

Music streaming in South Africa - new survey reveals musicians get a raw deal

By [Gwen Ansell](#)

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Musicians worldwide have been placing their tracks with global streaming platforms such as Spotify for many years. South African musicians, however, have reported only sparse earnings from streaming music online.



Source: www.unsplash.com

When our 2020 survey revealed this, we wondered if part of the reason was inexperience. At the time, Covid lockdowns had made live performances impossible, driving many South African musicians to try what looked like an alternative revenue stream.

In 2022, we broadened and deepened that research. And we discovered that earnings from music streaming remained poor. Further, major international studies were also now demonstrating the same earnings trend everywhere.

Those studies suggested that, without urgent reform, the entire streaming system was rigged against musicians. And genres and musicians on the periphery of the western-dominated music industry were hit hardest.



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We heard from 279 music role players – artists, venues and local platforms – and took the international findings on board. The full report, Digital Futures 2 Taking Music Online in South Africa, confirms, with much more nuance, that our 2020 findings were correct.

A much bigger sample spread across all provinces demonstrated that South African musicians weren't beginners in the world of streaming: 77% of respondents had some involvement even before Covid struck. Just over 40% used methods including site analytics to monitor their business performance. But despite this, and despite the data also showing improved audiences and that more artists now owned their streaming rights, the earnings picture remained just as bleak.

"Poor" or "very poor" was how 63% of respondents rated their earnings. At best, streaming provided a supplement to other music-related earnings such as live performances or hiring out equipment. At worst it was a drain on them – because of platform fees. Without sponsorship, streaming would be impossible for most.

Musicians are the losers

South Africa's musicians pay a dollar-equivalent fee to post their music on an international platform. They are allocated a payment whenever a track is streamed. But each stream is at best a few hundredths of a US cent, depending on the platform. What listeners pay doesn't go directly to the artist. It goes into a global pot and is then allocated – after platform service fees are deducted. Allocations are made via complex algorithms based on many factors, including the artist's existing share of the market and where their listeners are based.

South African artists find themselves in the same boat as their international counterparts, even those in countries with far stronger digital infrastructures. The World Intellectual Property Organization goes as far as to suggest that streaming, currently controlled by a handful of global platforms, is corroding the ecosystem that nurtures music creativity.

Despite rising platform and label revenue from streaming, "there has been no trickle-down to performers," the organisation says.

Even worse in South Africa

In South Africa, these problems are intensified by a massive digital divide and an undeveloped policy environment. Official policy on copyright – including the proposed Copyright Amendment Bill – does not even discuss engagement with the dominant global platforms. Neither does it address the possibility of new forms of royalty designed for streaming rather than broadcast or publication.

South African audiences lack easy, affordable digital access. Production and the constant online promotional engagement needed by musicians are constrained by the same circumstances.

Survey respondents, meanwhile, expressed urgent concern about digital piracy, theft of intellectual property, illicit sharing and how social media companies "work off our original music". Load-shedding, regularly scheduled power cuts due to creaking power infrastructure, was often mentioned. Power problems particularly affect music whose largest potential audiences are in townships (often underdeveloped urban areas populated by black South Africans) or rural areas. One wrote: "Some of my fans don't understand the streaming technology; some don't have phones that allow them to stream." Another: "Poor network and load-shedding compromise production."

Our conclusion is that unless change happens, streaming offers a very limited future for South African musicians.

What's needed

Respondents called for faster official action on bridging the digital divide and on developing other demand-side stimuli for the South African music industry. It is not enough to assist music creators (the supply side) if audiences cannot afford or access their products. Government should collaborate with the royalty collection agencies to engage with global platforms, respondents said.

Longstanding discontent around the efficient collection and disbursement of royalties in South Africa are now joined by an urgent need for policy engagement with global platforms to seek more equitable payment regimes. (Depressingly, though, collection agencies and labels were still characterised as poor communicators with musicians, as they had been in 2020.)



Here are the Spotify Wrapped stats for South Africa

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The musicians and music providers who responded to this survey demonstrated solid practical experience in managing their activities. They acknowledged that “the world is changing fast”. They named areas where they would welcome further training and information, because “we need to create more consistently, regardless of the landscape of the country’s support.”

One striking and positive finding was about how respondents saw their reasons for streaming. In the thematic analysis of all the open responses, a sense of social mission and purpose constantly recurred: inspiring listeners; providing hope; “expressing feelings that people are afraid to express”; and advocating for the beauty of Africa’s music heritage. Our respondents know they may be on their own and may not make money from posting music online, but they do it “not for seeking attention or likes, but to share our ghetto experiences and stories.”

But musicians need to eat in order to tell their stories. National training and demand-side interventions can help, but the problems of musicians with the streaming system are global and systemic and need attention from policymakers on that level too.

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