UP HIT CREEK

THE DRY STREAMS PARADOX

Are you frustrated with the size of your fanbase? Tired of banging your head against a brick wall with ticket and merchandise sales? Unable to reconcile your streaming figures with the number of genuine fans? Then you too might be suffering from The Dry Streams Paradox.

OK, we’re being slightly facetious with the phrase Dry Streams Paradox, but the problem is a real and present danger, as musically SVP of digital strategy Patrick Ross explains. “What we are hearing from a lot of artists is that playlisting doesn’t necessarily grow fanbases,” he says. “You get listens and a lot of those come from playlists; but that doesn’t necessarily mean they connect with you as an artist. We have seen this where an artist has millions of streams, they play a show and there’s no one there.”

sandbox spoke to multiple artist managers for this piece who did not want to be quoted directly – but all of whom confirmed that this is a genuine problem. At the root of this problem is the fabled “dry stream”.

“I was with somebody the other day and they said, ‘Oh my god, I love this song, I’ve added it to my library.’” Ross says. “I asked, ‘What is it?’ And they said, ‘I don’t know – it is on one of my playlists.’ And that is the dry streams paradox.”

What happens when you realise the streams are dry?

Dry streams, Ross explains, are streams that come without a great deal of interest in the artist themselves; streams where the artist is reduced to little more than a name and packshot on a playlist.

Dry streams tend to come from playlists created by editorial teams rather than by algorithms and that makes them time sensitive and rather insecure: your playlist placement is based on a human decision that can easily be changed. And when your playlist placement goes, as it inevitably will, then streaming counts plummet.

“If the main portion of an artist’s listener base comes from third-party playlists, they will have to rely on releasing a constant flow of content in order to get those playlist placements and the monthly listeners they bring in,” says musically digital marketing coordinator Isabelle Ljungqvist. “Being featured in large and prominent playlists might be good in the short term for initial streams, but it doesn’t automatically foster a healthy and committed fanbase.”

One Scandinavian manager, who did not wish to be named, says that they have seen numerous examples of this problem. “We have had a lot of projects that just ran crazy on streaming and then you have to play catch up on the rest,” he says. “Especially Scandinavians, we have been working with Spotify for a long time. We have had that as the major part of our music market for a long, long time. We are seeing tons of projects and tons of talent just completely wasted because the labels are fine with having it stream really well and not changing how they work to try to build more stuff around it.”

From connection to disconnection: streaming in a vacuum

Unpleasant as this might sound, the phenomenon of dry streaming is perhaps to be expected the more the industry shifts to a playlist culture. No one here is complaining about streaming, with global music industry revenues once more on the rise due to the uptick in user numbers for Spotify, Apple Music, Amazon and more.
Nor are we about to grumble about the incredible access to music that streaming brings. But it is hard to argue with the idea that more access to music has led to a disconnect with individual acts.

"With physical and digital purchases, you'd pay up front for a specific artist's music; whereas the financial commitment of a streaming subscription isn't directed at a certain act," says Ljungqvist. "Having that financial commitment to an artist fosters a loyalty to the act, as the consumer has spent money for a specific album or track, which they will probably listen to multiple times."

**Platforming rather than performing**

You might wonder what exactly the problem is here. Dry streams are still streams and pay as well as any other kind of play. And if people don't exactly know your name, well, there are worse things in the world than well-paid anonymity. Like a twist on the old Oscar Wilde line, there is only one thing in life worse than being dry streamed and that is not being dry streamed.

*This helps to explain why many labels are OK with the dry stream paradox: streaming makes them money and, if they budget accordingly, they can still make a profit off this temporal success.*

"I call it ‘platforming’ – that first year and a half of a project, when you get some radio support, some DSP support and you end up going up a level," says our Scandinavian manager. "But it flattens out and you stay on that level for a long time. It is extremely hard to scale from that point. And especially if you have the DSP support, as a label you can keep on servicing tracks and putting out tracks at that level and doing all your budgeting based on that level."

They add, "If you are a label that works volume-wise, you are kind of fine with that. You're not going to lose any money, you're not going to pay any big advances, you just say, ‘OK the plan for this is to stream 5m to 10m and after that you are fine.’"

The fundamental problem is that dry streams put artists at the mercy of the streaming platforms. "If you are finding favour within the streaming ecosystem, then every time you release something you get a bump because you get playlisted," Ross explains. "But in reality you are completely beholden to the playlist owners so that they continue to playlist you."

If the stream is dry then flooding it must surely be the answer. Right?

One remedy to this problem is to simply keep releasing new music, in the form of singles, and therefore to keep the editorial spotlight on you. This might work – but it is hugely risky and puts a vast amount of strain on the artist to keep coming up with the goods, and also doesn't work well for albums.

"You can keep releasing music forever and then you can keep playing Spotify," Ross says. "But you need to realise it is part of the ecosystem and if you put all of your eggs in one basket, then you are not actually doing the job."

It is also a rather shortsighted approach to take. "My biggest issue about this is so many labels creating stuff that lasts maybe a maximum of three months if you are lucky," says one manager. "They create lots of catalogue that doesn't stick or have any value other than being used for a while."

To address the dry streams paradox may require labels, managers and artists to re-think some of their most treasured beliefs about the power of playlists, taking down some holy cows with them. "We speak about [Spotify playlist] New Music Friday being a curse and a blessing at the same time: it provides the peaks that you get on release day and then [streaming numbers] fall and flatten out after that week," says our Scandinavian manager. "Only the ones that are in the top 10 stick and get that major boost with people."

So acute is the problem that at least one manager talked to *sandbox* about actively avoiding the all powerful New Music Friday. Instead, they look to “curate” their audience through more traditional methods, creating engaged audiences that will follow them on to Spotify. "It’s all about trying to build an audience from the get go," the manager says. "When we launched some of our young artists last year, we went to Spotify and said the only thing we are going to be focusing on on Spotify is to build that..."
Spotify follower numbers. We are not asking you to add stuff to playlists.”
To build this kind of engaged audience, marketers may want to take a leaf from
the music industry’s recent past. “It is basically dusting off the marketing
book from 2009 and going, ‘What are all the activities you have to do? And what
actually makes an artist?’” says Ross.
And that involves all kinds of marketing,
physical and digital, whether that be a good
Instagram strategy, frequently playing live,
and even TV or radio or bits of press: all the
things that make the artist more than just
a name and a packshot on a playlist.”
The Scandinavian manager talks about
building a buzz in an organic way: choosing
which kind of public you want to reach first
then widening out your audience. “I think
you can be very organic if you are extremely
careful about where you put your music, if
you are extremely concentrated when you
put music out and you look for the right
YouTube channel to ask to post your stuff.
Or the right blogs, marketing to the right
people on socials,” he says.

Stories trump playlists
Back in the late 2000s, when streaming
was yet to really make a name for itself,
the buzz word in music marketing was
storytelling: creating connections with fans
on a fundamental, lasting basis. “It is still
just as important to create the story and
create the image, helping people to connect
with artists,” says Ross. “That affinity that
makes people go, ‘Oh, I want to listen to
this artist.’ As opposed to just being fed
what is on a playlist.”
This kind of storytelling involves a
significant degree of planning, as well as
concentration on the kind of marketing
skills that are sometimes overlooked today,
such as creating engaging social media
posts and working on your mailing list.
“We have forgotten these classic skills
because we thought, ‘There’s a new way,
it’s not about Facebook any more, it’s about
Spotify, this is it,’” Ross says. “And now we
are realising, ‘Hang on a minute: we have
actually lost control on some level here.
We have actually lost identity.’
There is also a digital element to this
particular solution. Ross says that it is
vitally important to join up the dots on
your digital presence, so that artists have
a life beyond Spotify and Apple Music.
“Make sure that your digital presence is
well connected, that you are giving fans a
clear way to connect with you on social or
whatever platform it is,” he explains. As
important as DSPs are, Ross believes it is
imperative to find a way to communicate
with your fans away from streaming
platforms. The alternative – that bands on
Spotify essentially end up begging fans
to follow on the streaming platform like
teenage YouTubers – hardly carries water.
“Off platform, it’s all about web
presence,” says Ross. “Making sure there’s
a next step for people who, when you do
get playlisted, want to know who you are.
So that’s where tracking, remarketing and
digital advertising and promotion back to
these people comes in. You need to be able
to figure out who your audience is by using
the tools provided. That includes simple
followers and likes as well as custom
engagement based audiences within
Facebook and Google Ads, and actually
cultivating your own audience and having
the ability, even if it is paid, to have an
audience that you reach and activate. So
that when it is time to get the message out,
you have the ability to do so.”

A life beyond the stream
dry or otherwise
Ultimately, the goal of this is to give new
artists a life beyond streaming platforms, to
enable them to tour, sell merchandise and
even – why not? – shift the odd CD, freed
from the straitjacket of Spotify playlists.
But the added advantage of having fans
who actually know your name is that this
will also help to drive plays and algorithmic
playlist adds on streaming platforms.
“When something is extremely
organic, it says something to
Spotify; it tells them to think of this
as something that is going to be
worked by algorithms and all that
good stuff that keeps your
streams going,” says the Scandinavian
manager.
Ross says that many people
underestimate the importance
of algorithms on streaming services. “We felt
like we moved into an age where it was all
about human curation; but I think we have
underestimated how powerful the data,
the algorithms and the analytics still are,”
Ross explains. “If you are an artist with
a big fanbase and you can drive them all
to Spotify on day one, that will trigger the
algorithm to serve up your track to more
people on the algorithm-based playlists,
which will in turn also affect the playlists
to pick up on your track. This is especially
true of albums, where you may only get
2-3 songs off a record in curated playlists,
but can get an albums worth of algorithmic
streaming pickup if you are diving fans to
stream your entire album.
“So there are two sides to this: one is
having the humans on board, with their
curated playlists. But the other side,
which is almost wider, is having the fans
on board. And the way that is displayed
is through engagement, listening and
interaction, anything on those lines that
tells an algorithm that, ‘Hey this is good,
you should show this to more people.’”
Take heart: it is possible to water down
the threat of the dry streams paradox. :)
The Smart Audio Report from NPR and Edison Research, published at the end of last year, claimed that there were just shy of 120m smart speakers in US homes while around the same time Amazon suggested that over 100m Alexa devices had been sold globally to date.

Voice-activated technology is obviously the next frontier for listening – not just for music but also podcasts, news, sport, comedy, politics and more.

The challenge here for music marketers is to establish sustainable artist fan relationships in a screen-less and voice-led environment while standing out from the mountains of other voice-accessible content. Being skilled in Alexa Skills is only going to become more important and we are already seeing pop acts and labels testing the ground here – like Little Mix’s giving backstage insights around their latest album or Michael Bublé serving fans daily inspirational quotes.

Skills are increasingly feeling tailor-made for music. So how should you look to get started on all the competing voice-activated platforms out there?

First, the good news: there are plenty of options to create skills without any need to be gifted in coding. With Amazon being the market leader across the smart speaker landscape, the company is increasingly encouraging the creation of skills for Alexa in order to boost its ecosystem of voice applications.

It has not only set up a programme that pays Alexa developers for valuable, quality voice apps, but its own Alexa Skill Blueprint tool allows anyone with an Amazon account to create skills thanks to various free templates that are easily customisable. While it used to be geared around helping Alexa users customise their own voice experience, in a recent update Amazon has announced that its Alexa Skill Blueprints website now allows Amazon users in the US to upload their skills to the Amazon skill store.

The blueprints are broken up into four categories: Fun & Games; Learning & Knowledge; At Home; and Storyteller. They’re available to build at blueprints.amazon.com and the review process will take between one and two business days according to Amazon. While the sophistication of these skills might be slightly limited, one skill category that sandbox thinks could benefit artists of all sizes and is comparatively easy to manage is the Flash Briefing skill. (In the UK, the BBC is the default news provider when you say, “Alexa – what’s the news today?” and it is really showcasing what can be done here.)

You can create daily or weekly content,
pulling from a RSS feed or uploading recorded messages that can keep fans up to date with what's happening with an artist, operating like a voice-led newsletter. Users can prompt Alexa to give them their Flash Briefing, enabling artists to become a part of their fans' news routine, thus keeping them regularly engaged. Similarly, creating Trivia Games around an artist is a simple but efficient way to connect with the fanbase on these devices, which can be done in a few steps using the skills blueprint.

In contrast, Amazon's Developer services offer a more advanced take on creating skills for Alexa, with a dedicated Music Skills category, the in-skill purchasing feature (think tickets, merchandise or physical upsells) and the possibility to publish skills in multiple languages. Again, there's no programming knowledge required; you can add your own intents (i.e. what the user wants to accomplish) or choose from an existing library and then add various utterances (i.e. ways a user might interact with the skill).

You can add slots that take into account different values a user could ask for, like requesting different genres. So, an intent could be "Story about artist X" and the various utterances could be "Tell me about how X first started to make music" or "What was X's childhood like" and so on. The platform automatically generates code from these intents, utterances and slots which you can edit using the built-in JSON editor. The Alexa Skills Kit provides a multitude of resources that help you get started with your skills and inform on how to shift from a screen-first to a voice-first design.

Even though Alexa still dominates the market, Google is gaining ground and more and more products are entering the market. Tools that help create voice-enabled applications that run on various AI-powered devices will therefore grow in importance. Enter: Voice Apps which claims that 10% of all Alexa skills worldwide were built with its platform, while it also runs on Google Assistant (where Skills are called Actions) and Microsoft Cortana devices. This is something that stands out amongst the various skill-creating tools out there.

(You might have noticed that Apple's Siri is missing here. Apple does offer a SiriKit; however this is merely an extension for iOS and WatchOS apps to work in a voice setting instead of promoting the creation of voice-first applications.)

After registering, Voice App's dashboard provides a selection of Sample Projects giving valuable ideas around potential types of skills while helping to get the creation process going. Just like with Amazon's Alexa Skills Blueprint, you'll get access to Flash Briefing and Trivia Games templates, but also Streaming Audio Skills, Fact Skills or Quote Of The Day Skills. A data tab allows the skill to have a memory and also personalise its interaction with its users, including to welcome them by name or remembering scores in a trivia game. You can enter various responses that Alexa will choose randomly to keep the experience feeling fresh and making it feel authentic and approachable.

When creating a new project, you can choose between a Custom Skill, Flash Briefing and Business Skill. When creating a Custom Skill, you will be asked to choose a category which currently features the music-related options: Music & Audio Accessories; Music & Audio Knowledge & Trivia; and Music Info, Reviews & Recognition Services. But you could easily picture artists in the context of other categories such as Exercise & Workout or Cooking & Recipe. The professional plan costs $19.95 a month and makes Alexa's voice customisable, allows for building single skills in multiple languages and is able to deliver contextual help, all of which helps the users to navigate their smart device. Moreover, it comes with templates for smart speakers with built-in screens, a category that enables richer skill experiences for fans. A good example for how this can be leveraged was Michael Bublé, whose team developed one of the first skills with video capability at the start of this year, incorporating video and photo into the voice experience. A fully customised skill service by Voice Apps is also up for grabs, with the Voice Apps team building the skill based on your specific needs.

Whichever tool might fit your needs best, it is important to note that applications on smart speakers can be created with zero-to-minimal costs and user-friendly interfaces that require no programming knowledge whatsoever. This should inspire artist teams of all kinds to start thinking about how you can use voice to connect with your fans in a meaningful way, especially when considering how music on smart speakers is generally consumed more passively and is less about specific artists. 😊
CAMPAIGNS
The latest projects from the digital marketing arena

CALM ON: MOBY DEBUTS ALBUM INSIDE MEDITATION APP

Being a teetotal vegan, one would imagine meditation is a big part of Moby's world. So it makes delightfully perfect sense for him to release his new album, Long Ambients 2, via mediation app Calm – which has the exclusive for 30 days before it lands on all the main music streaming services. Fittingly it debuted on World Sleep Day on 14th March.

There was a brief period where exclusives were the new arms race for streaming services; but this is an exclusive with a difference as it is not prioritising one DSP over another, especially as the album is limited to paying subscribers on Calm.

Ultimately this puts Moby's music in front of a potential audience of 45m users, 40m of whom will be emailed about the partnership (although the company is not saying what percentage of its users are subscribers).

Sleep- and meditation-based playlists are a big part of the streaming world and acts like Max Richter with his 2015 album Sleep, which ran to eight hours, have been quietly and calmly marrying their music to relaxation techniques. Yet none of this is a leap into the unknown for Calm as it debuted the Calm Music feature within its app 18 months ago and says that the 200 tracks accessible on there have so far amassed 150m streams between them.

It is also worth noting that Calm raised $98m in a funding round at the start of February this year that gave the company a valuation of $1bn. Could it now start to become a label in its own right, commissioning music from artists specifically designed to relax the app's users? Moby's breakthrough album, 1999's Play, changed music synchronisation forever, with every track on it being licensed for use in a TV show, film or ad, so he is no stranger to experimenting with ways to reach new audiences. Once again, he is probably onto something with Calm.

PYRAMID SCHEME: RHCP LIVE STREAM CONCERT FROM GIZA

Doing a pop concert from the Great Pyramids of Giza is nothing new. The Grateful Dead did three concerts in the shadow of the Sphinx in 1978, no doubt inspired by the fact that Pink Floyd had played the ancient amphitheatre in Pompeii in 1971. In 1979, Frank Sinatra recorded a show there, while Jean Michele Jarre played his The Twelve Dreams Of The Sun show in Giza on Millennium Eve to 120,000 people.

None of that stopped shirtless funk-rock raspSCALLIONS Red Hot Chili Peppers from playing at the same location on 15th March. The twist here was that, rather than get in a film crew and sell the broadcast or DVD rights to the highest bidder, the band live streamed the whole thing from their own YouTube channel as well as on Twitter and Facebook – and all for free.

"The pyramids, it's unbelievable, we just jumped at the opportunity [...] I have always been fascinated by Egypt and that region of the world and I am so excited to go," bassist Flea told the LA Times ahead of the show. (Thinking about it, he really should have changed his name to Scarab Beetle as a fitting twist on the entomological theme.)

The pyramids, it's unbelievable, we just jumped at the opportunity [...] I have always been fascinated by Egypt and that region of the world and I am so excited to go," bassist Flea told the LA Times ahead of the show. (Thinking about it, he really should have changed his name to Scarab Beetle as a fitting twist on the entomological theme.)

It wasn't some half-hearted undertaking, either. They played for close to two hours and the number of views for the on-demand recording of the show on YouTube had passed 2.5m within four days. The only direct monetisation (apart from YouTube advertising) was a link on their YouTube channel to buy commemorative T-shirts with the pyramids or the Sphinx on them. Even their LiveChiliPeppers.com site (which sells recordings of live shows taken straight from the mixing desk) had not, when we checked on 18th March, been updated to sell downloads of the show.

sandbox is, however, extremely disappointed they didn't just play their fourth album in full and retitle it Mummy's Milk. Or do a cover of that song off the debut album by The Streets – 'Gizas Need Excitement'. Or change the title of 'Higher Ground' to 'Hiero Glyphs'. Or get Nile Rodgers on stage with them. Or... OK, we'll stop now.
The latest projects from the digital marketing arena

KNOCKIN’ ON SEVEN’S DOOR: LUDOVICO EINAUDI PLANS SEVEN ALBUMS IN SEVEN MONTHS

In the 1960s, banging out two albums a year was the norm. Even by the 1980s, an album a year was standard practice. But by the 1990s – coupled with the rise of the CD and expectations that acts must fill all 73 minutes of the disc – albums started to appear every two or three years. In the streaming age, however, the very notion of an album is starting to feel archaic for many acts.

Defiantly swimming against the tide, classical composer Ludovico Einaudi is planning to release seven albums in seven months this year. Those with a long memory will recall The Wedding Present releasing a single every month in 1992 or Ash doing 26 singles (one a fortnight) between October 2009 and September 2010. But seven albums in seven months is massively raising the productivity bar here.

The timing of all this is very interesting because at the start of March, Einaudi was named as the most successful classical artist of the streaming age – with Decca Records reporting that his works have been streamed over 2bn times and that he has 3m monthly listeners on Spotify who collectively generate over 1m streams a day.

His new seven-album project is called Seven Days Walking and the first album, Seven Days Walking: Day One, is released on 15th March, with Seven Days Walking: Day Two to arrive in mid April and so on until September, culminating in a box set of all seven albums.

“I decided to thread them all together in a sort of musical labyrinth, a little like stepping inside the twists and turns of the creative process, to understand how a musical idea can develop in multiple directions, and changing once again at the moment in which it is heard,” said Einaudi of the project’s overarching concept.

Given his music appears on multiple mood-based playlist on Spotify (and other DSPs) like Peaceful Piano (with 5m followers) as well as just about every classical-themed playlist going, this bonanza release schedule will ensure he is even more front and centre here than usual.

BOOZE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE: BLOSSOMS PULL PODCASTING PINTS

“We’ve fuckin’ spent it, ain’t we?” a somewhat refreshed Steve Jones of the Sex Pistols said of what happened to the band’s £40,000 advance from EMI during their infamous TV interview with Bill Grundy in December 1976. When asked how, Jones replied bluntly, “Down the boozer.”

UK band Blossoms are unlikely to have blown their advance from Virgin EMI “down the boozer”, but they did take their name from a pub in their home town of Stockport and this was where they decided to record their own podcast series. They’ve even called it a “pubcast”.

Frankly, we’d have been disappointed if they didn’t.

“Each week, the lads greet you into their local for a swift half, top laugh and all kinds of rum malarkey,” runs the blurb around the podcast. “There’s tall tales, sound advice, crank calls, and the ‘Sixth Blossom’ - Charlie’s Granddad John. It’s a bit like Cheers... but set in Shaw Heath rather than Boston.” The fact that the first episode is called A Bee Waved At Me underscores the fact that tongues are firmly in cheeks here.

The opening two episodes are marked with an "E" for explicit content so the topics of conversation and language used are not for everyone. Perhaps it might draw in new fans, but the tone would seem to suggest it is all about super-serving existing fans and perhaps plugging the promo gap between albums given that their second album came out last April.

Starting a podcast is one thing, but keeping the momentum going is another, especially when touring and recording bites into an act’s time. Blossoms have no doubt been spurred into action by the success of something like George Ezra & Friends which has been running regularly since February 2018.

Where Ezra really succeeds, however, is that he pulls in huge names – like Ed Sheeran, Elton John, Lily Allen and Nile Rodgers – so the podcast appeals to multiple fanbases simultaneously. Granddad John is a funny, if scatological, chap but he’s not exactly going to have the same draw as Elton.
Khruangbin are a three-piece from Houston originally but who reside in LA now. Their name means "aeroplane" in Thai and that shapes what their sound is. They are a global music-influenced band, with the aeroplane obviously indicating the travel globally. Their first album drew a lot from 1960s and 1970s Thai psych and funk music. On their new album they pulled in some additional influences including some Iranian and pre-revolution psych music. They are a band who are largely instrumental. They have a massive following live which has only grown and they are super-savvy when it comes to their branding, the way they market themselves and the way they do their live show. They all wear wigs on stage and costumes. It is a really deep and amazing project.

DSPs want acts that can cross more borders

Another thing to add to the global appeal of the band is that when we started to initially speak to DSPs about the new record, in mid 2017 ahead of the album release in January 2018, we found that streaming was becoming more and more global. That is an obvious statement; but we also found that
DSPs are quite keen on artists who can really get into these other international markets – as opposed to regular bands who just do well in the US and the UK, for example. That was very appealing. We all know that emerging markets are where it is happening and where DSPs are expanding into.

RM: They have played in much more far-reaching countries than most of our other artists have. They have played in India and all over Asia, Turkey and so on. They were very active. Once we started working with them, they had a full head of steam in terms of their audience and their reach.

Doing DJ sets on Facebook Live
RM: They are quite keen in terms of their understanding of the way that music works and the way that people consume music. As we started working on this album they were already doing amazing things. They were doing weekly – or as often as they could – DJ sets on Facebook Live called **AirKhruang**.

They would do a live DJ set on their webcam, spin vinyl and then post the playlists to Spotify and then later to Apple Music. It had that two-point hit where they were playing really amazing obscure world music and then posting a playlist. So they were engaging with their audience live on the platform on Facebook and then bouncing it over to Spotify so people could save the playlists and learn about who they were there. The visuals, the branding and everything else they started doing – from the band name to the aeroplane motif – was already really dialled in at that point.

LS: It didn’t matter where they were in the world, they would do the sets. They had committed to doing it and they were letting fans know they were going to do it and it was scheduled on their Facebook calendar that this live event was coming so people could tune in. It was effectively them sitting behind the campaign with their record player and playing records. They would show the covers to the audience and then play the records. People really got engaged with them.

RM: They would also actively be speaking to the fans and commenting via the chat function.

Turning a difficult name into a promotional asset
RM: Their visuals are just so on point. We made a couple of great music videos for them. One of the best assets that Khruangbin have is their name. You might at first think it is a bit of a stumbling block because no one knows how to say it unless they are Thai. In a way that was a challenge but it also gave us a great way to open a conversation. “Here’s this band called Khruangbin, it’s spelt like this and here is what it means.”

One nice asset that we used to address this was that we made a very simple social picture which was a pronunciation guide. Obviously their fans knew what they were called but in moving them over to the Dead Oceans universe, that was a small but effective tool that we employed.

The first singles and setting up the album
LS: The first single was ‘Maria También’. They started playing that single in their Facebook DJ sets. We launched that first single with a video which is a fairly traditional way of launching the album. That is what we led with as their comeback.

RM: We followed that up a few weeks later with the second single and video [‘Friday Morning’] and we announced a global headline tour. The tour started at Koko in
London in January. It was a pretty extensive tour. They toured non-stop really all the way through that summer in the US and the festivals. They really put in the work and the time around their live output.

LS: They also took part in Gilles Peterson’s Worldwide Awards in January 2018.

A website that plays on the flight motif and links into Spotify

RM: A big cornerstone of this campaign for us was the website that we built for release. In leading up to that, they stopped by Spotify to record a *Spotify Single* that came out later down the line. We didn’t release another asset until this website.

We had a lot of fun with the website and it does a great job of scooping up all the different ways that people approach Khruangbin.

They actually came to us and said, “What would happen if we built a website that acted like an Orbitz, a Kayak or an American Airlines where you can book a flight from an origin to a destination and you got a playlist back?”

It was a really incredible but simple concept that allowed us to get our minds wondering. At the same time, Spotify was encouraging a lot of its label partners to take advantage of their open API.

They gave all the label partners access to the API. With this website we figured out a way to engage with Spotify with that resource and to do something pretty unique.

We built a website called AirKhruang and hired a developer to help us build this out. It was a pretty robust build that began with that concept of booking a flight, choosing an origin and choosing a destination.

If the flight from JFK to Heathrow is eight hours, you could build an eight-hour playlist that you would listen to and that would be the “flight”. Because we have the access to the API, we were able to do a lot more customisation of that. We hired a developer who was able to map out what the flight durations would be from every airport to every other airport in the world. The band then provided us with hundreds of songs from Spotify – many of those songs being ones that they would play during their Facebook DJ sets.

It is not completely accurate, but the developer was able to map the general location of where each track was from to the flight path of where you were travelling on this imaginary flight. On your flight, if you passed over certain regions, it would prioritise tracks from that region. Then we played with the audio features that are built into the Spotify API.

There is metadata that indicates the length of the song and there are attributes like ‘danceability’, ‘liveliness’, ‘loudness’ and ‘instrumentalness’ and they obviously scored high on the ‘instrumentalness’ scale.

We found fun ways to assign different attributes to these playlists for these flights. We thought: what is it that you do when you book a flight to determine what sort of flight you will have? You go in and you choose a couple of different options.

We used a very simple *Buzzfeed-style quiz. You picked your flight and then you were asked to choose where you would like to sit. Depending on what you choose in terms of window or aisle, that determines how danceable you liked your tracks.*

Then you choose your drink – coffee and tea. Some people like to stay up and have energy on their flight and some people like to have a tea and go to sleep. Then you choose your class. They put the people in first class upfront so it is a quieter flight; and they put people in coach class at the back so it is louder.

Then you choose if it’s a direct flight or if you want to have stopovers – and that determines the speed.

Using those parameters and the locations, we are able to pull together custom playlists that you can put in and get a flight back. We were able to have it so that when you log into Spotify after your playlist is built, the icon on Spotify for the playlist would be a custom boarding pass with your origin and destination. You can obviously use that to share with friends.

What was great about this feature was that it very quickly explained who Khruangbin are, the music that influences them, the idea of global travel and the fact that they do these DJ sets – but it is also just a great utility. You don’t have to know who Khruangbin are to engage with this application. That is what made it extra special to us. Now we are seeing people who have found the site and are using it who aren’t super familiar with the band or who discovered the band because of this utility. Obviously engaging with Spotify...
is something that they appreciate. It is a good partnership.

They were also peppering the playlists with their own tracks. And because we are marketing a record here we would give those tracks a little bit more priority just so people would hear Khruangbin while they were hearing all this other great music.

We obviously didn’t want to overwhelm users or make it something that felt like we were just trying to generate sales or streams. It is more about the flow and the fun that you can have with the app and less some kind of one-to-one and hand-to-hand marketing.

LS: The overall pool of tracks that were used on the site were all selected by the band individually. So for things like which country the track was from and other information like that, the band actually helped us apply those attributes to those tracks. That in turn helped with the development work.

They were the curators of that and a lot of the songs were ones they had already DJ-ed on their Facebook Live sessions so fans were familiar with them. Lots of them were random unearthed gems that sometimes get lost on streaming services, so they all got a boost in their own right again.

RM: That is when the tour was in full swing. It was largely a completely sold out tour. Then we put out ‘Evan Finds The Third Room’ as the third single.

Partnerships with Gilles Peterson, Spotify, Tiny Desk & Pitchfork Live
LS: The Khruangbin Spotify Single was a two-track release was May 2018, so was about four months after the album came out.

RM: They did another collaboration with Gilles Peterson via his partnership with WeTransfer. In the US they did Tiny Desk which was amazing to see them in that format. Pitchfork Live went above and beyond. They had the band play a bespoke session with these live psychedelic projections behind them. That received massive engagement.

A Christmas single
LS: They also did a Christmas single. It was a fun thing where they did a cover of the Vince Guaraldi Trio track ‘Christmas Time Is Here’ which is in the Peanuts movie. We made a 7-inch which they took on tour and which we sold in stores regularly. But in terms of things like holiday-themed playlists on DSPs that was really good because it was a new holiday song. Often you find those Christmas playlists bring out the same holiday tracks. That was fun and it rounded off the end of the year nicely.

RM: They are showing no signs of slowing down and they are touring this year all the way through. They are machines when it comes to the live stuff. :)

WANT TO FEATURE IN BEHIND THE CAMPAIGN?
Marketing people: do you have a campaign you are working on that you would like to see featured in Behind The Campaign in a future edition of sandbox? If so, send a brief synopsis of it to Eamonn Forde for consideration and your work (and your words) could appear here.
Email: eamonn.forde@me.com
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