

Going it alone

The recorded music industry has evolved hugely over the last few decades. What does this mean for the musicians who want to share their work? Alastair Penman discusses the pros and cons of self-releasing your music and shares what he has learned along the way

In the immortal words of The Buggles, "Video Killed the Radio Star". Whilst I'd argue that radio is actually still doing okay for itself, streaming services such as Spotify, YouTube and even Apple Music seem to be slowly killing the careers of all but the most popular of musicians. Before the advent of streaming, recording and releasing CDs (or tapes/vinyls) could provide a good additional income stream for musicians. However, there has been a 95% decrease in sales of CDs since the peak in 2000, and sales are now at their lowest level since 1986 (Data for USA*). Whilst this drop in CD sales has been largely replaced by streaming, unfortunately this doesn't provide nearly the same income for artists.

PRS data is a good way of keeping track of how musicians (specifically writers) are being remunerated. In a recent statement, one of

my compositions had been used on a social media site and had amassed over 32,000 plays. The income from this? £0.22. I'll try not to spend it all at once. In the same period, a different track received 67,000 plays on a BBC Sounds playlist and earned £69.33. This raises the question of why some services are paying 150 times less than others. Crucially, if just 10 of the 99,000 people listening to these tracks had bought a physical CD (which they may have done if we didn't live in a culture where music is expected to be free), then I would have received significantly more income! (If all of them had bought a copy, I'd almost be a millionaire – we can all dream...)

This may sound like a rant against streaming services (which, to be honest, it is). However, on a positive note, streaming offers opportunities to reach a much wider audience, which ➡

* Reference: [statista.com/chart/12950/cd-sales-in-the-us/](https://www.statista.com/chart/12950/cd-sales-in-the-us/)

could not be achieved via CD sales or live concerts alone. It's also incredibly easy to distribute your music digitally using services such as CD Baby and DistroKid. This leads us on to the main topic of this article: self-releasing your music.

I was very fortunate, upon graduating from the conservatoire, to win an award from the City Music Foundation (CMF). At the time, I was working on my first solo album (*Electric Dawn*), which John Harle

with getting reviews and booking live performances. Financially, however, had the disc not been funded by CMF, I would have been left firmly in the red, despite having a favourable agreement with Sospiro. (I later recorded an EP, *Do You Hear Me?* on Sospiro Records, raising money for charities fighting climate change, and Sospiro were incredibly generous in waiving their usual cut from sales to maximise the charitable donations.)

expect the musician to cover all the costs, with some labels even charging artists to release with them. Labels that do cover the costs of making the album often take a huge cut of sales – sometimes exceeding 90 per cent – to recoup their costs. Even if you have covered the recording costs yourself, some labels may still take up to 50 per cent. It is not only the label that takes a cut either; to get the CDs into shops (and on streaming services), most labels use a distributor who will take a cut (often around 25 per cent), and of course retailers (Amazon, for example) also take their slice of the pie. If a CD sells on Amazon for £10, it's not unusual for the artist to see around £2 (or less) of this. In comparison, if you buy a self-released CD directly from an artist's website, they'll probably receive over £9.50, only losing the card transaction fee.

You may wonder, then, why anyone ever records on a label, but there are some clear advantages. Perhaps the biggest things a label can offer an artist are their experience and their contacts. For example, labels may have in-house producers and engineers, or relationships with recording studios or artwork designers, so even if you'll be paying for these yourself, you may get preferential rates, and you can have confidence in the quality of the end product. Crucially, labels will usually promote your album and, through their contacts, help you

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kindly offered to release on his label, Sospiro Records. At this point, I had little idea about how to record and release an album, and I am hugely grateful to John and CMF for guiding me through the process. Luckily for me, CMF were covering most of the costs associated with the CD, and I mostly observed the negotiations surrounding fees rather than undertaking them, which meant I was protected from any danger of being exploited. (Sadly, it's not uncommon for labels and agents to take advantage of young and inexperienced artists.)

This experience gave me the opportunity to work with John Harle as a mentor. He produced the album, which was recorded and mixed at his studios. I felt that having John and the City Music Foundation behind the album gave it credibility and helped

I think many people are unaware of the costs associated with releasing an album and what is typically paid for by the label, what is covered by the artist, and how the income from sales is divided. Some of the costs to consider are: venue/studio hire, recording engineer, editing/mixing/mastering/producing (could be one person or several), any other musicians on the album, artwork design, MCPS license (required if producing physical discs), CD manufacturing, PR, and label fees.

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to get reviews, features and interviews in magazines (such as this one!), newspapers or on the radio. Recording on a label also gives your recording gravitas; if consumers recognise the label's logo on your album, this boosts the chances of them buying it.

So, the million-dollar question – should you record on a label or not? I would say this largely depends on your audience, budget, the stage you're at in your career and the purpose of the release. I recorded my first two albums (*Electric Dawn* and *Do You Hear Me?*) on Sospiro before choosing to self-release my most recent two (*Soar* and *Quietude*) on my own label, Meadowbank Music. As I explained, releasing my first album on Sospiro was a no-brainer. It gave me the chance to work with John Harle and the opportunity to record on the same label as some of my favourite saxophonists (Rob Buckland,

After the steep learning curve of releasing *Soar*, recording and launching my second self-released album, *Quietude*, has been a smoother process. In contrast to previous albums, I'm hopeful that it could make a profit! (Nobody becomes a saxophonist for the money, but we've got to pay for our reed habits somehow...) This time, I decided to do as much as I could myself: playing all the instruments, recording, editing, mixing, mastering and producing the album, all from my home studio. This meant that the recording cost was essentially zero (if you ignore the huge amount of time that went into it), so the only costs were artwork design, MCPS license, and production of the physical discs. One of the big challenges is knowing when an album is finished, so I had to set a release date as a deadline to put an end to my tinkering! Now I'm at the stage of

writing the press release, sending copies to reviewers and the unavoidable social media promotion; all of these are time-consuming, but fairly easy to do yourself.

Recording an album from home is much easier now than it was just 10 years ago. Whilst I do have a background in software engineering and I regularly work with recorded and live electronics, recording software such as Logic Pro is within reach of most musicians in terms of both cost and ease of use, and there are plenty of good tutorials online. Part of my role at the Guildhall School of Music includes teaching postgraduate sax players to record themselves and work with live electronics, and most of them get to grips with it without too much difficulty. You can pick up microphones and a good quality audio interface at very reasonable prices, and there's also the option of hiring top-end microphones. Although costs can spiral as you get into more sophisticated hardware and software (I seem to buy something new for every project...), it's perfectly possible to make studio-quality recordings from the comfort of your ➡

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Simon Haram and, of course, John). Plus, I was fortunate enough to receive funding to cover the costs of making the album.

So why did I decide to try self-releasing? Partly out of curiosity, partly as an experiment and partly because I like being in control. I wanted to give myself the challenge of creating a whole album: project managing, learning more about how the process works, and seeing whether or not it would work out financially. (Though, let's be honest, no-one is getting rich from recording classical saxophone albums.)

What did I learn in the process? Firstly, doing everything yourself is a lot of hard work. From booking studios and engineers to liaising with artwork designers, applying for MCPS licenses, IRSC and EAN codes, registering the recording with PPL, writing press releases, emailing reviewers, sending promotional copies and posting CDs, there is a huge amount to be done. With my first self-release, *Soar*, the timescale for the project slipped and slipped. I hadn't set a release date at the point we recorded the disc, so there was no pressure, which meant there was a temptation to keep tweaking the record until it was 'perfect'. This meant that it took over a year from the first recording session for the album to be released. I also made a few false economies along the way, which meant the disc ended up costing more than planned, and I'm unlikely to break even on it. However, it did receive several very complementary reviews and has been played on BBC Radio.



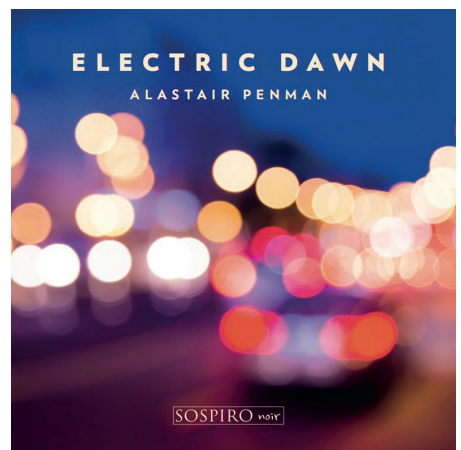
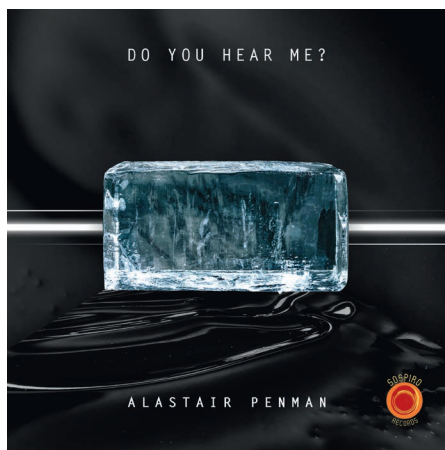
Recording his debut album *Electric Dawn* at The Old Malthouse, Kent

home at a fairly modest cost, and many listeners probably won't be able to hear the difference.

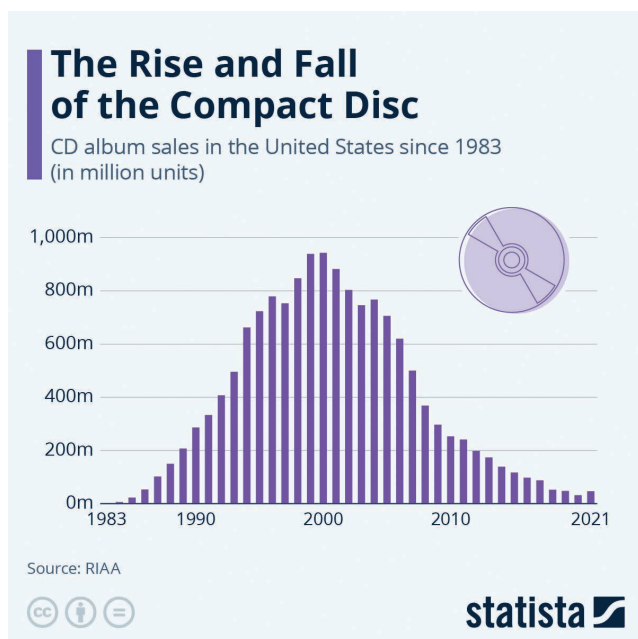
It's interesting to consider the parallel between self-releasing albums and self-publishing compositions - another area I've put much thought into. Again, I have explored both options; I have over 30 publications with Saxtet Publications and Sax Music Scores (both of which I'd highly recommend), and a similar number of self-published works. As with labels and albums, the main question is how many more copies would be sold through the publisher as opposed to the composer's website. Then there's a quick calculation of whether the cost implications of selling it through a publisher are worthwhile (as with labels, publishers can take a significant cut), but also whether you are more motivated to generate income or reach a wider audience. For me, usually the pull of the latter prevails!

There is a lot to consider when deciding whether to release music yourself or through a record label. Whilst doing it yourself allows you to retain control both artistically and financially, would working with a label give your project more weight and enable it to reach a bigger audience and build your fan base?

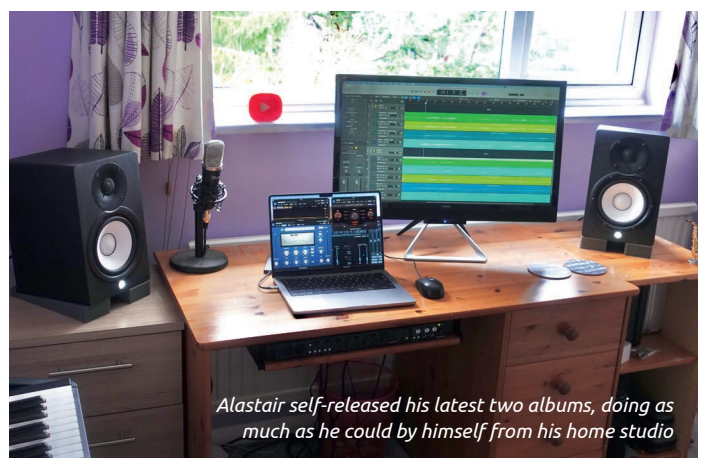
As for myself, I'm enjoying exploring the possibilities of self-releasing, and I am likely to continue to do so, building up the catalogue on my new label. That's not to say that I wouldn't work with a label again in the future though. If the right offer from the right label came along and I thought it would help my music to reach a new audience, then I would almost certainly take it. A final thought - if you want to support an independent artist, the best way is to buy their work directly from their website! ■



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The life cycle of the compact disc



Alastair self-released his latest two albums, doing as much as he could by himself from his home studio

Alastair's fourth solo album, *Quietude*, is released on his own label, Meadowbank Music, on 15th March 2024 and is reviewed on page 42. His website is alastairpenman.co.uk