



Notes from the Independent Artist Ecosystem

What follows is a collection of ideas and reflections I shared throughout 2025, mostly in the form of short articles on LinkedIn. These writings were never intentionally planned as a book; they emerged organically from lived experience, conversations, observations, and moments of clarity (and confusion) along the way. What you are reading now is simply a curated collection of those thoughts.

As I continue to navigate life—trying to understand myself more clearly and define my purpose, values, and lifestyle—I’ve had the privilege of surviving through experiences that offered insight. Many of these insights came as cautions: things to watch out for, questions to ask, and more informed ways of thinking about and practicing creative work, especially within the creative arts.

Some ideas in this collection are mine; others stood out to me while listening to people walking similar paths—artists, practitioners, and stakeholders sharing what they believe has worked for them. All these reflections sit under a broad umbrella I describe as *independent artist survival*. At the center of this is a recurring question: how do we sustain our creativity while developing a deeper understanding of ourselves and our work?

Personally, I am a consistent advocate for authenticity, identity, humility, and intentionality. You may notice repetition across these articles, and that is intentional. While I speak strongly about concepts like identity, I consider myself as much a student of these ideas as anyone else. In fact, I rarely use myself as an example. Much of my understanding comes from observing, listening, and consuming—being present in conversations and communities where these ideas are actively tested.

Through my work with the Academy Musician Fellowship, various workshops, and artist development programs such as Music Connects Africa (British Council – Tanzania), Yo Voice Be Hard projects, and other independent engagements, I’ve been exposed to a wide range of perspectives. These interactions—with artists, music lovers, producers, venue owners, policymakers, festival directors, diplomats, and other stakeholders—have offered me valuable insight, especially because most of them were pursued intentionally.

Being a practicing musician myself also places me in a unique position. Playing the guitar almost daily, writing songs, rehearsing, organizing concerts, spending time in studios, bars,

rehearsal rooms, and on the road with artists has allowed me to observe the ecosystem from within. I believe these lived, shared experiences give weight and validity to my observations.

Additionally, my somewhat illusionary habits of reading research reports, conducting small-scale research, and developing digital curricula have further shaped my thinking. Moving forward, I aim to continue gathering information while becoming more focused on specific aspects of independent artist development—particularly identity, which I find increasingly relevant. Alongside this, I intend to deepen my research practice: understanding the market and exploring more practical and sustainable solutions for independent artists who wish to serve music lovers consciously and responsibly.

These articles do not follow a strict sequence or linear argument. They are authentic, experience-based reflections drawn from random but meaningful encounters within my work as a musician and artist developer. I use real-world examples, occasionally concealing identities where necessary. My intention is not to present definitive truths, but rather useful reminders, prompts, and starting points for artists and stakeholders.

Some of these pieces are reproduced directly from LinkedIn. I may no longer fully agree with every idea as written, but they remain honest reflections shaped by context and experience at the time they were shared. Where necessary, I will add commentary.

For clarity and feedback, I have grouped the articles into questions. This allows readers to engage more intentionally, respond critically, and perhaps even build new ideas from these reflections. Ultimately, this project is also a form of documentation and personal journaling.

My plan is to continue publishing regular blogs and to release a consolidated collection like this every twelve months

Collin Sserunjogi

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What Should Come First in Creative Production: Systems, People, or Gear?

Most people, when they think about doing something creative, believe they've "made it" once they get access to physical equipment. It's a common mindset — someone buys a guitar and suddenly believes they're ready to make music or produce a record.

I just got off a call with someone who wanted me to organize a production in their new space simply because they had purchased a keyboard and a set of drums. While I appreciate the enthusiasm, the truth is this: it's not the equipment that creates impact – it's the people.

To pull off a successful production, you need the right people – professionals who not only have the skill but also believe in the concept and are willing to give it life. That's where the real work lies.

It's also common to find people building entire event or music concepts around a venue – a beautiful café, a theatre, or a trendy rooftop – just because they admire the space. But unless you already have over a thousand loyal fans, a reliable budget, and a committed team of professionals, such admiration can be misleading. The result is often an unsustainable venture that burns out quickly.

Over the years, I've seen many well-intentioned people purchase production equipment without ever being involved in the creative ecosystem. Unfortunately, many of these setups flop. They later call us, the practitioners, hoping we can use their equipment – but that's rarely what draws us in. What attracts us is not the tools, but the systems – a sustainable network of people, venues, artist development, and community support.

As artists, we often prefer performing in spaces that feel like home – even if the gear is substandard – because belonging, trust, and shared vision matter far more than the brand name on the console.

My own brother often tells me to buy a full set of equipment for my band. I keep explaining to him that I first need to build the systems – the community, the team, the structure – so that when I finally acquire the equipment, I can use it effectively.

The most successful service providers in Uganda understand this deeply. Take Steve Jean, whose company is behind some of the most sought-after sound and lighting in the country. Before building that empire, he spent years developing artists and producing music. Or Swangz

Avenue, which began as a creative collective, learning, building, and refining systems long before acquiring state-of-the-art studios and facilities.

So to anyone passionate about contributing to the creative industry – whether as an artist, a producer, or an investor – remember: Don't start with the equipment. Start with the system. Build people. Build understanding. Build community. The tools will find their place naturally.

Why Does Commitment Unlock Breakthroughs for Artists Who Go All In?

In every field, from music, to love, to business – there is one truth that often separates those who merely participate from those who achieve meaningful success: the willingness to go all in.

This realization struck me strongly during a recent Academy workshop led by Abaasa of AUMEX. He spoke about hit songs from new artists, and one key takeaway stood out: those who eventually break out often invest heavily and consistently long before success finds them. They don't just release one or two songs hoping for luck; they release tens of songs in a single year, refining their craft, building recognition, and increasing their chances of being noticed.

When the fellows at the Academy heard this, many were scared – and understandably so. The idea of investing that much time, energy, and money can feel threatening. But it is also the truth: you cannot hold back and expect extraordinary results.

My Personal Lessons on Going All In

1. At the Academy

Recently, we set a new standard for our fellows: they must create at least an EP before they graduate. This wasn't just about having more music; it was about pushing them to commit fully to their artistry. An EP requires time, dedication, and a clear artistic direction. It forces artists to stretch themselves beyond their comfort zones.

2. In Love and Companionship

I've also seen the truth of "going all in" in my personal life. For years, I blamed my lack of companionship on external factors – sometimes even jokingly on things like global warming. But deep down, I know I hadn't fully committed myself to the pursuit. I wasn't intentional enough, and I didn't put in the same energy and planning that I do in my professional work. If I want to experience love meaningfully, I have to stop halfway measures and go all in on vulnerability, pursuit, and presence.

3. At CMH LIVE

For five years, CMH LIVE has been trying to build a strong team. But it was only this year, when we took full responsibility for our vision and for the people around us, that the team truly came together. By committing to leadership, systems, and accountability, we created a more cohesive unit. It wasn't luck – it was the fruit of seriousness and commitment.

What "Going All In" Looks Like for Artists

If you're an artist (or pursuing any meaningful goal), here are practical ways to systematically go all in:

1. Collaborations – Work with peers, mentors, and even across disciplines. Every collaboration exposes you to new audiences and forces you to level up. Don't isolate yourself.
2. Extended Versions of Your Work – Don't stop at singles. Work towards EPs, albums, live recordings, and remixes. Extend your catalog so that the world can find you in multiple ways.
3. Adjusted Lifestyle – Build routines that support your artistry. This could mean dedicating daily hours to practice, saving money specifically for your craft, or restructuring your social life to create more space for creativity.
4. Consistency Over Perfection – Don't wait until everything is flawless. Release, refine, and repeat. Ten imperfect songs teach you more and reach farther than one "perfect" but delayed track.

5. Invest in Systems – Whether it's project management tools, a small but committed team, or mentors, having a structure around you ensures you sustain your momentum.
6. Personal Responsibility – Stop outsourcing blame. Whether in your art, your relationships, or your team-building efforts, own your outcomes fully.

Conclusion

The truth is simple: breakthroughs don't happen at half-measure. They demand everything – your time, your money, your energy, and your courage. Whether in art, in business, or in love, going all in is uncomfortable but necessary.

At the Academy, with my own pursuit of companionship, and in building CMH LIVE, I've seen firsthand how half-efforts lead to stagnation, but full commitment brings progress and cohesion.

So to every emerging artist: don't just dabble. 10x your practice. Flood the world with your art. Build, collaborate, extend, and commit. It's the only way to maximize your chances of success and recognition.

What Can Artists Learn from Venue Owners About the Business of Music?

Recently, I came across a post by @ashleytheartist on Instagram that struck a chord with me: *"Bar owners do not care about anything when they hire you as a musician but your ability to retain the audience and keep people buying."*

That statement sums up a reality many musicians overlook. When a bar or venue hires you, they are not only hiring your talent—they are investing in your ability to create an atmosphere that makes people stay longer, spend more, and want to return.

Thinking Like a Promoter

Too often, musicians approach gigs with the mindset: *"I just play my music."* But success in live performance spaces requires more than just talent. The artist who thrives is the one who also thinks like a promoter:

- *How do I make the audience feel good so they don't leave?*
- *How do I pull in a crowd, not just rely on the venue's audience?*
- *How do I make myself valuable enough that the owner wants me back?*

When you can answer those questions, you move from being just an act to being an asset.

Artists as Entrepreneurs

In my own partnerships with venues to run regular live nights, I've seen events succeed—and I've seen them fade away—often because the artist and the venue owner weren't speaking the same language. At one point, I even told a venue owner: *"We are just musicians, our expertise is to play music."* But with time, I realized that was only half the truth.

Musicians in today's gig economy must also be:

- Marketers who attract audiences.
- Salespeople who create an environment that encourages spending.
- Accountants who understand how their performance affects the bottom line.

This doesn't take away from artistry—it strengthens it. It means being an *artist-entrepreneur*.

Speaking the Language of Business

To connect with venue owners, artists need to reframe their value. For example:

- Instead of saying: *"I play good music,"*

- Say: *“My performance keeps customers entertained so they stay longer, and I promote my shows to bring new people to your venue.”*

The moment you show that your art contributes directly to the business, you stop being seen as an expense and start being seen as an investment.

Value Beyond Money

I’ve also seen venues offer free space for artists to run projects, only for artists to turn it down because there wasn’t direct payment. While money is important, value isn’t always cash upfront. Sometimes, opportunities give you visibility, networks, and future bookings that pay far more than the initial gig.

The key is asking: *“How do I create value today that can translate into money tomorrow?”*

Final Word

Artists need to understand the language of the ones who hold resources—venue owners, promoters, sponsors—and communicate in ways that make sense to them. Music will always be at the heart of what we do, but thinking like a business person ensures that our art not only survives but thrives.

What Can Maurice Kirya’s Musical Legacy Teach Us About the Future of Ugandan Artists?

There are artists whose influence can be measured by awards, charts, and streams. And then there are artists whose impact is quietly woven into the very fabric of an industry—artists whose work shapes the sound, mindset, and ambition of an entire generation. In Uganda, Maurice Kirya is undeniably one of those rare figures.

For over a decade, Maurice has set the gold standard for Ugandan Afro-soul. His music, grounded in authenticity and depth, has inspired countless younger artists—many of whom have

never even met him. If Maurice had not been doing his craft, I dare say that half of the young Afro-soul musicians in Uganda might not have the careers they do today. His songs and example have given them a blueprint, a sense of possibility, and a reason to dream.

I have personally felt this influence. Some of the first songs I ever played on guitar were Maurice Kirya's. I even remember tearing up while listening to *Mulembe Gwa Kirya*, a song I believe speaks some of the truest truths about the music industry. Over the years, I've met Maurice a few times—volunteering at his shows, sharing the same stage—but last weekend was the first time I truly experienced his full performance up close, thanks to the British Council, who offered tickets to me and some Academy Musician Fellowship fellows.

What struck me most was not just his musical brilliance, but his focus on expression over mere impression—and yet, somehow, he masters both. Every lyric, every chord feels intentional, and every performance is a lesson in how to connect deeply with an audience.

Maurice's awareness of his role in inspiring younger musicians is clear. From Joshua Baraka, currently trending across the continent, to John, a fresh-out-of-college guitarist, his ripple effect is undeniable. He doesn't just inspire from afar—he actively creates opportunities for others, as he did for rising artist BIYA during last weekend's concert, and as he often does with instrumentalists on his platforms.

**KIRYA
LIVE
2025**

**THE
MAURICE KIRYA
FOUNDATION**

Empowering Communities Through Music & the Arts

The Maurice Kirya Foundation focuses on promoting literacy in music and the arts across Uganda by providing free, credible information, resources, publications, workshops, lessons and seminars, especially in underdeveloped communities.

Part of the proceeds from KiryaLive2025 go directly to support these efforts, including free music workshops, instrument donations to schools and creative arts programmes that uplift youth and inspire future generations.

Thank you for being part of the change.

www.themauricekiryafoundation.org

But what elevated my admiration for him even further was his announcement during the concert: The Maurice Kirya Foundation—a new chapter in his journey, dedicated to offering counsel, guidance, and support to young musicians. This is the kind of intentional legacy work that our creative industry needs. It's what I hope to see more of from successful professionals: using experience, networks, and knowledge to lift others up.

Maurice's story is proof that one can pursue personal dreams while also nurturing the next generation. He has written and performed dozens of timeless songs, maintained artistic integrity in a fast-changing industry, and now, he is building structures to ensure that his influence is not just felt, but sustained.

For me, this is more than admiration—it's a call to action. I would like to openly state my desire to collaborate with the Maurice Kirya Foundation to help move this vision forward. To every young artist reading this: listen to Maurice's music, follow his journey, and most importantly, learn from his example.

Maurice Kirya is not just an outstanding Ugandan artist; he is a custodian of East African music culture, and a beacon for what artistic excellence and generosity can look like.

Why Are You Not on the Festival Line-Up—and What Actually Gets Artists Booked?

Must you Prepare before the Call?- Here are lessons from an Alternative Festival Stage

Over the weekend, I had the opportunity to produce an alternative stage at a music festival—an experimental space designed to host emerging and passionate young artists who didn't make it to the festival's main lineup.

Some of these artists had applied and were turned down by the curators. Others were part of the CMH LIVE crew, artists we've been nurturing and working with. When I invited them to perform on this alternative stage, I was upfront about the realities: there was no performance budget for them. The festival had offered us a platform, not pay. Still, many said yes, eager for the exposure.

Unfortunately, due to unpredictable changes in the program, several artists had their sets shortened or canceled altogether. Frustration naturally followed, and I deeply empathized with their disappointment. But it also made me reflect critically.

The Real Question

By Sunday morning, I had to facilitate a scheduled workshop on artist development. Originally, I had planned a session on artist branding and professionalism, but after the events of the weekend, I reshaped the topic to reflect the present tension. The new theme became:

"How can early-career artists seize opportunities and become the main acts at major festivals like this one?"

What followed was a raw and honest conversation that has stayed with me. What stood out the most wasn't just the external challenges—budget constraints, limited time, or poor scheduling. It was the internal gap: a lack of preparation.

The Hard Truth: We Were Not Ready

Most of the artists, despite being enthusiastic, were not prepared to take full advantage of the opportunity. Some arrived hours after their scheduled slot. Others hadn't even decided what song to perform. A few assumed there would be a band at the festival to support them and only began discussing song arrangements minutes before stepping on stage.

I ended up playing guitar for several of them, but I found myself having to ask what they were performing just moments before going live. They hadn't sent me setlists or recordings in advance. They simply showed up hoping to "figure it out on the spot."

During the workshop, I posed a provocative question: "If one of the lead acts dropped out last minute, could you confidently take their place?"

The room fell silent.

One artist finally responded, "I'd need time to prepare."

My response: "Why aren't you preparing now?"

The Delusion of Readiness

Many young artists apply to festivals, hoping for that one big break, yet they have never rehearsed with a full band, written a compelling setlist, or built a team. They live in a constant state of "I'll get ready when I get the opportunity."

But by then, it's too late.

Opportunity does not wait for your internal readiness.

Start Acting Like the Main Act

At CMH LIVE, we're now developing a workshop this week at our Academy focused on this very issue. It's called: "Be the Main Act Before They Call You."

We'll explore the mental shift required to act as if the opportunity is already yours. Because the truth is, that kind of "delusion" is necessary—treating yourself like you're the headliner even when no one is watching yet.

This doesn't mean arrogance. It means discipline, consistency, and preparation without permission. It means rehearsing before the call, building a team before the show, investing in your brand before the first stage.

Final Thoughts

Festivals, showcases, and gigs will come and go. Some will be unpaid. Some will be disorganized. But your readiness should never be in question.

If you're an emerging artist reading this, ask yourself:

If you were called today to headline your dream festival, would you be ready?

If the answer is no, the work begins now.

Not after the call.

What Does It Really Take to Get Paid for Gigs as an Emerging Artist?

If you are a musician or performer trying to build a career, one of the most recurring frustrations is figuring out when you're getting paid and when you're not.

It happens all the time: An artist sees a poster for an upcoming open mic, jam session, or showcase and asks, "*Can I perform?*" That's a great initiative, but quite often the next question is: "Will I be paid?"

I believe it's a healthy and professional thing to ask. Payment for your work is important, and every artist deserves fair compensation for their craft. However, there's an essential mindset shift many emerging artists need to make: It is not always the organizer's job to explain whether an open platform is paid. It is the artist's job to understand the context and make informed decisions before saying yes.

Let's unpack this.

When You Should (and Shouldn't) Expect Payment

1. You Asked to Be on the Lineup

If you approach an event asking to perform, it's unlikely you'll have much bargaining power about fees—especially if the platform is promotional, open-mic-style, or community-focused. If you offer your services voluntarily, it's safe to assume you're doing it for visibility, networking, or experience—not for pay.

2. You're Added as a Last-Minute Extra

Sometimes artists join in alongside friends or ask for extra slots on the day of the show. While this is a great way to get experience and build a performance history, it usually doesn't come with a paycheck.

3. The Organizer Invites You Directly

Now this is different. When organizers approach you specifically and ask you to perform, you should immediately ask for the terms. Don't assume you'll be paid—but also don't assume you won't. Clarify early. If there's no fee, you can choose to decline or accept, depending on your current goals.

So How Do You Actually Find Paid Gigs?

This is the real question. And the short answer is: ***You make yourself worth the pay.***

Understand the Game

Not every artist is automatically a commercial artist. Being talented is not enough to guarantee bookings that come with paychecks. If you want to get paid consistently, you need to develop a product the market wants.

Ask yourself:

- Who gets paid at these shows—and why? Study the artists on the same stages as you. What makes them valuable to the event? Are they bringing a crowd? Do they have a following? Are they part of a bigger brand?
- Can I mobilize an audience? A common trait of commercial artists is the ability to pull in people. If you can help a venue sell tickets, drinks, or boost their attendance, you are more likely to get paid.
- What is my brand positioning? Some artists brand themselves as freestyle, jam-session players, or open-mic regulars. That's okay—but understand that this may limit how event organizers perceive you. If you want to be paid, you need to transition from “community contributor” to professional act.

Build the Business Side of Your Art

Here's a checklist to start thinking commercially:

1. Develop Final Products

Have polished sets, refined material, and a clear performance offer. Whether it's a live concert set, a themed showcase, or a corporate event package—make it clear you're ready to deliver.

2. Create Rate Cards

If people don't know your services are for sale, they won't buy them. Develop rate cards or packages, so the market knows what it costs to book you.

3. Understand Pricing and Negotiation

Don't leave your pricing to guesswork. Build a pricing strategy that reflects your current level but leaves room for growth. Consider variables like audience size, location, set length, and event type.

4. Choose Your Goals Clearly

Some artists focus on community growth and fan building—others focus on immediate monetization. Both are valid, but mixing the two without clarity can lead to frustration. Know what you're optimizing for.

5. Learn Sales and Marketing

Talent is not the only asset. Visibility, positioning, and marketing are equally critical. Start thinking like a small business: build a basic business model canvas for your music career. It doesn't have to be complicated. Just outline:

- What are you selling?
- Who are you selling it to?
- How do you reach them?

- What are your costs?
- What is your revenue model?

In Closing

Performing for free is not always a bad thing—especially in the early stages. But don't confuse exposure with exploitation. At the same time, don't confuse talent with commercial readiness.

If you want paying gigs, treat your art like a product and your career like a business.

Ask the hard questions early, know your worth, and build a brand that commands both respect and fees.

Why Do Most Artists Miss Out on Opportunities—and How Can They Stop?

All week, I've been sitting with a thought that I believe more artists and creatives need to deeply reflect on:

"Prepare before the opportunity comes; not after."

This may sound obvious, but in my years of working with musicians across East Africa—through CMH LIVE, the Academy Musician Fellowship, and independent showcases—I've learned that most people want opportunities but haven't done the work to *deserve* or *deliver on* them when they show up.

Let me explain with real-life experience.

Artist Opportunities Are Not a Lottery, They Are a Test of Readiness

Whenever I come across artist opportunities—performances, residencies, paid gigs, festivals—I usually know within minutes who in my network is best suited for them. Not because I’m biased. Not because I have favorites. But because I quietly follow a simple question:

"Who is most prepared for this?"

Surprisingly, this conclusion is often *too* easy to reach, and that’s a problem. Why? Because most artists assume that talent is enough. But when I sit down with them and ask:

"Can you perform 45 minutes of original content at a festival?"

They say yes. Then I ask:

"Do you have a video of yourself doing that?" "Can you perform that set for me today?" "Can you show up to the studio tomorrow and do the 45-minute set?"

That’s when the silence kicks in. That’s when they realize they’re *not* ready—at least not yet.

The Dangerous Comfort of "I'll Prepare When I'm Invited"

This mindset—"*I'll prepare when the opportunity comes*"—is not just naïve, it’s a career killer.

Some artists argue that because no one has invited them to perform at a big show or festival, there’s no need to prepare extensively. But here’s the truth:

Preparation comes *before* opportunity. Readiness is what unlocks trust.

I once developed a workshop curriculum and designed entire presentation modules five years before I was ever invited to use them. When the invitation came, I didn’t scramble, I showed up with something solid. That made me dependable. It opened more doors.

The Myth of "Winging It"

I also have friends who believe they can “wing it.” Their logic is that their experience will carry them through any gig. And yes, sometimes they pull it off.

But many times? They bomb.

Why? Because every opportunity—every audience, venue, topic—requires customized preparation. Even when I’m invited to deliver the same workshop topic, I always revise it to fit that audience, space, or moment. That’s respect. That’s professionalism. That’s how you stay relevant.

Show Us the Evidence—It Matters

I often get artists sliding into my DMs or approaching me at events asking to be considered for opportunities. But when I go to their social media, I see zero videos. No live performance content. No rehearsal snippets. Not even a cover of someone else’s song.

How can someone consider you for a stage if there’s no proof you’re actively working toward it?

Visibility is part of preparation.

Readiness Is a Cycle: Practice, Document, Repeat

If you’re an artist reading this, I encourage you:

- Rehearse a 45-minute set—even if you’re not booked.
- Create your EPK (electronic press kit), artist bio, and repertoire list now—not later.
- Record yourself. Share process videos. Build a trail of your growth.
- Prepare your performance like someone already paid you for it.

Because the day someone *does*, you won't have time to start from scratch.

Final Thoughts: The Opportunity Is Already Here

Opportunity doesn't always arrive with an official invitation. Sometimes it shows up as a question, a referral, a random DM, a cancelled headliner slot that needs to be filled *tonight*.

The only question is: Will you be ready when it does?

As I continue to work with young and emerging artists across the region, my commitment remains: to encourage a culture of professionalism, preparation, and pride in what we do.

Let's not wait for the festival to prepare for the festival.

Let's *become* the kind of artists that opportunity recognizes.

Is 1,000 True Fans Enough to Sustain an African Artist's Career?

Building Artistic Livelihoods: Why Economic Freedom Must Be Central to the Creative Ecosystem

For over a decade, Derek Debru and his team at Nyege Nyege have been slowly and deliberately shaping a movement, one that has not only redefined music and culture in Uganda but has also impacted the livelihoods of hundreds of artists. Through a hybrid model encompassing a festival, record label, artist residencies, and global showcases, Nyege Nyege has created one of the most innovative platforms for experimental and underground African music. But beyond the lights, sounds, and spectacle, Derek has distilled one simple but powerful truth: artists need sustainable support systems to survive and thrive.

“We’ve worked with over 100 artists, released more than 100 albums, and done over 400 shows around the world,” Derek explains. “And what I’ve learned is that if we don’t help artists create viable economic ecosystems around themselves, all of this doesn’t last.”

At the heart of Derek’s thinking is what he refers to as “The 1000 Fans Rule.” Adapted from a well-known concept in independent music circles, this rule encourages artists to build a direct and loyal community of 1,000 fans who are willing to buy anything they create. Whether it’s music, merch, experiences, or performances, this core audience becomes the economic lifeline of the artist.

“You don’t need to be a global superstar,” Derek says. “You need 1000 people who believe in you, who will buy your music, attend your events, and share your work. That’s enough to build a livelihood.”

This vision is not just a marketing strategy—it’s an urgent call rooted in the shrinking nature of traditional markets and the precarity of the music industry, especially for African artists. The hard truth, Derek notes, is that many artists he works with come from backgrounds of poverty. They cannot afford to pursue music as a hobby. For them, success is not just fame—it is the ability to pay rent, eat, support family, and invest in their craft.

Why Cover Gigs Are Not Enough

In discussing the economics of music performance, Derek pulls no punches. Cover bands, a staple of nightlife and lounge culture across African cities, rarely offer financial sustainability. “Artists are often paid \$50 to \$60 for playing six hours of music,” he says. “That’s not sustainable.” In contrast, performing a single curated show in Europe—or in a well-supported local showcase—can yield significantly higher returns for the same or less effort.

But the problem is deeper than money. Performing only covers distances artists from their authentic voice. It reinforces a culture of replication rather than originality. According to Derek, artists must find their own voice—not just for artistic integrity, but also to stand out and create intellectual property that can be monetized in meaningful ways.

The Local Market is the New Global

In a world where global attention is fleeting and saturated, Derek advocates for a new priority: build locally first. The shrinking global attention span and the inequalities of international markets mean that artists must anchor themselves in strong local communities that believe in their value. “You have to build a real market here,” he says. “A real fanbase. A local economy. That’s how you survive.”

This principle resonates powerfully across the continent. Artists from marginal communities are no longer waiting to be discovered by global gatekeepers—they are creating, distributing, and monetizing on their own terms. And that requires infrastructures of support—festivals, platforms, co-ops, rehearsal spaces, creative hubs, and more. But most importantly, it requires a mental shift: artists must see themselves as entrepreneurs building value in their work.

Reimagining Artist Success

So, what is success for an artist? According to Derek, it’s not just media attention, awards, or viral fame. Success is economic freedom. It is the ability to live off your art, to create without fear, to sustain a career on your terms.

This is why the work of initiatives like Nyege Nyege matters. It is not only about artistic expression—it is about artist survival. And if the creative industries are to flourish in Africa and beyond, then the economy of the artist must be placed at the very center of every conversation.

Conclusion: A New Era for Artist Empowerment

Derek’s ideas are not abstract theories. They are lessons learned from the frontline, working with real artists, navigating real challenges, and building real solutions. The future of African music, and indeed the global creative economy, depends on how well we center the artist—not just as a cultural symbol but as an economic actor.

To do that, we must collectively invest in systems that help artists find their voice, own their value, and build their 1000 true fans. Only then can we move from survival to sustainability. From performance to power. From art as struggle to art as freedom.

If “Let’s Jam” Isn’t a Career Plan, What Does Intentional Creative Practice Look Like?

One of the most limiting phrases I hear in the creative circles I move in is, “*Let’s jam.*” Or “*Let’s vibe.*”

Don’t get me wrong, improvisation and play are beautiful parts of the artistic process. But when they become *the whole plan*, we begin to see a pattern of missed opportunities, poor preparation, and underwhelming outcomes.

As someone who organizes showcases, leads rehearsals, works with artists through CMH LIVE and the Academy Musician Fellowship, and performs professionally, I’ve come to appreciate the deep value of intentionality in every step of the creative journey.

Let me give you a few examples from my day-to-day experience:

The Spontaneous Guest Performer: I often receive messages or on-the-spot requests from musicians saying, “Is there a slot for me to play along?” Or I’m at a friend’s gig and they call me up from the audience to jam with them, sometimes on songs I’ve never heard. They tell me, “You’re good enough, just vibe with it.” What they don’t realize is: I *don’t* want to play along because I *hope* they’ve crafted their set with care and thought. When I create my own performances, every artist I include, every moment I build, is carefully curated to tell a story and offer a meaningful experience to the audience. A spontaneous jam doesn’t fit into that.

The Freestyle Songwriter: Many emerging artists I work with start out writing songs purely on “vibes.” When we enter our *content creation month* at the Academy, we always remind them to

dig deeper. What is your song trying to say? What does it want to *do*? Without a clear intention, you're not writing—you're just stringing together lines and hoping they stick.

The Repertoire with No Reason: I once asked a fellow musician why they chose a particular set of songs for our gig. They laughed and said I was being "too theoretical." But here's the thing: being deliberate with your repertoire isn't overthinking—it's *preparing for success*. Every song should serve the mood, the moment, and the audience.

🎵 The Album with No Theme: A young artist began listing songs for their upcoming album. I asked about the titles, themes, and choices—and quickly, they realized they were doing it "just because." After our conversation, they restructured the project to reflect a clear narrative and personal intent. That album is now on a much more compelling path.

The Song About a Place You've Never Studied: Another young singer wrote a song about women from a specific African region. I challenged him: "Do you know this place? Its people, its sounds?" He took it seriously and committed to a one-week research dive into the region's culture, language, and music. That step alone will elevate his project beyond the superficial.

My Point Is Simple:

Freestyle and spontaneity are not the enemy but without intention, creativity floats without direction. Intentionality is what turns ideas into movements, one-off gigs into powerful showcases, and random songs into timeless albums.

So to the artists I work with, and those reading this: Before your next rehearsal, your next recording, your next performance—ask yourself:

✅ What am I trying to communicate? ✅ Why am I choosing these collaborators? ✅ Who is my audience and what should they feel? ✅ How does this project move me closer to my goals?

Let's not just jam. Let's build. Let's grow. Let's be intentional—*because intention leads to impact*.

What Can We Learn About Songwriting Beyond the Muse from Benjamin Wana?

Fresh Songwriting Perspectives from the Academy: Lessons from Benjamin Wana

This week at the Academy Musician Fellowship, we were privileged to host Ugandan-based music producer @Benjamin Wana for a songwriting workshop that turned out to be both engaging and enlightening.

Held on Tuesday evening at the MCI Media Hub conference hall, the session kicked off around 4:40 PM in a room arranged like a boardroom, an unusual setup for us, but one that worked well for the kind of focused exchange that unfolded.

Benjamin brought a refreshing, interactive approach to the session, prompting questions and sparking reflection from the fellows throughout. One of his opening thoughts set the tone for the entire workshop:

"When writing a song, one of your goals is to perform it for an audience—always write with the final destination in mind."

This simple yet profound idea challenged participants to think beyond personal expression and consider the listener's experience from the start.

Authenticity vs. Transferability

Wana made a compelling distinction between authenticity and transferability, noting that while it's crucial to be genuine, it's equally important for a song to connect beyond the writer. A transferable song—one that can be covered or interpreted by others—often finds a wider audience.

Interestingly, he also mentioned that a song doesn't always have to follow emotional logic—mathematical sense in structure, rhythm, or arrangement is just as valid.

The Building Blocks of a Strong Song

Wana emphasized the need for intentionality in songwriting. He shared a checklist of creative tools and concepts that songwriters should explore:

- Wordplay
- Rhythm
- Harmony
- Lyrics
- Layered storytelling (“Show, don’t tell”)

One key takeaway: Authenticity doesn’t necessarily mean originality. Experimenting with covers or playing around with existing material can be a powerful route to discovering your voice.

Writing as a Creative Practice

A recurring theme was discipline. Wana encouraged fellows not to wait for inspiration but to treat songwriting as a creative practice—something to be done regularly, not just when the muse appears.

He advised writers to have a clear blueprint or song map—a structure that outlines where the song is going. This not only helps when collaborating but also makes it easier to return to a song later with clarity and focus.

Additionally, Wana stressed the value of learning complementary skills like music theory, instrumentation, and production to enrich one's songwriting practice.

Emotions, Feelings, and the Art of Masking

An interesting debate emerged around the question: “Do feelings matter when writing a song?” And further—what is the difference between feelings and emotions?

This sparked thoughtful contributions from the fellows. Davix the beat boxer noted that *“Your discipline beats your emotion,”* while Fionolla reminded us that writers can push creativity beyond linear storytelling, often by masking what they're expressing to connect with more listeners.

Wana echoed this by suggesting writers broaden themes—don't just write about the loss of a loved one; write about grief. In doing so, a deeply personal experience becomes universally relatable.

When Is a Song Ready for Studio?

I had the chance to ask Wana what convinces him that a songwriter is ready to record. His answer was simple but powerful:

“They must show confidence in their creation—even if it's not fully complete.”

That belief in one's own work, he explained, is often what drives a song forward in the studio and inspires collaborators to rally behind the idea.

This session reminded us that songwriting is both art and craft, requiring equal parts inspiration and intention. Thanks again to Wana Benjamin for his time, and to the Academy Musician Fellowship team for curating such timely and impactful conversations.

Is Community the Real Measure of an Artist's Value?

The Useful Artist: Why Community is the True Measure of Value in the Music Business

In the music business, the term *useful artist* may sound strange, even uncomfortable. But it's a phrase that has guided many of my decisions when recommending artists for gigs, bookings, and collaborative opportunities. To be clear, it's not about exploiting artists, rather, it's about identifying those who bring *real value* to the spaces they occupy.

So, who is a useful artist?

It's not just someone who is talented. In fact, there's rarely any question about talent in the artists I come across. Many are gifted singers, instrumentalists, and performers. But talent alone doesn't move the needle. What sets a *useful* artist apart is their ability to *move people*—to gather a community, influence action, and sustain relationships over time.

A Community, Not Just Followers

Let's get one thing straight: I'm not talking about social media followers. I'm talking about a *real community*—a group of people who are emotionally invested in the artist's journey. These are people who:

- Show up for your shows.
- Buy your music and merchandise.
- Share your work with others.
- Participate in your campaigns.
- Defend your name when needed.
- Stick around even when the hype is low.

That kind of community doesn't happen by accident. It's built *intentionally*. And often, it's what determines whether an artist gets on the stage—or off the list.

The Artist with No Community

There's an artist who's been asking me for performance opportunities for almost two years. They've played at countless open mic nights and asked repeatedly to play "any gig, anywhere." When I asked them *why* they wanted to play so much, their response was simple: "*So people can hear my craft.*"

Fair. But then what?

“So I can do my own shows and get invited to paid gigs.”

That’s when I asked the real question: *Do you have people you influence? Could you bring 20 people to your show if you organized one tomorrow?*

Their answer: “Like a WhatsApp group?”

That response told me everything. There was no plan to cultivate a tribe—only a hope that talent alone would spark a career. But community doesn’t emerge from hope. It emerges from action.

Building Community: Start Now

Community building should start *early*—even before the first single is released. Just last weekend, I was part of an event with Zoey the Story Teller, an artist I’ve had the pleasure of working with. She had just released her very first song—and instead of pushing it blindly to the public, she did something remarkable: she *invited a small circle of friends* to listen to the song together and give her feedback.

This wasn’t a grand showcase or an industry pitch. It was something more powerful: *a moment of shared trust and connection*. That session created emotional buy-in. Her friends now feel like part of her journey. They *belong*, and they’re likely to stay on board because of how involved and valued they felt.

That is the essence of community building.

The Power of Friendships

Back in our Academy Musician Fellowship, I always encouraged participants to make friends with one another. Not just for networking, but because *community is strengthened by connection*. Sometimes, people keep showing up—not because of the artist on stage, but because of the friends they’ve made in the audience. That shared energy becomes a support system for everyone involved.

💡 Practical Steps for Artists

If you're an artist reading this, here are a few ways to start building your community today:

1. Create intimate spaces – Listening sessions, WhatsApp groups, or house concerts where people can connect around your music.
2. Ask for feedback – Make people feel like their input matters. Involve them in your process.
3. Encourage relationships among your followers – Let your fans get to know each other. This builds a network beyond you.
4. Stay consistent – Update them. Celebrate with them. Let them into your journey—highs, lows, and everything in between.
5. Be a friend, not a marketer – Community thrives on authenticity, not constant promotion.

The True Value of an Artist

In today's creative economy, the true value of an artist isn't just in the music—it's in the *movement* they create. Artists who take the time to build a genuine community are the ones who create long-term impact. They don't just perform; they lead. They don't just release songs; they build ecosystems of support, influence, and love.

And that, in my view, is the mark of a *truly useful artist*.

I'd love to hear how you or artists you know have intentionally built community. Let's keep the conversation going.

Research Residency; Live Performance Techniques That Captivate and Sustain

Over the past two weeks, I've been in residence at The Wild Ones, conducting a focused exploration on live performance techniques that both captivate audiences and make economic sense for artists.

From my desk research to practical field experiments, one insight has echoed clearly across all my interactions and observations: Audiences today are craving genuine engagement.

That one word – engagement – kept showing up. So I leaned into it.

Starting With the Question

To validate the initial findings from my desktop research, I have sent out a short questionnaire to my network asking:

“What do you feel is missing or needs fixing in how we experience live music shows?”

Turning Research Into Experimentation

At the beginning of last week, I moved into the Jungle – the creative studio at The Wild Ones – for a week of hands-on experimentation. I invited different artists to explore their performance products with one goal in mind: How do we build live shows that are emotionally engaging, creatively distinct, and financially viable?

Here’s what we tried:

Tilda – Embodying Character in Cover Music

Tilda, a solo singer, wanted to move beyond just “singing covers.” She experimented with Alicia Keys and Amy Winehouse songs, trying to embody a specific character and emotional attitude. Her vocal strength was obvious – but this week, she began building the confidence and on-stage persona needed to truly connect.

Davix & Talemwa – The “Beatbocoustic” Format

Davix (a beatboxer) and Talemwa (a singer) formed an exciting new performance duo. With me on acoustic guitar, we developed a 15-minute “Beatbocoustic” set – an intimate yet energetic fusion of vocal percussion, melodic hooks, and guitar. Their concept has real potential for venues looking for fresh, low-budget, high-engagement acts.

Maureen & Michael – Soul Meets Classic

This duo focused on vocal harmony and emotional resonance. We turned a well-known Ugandan song into a jazzy, soulful rendition – and the results were magic. Their ability to reimagine the familiar created something both comforting and fresh.

Wild Ones Band – Building a Full Band Experience

The newly formed Wild Ones band – complete with bass, drums, and guitars – supported singer Jovia in rehearsing her set. After two days of prep, we delivered a live Sunday show that truly entertained. The band’s tight chemistry highlighted how structure, energy, and rehearsal combine to elevate live performance.

Mitrikpwe – Storytelling as a Performance Anchor

Mitrikpwe, a solo singer on her World Tour, rehearsed her 30-minute set ahead of a Jinja performance. Accompanied by guitar and her incredible voice, she connected with her audience through personal storytelling and intimacy. Her performance reminded us that even minimalist shows can be emotionally rich and deeply engaging.

What’s Emerging?

Here are some of the standout takeaways from this phase of the residency:

- *Engagement is not optional. The best performances intentionally consider the audience at every step.*
- *Formats matter. Whether it's a duo, solo act, or full band, the success of the performance hinges on preparation and concept clarity.*
- *Economic sustainability is possible. Artists like Mitrikpwe and the Beatbocoustic duo show that low-tech, high-creativity formats can reduce production costs while delivering immense value.*

What's Next

I'll be spending the next weeks continuing to prototype, document, and refine these live performance ideas. The goal? To develop a practical guide for artists – rooted in real experiences – that outlines formats and techniques to not only hold the stage but thrive on it.

This residency for me, is more than an academic exploration. It's a practical investment in the future of African live performance. And I'm deeply grateful to all the artists who have collaborated so far – your risk-taking, your stories, and your creativity are the pulse of this work.

Before a Performance, Are You Nervous or Excited—and Does the Choice Matter?

That restless flutter in your chest before stepping onto a stage or standing up to present—it's a feeling every artist knows. Over the years I've watched guitarists, vocalists, front-people, and even seasoned facilitators grapple with that same unease. Yet only recently did I edge closer to understanding it—and discover a simple remedy: replace nerves with excitement.

When Nerves Signal You Care

For the longest time, I thought I was immune to pre-show jitters. As a guitar player tucked slightly off-center in the ensemble, I rarely felt that trembling anticipation. Perhaps I simply didn't care as much... or maybe I was always more prepared than I realized.

But lately, I've noticed genuine nerves creeping in—especially when I'm about to take on something new, important, or uncertain. It dawned on me: I only get nervous when I deeply care about the outcome but can't fully predict how it'll go.

When a fellow musician confided in me about their pre-gig anxiety over the weekend, I told them exactly that: "Your nerves are here because you want this to go well, and there's some uncertainty in the mix."

The Excitement Mindset

Here's the game-changer I've adopted: while nerves may never disappear completely, excitement can dissolve and replace them.

Preparation breeds excitement. When I know I've rehearsed thoroughly—when I've tuned my guitar, memorized my set, and checked every technical detail—I feel a surge of anticipation instead of dread.

Experience fuels confidence. Before my first international workshop presentation on artist identity, a friend asked, "Aren't you nervous?" I could have been—new faces, new country, new stakes. But I didn't need to be. I'd delivered that content countless times. Instead, I was genuinely excited to share my insights. And the workshop was a success.

Mindful language matters. Rather than asking, "How nervous are you?" try, "How excited are you for this?" The shift in vocabulary can nudge your brain toward positivity and readiness.

Practical Steps to Cultivate Excitement

1. Rehearse with intention. Don't just run through your material—simulate the real thing. Set up your space, time it, record yourself, invite honest feedback.

2. Visualize success. Spend a few minutes imagining the audience's applause, the clarity of your delivery, the energy of the performance.

3. *Anchor to past wins. Remind yourself of previous moments when you crushed it—on stage, in meetings, or on video calls.*

4. *Reframe uncertainty. That unknown outcome? Think of it as an opportunity for discovery rather than a threat.*

The Choice Is Yours

The next time you feel that knot of nerves, pause and ask yourself: “Do I want to be nervous—or excited?”

Nerves tell you one thing: you care. Excitement tells you something even better: you’re prepared and ready to bring your best.

So, whether you’re about to perform at your next small showcase, pitch a new project, or give a keynote, choose excitement. Turn those butterflies into beating drums, and let your passion lead the way.

Can an Artist Do Other Things and Still Take Their Art Seriously?

“Rat Poison or Reggae?” – The Hustle Dilemma of the Modern Artist

Not too long ago, I was at this rooftop art mixer in Nairobi—one of those vibey evening events with music, lights, and creatives everywhere. Great energy. I’m chatting with folks when this guy walks up to me, backpack strapped tight, holding a sachet of something in his hand.

He goes straight in:

“You know cockroaches and rats are a real danger in the house, right? I’ve got something strong for that. Just one dose and boom—they’re gone.”

I pause. Blink. Smile.

"Uh... bro, I'm actually just visiting this hotel," I tell him, "and even if there were roaches, they're not my roaches to kill."

Without missing a beat, he flips the conversation.

"So what are you doing here, by the way?"

I tell him I'm here for the music. His face lights up.

"Oh cool, I'm a singer too! Reggae. I have two songs on YouTube."

Now I'm curious. I check him out. Not bad at all. I subscribe (I might've been his fifth subscriber), and then I ask the golden question:

"Why are you here selling rat poison instead of your music?"

He laughs, then shrugs.

"Man, I need to survive."

And look, I get it. Hustle is real. Bills are real. Life is very real. But I told him something I believe deeply:

"You know, if you had tried to sell me your music instead, I might've actually bought it—especially because I liked it."

Here's the thing.

This guy isn't alone. A lot of talented artists are out here pushing everything but their art—because they don't believe it can pay the bills. They show up late to gigs with excuses like, "I was stuck at work," and it makes me want to ask:

Isn't this supposed to be your work too?

I'm not saying don't have a day job. By all means, pay your rent, eat good food. But why act like your art is just some side thing you're squeezing in between your "real" work?

ARE YOU SURE
YOU WANT TO
RELY ON YOUR
ART TO MAKE
A LIVING?

Poster from Santuri offices in Nairobi

What if you treated your music like the main hustle?

Whenever I negotiate for gigs, I don't say, "I left my other work to come here."

I say, "This is my work. This is what I do. Respect it."

The global creative industry is now worth over \$2 trillion, growing at a steady 5–7% annually. There's money. But you only get your share if you show up like you deserve it.

Some artists ask me, "What if I run another business—won't it confuse my brand?"

Nope. You can be an artist who sells clothes, or a clothes seller who makes music. The difference is in the order of identity.

Art isn't in competition with other jobs—unless you treat it like the weaker option.

So to that brother on the rooftop: keep your herbs, but also keep pushing your music. Put more of that sales energy into your art. Believe in it. Build it. Advertise it. And sell it like it's the most valuable thing you have—because honestly, it might be.

Final thought:

If you're serious about music, act like it's your career. Not your plan B. Not your hobby. The world will follow your lead.

How Can Artistes Build a Team Without Chasing People?

For a long time, I kept asking myself: How do you get others to work with you?

I was searching for the perfect answer until I stopped. Why? Because I met people like 'Cooky'.

Let me give you some context.

Cooky is one of those rare humans who is always willing to help with anything I'm working on—even if it means investing his own time or money. He has become a dependable force behind many of the things we do at CMH LIVE, from running live shows to supporting other artists, to even helping me with what to wear or how to talk to girls. Yeah, he's my guy.

So how did we get here?

I first saw Cooky at events where he and his brother were always dancing and enjoying. We had crossed paths a few times before, but it wasn't until mid-last year when he joined the Academy Musician Fellowship that things shifted. He told me he felt understood at the Academy—that there was something about the energy, the vision, the space that made him want to be involved. He simply offered to help, and I said, "Okay."

Since then, Cooky has grown into his own dream. He's becoming known as a live events producer, poet, and MC. He's not just helping me; he's building himself—within the vision I started.

This memory came back to me recently while leading a workshop in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. One of the participating artists asked, "How do I work with a team?" My answer was simple: Articulate your vision clearly, stay committed, and the right people will come.

I didn't go into detail then, but Cooky's story is the proof.

Here's what I've learned from that experience—and what I now share with artists trying to build a team:

1. Articulate Your Vision

People don't join you because of what you're doing now—they join because they see where you're going. A vision should be clear enough to guide others and wide enough to contain their own dreams.



Photo of participants during the Music Connects Africa workshop at the British Council and Ongala Music in Dar Es Salaam

2. Work Hard (Loudly and Consistently)

People are drawn to momentum. If you're putting in the work, staying visible, and delivering results, it becomes easier for others to believe in what you're building.

3. Create Room for Others to Grow

Your team shouldn't feel like they're only "helping you." If someone wants to be a tour manager but is currently skilled at design, bring them on as a designer—but give them the chance to tour and learn. Help them evolve within your ecosystem.

4. Money Isn't the First Motivator

Most people don't join you because of money. They join because they feel aligned with your journey. If your vision can accommodate others' growth, that's powerful currency.

Now, this brings me to the other side of the coin.

Many artists ask me to join their team—as a manager, mentor, or collaborator. I often don't give a direct yes or no. Not because I don't want to support—but because I don't feel it yet. I need to believe in what you're building. I need to see that there's space in your journey for me too—not just to help you succeed, but to grow myself in the process.

So, to the artist looking for a team:

Focus less on convincing people to join and more on building something worth joining.

Let your work speak. Let your vision breathe. And give others the space to grow inside it.

If you're an artist struggling to build your tribe, I'd love to hear your story. How are you making space for others in your vision?

Is Authenticity the Real ‘Secret’ to Artist Success—Beyond Performance and Animation?

In the ever-evolving world of music, it's easy for artists to get caught up in the pressure to appear perfect and polished. We live in a time where being “animated” or overly curated often seems like the key to gaining attention and establishing a presence. However, this might not always be the case. Independent artists, in particular, face unique challenges in breaking through the noise, and many often overlook the most important ingredient for connection: authenticity.

I recently spoke with an artist who has been practicing music for over 10 years. They are immensely talented, having released multiple songs, and yet they have fewer than 50 monthly listeners on Spotify and less than 500 followers on Instagram. Despite all their dedication—investing in studio sessions, rehearsals, and perfecting their craft—they have not found the right way to connect with an audience.

What they are missing is not their talent, but their ability to build a meaningful relationship with listeners. And this is where authenticity comes into play. To truly resonate with an audience, an artist needs to go beyond showcasing their skills. They need to share their true selves—their inspirations, vulnerabilities, and real-life experiences. By doing so, they create content that people can connect with on a human level, rather than just admiring from a distance.

In my own experience, I discovered this concept when I shifted my approach to social media. I stopped posting “serious” content and started sharing raw, everyday moments—like flowers, roads, or buildings—with music that resonated with me. This simple shift led to more engagement and followers, as people were able to connect with my personality rather than just my polished persona.

Why Authenticity Beats Animation

We live in an age where AI-generated content can feel detached and soulless. How many times have you seen a piece of AI-generated material and immediately been put off because it didn't feel real? The same principle applies to music. Imagine hearing a love song that seems hollow, as

though it was written without any personal inspiration or connection. Chances are, the song won't resonate deeply with listeners.

This is where artists can truly compete with the rise of AI-generated content: by being genuine. Authenticity is the one thing that machines cannot replicate. Your emotions, your struggles, your victories—these are the things that create a meaningful connection with your audience.



How Can Artists Build That Connection?

1. Develop User Personas: To truly understand your market, it's crucial to develop user personas. Who are the people you want to reach with your music? What do they care about? What inspires them? By studying your ideal audience, you can tailor your content to better connect with them.

2. Study Social Media Insights: Social media platforms provide a wealth of data on what types of content get the most engagement. By studying these insights, you can refine your content strategy and focus on what truly resonates with your audience.

3. Share Your Truths and Be Vulnerable: People connect with people, not polished brands. Share your story—your struggles, your triumphs, and your passions. It's this vulnerability that makes you relatable. Stop trying to be perfect. Embrace your flaws and let your audience see the real you.

4. Engage, Don't Just Showcase: Don't just show off your skills—engage with your fans. Talk to them, share what you care about, and be open about your journey. Music isn't just about the song; it's about the person behind it. Make real connections with your audience, and they will appreciate you for who you are, not just for the music you make.

A Case Study: The 10-Year Veteran with 50 Monthly Listeners

Going back to the artist I spoke with—despite having 10 years of experience and a wealth of talent, they had failed to build an engaged fanbase. This artist was dedicated to their craft but was missing the essential component of connection. I suggested that they begin sharing more authentic, raw content with their audience. Rather than focusing on simply promoting their songs, they could share their passions, their inspirations, and the things they care about. They could show up as a real person, not as an animated version of themselves.

This shift could change everything for them. By connecting with their audience on a human level, they would begin to build the relationships that will ultimately lead to sustained growth and success.

Conclusion: Be a Normal Person Doing Extraordinary Things

The key takeaway here is simple: authenticity is what people crave. In a world full of curated personas, the real you will stand out. Artists should stop striving to appear perfect or flawless and instead focus on sharing their truths. They should stop selling music directly and start selling their narrative—showing the world who they are, not just what they do.

By being genuine, vulnerable, and engaging with their audience, artists can forge meaningful connections that will resonate far beyond their latest track. This is the power of authenticity—and it's how independent artists can truly thrive in an increasingly AI-driven world.

Why Does Every Artist Need a Stage—and What Happens When You Create Your Own?

In the journey of artistic growth, waiting for the perfect opportunity can be a losing game. The reality is that artists don't just need exposure—they need spaces where they can engage with an audience, receive real-time feedback, and sharpen their craft. While major platforms are valuable, the most consistent and impactful growth often happens in smaller, self-created spaces where artists can experiment, connect, and evolve.

A year ago, my friends and I started a Sunday jam session in Kampala, not as a formal event but simply as a way to hang out, play music, and enjoy ourselves. What began as a casual gathering turned into something bigger than we expected. We unknowingly built a loyal following, improved our performance skills, and created a community where artists could experiment and grow. This experience reinforced a crucial lesson: if you can't find a platform to showcase your work, create one yourself.

The Lesson for Artists: Create Your Own Platforms

For artists, finding a place to showcase their work and receive immediate feedback is crucial. Many wait for opportunities, but often, the best way to grow is by creating your own platform. If you

are a recording artist, for instance, you should not only focus on the studio but also find ways to perform your songs live—even if it's just for a small group of people. Your first fans are usually your friends and family. Convince them to love your music, and soon, you'll have your first 10 true followers—people who will support you no matter where you go.

If platforms don't exist, create them. Host a regular session at a small venue, invite friends, and consistently share new material. Use these spaces to sharpen your skills and develop an audience.

Be Intentional with Your Presence on These Platforms

Whenever you perform—whether at an open mic, a jam session, or even an informal gathering—have a clear objective. Ask yourself:

Are you trying to improve your live performance?

Are you collecting feedback?

Are you testing new material?

Are you looking for collaborators?

One mistake many artists make is using these platforms to “show off” rather than learn and connect. Audiences can sense when a performer is more interested in proving their talent than engaging with them. Instead, approach each performance as an opportunity to grow, not just to impress.

Final Thoughts

Growth comes from engaging with people, refining your craft, and building meaningful connections. If you can't find platforms to do this, create your own. Start small, be consistent, and allow the process to take shape naturally. Before you know it, you'll have a loyal following, a sharper skill set, and a deeper understanding of your artistry.

This approach is not just about live performances—it applies to any artist looking to grow. The key is interaction, feedback, and consistency. So go out there, create your stage, and keep building.

What Does It Mean to Treat Musical Skill as a Lifestyle, Not Just a Technique?

In the journey of becoming a professional artist, picking up a new skill—whether it's playing an instrument, improving vocal technique, or mastering performance dynamics—is often seen as a necessity. However, what many artists overlook is that skill development should not just be a means to an end. Instead, it should be approached as a lifestyle—an extension of one's artistry rather than a quick fix to a problem.

Learning an Instrument: A Long-Term Commitment

Recently, I spoke with a singer who, after struggling to find an instrumentalist for a gig, decided to pick up the guitar to accompany themselves. While this is an admirable decision, I found it important to offer some perspective. Learning an instrument is not an overnight process—it takes time, patience, and a deep connection to the craft. Many artists who take up an instrument out of necessity often face frustration when they don't progress as quickly as they hoped.

Instead of choosing an instrument just to fill a gap, artists should find one that truly resonates with them—one they would enjoy playing even if they didn't urgently need it for a performance. This applies to unconventional choices as well. Traditional and local instruments can be powerful tools in shaping a unique artistic identity.

Beyond Instruments: Exploring Other Ways to Enhance Your Artistry

Not every singer needs to be a guitarist or pianist to have a great set. There are multiple ways to develop artistic versatility:

Vocal Mastery – If playing an instrument feels like a struggle, focus on refining your voice to a level where you can command an audience without accompaniment.

Exploring Other Art Forms – Consider dance, percussive storytelling, or even tube fiddles and other non-conventional instruments to enhance your stage presence.

Performance Flexibility – Train yourself to perform with a variety of setups—acapella, with a single instrumentalist (like a pianist or bassist), or even using high-quality backing tracks.



*Producer and DJ Nach Mao performing at the Xpressions Ug concert in Kampala in March 2025
(Photo by Maris of Xpressions Ug)*

Building Strong Relationships with Musicians

Beyond skill development, another crucial aspect of an artist's growth is building strong connections with instrumentalists and fellow musicians. Instead of only reaching out when you need someone for a gig, create relationships through:

Jam Sessions & Rehearsals – Invite musicians to casual jam sessions or songwriting meetups to build rapport.

Collaborative Growth – Support each other's work beyond performances. Attend their shows, co-create music, and exchange ideas.

Having a reliable network of musicians ensures that even when you need an instrumentalist last-minute, you have people who are willing to step in because of the relationships you've built over time.

My Final Thoughts

The Best Artists don't just acquire Skills – the Embody them

Becoming a well-rounded artist isn't about collecting skills just to solve immediate problems; it's about integrating them into your lifestyle. Whether it's mastering an instrument, improving stage performance, or strengthening connections with fellow musicians, every step should feel like a natural part of your artistic journey.

So, the next time you consider picking up a new skill, ask yourself: Am I doing this because I truly want to, or just because I need a quick solution? The best artists don't just acquire skills—they embody them.

Can Refining Creative Ideas Actually Change the Music Industry?

Are you feeling underappreciated, underpaid, or exploited as an artist? You might be right—perhaps the industry should give you more, treat you better, and respect your craft. However, instead of waiting for the system to change, you can take control of your career by refining and elevating your creative ideas, not just by demanding more but by demonstrating undeniable value.

Too often, artists assume that securing a manager, drafting contracts, and making transactions legal and professional will guarantee them better treatment. While these steps are essential, they are not enough. The real power lies in productizing your artistry—creating tangible, marketable products and presenting them in a way that commands respect and higher value.

Productizing Your Artistry

Think of your art as a collection of products. An acoustic set, a DJ set, an EP, a single, merchandise, a full album, or a band set—these are all products that can be packaged, marketed, and upgraded to command higher value. The key is not just creating but refining these offerings to maximize their appeal and impact.

A powerful example of this is Mitirikpwe, an artist I have worked closely with since the start of her career. She recently released her debut six-track EP and then announced a world tour. Now, as an independent Ugandan artist, staging a world tour in the conventional sense would be nearly impossible. But Mitirikpwe redefined the concept: her world tour consists of small local venues, including private shows at fans' houses.

The genius of this approach is that her fans and her team fully embrace the idea that she is on a world tour. This mindset has led to increased bookings, making her one of the most in-demand artists in her category. She rehearses diligently and ensures her performances are extraordinary, making her presence feel like that of a globally recognized artist. By focusing on her dream and treating it as reality, she has influenced the industry to perceive her the same way.

Creating Self-Value by Following Your Dreams

This is a lesson I have lived through in my own journey as a guitarist and artist development advocate. By committing to my vision of supporting artists beyond my immediate community, I have positioned myself as more than just a musician—I have become a mentor, an educator, and a driving force for artist growth in East Africa. The industry may not have initially acknowledged this value, but by consistently building and refining my work, the recognition and opportunities followed.

FEBRUARY

~~22nd, Bahai - Secret Location~~

22nd, Nakasero - Smokey's Lounge

24th, Kamwokya - Cookout Restuarant

27th, Kololo - Kardamom & Koffee

28th, Bahai - Secret Location

MARCH

7th, National Theatre

8th, Onomo Hotel

9th - To be Announced

Poster for Mitirikpwe's upcoming shows for her 'World Tour'

When the industry treats you unfairly, don't just fight it—outgrow it. Work on your art, refine your presentation, and create undeniable value. The business side of the industry will eventually catch up, wanting to associate with your vision.

So instead of asking the industry to change, challenge yourself to be the artist who shifts the narrative by living your dream as if it's already a reality. The opportunities, respect, and financial rewards will follow.

What Does Uganda's Music Scene Look Like from Kenya—and Why Should Artists Care?

A Fresh Perspective: Understanding Uganda's Music Industry from Nairobi

After spending just 10 days in Nairobi, Kenya—the longest I've ever been outside Uganda—I've gained a unique perspective on my country's music industry. My journey here was motivated by a desire to explore and understand the dynamics of the East African music scene, and in doing so, I've realized the value of stepping outside one's comfort zone to gain fresh insights.

Seeing Uganda's Music Industry Through New Eyes

From the vantage point of Nairobi, Uganda's music industry appears vibrant, deeply rooted in local culture, and well-consumed by its own people. Outsiders often describe Uganda as the East African party capital, a place where nightlife thrives all year round with an unmatched energy. Kampala's night industry is immense, with countless events that highlight the popularity of local music genres, particularly Kidandali. This genre, while widely recognized at home, is often perceived by outsiders as a singular representation of Ugandan music, leaving little room for differentiation in the global arena.

Interestingly, while Ugandan music enjoys robust local support, its presence beyond our borders seems limited. Many Kenyans I've interacted with are only familiar with Jose Chameleone, an artist who rose to prominence years ago. This raises questions about why more Ugandan artists aren't breaking through to neighboring markets like Kenya, despite the proximity and shared cultural ties.

Kenya: A Well-Established Economy with Emerging Opportunities

Nairobi, on the other hand, is a city bustling with investment in technology, real estate, hospitality and more. Its economic foundation is more developed compared to the rest of East Africa, and this reflects in the structure and ambition of its creative industries. While I'm still in the early stages of my observations, it's evident that the Kenyan music industry benefits from this strong economic base. However, I've also noticed that the challenges faced by Kenyan artists mirror those in Uganda—a lack of access to sufficient resources to compete globally.

Lessons and Opportunities for East African Artists

These observations have led me to reflect on the immense opportunities that exist for East African artists if we choose to bridge the gaps between our industries. For instance, Uganda's vibrant nightlife and loyal local audience could inspire collaborative events and music exchanges with Kenya, whose artists have experience navigating a more competitive, structured economy. Together, we could redefine the East African music narrative and create a shared identity that attracts global attention.

A recurring theme in my conversations with professionals, musicians, and expats here in Nairobi is the need for better infrastructure and resources to elevate East African music. The success of West African and South African artists on the global stage has set a benchmark that we, as East Africans, must strive to meet. This calls for greater collaboration, an understanding of each other's geopolitics, and a deliberate effort to expand our reach as a unified region.

Conclusion: The Power of Perspective

Being in Nairobi has taught me the value of looking at one's industry from an outsider's perspective. It sheds light on blind spots and uncovers opportunities that might otherwise go unnoticed. For Ugandan artists, this means leveraging the strong local support we enjoy at home while exploring ways to connect with audiences across the region. Similarly, Kenyan artists can learn from Uganda's thriving nightlife and apply those lessons to their own context.

Ultimately, the goal is to create an open market where East African artists can thrive collectively, showcasing our rich diversity while competing on the global stage. It's only through mutual understanding and collaboration that we can make East Africa a powerhouse in the global music industry.

This journey has just begun, and I look forward to discovering more as I continue to experience Nairobi and connect with the incredible talent here. For now, I encourage every East African artist to step out, explore, and see the opportunities that lie beyond their borders.

If It's Beyond the Band, What Does True Musical Independence Look Like?

In the past month, post-The Academy Musician Fellowship, I made a conscious decision to prioritize income-generating projects. While this was a necessary step, I soon realized the unintended consequences of neglecting my pro bono artist development activities.

One such instance involved a talented artist I've been working with for some time. When I informed them of my decision to step back from actively playing guitar with them, their reaction was a stark reminder of the crucial role of mentorship and collaboration in an artist's journey. They felt a sense of vulnerability, fearing that their career trajectory might be hindered by my absence.

This experience prompted a valuable insight: just as an artist can experiment with different outfits to enhance their stage presence, they should also be adaptable in their musical arrangements. Relying solely on a single collaborator can limit their growth and potential. By learning to perform with various instrumentalists, backing tracks, or even acapella, artists can empower themselves and maintain their creative momentum, regardless of external circumstances.

Are you letting that gig go because of the instrumentalist?

I believe artists, especially for live performances, need to be as versatile as possible. What is wrong with performing with a drummer alone or performing your song as a poem? It will perhaps give the audience a look into the lyrics. This is what we should call an artist.

When we organized a poetry night in Kampala as CMH Live, we were faced with a challenge of having more singers than poets turn up. When so many performances had become music performances, I kept reminding my producer that the event was essentially a poetry event and we needed more poetry performances. But when this was not working out, I approached one of the singers and asked if they could redesign their performance to accommodate poetry. They accepted, and after their performance, they were so impressed and said they would like to do something like that again.

In another situation, a singer refused to do a gig because they required them to use performance tracks. While one can decide to be an artist that only plays live, this wasn't the case for this artist. They were just uncomfortable with the tracks and had never thought about having to use them.

The advantages here are that, when you do not have your band, you can still perform.

It is, however, important to rehearse thoroughly and be comfortable. Some of the things you can do include:

- *Creating stems with musicians so that you can play when they are not available.*
- *Rehearsing and trying out stuff with other musicians other than the ones you work with regularly.*
- *Getting the music notes for your music and being able to read them or share with other musicians.*
- *Practicing a musical instrument to be able to play on your own.*

I understand that there are musicians that one works with and they are very comfortable with them, but those may not always be there in real-life situations.

Conclusion & Invitation for Feedback

This collection is not a final statement, manifesto, or rulebook. It is a snapshot of thought in motion—ideas shaped by practice, proximity, conversation, and experience. Some of the questions raised here may feel unresolved, repetitive, or even contradictory. That is intentional. These reflections are rooted in specific moments, contexts, and encounters, and they reflect a mind that is still learning, observing, and refining.

I do not present these writings as answers, but as prompts—for artists, stakeholders, music lovers, and collaborators to pause, reflect, and question how we practice, support, and sustain creativity within independent ecosystems. Some of these ideas may resonate deeply; others may invite disagreement. Both responses are welcome.

I am particularly interested in hearing how these thoughts land with you:

What feels accurate? What feels incomplete? What feels worth challenging or expanding?

Your feedback will help shape future writing, research, workshops, and documentation as I continue to focus on identity, practice, and sustainable independent artist development.

If you have thoughts, reflections, critiques, or ideas sparked by this collection, I invite you to share them with me directly:

Email: thecmhacademy@gmail.com

This work will continue to evolve, and your perspective is part of that evolution.

Collin Sserunjogi is a Ugandan musician, artist developer, and cultural practitioner working at the intersection of identity, creative practice, and independent artist sustainability. He is the founder of **CMH LIVE** and the **Academy Musician Fellowship**, initiatives dedicated to supporting artists through capacity development, community building, and practical resources.

Collin is the author of *African Professional Artist Handbook* and has facilitated artist development programs and workshops across East Africa, including with the British Council's **Music Connects Africa** program in Tanzania. As a practicing guitarist and collaborator, his work is grounded in lived experience—spanning studios, rehearsal spaces, stages, classrooms, and cultural conversations.

His current focus is on research-led approaches to identity, intentional creative practice, and building sustainable ecosystems for independent artists in Africa.



[Collin Sserunjogi](#)

Artist Development Specialist~focused on capacity building and comfortable platforms for music lovers in Africa.

<https://share.google/GFMB1EgQD8IXPhJwf>

[colessserunjogi/instagram](#)