

# On contemporary music and musicians: What singer Kate Nash's choice tells us ...

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A disturbing item appeared in the news several weeks ago.

It reported that Lily Allen and Kate Nash, English songwriters and performers, were both peddling images of themselves on OnlyFans, the online subscription service primarily used by pornographers, amateur and professional.

Nash indicated she had begun posting suggestive photos to raise money for a concert tour. According to the *Standard* in the UK,

She started her “Butts 4 Tour Buses” page in order to ensure “good wages and safe means of travel for my band and crew ... No need to stream my music, I’m good for the 0.003 of a penny per stream thanks,” she told her followers on Instagram.

Allen began selling images on OnlyFans last summer.

Both women treated the circumstances somewhat light-heartedly, but the conditions that impelled them to take such action, with its inevitably humiliating, demeaning aspects, are no laughing matter. Conditions for the vast majority of musicians (and artists generally) are increasingly calamitous in Britain, the US and elsewhere. That performers have to resort to semi-pornography to earn a living brings to mind the general identification in the 18th century of actresses with prostitutes.

Nash, in fact, indicated that she was, so to speak, “smiling through tears.” “It’s very funny,” she said. “I think it is also fun to do, and my industry is completely broken, I don’t think it’s sustainable, and I think it’s a complete failure, I think it will collapse as well. So I do think people are going to have to find solutions to fund their art.”

She told *Rolling Stone* that she loses money with every show at present. Nash estimates

each performance costs her about \$10,000 in production, including backing musicians, a stage crew, and potentially a sound engineer ... Coupled with the rise in dynamic ticket pricing (which fluctuates based on demand), stagnant performance wages, and the skyrocketing cost of travel, accommodations, food, and gas, Nash was in a sinkhole of debt just for doing her job.

Nash informed the music publication:

It’s the same problem as what’s happening to people at home with gas prices and everything going up. It’s the same millionaires making everything shit for everyone.

She placed the blame on those same millionaires for “trying to ... ruin everything,” and, generally, “late-stage capitalism.”

What sort of society drives its artists into pornography? One that has no need for virtually any of them—is, in fact, ashamed of them, and wishes them to be ashamed too. It wishes the artists had the same view of themselves that it does—as scoundrels capable of any degradation. After all, there is always the danger one of these “scoundrels” may hit a nerve with the public and expose the rottenness of the social order before tens of millions. Such things have happened, and will happen again. A billionaire-infested society “fears superstitiously every new word,” even more than it did when Trotsky made the comment in 1938, for, as he went on, “it is no longer a matter of corrections and reforms for capitalism but of life and death.”

The system is “broken” and “a complete failure” for the artists certainly. The giant music companies are doing very well. Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment and Warner Music Group, for example, which control over 85 percent of the US recording music industry, took in more than \$30 billion in revenue between them in 2023. Universal CEO Lucian Grainge received \$150.3 million in total compensation this year.

Various commentaries have appeared inveighing against the present situation. A piece on *Paste* referred to “our capitalism-ravaged world,” and continued:

For musicians, this is an especially dire situation, as they’re expected to put out works of art that have taken years to create, all so that we can listen to them for free-or-cheap on vampiric corporate streaming platforms. And *then* they’re supposed to go on tour, which is a prohibitively expensive endeavor, especially since the pandemic. Touring costs have skyrocketed by about 40% since lockdowns.

*Business Insider* headlined a recent exposure, “Want to make money as a pop star? Dream on—Why it’s nearly impossible to make money as a musician in 2024 (unless you’re Taylor Swift).” It observed that, “Music has always been a business, but streaming, TikTok, inflation, and the ballooning costs of touring have dramatically altered a musician’s traditional routes to making money.”

Royalty distribution—how artists and others who own copyrights get paid—is a many-headed beast, but reliable industry estimates have put Spotify’s payout rate at less than half a cent per stream, while Apple Music in 2021 was said to have told artists it paid about one penny per stream.

Songwriters meanwhile, *Billboard* indicated in 2022, could expect to earn 9.4 cents for every dollar a streaming service paid in royalties.

According to someone familiar with the industry interviewed for the *Business Insider* piece, the baseline cost to record a full-length album would be “about \$300,000. ‘That eliminated 75 percent of the people who are aspiring.’” The article went on to assert that:

In a market flooded with demand in the wake of the pandemic, costs for everything from bus rentals to hotel rooms to hiring a lighting technician or manning a merchandise table have ballooned. (Not to mention that venues take a cut of merchandise profits these days, too—sometimes as much as 40%).

When prominent artists “are canceling tour dates or entire tours amid reports of weak ticket sales, what hope is there for everybody else?”

In the *Guardian* last March Damon Krukowski pointed out that Spotify, Apple, Amazon and Google dominate streaming, and streaming accounted for 84 percent of all recorded music revenue in the US. For content, the current streaming system pays an average,

across these platforms, of approximately \$0.00173 per stream. And that meager amount ... doesn’t even go directly to the artist. It goes to the rights holder for the master recording, which is usually a record label—which then splits this income with artists according to individual contracts, with a typical artist share somewhere between 15% and 50%.

William Deresiewicz, in his *Death of the Artist* (2020), written before the pandemic, the further cartelization of the industry and the introduction of the newest technologies, asserted that,

The system is designed for scale. You can actually make a lot of money as a musician from streaming, but only if you generate, say, *a hundred million streams*. A paltry million streams will only get you between about \$700 and \$6,000. ... In the age of [Michael Jackson’s] *Thriller*, the great blockbusting album of the early 1980s, 80 percent of revenue in the music business went to the top 20 percent of content. Now it goes to the top 1 percent.

Deresiewicz noted that, according to one economist, in 1982,

the top 1 percent of artists garnered 26 percent of total concert revenue; by 2017, the number was 60 percent [What is it now?]. At a mega-festival of two hundred acts ... 80 percent of the money will go to the three or four headliners.

More generally, Deresiewicz asserted that, in the arts,

tech does not eliminate existing producers—creation can’t be automated—it exploits and immiserates them. Jonathan Taplin estimates that between 2004 and 2015, about \$50 billion in annual revenue ‘moved from the creators of content to the owners of

monopoly platforms.’ ...

The devastation of the arts economy, like the degradation of the college experience, is rooted in the great besetting sin of contemporary American society: extreme and growing inequality.

Creating and performing music that has an impact on the listener and that endures is no easy matter. In music, according to Hegel’s fine phrase, “the whole gamut of the heart’s feelings and passions resound and die away.” This is not something that comes about overnight, or that a person stumbles on accidentally.

Popular songs take countless forms and convey countless moods—lyrical, unruly, sensual, regretful, angry, pensive, rebellious and more. Through the best songs, an individual communicates to others his or her own inner life, with all that’s objectively important, original and elemental in it, both as it has developed over a lifetime and as it seizes him or her and his or her entire being powerfully at a given moment. It is appalling to consider that this often delicate and complex process, even if the final product is raucous or coarse, is at the mercy of financiers and philistines and other swinish types.

At present, of course, a great deal of what dominates the music and entertainment world is backward and degraded. But that is not the end of the story. Deresiewicz, a liberal critic of capitalism, is wrong about the “death of the artist.” The artists and musicians will *live*, and live *significantly*, precisely in so far as they take up opposition to what exists, artistically, politically, economically.

Pierre-Jean de Béranger (1780-1857) was a French poet and songwriter who enjoyed immense popularity after the downfall of Napoleon in 1814-15. He has been described as “the most popular French songwriter of all time.” He once wrote, “The good of humanity has been the dream of my life.”

As one commentator explains,

[Béranger] composed songs and poems highly critical of the government set up under the restored Bourbon monarchy. They brought him immediate fame through their expression of popular feeling, but they led to dismissal from his post (1821) and three months’ imprisonment (an experience he compared favourably to life in his garret).

Béranger’s lyrical, tender songs glorifying the just-passed Napoleonic era and his satires ridiculing the monarchy and reactionary clergy were written in a clear, simple, attractive style. Both song and satire soon made him as well known among ordinary country people as in the liberal literary circles of Paris.

In one famed and beloved song, “My Republic,” Béranger explains that he has “grown fond of the republic / Since I’ve seen so many kings.” As a result, he has set up his own republic where “One trades there only to drink, / One judges there only with gaiety; / My table is all its territory; / Its motto is liberty.”

Where is our Béranger?

In 1842, the youthful Karl Marx turned to lyrics by Béranger to help illustrate his own attitude toward art and commerce. In his article, “On Freedom of the Press,” Marx noted that the writer, for example, “must earn in order to be able to live and write, but he must by no means live and write to earn.”

Marx then cited these lines by Béranger:

Je ne vis que pour faire des chansons,

Si vous m'ôtez ma place Monseigneur  
Je ferai des chansons pour vivre.  
[I live only to compose songs.  
If you dismiss me, Monseigneur,  
I shall compose songs in order to live.]

Béranger's "threat," Marx went on, "contains the ironic admission that the poet deserts his proper sphere when for him poetry becomes a means." This remarkable passage from Marx follows, one that ought to be memorized by every artist with an ounce of integrity:

The writer does not at all look on his work as a *means*. It is an *end in itself*, it is so little a means for him himself and for others that, if need be, he sacrifices *his* existence to *its* existence. He is, in another way, like the preacher of religion who adopts the principle: "Obey God [i.e., art] rather than man" ...

The recording and entertainment industry giants, the tech conglomerates, all of these are useless parasitical entities, which do nothing but drain wealth and energy and artistry. They only exist to subtract from and damage the culture. The working class in power under socialism will expropriate these corporations and place the production of music under the democratic control of the writers, singers, musicians, producers and technicians who create it.



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