

Counter-narratives: An Oral History Project

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Counter-narratives: An Oral History Project¹

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ABSTRACT

The Counter Narratives Oral History Project explores COVID-19 pandemic-era blockchain technology adoption among the music industry's population of women producers and engineers. Public safety measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, including lockdowns and quarantine mandates, forced recording studios to close their doors. For women who reportedly represent just 2.6% of the population of producers and engineers in the music industry, this shift proved significantly challenging. Published in March of 2022, the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative Study revealed that 10% of women music industry professionals surveyed could not find work during the pandemic. More than 90% of respondents declared the music industry their primary occupation, and exactly 90% stated that they held secondary music-related jobs to earn sufficient income before COVID-19 shuttered the music industry.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19; blockchain, NFTs, women in music, cryptocurrency, pay equity; work-life balance; oral history; virtual studio technology

INTRODUCTION

During the pandemic, non-fungible tokens (NFTs) became popular sources of primary income for many out-of-work music acts. An NFT is a type of digital intellectual property, commonly visual art or music, that exists in a virtual marketplace where it can be exchanged for cryptocurrency and fiat currency such as USD. Blockchain, the technological framework of Bitcoin, is the foundation of NFT technology. Fans collect, hold, and resell

¹With support from the Center for Women, Gender and Global Leadership and Spotify, this oral history project employed four Howard University students during the summer: Troi Prophet (School of Business), Makailah Gause, Alyssa Davis, and Victoria Graham (School of Communications). These students assisted, and are continuing to work, in post-production for the podcast which will be the final expression of this research.

the work of their favorite creators. The creator of an NFT receives compensation for the initial sale of their work in addition to royalties from each subsequent sale. The creator also benefits from having metadata, including vital crediting information, permanently etched onto the blockchain, an immutable, distributed digital ledger, or a record of account.

The Annenberg study supports with data the lack of representation, work-life balance, and pay equity experienced by women in the music industry. I expound upon that data by recording firsthand recollections of women and gender-expansive producers and engineers' unique memories and lifestyles during the pandemic. Important to the Counter Narratives Oral History Project is an accurate capturing of how the population feels about the aforementioned technological developments in light of the understood economic needs brought on by the pandemic. Interview questions also explore whether their needs spurred the adoption of blockchain and NFT technologies and, if not, why. Their stories will be usable in a social history context as the music industry apprehends simultaneously the proliferation of advanced-technology NFTs and historic inequities plaguing its women and gender-expansive participants.

Public safety measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, including lockdowns and quarantine mandates, forced recording, mixing, and mastering studios to cancel sessions and close their doors. For women who represent just 2.6% of the population of producers and engineers in the music industry, this shift proved significantly challenging. Published March 2022, the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative Study revealed that 10% of women music industry professionals surveyed could not find work during the pandemic, a staggering statistic in light of 91% of respondents declaring the music industry as their primary occupation and 90% stating that they held secondary music-related jobs to earn sufficient income before COVID-19 shuttered the music industry. Women producers and engineers entered the pandemic underrepresented, overworked, and underpaid.

OBSERVATIONS

Women interviewed for the Women in the Mix study suggest that the often quoted 2.6% population statistic is wrong, that the music industry's population of women engineers and producers is healthy, but these individuals often do not receive credits for the work or are erased from the song or album credits. With one of the features of blockchain technology being its immutability and direct-to-creator payment capabilities, we expected interview participants to have widely adopted the technology. In the 16 hours of recorded audio, to the surprise of our research team, all of the oral history interview subjects reported knowing about Blockchain and NFTs, but only 14% of the interview subjects reported interacting with the technology. Suzy Shinn, a recording engineer, songwriter, and producer in Los Angeles, CA is the only interview subject to report the technology as a benefit to her career.

"I think NFTs and Bitcoin, cryptocurrency, blockchain, I think it's awesome. I think it's so smart. I think I wish I knew more and was more involved. Like I have some Bitcoin, I have some Ethereum or Litecoin like that, but. You know, a handful of my friends just made out

like bajillion dollars over the pandemic by investing everything they had to their name and then like striking gold. It was like a gold mine.... I was involved. I have this separate part of what I love to do. And, like, I wrote, like a TV reality dating show that was completely backed by cryptocurrency, and it was completely in Web 3 And it sold out - the finale sold out Webster Hall. So many people came like it's just a really new, exciting time. So I think people should learn about it... We raised like \$30,000 for, I forget, invisible hands. It was during COVID times.

Most interview subjects hold neutral positions regarding cryptocurrency. Denise Barbarita, an engineer, songwriter, and composer in Long Island, NY, passionately denounces it:

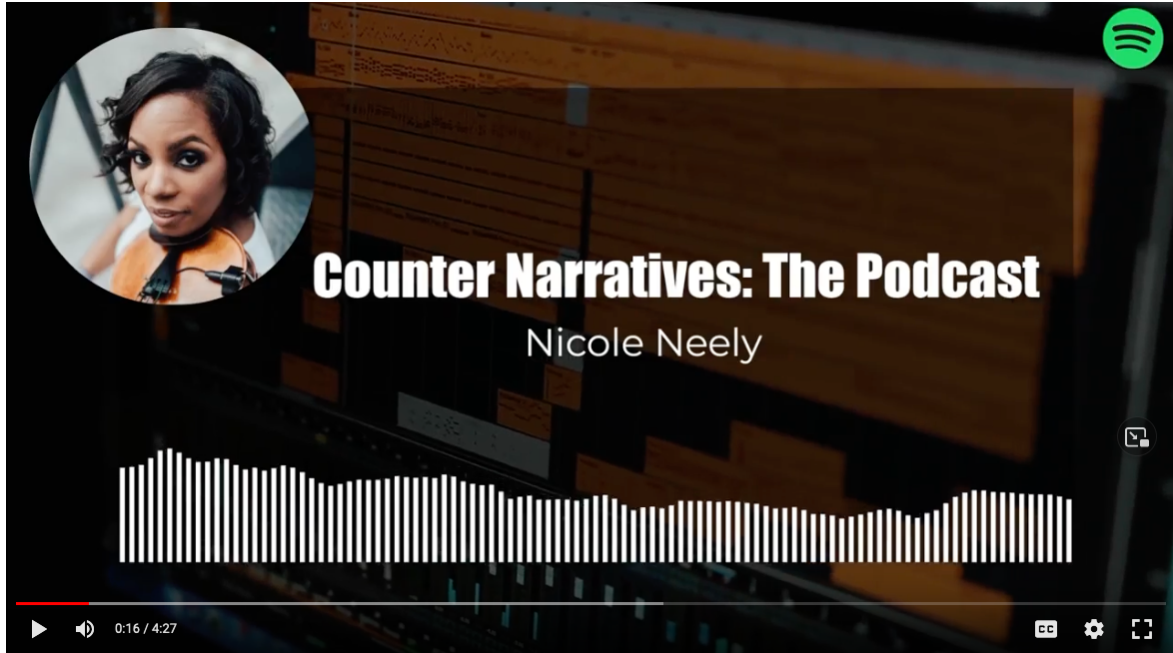
"I have zero interest in crypto because it's a ponzi scheme and I don't trust it. I don't trust it one bit. And you can see how volatile it is, you know? Like, here's a great idea. Let's have a monetary system that has no regulation. Yeah, that's a great idea. Done analysis. I just... I don't understand it at all. It's like so many people right now are complaining because certain, I guess, crypto accounts or whatever are tanking and it's like, well, what did you expect? Seriously, what did you expect? The whole point of regulation of a financial market is to make sure bad people don't do bad things. And when you get rid of regulation, you basically allow everybody and their brother to just, you know, run rampant. And that never works because greed will never go away. It's human nature. Anything that seems altruistic is great for a short period of time. And then you realize that there's always going to be somebody who's going to try to game the system. And that's where we are now with crypto. Now there are a lot of people who I'm sure would vehemently disagree, and that's their right."

With incomes severely diminished during the pandemic, and blockchain technology or NFTs not used as a solution, the question of how this population survived economically. Over 90% of the women surveyed for the Women in the Mix study hold a secondary music-related job (page 38).

Counter Narratives interviews suggest that these secondary jobs are not separate from, but intertwined with, the primary. Interviews also establish that the people working in the capacity of songwriter, composer, or arranger often unknowingly perform the work of music production. For Nicole Neely, a producer, arranger, and composer in Nashville, TN, leaning into the role of producer was a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"[The pandemic] leveled the playing field. ... It gave you time to really figure out what your next steps were, if you were smart and it allowed for you to tap into those things that you haven't been exploring within your gifting and your talent, within your discipline. And so people would always refer to me as a producer, but I was like, no, I'm not a producer, you know, because I think the traditional producer... I started getting music that really required me to dig deep and really like I was doing way more synthesis. And, and I mean, this wasn't just your run of the mill. Like, take a song and put strings on it. I was composing more. I

was really figuring a lot of things out for people because of the predicament we were in. So I was truly operating from a production, like the producer standpoint... And so I actually just got my first producer's credit on a Tank album... I'm really starting to see myself or begun seeing myself in that producer's role during the pandemic because I had to."



Women producers and engineers are present in the music industry, but perhaps their work isn't acknowledged as production - or they themselves are unaware of the categories in which their work falls. In addition to the conundrum of crediting, oral history interview subjects discuss local government lockdown orders' impact on the nature of work; virtual studio technology (VST); and mental health, and new social awareness as a result of the shifting socio-political landscape of the United States.

NEXT STEPS

The podcast with the oral history interviews are in post-production. I would like to extend my gratitude to the Howard University Center for Women, Gender and Global Leadership for supporting this research. This project compensated and created personal storytelling opportunities for women and gender-expansive producers and engineers who are often overlooked in the male-dominated music industry.

REFERENCES

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