

Dreams of ‘shooting out’: hip-hop music production in Bishkek in the age of streaming

Florian Coppentrath, Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient

Abstract

Digitalised music production and the rise of music streaming platforms shape music markets worldwide. Whereas in Western Europe and North America, the age of streaming has also been criticised for a casualisation of musical labour, in peripheral music economies like Kyrgyzstan it participates in structuring a market for music makers. At the same time, digitalisation also tends to reproduce global inequalities. Based on the case of hip-hop music production in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, the present working paper examines how the ‘age of streaming’ affects the musical production and the dreams and ambitions of music workers.

Introduction

“Every day we’re working hard for our art!” jokes Belyi, one of Bishkek’s best known and most respected rappers as he fixes lights on the filmset.¹ It’s late one evening in December 2019 at the Uma Photospace, in the eastern part of Kyrgyzstan’s capital, and one of the first filming sessions of Curltai (a stylised form of the Kyrgyz Kurultay: traditional assembly), a musical and artistic project that began some weeks earlier, is under way. In one corner of the room, which is bathed in red light, a microphone is hanging from the ceiling, attached to a computer with a digital audio workstation. About 20 people are there, and more are coming and going. Some are working on the image- and soundcheck while others are greeting friends, chatting and waiting for their turn. Tonight, a range of musicians – mostly rappers – will be filmed giving a live performance of some of their songs. Hip-hop musicians in Bishkek are predominantly, though not exclusively, male, as reflected this evening. The atmosphere is informal and friendly, with filming sessions punctuated by applause after successful takes. Later, the best material will be released on the project’s YouTube channel.²

Since these early days, by 2021 Curltai has grown into an important platform that offers a professionally curated and eclectic impression of music production in and around Bishkek. At the time of writing, the channel has more than 85,000 subscribers and includes about 200 videos: live sets, music videos, interviews, and teasers. In its YouTube description, Curltai presents itself as a “neutral zone of

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creation” aiming for the “promotion of musical culture in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere”. Apparently inspired by platforms such as the Colors studios (Berlin) and özen (Almaty, Kazakhstan), Curltai offers musicians the possibility to obtain visual material for the promotion of their music, in exchange for monetisation of that material on the project’s channel. It also launched a music label in early 2021.



Fig. 1: The rapper Belyi in December 2019 during the recording of a live-video for Curltai. Florian Coppentrath.

Curltai is not a hip-hop project strictly speaking, even though most of its initiators have been associated with hip-hop as practitioners and/or entrepreneurs. This is the case for Belyi, who accompanies the film sessions as sound engineer and has performed several of his songs on the platform, as well as for the project’s founder Mirlan Satkymbaev, a film maker, “hip-hop entrepreneur”,³ and key figure in the development of the genre in Bishkek for the past 15 years. The project can be considered as a successor of previous attempts to organise and develop the local hip-hop economy. The fact that it is built around a YouTube channel with monetisation of content is a telling local manifestation of the digital turn in music industries. Indeed, since 2019, more and more music from Kyrgyzstan (including most of its hip-hop) has become available on music streaming platforms (MSPs).

¹ For some background on Belyi, see Coppentrath 25.02.2020.

² See <https://www.youtube.com/c/CURLTAI/featured>.

³ Mbaye 2011: 91–95.

This change has had an important impact on music production in Kyrgyzstan.

This paper takes a closer look at how the arrival of such digital distribution opportunities has affected the work of music workers in Bishkek and their hopes and chances to engage in a musical career. It is part of the on-going work relating to a PhD dissertation on the economy of hip-hop music in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. It draws on data collected during 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Bishkek, which took place between May 2019 and July 2020. This includes a range of interviews with music workers involved in hip-hop in the city (rappers, *bitmeyker*,⁴ recording studio owners, entrepreneurs), as well as archival data such as newspaper reports, forum posts, and field notes made in places where hip-hop music is produced and performed. Avoiding the mystical sublimation of artistic creation as an alternative realm to the market, which effectively disregards the economic needs of artistic workers,⁵ music-making is framed here as a form of work. Even though ‘music worker’ is not a phrase used by hip-hop music practitioners in Bishkek, there are numerous references to the work that music-making implies, as the opening quote illustrates. This paper thus builds on previous theorisation of creative and artistic labour, starting with Becker’s “Art worlds”, in which he underlines the inherently collective character of artistic creation and the “businesslike work habits of many artists”.⁶ In his framework of “the economics of creativity”, Menger argues that creative labour is essentially “shaped by uncertainty”.⁷ According to him, the intrinsic uncertainty of creative work and of its success is of key importance when examining artistic engagement; it “acts as a necessary condition for innovation and self-realization in the creative act, but also as a delusion, because of the overestimation of the chances of success that it can trigger”.⁸ This allows us to trace the numerous choices that are part of a creative process and its management. In a similar vein, Negus shows how uncertainty about success is a structuring factor in the rationale and working practices of record companies.⁹

This paper also addresses an important body of literature on the effects of digitalisation and streaming on musical labour and music industries at large. As a UK parliamentary committee notes in a recent report dedicated to the topic, music streaming, simply defined as “the process whereby music multimedia is accessed by consumers over the internet”, has become a key source of income

for music workers.¹⁰ On a wider scale, the advent of legal MSPs around the turn of the decade has led to renewed growth in global music industries since 2014.¹¹ However, there has been ample debate about the distribution of streaming revenues among music workers and rights holders.¹² Many academic enquiries picture the business model of streaming as detrimental to the economic position of musicians,¹³ while others argue quite the contrary – that streaming might pay better than ‘traditional’ pre-digital models and may be more equitable for so-called long tail artists.¹⁴ Hesmondhalgh sums up his critical engagement with the debate around streaming revenues: “It may well be the case that more musicians rather than fewer can now earn money from recorded music. But it seems clear that the current system retains the striking inequalities and generally poor working conditions that characterised its predecessors.”¹⁵

Additionally, the expansion of internet use, and particularly of the so-called Web 2.0 and social media platforms, has led to the redistribution of cultural intermediation’s workload, which appears to bring more possibilities for direct engagement between music-makers and their audiences. In the Anglo-Saxon and Western European contexts of most of these studies, this evolution forms part of wider trends towards a “neoliberal ‘creative economy’” where economic risk is increasingly borne by the sole “cultural entrepreneur” musician, sometimes organised as a “label of one”.¹⁶ This is how the internet has tended to generalise the move towards do-it-yourself (DIY) practices by music workers.¹⁷ As Nordgård summarises, this “may be interpreted in a progressive and positive sense, with the artist taking more control”, and, “in a more passive and negative sense, with the artist being left with all control”.¹⁸ However, most of these analyses refer to musical workers in Western Europe and North America, in the context of large-scale music industries. In places where there is little in the way of musical market infrastructure, one should rather speak of “music economies”,¹⁹ putting the focus on bottom-up efforts where “the possibility

4 *Bitmeyker* (sometimes also *bitmar*), from the English beatmaker, refers to the activity of writing the musical element of hip-hop songs (also called beats, or *bity* in Russian). In an English-speaking context, one would speak of a hip-hop producer (cf. Schloss 2014, p. 41), but producer (or *prodjuser*) tends to refer to “a kind of all-embracing manager” in a Russian-speaking context (Tolstad 2021: 69–70).

5 Stahl 2015, 136; Praznik 2020: 84–85.

6 Becker 1982: 1, 18.

7 Menger 2014: 3.

8 Menger 2014: 318.

9 Negus 2001: 152–153.

10 House of Commons – Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee 9.7.2021, p. 10. Further, the report offers complete and readable explanations about how streaming works economically, notably how incomes are being redistributed.

11 Hesmondhalgh 2020, 2; House of Commons – Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee 09.07.2021, 11–12.

12 Hesmondhalgh 2020: 3–4.

13 Huber 2018: 153; Nordgård 2018: 38; Cook 2019; Scherzinger 2019.

14 Sinnreich 2016. The notion of ‘long tail’ refers to an argument by Anderson (2009) that digitalisation in creative industries will open new market shares for lower-tier artists by lowering reproduction costs.

15 Hesmondhalgh 2020: 18.

16 Powers 2015: 124–127.

17 Jones 2021: 7.

18 Nordgård 2018: 19, italics in the original quote.

19 Mbaye 2011: 237–38; Perullo 2011: 14.

for artists to live off their music is thought through the development of a music industry considered as largely inexistent²⁰. Departing from the observation of Russia's "not having a music industry", Tolstad notes a similarly critical perception that musicians engaged in Russo-Swedish cooperation have of the working environment in that country.²¹ As Mbaye points out, considering the example of Francophone West Africa, entrepreneurial DIY practices are not a new phenomenon in such contexts, nor specific to creative labour: "in a society where workers are generally forced to bear all the risks associated with their employment, evolving in precarious and insecure careers historically is a common practice".²² This can also be said of Kyrgyzstan, where entrepreneurship and self-employment have been widespread since the dissolution of the USSR.²³ In such a context, music-makers meet the 'digital turn' in their sector from a radically different socio-economic standpoint than is the case in Western-style welfare states.²⁴

In Central Asia, popular music workers have largely been reliant on the wedding and private event business as their main and sometimes only source of income.²⁵ As Klenke shows, estrada (which can be taken for an equivalent to popular music) musicians in Uzbekistan operate within a constraining system of state regulation, although, on the other hand, this grants them the legal status of music workers.²⁶ In contrast to such an institutionalised cultural policy, Kyrgyzstan could be pictured as an extreme example of *laissez-faire*: popular music as work is de facto completely unregulated and music-makers operate in a state of what Mbaye describes as "legal invisibility".²⁷ As I will argue, the introduction of digital distribution and MSPs in Bishkek's music economy can thus be understood as a form of (re)structuring.

Developments among the community of hip-hop music-makers serve as an indicator for evolution in the wider popular music sector in Kyrgyzstan.²⁸ Hip-hop and rap can

be considered as representative of wider musical trends for several reasons.²⁹ First, in terms of audience and cultural influence, they are dominant contemporary musical genres.³⁰ Second, hip-hop's cultural ethos and its low barriers of entry (allowing an amalgamation of amateur and professional music workers) make it prone to embracing aesthetic, technological, and entrepreneurial innovation.³¹ At the same time, as Mbaye argues, introducing her notion of "hip-hop entrepreneurs", the connection to a wider "community of practice" means that hip-hop practitioners in contexts outside the music industry are more likely to try and sustain their own activity as well as advancing the wider cultural field in which they position themselves.³² In the case of Bishkek, this 'cultural field' has developed over time: hip-hop music makers tended to invest a wider hip-hop culture (including different elements such as break dance, graffiti, and music) into the 2000s; today, they would rather see themselves as part of a wider local music economy, as the example of Curltai illustrates. As the editors of a recent journal special issue on "hip-hop world(s)" observe, there is a rising academic interest in the economic role of hip-hop, which is "increasingly described as the lever of real local cultural industries, where entrepreneurial practices, success stories and strategies of insertion into wider musical networks are asserted".³³

Considering that such networks often span different spaces, I take the analytical lens of translocality to qualify the social and economic practices of hip-hop music-making in Bishkek. As posited here, translocality does not refer to the dilution or transgression of locality, but involves "the local adaptation, re-structuring and limitation of translocal experiences in particular settings".³⁴ This is how Stephan-Emmrich and Schröder invite us to consider translocality as "lived experience" in the contexts of Central Asia and the Caucasus, where "translocal practices and experiences are tied to physical or imagined localities".³⁵ Although this is certainly not a recent feature of hip-hop music in Bishkek, the introduction of digital modes of production and distribution can be considered as a structural change that enhanced translocal practices.

To put this change into historical perspective, the first part of this paper consists of an overview of early hip-hop production and distribution in Bishkek and the progressive arrival of web 2.0 and streaming into the local music economy. Further, the effects this change has on

20 Navarro 2018: 1.

21 Tolstad 2021.

22 Mbaye 2011: 263.

23 Pétric 2013: 194; Satybaldieva 2018: 35.

24 About the latter, see for example Menger's chapter about the different underpinnings of public intervention in the arts in France (2009: 847–902).

25 Sultanova 2005; Otan 2019: 75.

26 Klenke 2019.

27 Mbaye 2011: 219–26.

28 Instead of 'popular music' or 'pop music', the Russian term *popsa* would be used as signifier for this 'meta-genre'. Besides hip-hop music, this notably includes estrada (Klenke 2019: 13–29), certain forms of rock and different kinds of dance music (e.g. electronic dance music). The borders are fluid and dynamic, though, as most of these resort to similar production practices, and to what Regev referred to as the "rock aesthetic" (2002: 252–54). For example, rappers who are popular within Kyrgyzstan are sometimes associated with estrada (Coppentrath 2019).

29 'Hip-hop music' puts an emphasis on the historical and ideological connection to a wider 'hip-hop culture', of which rap and DJing (as well as music production) are the musical forms of expression.

30 Dietrich 2016: 8–9. This also holds true for the Russian market, where local hip-hop music "reigns supreme", according to the statistics of Spotify (Spotify 15.07.2021).

31 Negus 1999; Schloss 2014: 197.

32 Mbaye 2011: 91–95.

33 Aterianus-Owanga, Milliot, and Noûs 2020: 7.

34 Freitag and Oppen 2010: 6.

35 Stephan-Emmrich and Schröder 2018: 31.

the working conditions and prospects of hip-hop practitioners will be analysed, before looking at their positioning within a wider, translocal music economy.

Early hip-hop music economy in Bishkek

As Ivanov writes in his thesis about Russian hip-hop, the different elements of the culture appeared in the Soviet Union during the 1980s.³⁶ Break dance, in particular, “became one of the most massive and popular movements and subcultures” by the second half of the decade.³⁷ In the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic as well, newspaper reports testify of the popularity of break-dance at that time.³⁸ Access to hip-hop music was mostly limited to those with connections abroad or on the local black market, so that the first hip-hop musicians in Frunze/Bishkek started to develop their skills at home. A small, but active hip-hop community began to grow as fans and performers got in touch with each other and set regular meeting places.

After independence in 1991, hip-hop music became more accessible thanks to bootlegged cassettes that started to appear on sale and began to circulate within the community, as well as a number of foreign TV and radio shows that were retransmitted on local channels. Most of these early influences came from the United States and from the developing hip-hop music scene in Russia, but there were also other sources: for example, some programmes from the French music channel MCM were retransmitted on local TV. Access to more detailed cultural knowledge and to musical hardware (notably DJing equipment) remained limited to those with contacts who were travelling abroad or were wealthy enough to indulge their interest. Regular events such as ‘rap parties’ (*rep vecherinki*) in different nightclubs (1996–1999) served as places where subcultural knowledge and skills could be exchanged via a form of mentoring. Except for a few exceptions, local hip-hop music could be heard exclusively on stage: in Bishkek, as in the Bronx of the 1970s, it started as performances.

The first open air hip-hop festival, the Styles Tournament, took place in August 2000,³⁹ organised by leading rappers and break-dancers. This marked a watershed and signalled the increasing popularity of the genre. Hip-hop music met the marketplace, becoming a relevant genre for local ‘cultural entrepreneurs’: the more popular ‘rap stars’ could monetise their performances and sometimes sell beats or texts to other musicians, but they were also confronted with new costs, notably for the professional recording sessions that were required to meet the standards of radio broadcast. Radio play, and particularly the specialised evening programme with radio host Amir Kadyrov (2002–2006) on the public channel 21-ii Vek (21st century), was a key distribution

channel for local hip-hop at that time. The sale of music recordings and merchandise was widely appropriated by piracy networks, but the concert business could bring a significant income to some. In 2005, leading hip-hop makers and Amir Kadyrov created the group Vendetta, a collective that made use of their market power to negotiate fair concert fees and to structure musical production, promotion, and booking.

Vendetta was short lived, and the wave of hip-hop in Bishkek increasingly lost momentum after 2006 as audiences lost interest in the context of the genre’s wider decline. As contemporaries observe, this was mainly because too much music was provided by low-quality newcomers.⁴⁰ It also coincided with the rising popularity of the Kyrgyz language estrada, in a context of “demographic shifts” and “an ethnic turnaround of the city”, with the relative size of the Kyrgyz population increasing through migration.⁴¹ Most hip-hop musicians thus took other career paths or went abroad, either because of the stage in life they had reached or because of the perceived lack of economic prospects.⁴² The first wave of hip-hop music was mostly animated by schoolchildren and students,⁴³ who became less enthusiastic about the risks of an artistic career as they grew older and considered establishing their own families.

The trajectories of some of the early hip-hop artists were later traced by journalists, for example in Kloop.kg’s 2018 article “Clans, Dynasties and *Balashki s Chochoshkami*. Where have the stars of 2000s’ Kyrgyz rap gone?”⁴⁴ In the words of the *bitmeyer* ReenBoy (aka Shino6i), who was beginning his musical activities at that time, previous rappers “left and closed the door. [...] None of them approached [us] and explained at least to one person: ‘come over here and talk to these ones ... come to that studio’. Nothing like that. We just organised it all (*mutili*) blindly.”⁴⁵

In the decade after 2005, hip-hop music production remained active but with less reach, as its participants grouped in so-called *leybly*,⁴⁶ around recording studios that specialised in hip-hop music. These proliferated as computers and digital audio workstations became more

³⁶ Ivanov 2012: 81–87.

³⁷ Ivanov 2012: 83.

³⁸ See for example Zhulev 19.02.1987.

³⁹ Gruzdova 23.08.2000.

⁴⁰ Ryskulova 2007.

⁴¹ Schröder 2017: 8–9.

⁴² Ryskulova 2007.

⁴³ Mel’nikov 2005.

⁴⁴ Dzhumagulov 07.07.2018. “*Balashki s Chochoshkami*” (“Boys with willies”, in a mixture of Kyrgyz wording and Russian endings) refers to an infamous line from the song “*Krasotka*” (Pretty girl) by Acapella, an exploration of sexual fantasies by one of the most popular rap groups in Bishkek in the early 2000s. The song is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcRY0kpkhdc>.

⁴⁵ Interview with ReenBoy in Bishkek, 9 February 2020.

⁴⁶ From the English ‘label’. Such *leybly* did not have a formal work organisation and mostly served as a form of collective affiliation and a way of gathering resources to entertain a recording studio. Members usually paid a monthly fee that allowed them to record a given number of songs.

accessible.⁴⁷ For their owners – usually practitioners themselves – such hip-hop studios were also a way to reduce costs by owning the means of production and gaining some income from renting out studio time.⁴⁸ However, most of them continued to struggle to pay the rent, leading to a large number of studios quickly opening and closing. Only a few, notably Connection Pro – which moved six times in its five years of existence (2007–2012) – made significant efforts to promote their hip-hop musicians on the wider local music market.

These years also marked the establishment of Kyrgyz-language rap (songs had previously been mostly in Russian or English). Popular representatives of the genre such as Dobror, after 2010, Begish and Bayastan, were able to reach a wider domestic audience than their Russian-speaking counterparts.⁴⁹ This allowed them to gain access to certain sources of income that were typical for the local estrada, in particular performances at private events such as weddings. However, becoming too dependent on these might also mean curtailing one's creative freedom, since only certain kinds of light-hearted hip-hop songs (notably with a festive or patriotic content and danceable music) would please cross-generational audiences. In any way, a more significant domestic audience made up for a market segment of its own, with distinct media platforms (e.g. newspapers specialised on the 'show business' such as Super Info).

Internet access in Kyrgyzstan considerably expanded at the turn of the 2010s, with the percentage of internet users in the population raising from about 16 per cent in 2010 to about 30 per cent in 2015, and the international bandwidth surging from 1.240 Mbit/s to 77.323 Mbit/s over the same amount of time (see Table 1).⁵⁰ Most of the music produced at that time was distributed free of charge via file-sharing platforms, local internet forums, and multimedia platforms such as Namba.kg; only a few hip-hop music workers could hope for earnings from concerts or contracts. An important share of exchange in the creative economy was organised on a non-monetary basis, with barter playing a role. For example, writing the soundtrack for a film could help a musician to procure an otherwise expensive music video. But in the absence of any significant copyright protection, musicians could not expect any direct gain from their work.

Most of the early history of hip-hop music in Bishkek was thus shaped by the failure to accumulate resources in the local musical economy. As in other, similar contexts, this was "lived as a lack – lack of infrastructures, lack of professionalism, lack of private and public

support", with musicians having to organise resources themselves.⁵¹ The time and effort put into creating the conditions for musical production often left them with the sense of a vicious circle and a lack of artistic progress. Over the years, the great majority of hip-hop musicians have therefore dropped out, with this leading to disruptions in knowledge transmission between different 'generations', as ReenBoy pointed out. However, certain hip-hop musicians of the 'second wave' (after 2006) remained active even far into their 20s, actively opting to pursue a musical career. This can partly be explained by the increased opportunities for independent musicians to control the production chain via their own studios and, ultimately, the distribution and promotion options offered by the internet.

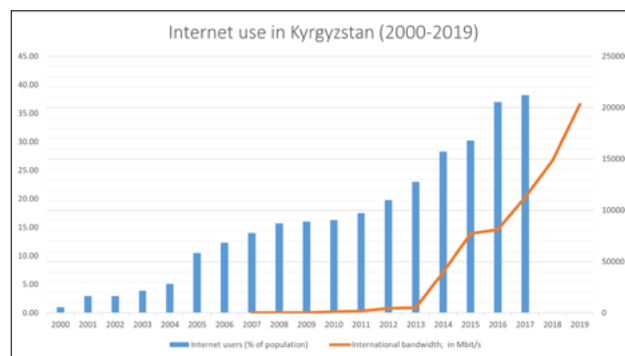


Fig. 2: The evolution of internet use in Kyrgyzstan between 2000 and 2019. Data source: ITU.

Entering the age of streaming

In 2012, the music label Headliners (2011–2014) released three music albums on streaming platforms via an aggregator that offered distribution services. This innovative move was only possible because the head of the label had a bank account in the United States, having travelled there on several occasions.⁵² The bitmeyer Jaya (aka DJ XTZ) remembers how his album *Xtazy Love* (2012) was distributed this way:

Little money came in from streaming. It was only enough to pay for the tracks to be available there. But I remember my first honorary ... That was at the end of 2012, I think ... Headliners ... Chyngyz [the head of the label] gave me 100 dollars for the streaming. That was like "for the fact that they bought it on iTunes". [...] People bought the album there ... imagine (*prikin*)! And he showed me in what countries ... I was like, "oh, great!"⁵³

After the end of Headliners, Jaya started to cooperate with the Russian label Zhara Music,⁵⁴ and garnered some streaming success with certain tracks by his duo Jaya Miyazaki. As he pointed out on Twitter in May 2021,

⁴⁷ See also Schloss 2014: 200–205; Schoop 2019: 85.

⁴⁸ Navarro 2018: 2–3; Spinetti 2005: 197.

⁴⁹ Copenrath 2019.

⁵⁰ The data, which rest mostly on estimations by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) for the percentage of internet users and on data from the Kyrgyzstani State Communications Agency for the bandwidth, are likely to be incomplete. However, it gives an idea of the trends in terms of internet use over time, even more so as the capital Bishkek makes up a large share of these numbers.

⁵¹ Navarro 2018: 1.

⁵² Interview with the then head of Headliners Chyngyz (also known by his stage-name CeeTee) in Bishkek, 10 June 2020.

⁵³ Interview with Jaya in Bishkek, 19 March 2020.

⁵⁴ In March 2021, Zhara Music was acquired by the American major label Warner Music and renamed Atlantic Records Russia (Warner Music Group 24.03.2021). As the labels leadership and artists remained in place, Jaya became the first hip-hop musician from Kyrgyzstan to be signed on such a major label.

giving a rare insight into artistic income, Jaya Miyazaki was the first musical group in the country to make profit from streaming – thanks notably to the group’s two songs, “Manit” (It beckons) and “Iskra” (Spark). It is said to have earned about US \$68,000 from an investment of \$5,000 in one and a half years, with an audience “across the whole Russian-speaking world”.⁵⁵ The accuracy of these numbers is impossible to verify, but given the popularity of the two songs and their streaming numbers in the millions or tens of millions, the order of magnitude seems plausible.⁵⁶ This represents a multiple of the average income in Bishkek for a similar amount of time (a bit more than \$4,500 for 18 months),⁵⁷ even though one needs to take into account that there are at least two people involved in the project, and it is unclear what proportion of the costs involved was covered by the investment mentioned.

In any case, Jaya Miyazaki’s and Headliner’s efforts initially remained an isolated case in Bishkek. The turn from ‘normal internet’ (with predominantly locally hosted websites and forums) to the so-called Web 2.0⁵⁸ happened progressively at the beginning of the 2010s in Kyrgyzstan. The establishment of a 3G network facilitated mobile internet access by the end of 2010,⁵⁹ between 2011 and 2012, the number of active mobile broadband subscriptions in the country skyrocketed from about 260,000 to over a million.⁶⁰ At the same time, internet providers switched from differentiated tariffs for internal and external traffic to affordable flat rate tariffs.⁶¹

The use of locally hosted platforms such as Namba.kg or the (now defunct) video-sharing platform blive.kg for musical distribution was progressively outshone by the increased use of YouTube and social media such as the Russian platform VKontakte (VK). Initially a haven for music sharing transgressing copyright regimes, VK progressively established a legal streaming service between 2014 and 2017.⁶² The YouTube live-performance format Street Voices 21/91 (2015–2016),⁶³ in Bishkek, was an early hip-hop project built on such platforms, inspired by the analogous Myasorubka (meat grinder, 2011–2016) in St Petersburg. Such new musical distribution and promotion practices were also fostered by physical mobility. As

the musical entrepreneur Bakai Kolchaev recalls, he observed the arrival of VK and its use as a tool for musical promotion when he was living in St Petersburg in the late 2000s. When he returned to Bishkek some years later and got in touch with local hip-hop makers, he volunteered to take charge of the social media marketing of some prominent groups (notably Troeraznykh, Belyi’s former group). Starting with that experience, Bakai became interested in digital distribution more generally: “I was using different [distribution] services: Tunecore, CD Baby, and so on. We uploaded some songs. Tried something. And sometimes we hit our limit (*obzhigalis*). Sometimes we were fooled.”⁶⁴ Alongside such experiments, he founded Infinity Music in 2015, which would become the first digital music distribution service in Bishkek. After having taken on the back catalogues of its early collaborators and negotiated a direct cooperation with major labels,⁶⁵ as well as leading streaming platforms (Spotify, YouTube, Yandex Music, etc.) to minimise the cost for intermediaries, Infinity Music began to actively promote the use of digital distribution in 2019. From that point, more and more hip-hop music-makers (and other musicians) in Bishkek began to resort to digital distribution and make use of its promotion opportunities.⁶⁶ Begish’s album Kara Toru (Kyrgyz for dark brown),⁶⁷ released in February 2020, was the first Kyrgyz language rap album to figure in ‘vitrines’ (curated playlists or promoted tracks) on streaming and digital retail platforms such as iTunes, as Bakai pointed out in a podcast interview.⁶⁸ Along with other available services (some musicians work with Russian labels or with aggregators), Infinity Music has given a significant impetus to the turn towards digital music distribution in Bishkek, with information about it circulating by word of mouth.

This ‘streaming turn’ in the Kyrgyzstani music economy was accompanied by other initiatives that structured music production. One of them is Curltai, mentioned earlier. In Autumn 2019, the video production firm 1.1 Studio in Bishkek announced the launch of its music label, 1.1 Music, in association with the rappers and *bitmeyker* Yamadzhi, Feidzhi, and Enot MC (later with the stage name Allega), the latter also working as label director. In his words, the label aims to redistribute creative work, taking non-music related tasks off the artists’ shoulders. In contrast with previous hip-hop *leybly*, musicians can use the services of a team that specialises in PR, communication, and booking.⁶⁹ With more than a million subscribers, the

55 The tweet from 23 May was later deleted but can be accessed via the internet archive: see <http://web.archive.org/web/20210524200557/https://twitter.com/jayamiyazaki/status/1396630530616172546>.

56 For comparison, see the streaming income by the cellist Zoë Keating, quoted in Hesmondhalgh 2020, 6.

57 Based on numbers from the national statistics committee: <http://www.stat.kg/en/opendata/category/112/>.

58 Prior 2015: 494–95.

59 Melvin and Umaraliev 2011: 3.

60 ITU statistics: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

61 Melvin and Umaraliev 2011: 3–5.

62 Biasioli 2021: 53; Åker 2018.

63 <https://www.youtube.com/c/StreetVoices2191>.

64 Interview in Bishkek, 27 February 2020.

65 Major labels are leading labels with an embedded music distribution service. As an example, Infinity Music figures among the partners of the French Believe Music in the Russian-language market. See <https://www.believemusic.com/ru/our-clients-ru/>.

66 For the year 2020, Infinity Music announced the release of over 1,800 singles and over 100 albums and collections, though this also includes the firm’s clients outside Kyrgyzstan. See the Instagram post “Yearly results 2020”: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CjdNNXfLkn6/>.

67 Copenrath 07.02.2020.

68 Eshimbekow 25.02.2020.

69 Interview with Enot MC in Bishkek, 22–23 January 2020.

1.1 Studio also has one of the leading YouTube channels in the country.⁷⁰

Such new infrastructures in the local musical economy are directly connected to and make ample use of the options offered by streaming and Web 2.0. They are participating in a wider trend of restructuring of the musical market, whereby streaming goes alongside externalities that help to stabilise musical careers and measure progress, thereby significantly fostering the motivation and the dreams of music-makers themselves.

Digital distribution as an organiser of the music economy

In his late 30s, Rasheed is one of the oldest active rappers in Bishkek.⁷¹ Having been very popular during the first wave of hip-hop in the early 2000s, with the group AP Clan, he continued his musical activity even after studying, alongside his main job in accountancy. In an interview, he evokes the perspectives he associates with the digital turn: “Now you don’t know what to listen to, [...] it’s all so vast: Instagram, Facebook, advertisement everywhere. Now anyone can become famous, you just have to *vystrelit*.” As he elaborates further, in his case such success would allow him to completely focus on music instead of relying on another job: “It’s always possible, you just have to work hard (*pakhat*). If we are successful (*esli strel’nut*), we need to remain on that wave, keep working. Drop everything and do only music. At least it will be our labour of love (*lyubimoe delo*).”⁷²

In the jargon of cultural production, the Russian verb *vystrelit* (along with grammatical variations of it, such as *strel’yat* and *strel’nut*) describes the exceptional success of a given work of art and/or artist. The verb literally means “to shoot out”, but in a musical context it would be better translated as “hitting the masses” or “landing a hit” (I also encountered the russified noun *khit* during the fieldwork). Just like the English ‘hit’, *vystrelit* metaphorically suggests that success is something that occurs abruptly, that it’s mostly a matter of *hit-and-miss*. The prefix *vy* (‘out’) represents an outwards motion towards the audience, but also outside the musician’s immediate surroundings, his/her neighbourhood, city, and country. As Rasheed’s remarks suggest, the notion can also be a signifier of the hopes of contemporary musical workers in Bishkek and Kyrgyzstan, as elsewhere, who are confronting the “bewildering world” of “music in digital culture”.⁷³ “You just have to shoot out...” points at the wish of being heard by a wide audience, as well as the economic prospects associated with such a success, which would facilitate a stronger focus on artistic work.

There is some material underpinning to such prospects, as MSPs introduce effective copyright mechanisms into the music economy of Kyrgyzstan. This is the precondition for the direct monetisation of music, and materialises music-makers’ ownership of the product of their work.

Copyright is a structuring part of any music economy, providing for the legal basis to channel some of the profit generated from music distribution towards the right-holders. Wikström even argues for the use of the term “Copyright industries” to describe such sectors.⁷⁴ Since there is no society for collective rights management in Kyrgyzstan and – as several musicians pointed out – the national agency for intellectual property, Kyrgyzpatent, works in an unsatisfactory manner,⁷⁵ musicians had hardly any ability to assert their copyright before digital distribution services did this for them with their partly automated copyright protection. Based on the distribution of copyrighted material, streaming may grant music workers in Kyrgyzstan an additional, and regular, source of income. Its economic effect should not be overstated, even though even for smaller artists it can already help to cover some production costs. For more successful musicians (notably Yamadzhi, Feidzhi, and Ulukmanapo, whose songs are streamed millions of times every month, mostly in Russia), it can mean a significant income, even more so because once a song is released, its further reproduction does not require additional work. As Stahl observes in his work on recording artists in the United States, “those popular music-makers who can claim the mantle of authorship” may effectively enter “the class of rentiers, those who make money from property and investment”.⁷⁶ This reduces the otherwise high level of uncertainty and risk that is inherent to any creative work, especially when there are hardly any social guarantees for artistic workers.

Previously, selling physical formats was never a noteworthy source of income for musicians: the distribution of cassettes and CDs was widely appropriated by piracy networks, as media reports about a series of unauthorised hip-hop samplers in the 2000s indicate,⁷⁷ and the sale of albums by hip-hop groups themselves mostly involved a small number of copies for marketing purposes. Further distribution via download from local online platforms did not generate any direct material gain, and neither did radio or TV play, as the rapper Begish points out:

Now everything has changed. For example, all the digital platforms started to do monetisation. And when you send [songs] to [the private station] Tumar radio they ... that’s not right. For example, I have my audience, I have my songs that ... Tumar doesn’t help me to record them. They don’t invent them, they don’t offer any technical help, but I send them a track, they play it, register it as their own and they receive the monetisation from my track. Although they should pay me for just sending them the track. And all TV companies should also do that. I fill their broadcast-time (*efir*), I provide content for them, and at the same time they dictate me their rules.⁷⁸

74 Wikström 2009: 12–45.

75 See Bakai’s remarks in Eshimbekov 25.02.2020.

76 Stahl 2013: 98–99. The notion of musicians as rentiers can be traced back to an observation by Attali 1977: 80.

77 Filatov 2005.

78 Interview in Bishkek, 22 November 2019. While I have found no indication of *payola*, or *pay-to-play* practices (besides an unsolved controversy around Radio 21-ii Vek in around 2005), getting one’s

70 <https://www.youtube.com/c/11TV11STUDIO/featured>.

71 For more information about him, see Coppenrath 25.02.2020.

72 Interview with Rasheed in Bishkek, 22 October 2019.

73 Cook, Ingalls, and Trippett 2019: 1.

This is how the arrival of streaming is often equated by hip-hop musicians with emancipatory monetisation. Whatever the ultimate level of royalty payments, the direct monetising of music by itself fosters a feeling of progression, as it provides musical workers with an indication of the actual consumption of their music. The rapper, studio co-owner, and collaborator with Infinity Music Belyi confirms the motivational effects these changes generate:

You can feel that very many got involved (*ochen' mnogo reb-yat vklyuchilis'*), those who had already lost their enthusiasm (*gasli*), given up (*opustili ruki*). They all got involved again now because music gained some sense (*smysl*). The monetisation of music appeared. And I think this activeness among rappers will trigger a new wave, the number of artists is growing. And the fire in the chest of these artists will burn much brighter because they will justify all their work now.⁷⁹

According to Menger, one important feature of the quality of self-actualisation that is often ascribed to artistic work is the discovery of one's own abilities, which can also justify the economically risky character of such an activity.⁸⁰

This accounts for the importance of indicators of artistic success beyond income. As long-time rapper L'Zeep stated after releasing his latest album *Tak Govoril Z* (Thus spoke Z) on MSPs in September 2019: "I am telling you, we entered the game, so to say, for the first time. And now everything is monetised. I know how many times the album was downloaded, how many times it was listened to. I will know how much I earned."⁸¹

Through the statistics it collects about music consumption, digital distribution offers a seemingly objective measure of the demand for a given piece of work. Although this was partly provided by earlier music distribution methods, audience requests for particular songs on the radio in the 2000s or publicly visible 'download charts' on music-sharing sites such as *Namba.kg*, streaming services provide much more thorough and detailed information, depending "on the aggregation of large data sets [about users] as a fundamental principle."⁸² On YouTube, for example, "[t]he importance of growth presents itself through the centrality of statistics composed [...] on the website. Numbers are presented under every video in the interface: the number of times it has been viewed, liked, shared and subscribed to is displayed numerically."⁸³

songs played on local radio and TV would sometimes require some form of non-monetary favour, such as free performances at concerts organised by a radio station.

79 Interview in Bishkek, 23 November 2019. About this motivational effect, see also Coppenrath 25.02.2020.

80 Menger 2014: 74.

81 Interview in Bishkek, 8 September 2019.

82 Johansson and Werner 2018: 13 See Baym, Bergmann, Bhargava, Diaz, Gillespie, Hesmondhalgh, Maris, and Persaud 2021: 3423–3428.

83 Werner 2018: 135. See also van Es's analysis of "the view" as a "central structuring agent on YouTube" (2020: 224).

As Baym et al. point out, such streaming metrics are actively used and interpreted by music workers to deal with the uncertainty inherent in their activity.⁸⁴ For promoters, concert organisers, or music labels they hint at the demand for a given artist or song, while for musicians themselves they provide a sense of the progression of their musical career over time and a basis for comparisons with their peers. In a similar vein, and on a more general level, Menger argues that this form of competition in artistic work "structures uncertainty in interactions and in interdependencies with others (such as peers, personnel in a given professional world, audiences)", and thus forms part of the "regimes for managing uncertainty".⁸⁵

By making the audience, and thus the demand, more tangible via granular data (notably including demographic and geographic indications), the metrics provided by MSPs help musical workers to inscribe their activity into time, breaking with the feeling of a vicious circle and a lack of perceived progression. I would argue that this is what Belyi understands by the "sense" that music-making has gained or what L'Zeep means when he talks about having "entered the game". Furthermore, measuring musical consumption also means that non-monetary rewards are possible, a notable example being gold and platinum records for singles based on their streaming performance that Infinity Music introduced in 2019, the first scheme of its kind in Kyrgyzstan. As research in other contexts suggests, easy access to digital distribution, along with motivational structures, tends to increase the overall volume of released music – and leads more people to pursue their desire to become a recording artist.⁸⁶ This is corroborated by Belyi's observation that "the number of artists is growing" as well as the prolific activity of a platform such as *Curltai*.

A noticeable result of this restructuring of the music economy via streaming, as well as platforms such as *Curltai*, has been the encouragement of newcomers, as well as comebacks by rap musicians who had interrupted their musical career. L'Zeep's album mentioned earlier was the first in five years. The group *Kiggaz*, among the rap stars of the 2000s, re-released their 2006 album *Bitva* (Fight) on streaming platforms in May 2021 and announced that they were working on a new album.⁸⁷ Nurekesha had been very active in the early 2010s and restarted her musical activities in early 2021 with the new track "Dimicandum", which she also performed on *Curltai*.⁸⁸

At the same time, the new opportunities linked to music streaming also bring along new kinds of workload, as a musician and his or her songs risk being lost in the apparently endless musical offer. As Schoop observed in her inquiry into independent music production in the Philippines, "[p]romotion is gaining importance as new means of music production and online distribution increase mu-

84 Baym, Bergmann, Bhargava, Diaz, Gillespie, Hesmondhalgh, Maris, and Persaud 2021: 3421.

85 Menger 2014: 177–178.

86 Nordgård 2018: 38.

87 Ibragimova 08.12.2020.

88 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSxaZkMCoPE>.

sic's availability".⁸⁹ To effectively pursue a musical career in the time of Web 2.0, musicians need to retain a certain level of visibility and popularity for their songs to continue being streamed. This involves a considerable amount of work on public image and social media presence. However, high visibility on social media can allow artists in turn to resort to other sources of revenue, notably sponsoring and advertising contracts: in late May 2020, for example, Ulukmanapo announced a sponsoring deal with the Kyrgyzstani importer of the clothing brand Lacoste, and Yamadzhi and Feidzhi took part in an advertising campaign for the mobile operator Megacom in December 2020.

Eventually, success stories about certain hip-hop artists gaining a significant audience via streaming and social media stir the hopes of fellow musicians, attracting those who aspire to such success. The first successful Bishkek hip-hop artist in this streaming age – putting Jaya Miyazaki, mentioned above, on one side – was likely Ulukmanapo, with his first single “Ne segodnya/Semdesyat Pyatii” (Not today/75th),⁹⁰ which was certified gold by Infinity Music in December 2019. Further, the rap track “Minimum” by the duo Yamadzhi & Feidzhi (certified platinum in late 2020) became a hit via the viral spreading of a recording of their performance in the Russian talent show *Rep Zavod* (Rap factory – the two won the show in January 2020),⁹¹ via the social media platform TikTok in September 2020. As Yamadzhi states, “The video from Rap Zavod became popular, but it organically started to gain popularity (*prinimat' oboroty*) on TikTok. It really blew up (*vzorval*).”⁹²

Another example of such seemingly sudden success is the young rapper Bakr's song ‘Oylorumda’ (Kyrgyz: In my thoughts) in early 2021. As the rapper explains in an interview on the YouTube Channel “News KG”, he had been involved in music at that point for about two years and was consciously preparing a musical career: “I thought ... if I want to concretely get into that game (*zaletet' v etu igru*), into hip-hop, rap, then I need my own style, I need a character. A pseudonym, everything ... image, I don't know ... So I took a break (*stopanulsya*), I worked on myself for about a year.”⁹³ His success came via social media, with a short video of him rapping part of the song in an intoxicated state (as he confirms during the interview), surrounded by friends.⁹⁴ This video ended up becoming a viral hit via TikTok, as he recounts:

Bakr: There, it turns out, my buddy (*kent*) filmed everything on video when we rapped. [...] Then he uploaded it to TikTok, and after a week or so ... I was walking around with my girlfriend, went home and looked at TikTok, like “what the heck” (*chyo za fignya!*)! [...] I was very afraid to get home, like family members will see that (*tuugandar köröt*). I called the guy who uploaded it and he doesn't pick up, and it's already 3am, I was like damnit (*yo-moyo*) ... I could not sleep until the morning. Then I fell asleep around 7am. At lunchtime they call me already, some... OMKS [“One Million Kyrgyz Stories”, a popular social media channel in Kyrgyzstan], I don't know, like “you have so many views there”. There ... and under the video on OMKS there were very many comments, like damn ... And that same OMKS-video made it to other groups, Kazakhstan (KZ), Russia (*Rasha*) ... and there were fewer negative reactions. I understood that here in Kyrgyzstan our mentality is completely different.

Aygerim Ibragimova: But you don't regret that?

Bakr: I was striving to that ... why regret?⁹⁵

Six months after its release, a live version of the song was the second most watched video on Curltai's YouTube channel with a bit under 3 million views.⁹⁶ As such examples of social media-induced hits gain wide visibility, they may also increase the risk tolerance of fellow artists, as “risk-taking [in artistic labour] is encouraged by the hope of high gains”.⁹⁷ This may in turn have a positive effect on innovation. As Bakr suggests, the video that took off involved a range of negative comments from the Kyrgyzstani audience and the risk of being scorned by his relatives, which was more than compensated for by its overall success. As I write elsewhere, the reconfiguration of the musical economy in 2020 was one of the factors that encouraged a wave of ‘protest rap’ in Bishkek.⁹⁸

‘Shooting out...’ where? Translocal prospects and their limits

But these new opportunities and their positive effects on Kyrgyzstan's music economy are only one side of the story. Streaming is certainly no panacea for systemic problems of inequality within music markets.⁹⁹ This is not just an issue for popular music. As Menger points out, structural inequality in revenues is particularly marked in artistic professions where “the distribution of income [...] generally follows a Pareto-curve. [...] Once expenses for exercising their professions are deducted, there are more individuals making zero or even negative income in the arts than in any other higher occupation.”¹⁰⁰

In search of artistic success in a particularly small and poorly institutionalised musical market such as Kyr-

⁸⁹ Schoop 2019: 148.

⁹⁰ The corresponding music video, which has 7.5 million views at the time of writing, is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jj31IRGgn-Hs>.

⁹¹ A recording of the performance, with over 10 million views at the time of writing, is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yAaDedw-t3U>.

⁹² Personal communication with Yamadzhi via Telegram, 7 September 2020. Note the metaphor of ‘blowing up’, which also suggests a very sudden and intensive action.

⁹³ Ibragimova 06.02.2021.

⁹⁴ One upload of the video in question is on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kqymjDICVw>.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4v90IGR5E4g>.

⁹⁷ Menger 2014: 100.

⁹⁸ Copenrath forthcoming.

⁹⁹ House of Commons – Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee 9.7.2021, 16–25; Hesmondhalgh 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Menger 2014: 159.

gyzstan, some hip-hop musicians take advantage of the opportunities of digital distribution to project their career abroad; in other words, to 'shoot out'. This involves taking foreign audiences into account during music production. For example, Bakr mentions the positive feedback he obtained from Kazakhstan and Russia, showing how digital music distribution is also directed at and reaches audiences outside Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, digital music production favours collaborations across space: translocality is an essential aspect of music production. As this section shows, several factors draw music workers in Bishkek to take a translocal orientation in the organisation of their artistic career and when considering their imagined audiences. These are either connected to geographical inequalities persisting in the 'digital age' or to the imperatives of creating distinction and building a reputation that will sustain a musical career.

Despite the increased access to information and all the new opportunities that come with the digital turn, global inequalities based on geographic location continue to play a decisive role in the career opportunities for music workers in Kyrgyzstan. First, not all digital services are equally available and used in all territories. This holds true for MSPs as well. While Spotify only made its entry into Kyrgyzstan in February 2021,¹⁰¹ the Berlin-based music streaming service SoundCloud was blocked by court order in Kyrgyzstan in 2018 for allegedly containing "extremist" material,¹⁰² leaving music-makers with one tool less for the promotion of their music (and one that is experimenting with a presumably fairer distribution of royalties).¹⁰³ Moreover, the use of 'legal' MSPs remains at a low level, and getting listeners in the country to listen to music legally is a "slow process" according to the head of Infinity Music.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, the domestic music audience, which still makes up for a big share of Kyrgyzstani musicians' listeners, is poorly reflected in their streaming income. Even more importantly, being in Kyrgyzstan considerably affects the chance to make use of international money transfers. While direct money transfers are very expensive, a more practical tool such as PayPal only allows users in the country to send money, not to receive it. This leaves many creative workers (notably bitmeyker) with little ability to profitably sell their work abroad. These restrictions were mentioned several times as a serious impediment,¹⁰⁵ for example by bitmeyker ReenBoy:

ReenBoy: [...] A year ago, I practically prepared everything ... Beats, everything, the logo ... And damn, problems with PayPal again. And there [the worldwide marketplace for

beats] BeatStars is strict, it only works with PayPal. And for me to open a PayPal, that means so much hassle (ponty)!

Florian: You need to get to another country, open an account there... [...]

ReenBoy: It's only not working here, and damn, in all kinds of "-stans" maybe neither. That's a shame (obidno), because the country is not developed, you understand ... It's stupid, because it's just a detail, but it's fucking impeding people. If PayPal was working here, I'm sure that not only musicians ... other people as well could easily earn money.¹⁰⁶

As ReenBoy suggests, such limitations have a substantive impact on the possibility for him to make an income from his music, as they make it more difficult to sell beats (presumably at a better price) to other musicians abroad. Despite their relative openness and transgression of state borders, digital infrastructures are inscribed in patterns of global inequalities, with an underdeveloped banking sphere or security concerns leading globally acting firms to restrict their services, directly affecting cultural workers.

Ultimately, the functioning of MSPs themselves tends to reproduce patterns of global inequalities in the music markets and thus incentivise a search for audiences and affiliations abroad. Based on a study of metal bands from Hungary, Tofalvy and Koltai conclude that "the way bands are represented in the recommendation system [of Spotify] —the way they are connected to other bands—significantly overlaps with their offline connections in the music industry".¹⁰⁷

The value of streams themselves is also linked to geographic location. In a 2018 post on the Telegram channel "Zakulis'e. Blog odnogo prodyusera" (Backstage. Blog of a producer), recommended to me by the head of Infinity Music, the Russian rapper and musical entrepreneur Bahh Tee answers the "often-asked" question "How much does YouTube pay for a Million views?": "For a clear answer, nothing at all. YouTube doesn't pay for views, but an advertiser; and he pays not for views, but for ads." Addressing his Russian-speaking audience, he further specifies:

It is all simple: if an adult, solvent audience watches your content, then many ads will appear in your video, and the video will earn more. [...] It is also very important from what territory people watch your videos. For example, if your main public lives in Uzbekistan, where there is very little and cheap advertising, the monetisation will be low. If it comes from the USA, then, on the contrary, high.¹⁰⁸

This does not apply exactly in these terms to other MSPs. The share of the revenue generated by streaming that ends up in the pocket of music workers also very much depends on the distribution option they choose and on whether they are author and/or performer of the text and/or the music. As the House of Commons report es-

¹⁰¹ Spotify 22.02.2021.

¹⁰² Arykbaev 11.05.2018.

¹⁰³ SoundCloud 02.03.2021.

¹⁰⁴ Copenrath 25.02.2021.

¹⁰⁵ Such concerns can also be followed in the thread "PayPal. Obchshaya tema" (PayPal. General topic), which has been ongoing on the popular online forum platform Diesel.elcat.kg since 2012. See <https://diesel.elcat.kg/index.php?s=0b99d55a28b985f104f6ad00c-911f45a&showtopic=22366260&page=1>.

¹⁰⁶ Interview in Bishkek, 9 February 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Tofalvy and Koltai 2021: 20.

¹⁰⁸ "Zakulis'e. Blog odnogo Prodyusera", 6 August 2018: <https://t.me/zharasmusik/7>. Bah Tee is the head of Zhara Music/Atlantic Records Russia.

timates, the so-called royalty pot makes up 65–70 per cent of streaming revenues, the remainder being kept by the MSP. This money is shared between rights holders and their service providers (usually music labels or distribution companies), most often based on a pro-rata calculation that tends to favour the most popular musicians,¹⁰⁹ and which discriminates between streams based on whether listeners have a premium account and also according to their geographic location.¹¹⁰ For example, Infinity Music takes a given share of the sum it receives from a given song for its distribution and promotion services, which include the licensing of music, its distribution to MSPs, and some promotion via ‘vitrines’ and social media.

For hip-hop music workers in Kyrgyzstan, the main target for ‘shooting out’ is what is often referred to as SNG, the Russian abbreviation of the Community of Independent States, taken as equivalent to the Russian-speaking world. In a similar vein, Friess notes how such an engagement with Russian and Russophone audiences and cultural infrastructures is an important aspect of the artistic work of Kazakhstani writers.¹¹¹ In the case of music, such a geographic horizon is relevant because Russia in particular is a very dynamic market for MSPs and has the biggest share of streaming users among music consumers worldwide (87 per cent).¹¹² Besides the former Soviet space, the Russian language community also includes places with a significant Russian-speaking population, such as parts of Germany and the United States. Hip-hop in the Kyrgyz language tends to be more confined to a domestic audience, even though it may aim to reach Kyrgyz speakers abroad, particularly in Russia.

According to hip-hop music workers in Bishkek, this orientation towards SNG is linked to common aesthetic taste preferences and common cultural references, as well as Russian being the lingua franca. As the rapper Belyi objects when asked whether he has ambitions beyond the SNG, “Who needs our music in Europe? Our task is to spread our music among those who can understand it, and that’s mostly the SNG.”¹¹³ According to the rapper and director of 1.1 Music, Enot MC, the difference between SNG music and European music lies “in the language barrier at first. Second, the mentalities are very different, incredibly (*bezumno*) different. That has an impact on everything. That impacts on any creative unit in the SNG.”¹¹⁴ This mention of mentality reminds us of Ingrid Tolstad’s observation that musicians from Russia mobilised stylised notions of ‘Western’ and ‘Russian’ “as a way of distinguishing between different entangle-

ments of practices, collaborative formations, aesthetic preferences and distributions of power in music-making”.¹¹⁵ In an interview with the online youth platform Limon.kg, Enot MC names an example of the effects such an imagined audience may have on musical production: “For example, in [the track] ‘Antarktida’ I tried to make a lyrical streaming track for listening. I knew that the Russian (*rossiiskaya*) audience has a given ‘minor’ mood.” He adds that such considerations may be harmful for the “artistic” quality of the result,¹¹⁶ mobilising an often-cited dichotomy between art and commerce that, however, is pictured more accurately in terms of a co-construction and differences in degree rather than in nature.¹¹⁷ While creative work represents a form of “communication of experience”,¹¹⁸ artists also “work with an eye to what the system characteristic of their world can handle”.¹¹⁹

This negotiation (and tension) between cultural logics of “commercialism” and “avant-gardism”, as Regev puts it,¹²⁰ did not appear with streaming, though. For example, representatives of Kiggaz, one of the most popular rap groups of the 2000s, would refer to different audiences differentiated as market “segments”,¹²¹ while at the same time certain hip-hop musicians self-labelled as *underground* (the Russian spelling of ‘underground’) claimed to be free of such considerations and complained about the lack of originality of ‘commercial’ rappers.¹²² What has changed is the scale (in terms of imagined audience) in which music workers inscribe themselves – from predominantly domestic to wider, Russophone, targeted audiences. Ulukmanapo, for example, specialises in ‘*rayonskii*’ (from “*rayon*”, here roughly the equivalent of “hood”) rap, a form of “reality rap”,¹²³ which includes markers that audiences across the SNG can identify with. On the other hand, locality can also be mobilised as an artistic resource to differentiate oneself from other SNG hip-hop music-makers – even more so as this is a typical hip-hop *topos*. Ulukmanapo’s first solo album *Kod dostupa 996* (Access code 996) refers to the country code for Kyrgyzstan. On a subtler note, the hip-hop duo *Vtoroy Ka* define “creating a Bishkek-sound” as one of their artistic goals, while they also take inspiration from artists in other places and collaborate with a label and other rappers in Moscow and St Petersburg.¹²⁴

¹¹⁵ Tolstad 2021: 72.

¹¹⁶ Limon.kg 25.02.2020.

¹¹⁷ Negus 1995.

¹¹⁸ Negus and Pickering 2002: 183–85.

¹¹⁹ Becker 1982: 94.

¹²⁰ Regev 2002: 256–57.

¹²¹ Interview in Bishkek, 14 September 2019.

¹²² See, for example, the full version of an interview given to the newspaper *Limon* (Mel’nikov 2005) on the website of the rapper Black-D. URL: http://black-d.narod.ru/read_black_limm_2.htm.

¹²³ Krims 2001: 70–80.

¹²⁴ Coppenrath 26.07.2020.

¹⁰⁹ This is quite a simplified account of the remuneration system of MSPs. For more details see House of Commons - Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee 09.07.2021, 16–20.

¹¹⁰ Sinnreich 2016: 161; Hesmondhalgh 2020: 10.

¹¹¹ Friess 2019.

¹¹² PwC Russia 2019: 68.

¹¹³ Interview in Bishkek, 23 November 2019.

¹¹⁴ Interview in Bishkek, 23 February 2020.

Beyond imagined audiences, technological innovations associated with digital music production and Web 2.0 facilitate translocal collaborations,¹²⁵ whether by the exchange of hip-hop beats or the co-production of songs. Such collaborations may also play an important role in the pursuit of a musical career. Addressing the issue of inequality among artistic workers, Menger argues that “even a minimal difference in talent can suffice to generate enormous differences in rewards”.¹²⁶ According to him, the disproportionate gains of successful artists can be traced back to what he calls “assortative matching”: “an artist benefits from associating with professionals reputed to be of equal or superior quality in their respective careers”.¹²⁷ ‘Featurings’, or joint hip-hop tracks, may be seen as a way to “open up the market” and share audiences with other musicians,¹²⁸ and also as a form of associative matching that allows an increase in reputation thanks to collaboration with others. This is how Ulukmanapo’s career progression can be measured through his featurings with Kazakhstani artists, some of whom are signed on prominent Russian labels.¹²⁹

Such translocal connections thus also provide differentiation from other hip-hop musicians and are part of the competition that is intrinsically linked to creative work.¹³⁰ In addition, participation in competitions or talent shows abroad tends to be valued more and widely covered in the media, as shown, for example, by Enot MC’s participation in the Russian talent show *Molodaya krov’* (Young blood) in 2015–2016 and his subsequent brief cooperation with the Russian label Black Star. More recently, Yamadzhi & Feidzhi’s victory in *Rep Zavod* was also widely covered in Kyrgyzstani media. In fact, headlines such as “A musician from Kyrgyzstan produced a song for Basta’s label Gazgolder”,¹³¹ where Jaya, the musician in question, is not even named, illustrate the impression that several musicians expressed in interviews that one needs to have success abroad to receive public acknowledgement at home. Similar observations have been made about the music scene in the Philippines – a sign of what Schoop suggests is a “colonial mentality”.¹³²

This is why participation in translocal networks is considered to be a career achievement and a boost for music

workers’ artistic reputation, constituting “a form of capital that can be managed in various ways to protect him [the artist] from the variability of instantaneous evaluations and to more rapidly increase the benefits derived from his fame”.¹³³ But not all foreign contexts are equally considered and accessible. Musical networks are conditioned, among other factors, by travel costs and administrative barriers (notably visa regimes). This is why, when it comes to building a musical network and a career abroad, Europe and the United States tend to be perceived as out of reach, while neighbouring Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were never mentioned by my interlocutors as career relevant. In the end, translocal networks mostly span towards Kazakhstan and Russia. There is, of course, mobility to other places, but then artistic activity is usually not the main motive. For example, the hip-hop music-maker Yamadzhi established a working relation with a DJ in Germany during his stay there in 2018, but the trip was framed as a work and travel programme. Artistic mobility to Russia, though, has structural differences to other forms of migration there, as was also noted in the example of Tajikistani rappers.¹³⁴

During the quarter finals of the filmed battle rap competition “Street Cred BPM” (2019–2020), Belyi delivered a public answer to criticism the project received in YouTube commentaries: “All are with us! Kazakhstan is with us, Samara is with us, Moscow, St Petersburg, Vladivostok, and of course my native Bishkek.”¹³⁵ The list of places is not haphazard and refers to genuine artistic connections. In these, Kazakhstan holds a prominent place – and Belyi’s statement is underlined by the presence of Tanir and Tyomcha, two prominent rappers from Almaty, in the jury of that day’s event.

As Almaty is only about 230 km north-east of Bishkek and easily reachable by shared car or minibus, it holds a particular place in Bishkek’s hip-hop networks. Through “complex networks and relationships, through which [...] music participants actively create and produce organisational and entrepreneurial spaces in their own image”, one could qualify that relation as what Mbaye calls “musical borderlands”.¹³⁶ This is why, for example, several musicians from Kazakhstan have come to perform on *Curltai*, which also maintains relations with the Almaty-based platform *özen*. The relationship is an asymmetrical one, though: Kazakhstan has long been associated with wider opportunities and a more developed musical economy, to the extent that cultural workers from Kazakhstan have become very prominent in the wider Russian-speaking media-sphere. While music workers from Bishkek are seeking opportunities in Kazakhstan, the reverse is hardly true.

¹²⁵ Dietrich 2016: 18.

¹²⁶ Menger 2014: 200.

¹²⁷ Menger 2014: 225.

¹²⁸ Künzler and Perrot 2016: 92–93.

¹²⁹ Starting with the joint EP *Zakrytii Krug* (Closed circle) with the Germany-based Kazakhstani rapper DASHXX in October 2020, he released a featuring with the Kazakhstani rapper Lucaveros on the prominent Russian rap label Gazgolder in March 2021. In July 2021, his featuring with the Kazakhstani group Captown was shown live on the YouTube channel of the Russian hip-hop magazine Toaster.

¹³⁰ Menger 2014: 179.

¹³¹ Limon.kg’s report on 9 December 2020 about a song released in Russia produced by Jaya and including the Kyrgyzstani rapper 6Ars. See <https://limon.kg/news:73596>.

¹³² Schoop 2019: 33.

¹³³ Menger 2014: 228.

¹³⁴ Malakhov, Olimova, and Simon 2018.

¹³⁵ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Tj9FlgKn-U>.

¹³⁶ Mbaye 2015: 21.

Conclusion

If in the age of streaming “everyone can become famous, you just have to shoot out”, the chances for a musician to realise such a success remain thin, above all in a peripheral music economy. As Schoop concluded her work about the role of digital technology for independent musicians in the Philippines: “socio-economic as well as infrastructural circumstances affect and shape the use of digital technologies, and [...] taking local specificities into account can add to a more detailed and non-Eurocentric perspective on the changing music industries”.¹³⁷ This paper has endeavoured to highlight the perspective of hip-hop music workers in Bishkek.

Intervening in a largely unstructured and unregulated music economy, in which existing intellectual property laws are not enforced, one of the major externalities of streaming services is the introduction of a functioning copyright regime. The direct monetisation of music provides the most popular musicians with a form of rent from streaming and all musicians are given a tangible sense of the demand and value of their work. If “taking [artistic] risk is a demand for information”, as Menger argues,¹³⁸ streaming services (and social media), with their ample statistics, are an essential indicator that music-makers can use to measure the success of their work. This has important psychological consequences for their motivation and risk tolerance, and for successful streaming artists it reduces their dependency on the domestic music market. Along with the construction of local intermediary organisations around the opportunities of digital distribution, streaming thus fosters a wider restructuring of the musical economy. However, these effects need to be nuanced in the light of persistent inequalities in music markets. At a local level, only a few music workers can rely on streaming as a source of income. MSPs may facilitate the appearance of local ‘rap stars’ and a ripple effect for hip-hop music from Bishkek,¹³⁹ but they also increase the income gap within the local music economy as more musicians are attracted by lottery-like prospects of artistic success.¹⁴⁰ For those who cannot rely on a significant audience abroad, traditional distribution channels such as radio, TV, or specialised local portals remain important, so they can gain access to the wedding market, for example.

Ultimately, despite all new opportunities that come with the digital turn, the music economy in Bishkek remains handicapped by its peripheral status among worldwide music markets – an inequality also reproduced by MSPs – and by poor legal and social guarantees for music workers at home. A similar point is made by Jaya, who in a Twitter-thread recently proposed to the Ministry of Culture

¹³⁷ Schoop 2019: 213.

¹³⁸ Menger 2014: 9.

¹³⁹ The hypothesis that one successful artist from Kyrgyzstan would increase the overall attention received by the local music economy was voiced by several of my interlocutors. A seeming precedent is the Kazakhstani rapper Scriptonite, who became one of the most prominent Russian language rappers in 2014–2015 and has been actively supporting the career of fellow Kazakhstani musicians with the foundation of his label Musica 36 in 2019.

¹⁴⁰ Menger 2014: 159.

measures to improve cultural activities for youth in Kyrgyzstan. He underlines that his statement is based on almost “20 years of experience in that sphere” and his numerous work experiences across the CIS, and concludes:

Financial success is a very important part of cultural development, as it is finances that allow us to create favourable conditions for the further development and the appropriation of the musical world, through the integration of our culture into the other different cultures of the world.¹⁴¹

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¹⁴¹ <http://web.archive.org/web/20210524212435/https://twitter.com/jayamiyazaki/status/1396628130626949121>.

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Florian Coppentrath holds a dual M.A in international relations and political science from Sciences Po (Paris) and Freie Universität Berlin. He is currently a PhD student at the Central Asia Seminar of Humboldt University and an associated research fellow at Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient. His dissertation examines the economy of Hip-Hop music in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. He is also co-founder of the online magazine "Novastan.org", that covers news and analyses about Central Asia in German and French. (Florian.Coppentrath@zmo.de)

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