keys float around the mix and a clever echo effect adds to the otherworldliness of Serge's vocals. Title track **Other Side Of The**

Mirror (Halloween Song) follows; again a recent single, tongue-in-cheek with its dramatic dark lyrics set against swirling strings that appear and disappear while the persistent beat and single keyboard chords provide the foundations.

Thunder (Is Inside You) includes **Najka** whose breathy, expressive vocals provide the perfect foil for Serge's deeper tones on a song that has an enigmatic, mystical night-time aura, making smart use of a three chord figure and staccato synth bass. **Hey You It's Coming** picks up the pace with some big lush chords, power-driven beat. The verses have an intensity that is contrasted by the epic feel of the chorus and hook. **Nasty** is more laid back with a smooth 80s feel, the chords changing over a kind of ostinato bass and yearning vocals. There are some very cool

production ideas at play here. **Kiss Me** continues a similar mood while **Sexual Free** is slightly trippier and has a catchy little synth riff that comes and goes. The dreamy vibe works well.

Then we are into the familiar territory of the synth-funk drive of **Miami Chicago** which has lit up our radio show in recent times and has such a movie soundtrack aura. The album ends with **Where Do We Go**. It starts with sweet strings and a little guitar melody before a crisp beat takes it in a new direction. Serge's vocals are measured and reverberant while major and minor chord shifts evolve around him and more sweet melody figures come in on the synths. It runs to nearly six minutes of nuanced instrumental ideas that complement the vocals and keep events moving; a fitting finale to a creative and contrasting set of songs that underline Serge's ability to subsume a range of influences, past and present into a thoroughly contemporary and refreshingly individual style and sound.

December has also seen a new EP from Spain-based Merseysider **Stephen Lewis** aka [Exposed Brick](#). **Low Skies** has six tracks including the recent singles **Autumn** and **Another Woman**. This is significant in a sense because they offer two sides of Stephen's musical and

creative personality and the EP consolidates that expansion of his sound and style. There are also two bonus tracks with different versions of tracks on the EP and it is mastered by the super talented Mark L Beazley (aka **Rothko**).

It kicks off with **Another Woman** with its repeating hookline, consistent beats, drone-like bass and slightly edgy synth figure accompanying Stephen's highly distinctive vocals. It's a stirring start. **Bob** then takes us into major key with one chord playing in suspension while a buzzing low synth melody dances around it. The vocals and melodic style here have echoes of fellow Merseysider Black (Colin Vearncombe, sadly no longer with us). The key change and addition of upper string sounds is clever and there are goose-bumping chord ideas at play. The song deals with the death of Stephen's brother-in-law and he achieves a dreamy, otherworldly atmosphere in a really beautiful and moving way.

Low Skies is introduced with a foghorn-like blast of synth and spoken word female voice. What follows places a strong drone under a quite cinematic exploration with some subtle dissonances spicing up the aura. Then it's the poppier **Jericho Lane** with a bit of Depeche Mode about it but also shades of

more contemporary acts like Nation Of Language and Working Mens Club. Next it's the unstintingly beautiful piano-dominated ***Autumn*** reminding us of the impressive quality of Stephen's upper range. The official final track is ***Stuck***, an unusual instrumental with harmonised synth figures bouncing and bumping around the sparse backdrop, a soundtrack to what Stephen describes as '... the isolated & bucolic existence now led by South Liverpool'. It includes field recordings that emphasise that post-industrial backdrop. The two bonus tracks are a lovely extended mix of ***Bob*** and a clever instrumental rendition of ***Low SKies***.

Once again Exposed Brick has delivered a cohesive and complete sounding set of short stories that demonstrate the breadth and quality of his writing, production and vocal skills along with his thoughtful and sophisticated observations on the place he grew up in and its often less than happy history. All the tracks are strong but I particularly love ***Bob*** and ***Autumn***, both tracks that are superbly conceived and very moving.

I was delighted to receive an email from the super talented **Chloë March** announcing her first new material in five years. ***Wintering***

Snow is a 5-track EP described, in the accompanying press release, as '... imbued with melancholy romanticism, magic realism and a deep undertow of grief'. ***Winter Twin*** sets the scene, rapid harmonised arpeggios and a shuffly beat accompanying Chloë's instantly recognisable, distinctive and beautiful voice. The feel is dreamy, drifting and definitely wintery. The ideas expand gradually, more voices playing off against one another and long deeper notes adding to the aura. It is oddly affecting and emotional despite its impressionistic sensibility; a truly impactful opener. ***Under Snow*** offers a complete contrast, soft semi-classical piano accompanying a folkier melody with some ethereal backing vocals responding in ghostly fashion. There is perhaps a hint of Emily Hall about this short but lovely track.

Minster Bell does have bell-like sounds playing a sparse figure against upper register vocals. It is immediately evocative and has a sadness that I can't put my finger on but I feel it all the same. The tracked vocals add to this sense as enigmatic synths somehow make the major chords that sometimes permeate the arrangement seem even sadder. Chloë's ability to shred my emotions is astonishing at times. Staccato percussive synth

chords and stuttering echoes introduce **No Loving Face**. The reverberant, low-mixed backing vocals remind me of Elizabeth Fraser and have the same semi-classical beauty, tinged with the rueful, raw beauty of Chloë's voice with all its timbres and textures. She manages to create so much with so little at times. Even though it is never expressed, there is a death-like aura that is difficult to articulate; as if the songs are trying to tell us to no longer mourn. **Wolvy** rounds it off with mystical chords like ghostly voices on the wind. The lyrics, which also deal with memories of someone she used to meet in the forest, emphasise this same sense of sadness and mourning of some kind of passing that I cannot escape from.

The entire EP has an otherworldly sense. Chloë's expertise in picking

POP NOODLES



It's always good news when fellow FOTN mod and TTD favourite [Mia Wilks](#) has a new track out and **L.Y.A (Love You Always) (Liar)** is a snappy triplet time pop track that showcases Mia's vocal range,

out evocative piano chords, ambient backdrops and nuanced passages of musical invention reinforces the sense of lives and places gone and available to us only as heartbreak memories. It is almost unbearable at times because I had not expected to be so emotionally affected by this EP. At the same time, it is compelling listening because it is rare to hear music so beautifully written, performed and sung. What an extraordinary talent Chloë March is.

especially her agile upper register. Her voice dexterously dances around a detailed mix, supported by some cleverly configured harmonies and translucent but intricate instrumentation. Lyrically

she dishes it out to a dishonest ex while also setting out an instantly

catchy and inviting melody. Great track in every department.

ALT ROCK & INDIE



Birmingham's [Layla Tutt](#) brings the noise on *Sha La La*. It is slightly confusing as to whether Layla is a solo artist or a trio (going by the pics on the Soundcloud page). But either way, this has shades of Patti Smith jamming with Dream Wife while The Mysterines bring ingredients. This is bristling with energy, powered by fuzztone guitars and underlying bass and drums while the female vocal is punchy, alto range and full of character. Meanwhile tunes, riffs and contrasts bounce around in an agreeable collage of positive sounds.

[Soft Cotton County](#) return with *Soft Rain*. This has a laid back, reflective feel, male and female voices an octave apart like Saint Etienne in a mash with The Dream Academy while Paddy McAloon brings ingredients (or something like that anyway). The combination of legato keys, chopping and melodic guitar lines and consistent bassline and beat provide a wintery but warm backdrop. The melody is the highlight here but it

all hangs together agreeably and with an air of accomplishment. Somerset's Lara aka [Never The Bridle](#) offers us another side of her musical direction on *All In The Mind*. In a mid-paced playful triplet time, she swaps the usual fuzztone power chords for acoustic guitar and creates a clever and fluid multi-tracked vocal round in which harmonised figures play off against more harmonised figures. There is a sense of buoyant beings bouncing around in circular motion. Engaging and original.

Literally the day before writing this review, I (Neil) ran into **Ming** from [Mi.el](#) in North West London and she told me the band had just played a couple of exciting gigs including one at the Sebright Arms. Meanwhile **Grain Of Sand** had landed in my FOTN in-box. Mi.el are the Belgian-British Indie act mainly consisting of **Ming** and **Ellie** (sometimes augmented by live drums). They also played a great live set at one of our gigs earlier in 2025. **Grain Of Sand** is intriguingly individual. The drum machine kicks

things off with an unusual beat before the guitar and bass bring an Eastern air in a reverberant and kaleidoscopic interplay. The vocals are lower range in the verse but higher and more ethereal in the chorus. It has a great middle section too with crashing guitar and melodic bass. Shades of Lush

and a little of Breeders in the versus while the chorus is more in shoegazey territory but I could probably pick out a load of other vague references too! Importantly, this is inventive, atmospheric and refreshingly individual in melodic style, structure and sound.

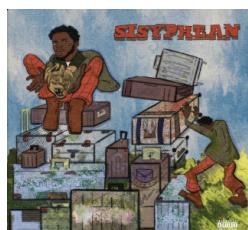
BEATS, RHYTHMS & RHYMES



Flying in from Rio are [**Dub Tropico**](#) with the trippy dub of **Never Sell Your Soul**. A sweet sounding female vocal drops in and out amid a sea of dub effects, minor key

chords and spaced out production. It is oddly rueful in feel but also has an irresistible groove and fluidity that makes for compelling listening.

SOULFUL SENSIBILITIES



Summer may be long past in the UK but, for Jonesboro, USA artist [**Obum Neme**](#), this seems not to be the case if **Day By Day** is any indication. A laid back groove and sunny chords set the scene for a mix of soulful reflective vocals and correspondingly thoughtful rap. Obum Neme takes us to hazy late summer vibes, lightly suggestive of

a jazz undercurrent to his R'n'B/Hip Hop hybrid. A track to lose yourself in.

Rising star of R'n'B [**Akia**](#) hits us with **A Minute**, courtesy of our friends at Plugged In PR. A clever half time backbeat comes and goes as dreamy keyboard chords float and flutter around Akia's

distinctive, dynamic and expressive vocal performance. Catchy, sensual

and soulful, this is really quite lovely.

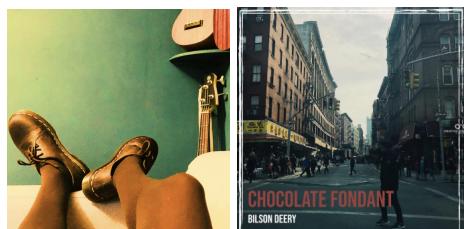
CLUB CULTURE



Somdip Dey aka [Intelidey](#) mixes his trademark big reverberant take on House with a distinctly Eastern vibe, helped by an uncredited but impressive female vocalist, on ***Dysmorphia***. This has a lovely bouncy synth bass playing in

syncopated fashion against the persistent crunching beat while swathes of synths float around the mix and the melody takes centre stage. Floor filla for sure but also a track you can chill to and appreciate its cinematic qualities.

SINGER-SONGWRITERS



[Rochelle Anne Swanson](#) brings us ***Minimal Animal*** which has an unusually lengthy explanation on Soundcloud that references Kandinsky. It is an intriguing track, built around arpeggio figures on the piano and Rochelle Anne's voice, soft and playful, multi-tracked. The lyrics are descriptive and interesting and the sparse atmosphere and contrasts between dynamics, uses of harmonies and additional keyboard colour all add to the aura

of this refreshingly creative and individual track.

From Galway on Ireland's West Coast comes [Bilson Deery](#), a singer-songwriter who has put three new tracks out on digital platforms of which ***Chocolate Fondant*** is probably our favourite (although all three are well worth checking out). This track has a driving energy, It kicks off with a fading in foghorn-like sound followed by a striking tune and guitar chords that are soon joined by some punchy bass and crisp

beat. The chorus is particularly catchy and his voice has a distinct character that is engaging. Also

check out the jaunty pop of ***Laissez Faire*** which shows another aspect of his sound and style.

SYNTHEMATIC



We (as in [The] Music Of Sound) have recently had the privilege of working creatively with the super talented young Indian artist **Sharon Katta** and he treated us to the maiden spin of his seven and a half minute epic ***Death Said, Breathe*** when he had literally just finished the production and mastering of it. He has now made three bitesize chunks of the track available and easy to fit into radio schedules but we will probably put the full length version onto the playlist for the radio show because it deserves to be heard. This is Sharon at his most intensely creative; emotionally charged, full of invention as the track navigates its way through contrasting sections, picking guitars playing off against cinematic synths, striking ambient effects (especially the thunder cracks and crashing waves) and Sharon using the different timbres and dynamics of his voice to emphasise phrases and present, at times, his despair at the world that confronts him. This is an

outstanding work and I hope it will get some recognition and reviews that bring Sharon Katta to the attention of a bigger audience and media. Talent like his is rare and should be celebrated.

Helen and **Matthew** aka Leeds duo ***Lines Of Flight*** return with ***Distant Warning***. The crisp beat and big synth chords remind me a little of Talk Talk. Helen's vocals lead the line but the pair intertwine and play call and response, bolstered by multi-tracked harmonies in this slightly moody, darker example of their robust Synthwave sound. It is characteristically catchy though and has a punchy energy that is very appealing.

The very likeable **Tim Blackburn** aka ***Mistrust*** has released a new version of his track ***Life*** to raise money for The Whitechapel Centre in Liverpool and other homelessness charities. His instantly recognisable deep bass voice and deadpan delivery

delivers a thoroughly engaging melody against a lovely synth electronic backdrop that has echoes of Kraftwerk in a mash with OMD while Future Island look on. The track is interspersed with spoken word samples of homeless

charity representatives talking about the bleakness of the current situation; a stark contrast to the calm, soothing nature of the song which is heartwarming and rather beautiful.

ELECTRONIC & AMBIENT



D+VE brings us + *The Atoms Flowed Like Rivers*, an out and out ambient piece in which a watery sound runs quietly throughout and for a long time at the end but mostly this is a series of crescendoing and decrescendoing chords played on synths and mixing in with enigmatic ambient sounds. The atmosphere it creates is fluid and interesting and it holds my attention for the duration.

TTD favourite and friend **Hannya White** makes a welcome return with *Slow My Mind - Devil Threw The Night*. This builds slowly around a pulsating beat, ambient noise, heavy breath sounds and Hannya's spoken word, low in the mix and reverberant, ricocheting around the mix. It is less fluid than her usual tracks in that it maintains one mood for most of the duration although there are moments when

the beat suddenly bursts into a spray of rapid semi-quavers. There is a breakdown late in the track and a clever increasing of the intensity around additional sounds and spooky vocals in the final stretch. Keeps us hooked for the full five minutes and three seconds.

Another pleasant surprise in recent weeks was the arrival in my radio in-box of a new single by original Electro-Industrial South East London legends and pioneers **Test Dept.** The band, formed at Goldsmiths, University Of London (where I would study two and a half decades later for my Mmus. and PhD), were peers of 23 Skidoo (with whom they had the most in common) and others like Cabaret Voltaire and Throbbing Gristle.

State Of Affairs [John Peel Session (15-08-1983) 2025

Remaster] is, as the title suggests, a recording from a 1983 John Peel Show session on BBC Radio 1. What is particularly extraordinary is that it sounds so fresh and relevant 42 years later. A spliced up, echoing spoken word sample is set against a combination of crashing,

reverberating ambience and their trademark tribal metallic drumming while vibrato organ plays long tones and overlaps. Events are fluid and it builds in intensity and texture, creating a trippy, hypnotic atmosphere but with characteristically hard edge.

CONTEMPORARY CLASSICAL AND SOUND ART



The always amazing [**Nwando Ebizie**](#) teams up with **Docklands Sinfonia** and **Junior Guildhall** on ***Carry The Other***. This is a goose bumping journey from dark deep strings, almost Gorecki-like, taking us gradually through rising semi-tones into an enveloping sound world that blends that late twentieth century post-minimalist aura with elements of impressionism and some subtle dissonances before a single note ushers in a dreamier neo-romantic section that still finds room for harmonic ambiguity and surprise. This is so brilliantly orchestrated and beautifully interpreted by the musicians. The changes of mood, feel and harmonic language evolve so effortlessly and the switches between dark and light are exquisite. One of the best

contemporary classical tracks we have heard in the whole of 2025. A masterpiece.

This is not actually a new release but I only discovered it in late December. The Renaissance era English composer **William Byrd** is someone whose music struck me with its harmonic language in my early years as a student of composition. So I was interested to hear [**Shani Diluka**](#)'s thoughtful and beautifully executed rendition of Byrd's ***Pavana Lachrymae (after Dowland's Flow My Tears)***. It sounds more Baroque than I would have expected with its relentless contrapuntal themes of call and response but it is enchanting as is the remainder of the 4-track ***Renaissance*** EP it is taken from which also includes works by

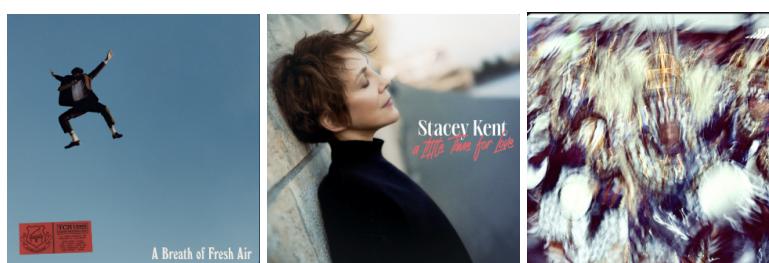
Domenico Scarlatti, JS Bach and John Eccles.

Continuing on a theme of new interpretations of older music, Orit Wolf has a new version of **Claude Debussy's *Arabesque No 1***, not one of his most performed works. In one sense, it is unlike his more adventurous works, using a comparatively conventional romantic harmonic language. But the dynamism of the arpeggios as they spread outwards across the piano sets the scene for a jazz-like B Section; not an analogy Debussy would have welcomed given his disdain for Jazz but then he always despised his music being defined as Impressionist due to his dislike of that school of art too but, in reality, no single composer more perfectly fitted that description. In

this respect, *Arabesque No 1* is another example of this with its dreamy harmonic ideas, continuously unfolding arpeggios rising into the upper register of the piano. Orit Wolf shows great command of the piano and provides an expressive and accomplished version of the piece.

Italian composer and pianist Emmanuele Pellegrini brings us ***The Words It Takes To Say I Love You***. This is very Erik Satie influenced with the rhythmic and chordal style of one of his *Gymnopédies*. But it utilises a series of rich chords while the right hand melody covers a lot of ground. He is not looking to shake any trees here but it is skillfully done all the same.

JAZZ & INTERNATIONAL JOURNEYS



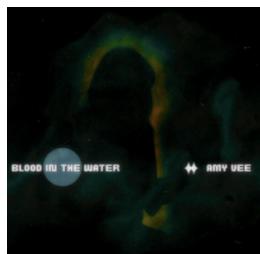
From Charlotte, New Carolina comes Sean Mason, a Grammy winning Jazz pianist and composer, joined here by a band that includes breathy Getz-like Saxophone, buoyant Double Bass and inventive drums. ***Secrets*** is breaking no

ground but it is a beautifully played lilting, swinging slice of late night City bar jazz with spine-tingling piano chords, accomplished and understated playing and a great interband chemistry. It's impossible not to love.

[**Stacey Kent**](#)'s *The Shadow Of Your Smile* is a classic jazz ballad with deep, resonating piano chords and her distinctive alto range vocals, penetrating and expressive. As the song develops, she stretches out dynamically, her vocals and the lyrics slowly shredding my emotions before haunting sax adds the final touches on a thoroughly lovely track and the ensuing piano solo is achingly beautiful too. Sometimes music is just timeless.

The astonishing [**Carwen Ellis & Rio**](#)

FOLK & COUNTRY FARE



Australian singer-songwriter [**Amy Vee**](#) brings us the impressive *Blood In The Water*. It kicks off with some shimmering Joni Mitchell-ish guitar and Amy's striking voice setting the scene. But the mood soon changes considerably as a shuffly, scratchy beat takes matters in a different direction and

[**18**](#) return, in collaboration with vocalist [**Miriam Isaac**](#), on *Tonnau Ar Tonnau* [which translates from Welsh to English as *Waves Upon Waves*]. This is less Latinesque than some of their music, displaying a Funk sensibility with lovely fluent instrumental play and gorgeous multi-tracked female and male vocals although there are still some distinctly South American touches in the structure of the verses. This is energetic, sassy, soulful and irresistible.

darker synths play off against the guitar as the arrangement fills out. Suddenly the gentle opening gives way to growing intensity and ideas and sounds come and go, keeping events fluid and fascinating. So much invention in one track. This is a real gem.

PART THREE: OTHER COMMENTARIES

GRASSROOTS MUSIC: HAVE WE FORGOTTEN WHAT MUTUAL SUPPORT LOOKS LIKE? (by Neil)



Over the past eight or nine years of involvement in promoting, supporting and shining a light on grassroots music, I have perhaps been guilty of creating my own cliché. Namely the phrase 'support is a two-way street'. But I have used that phrase less often in recent times. Maybe because I

have been aware of the danger of sounding like a stuck record! But also maybe because the notion that support is indeed a two-way street has begun to feel a bit phoney at times.

THE CRISIS IN GRASSROOTS LIVE MUSIC: HOW IT HAPPENED

The past few years have been challenging for grassroots music's creative entrepreneurs and [occasional] influencers. It is difficult to pinpoint when the change first happened. Maybe in 2022 when Boris Johnson's government decided to viciously cut funding to Arts Council England with the cynical and disingenuous narrative about redistributing money away from London and towards the regions, resulting in that organisation cutting off the oxygen supply to lots of not-for-profit projects that were supporting grassroots music. In fact, as subsequent statistics have proved, it meant cutting funding to London despite it having the biggest population of any English region and by far the most active projects and then also cutting it everywhere else! There were no winners in this disgraceful episode as the Tories, formerly and quite incorrectly portrayed as the party of the economy, sabotaged the UK's world-leading creative industries.

Then there was the double whammy of the cost of living crisis and the unprecedented hike in energy bills that the same government, by then under Rishi Sunak, did literally nothing to mitigate or regulate. The fact that

there were high ranking government ministers with shares in the utilities may just have been a coincidence. You decide!

There is a common myth that COVID 19 was the primary cause of falling attendances at grassroots gigs and closures of venues. In fact, in the immediate post-COVID period, attendances were high as people celebrated being allowed out again. The period between 6th May 2021 [when, contrary to claims often wrongly relayed on BBC Radio 6 Music, Trust The Doc Media *actually* put on the very first post-COVID outdoor live event in London] and the following summer was one of the best we ever experienced as promoters of regular monthly gigs in the Capital and beyond.

Then one day I turned up for the beginning of soundcheck at a venue I had been promoting at since that first post-COVID gig to find the finance person, who I very rarely saw, having a meltdown over receiving an electricity bill for £12,000! It turned out to be the beginning of the end for that venue. 2023 was the toughest year we had encountered. Two trends emerged. One was generally lower ticket sales. The other was most people leaving it until hours before the event to buy tickets, making it impossible to predict how many

staff the venue needed to put on the bar and causing untold stress in general.

2025 has now been the worst year since the business began. Even when we offer the cheapest ticket prices in London, people still don't want to pay. They will continue to post on social media praising us for our tireless promotion of grassroots music and showering us with compliments. But, while I would not suggest even for a moment that what we do can be remotely compared to NHS workers, there is a slight analogy in the way that, just as people pointed out that clapping once a week does not pay the bills, so elaborate praise on social media does not mitigate the gaping hole in our bank balances from being fair to artists, sound engineers, door and stage staff etc. by paying them when we are incurring massive losses all the time. And, if the Arts Council is in such a mess that it cannot even award us the most modest amounts in grants to help us continue 'supporting grassroots music' (the name they have ironically given their fund), we just cannot keep doing this.

Audience apathy, coupled with some artists making precious little effort to help us promote their gigs and venues doing even less (not even putting the gigs on their

socials or listings for example), means that praise has become hollow, insulting even. Of course there are some folks for whom there are appreciable reasons why they cannot go out to gigs but, for the rest, praising us while no longer coming out to support our events? No thanks, save your words. We may be about to become just another once highly active promoter of grassroots live music who threw in the towel. Not-for-profit we are and always have been. But we are NOT a charity!

THE RACE TO THE BOTTOM AMONGST ARTISTS

This brings me to another issue of great disappointment. One of the other ways in which we support grassroots music is through our involvement in independent not-for-profit (i.e. free) media. That includes Fresh on the Net, a platform always run by volunteers, shining a light on independent artists for well over a decade so far. There was a time when scores of people, many of them fellow artists, would turn out to vote every weekend at the Listening Post. But the numbers have fallen dramatically since Tom Robinson took a back seat, no longer presenting the BBC Introducing Mixtape on 6 Music and no longer leading Fresh on the Net.

Despite this, the standard of submissions has been as high as ever and, thanks to Del Owusu assembling the most diverse team of moderators we have ever had [in terms of gender, gender identity, ethnicity, disability, age and musical outlook], we have had the most diverse Listening Posts in the history of the platform over recent times. Yet where are all those artists who used to support others? The two-way street appears to be closed for ongoing maintenance work. More and more artists seem only concerned with themselves and their own projects. This is reflected in the way so many of them only vote if they have a track in the list that weekend. It is sad, short-sighted and silly.

We need one another more than ever in grassroots music. And, as we have seen time and time again, if you are prepared to give out a lot of love through bothering to comment positively on others' content, share one another's posts and contribute to message threads, you get that love back in spades. But, by the same token, if you gatecrash others' threads and try to make them about yourself or you only ever post in order to talk about yourself, you quickly become noted as a narcissistic bore and then you really are on your own.

There never has been anything to gain from treating fellow artists as competition. What would you imagine you are competing for? It is not as if there is one golden ticket with the words 'lucrative record deal' printed inside that only one lucky band or artist can stumble upon! The music industry has not modelled itself on Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory!

I am pleased to say that the regular listeners to my Trust The Doc Radio Show are a positive example of mutual support, using the threads on X and Bluesky to praise one another's tracks and be supportive. Even then, I have noted certain individuals who are reluctant ever to say anything nice about certain others. I won't be naming either, so don't bother asking, but they know who they are! In the main though, it is that sharing of love and support by artists and fans of artists that contributes to the show being such a joy to present as it heads for its sixth anniversary.

It is not a competition, people. We are all on the same side, battling away with what little resources we have; trying to expand our profiles and fanbases. We could do small things to help one another out; support slots at gigs in locations where we are not established enough to pull a crowd (which

could then be reciprocated), a review in a blog or journal that has a genuine readership and so on, a play on a radio show we host, being added to a playlist on Spotify etc. You are not damaging your own chances of success by helping others to reach more people. On the contrary, you will only benefit from your kindness if kindness is genuinely part of your ethos.

SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT

That brings me to the next issue we need to address. At grassroots level, partnership and collaboration are key components of success. As a live music promoter, I have always accepted that it is ultimately my responsibility to get people to come to the gigs I curate. But I can't do it alone. When you try to build a regular night you put on at a venue, the dream is that the gig develops its own regular audience that keeps coming and encourages others to join them because they know what they are getting and they love the whole vibe and experience. In such an ideal scenario, it becomes easier to put on artists with little or no following and expose them to new audiences. We had that for a good while at Vanishing Point, both at the Ivy House (pre-COVID) and then at AMP Studios.

Such a situation does not arrive overnight though. When we are promoting a gig, we need everyone to play their part. So if we are paying the artists, the sound engineer, the door manager and the poster designer-artist as well as putting a bit of money into marketing the event and producing a series of social media posts (reels, carousels, influencer videos, trailers, stories, general posts etc.), it is reasonable to expect that the artists performing at the gig will make an effort too by publicising the gig on their socials, storying it and reaching out to their followers in the crucial final period running up to the event.

Sadly, a lot of artists do not seem to understand this. Worse, some fail to tell you they have accepted another nearby gig within days of yours that will mean people are likely to go to that one instead of yours despite all the work you are putting into promoting the night. There is nothing more soul-destroying than looking at an artist's Instagram page in the days leading up to the gig and discovering there is literally no mention that they are even playing your gig but there is a post rallying people to come to another one in the same area days later.

There are several reasons why this approach is foolish. Firstly, artists

should not be playing multiple gigs in the same locations. When I speak to artists and their managers at a much higher level in the industry, they tell me they will only play a city like London a maximum of three times in any calendar year and usually less. That way, they can sell the venue out on each occasion. So, if a band who are regularly on the A-List of national radio stations and are playing headline tours across well-known UK venues limit their appearances in any one geographical area usually to twice a year in order not to spread attendances too thinly, why would you think you should be playing the same places twice or three times a week?

There is also an issue of respect. I have long been an advocate of being able to take action to stop so-called ‘promoters’ from operating pay-to-play policies or imposing 30 day [either side] restrictions on artists playing other venues in the same area as theirs. However, I also think it is highly disrespectful to grassroots music promoters when artists accept a paid gig but fail to tell the promoter they are playing another gig nearby in the same period. And it is both lazy and disrespectful to make no effort to encourage people to come to the gig. I wouldn’t go and watch my

favourite band that often so expecting your friends to keep coming out to see you is unrealistic..

All these traits add up to an enormous sense of entitlement and it is not a good look! Artists should show support to those who are trying to help and support them and they should also be making an effort, as a matter of course, to promote the gigs they are given and encourage as many people as possible to come. It is a partnership at grassroots level. Without that, it just becomes an exhausting labour of love for promoters and, in the end, they will become disillusioned and simply stop putting gigs on at all. We, at Trust The Doc Media, are close to that point right now.

WHAT NEXT?

The future of grassroots live music is in the balance. Everyone involved has to decide how much they genuinely want it to survive. It needs the following things to happen.

Promoters need to not be exploiting artists with cynical pay-to-play policies and other restrictive practices. But artists also need to be fair to ethical promoters and not kick them in the teeth or refuse to make an effort. Audiences also need to decide

whether they want grassroots gigs enough to get out of their armchairs and come out to support the sector. They could also help everyone by not leaving it until the eleventh hour to buy tickets. Praise in the form of social media posts is not enough and, worse, it starts to grate on the teeth when it becomes a substitute for actual support.

The Arts Council's 'Supporting Grassroots Music' team also needs to take a collective look in the mirror and ask whether that name has become heavily ironic and not in an amusing way. When I see them consistently rejecting grant applications from all the people in our grassroots music community who actually *are* 'supporting grassroots music' (and yes, we know most of them personally), I am bound to ask who the money is going to instead. Should we be concerned about this? Some of the feedback I have seen for rejected applications has been utterly disgraceful and shows an alarming

lack of basic competence in their understanding of what the applications are about and what grassroots music is [and, more importantly, what it *needs*]. The UK is not exactly awash with grant funding for our sector. Baroness Hodge's timely report may at least do some good in this respect.

As for those of us who have kept the flag flying through all the heartache and disappointment of the past decade, including a Labour Government seemingly more concerned with demonising hard working immigrants in a pathetic attempt to follow the Farage narrative than with reversing Tory cuts, the future looks very uncertain. Do all those people praising our commitment to supporting grassroots *live* music want us to continue doing so? If so, tell us why we should bother! Are you going to start coming to gigs again? I guess it comes down to how much of a flying f*** you genuinely give.

LIVE STREAMS - A FURTHER EVALUATION

Mark Gee: Curator & Promoter of 24:1900 Festival & Founder of 122 Music Management follows his last article for us with an update on live streams



A few months ago, Neil and Sherry kindly let me offer [my opinion](#) on the potential of live-streaming, and particularly whether it's something we in the grassroots/emerging community should be considering. Since then, we've held the second edition of our online music festival, [24:1900](#). So here I am again.

I'll be honest; I'm still not quite sure how I feel about this year's 24:1900. What I do know is that, as in 2024, we had a stellar lineup of

independent international artists and some seriously impressive sets.

For the uninitiated, 24:1900 is a 24-hour global online festival celebrating independent artists across every time zone. Each act performs at 19:00 in their local region, creating a rolling, music-led showcase connecting musicians and fans around the world.

As the creator, organiser, promoter, editor, scheduler, basically the

stressed-out monkey nut who had no hair left to lose anyway, an incredible amount of work went into making it happen.

On the surface, slow ticket sales and last-minute changes made it feel like 24:1900 hadn't gone as well as I'd hoped.

But beneath the surface, a different story emerges. Our mini highlights video pulled in loads of views — especially on the day of the event — and it's still bringing in visitors. To this day.

Our [YouTube](#) data confirmed 320 viewers during the livestream, backed up by numbers from Upstream, the platform we used to host and schedule the festival.

And then there's the human side. The part you can't stick on a spreadsheet. Many of the artists genuinely enjoyed taking part. For us, one of these talented acts will be working with us again next year. We're really looking forward to this particular project.

If you're an artist who read my last piece on TTD, you might be asking (rightly), "is there actually any point in live-streaming a gig?" My answer is still, probably, "yes".

For starters, we were running a global 24-hour stream. Not a two,

or three-act gig night. But a few lessons from the latest event might help you out.

Don't ticket your event. Stream it for free. It's better to attract as many people into your world as possible. You can still list your free event on platforms like Fatsoma or Dice, which gives you access to attendees' contact details for next time.

Of course, make full use of social media. Your audience is international, so promote widely. And don't forget Bandcamp and Bandsintown messages. You can even add the event to your Spotify Artist Pick if you're still engaging there.

Another idea worth exploring is a tip jar. But not the boring kind. For 24:1900, we ran something called [band adoptions](#). Fans paid £2 to "adopt" an artist, and in return, the artist offered a little something back. We also gave them digital adoption certificates (an idea we [bastardised](#) from the brilliant Tim Burgess). Naturally, we made sure merch and music links were pinned in the chat too.

We all know the cost of living crisis has hit the grassroots music scene hard, and audience habits are shifting. But just as podcasts took a while to take hold, I still think live

streaming — whether live or pre-recorded — has potential.

If any artists are looking to put on an online night in 2026, feel free to get in touch. Before you do, please make sure that you have read this

piece, and the one from September first. We'll then do what we can to help steer you in the right direction.

Thanks to Neil and Sherry once again for the invitation.



WHAT ARE YOU LISTENING TO?

Del Owusu: Musician, DJ and Head of Fresh on the Net, talks about what, how and why he listens to new music



This is a question that I like to ask people a lot. It's a central question in my *Tea Biscuits and a Chat* interviews. It's an ice breaker, but I genuinely like to ask.

The reason why is because I don't like to assume what people are into, as I've had that done to me and it sucks. When I joined FOTN in 2020, it opened my eyes - we get tracks from all over the world, artists who record in world class recording studios like Abbey Road to recording in a makeshift recording studio in their kitchen.

These are all different genres and skills

I don't take this into account when I'm listening to music for FOTN, in fact I have a bit of a routine. Bear in mind we get up to 200 tracks a week, and it's a mixed bag. For me it's emotional, I have to feel the song in every part of my body, whether it makes me want to sing out loud, cry like a baby, get angry, shout, punch the air I have to get that emotional connection where I have to call my friend Eddie and say hey listen to this. I don't

purposefully sit down and listen to music, I have to be doing something else. When I joined the FOTN team it was in lockdown 2020, so I used to wait for the inbox to open and then I'd go out for a walk around my local park and then I'd start picking my favourite tracks. Later on I would do it on the train journey to work while reading a book, or when I'd go shopping. If it stops me in my tracks and I have to play it again then it will go on my shortlist; it's as simple as that. There's no magic trick. Even the one song that's my track of the year for 2025 is so simple but the storytelling behind it is what touched me, both lyrically and musically. I'm not going to reveal it just yet but the first line drew me in, it had me locked in. The melody is fragile and vulnerable, the chorus just lays bare everything and I must admit I shed a few tears hearing it. Knowing the story behind it made it hit harder and I felt a personal connection to it in more ways than one. I won't reveal it just yet as, at the time of printing, I'd not finalised my show's running order for that yet. So watch out for two weeks' time!

I lead a team of moderators (mods) and they have very different tastes in music, and have very different lives - I've never been to Glastonbury, never been

signed to a label, don't hold a doctorate, have no clue about mixing and mastering, can't play guitar, and I can just about hold a note yet my team have all this and so much more. Our experiences are very much different hence why the stars align and our picks match up enough to create a listening post week in week out.

The beauty of what we do is that while we are very different it all comes together beautifully. It's hard at times because, when you are presented with so many great tracks, we still have to whittle it down to 25 tracks that you get to hear on the listening post over three days. There's no voodoo, no magic incantations you have to utter, our process is pretty transparent. The general rule about 30 seconds is pretty valid: Make your point with your track within 30 seconds otherwise people will get bored - not only that, if you have a track that's 9 minutes long and you're submitting it for radio for example it's got to be really exceptional for it to be that long otherwise I'm cutting out 2 tracks that could have had that time.

When I put together my picks I think about certain things:

1. Can I listen to it over and again?
2. Would I play it on my show?

I also have to be brutal at times, and then trust my team to pick the track I don't pick and oftentimes they have, thank God!

Everyone's got their approach, and there's no science to it, but this is the way I approach things.

2025: THE YEAR IN [NON-GRASSROOTS] MUSIC



Black Country New Road: One of the standout acts in music in 2025

One of the key tenets of the Trust The Doc Radio Show has always been that we mix playing a lot of grassroots music artists with the best current tracks by more well-known, established artists; typically but not exclusively those who make the BBC Radio 6 Music A, B and C Lists. 2025 has been an interesting year. So who have been the artists who have particularly grabbed our attention over the past twelve months.

FKA Twigs was always set to have a strong year. When she released the astonishing track *Eusexua* in late 2024 as a taster for the album of the same name that would be released in February 2025, we knew we were in for a treat. The album did not disappoint. It combined innate pop sensibilities, R'n'B, Alt Rock and a sense of drama with her penchant for colourful cinematic, often quite leftfield

vocal and instrumental concepts. Add sonic experimentation and epic production and she underlined her credentials as one of the most important, invigorating and exciting artists in the current era with sufficient substance and originality to be influential well into the future too.

She was given a run for her money by Galway's **NewDad** and **Altar**. The Alt Rock/Shoegaze band were in fine form for this second album.

Black Country New Road grabbed our single of the year accolade with the hugely creative and smart pop of **Besties**. Intentionally or not, it had moments that recalled Todd Rundgren, 10CC, The Beatles, Elastica and so much more. The instrumental elements were sophisticated and inventive and the vocal performances were dynamic, heartwarming and, in moments, quite epic too.

Norway's likeable (ask Tony Hardy) singer-songwriter **Sigrid** has been making waves for several years but it was one particular track **Jellyfish** that grabbed us by the ears and refused to let go. The talented artist certainly knows how to pen a serious hook. Meanwhile, the ever dependable **Little Simz** delivered another lyrical masterpiece in **Thief**, tearing the character of a dishonest former collaborator to

shreds in the form of a punchy, energetic slice of UK Hip Hop.

Two artists with African and Asian roots respectively took the year somewhat by storm. **Pink Pantheress** provided the soundtrack to our on-tour TikTok content with the insanely infectious **Illegal** and continued to release quality Pop with R'n'B, HipHop, Synthpop and cinematic leanings. **Miso Extra** also had a strong year with the undeniably catchy **POP** and the versatile synth and electronic pop of her appropriately named album **Earcandy**.

Others who impressed, as usual, in 2025 included **Thundercat**, **Bon Iver**, **Sudan Archives**, **Tom Misch**, **Loyle Carner**, **Fontaines DC**, **BC Camplight**, **Ezra Collective**, **HAIM**, **Mabel**, **Pigs Pigs Pigs Pigs Pigs Pigs Pigs** and Welsh artists **Gwenno** and **Adwaith**, flying the flag for Welsh Language lyrics in indie and synthpop music.

Not an outstanding year by any means but, as always, there was plenty of great music released.

Our Top 20 singles and Top 5 albums provide a snapshot of what we were most drawn to.



FKA Twigs

**TRUST THE DOC RADIO:
BEST SINGLES OF 2022**

1. Black Country New Road: Besties
2. Little Simz: Thief
3. Sigrid: Jelly Fish
4. Thundercat ft Remi Wolf: Children Of The Baked Potato
5. Pink Pantheress: Illegal
6. Bon Iver (ft Danielle Haim): If Only I Could Wait
7. Sudan Archives: DEAD
8. FKA Twigs: Striptease
9. Miso Extra: POP
10. Tom Misch & Loyle Carner: Colourblind
11. Fontaines D.C.: It's Amazing To Be Young
12. BC Camplight: A Sober Conversation
13. Adwaith: Miliwn



Pink Pantheress

14. Gwenno: Y Gath
15. Ezra Collective ft Sasha Keable: Body Language
16. HAIM: Relationships
17. Mabel: Love Me Gentle
18. Bon Iver: From
19. New Dad: Roobosh
20. Pigs Pigs Pigs Pigs Pigs Pigs Pigs: Glib Tongued

Albums Of 2022

1. FKA Twigs: Eusexua
2. NewDad: Altar
3. Miso Extra: Earcandy
4. Pink Pantheress: Fancy That
5. Black Country New Road: Forever Howlong



Sigrid



NewDad

ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND: WHAT DOES BARONESS HODGE'S REVIEW MEAN? - Neil provides the analysis

Policy paper

Arts Council England - an independent review by Baroness Margaret Hodge

Updated 19 December 2025

The publication of Baroness Margaret Hodge's report on her review of Arts Council England has drawn a mixture of headlines. The right wing press have inevitably seized on its criticisms and presented it as proof that Arts Council England is not fit for purpose. Others have focused on the recommendations and what they are likely to mean for the funding of arts activity in the coming years. Despite what the likes of the Telegraph claim, with tiresome dishonesty, arguably the most significant of Baroness Hodge's recommendations is that we need the Arts Council and replacing it would be a mistake.

Baroness Margaret Hodge

Firstly, who is Baroness Hodge? My first memory of Margaret Hodge was when she led Islington Council out of a period of political and financial recklessness, steadying the ship in the late nineteen eighties and early nineties before becoming an MP at the 1992

General Election. She was a significant figure in the period that saw the demise of the Tory Government under John Major that had, including the eleven and a half years of Margaret Thatcher's Premiership, been in power for eighteen years.

I particularly recall one televised parliamentary debate in which she demolished a hapless Tory minister, using statistical data his own department had published of which he appeared embarrassingly unaware! She was always a strong debater and orator.

Following the election of the Labour Government in 1997, she held a number of Cabinet posts including, most significantly in the context of this report, being Minister for Culture and Tourism in the final years of that administration under Gordon Brown. In opposition, she still went on to chair the Public Accounts Committee.

Her career has not been without controversy. It emerged that her complacency in the face of child abuse allegations in Islington led to those abuses not being taken seriously and she later apologised for her error of judgement. As an MP, she appeared to be critical of the treatment of UK-born citizens in relation to housing and other issues by comparison to immigrants, leading some to accuse her of playing into the hands of the racist BNP who were, at that time, the leading force on the far right. She has also been accused of defending the indefensible in relation to Israel. She identifies as a Zionist.

Despite this, she has had a largely successful career, holding a number of ministerial posts in the Blair and Brown Governments and being appointed a life peer after deciding not to stand in the last General Election. She was also tasked, by London Mayor Sadiq Khan, with reviewing the Garden Bridge project that previous Mayor and subsequent Tory PM Boris Johnson had spent considerable GLA money on developing. Her report savaged the project and concluded that taxpayers would benefit more by scrapping it and cutting their losses than by continuing with such a ridiculous vanity project. So she certainly has a track record of pulling no

punches when brought in to review a project that has been facing public criticism.

Report And Recommendations

I have read the report in full. It is very lengthy and detailed. Yet, somewhat disappointingly, there is not a single point at which it refers to the Supporting Grassroots Music fund despite that fund being decoupled from National Lottery Project Grants and given independent status within ACE's structure in August 2025. There is, however, a recommendation that ACE should reduce the number of individual funds it operates in order to streamline and simplify its processes. So that independence for Supporting Grassroots Music may prove to be shortlived. Given how it has been operated so far, that may be just as well.

The report opens with a summary of the recommendations. Probably the statement we should take most notice of is 'Whilst recognising that the fiscal constraints limit the government's ability to increase Grant in Aid funding for culture and the arts, the government can and must find innovative ways of responding urgently to the underfunding that has undermined the arts over the last decade'. In other words, the report recognises that under-funding is a problem that urgently needs addressing but

with the caveat that there is precious little money around to use for that purpose.

The opening recommendation is 'The Government must retain the Arts Council'. So Baroness Hodge has ruled out any thoughts of scrapping it and trying to put something entirely new in its place. She goes on to say that its 'Arms Length' principle must be protected against any political interference; presumably a swipe at the previous Government and its attempt to use the alleged [and utterly cynical] regionalisation of ACE funding as an attempt to win Tory support in traditionally Labour areas of the North and Midlands. She goes on to propose some tax relief initiatives that might ease the burden on cultural institutions and the use of repayable loans in some cases rather than straightforward grants.

The report states 'There should be a completely new model for funding the National Portfolio organisations'. Accordingly, Hodge recommends extending the NPO funding cycle from three to five years. This does not affect grassroots music as it applies to large projects involving key cultural institutions with national profiles. She does also propose a National Programme for Individuals that would make £30K available along with mentoring support for

talented individuals from lower income backgrounds; mirroring the manifesto commitment to bridge the class gap in arts access. There is also stuff about appointing people with roles in local areas, linking artists and communities.

Some good points are made about how many local Councils have simply stopped committing any resources to supporting the arts. She could have made more of the inconsistencies this has created, a postcode lottery in terms of access to support in different areas. She has not commented on the contradiction between councils supporting local live music initiatives but then granting permission for houses to be built next to them so entitled privileged homeowners can complain about a venue carrying out its core business of hosting live music and get it shut down even though they have chosen to move there!

One statement we can all hopefully agree with is 'The significant cut in public funding coupled with huge cost pressures has created immense challenges for organisations and individuals working in the sector. A failure to respond could be deeply damaging to one of the most precious jewels in Britain's crown: our world class artistic and cultural offer'. The issue is how the current

Government intends resolving this problem, largely created by its predecessor.

She comments on the problems caused by COVID 19 but, like so many politicians and journalists, she over-estimates the impact of COVID and fails to acknowledge that it was the double whammy of the cost of living crisis and the hike in energy bills that actually caused the current crisis in attendances at grassroots live music events. In fact, the immediate post-lockdown period was one of the best for grassroots promoters in the past twenty years. She does rightly insert 'Many expressed frustration about the decline in public funding to the Arts. Everybody recognised the importance of ACE to maintain and grow cultural work and to support individual artists, ensuring a pipeline of new talent'

She goes on to say 'Many people spoke highly of dedicated and committed individuals at ACE with whom they had interacted and worked. There was praise for some of the regional directors and for some relationship managers. There was also an understanding of the challenges that ACE itself faces because of funding cuts'. Again, I strongly echo this sentiment. While I have been vocal in criticising appalling feedback from panels and decisions clearly based on not

reading the applications properly, I have nevertheless had good support and help from ACE team members who are sympathetic and do their best to point us to where we can obtain useful advice. It is ignorant and ridiculous to pour scorn on hard working staff when they have been stripped of resources and are serially under-staffed. I would, however, have liked to see feedback on the panels and the process of decision making and provision of feedback as I believe these are areas where considerable improvement is needed. Panels for a specific fund should consist of people who have a working knowledge and experience of that area of the arts.

I once complained that feedback on an application suggested panel members did not understand how grassroots music worked. I was astonished to be told there was no guarantee my application would be looked at by anyone who had knowledge of grassroots music! So a decision, say, on whether to fund a series of diverse live events in key areas supported by music industry education and mentoring might be made by an architect, a poet and a sculptor! That is like me being asked to judge the technical merits of advanced pottery!

One interesting observation in the report is the assertion that 'People

felt they had to tick all the ACE boxes to secure funding, rather than explain their artistic strategies and ambitions. People viewed ACE as a command-and-control funding body, rather than a leader and facilitator in the cultural landscape'. It is always easy, perhaps even lazy, to accuse an organisation like ACE of expecting people to tick boxes. I cannot conceive of an application process that would not involve some element of box ticking and often for good and tangible reasons. But I share the frustrations of applicants who feel the form does not allow sufficient scope for describing the artistic, creative vision behind a proposed project but does push applicants towards having to focus instead on information that is not particularly important at the application stage and can only be based on the least reliable of forecasts.

For example, why only 600 words to set out the basis of the project, the vision driving it and what it aims to achieve? And why only 300 words on what has brought you to this point? Yet the sections on where and when events will happen and how we have calculated how many people will be involved are needlessly rigid and can only be based on wild estimates anyway.

The truth is that we may not know what venues we will end up using and we will almost certainly not know the exact event dates when making the application. It would make more sense for the application to ask about the general location and demographics of events, participants, audiences etc. so these can be explained logically and in more informative detail instead of plucking numbers out of thin air just to get through the process.

It was also helpful to see Hodge's report acknowledge that '... the lack of communication led to a view that there was a lack of transparency in ACE's decision-making. When decisions not to fund are taken by ACE there is little feedback'. This is unquestionably the case. Feedback is often appalling and, at times, makes literally no sense in relation to the contents of the application. Instead of accepting criticism, ACE will never admit its panels have got anything wrong which is worrying because an organisation that can never accept let alone act on justified criticism is, at best, in critical denial and, at worst, is not fit for purpose.

The panels need to be much better at reading and understanding the proposals in front of them and, where rejection is the outcome, this

needs to be explained in a way that the applicant can at least recognise and understand even if they don't accept that the decision was just. ACE also needs to be more honest about acknowledging mistakes. If an applicant is told the panel will not even consider their application for a live music project because it doesn't involve live music, the complaint must be upheld instead of being whitewashed because ACE puts saving face above ensuring its actions have credibility. There is also a respect issue which the report touches on.

There is a sense that the panels have become so removed from the reality of trying to manage complex projects that they end up providing feedback that makes no sense or which makes ludicrous, counter-productive demands on the applicant. ACE urgently needs to improve how it assesses applications and who is competent to carry out that work.

So What Next?

The report carries a number of recommendations. A lot of them are specific to big national projects, leaving very little when it comes to Supporting Grassroots Music.

In response to the report, the Secretary of State for Culture, Lisa

Nandy released the following statement: 'The government strongly welcomes the Rt Hon the Baroness Hodge of Barking DBE's Independent Review of Arts Council England. I would like to personally thank Baroness Hodge for her unwavering rigour and dedication, and thank the Advisory Panel for their expertise.

Access to arts and culture is not a luxury - it is a necessity. It shapes our communities and enriches our lives. This government believes that excellence must be open to everyone, wherever they live and whatever their background. A national Arts Council, connected to the places and people it serves, is essential to making that vision a reality.

This Review highlights the strengths of Arts Council England's work, but it also challenges us to do better. It sets out recommendations to strengthen support for artists, reach communities more effectively, and ensure that creativity is accessible to all. The government will now consider these recommendations.

A response to the Review will be published in the New Year'.

So an acknowledgement of the need to come up with a response but nothing concrete at this stage.

In truth, even if all the recommendations were to be implemented, this could still be achieved without any promise of substantial new money.

One interesting recommendation is 'The government must consider enabling ACE to offer a wide range of financing options by having a trading arm. This would enable public funding to go further by moving beyond repayable grants and introducing loans, blended finance, social impact investment and equity investment'. In other words, if ACE could generate its own trading income, it would mean more money but then, by introducing loans, there is a danger that this could undermine the essence of what makes ACE such a supportive outlet. There is a further recommendation for the government, 'when possible', to create a £250 million endowment fund with ACE raising £1 for every £1 they receive. And then there is a vague recommendation that says 'ACE should work with the sector to develop a better capability in philanthropic giving'.

Hodge recommends scrapping the current *Let's Create* strategy (about to enter its 7th year) with what she calls a 'less prescriptive' model that allows more freedom for expressing creative ideas. It would be hard to argue against

that. She also proposes devolving decision-making to local and regional boards, an idea that is good in theory but whose effectiveness will depend upon the quality of the boards and who is allowed to sit on them.

She goes on to say 'ACE should radically reform its application and reporting requirements so that they are less bureaucratic and onerous for organisations but still ensure accountability for public money. ACE should also review its data requirements to demonstrate that the data it collects has a clear purpose and that the data demanded is appropriate for the different objectives of the different organisations and the different cultural disciplines'. Again, it would be difficult to oppose this idea. The current application process is cumbersome and puts too much emphasis on irrelevant processes and, conversely, too little on setting out a creative vision and being able to tell the accompanying story.

Another recommendation reads 'ACE should review, simplify and reduce the number of its funding streams to make it easier and less bureaucratic for those applying for funding'. This is interesting as it might mean Supporting Grassroots Music's tenure as a stand-alone fund could prove to be very short!

There is also an interesting recommendation for a new fund enabling people from low income backgrounds to receive £30K to support artistic excellence but it is vague both as to how low income would be measured and in how wide the spectrum for artistic excellence might be.

There is a recommendation for ACE to work with other funds and philanthropists to make more money available to support arts activity in schools. This is a welcome move given the parlous state of music teaching and access in the UK's State Schools.

Coming back to what might benefit grassroots music, there is a recommendation for ACE to 'grow culture' in 'under-served areas'. Hodge talks about appointing community workers to identify local arts talent and work with local community organisations and schools to offer support. Again, it is vague as to what form this talent would need to take and who would be admitted to the party.

There is a recommendation to support under-represented groups which is interesting since ACE claims to do this already. Perhaps it is a tacit recognition of their failure in this area of activity, reflecting some of the worrying treatment we have seen them mete out to

applicants from BAME backgrounds.

For example, when we received a grant for Fresh on the Net Live, our leader Del Owusu was put through unnecessary additional scrutiny in proving his bank account was genuine compared to other grants where myself or another person with a classic white British name has been the primary applicant. No explanation was ever offered for this intrusion and, without any logical reason being offered, we had to assume it was a classic case of institutional racism.

In a section of the paper headed 'Public Funding For The Arts', Hodge laments the 'bleak' picture in relation to funding in recent years and points to the UK's poor track record compared to other nations. She goes on to highlight the terrible pressures caused by the cuts to ACE funding but stops short of recommending a significant injection of cash. In so doing, she has let her party off the hook to a large degree. As we know, Starmer was gung-ho about Labour's promise to restore funding before Sunak surprised him and called an early election.

So there are some potentially good and useful recommendations and a clear acknowledgement of the damage done to the arts and the

wider economy by cuts. But the report is shy about new money. Without that, it is difficult to see how change can make the kind of difference the report claims to be calling for.

In the meantime, we must keep the pressure on Lisa Nandy and the DCMS Select Committee to act decisively and restore funding to pre-Tory levels. Get writing, folks.

AND FINALLY

We don't want to bring the mood down as we enter the New Year. It needs to be a time for optimism and renewal. We have had our [controlled] rants elsewhere in this edition! So let's focus on what our hopes are for 2026.

Apart from the obvious ones most decent people want - peace, an end to genocide and all suffering etc. - our hopes are currently built around a few key activities and avenues. More on that later.

SIMON RAYMONDE

Without question, two of the highlights of 2025 involved Simon Raymonde, former Cocteau Twin, member of Lost Horizons and boss of the fantastic Bella Union label. One was the two of us meeting him over coffee and having an hour of his time which was enlightening, fascinating and a real honour. The other was reading his inspiring book ***In One Ear***.

There is so much to learn from the book both from the perspective of

an artist and of an entrepreneur, driven by supporting artists. We thoroughly recommend reading it.

We were saddened by the chapter in which he talked about how, in interviews subsequent to the break-up of Cocteau Twins and the departure of Robin Guthrie from being involved with Bella Union, Guthrie has attempted to write Simon out of Cocteau Twins history. Aside from the staggering ingratitude considering how Simon had to steer the ship so much of the time during Guthrie's most excessive drug addiction years, it is ridiculous on any level.

Any Cocteau Twins fan knows the transformation from the *Head Over Heels* album in December 1983, on which the band were still reliant on a heavily Banshees and Birthday Party influenced sound to *Treasure* almost exactly a year later in December 1984 was frankly astonishing. The inventiveness, sophistication and diversity that Simon Raymonde, who had already impressed in The Drowning Craze, brought to the band was

phenomenal. The notion that, with Guthrie solely responsible for the instrumental elements, they could have come up with tracks like *Aloysius*, *Persephone*, *Beatrix* and *Lorelei* (well, the whole album basically!) is laughable. The same is unquestionably true of their EPs.

Simon's contribution to their other best album *Heaven Or Las Vegas* is abundantly clear. It was his joining the Cocteaus that took them from being a band who had great potential to becoming the best band in the world. Guthrie may have great talent but he is, in our opinion, an entitled and disingenuous disappointment. We are certainly not interested in anything he has to say now and his recent solo output has been mediocre.

By contrast, Elizabeth Fraser has made some magical, enchanting music with Sun's Signature. Her genius has never been in doubt. Lost Horizons have continued to make beautiful, heartwarming music too and will hopefully have more to share with us in due course.

Of course, Simon Raymonde is far too modest to make such claims for himself. But we can say it. He is the oft unsung genius in the Cocteaus' story and Guthrie is a prick for

trying to rewrite history and give himself all the credit.

[THE] MUSIC OF SOUND

We are obviously hoping our band [The] Music Of Sound can build on the success we have achieved in 2025. Another tour, in June, is a particular aim as is an album to consolidate the many singles we have put out and will continue to put out via our amazing label Monochrome Motif Records. We also have tracks we play live that are not earmarked as singles but would be a must for an album if and when we make one.

We are, in the meantime, unquantifiably grateful to Serge Wenus, Del Owusu, Michelle Ward, Andrew Hartshorn, Elaine McGinty, Steve Trigg, Gemma and Nicky of Lost Chimes, John Serrano, Adam Kidd, Brett Hulme, Ray Jones, Sharon Katta, Brian O'Neill, Sue Oreszczyn and everyone who has supported us so far on our journey.

TRUST THE DOC MEDIA

Business-wise, we hope we can keep going. Some Arts Council funding is always a lifeline for a not-for-profit enterprise like ours but we also hope to generate more independent income through our new online education project and by properly developing and marketing our merchandise store.

For the wider independent music industry and media, we hope audiences will start coming out in greater numbers for grassroots live music events. We also hope more people will turn to internet radio to discover new music now that the BBC seems too determined to ape its commercial 'rivals' (not that a public service broadcaster should be concerned about such things).

There are a load of radio shows on internet stations; far more than we know about but, aside from the Trust The Doc Radio Show, Del is also on Exile FM these days and Michelle Ward continues to fly the flag for grassroots music on FM Radio in Essex and online everywhere else with her Eat My Brunch show (daily, weekday mornings on Phoenix FM). Others include Space Is The Place Radio on Cando FM, Postcards From The Underground on Cumbernauld FM, Richard 'Dexter' Bentley's Hello Goodbye Show on Resonance FM (DAB, FM & Online) and lots more.

We also hope independent music and music artists will have access to more exposure than ever before. Independent labels have always been the natural home of what is exciting, fresh and groundbreaking in popular music. In the digital age, self-releasing artists are now far more common and the traditional routes of having to sign to big

labels who have the power to force artists into exploitative contractual terms are being challenged more so than ever.

Contrary to the absurd grumbles of a certain group of nostalgists, there is no such thing as a good or bad era for music. Such a notion is illogical. There is always great talent just as there is always a lot of mediocrity! But, lest we should forget the cost and lack of access that prevented artists even getting to record most of their best songs back in the day when 2 days in a bog-standard studio cost over a month's wages, it is unquestionably easier overall to be an artist in 2026 and we should relish the freedom, access and affordability that the digital revolution has handed us.

There is always great music being made and there are always exciting new artists who are yet to be discovered. Any part, however small, we can play in nurturing and supporting new talent is always worthwhile and lovely to see unfolding.

So Happy New Year everyone. Let's hope 2026 is a lot better overall than 2025. We can all play our part in trying to make that happen. Best wishes to you all.

NEIL & SHERRY xxxx