cartel.
AUSTRALIA

The Industry Isn't the Villain Anymore.

Why some of the most toxic behaviour in Australian music now starts with the artist.

For decades, artists have been handed the same story.

The label wants your masters.
The manager wants your money.
The booking agent wants their cut and doesn't care if you eat.
Everyone in a suit is out to get you.

That story was earned. There was a time when artists signed away their masters for life, got buried in recoupment and had no way to reach an audience without a gatekeeper's blessing. But this is not 1986, and this year the story is out of date. In a lot of the rooms we sit in, the person being taken advantage of isn't the artist. It's the people working for them.

Before we go any further:
1. This isn't aimed at any artist in particular, and it isn't aimed at our roster. It's a general view of trends we see across the local scene and hear about from other managers, labels and agents. It won't apply to everyone.
2. Real harm still happens in this industry. The 2022 Raising Their Voices review found that 76% of participants had been bullied at work in Australian music. This article isn't about that, and nothing here takes away from it. If you've been harmed, Support Act's helpline is 1800 959 500.

1. The power has shifted

As we wrote in *The Audience Is Their Own Tastemaker*, the age of the gatekeeper has collapsed. Any artist can distribute globally for the price of a coffee, own 100% of their masters and talk directly to their fans. Nobody can lock you out anymore.
That's a great thing. But it also means the old power imbalance has flipped. Today the artist holds the IP, the audience and the final say. The industry people around them hold the risk.

2. Who actually carries the risk now

Let's talk about managers, because they cop the most of it.
In Australia, a manager's income is entirely commission-based. As the Association of Artist Managers (AAM) puts it, if the artist earns nothing, the manager earns nothing, regardless of the hours invested. The standard 20% was set back when managers had far fewer responsibilities

than labels, publishers and promoters. Today managers have become the marketing department, the radio plugger, the playlist pitcher and the data analyst, for the same percentage or less.

We've done this math before. A manager working full-time on 15% of an artist who makes $0 earns $0.

"Then you have a manager who is expected to put full-time hours of commitment in for 15% of an artist that makes $0 in income. This leads to managers having to take on other work, leaving the artist feeling like they have been shelved." — Anthony Agostino, Director, Cartel Australia
The result?

AAM says professional managers are leaving the industry in droves, and expects a significant decline in their numbers over the next five years. Their own submission describes the manager as subservient to the artist, and names artist-to-manager bullying as a real problem.

That's not the Hollywood version of the evil manager. It's the actual one.

3. The patterns we keep seeing
None of these are one-off stories. They're the ones we hear in nearly every conversation we have with other industry.

- The build-and-bail. A manager spends two or three years developing an act for little or nothing. The moment it starts paying, the artist leaves for a bigger manager or decides they'll "do it alone now". They take the growth, the relationships and the percentage the manager was finally about to earn.
- The commission haggle. "Can you do 10%?" "Can you work for free until we're making money?" Then the same artist expects full-time hours, instant replies and a label deal by Christmas.
- Service, not partnership. Managers, labels, agents and publicists are working *with* you, not *for* you. Too many artists treat their team like staff they don't pay.
- Blame only flows one way. There's an old saying among Australian managers: when all is going well, the artist is to be praised; when things are going wrong, the manager is to blame.
- Advice ignored, then reinvented. The manager suggests an idea, the artist dismisses it, and two months later it comes back as the artist's "genius idea".
- Expecting work for free. Photographers, mix engineers, publicists and designers get asked for mates' rates, then no rates. Your hobby is someone else's livelihood.

4. Why this should matter to you
Australia is a small industry. Everyone knows someone who knows someone, and how you treat your team gets around faster than your next single.
When good managers burn out and leave, there are fewer people willing to back the next developing artist on a promise. That next artist might be you. Every unpaid hour you take for granted makes the industry less able to support artists at all.

5. What valuing your industry actually looks like

- Pay for expertise, or agree to a structure that's fair. If you can't afford a commission that makes sense yet, a consulting arrangement with a fixed fee is honest for both sides.

- Agree on post-term commission up front. If someone builds your project, they should share what they built after you part ways. That's not greed. It's fair.
- Do your job. Your manager isn't your social media team. Artists innovate, managers manage.
- Respect people's time. Agree on how and when you communicate, and stick to it.
- Leave well. If you outgrow someone, honour the agreement, credit their work and don't burn the bridge. You'll be in a room with them again.

The industry isn't perfect, and nobody's saying it is. But the cliché of the predatory industry and the helpless artist doesn't describe most of what we see this year. The people in your corner are taking real risks on you, usually before you've earned a cent. Treat them like it.

WORK WITH US, NOT OFF US.