Listening Ethically - Environmental Crisis, Artist Income and Streaming
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Good Morning,

I very much appreciate this opportunity to speak today and note how wonderful it is to now have this group of people working together in this forum.

I have proposed that today we could do some thinking about listening and it's relationship to the crisis at hand, while not coming to any pat conclusions or grand statements, let's look at the playing field.

First some history that explains how I have come to be involved and concerned with the issues around the current ways we listen to music in particular.
At the dawn of the streaming era (1995-2000) two tropes emerged,

1. Music was being stolen in vast quantities existentially threatening the music industry,
2. A more hopeful possibility – could the 'tyranny of taste' in the music industry be overturned by artist creation of their own distribution networks.

We saw the twin tropes of music theft and artist led distribution play out in various ways, but as expected the music industry won, and artist share of the profit of their work doesn't seem to have particularly improved.

Back then, I was credited, kindly I admit, with releasing the first commercially available MP3 in the UK, here's an item from ITV News about it from the time.

(CLIP SLIDE – PLAY CLIP)

So I was heavily involved then, noticing the imminent change in how music would be listened to and shared, I jumped in with both feet.
Recently I have noticed a similar set of markers of change and wondered where we are.

(Environment in Crisis – CRISIS SLIDE)

On the first of May 2019, Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn proposed a motion, agreed by Parliament saying, "We have no time to waste. We are living in a climate crisis that will spiral dangerously out of control unless we take rapid and dramatic action now."

It reminded me, for our purposes this morning, of the words of Antonio Gramsci, "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born."

So this is the problem at hand. We all know there is a problem, we all talk about it.

AND there is a block in that the major structures around us prevent change. Even the environmental measures we have taken previously aren't working in the way we would like - some say. Unless we have no conscience we all feel guilt about the part we play in the creation of the crisis.

Let's consider the signposts of change in our own field then, SOUND.

So music and its consumption is often a thought leader in how things change, from the Viet Nam war to Live Aid, regardless of music's often flawed tone of voice on various subjects, it does work as a signifier to what is about to happen culturally. It has a predictive effect. Thinking about Jacques Attali's writing about the middle class and the rise of the concert hall in Europe, we know that modes of listening can be a predictor of change in the world culturally.

(SLIDE – GLASGOW UNIVERSITY)

In the run-up to Record Store Day in April 2019, Glasgow University Researcher Dr Matt Brennan published "The Cost of Music" a report revealing that the most environmentally problematic music format in history is the digital download.

(SLIDE – APPLE ENDS ITUNES)

This month Apple announced the end of it's software ITunes, a piece of software that was launched 18 years ago largely to manage the content on its then new product the IPod, which is now all but gone. During the intervening 18 years, Apple probably manufactured more than half a billion IPods. All of us in this room probably owned several versions of the device. Commentators note that, as has Apple, that they don't really know what happened to most of those now obsolete devices, but we do know that a significant amount of them, ended up in the landfill. Heavily designed, the IPod is part of the problem of design, that unlike craft, it is largely disposable. In sound we used to speak a lot about sound craft, and the same is true in our personal lives. Something crafted like a hand knitted scarf or your grandmothers watch, are things that we pass along from generation to generation. Design is something that we want to be rid of; to cast off the moment it no longer has value.

CRISIS SLIDE 2 (Stuart Hall Quote, end of year show, fits a pattern)

It is a cliché to say that everything old is new again, despite this; it's also kind of true at the moment.

Stuart Hall wrote, "Yesterday's deconstructions are often tomorrow's orthodox clichés."

Student work in the 2019 RCA End of Year show is being exhibited on a variety of retired audio formats including, NAGRA Reel to Reel, cassette, Minidisc, and 8mm and 16mm film.
 This is not nostalgic, I would argue, it fits a pattern.

Like the dawn of the download in 1997 and 98, we are seeing in 2019 a similar crossroads. Let's consider why.

ALL OF THE CHANGES FIT A PATTERN

(CASSETTE SLIDE) – the continuation of the rise of the cassette
(Reel to Reel SLIDE) – the resurrection of "unconnected high fidelity formats"
The Reel to Reel is being manufactured again.
(Academisation SLIDE) – The Rise of Sound Design, experimental design and acoustics departments at major universities, in particular art schools
(Slow Listening SLIDE) – the continued rise of the slow listening spot where non digital, and non connected technologies are fetishized
(Slow listening development SLIDE) – Slow listening has led to the rebrand of the term NOT SPOT –
- The "Not Spot" used to be a negative term for a place – a building, or city or even a country that had low data or Wi-Fi connectivity
- The neuro-game developer, Ted Talker and developer of the game RIOT, Karen Palmer, has posed questions around how young people, particularly those at risk of unfair treatment at the hands of authorities – People of Colour, LGBTQ activists - have begun to think of areas of low connectivity, like slow listening spaces and spaces where music is played without connection to the internet, as spaces of GREATER liberation. Particularly if the negative aspects of 5G become a reality
- Put your phone away, in a container, don't bring it, don't take pictures
- New DIY music concerts and shows where the idea is to be more personally connected than digitally - taking out your phone is embarrassing – peer pressure to put it away. (DIY Space for London, for example).
 (Fool the tech SLIDE) – A renewed desire to be away from the tech – Drag performers, environmentalists, People of Colour trying to avoid the eyes.

(Revisiting the old SLIDE)

These new-ish ideas, taken as a whole, represent a more environmentally hopeful reuse of older ideas - building a newer, fairer way of listening and socializing while listening...there's another strand of thinking though...where is the commercial world of sound and music going...will it challenge the environmentally problematic stream?

Thinking about the other side – how are things going "digitally"

(CHANGES TO LISTENING SLIDE)

As downloads disappear with the end of iTunes, and streaming continues to grow with the expansion of 5G, there are a few interesting ideas to quickly consider
Streaming only pays the artist if the listener listens to the whole song
Listeners are notoriously fickle with streams
(LOOK AT SLIDE AND POINT OUT THE POINTS)

(STREAMS DON'T PAY VERY WELL SLIDE)
Personal example – despite dramatic increases in listening, or starting to listen, income doesn't go up.

(DESPITE STREAMS GOING UP SLIDE)

Despite streams going up, they didn't FINISH the song - Goal – stop the listener dropping out…so you get paid – YouTube Analytics – Dropouts in middle 8s. A lot of listeners just don't like Middle 8s!

(RETAINING YOUTUBE AUDIENCES SLIDE)

How to retain streaming and YouTube audiences – replace middle 8s with another "chorus" – often just from another song already existing…don't get caught…

(THE RESULT – IS DATA DRIVEN CONTENT CREATION – THAT MAY IN THE END KILL THE THING IT WAS SUPPOSED TO ENHANCE)
(READ SLIDE POINT OUT DETAILS)

So what we can see is that the amount of Streaming is probably going to increase and that unless we reconsider how we are participating in this and acknowledging our place in it we will perpetuate this environmentally problematic practice of streaming. We need to perhaps recraft the stream, so that it is not constantly on, constantly drawing energy and polluting the environment with unwanted gasses and sounds.

And we need to embrace the expansion of the disconnected and the not spot. Where can we go to refuse?

For that I go to the last quote by Stuart Hall.

Thank you.