Taking Metal on the Road

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For over a decade, starting in middle school, I have been playing in a death metal band called Death Island. For the last six years, the band has been working to try to make playing in a band our full time career. When we first started in 2014, the most common method for generating income was understood as live concerts and selling merchandise, however, it seems like that business model has started to change a lot over the last 20 years.

Key components of the industry, including record labels, streaming platforms, touring, merchandise sales, and fan support, all play significant roles in sustaining today's metal artists. Major labels like Nuclear Blast and Roadrunner Records, alongside smaller (yet equally influential) labels such as MetalBlade Records and Closed Casket Activities continue to support a range of artists, while platforms like Bandcamp offer a direct-to-fan approach that bypasses traditional industry recording structures.

However, despite the industry's resilience, it remains challenging for many artists to earn a consistent living from music alone. Streaming revenues, notoriously low per-stream payouts, and limited income from digital sales have made it increasingly difficult for musicians to rely solely on these channels. Touring, once a primary source of income for many metal bands, has seen a decline in both opportunities and financial rewards in recent years, making it harder for artists, particularly emerging ones, to gain

the (visibility/exposure/presences) essential to establishing and sustaining their careers. This is something is especially challenging for artists in more niche genres, such as Metal, and Hardcore music. I have found through research, as well as my own personal experiences both as a fan and as a musician in the Metal scene, that the music industry has been shifting in a way that makes earning a living off touring more and more difficult.

The research that follows aims to illuminate or explore how musicians, and specifically metal musicians, are navigating these challenges and how live touring, despite its current struggles, remains crucial for both the art form and the livelihood of many artists. Ideally, this paper can serve as a way to document the state of the metal music industry today, and help any upcoming artists have a better understanding of and ability to navigate careers in music.

Metal Music - A Brief History

The genre of Heavy Metal music is widely considered to have begun with the band Black Sabbath (links to live videos) from Birmingham England. Black Sabbath was started by Tony Iommi, Geezer Butler, Bill Ward, and Ozzy Osbourne. The four took sounds inspired by big rock bands from the times, like Led Zeppelin who were already starting to bring more heaviness to the rock genre (Master Class). After having a traumatizing experience working in a factory, Tony Iommi had to completely change how he played the guitar, which led to him playing slower and more down tuned. These factors came together to create the genre we now know as Heavy Metal. Years later,

Hair Metal starts to take over the scene. Bands like Motley Crue, and Dokken, and W.A.S.P. were the biggest craze, with big crazy hair and songs about love. In California's Bay Area, bands saw what was going on and wanted to make Metal evil again. Out of that scene came Thrash Metal, pioneered by bands like Metallica, Slayer, Megadeth, and Exodus, and even out of New York, bringing thrash to the upcoming New York Hardcore Punk scene, came Anthrax. Thrash metal brought speed and aggression into the metal genre, wanting to be more in your face, and be everything that hair metal wasn't. Then in the late 1980s, a kid in Florida wanted to go even more extreme. Hearing bands like Venom and even Possesed, he knew there was something even more extreme than just Thrash metal. And in 1987, Chuck Shuldiner released the first album from his band Death who are considered to be the first Death Metal band. The concept behind Death Metal was to take what was already a more extreme genre, like Thrash metal, and go even further. With lower tunings, blazing fast riffs, as well as heavy and pummelling sections, death metal was all about going to the extreme. The best examples of early death metal are bands such as Cannibal Corpse, Deicide, and Suffocation, who pioneered the genre that bands like Death started.

> "Major music scenes typically blossom in big cities: New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, London. Strangely, the death metal movement began in and around slow n' sleepy Tampa, Florida. Death (originally from Orlando), Obituary, Morbid Angel, Deicide, Atheist, Cynic and Massacre are just a handful of the bigger bands that developed in the area. There are several reasons why these groups and many others breed like subway rats." (Loudwire).

At the same time, in Europe the Black Metal scene was beginning to grow from similar influences. Focusing more on speed and aggression, black metal is

characterized by its low quality recordings, high shrieking vocals, and atmospheric melodic guitars.

The 1990's painted a different picture for metal music. While extreme genres such as Death Metal and Black Metal continued to grow in the underground, the mainstream spotlight was beginning to shift. The rise of Grunge Rock and Alternative music began to dominate the public eye, taking influence from the punk and metal scenes characterized by rebellious and DIY attitudes, but with a more melodic and more easily marketable sound. Many metal bands struggled to compete with the popularity of Grunge, leading to legacy metal acts like Metallica going through major changes in both their sound as well as their general aesthetic. Trading in long greasy hair with short well kept buzz cuts, and turning to a more blues rock influence. In the late 90s, however, a new subgenre of metal started to form, known as Nu Metal. Combining the heavy sounds and dark aesthetic of metal music with influences from other popular genres, mainly hip hop, created this new subgenre that exploded in the 90s with bands like Korn, Limp Bizkit, System of a Down, and Slipknot, to name a few of the most popular bands in this style.

During the early aughts (2000's), metal music was somewhat sidelined from the mainstream lens, with Emo and Grunge music dominating the public eye. This led to more underground movements within the genre. Known to many as the "MySpace Era" of metal music, the early days of the internet and social media were a breeding ground for new styles of the genre.

"With the advent of Myspace, kids in the early 2000s were being exposed to all sorts of niche genres in a way that hadn't been done before. They heard these "proto-deathcore" bands, but also tons of metalcore, hardcore, post-hardcore, and whatever else was out there shaping their tastes." (Lambgoat)

Combining more melodic riffs, and singing vocals from early heavy metal days, with the fast moving guitars and heavy breakdowns of Hardcore Punk created the subgenre of Metalcore (Also known as Melodic Metalcore), with bands like Avenged Sevenfold and Killswitch Engage pioneering the sound. Very quickly bands like Suicide Silence and The Red Chord took this idea and started to combine it with Death metal influences, creating the genre known as Deathcore. Metalcore and Deathcore continue to be very popular styles of metal to this day, with bands like Lorna Shore going viral in 2022 with their song "To The Hellfire" because of their unique style of vocals. As a whole, the genre of metal keeps expanding exponentially, with new subgenres and styles being formed and evolving the sound that defines metal music.

Contemporary Metal - *Movements, Motivations and Movers*

In the modern day, Metal music is as strong as it has ever been. While it may not be in the spotlight in the same way as it was during the 1980s-90s, it has started to creep its way back into the mainstream. From bands like Knocked Loose being featured on Jimmy Kimmel in late 2024, to bands like Slipknot and Metallica playing major music festivals, metal music has made a return to the public eye. One big challenge metal music starts to face as it returns to the mainstream, is the fans perspective of this success. Many fans like metal music because of its more niche nature, and prefer staying out of the mainstream, however, with the music reaching broader audiences can only benefit the industry as a whole.

Currently there are a few bands in the metal world who can be considered “Key Players” when it comes to touring, and record sales. The most well known example is Metallica. Having come a long way from the early days of the west coast thrash metal scene, Metallica is now the biggest and most successful metal band in the world. In 2024 Metallica continued on their M72 tour, promoting their latest album. “With an average of $2.79 million grossed per show, Metallica grossed approximately $179 million in ticket revenue across 24 shows [in 2024]” (Forbes)

Another band that can be considered a “Key Player” in the metal world is Slipknot. "Slipknot pull in nearly $300k a night for their current tour, not a bad run at all!” (Metal Injection). Slipknot have been in the forefront of mainstream metal for the last few years, with their tours selling out arenas all over the country, and headlining major festivals. They are a great example of how the genre has had bigger success in the mainstream without needing to “dilute” the sound, maintaining their heavy and aggressive musical style but still gaining mainstream recognition.

With the way that the genre keeps expanding today, it is hopeful that this trend continues upwards. With new metal bands forming all the time, the underground scenes are filled with possible up and coming artists who could someday be considered the “next big thing.” With bands such as Tombstoner from Staten Island, or Non-Residents from Brooklyn. This underground scene is what keeps the metal community thriving, the desire to keep the niche genre alive means emphasis on promoting the new bands who

are trying to make something new. This grassroots movement is the lifeblood of the metal community. Driven by a shared passion to keep the genre alive and push its boundaries. Supporting emerging acts is essential to that mission. Since metal and hardcore are genres that thrive on the energy of live performance, smaller towns with an absence of major touring acts often create space for local and underground bands to step up, gain exposure, and carry the torch forward. These local metal scenes, along with major touring acts gaining more mainstream attention, is not only keeping metal music alive, but pushing the genre forward.

Making a Living in Metal

Most musicians have a few sources of revenue for their work. Publishing recordings of music on streaming platforms is a way to make some income for musicians who are very successful, however, few are able to count on streaming as the main revenue source. Selling merchandise is often what musicians credit to what makes the most money, by selling shirts and other accessories at concerts or online. For many, income comes from external sources, whether it be donations or other jobs outside of music to support their art.

Touring is a very important part of musicians' livelihoods. The standard practice for most musicians was to spend about a year or two recording an album to be released, then spend a year or two touring to promote that album, then head back into the studio to restart the cycle. This schedule has been the norm for musicians for

decades (McKinna, 2013). Ever since the age of streaming music, touring has become even more important as a main source of income. While in the past musicians could rely on album sales as a source of revenue, streaming made it so that they only earned fractions of a penny for every time a song was played. With this live concerts became more than just a way to connect with audiences, but it became lucrative to sustain a career. Ticket sales, merchandising, and VIP experiences such as one on one meet and greets and backstage passes became the main focus. Artists leveraged the release of new albums as catalysts to ignite fervent anticipation among their fanbase, strategically timing tour announcements to coincide with album drops and leveraging the momentum of new releases to fuel ticket sales and generate buzz for live shows. Moreover, in an era characterized by unprecedented access to artists through social media and digital platforms, the live experience took on added significance as a means of fostering genuine connections and forging lasting bonds with fans in an increasingly fragmented media landscape.

Streaming and digital sales provide metal artists with some income, but the payouts are often too low to sustain a career on their own. Streaming platforms such as Spotify pay approximately $0.003 per stream, meaning bands need millions of streams to generate meaningful revenue.

> “The pay-per-stream rate on Spotify varies widely, typically ranging from $0.003 to $0.005 per stream. However, this rate isn’t fixed—it depends on various factors, including the listener’s country, whether they use a free or paid account, and the artist’s agreement with their record label or distributor.” (Venice)

For most metal artists, reaching those numbers is difficult, making digital streaming an unreliable primary income source. However, alternatives like Bandcamp

and direct-to-fan digital sales allow bands to retain a larger portion of their earnings. Many metal fans prefer to support their favorite artists directly, purchasing digital albums or exclusive content from platforms that offer better financial returns for musicians. This has led to an increase in fans collecting physical releases of music, as well as bands and labels releasing additional limited releases of physical media for fans to consume. Additionally, live albums sometimes perform well within the genre, offering another potential revenue stream, though their profitability depends on fan demand and marketing efforts.

Merchandise sales are another major revenue stream for metal bands, often surpassing income from streaming or album sales. Fans are known for their dedication to collecting band merchandise, whether it be T-shirts, hoodies, patches, or vinyl. Many bands take advantage of this demand by offering exclusive, limited-run designs at live shows and through online platforms like Big Cartel or Shopify. Selling merch directly allows bands to maintain better profit margins while fostering a stronger connection with their audience. For many independent and underground metal acts, successful merch sales can be the difference between financial struggle and sustainability, making it an essential part of their business model.

Tour revenue comes from either ticket sales, guarantees from venues or a combination which might include splits on bar sales.

Importance of Touring

Touring and live shows remain the backbone of the metal economy, providing bands with their most reliable source of income. While recordings of music and record sales have always been an important part of Metal music, live performances are an integral part of the culture behind the genre. Physical engagement is a huge part of metal and hardcore music, whether referring to it as slam dancing, moshing, or hardcore dancing, the almost primal semi-violent movements are a way to express the wild variety of emotions and energy felt while listening to such extreme music. Every subgenre of metal moshes differently, and even Hardcore music, while often tied together with metal, has a completely different “mosh culture.” Whether it's just shoving each other around, running around in a circle pit, or climbing up and jumping off the stage in a stage dive, moshing is a big part of the metal and hardcore experiences.

Metal concerts are known for their intense crowd participation, with mosh pits, singalongs, and stage diving creating an immersive experience that keeps fans engaged and loyal. Larger, well-established bands tend to dominate the touring circuit, as they can command higher guarantees and attract bigger audiences. However, smaller and mid-level acts often rely on constant touring to build their fan base and sustain their careers, sometimes even self-financing tours in hopes of breaking even or generating long-term growth. It is common for smaller bands to book short “weekend warrior tours” or “weekend runs” by booking 3 to 4 smaller shows in different areas to try to reach more audiences.

Touring also plays a major role in how musicians write music. Focusing more on how a live audience would perceive the song at a concert, versus how someone would

perceive it from their headphones in their bedroom. The artists have to consider the fact that they will be playing these songs repeatedly while on tour, every day sometimes for a few months while they travel the country and even the world performing to new audiences. This repetition allowed the artist to really understand what works and what does not work in a song by paying attention to the audience's reactions. On the other side of this, it could be challenging to really dedicate the proper emotions to the performance if the song was played every day for such a long period of time. Some artists use this as a way to really focus on the audience, and try to have an emotional connection with the crowd's reactions to the song while they play (McKinna, 2013). Others find the repetition allows them to form an even deeper emotional connection to the song itself, and even find new meanings in the work that they have created. Whether through conscious engagement with audience reactions or introspective exploration of their own creative process, musicians navigate the complexities of touring with resilience and adaptability, honing their craft through experience and practice. Thus, while the challenges of touring may vary, artists universally find ways to navigate the unique demands of the road, evolving and growing as both performers and creators in the process.

Contemporary Touring Challenges

In 2020, the COVID-19 virus spread across the world, plunging into a global pandemic. During this pandemic social distancing measures were put in place to

prevent the spread of the virus, meaning people were encouraged to stay indoors and away from large social gatherings. This led to the cancellations of major tours, as well as other events that would put people at risk of coming into contact with the virus. The world seemed to shut down entirely during this time.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic dealt a significant blow to musicians, disrupting not only their financial stability but also their deep-seated need for live performance. For many artists, the stage serves as a sacred space where they connect intimately with their audience, fueling their passion and sense of purpose. The sudden cessation of live events severed this vital connection, leaving musicians adrift without their primary outlet for expression and engagement. Beyond the financial impact, the absence of live performances created a profound void in artists' lives, depriving them of the intrinsic satisfaction derived from sharing their craft in real-time with a live audience (Rieger, 2015). As the pandemic unfolded, musicians grappled with feelings of isolation and a loss of identity, prompting a collective longing for the return of live performance opportunities. From the spring of 2020, until the fall of 2020, and even into 2021, many artists were simply not able to tour at all. Despite the challenges, artists demonstrated remarkable resilience, leveraging virtual platforms and innovative approaches to bridge the gap and sustain their connection with audiences. However, the yearning for the electrifying energy of live shows remained palpable, underscoring the irreplaceable role of live performance in the lives of musicians and the broader cultural landscape.

Touring in the Post-Covid Landscape

From the devastating impact on live performances and touring to the seismic shifts in consumer behavior and revenue streams, the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities within the live touring and events industry. With a large reliance on live performances for revenue, losing a major source of income was extremely detrimental. Combined with rising costs due to inflation, as well as other external factors, returning to touring was suddenly much more expensive than before.

The most frequently seen complaint from musicians returning to the road after Covid was the raised price in renting tour buses, and the rise of merch cuts from venues. These issues were raised frequently on social media pages which were increasingly providing a means for bands and artists to connect with and inform fans on the rising issues surrounding touring. While for some artists who have had success in the mainstream may not have had as much trouble getting back on their feet, there were many bands who have had success in more niche genres and markets who were now struggling to return to the road. From rising prices, to changes in venue policies, making a profit off of touring became more challenging.

An American musician wrote about his struggles of booking his first tour since the start of the pandemic in the UK and Europe during 2021. The first issue he addressed was finding a tour bus, which was a long and difficult process as they were one of the first tours in the UK since the pandemic had started, however, being so early to return allowed them to be able to rent a bus for a similar price as would normally be charged to

rent a van. The problem then arose that plane tickets to Europe had nearly tripled since before the pandemic, and with all the gear they needed and the crew that traveled with them, this was a major setback. Unfortunately this was not a one off scenario, and this trend has been seen in every aspect of touring, with bus rental and gear rental prices skyrocketing to profit off everyone trying to return, it makes it almost impossible for smaller musicians to be able to afford to even go on the road.

Another issue that was brought up very frequently was the rise in merch cuts at venues. With merchandising being an important source of income to musicians, many artists relied on receiving as much of the revenue as possible from selling merchandise at concerts. However many venues have rules where in order to sell merchandise at the venue, the artist had to pay the venue a percentage of the profits made from the sales.

> “Over the past three years, merch cut percentages have climbed and become largely unavoidable. It’s the latest in a particularly potent formula of touring difficulties that went sour post-pandemic: gas hikes, inescapable inflation on food and lodging, venues overbooking, no significant income from streaming revenue, and of course, the physical and financial pitfalls of COVID-19.” (Pitchfork)

While this was already in place for many venues, in the last decade it has risen significantly, both in frequency and severity. This shift marked a significant departure from previous practices, where artists typically retained the majority of the revenue generated from their merch sales. The imposition of merch cuts posed a formidable obstacle, particularly for smaller and independent artists already navigating the precarious terrain of the music industry. Faced with the prospect of relinquishing a portion of their hard-earned profits, many artists were left with no choice but to reconsider their merchandising strategies. Some opted to forgo selling merch at venues

altogether, recognizing that the financial burden imposed by merch cuts outweighed the potential gains. Instead, they sought alternative avenues for selling merchandise, such as online platforms, where they could retain full control over pricing and revenue. However, this shift away from venue sales posed its own set of challenges, as it required artists to invest additional resources in marketing and distribution to reach their audience beyond the confines of live performances. Thus, the rise in merch cuts at venues underscored the precarious nature of artists' livelihoods and the need for innovative solutions to navigate the evolving landscape of the music industry.

Adapting to Survive

While there are many issues with the music industry today, there are those out there working to make things better. While larger “Key Player” acts may not be suffering as much, the smaller to mid size acts are looking for new ways to approach the challenges of the music industry. From outside companies offering programs to support musicians, to alternatives to touring, musicians are looking for new ways to overcome the changing landscape.

One company is Neven Eyewear, who recently launched their Sight for Sound program. Sight for Sound is a program started by Johnathon Strauss, who took inspiration from the metal and hardcore scene and wanted to give back to what brought him up. Sight for Sound is a program that allows touring musicians, from any point in their career, to get prescription glasses and sunglasses for free.

> “Strauss explained the reality for most working, touring musicians and how Neven aims to show their support. “A lot of people think musicians or people in the industry are living the dream, but what they don’t see is the reality behind the scenes — no health care, no safety net. And when a tour ends, the realities of life kick in fast. We started Sight for Sound because we wanted to change that, even in a small way. This is the least we can do — to support a community that often gets overlooked once the lights go down.” (Knotfest)

While this does not directly solve problems with the touring industry, it provides support to touring musicians in a way that is not normally offered. Being a musician often means being self employed, with no benefits, or health insurance. Having a brand offer free prescription glasses is a way for touring musicians to be able to save on necessary expenses.

Some bands have opted to stop touring altogether, and instead focus on playing bigger one off shows and festivals. For many bands this system works well as an alternative, as it allows for them to work other jobs that may pay better so that they can afford to support the music. One example of this is the band God’s Hate from Van Nuys California. Since God’s Hate does not tour, their drummer is able to host one of the most popular Hardcore/Metal podcasts Hardlore: Stories from Tour. Not to mention, their vocalist is famous professional wrestler Brody King from the AEW.

What the Future Holds

Despite its current challenges, touring remains essential to the livelihoods of professional musicians. This is something is especially challenging for artists in more

niche genres, such as Metal, and Hardcore music. I have found through research, as well as my own personal experiences both as a fan and as a musician in the Metal scene, that the music industry has been shifting in ways to make touring even more difficult. This shift has led to bands having to change how they approach touring and playing live in general.

> "One of the key drivers of revenue for this industry is live concerts, especially for the artists who make the vast majority of their income touring. In 2010, touring made up 82 percent of artists' income, and by 2022, it made up roughly 95 percent." (Economic Liberties)

While so much is changing, and touring becomes increasingly difficult, it remains the backbone of the industry. With streaming becoming the most popular way to consume music, despite its low artists payouts, live touring remains the most vital aspect to musicians' livelihoods.

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