Rethinking the Music Business: Music Contexts, Rights, Data and COVID-19. Edited by Guy Morrow, Daniel Nordgård and Peter Tschmuck

Book Review

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“Rethinking the Music Business” edited by Morrow, Nordgård and Tschmuck is an insightful and comprehensive collection of essays that provides fresh perspectives on the current state of the music business and explores cutting edge issues around music in the digital age and in the age of COVID-19. The authors, who are a diverse group of researchers, cover a broad range of topics, including music streaming, copyright law, and marketing strategies. They provide well-researched analyses, case studies from a variety of contexts, and real-life examples that offer readers a nuanced understanding of the issues at hand.

The book starts with a section dedicated to the impacts of COVID-19 on music. The decision to dedicate the first section of the collection to the pandemic works well: given the way music has been an area impacted hugely by COVID, a book on the industry coming out at this point can hardly ignore it, but limiting the amount of space it is given allows other, still important, conversations to also take place. The COVID section contains focused case studies on different aspects of the pandemic in different regions that, as a whole, demonstrate the complexities of the impacts of the virus and the responses to it. While it has already become somewhat clichéd to describe COVID’s impact on music as ‘presenting great hardship but also new opportunities!’, the detail included in these chapters adds new depth to this accepted understanding.

The work of Musgrave on discourses around mental health in chapter 2 picks up on pre-existing work in this area and moves this conversation on, showing how concerns around employment but also personal worth and meaning were central to how musicians’ mental health was framed during the pandemic. Chapter 3 by Tschmuck et al presents detailed data on income loss for freelance classical musicians in Austria. The dissection of this data that shows the uneven impact of COVID even within this niche group emphasises the complicated nature of the fallout of the pandemic. In chapter 4, Oliver and Lalchev look at how new business opportunities were created in the digital realm during the pandemic, with investment in and development of technologies such as Blockchain, the Metaverse and streaming accelerating during this time beyond what would have been likely under ‘normal’ circumstances. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 explore various aspects of how the social elements of the music industry interacted with the pandemic, by looking at how the social capital of women musicians in Zimbabwe impacted on their resilience during the pandemic (Butete), how the important social and networking roles of live venues in music ecosystems became more apparent as they struggled through the crisis (Blomeke et al), and exploring how the jazz festival circuit in the UK found ways to innovate and even in some ways improve on their normal programming to still deliver events in a fragile genre ecosystem (Raine et al). These chapters are timely reminders that the functions of music go well beyond the economic or artistic, and that recovery from the destruction caused by COVID needs to include consideration of the social function of music, musicians and music spaces.

The second half of the book moves beyond COVID (while not ignoring it entirely) to tackle other big-picture issues and trends in the industries. Streaming is unsurprisingly a major focus: in Chapter 9, Morgan examines how industry players engage with algorithms and playlists, while in chapter 13 Morrow and Beckett take on the impact of streaming from a different angle, examining the meaning of charts in this context. These chapters both use
Australian case studies, and discuss how artists and other players in music businesses do not necessarily focus on algorithms and the mechanics of streaming in the ways that might be expected, because of a lack of understanding or a disinterest in the types of practices that would emerge from concentrating on these.

Chapters by Anacin (chapter 11) and Murphy and Hume (chapter 12) explore different aspects of DIY or independent music careers, looking at the Philippines and Australia respectively. Both provide detail on how digital platforms create opportunities for musicians to connect with each other and audiences, with Murphy and Hume using their data to refine pre-existing models for understanding success and putting songs at the centre of these. DIY activities are also central to Daga’s exploration of the rap scene in Dharavi, the largest slum in Mumbai, where the lack of resources and support leads to innovation and entrepreneurial activity that is creating possibilities for the residents. Morrow and Nordgård take a different approach in chapter 10 to the other chapters by exploring copyright issues through a deep-dive on the Music Modernization Act, providing a historical overview of the development of mechanical rights and an investigation into whose interests are served by recent changes to these. There is a combination in this second half of the volume of articles, such as chapter 12, that are more pragmatic, explaining the lay of the land in a way that might help participants work with new digital tools and practices effectively, and those that take a more critical approach. Illuminating in this respect is Morgan’s conclusion to his chapter on streaming, where he calls for a rethinking of how value is ascribed to music itself and a move away from the concept of ‘rarity’ as a key part of our assessment of it.

Overall, “Rethinking the Music Business” is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the music industries. The topics covered would be useful for undergraduate students coming to grips with the complexities of how music exists in the world and newly emerging challenges for those seeking to make a living from it, but equally offers insights to other researchers. It is an excellent new addition to the growing literature on issues in music business.