
Book Review: *Music by Numbers: The Use and Abuse of Statistics in the Music Industries*

Richard Osborne and Dave Laing, *Music by Numbers: The Use and Abuse of Statistics in the Music Industries*. New York: Intellect Books, 2021. 256 pp.

How can we calculate the overall value of the live music industry in relation to the recording industry? How is the argument that musicians earn more from live music used to justify lower streaming royalty rates? What is the success ratio of artists signed to a record deal? Is it “one-in-ten”? Where does this infamous statistic come from and why does it matter?

These are only a few of the questions broached by the volume *Music by Numbers: The Use and Abuse of Statistics in the Music Industries*, edited by Richard Osborne and the late “father figure” of popular music studies, Dave Laing. In fourteen distinct and loosely connected chapters the contributors variously analyze, dispute, or contribute statistics on the music industries. As Osborne notes in his excellent introduction, the book was Laing’s idea; however, it is largely due to Osborne that this volume saw the light of day, as Laing sadly passed away in January 2019. Osborne was thus forced to contribute more than he had initially planned and wrote all three chapters for Part I on the music industries’ “winners and losers.” These are some of the most interesting chapters of the book. They range in topic from how the United Kingdom singles chart has historically both reflected and driven musical popularity, to the peculiar celebration of sales figures by rewarding gold or platinum status, to the disputable but highly influential rhetoric of the “one-in-ten” success ratio that is still frequently heard today.

Part II focuses on policy. David Arditi first provides a detailed analysis of the *Recording Industry in Numbers* and its successor, the *Global Music Report*. These reports are very difficult (and expensive) for researchers to access, and Arditi usefully questions why this is the case. One possible answer is that these reports complicate the standard narrative about the harms of file-sharing that the recording industry actively propagated in the press. The discussion then shifts to Shain Shapiro’s chapter on Canadian popular music funding. While the country has been celebrated for its arts funding, Shapiro documents a transformation in this system that started in the 2000s, from “promoting and protecting Canadian culture” to “enriching its makers” (91).

Part III examines the increasingly lucrative and influential live music industry. While live music has not historically been as data-driven as the recording and publishing

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industries, this trend is beginning to change, and researchers are attempting to account for the value of this sector. The first chapter demonstrates just how difficult and resource-intensive this is to do. It provides some “experiential reflections” from the team that conducted the first U.K. Live Music Census and usefully compares this project to previous censuses around the world. Next, Osborne includes a blog entry by Dave Laing that draws on an array of sources in an attempt to calculate the economic size of live music in several countries around the world. Finally, Osborne examines how the numbers for live music are calculated, the arguments that derive from these calculations, and the motivations that lie behind them. He reminds us that there is “a need to urge caution in respect of how the statistics are applied,” particularly when they are used to compare live music to the recording industry (29).

Piracy is the focus of Part IV. It begins with Lucas Logan’s case study of OiNK’s Pink Palace which details the interesting history and legacy of the defunct file-sharing site. This chapter largely repeats Arditi’s earlier claim that the recording industry exaggerated the threat of piracy. Lola Costa Gálvez’s subsequent chapter makes a similar argument by demonstrating how statistics were used by the Spanish music industries to support their anti-piracy policies. This is followed by Vanessa Bastian and Dennis Collopy’s detailed overview of the difficulties in developing methods to accurately measure copyright infringement and its effects.

The final section of this volume, “Digital Solutions,” opens with a particularly interesting chapter from Michael Jones about his discovery that he had earned one penny in Brazil through Universal Music Publishing Group’s new online royalty portal. This critical insider’s account provides a necessary corrective to the recent hype around music publishing revenues. Blockchain is another digital solution that has been presented at music industry conferences and in tech magazines repeatedly over the past few years. Marcus O’Dair provides a balanced overview of the blockchain hype within the music industries. He asks how we might understand this technology’s potential value and concludes that it is still impossible to quantify. The final chapter by Craig Hamilton critically engages with data collection and analysis systems that power music streaming recommendations and explores how computational techniques provide scholars with new opportunities to understand listening behavior. While the author’s “Harkive Project” points to new directions for research, it also raises questions about “the potential pitfalls of using such techniques without proper engagement with the figures, rationales, and processes behind the results they help to produce” (237).

Although *Music by Numbers* includes chapters that draw on data from various parts of the world, it prioritizes the British music industries’ use and abuse of statistics. It is also to some extent a product of its time: the volume was conceived when scholars were just starting to shift their attention from file-sharing to streaming. As a result, while there is an entire section on piracy, there is less focus on the “datafication” enabled by Spotify and its competitors. This is not a criticism but rather a proposal for scholars to use this volume as a foundation for future research. As such, I would like to suggest a few directions for researchers interested in the role of numbers, statistics, and metrics that build upon the work conducted by this volume’s contributors.

