

TIME TO STEP OFF THE TIKTOK TREADMILL !!!

Neil asks whether it is time to challenge the narrative

It is the current curse of the marketing culture among aspiring music artists. Everywhere we look, on TikTok timelines, Instagram videos, YouTube, Music Business Forums etc, we are bombarded by self-elected 'experts' telling us the only way to have a career in music is by posting up to four videos a day on TikTok with engaging content.

Given that TikTok is an audio-visual platform, that means every piece of content has to have both appealing video content and suitable sound (typically either the artist's own music or some kind of *trending* track). 'Hooks' are also considered to be a key means of going viral! Just think about how much work that entails on a daily basis for the artist.

The noise can seem deafening at times and the message is frequently brutal. Follow the advice or forget about ever having a successful career in music. Never mind that this is pouring enormous pressure on often impressionable individuals to push themselves day after day to produce sufficient content, however unrealistic and ultimately unsustainable that may be.

The issue came to a head for me when I was discussing it with a group

of teenage BA Music Marketing students. They were feeling exhausted and disillusioned from the amount of time they felt obliged to spend on social media, making content for engagement when they would far rather be creating music. Earlier the same day, I had been talking with two ICMP colleagues who are hard working musicians, one a singer-songwriter, the other a session musician. Even they were talking about the absurd amount of time they spend making videos for social media instead of putting that time into honing their skills or creating music.

The point that particularly resonated with me, when talking to the young students, was that they no longer see any pleasure in social media. It has become a necessary evil; a place they are forced to spend time in but not a place they visit for their own entertainment or enjoyment. This is supposed to be the generation most likely to want to engage with social media and spend time in that environment. Yet they don't go on social media for fun anymore; just to work at building a fanbase. They feel burnt out by the experience. And this is at age 18 or 19!

I did take the opportunity to flag the idea with them that maybe it would be worth finding someone who is happy to handle their social media and treat them as a band member (or creative partner) just as, in pre-digital times, artists would have had to have found, say, a drummer in order to perform their music live and make professional recordings. While none of them were opposed to the idea, they still resented the feeling of being trapped on a TikTok treadmill. They also made the point that the more people who follow this approach, the less effective it will be for most of them anyway.

What is certainly true, and a further justification for the resentment these young artists are feeling, is that those who hammer home this message daily on social media about the need for such an intense level of content creation are not musicians. Perhaps they can spend that time being on social media because it fits their own business models and the only content they have to create is a video of themselves talking this trash. But, in order to have sufficient content to meet such a high level of commitment, artists need to have time to create new music. They can't do that AND be on TikTok all day! There is something distasteful and arguably hypocritical about people who are not creative artists putting pressure on those who are to be

shunning their creativity in order to slavishly follow trends like these.

Yesterday, I went onto my TikTok timeline. In the space of about 20 minutes, I sat through about 5 videos posted by self-elected experts all hammering home this same message. The narrative never changes. And it comes with the implied threat that, if you don't do as they suggest, you are destined to fail. No doubt they believe they are giving out good advice. But they are certainly not thinking about the potential consequences of pushing ambitious, committed artists to burn themselves out, chasing an unattainable goal of creating 4 distinct pieces of engaging content every day. We have to shout 'STOP !!!' and take a collective step back.

If you are in a band, this is potentially an even bigger problem because you can't just knock out a video of yourself playing a new song on an acoustic guitar. You need the entire band to be together, playing and recording tracks for content. Where the influencer may have needed a few minutes to record yet another video telling us we must post 4 times a day, the band will need weeks to be able to produce content. That is why people who don't understand the creative process should not be giving out advice on frequency of content creation.

Firstly, there is no firm evidence that a viral video on TikTok is *guaranteed* to translate into meaningful record sales or streams. I do accept that there is evidence of a direct correlation between viral tracks and chart success in the USA, UK and Europe. I get that it can also help you build a bigger following which indirectly may become a fanbase willing to spend money. Yet there is also survey evidence suggesting people who like a track and contribute to it going viral may not show any interest in the artist's subsequent releases. So it is not really fanbase building in the real sense.

Even if it can help you build support, so too can gigging as far and wide as possible in suitable venues and with suitable fellow artists. So too can building an engaged community around your activities on other social media platforms. So too can gaining sufficient traction through supporting better known artists, playing some festival stages and getting endorsed by BBC Introduction, hopefully helping build the case for rotation on key radio stations. (See my article in Ed 113 about getting onto the media's radar).

Another negative bi-product of the TikTok treadmill is that it encourages artists to copy what others are doing in a rush to look and sound commercial and relevant. But, in reality, the way to stand out from the

crowd is by having your own distinctive sound and style, not by copying what others are already doing.

This brings me to another important point. There is no 'one size fits all' approach. The TikTok Treadmill might be effective if you are a mainstream Pop artist. But that does not mean it automatically translates for other, less mainstream genres where fans may take their interaction with music more seriously and are unlikely to be impressed by trending themes. In fact, if anything, they are more likely to take offence at content that they may view as trivial or vacuous.

We also need to encourage artists not to be blinded by shallow notions of superstardom. Pop historians, myself included, are very aware that it is generally not the overnight sensation hitmakers who go on to have long, sustained success in music. Better to be outside the pop mainstream and have a loyal, consistent following that builds gradually and continues for the long term. That is how bands and artists like U2, Prince, REM, Radiohead and more recently Fontaines D.C, Arlo Parks and Little Simz started out.

Even the received wisdom about building a fanbase through extensive live performance needs to be more nuanced. In particular, it can lead some artists to make a fundamental

but common error. Namely playing far too many gigs in the same locations. When big established artists are limiting themselves to playing any venues across the whole of London, a City with a population of around 9 million, no more than twice in any calendar year, why would a struggling grassroots band or artist think it is a good idea to play within the same three square miles radius every week?! Then they are just relying on their same friends coming to see them regularly which is unfair on the friends (after all, I wouldn't even go to see my favourite band more than twice in a year) and does not actually constitute building a fanbase.

A much better idea would be to play selected gigs a few times in any one geographical area and look for opportunities to go and play further afield where there are potential new followers to win over. If an artist is impressive enough, they will win audiences over wherever they play. But, even so, the hard slog of gigging around the UK is not the only game in town. We talk about TikTok, Instagram and YouTube being such important platforms for engagement [which they are] but maybe we need to look at the wider picture where digital options are concerned.

Live streaming offers a means by which audiences can join an event from anywhere in the world. Creating new forms of content for a YouTube

channel offers a means by which the artists can control how they present themselves and provide a focus for their activities through programme making, scheduling and marketing their work.

We also need to remind artists that there are other platforms. Since Twitter became X, its reputation within grassroots music circles has taken a well-deserved battering thanks to Elon Musk's far right politics and the reflection of his perspective through the constant and unfiltered accommodating of the most toxic, offensive, deliberately misleading and, in some cases, bullying content.

Yet if, like me, you avoid getting into futile arguments with far right morons and focus on talking about music, you can avoid that netherworld for the most part and X still offers the most efficient way to build or join communities and participate in message threads where everyone in the thread can see everyone else's posts. BlueSky is trying to provide a similar community-oriented presence that resembles the old Twitter but it is still a long way from achieving the same degree of efficiency. My advice is to be on both platforms for now.

Threads is the other potential alternative to X but it has been slow to offer much to users. Furthermore it is owned by Zuckerberg's Meta which

raises doubts about whether we should be any more inclined to trust it.

Whichever of these platforms you choose to focus on for the purposes of being part of communities and large message threads, artists should not under-estimate their genuine effectiveness in building followings. They also enable artists to present their music and project their personalities without being under pressure to produce a punishing level of audio-visual content.

Facebook has been desperately unfashionable for some time now. Yet this also leads to poor decision making. If you are an artist, you should at least have a presence on Facebook in the form of an artist account that acts like a mini-website where you can post content, populate your About page, put up Events and invite up to 500 people to attend them etc. There is a misguided tendency among artists, especially younger ones, to believe their fanbase is too young and cool to be on Facebook. But all the statistical data says otherwise with older fans being more inclined to spend money on purchasing tracks or tickets as well as streaming music by independent artists.

Facebook is also still the only platform that enables you to create or join multiple groups that align with

your music and activities whether through genre, location or some other shared interest. And it is quick and easy to share an important post with multiple groups provided you handle this carefully and avoid being suspended from doing so because you are accused of spamming people.

Soundcloud has also come in for a lot of criticism and negativity but it has equally proved to be a highly useful means for some artists to establish themselves. It has the advantage that your music stays on your page for as long as you want it to and you can include all the important links from your Soundcloud page to where you want people either to stream or buy your music or to interact on other platforms. Obviously, some artists are using the premium version to sell tracks and have more space to upload multiple tracks which is an option too.

Then there is LinkedIn. Once upon a time, it was a business-to-business platform where users posted profiles, advertising their work skills. But it has become increasingly used like a social media platform with artists posting videos and audio content and talking about their live dates, new releases etc. It is also the easiest platform on which to search for people via their job titles and make connections with potentially useful industry and media contacts. You don't need to be on it that frequently but it is always worth

sharing your important content there and it is a great networking site too. It also has a Music Industry forum you can join where people share posts, join message threads etc.

Of course, I am just flagging up all the various means through which it is possible to find new followers and get your music in front of new audiences. But the key issue at the heart of all this is that we have to stop pouring all this pressure on artists, especially but by no means only younger artists. If we don't, the NHS is going to be inundated with burnt out music artists needing therapy and other treatments because they have been overwhelmed by the constant, relentless stress they have felt obliged to put themselves under.

The self-elected experts need to take some responsibility for their actions. It is easy for them to sit in judgement, meting out advice when they are not creative artists and don't understand the need for artists to spend time writing, practising, experimenting, jamming etc. to produce exciting new music. They have no concept of where songs come from because they have never written any. If they did, they

might better understand the damage their daily diatribes are doing. And, as I previously pointed out, it takes far less time and effort to make the kind of content they create compared to artists who have to have a constant stream of songs, video clips and other time-consuming content to share. More so where bands are concerned.

We need a nuanced, informed and considered debate and not more self-elected 'experts' hammering the same drum to the same tune day after day on TikTok. We can start by encouraging artists to stop listening to and believing every word these people are throwing at them and think about all the avenues for sharing music with potential fans.

Ultimately it comes down to this. Are you a creative music artist or a full-time social media content creator? And is it worth making yourself thoroughly miserable to the point of breakdown in order to go after the pipe dream? Time for a reset.