

Howl If You Hate Algorithms

The mostly-true, occasionally tragic, exhaustingly inevitable origin of The Pack Music Co-operative — and where we are now

Every start-up has an origin story, and most of them are lies. The shape is always similar. The visionary founder, the eureka moment, the tidy march toward inevitability. Heroic individualism. Big investors.

The Pack does not have that story. The Pack has a kitchen, two broke musicians, a bottle (or two) of red, and roughly a decade of being told no by people whose job it apparently was to say no.

Here's the story as it actually went…

1. The kitchen

July 2016. Harry D and Melanie B were in a kitchen in Perth with too many candles and not nearly enough money. We were unsigned, broke, and possessed of the particular fury that visits working musicians around the second glass of wine, when you start doing the maths on what a fraction of a cent per stream actually buys you over the course of a year.

We opened a notebook. We wrote, more or less: **what if Spotify, but not evil?**

I want to be honest about how unimpressive this sounded at the time. It wasn't really a thesis. It was a tantrum. But sometimes a tantrum is a perfectly reasonable response to the conditions. The conditions, in this case, were a global music economy that had quietly decided artists were a renewable (and disposable) resource and audiences

were a marketing funnel. Once you see that, you can't unsee it. You can either drink about it or try to build something better.

We chose both. For the record… still drinking… still building…

2. The investors

In September 2016 Mel got into Curtin Ignition on a scholarship from the Office for Women's Interests, which is one of those tiny grants you take with both hands and a huge amount of appreciation while quietly noting that the Office for Men's Interests is, as ever, the entire economy.

Mel did some market research. The findings were not surprising to anyone who has ever bought a ticket to a basement gig. Musicians wanted to be paid. Listeners wanted to hear music made by humans they could plausibly run into at a bar. The cultural appetite for local music was robust. The funding model for it was a smoking shitstorm.

In October we registered as a partnership (business, not life, although we are both). We got an ABN. We did not break up, which felt revolutionary in itself.

Then we did the thing you are supposed to do. We pitched.

We pitched at Plus 8 Bootcamp, where I learned that the start-up sector is roughly 80% young men whose business plans are essentially their feelings about cryptocurrency, and 20% catering. We pitched to angel investors, VCs, and accelerator panels. We pitched in rooms with kombucha on tap, which I want to flag as a specific kind of bullshit hipster betrayal. We pitched to impact investors who used the word *mission* a great deal and then ghosted us.

Their questions were instructive. *Is mental health for musicians really a problem worth solving*? (um, yes, obviously, an should you say that shit out loud?). *Isn't music only worth what someone is willing to pay for it*? (a sentence with the moral compass of a parking ticket). *How do you monetise that*? (a question that, if applied consistently, would have killed public libraries, vaccines, and most of the Renaissance).

What we learned was less about pitching and more about exactly who venture capital is for. It is not for women over forty with a deep aversion to selling out. It is not for projects that propose to make impact rather than making billionaires more… billions.

It is not, in fact, for art. The clue is in the word *capital*. We were, very politely, asking capitalism to fund its own undoing. Capitalism, very politely, declined.

So, we stopped asking capitalism for permission. This is the only useful piece of advice in this entire story... If you err on the TL:DR side… you can stop reading here.

3. The (endless) grants

Surely, we thought, government would understand. After all, they're not here to make money, right? We were offering social impact. Cultural equity. Artist mental health. A digital platform aimed at the precise market failure that every cultural policy paper of the last twenty years has identified.

Dearest Reader, government did *not* understand.

From 2017 to 2024 we applied to the Australia Council, then Creative Australia, like clockwork. Twice a year, every year. We rewrote. We reframed. We hired grant writers who rewrote and reframed. We took feedback. We ate feedback. We sometimes regurgitated feedback verbatim back into the next round, a cooking method I do not recommend. The answer was reliably some version of: *great idea, just not a strategic priority right now.*

DLGSC (now DCITS), same. RISE, same. JTSI, same. The pattern is its own kind of education. Cultural funding in this country tends to reward what is recognisable, which is to say what already exists, which is to say the thing that produced the problem you were trying to solve in the first place. Innovation is much admired in the abstract and viewed with grave suspicion and risk aversion in grant application form.

We considered writing a book about it. Working title: *Thanks But No Thanks: A Love Letter to Cultural Bureaucracy.* We did not write the book. We wrote more applications. More than 30 of the bastards. I don't even want to think about calculating the hours committed, or what they cost me in time with my family, or my mental health.

4. The community

In 2018, having been comprehensively turned down by people with money, we asked people without money instead. Through ING Dreamstarter and StartSomeGood, our first crowdfunder pulled in $20,000. Not from funders. From actual humans. The kind who go to gigs in venues that smell faintly of beer and humbled ambition.

We borrowed another $50,000 from ourselves, because nothing screams *responsible adulting* like betting your mortgage on a fairer music economy. We met some developers. We kissed some frogs. We paid for wireframes we could not use. Eventually we found a local team who, at the time, seemed solid. (More on this. Sit tight.)

I wrote a white paper. Its actual title was sober. Its working title was *Streaming in Crisis: How Unsigned Artists Are Getting Screwed and What We Can Do About It*, which is, on reflection, the better title (sadly, we did not publish it thus). ArtsHub, CACWA, and WAM picked it up. It got me in front of the Parliamentary Hearing Committee on the growth and sustainability of the Australian music industry, where I gave evidence and several committee members briefly looked up from their phones. I count this as a personal win.

5. The MVP that wasn't

The plan was simple. Three months. A minimum viable product. We had a quote. We had a Gantt chart. We had milestones, which is the polite word for hostages.

Three months in: silence. Six months in: we were quietly project-managing our own developers, which is not a service we had agreed to provide. Nine months in: the MVP was a heap of broken dashboards, hopeful comments, and the kind of bug where you click a button and the whole thing has a small existential crisis. Twelve months in: still no product, an increasingly restless community losing faith, and a growing suspicion that we were going to have to do this the hard way.

We didn't quit. People were waiting and hoping. That is, in the end, the only reason any co-operative gets built. Somebody is waiting and hoping and you decide you cannot bear to disappoint them.

6. The structure

Late 2018 we converted from a partnership to a Company Limited by Guarantee, which is more respectable on paper and very nearly as chaotic in practice. I got into another incubator, this one underwritten by Coca-Cola Amatil, which I felt slightly sick about. We took the spot. We needed the spot. Ethical purity is a luxury good and we were very much shopping in the discount aisle.

In 2019 I pitched at PauseFest in Sydney. Excellent exposure. No money. I sat on the WA Music Round Table arguing for streaming transparency loudly enough that I

think one or two participants found me a touch alarming, which I have decided to take as a compliment.

Around this time, I started fantasising about being known as *that streaming Smurf who doesn't take crap from anyone*, a nickname which has stubbornly refused to catch on. I want to formally note that *Fetch* did eventually happen, so I am keeping the faith.

7. The B-side

In 2020, between further rejections from OzCo, DLGSC, and RISE, we got a small yes. AMP Tomorrow Makers came through with just over $13,000. Not enough to change a life. Enough to retire the Canva templates and shoot a real promotional video. We marked the occasion with what our neighbours would later describe as a questionable amount of karaoke.

By 2021 we were, by any reasonable measure, completely cooked. Twenty grant rejections. Six incubators. The cumulative effect of explaining ethical principles to men who keep asking *but how do you exit* is a kind of low-grade brain damage. We had one more wine-fuelled summit. The conclusion was unambiguous. We were no longer going to try to win at capitalism. We were going to do the other thing. Whatever the hell that was.

We held a small private wake for our former harakiri committing start-up selves and went looking for a different model.

8. The co-op

We found platform co-operatives and fell in love with the indecent speed of people who have been dating capitalism for too long. Mutual ownership. Distributed governance. Members who were not users, but co-conspirators. A century of working examples that are, unhelpfully for the prevailing narrative, mostly boring, slow moving, dependable success stories.

It turned out that the moment we stopped pitching ourselves as a start-up and started naming ourselves a co-op, the right people began turning up. Not the people who wanted to flip us (mostly). The people who wanted to *build* us.

The board we have assembled does not look like a vanity board. Working musicians. Tech people who have built platforms without selling anyone's data. Professional

writers who can translate co-op legislation into English. Sustainability people who care whether our digital footprint stomps on the planet. Arts advocates who have been in the trenches longer than some of our developers have been alive. Innovation people who can see a path where the rest of us see scrub.

One (non-muso) board member, on joining, said something that flattened me: they were sick of watching good musicians take day jobs they hated just to survive, because that is a waste of cultural capital. I cried a little. I will not be apologising for that.

I am asked occasionally how we recruited a board this strong with nothing to offer. The answer is twofold. One, the mission is clear enough to do most of the work. Two, the cheese platters are excellent. Both are important. Do not skip the second.

9. The launch (and the implosion)

Mid-2021 we worked with Ammo Media on a press push that landed The Pack on ABC TV, ABC Online, Radio National, and most of the print and online music press with a working pulse. I became an accidental but moderately articulate spokesperson for cooperative streaming, mostly fielding the question *but how will you compete with Spotify?* from journalists for whom the answer *we're trying not to be Spotify, that's the whole point* kept landing as if for the first time.

A waitlist of 300 artists formed. We had not yet launched anything to put them on. In September 2021 we launched the co-op formally at The Backlot Perth, with live music, a panel that ran satisfyingly hot, much applause and some actual tears.

Then our developer collapsed. Not from COVID. From the crypto crash. Their company had quietly pivoted into blockchain online gaming, which sounds like a punchline because it is one, and when the market turned, the investors vanished and so did the developer's ability to keep working on our project (or on anything, really). The platform we had paid for became a heap of code held together by stale optimism and the phrase *maybe it's a caching issue.*

Administrators reassigned the project to Origin Digital, a far better team, but with no money to pay them and a tech base that had to be partly excavated and partly rebuilt, we lost a year. We did not lose the plot. Mostly.

10. The slow climb

From 2022 to 2024 we clawed our way back. I joined the Co-operatives WA board to push for the modernisation of co-op legislation, which is the kind of nerdy sentence I hope my biographers will skip. I joined BCCM to keep an eye on the national picture. We rewrote the white paper. We rebuilt outreach. The Board developed what I can only describe as supernatural patience.

In 2023 I tried one last incubator. Subi Connect, which was creative-industries flavoured and considerably better suited to the work. The questions improved. The fundamental orientation did not. Even creative-sector incubators are largely structured around ROI and exit, and a co-op is, by design, an answer to a different question.

Mike, our Chair, and I did the AIM Co-operative Leadership course. We were, charmingly, underestimated. We taught the lecturer a thing or two about platform co-ops, which are a bit of an unknown quantity in old WA (**W**ait **A**while).

During this stretch we were also approached, as small ethical projects often are eventually, by Mr Potential Partner. He was charming. He wanted to *help*. He wanted to own the technology, the IP, and, by my reading, the dog. We took it to the Board. We declined, politely and firmly. The Pack is not for sale. Not the platform. Not the ethics. Not the firstborn. Not the second. And certainly not bloody Stanley (the dog).

11. The year we just had (2024–25)

Things you keep telling investors will compound do, eventually, compound. 2025 was the year that started to show.

We were accepted into the Createch Program, a creative-industries support program with mentorship, strategy, and a small but emotionally significant $5,000 attached. After a decade of being told we were not a strategic priority, the experience of being someone's strategic priority was disorienting and welcome.

The remarkable Hank Gidney delivered a complete brand identity for The Pack, capturing the irreverent, artist-first attitude we had been gesturing at for nine years and giving it actual visual coordinates. Stanley the mascot now exists in his proper form. New wireframes for the platform were finalised. Hank has since joined the Board.

On the advocacy side: I represented The Pack at Remix Summit and Emergence Creative Festival. We relaunched our Provocations paper and our Cultural Impact paper, both updated to reflect the current state of the streaming economy, which has

not improved on the merits and has, if anything, gotten worse. I applied to the WAM Industry Advisory Committee, which is pending at the time of writing, although by the time you read this it may have resolved into yet another anecdote.

On the funding side, I will not pretend the year was a fairytale. We submitted more government grant applications. The hit rate was, as ever, modest. We ran two crowdfunding campaigns: one through the Cultural Australia Fund (closed, small contribution gratefully received) and one through StartSomeGood, which is open as of this writing. If you have ever quietly muttered *someone should fix the music industry* at your phone, you may now consider yourself formally invited to be one of the someones.

Underneath the headlines, the unglamorous work was the work that mattered. We built an artist ambassador database of more than 1000 Australian musicians. We developed partnership prospectuses, pitch decks, contact lists, and the kind of operational scaffolding that nobody throws a party for and that quietly determines whether a launch lives or dies. We expanded the blog with longer pieces on streaming exploitation, the cooperative model, and what fair pay actually means. We refused, throughout, to lose our voice. The voice is not decorative. The voice is part of the politics.

12. The plan (2026)

So, with all luck and good management, here's what we are doing this year, in plain language.

Funding the last mile

We are running a final push to get the platform built and the doors open. Three pillars:

- **Major partnerships.** Targeting hospitality, beverages, corporate sponsors, and high-net-worth individuals who would like to be on the right side of cultural history at a relatively reasonable price. Do you know any? Please, please, please direct them our way.
- **Crowdfunding.** StartSomeGood is live. Small contributions stack. They have always stacked. Even $20 pushes us further towards our goals. Can you be one of the someones?
- **Grants.** Submitted: Regional Arts WA grant in partnership with Creative Corner and CTV, and the Innovation Booster Grant. In development: a City of

Perth sponsorship with CTV, and a Churchill Fellowship application. More to come… of course…

Living Labs

In 2026 we are taking The Pack out of the office and into actual communities. The Living Labs program will run across Bunbury (with CCI and CTV support), Busselton, Margaret River, the City of Vincent, the City of Subiaco, the City of Fremantle, and the City of Perth. The point is to test the platform under real-world conditions, with real local artists and real local listeners, in regions whose music ecosystems have been sustaining themselves on goodwill and beer for far too long.

Research networks

Under way and developing: WAAPA with ECU Business and Technology, RMIT with the University of Melbourne, and Royal Holloway at the University of London. The intention is to embed the cooperative model in proper academic study so the policy conversation that follows is grounded in something more substantial than vibes. Vibes are useful. They are not enough.

Strategic backing

Creative Tech Village (CTV) is now confirmed as a key supporter, and they've been absolutely amazing providing connections, credibility, and a foothold in the Minister's Creative Industries Taskforce. The Kamunity partnership is also epic, with beautiful, mutually beneficial opportunities afoot.

Platform

The intent is to finalise the platform MVP… finally… by mid-2026. After ten years, that sentence still feels slightly fictional to type. Frankly, we're pretty exhausted. But we know what we are building. We know who is building it. We know who it is for. We know it's still important.

Community and ambassadors

Our musician ambassador program is rolling out: photos, bios, and short video statements from artists who can speak to what fair pay would mean for their actual

lives. We are continuing to expand the artist database, with a particular push for jazz and classical contacts, both of which have been consistently underrepresented in streaming economics for reasons that range from arithmetic to snobbery. If you feel like you could be one such ambassador – please get in touch.

The mic drop moment (although we're actual musos, we would NEVER drop a mic – do you know how much a decent one costs???)

We are not Spotify. We are not Apple Music. We are not for sale, and we are not, despite repeated invitation, going to be scaled up, watered down, or politely euthanised by acquisition.

What we are building is a music streaming platform owned by the people who make the music and the people who listen to it. That sentence has taken ten years and roughly thirty rejections to say with a straight face, and we are saying it now.

If you are tired of being a user. If you are done with $0.0004 per stream. If you would like local music to come up out of the algorithmic sludge and stand on its own legs. Then this is your Pack.

Stanley is saving you a seat.

pack music/