

# David Alexander on the state of music publishing in South Africa



By [Evan-Lee Courie](#)

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The South African music landscape is vibrant, varied and full of talented songwriters. Often when musicians hear the term 'music publishing', it can create a lot of confusion. Some may seek a publisher - who can administer their rights on their behalf - and some may choose to self-publish. Since music publishing has a lot to do with how you make your money, it's important to know the ins and outs of the business, from protecting the use of songs to collecting royalties.



## ■ *Could you perhaps elaborate on the current state of music publishing in South Africa?*

I think it is a mixed bag – many of the larger publishers were already working online – so a move to work-from-home and online meetings was not a huge change. The smaller publishers have had to adapt to an online environment or outsource their administration to a larger publisher that has the necessary facilities.

The revenue sources that were disrupted during the hard lockdown have started to flow again – but at a much lower level. Advertising spend is down across all traditional media and TV production has only recently restarted and as publishers and songwriters rely on a share of advertising revenue this has become a critical issue for us.

There was an increase in uptake of legal digital music subscriptions – but the value per stream of these services is very low and a song needs to have millions of streams before a songwriter can receive meaningful money. So while there is more money in the pot it is also spread more thinly than ever before.



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The impact of the closure of live music events and the re-opening of only small events has had a significant impact on the musicians (many of whom are also songwriters) and there has been anecdotal discussion about a large scale exit from the profession of musicians and songwriters who can no longer support themselves and their families through their craft.

## ■ *What are the biggest challenges facing musicians and performers?*

As music publishers, we represent songwriters – the people behind the musicians/performers that you hear on radio or television. Songwriters are the storytellers that narrate the critical events on our behalf and our feelings around these events that run throughout the soundtrack of our lives.

Our biggest challenge is the pandemic and how it has shattered income streams and potentially forced Creators to look at other jobs to support themselves and their families. The relief that was promised by the Department of Arts and Culture has been poorly delivered and was too little at the outset to make a meaningful difference over the last year.

Global relief funds have been made available in billions of US\$/EUR/AUS\$ because their governments understand the critical role that the creative industries play in the fabric of our society.



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#### What can be done to overcome these challenges?

The first prize is a vaccinated society where live events are open again and musicians and songwriters can earn at pre-Covid levels. In addition, film, advertising and TV production returns to full scale operations including international co-productions and they continue to utilise the music of commissioned composers, or commercial and library music bringing back some of the money that was lost during the lockdown.

From now till then there needs to be an urgent intervention in the form of a cash injection into this industry and I would suggest that it be administered by the well-established and trusted collective management organisations who are in a position to deal with members nationwide.

#### Musicians and performers have been hit hard by Covid-19. What advice do you have going forward?

It is hard to stay positive, but we are all in this together – the whole world. There is a unique opportunity that has been created by the pandemic to work online with musicians and songwriters around the world. Everyone is in the same storm and has more time on their hands to collaborate with a global industry.

Services exist to facilitate the global online release of songs and the playing field is more level now than it has ever been for the DIY artist. Put yourself out there as a creator and join the many forums for collaboration or work through your publisher or label to get in touch with others who are keen to collaborate.

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■ ***As newly appointed chair of The Music Publishing Association of South Africa. How is MPA-SA assisting musicians?***

Note that we represent publishers who represent songwriters – many of whom are musicians. Initially our work has been mainly through the CMOs that we work with – ensuring that they distributed royalties more frequently and released money that had been held back in reserve for occasions like this. There are also a number of funds that can be applied for directly by members of the CMOs.

We continue our advocacy work with National Government and Arts & Culture and hope that they will make more relief funds available. We are also working to improve the financial wellbeing of our members by providing workshops that can offer insight into better financial management and estate planning for the long-term – please join up via our [website](#) and we will keep our members informed about these events.

■ ***The Copyright Amendment Bill has also thrown a spanner in the works. What's the current status around this?***

The last action by the President was to refer the Bill back to Parliament. What needs to happen is that there should be proper engagement by the committee with the creative industries broadly and more specifically with the Music Publisher's Association.

We agree that the Copyright Act is in desperate need of reform and that the last amendment predated the introduction of many of the digital services for music and video that are a seamless part of our lives. What is illegal in the real world needs to be illegal online and the language of the law needs to cater for the various forms of delivery that music follows between the creator and the consumer. We will support positive legislation that has had our input.

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