



# Organising Music

Theory, Practice, Performance

Edited by **NIC BEECH**  
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# Managing a punk band

*Marco Panagopoulos and Shiona Chillas*

## **Introduction**

United Fruit, formed in 2008 by the founding members Iskandar Stewart (vox/guitar) and Stuart Galbraith (guitar), were joined by Marco Panagopoulos (bass) and Ross Jenkins (drums). The band have taken the traditional format of guitars, bass and drums in a thunderous direction ever since. To date, United Fruit have supported numerous contemporary bands on tour, including Maps & Atlases, Die! Die! Die!, Future Of The Left, Monotonix and Desalvo. The band's debut EP *Mistress, Reptile Mistress!* was met by rapturous reviews from the music press, including *The List*. Well-received appearances at a variety of festivals, including GoNorth and Wickerman, also earned them further enthusiastic column inches. United Fruit tracks have been aired on a variety of radio stations around Europe, including BBC Radio 1. United Fruit's debut album *Fault Lines*, released in May 2011, marked a step forward in their song-writing skills, while maintaining a raw energy, balancing melody with mayhem and delivering a 'payload of pop sensibility within a sonic assault'.

This section tells Marco's story of learning to engage with the music industry.

## **Background**

Iskandar and Stuart had previously 'been done over' by their record label. The two friends spent the following year just listening to music and writing songs until they felt ready to start another band. Marco contacted the band through an advert on Myspace, although he knew Iskandar through a mutual friend, and was welcomed as the band's bass player. Marco says that United Fruit was his 'first proper attempt at being in a professional band'; before joining United Fruit he had just been writing songs on his own and getting to grips with the creative side of making music. At first, the band took things gradually, practising and working on

their music. They felt ready to introduce themselves to the 'circuit' once they had a set of seven or eight songs, and the first year was spent 'basically trying to figure out how to get people to the concerts'. They did this through making connections with bands who were already established in the Glasgow music scene, building friendships with these bands, and by touring. Marco recalls that a point came where 'the power shifted and we became one of those bands that other bands were asking to do that'. He feels that building friendships with other bands 'is just what you do' in order to become established. The network of bands in Glasgow is just 'like-minded individuals who all like the same kind of music and a bit of banter'. Marco is also the band's manager and feels that networks are vital for learning how the music industry works. United Fruit have made a conscious decision to take the DIY route, keeping control of their music but encountering some problems along the way. In common with other stories in this volume, grappling with the creative and business elements of the music industry involves determination, hard work and a steep learning curve.

### **Funding the album**

Once the band had tinkered with their songs to the point that they felt ready to release their music, the next stage was to source funding for an album. The band met with a representative from a record label which, although very interested in United Fruit's music, 'had bigger bands that they were going to prioritise more than us', and so advised the band to release the album themselves. Marco's view is that bands think that they should sign to a big label 'because those guys know what they are doing, they are throwing money at you'. However, that type of relationship is non-existent, he says, because there is not much money in recording any more. The music industry is 'not as black and white as it used to be', and Marco feels there is more opportunity for aspiring bands and more competition. The growth in downloaded music means 'more people are listening to you and you get bigger audiences at your shows'.

In order to fund their musical endeavours, the band filled out an application form from a major Scottish arts funder and spent considerable time ensuring they had the information required. Marco recalled that the form was very complicated and that they had to 'account for every penny that we were asking for'. They had to supply information on the instruments to be used and a detailed plan for how the money would be spent. Their application was successful, and yet there were constraints on the £3,000 grant: the money was to cover 'mastering, mixing and manufacturing' of a CD, so the band were told that they could not use the grant

money for instruments or a vinyl album. At the same time, the band felt that self-releasing was the ‘right thing’; they did not want to sign with a record label who ‘were not going to put any amount of effort into us’. The band created their own label – United Fruit Records – to release the album, which, Marco says, is a relatively simple process that involves registering the name to obtain release codes to distribute the record online.

Marco recalls sitting at a meeting with his bandmates thinking ‘I am going to have to do a lot of work for this’; this was of some concern, given that he had two other jobs. He feels he was the only one who had the motivation to ‘really get stuck into all the boring aspects of the band’. Although he recognised that the music was a priority, and that all creative decisions were made by the band collectively, he also wanted to be able to make a living from being in the band. He knew that, having just been on an expensive tour, the album had to go well or ‘it will be the end of the band’. It is a standing joke among bands that ‘there’s always got to be one responsible person because no one else can be bothered doing it’. Marco recognises that his bandmates trust his opinion when it comes to making responsible decisions, but acknowledges that he has had to ‘learn so much’, particularly about all the background work alongside the creative process.

### **Making the album**

The album was recorded in three weeks ‘in a relatively small studio’ for financial reasons. The associated time pressure was hard for the band, but they needed to keep money for other aspects of making the record. The band did not have a producer; instead, they relied on an experienced sound engineer, recommended by a music industry insider. The sound engineer ‘knew how to record and knew how to get good sounds from the instruments’. Although United Fruit share decisions on the creative process, Marco is in charge of the finances, so he knew that they had to set aside a certain amount of money and set deadlines for recording.

Marco recalls that ‘a lot of the finalisation of the songs came during the recording’. The process of recording was very different from playing live, and recording helped the band to ‘take a step back’ and actually listen to the way the songs were structured. At first, the band had wanted to make the album ‘properly live and raw’, but during the recording process they realised that they actually had to ‘cut corners’. The process of recording became one of trying to perfect parts of songs ‘through performances and routines’. For example, the band used ‘click tracks’ to keep time on some of the tracks; this process means that the bass player and drummer play a

tempo all the way through the track. Although the band worked hard during the recording, they found the process ‘quite tough’, particularly in terms of finding perspective on their songs. They only had ten songs and ended up ‘ditching one for various reasons’, with consequent pressure to perfect the remaining songs. If they had not had time and money pressures, Marco says, the band would ‘probably have spent a lot more time and written a lot more songs – we would probably have been a lot more happy with the album’. Even though ‘you put so much effort in changing how it sounds’, you ‘just get fed up with changing it’. Without the help of a producer who has ‘recorded loads and loads of bands and knows how recording should be going’, the band found it particularly difficult to judge their own work. They had a strong idea of what they wanted the sound to be like, and had to compromise slightly following the advice of the sound engineer. Maintaining the integrity of their music is crucial for United Fruit; however, Marco reflects on the difficulties of being objective about their music. When ‘it is only the four of us who call the shots’, he says, ‘it would be really good to have someone to tell us if we are on the right track or starting to lose it a little bit’.

### **Mixing and mastering**

The lack of professional production in the recording raised issues for United Fruit. The band opened a dialogue with a producer based in Ireland, who involved one of their sound engineers in mixing the album. This was an exciting development for the band, as they felt that it would help them to forge links with a label who would ‘give us a bit of money to tour and write and record albums’. They sent some material to the label by email and were told that ‘they really liked the song but production was an issue’. Dialogue with the producer began by sending tracks backwards and forwards by email – a long process in comparison to doing the production ‘in real time’, which is the way the band had previously operated. After the sound engineer understood the general idea of how the band wanted to sound, the mixing process began. Once the mixing was done, the next stage was to move on to the mastering aspect. Marco emphasises that ‘mastering is a very fine art’ and brings out all the fine intricacies of the music. He likens the mastering of a song to ‘taking a human being, an average, healthy human being and then mastering it makes that healthy human being go on steroids, makes it complete’. Mastering is important because it means that the music sounds good on any player and irons out variations in volume levels across album tracks. While Marco understood the advantages of mastering, he reflected that ‘unfortunately we did not really consider it [mastering] when we were recording’. This caused all sorts of problems.

The mixer had ‘manipulated the music, pressing lots of compressors and limiters’ so that he could ‘boost the overall volume’. What he had done, Marco says, was to ‘manipulate the mixes so that all the mastering aspects were already done’, although he did not necessarily have the correct equipment or expertise to master the record. That was the reason the band thought the music was so good when it came back from the mixer. When the expert masterer came into the process, he pointed out that there was nothing he could do: ‘it is way too loud’. He had all the correct equipment and twenty years of expertise, and United Fruit were keen to have their record mastered by him, particularly because he had charged an ‘incredibly reasonable price for the level of skills that he has’. The band then had to go back to the mixer to ask him to remove ‘all those limiters and all those things you have put on because we need just the mix’. When he did as requested it changed the mix so that the band felt ‘it did not sound good any more’. The band had to liaise between mixer and masterer to try to ‘get this perfect thing out’. At the time Marco was also working full time and booking a European tour, and felt excessively pressurised to have a record to sell on tour. The remixing took another five different drafts of the record. Subsequently, the band began working with another mixing engineer and now that they ‘know the score, we can check him out and so that won’t happen again’.

### **Artwork for the album**

Once the difficulties with mastering and mixing were resolved, the next stage in the process was manufacturing the CD, which again caused problems. The band ‘really wanted our product to be fresh and original’, but ‘the reality was that we spent so much money on the recording, mixing and mastering that we couldn’t do that’ and it had to be ‘just a normal CD that you would see anywhere’. Creating and formatting the artwork for the CD posed further problems, and involved considerable research to find out what was needed and how to go about getting the artwork together. The band enlisted help from graphic artists they knew, who were keen to be involved but found it difficult to work within the tight timescale. Eventually, Iskandar and a close friend of the band took on the role of creating and designing the artwork. The manufacturer ‘basically had to tell us what we had to do’, which meant that they spent time working on ‘getting the artwork ready, getting stuff formatted to specific sizes, making sure artwork photoshopped into correct size and still looked good’. Marco recalls that it was so easy to make mistakes: even after a meticulous process of going over the work, the manufacturers still found errors and the artwork and text had to be edited time and time again.

## Touring

In his role as manager, Marco arranges all the band's live performances, and from the very beginning United Fruit have been keen to increase their audience. Marco feels that 'the more you play, the more people might hear about you, be impressed by you'. Alongside the technical problems associated with producing the album themselves, Marco was also involved in setting up a tour to promote the album. Organising the tour was sheer hard work, and Marco recollects 'just plugging and plugging, there are literally thousands of emails'. The impending tour dates added pressure: the original release date had to be met; if not, Marco felt the 'tour would be ruined because there would be no CDs'. He was also aware that if he cancelled, the band would be blacklisted by venues and that people would 'lose interest' in the band. United Fruit have now been on four tours and visited France, Belgium and the Netherlands. It is clear that Marco has learned a lot about organising tours, and the process has become successively easier to plan and manage. Although it is hard work to get into a venue the first time – 'when no one knew who we were' – after a successful show, 'the next time you make friends, you see people, you legitimise yourself'. Gradually, the band have moved from subsidising tours themselves to making a small profit on the last tour. Marco admits the band have to be resourceful in financing their touring: they are fortunate to have a friend who owns a fleet of vans and so they 'get mates' rates'. Previously they enlisted friends to help with driving and selling merchandise, but this time 'we haven't had anyone'. Marco feels it is difficult to continually ask friends to go away with the band for three weeks 'but we can't pay you', and recognises that being with the band as a helper 'is pretty boring'. The latest tour was great, he reflects, 'we were all helping each other out – it was exhausting but it makes us feel good about ourselves, we are working harder than a lot of people'. In comparing United Fruit to more established bands Marco notes that on tour 'we are the roadies, we are the merchandise sellers, we are the musicians, we do it all ourselves'. Reflecting on the tour, where he did all the driving, he recalls that he was ill when he came back, and says: 'I didn't really have time to eat'. He says that 'he hates to sound corporate' but understands that 'money is an imperative – if we don't have an income, we are going to end up splitting up'. Making a small profit on the latest tour has been a key milestone for the band, much of it through merchandise such as t-shirts and posters, as well as 'getting more people into shows' and 'trying to drive economically'. The band are proud that they have become self-sustaining, making enough to fund their activities so that the other jobs they do maintain their lives rather than subsidising the band.

**The future...**

The motif of hard work runs through Marco's account of the life of United Fruit – for them, hard work is something that they feel will distinguish them from other bands and make them attractive to the music industry. He says:

We just have to keep on working as if we are never going to get a deal – that is really attractive to labels . . . If we can show them we are a self-sustaining band that work hard in their own right, then that is much more attractive than it is to sign a band that don't know what they are doing and that they have to work really hard with to get them on the right tracks.

The benefits to the band, though, are clear. A label would help the band get bigger audiences, invest money in producing CDs and perhaps even fund vinyl records, a resurgent development in the music industry. Marco thinks that 'CDs are dying' and predicts that the future will be online release or vinyl, 'just because it's more of a physical product'. He adds that there are good technical reasons for a return to vinyl: recording on vinyl adds to the overall sound and is more true to the original recording. However, it comes at a price: although United Fruit are continually asked for vinyl records, they cannot afford the 'extortionate' manufacturing cost of producing them.

United Fruit's aim is to 'move up a level', perhaps signing up to an independent label, and they are 'talking to a couple'. The band have reached the point in their career where they need an independent view of their music and also some help with negotiating the music industry. Marco is fairly strategic about the move – the band have gathered enough knowledge about the industry to capitalise on their growing popularity. While they have one label 'who are really keen, who would sign us tomorrow', they intend to send out their latest demo with their new songs and a press pack with 'all our previous conquests' to a wide range of labels, in order to evaluate interest in the band. The band have recorded nine tracks and are planning to record another four and then 'pick the best from the bunch'. They are also talking to another label that has 'shown a little interest, and I would stress little'. Despite forming a strategy to market the band, United Fruit have clear criteria for the kind of label that would be acceptable. United Fruit would have to respect a prospective label's roster of bands:

We would only appreciate the view of a label that had produced really good artists, produced records that we love. They gave those records the thumbs up, so they know what they are talking about, they've got good taste, or taste along the lines of ours anyway.

Another advantage of being with a label is that ‘a lot of people will listen to bands on a certain label because they know they are associated with consistently good material’. There is an element of esteem associated with the label each band is signed to, so that these days ‘instead of getting you loads of money, being signed to a label is more like a seal of approval’. However, Marco also recognises that signing to a label with ‘a stacked roster’ is a risk, and another factor in the decision that will be taken collectively. It seems that United Fruit have benefited and learned from their experiences – Marco is candid about the next step in the band’s career. On the one hand, he says, ‘we might find that nobody is interested’; however, ‘there is no point in jumping the gun when there may be a much more influential label that wants to work with us’. On reflection, Marco feels the band have come on ‘leaps and bounds’ since they formed – they have learned a lot, and are still a ‘total unit’, operating as a collective with a strong emphasis on delivering the music they love.

### Key lessons

- Marco enacts several different identities during the making of the album, each of which affects the finished product. Marco is a mix of musician, performer, researcher, manager, administrator and strategist. Some of these identities conflict – for example, being musician/manager and strategist (see [Chapters 6 and 15](#)).
- Marco’s reflexive account of the story illustrates that he has learned from his experiences (see [Chapters 3 and 14](#)).
- Organisational practices involved in making an album are crucial (in this case, knowing what each expert in the process does, coordinating supporting activities such as gigs and establishing relationships with record labels) (see [Chapter 17](#)).
- Managing relationships informs the career trajectory of the band. Decisions around which label to sign with have advantages and drawbacks that will affect the artistic and commercial future of the band (see [Chapters 7 and 8](#)).

### Discussion questions

- Reflect on, and discuss, how commercial and artistic considerations have affected United Fruit.
- What and how has Marco learned during his time with the band?

- List and discuss the relative importance of the different people involved in making an album.
- What would your advice be to United Fruit, and why?

For more information, visit:

[www.soundcloud.com/unitedfruit](http://www.soundcloud.com/unitedfruit)

[www.unitedfruit.co.uk](http://www.unitedfruit.co.uk).

# Bloggng, running a label and band management

*Lloyd Meredith and Shiona Chillas*

## **Introduction**

Lloyd Meredith from Glasgow music blog, Peenko, co-founded Olive Grove Records, an innovative independent Scottish DIY label, with Halina Rifai, the founder of Glasgow PodcART. The two decided to join forces to create an independent label that is essentially an organic platform for chosen artists to release their material. Any profits made are given straight to the artists, and Olive Grove's aim is to network with independent people to provide something a bit different for artists. The label currently supports seven artists: Esperi, Randolph's Leap, The Moth and the Mirror, The Son(s), Pensioner, State Broadcaster and Jo Mango. Lloyd has recently moved into band management with Randolph's Leap, and he also runs gigs and organises festivals to showcase Scottish bands.

This section tells a story of the different aspects of Lloyd's involvement with the music industry.

## **Peenko – the blogger**

Lloyd started his music blog in 2008. His 'back story' is that he has a degree in music and always wanted to work in the industry, 'but essentially it never came to anything' and so he ended up working in an office job, harbouring a 'desire to do something in music'. The blog came about as a result of 'being fed up going to the pub and telling my friends what bands were on and they ignored me'. He set up the blog using Google Blogger, really because 'it was simple to use'. Initially, Lloyd says that he just wrote about music that he liked; however, as he progressed, the blog became solely about Scottish bands. For the first year he wrote for himself, and is now 'up to about 400 [hits] which is pretty good'. Publicity was not necessary for the blog. Lloyd feels that 'people searching for bands will eventually come to you'. When he started the blog he had a clear strategy, noting that 'I don't have the skills or heart to review' – instead he would

feature bands that he liked, interview them for the blog and leave the reader to decide whether they liked the music. His minor concession to a critic's role is to say at the end of each year which music he most likes.

As Lloyd got to know more people and started writing more he entered 'a whole different world', talking to other people through the blog, meeting other bloggers and bands at gigs he was covering. Lloyd feels that there is a real community in the Scottish music industry, and this sense of community is a recurring theme in Lloyd's tale. He also acknowledges the facilitating role of the internet in his engagement with the music industry – when he started he was 'mysterious', and yet now 'everybody knows me'. For Lloyd, blogging is a way of reaching out to like-minded people, getting to know them online, talking via the blog and then meeting them in 'real life' and becoming friends. He also thinks Twitter is 'the best thing we have got'. Lloyd has an organised approach:

I will post an interview on a Monday, I will record a session and post that, then another interview, and another interview on a Thursday and on a Friday I will spend most of my spare time looking for free stuff on the internet, so someone will post a free download and it will go up on the fan page. On Saturday I will do a cover version and then Sunday I end up doing a news post.

Lloyd says that he now prefers to find music to write about rather than to be sent it by bands, largely because 'if you don't like it, it is very hard to do a blog'. As the blog has become more popular and established, and Lloyd has begun to pursue other interests in the music industry, he has enlisted other people to work on the blog. Lloyd's role in the blog has changed from being sole contributor towards 'managing people to write reviews'. He gives these contributors 'free rein' to write. They 'drift in, drift out', he says, but if they are not reviewing they don't get paid, so there is 'usually one of them there' at gigs. Although he is not as hands-on with the blog, Lloyd still goes to a number of gigs, 'probably one a week'. Incorporating more people on the blog has allowed it to develop and it now also features podcasts. The second theme running through Lloyd's tale is the love of music, which encourages bloggers to invest the time and effort to be involved in something they are passionate about.

### **Olive Grove Records – the label**

Halina and Lloyd became friends via their respective blogs; one day 'she phoned me out of the blue' and invited him to put together a label with her. Lloyd sees Olive Grove as giving their bands a platform perhaps to sign with a bigger label, by providing the organisational skills to boost their music. Both Lloyd and Halina were well connected and drew on

their contacts for information on setting up the label. Two months before they started the label, Lloyd researched a feature for the blog entitled 'About Scottish DIY labels', in which he asked people for advice on starting a label. The feature produced some concrete information on, for example, how to source CDs, but more importantly for Lloyd, it opened up a whole new network of contacts in the DIY music industry. Lloyd feels that there is little competition among DIY labels 'because we are all in the same boat and we have not got any money', so that small labels are happy to share information, experiences and contacts. The size and nature of the Scottish music industry facilitates word-of-mouth communication, and reputation becomes a commodity in the market. As with the blog, the ethos of Olive Grove Records is to support local bands, not for any financial return. Indeed, both Lloyd and Halina have invested money in bands that the label supports – money that they do not expect to be reimbursed. From its inception, the ethos has been to cover costs and return any profits to the band who made the music. Lloyd feels that 'going in thinking that you are going to make money out of it is a recipe for disaster at the moment'. The label is run from Lloyd and Halina's homes, and both feel that they are very much 'learning as we go'.

Essentially, the way the label works is that the band will pay for everything and the label 'does everything for them' – it is just a step up from self-release, Lloyd says. All the bands Olive Grove represent come from 'a pre-existing relationship' with Lloyd and/or Halina, either through reviewing a single or through meeting the band at gigs. Each band has its own needs, but typically the label would organise distribution of the music on iTunes and getting physical copies of CDs into record stores; they also operate a press agency. The leap from making music to releasing an album and getting the music to the market is difficult to take, and most bands 'don't know what to do'. The precise nature of help from the label seems to vary, sometimes because bands simply do not have the time to devote to the 'other stuff', or because 'they are not interested'. Conversely, others 'work their backsides off' and are 'savvy about what needs to be done'. These bands might arrange all the recording themselves and come to the label with the finished product, so they are really just looking for help to put it 'out there'. Organising mastering of the recording, artwork and making CD packages has become almost second nature to Lloyd – things that he admits he 'had no idea about' before he had to do it on behalf of Olive Grove bands. He recalls handmaking CD packages for Randolph's Leap, the label's first signing. Lloyd says that he works well with bands who don't really know what they are doing – he has built up so many contacts that he can pull in favours, right, left and centre. The small label scene seems to work on favours given and received: at the

beginning Lloyd felt that he was getting back a lot of the favours he had done for people over the years.

Although some of the bands that Olive Grove work with will organise their own tours, for example, Lloyd has learned that an album release needs at least three months' lead-in time. All the organisational work starts after the music has been recorded: promo CDs take two to three weeks, the album itself takes about four weeks to press. In between, the artwork has to be organised, reviewed and finalised and an album launch and tour arranged. Although some of the bands Olive Grove represent don't tour, many play live as often as they can, to sell more albums and to 'keep themselves in people's memories'.

The promo albums are sent to the print press (who, where and when also has to be decided), and press photos are taken. To promote the record with radio and bloggers, the band need to work out a single or a sequence of singles and, of course, send free downloads to bloggers for review. The label releases via Bandcamp links to the bands' websites, where purchasers can download the music. Some bands are quite happy for Olive Grove to get on with releasing the work that needs to be done, others 'want to know what is going on, they want updates on how their actual sales are going' but they 'know they can trust us'. Olive Grove has settled into a pattern of releasing two albums each year, and although 'loads of great bands will approach us, I have to say I just don't have the time right now'. Given the vibrant music scene, Lloyd says he doesn't want to 'make a million promises and not deliver'. He has had to remove his email address from the website to cut down on the incoming traffic; however, he also admits to checking his phone 'every hour just to keep up to date'.

Recently, Lloyd has begun to manage Randolph's Leap, who are an eight-piece band, and he says that he 'sort of manages' some of the other bands on the label. Randolph's Leap are becoming more successful, and along with organising a festival and booking travel and accommodation for the band, Lloyd is also involved in liaising with the press.

### **Organising gigs**

In a related but separate activity, Lloyd also puts on gigs to showcase bands, whether or not they are represented by Olive Grove. He does this with another blogger he knows. They always put on 'bands that we like, were friendly with – we learned our trade that way'. As with Lloyd's other ventures, this facet of the music industry has been a learning experience. Some gigs are fine because 'all you have to do is make sure you tell the bands what time to turn up'. Others can be a 'pain in the arse' if, for example, the venue does not have its own PA, which in turn means that

Lloyd, 'has to source all the bits and pieces, going there twice in a day, just to pick up equipment' and 'at the end of the day I'm not making any money from it'. Lloyd has learned from bitter experience that some venues will charge extortionate costs and be less than honest about the receipts taken at the door, and on occasion he has had to subsidise a gig, even though it has been really busy. Organising gigs entails significant forward planning, and Lloyd has learned a lot about the process; he now knows the different charges venues levy and their equipment, and has made contacts with venue bookers, which makes arranging gigs a lot easier. Arranging a gig also means getting tickets and posters printed and, as Lloyd says, 'me walking around on a Saturday morning putting posters up' – something that he is trying to avoid in the future.

### Reflections

Lloyd comes across as a really personable, committed and enthusiastic person. Given that he works from 9am to 5pm in an office job that he admits is 'not exciting' and has a small child, his reach and involvement in and around the music industry is astounding. Everything Lloyd says and does is underpinned by a strong sense of 'giving', and he describes his involvement in the music industry as an 'all-consuming hobby'. Essentially, Lloyd spends all his free time working – he reflects that he 'has deadlines in my head, reminders on my phone, calendars' and notes he is always 'supposed to be doing this, supposed to be doing that'. He has five email addresses, all for different facets of his life. Everything he does is working towards a goal on behalf of a band. Olive Grove Records is Lloyd's 'outlet to explore what I want to do'. When asked what he gives up for his involvement in the music industry, Lloyd admits that 'he doesn't see friends as much as he used to'. In among the clearly altruistic ethos of Olive Grove, there lies an extremely well-organised, well-connected hub of contacts and information on the Scottish music industry. Lloyd is well respected – for example, he is now asked to sit on the panel with music journalists at a festival that he used to cover for the blog. Lloyd hints that he is trying to build up a brand name with Olive Grove and 'is always plotting at the back of my head' – just for now, though, he is content to keep 'learning as we go'.

### Key lessons

- There are many supporting roles in the music industry: Lloyd fulfils a number of important roles, presenting music through the blog, organising gigs and managing bands. The accumulated knowledge Lloyd

brings is invaluable for bands, particularly at early stages in their careers (see [Chapter 13](#)).

- Lloyd's account illustrates the importance of networking in learning to negotiate the music industry.
- Lloyd gives a different perspective on the commercial and artistic: he does the 'day job' in order to fund what he loves to do – in this case, not making music but helping others to make their music and make it known (see [Chapter 4](#)).

### **Discussion questions**

- Discuss Lloyd's different roles in the music industry – what skills are required in each and how does Lloyd manage the different roles?
- Discuss the place of blogging in the music industry – how influential do you think bloggers are and should be?
- Why do you think Lloyd does what he does? Would you describe Lloyd as a music industry entrepreneur? Can you be an entrepreneur without monetary reward?

For more information, visit:

[www.peenko.co.uk](http://www.peenko.co.uk)

[www.olivegroverecords.com](http://www.olivegroverecords.com)

## Relationships between music, management, agents and labels

*Jill O'Sullivan and Shiona Chillias*

### **The Band – Sparrow and the Workshop**

Sparrow and the Workshop are a three-piece band based in Glasgow, consisting of Jill O'Sullivan (vocals, acoustic guitar), Nick Packer (guitar, bass, bastard) and Gregor Donaldson (drums, vocals). They are known for their use of harmonies, bastardised instruments and FX pedals. They formed in early 2008 in Glasgow and soon after began playing gigs throughout the city. The band's debut album, *Crystals Fall*, was released in 2010 to critical acclaim. In late April 2011 the band released their second album, *Spitting Daggers*. Both albums attracted radio play from BBC6 Music, BBC Radio Scotland, Radio4 (Austria), XFM and Kerrang Radio, and Sparrow have performed extensive radio sessions, including for Lauren Laverne, Marc Riley, Rob da Bank @ Maida Vale, Janice Long and Vic Galloway. In addition to completing two UK headline tours and one European headline tour, Sparrow have also supported many bands on tour, including Brian Jonestown Massacre, the Pogues, Idlewild, Broken Records and British Sea Power, and have supported the Lemonheads and Thee Oh Sees. Sparrow completed their third album, *Murderopolis*, in late 2012, and also engage in a number of side projects with other musicians.

The following is Jill's story of how the band are organised, the division of labour and the experience of writing and playing music together.

### **The band's history**

Jill has a background in classical music and played the violin as child. Her parents were 'really into folk music and country music', and from an early age would take her to blues festivals, jazz festivals and free festivals in Chicago. She was given a guitar for her eighteenth birthday, and from then on: 'that was it – I like this because I can write songs on it'. Jill started playing in bands at the age of 19 and wrote her first song at 23. Chicago then became really stifling and so Jill took jobs to save enough money to

take a master's degree in London. Jill described her experience of London as 'lonely and alienating', and she moved to Glasgow with her boyfriend, which gave her 'breathing space and you kind of need that when you are trying to be creative'. Completely by chance she moved into a flat with the band's drummer, Gregor; they formed a band and then Nick joined. From then on, the three band members were 'just lashed together'. There was an immediate trust between the members, which the band have worked on and consolidated over time. The three moved into a different flat and lived together 'for moments of creativity' and also for financial reasons, so that they could afford to work less. Jill and Nick have been a couple for six years and now live in the flat together; Gregor moved out a few years ago to live with his girlfriend.

From the beginning of the band's relationship Nick and Jill had no connections in Glasgow, but Gregor had been in many bands and knew of some local places to play, and the band began to be offered support slots at small venues. They were noticed by promoters in Glasgow and then in Edinburgh, particularly an influential blogger (Matthew Young; see [Chapter 18](#), pp. 285–9), who was the first person to get in touch with the band and is someone who is committed to helping new bands in Scotland. By the band's fourth or fifth gig in Glasgow, offers to play were rolling in. Jill describes the music community in Glasgow as 'very encouraging and generous' to new bands. Success in playing live music led to Sparrow being taken up by an independent label. First the band put out two EPs; the label suggested they combine the EPs, add another three songs and then make an album, which they made on a budget of £1,000. The second album was a more difficult experience: the band were now contractually bound to make an album, with a specified release date. Although they were writing songs anyway, the band were under some pressure to compile their material more quickly under slightly more stressful circumstances. After the second album there was an amicable split between Sparrow and their label and the band financed the third album themselves.

### **Working and living in a band**

The pressing need to make money is ever present in Jill's story. The costs of making music are high, in terms of time, effort and hard cash. For Jill, making music is not about profit: 'it's just about breaking even'. There is so much involved in producing an album: printing, choosing singles, artwork and merchandise, all of which is expensive and time consuming. The band are committed to making music, yet the creative process is constrained, as Jill comments: 'writing songs is not hard work but it takes a

lot of time'. During their time together the band have all had other jobs to make a living and finance their music. Jill has worked in various jobs and at present works in a café with other musicians, where there is an implicit understanding that you will go away on tour, and where cover can be arranged.

The band work well together and have loosely defined roles in making their music and in the associated activities of the band, each member contributing according to their skills and interests. Gregor has often done the driving on tour and contributed merchandising ideas such as posters for gigs, fake tattoos and flower pot shots. Nick is the 'tech boy', recording and mixing demos. He also does all the admin for the band's tours, giving festival promoters advance material and specs for the sets. Jill's role is to keep on top of emails, deal with press crews and maintain social networking sites and fan interaction. Jill is very aware that the background work is important to the band, particularly during the making and promoting of the second album when the band members 'made a sacrifice by quitting our jobs', putting added pressure to 'make it work'. She describes the 'business' of working in a band as hard work, saying: 'I wake up, I check my mail, I call my manager, I email our agents, we email the PR guy for our label: these are constant things'. Jill differentiates between the ordered business of making music and the disordered creative process, saying that bands need to have 'a democracy organisation wise' and 'musically there needs to be a bit of anarchy'.

### **The creative process**

The creative part of the band's life is also organised and split among members. The band work hard to create freedom from a prescriptive 'verse/chorus/verse/chorus' song structure, and generally practise once or twice a week for three hours. The guiding principle for Jill's songs is to get an emotion across through a song; she says that commercial considerations do not enter her mind while she is writing. In describing the creative process, Jill says she does 'the basics' – the skeleton melodies and the lyrics. The boys then 'put the flesh on the bones' and the three band members work on the arrangement. Everybody has their own creative input: as the drummer, Gregor often sets the pace of the songs and Nick has a tendency towards developing melodic bass lines that both accompany the rhythm and weave in and out of it. Sometimes Jill will begin with a melody and find lyrics that 'match the mood and the melody', the band will work on it and produce a song. In other songs she will fiddle around with her guitar, 'doodling', and call the guys in to add their input. Sometimes, she says, the melody comes first and sometimes the lyrics.

She feels, or would like to feel, the creative process has to be 'like spontaneous combustion', yet she also knows that songs have to be worked at. Not all of her ideas materialise in songs and she keeps melodies on a Dictaphone – only when Jill, Nick and Gregor agree does a song come into being. Jill says she instinctively knows when a song is right 'because it gets stuck in my head, you get a rush and if I play my initial idea, and both Nick and Gregor's eyes light up, then it is right'.

Reflecting on the creative process, Jill sees that her attitude towards writing has changed over time. When she was younger, she felt she had to be in a certain mood to write songs. In 2009 she was invited to spend time with other songwriters and realised that everyone has different approaches to writing. After that experience, she now knows that 'if you sit down and start playing around, then something will come out'. Being forced to write with others made her realise 'you can channel a mood' – just pick up a guitar and get lost in it. Writing itself has become a source of happiness and she enjoys the process, regardless of her mood. Jill's confidence has grown over time, and while she has been told in the past that she is not confident enough speaking to people, she finds writing songs fulfilling and says: 'it's the only thing I feel confident about'. Although she still has doubts about her abilities, she feels now that doubt 'pushes my music forward', and says she feels free when she is writing, making music and working with people that she trusts. These feelings have led to other projects and collaborations writing songs and making music.

### **Band relationships**

While the band have somewhat defined roles in the creative process, making music requires sensitivity and can create tensions in relationships within and outside the band. Jill remembers times when she has been working with her bandmates and has not liked the direction of the music. Arguments can flare and there are times when the band do not necessarily get along. Managing creative disagreements is connected to choosing the right time to address differences: 'when everyone is in a good mood', then the band can discuss how they sound and how they might change parts of the song. Sometimes it is better to say nothing in emotionally charged situations and wait for people to calm down. Jill says that the band are all so passionate about their music, and although there are times when the creative process is really emotional and difficult, they have learned to combat that aspect of band life by achieving a 'tender balance' of not offending each other, but equally getting on with things and making the best music possible. Arguments are healthy for the band, and working, living and touring together means that personal differences can be blown

out of proportion, yet the shared love of their music and mutual trust overrides the rare clashes. When two of the band members are having a creative discussion, the third member seems to take the role of mediator, making suggestions and smoothing out entrenched positions with 'a bit of diplomacy'. In particular, the second album was made under a strict timeline from the label and the three band members felt the pressure, so that working together became 'a bit strained'. The pressures of suddenly becoming a 'buzz band' and the accompanying raised expectations from the label affected the band. These pressures are symptomatic of the contradiction in the music industry between making art and making money.

Jill is candid in her explanation of the different and sometimes competing interests at play in the music industry, and reveals the complexities in relationships that are influenced by a musician's attitude to music and attendant pressures. Musicians, she says, can join the DIY community, where people shun the commercial but often end up 'never getting out of their bedroom' and 'playing to the same ten people all day'. If a band wants to make connections with listeners outside of 'their bedroom', they have some options. They can self-release – some choose physical only, press some vinyl and a handful of CDs – and/or make the music available online, producing digital releases available on Bandcamp or other online outlets, and attempt to let the music do the talking, which Jill thinks may be becoming more common. The downside is that bands may not be taken seriously by the wider music-listening public. Jill thinks that some listeners perceive bands as more legitimate if they are connected to a label. Sales may also be limited, and the music press and bloggers may not hear and publicise the band's music.

To get music 'out there', a more traditional strategy is to sign with a label; this is what Sparrow and the Workshop did for the first two albums. In entering a contract with the label, Jill realised that the band had to grapple with the business side of the industry. They quickly went from having no expectations and just making music to having a 'weight of expectations', feeling pressure to comply with market forces outside their control. The contract basically includes releasing and promoting the album; the band's agent is responsible for organising a tour to promote the album. The label has to try to satisfy the demands of the industry by selling albums, which in turn has effects on the creativity of musicians. Business decisions begin to conflict with making music in, for example, choosing which track on the album will be put out as a single. The band might want a certain song because they love it, but a radio plugger might choose a different song, either because it is shorter or follows the prescription for a single of verse/chorus/verse/chorus, or because it is more

commercial. The band are very clear that they would resist any attempt to alter their music and Jill emphasises that Sparrow retained complete creative control of their songs and the decisions regarding writing, arrangement, production and so on. Music is deeply personal to Sparrow, and Jill feels it reflects the personalities of band members. Jill's view is that there are tensions between labels, who are 'too interested in numbers' and the band, who are interested 'in the art form'. Losing control over decisions related to their work, Jill says, used to 'freak her out', but over time she has learned to 'zoom out' and think of the bigger picture. Whichever single is chosen for radio play, it is still their song and people will hear it. In the past, Jill has wondered whether it is arrogant to want to do well, to want to reach people and get the music 'out there'. Looking back, she says, it would be silly not to have tried to make a living from music and she will be able to say that she made an album that she loved, that people heard and loved.

The joy of figuring out arrangements and capturing emotion in a song is evident in Jill's story. She returns to the difficulties of turning art into a product and sees the dilemma in terms of having to become business savvy if you want to get your music beyond your bedroom walls. The experience of touring and dealing with the music business and relationships outside the band has taught her to take control, but only where necessary. She sees relationships based on trust as being crucial for the band – otherwise, there is too much 'zooming in' and conflict over really specific 'stupid things like how many t-shirts to print to take on tour'.

### **The third album – going it alone**

After two years of touring with the second album, and the new experiences connected with negotiating the music industry, Jill felt that the band had become 'burnt out'. They were tired and jaded by their experiences, prompting a split with their label that, although amicable, meant that the band were back in Glasgow with a clean slate and lots of free time. Jill felt that the split with the label was good for the band: they were exhausted from touring and wanted to come back and get to know Glasgow again, and 'get to know ourselves'. Without the pressures of touring, Jill and the band found a new vigour for making music and started writing songs again 'for fun'. They had lots of material and decided to think about making another album with a different approach. Once they had recorded the album, they reconnected with Matthew Young of Song, by Toad – the blogger turned label-manager who had encouraged them in earlier years. The band felt the blogger 'was on their wavelength' and 'in it for the right reasons', in that he liked their music

and liked them, and – importantly – they had a mutual trust relationship. As Jill said:

They [Song, by Toad] give us a lot of support actually because they are independent, it is like: ‘Oh right, your first album, it was okay, but we are going to stick with you for the second and let you kind of get your fans and blah, blah, blah, whatever’ – that is business talk, but it has been really good.

The band members had all taken other work to make a living and had to figure out a way of funding the album. They applied for funding from a large Scottish funding body, feeling confident enough to book studio time in advance. Unfortunately, the funding application was rejected; this was a hard blow to the band – particularly Gregor, who has lived and worked in Glasgow all his life. Jill felt the band put so much time into the application and that they were not asking for too much, just funding to produce the album. She recognises that they may have become victims of a larger political strategy involving cuts in funding for the arts. This was a particularly hard time for the band but, quoting an old saying, Jill stated: ‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’. Ultimately, they funded the recording of the album using a bit of money left over from touring and publishing, money raised at a fundraising gig and personal contributions from band members. Sparrow also received financial support from their publisher, who happened to be the label they were previously signed with. Jill says: ‘despite not being our label any more they are still supportive and did not want us to fall on our faces. We weren’t contractually due the publishing money until release of the album, so they did us a massive favour.’ Jill feels that the band were lucky to have support from their fans, from the studio who allowed payment by instalments and from their publishers. Although the third album will entail a lot of work for the band, the experience has been very positive. Jill is proud of the album, in part because the band have funded the recording of it entirely themselves. She describes it as a ‘culmination of everything we have done as a band’, yet recognises that without luck and support ‘we wouldn’t have been able to make the album’.

### **Playing live and touring – mixed emotions**

Playing live and interactions with audiences are unpredictable, producing different experiences for the band. There are technical issues around the monitors, which can mean that band members cannot hear each other, or times when guitar strings break, there is noisy feedback or groundloop. However, Jill recognises that the most important element in playing live is the audience reaction. The best gigs are ‘when you feel

you are not just doing it, that you are actually engaging, when people come up to you after and say that they got something out of that, they felt good'. Jill says the best compliment she can get is inspiring people to go home and write music, because that is exactly how she feels when she loves a gig. Conversely, the band have had audiences who have been chatting throughout the gig and 'totally disengaged'. From her perspective, Jill also tells of gigs where she has been more or less going through the motions, her hands moving, her mouth moving, but she is thinking of something else entirely.

Having fans has been a strange development for the band. They know they love to make music for themselves, but Jill finds it strange to think that 'people like me'. She recognises that she shouldn't feel that way, but would like to think that she's connecting to people through the band's music. Touring is part of the business of being in a band. It is vital to promote the album, and over the years Sparrow have developed strong relationships with a number of venues in Scotland. Despite the exhaustion and occasional boredom involved in touring, where 'if you are not driving, you are just sitting and staring at the road', Jill says she loves being on the road, visiting different countries and observing subtle differences in culture and in audience reactions. Touring is a unique experience, and the band have learned practical and emotional lessons from being together on the road. In the past they might have driven themselves to save money; now they realise that it is worth spending some extra money to employ a driver and give their legs and minds a rest before the next gig.

### **Key lessons**

- Organising in a band: it is important to understand and allocate roles in the creative process and deal with the music industry according to abilities and preferences (in this case, the band understand each other's strengths and allocate the workload democratically) (see [Chapter 4](#)).
- Managing relationships: band members must learn to be sensitive to the feelings of other members, dealing with different interests and learning which aspects of work are important to control (zooming in and zooming out) (see [Chapters 3 and 5](#)).
- Addressing the art/commerce contradiction: the band needs to decide which strategy to use, understanding the effects and implications personally and musically (see [Chapters 1 and 9](#)).

### **Discussion questions**

- What roles are adopted by band members, and why? Discuss where conflicts may arise between band members and how they are resolved. Is Jill a leader – how does she achieve her goals?
- Compare and contrast the different experiences of signing with a label and self-funding an album. Which do you think worked for Sparrow – why might this be?
- Reflect on how learning to ‘zoom in and zoom out’ has helped Jill. Discuss other circumstances where these different perspectives might apply.

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