



How It Really Works: Songwriter Sam Barsh On Success In The Streaming Age

The multi-platinum music creator discusses the reality of making a living as a songwriter in the streaming age

Sam Barsh (Intro by Nate Hertweck) Advocacy Apr 26, 2019 - 9:42 am

What does it take to make a living as a songwriter in today's music industry? The answer may surprise you. Multi-platinum songwriter, producer and keyboardist Sam Barsh would know. His smash-hit credits include co-writer on Aloe Blacc's "The Man," writer and keyboardist on Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly*, contributions to albums by Anderson .Paak, BJ The Chicago Kid, Ledisi and many more.

We sat down with Barsh to hear his perspective from the front lines of music creating as a living, and his insights are powerful. Below, Barsh shines a light on the reality of making a living as a songwriter in the streaming age and provides valuable advice to aspiring songwriters and a glimpse at why all music creators can find optimism in the recently passed Music Modernization Act.

As a major songwriter how has the streaming age affected your bottom line?

The biggest change that streaming has brought to the songwriting business is the replacement of physical or download sales with streaming, and the corresponding difference in revenue. Physical sales continue to disappear while streaming is the way of the present and the future.

The mechanical royalty payment for a physical or download sale of a song is \$0.091 per sale, while the average streaming mechanical royalty payment is \$0.00043 per stream. (The \$0.00043 per stream figure is the average per stream payment from Spotify, which is the most used streaming platform in the US. Apple and Tidal pay more, Google pays less, so the Spotify number is a good median). And since songwriters have their rates set by the U.S Government, we can't really go out and sell our songs to those services for what they should be worth.

The good news is the Music Modernization Act is set to change that [with the institution of a market-based "willing buyer, willing seller" standard], and that's exciting and encouraging, but at the end of the day the new royalty rates will still be set by the government and as we've seen recently subject to appeals and court fights. So even though I have a catalog of over 100 songs, a large number of which are with major artists, including four songs featured on No. 1 albums on the Billboard 200 and multiple Gold and Platinum plaques, that doesn't translate into rich.

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