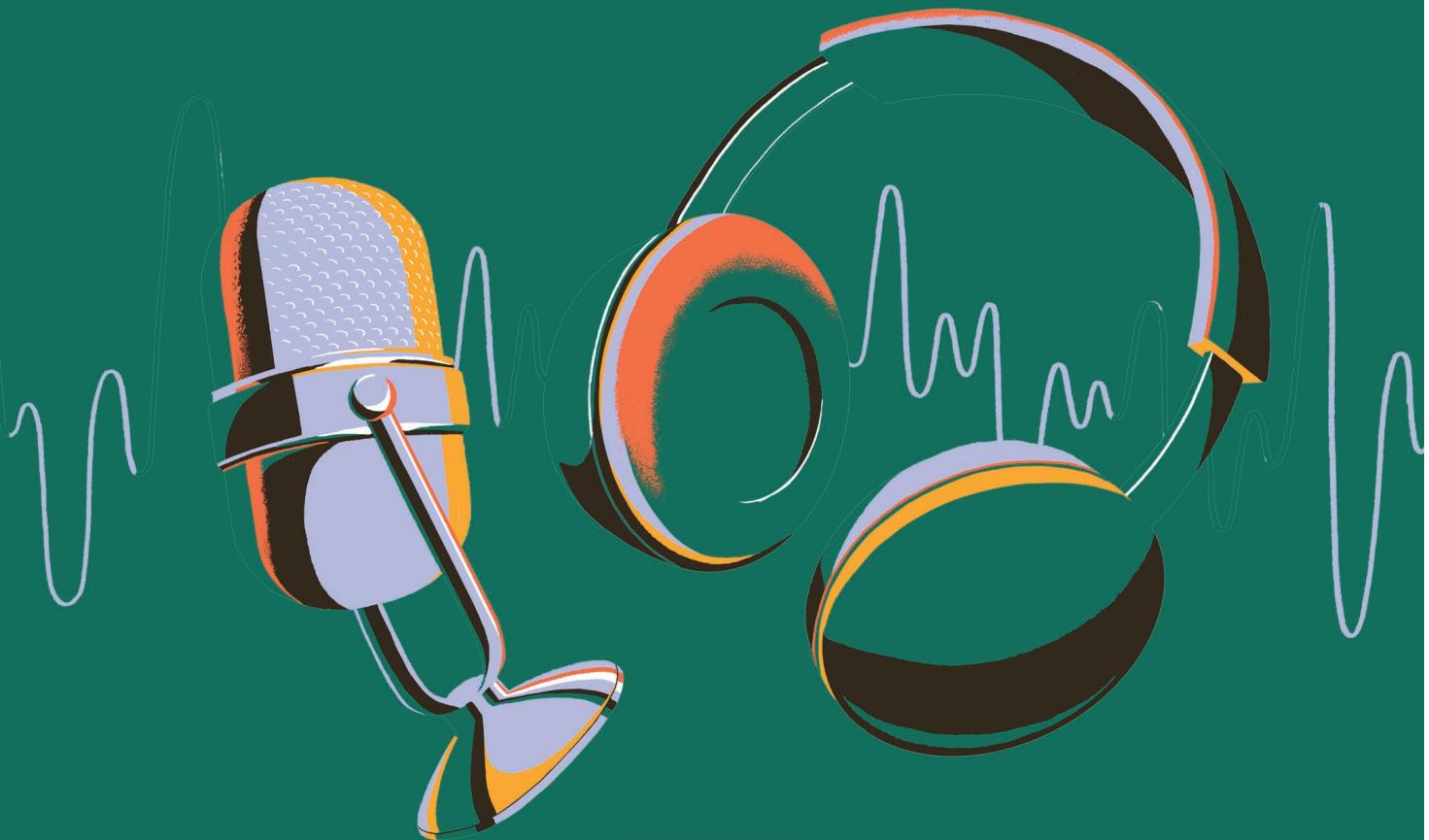


sandbox

the sandbox guide to



Substack



A direct route to fans and subscribers

music:ally Connect

2026



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The 2026 edition of our annual international music-business conference Music Ally Connect is moving to a larger venue – The Brewery in London – to reflect the growing demand and the evolution of the event as an essential new trade hub for the global music industry.

So please save the date, and read our coverage of the 2025 event for a taster of what to expect.

→ The Sandbox Guide to...

Substack

→ **Sandbox Guide**

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Hello - and welcome to the Sandbox Guide to Substack, in which we explore how and why musicians are using the platform as they seek direct fan engagement – without battling social media algorithms. Originally built for writers, it is also being used by some artists as a tool to monetise content through paid subscriptions, build loyal audiences, and foster genuine community.

For the right artists, Substack presents an opportunity: a reliable, scalable way for artists to control their messaging, deepen fan relationships, and generate sustainable income. With features like newsletters, group chats, and music-focused initiatives like Substack Sessions – plus a \$20M Creator Accelerator Fund – the platform is now investing in attracting musicians, too. We explore how you can make it work for your artist.

In this Guide:

- **Substack isn't the only platform that allows subscribers to access content** – but it is one that rewards artists who like writing and sharing: we explore some good examples.
- **It's a platform where users are prepared to spend long, lingering visits** – so how can your artist get the most out of it?
- We speak to artists and artist-teams who use Substack, including musician **Robyn Hitchcock**, Kat Kennedy of **Big Life • Management**, Connie Rose of **Partisan Records**, and also music-tech expert **Emily White**.
- **Case studies**, including how **We Are Scientists** have built a rich, engaged community of 10,000 subscribers; and how **Partisan Records** works with artists, including Laura Marling and NoSo, who use Substack to connect well with fans.
- **Actionable takeaways**: as ever, we've condensed the lessons from these case studies into action points – so you can get started immediately.

2



The Guide

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Sandbox Archive, Behind The Campaign and Behind The Single

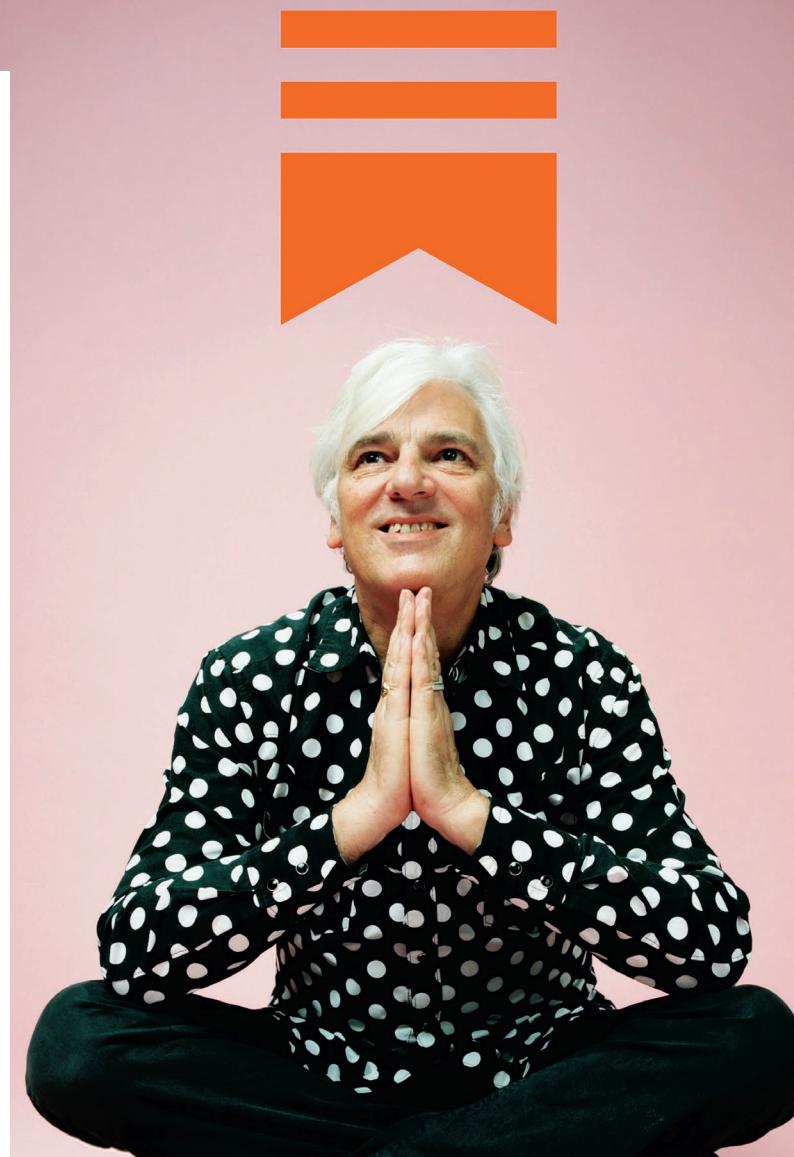
Music Ally's Sandbox vertical is the music marketers' handbook: the latest strategies, new platforms, cutting-edge case studies and expert tips. You can find all these publications – plus all music marketing news – together on the new [Sandbox hub page](#):

- [Sandbox Guides](#) – marketing strategy, case studies, and expert interviews
- [Behind the Campaign & Behind the Single](#) – deep dives into a successful campaign
- [Country Profiles](#) – insider information on what works and who to collaborate with.
- [Campaigns of the Year](#) – 50 utterly essential case studies

→ Actionable takeaways

Compiled by Music Ally's team of marketing experts, these are the key ideas from this Guide, condensed into action points so that you can get started and apply them to your own work.

- **Use multimedia** - Combine newsletters with voice notes, videos, behind-the-scenes clips or podcast-style chats to deepen connection.
- **Create regular features** - Develop ongoing content strands (e.g., artist Q&As, fan chats, song breakdowns) to keep engagement high between releases.
- **Blend free and paid tiers** - Use free posts for key announcements and paid tiers for in-depth or exclusive content to serve both casual and hardcore fans
- **Make it campaign-friendly** - Include clear CTAs, links, and visuals at the top of posts so important info doesn't get buried in prose.
- **Don't overthink it** - Be informal and clear; treat it more like a direct line to fans than a polished press release.
- **Tap into community** - Respond to readers, share other artists' posts, and treat Substack as a collaborative scene - not just a newsletter tool.



The Sandbox Guide to... Substack

“ I like to think that whatever my brain distills can be effortlessly poured out on Substack, into a cocktail for the mind,” says musician Robyn Hitchcock of Substack (pictured above), a platform that has shown significant growth in the music space over the past year.

Launched in 2017, Substack has traditionally been used by authors and journalists to create newsletters directed towards paying subscriber-

bases - but in recent times, the platform has seen the arrival of a large (and increasing) number of musicians looking for a new way to communicate with their audiences.

Using some social media platforms might feel for some artists and marketing teams like a daily game of “beat the algorithms and adverts” when aiming to get content in front of their target audience - a task that can be both costly and unpredictable.

For them, Substack might offer some breathing room and a different approach, by offering a direct route to fans. Paying-subscriber models can not only generate new revenue streams, but also offers access to “a sort of open, kindhearted community that I only dreamed was possible before Substack,” as [Jeff Tweedy of Wilco](#), who is one of the platform’s most prolific musician-users, put it.



A fast-growing platform – with an audience that craves multimedia

Having recently announced news of surpassing the 5 million paying subscribers mark, and with more than 1 million of those paid subscribers arriving since November 2024, Substack is in a growth phase. More than 50,000 publishers currently make money on the platform, with the top 10 collectively earning more than \$40 million USD per year. In April 2024, over half of the 250 highest-revenue creators used audio and video as well as the traditional text formats – with that number growing to 82% by February 2025. It suggests a strong shift towards multimedia content as the platform's preferred format.

The music category on Substack has millions of subscribers, and Substack reports that tens of thousands of publishers regularly cover all aspects of the music industry - from artists sharing news of releases and stories of their creative processes, through to fans and journalists alike turning to the platform to publish reviews, retrospectives and opinion pieces.

"Substack provides artists with a rare combination: direct mailing list + discoverability + monetisation," explains Emily White, an expert on music, technology and creator-fan engagement, and the author of the [emwhitenoise](#)

Substack. "It's an email list that you don't have to 100% build from scratch, and offers growth tools like recommendations from other

"Substack provides artists with a rare combination: direct mailing list + discoverability + monetisation..."

– Emily White



Carrie Walters

newsletters, algorithmic discovery on the Twitter-like Notes feed, the Bestseller / rising leaderboards, and social proof signals from followers and subscribers on the platform make it easier to get subscribers. Also, because music journalists and curators are active on Substack too, it creates a nice discovery ecosystem that echoes the music blog era. There is natural symbiosis between artists and curators that makes the platform feel like a scene more than just a newsletter tool."

This significant subsection of music-seeking users hasn't gone unnoticed by Substack, who – along with announcing a \$20 million [Creator Accelerator Fund](#) encouraging creators to move their paid subscriber audiences across to Substack – shared

news back in April of the launch of [Substack Sessions](#).

These are ten days of live sessions from

40 artists that are active on Substack, including Patti Smith and Jeff Tweedy. "What started as a sanctuary for

writers has expanded into a vibrant home for musicians, spanning genres and generations," stated Substack's head of culture and music Dan Stone upon the announcement of Substack Sessions. "Here, artists share their work on their own terms—new songs, covers, lost demos, behind-the-scenes glimpses of their creative process, videos, and longform writing—while forging meaningful connections with their audiences."

More than newsletters – Substack best practice

"Substack is more than just email newsletters - it's a multimedia platform for storytelling and relationship building," says Emily White of Substack's opportunities for artists. "This is where the key opportunity lies: not just pinging your mailing list when you have a new release, tour dates or merch to promote, but treating it as an ongoing window into the artist's universe."

With more and more artists and musicians creating an online hub and home on the platform, what are some tips for artists trying to carve out their own space on Substack?

CASE STUDY 1

PARTISAN RECORDS



A creative haven, and a new revenue stream



"Substack has attracted a number of our artists at Partisan Records (namely Laura Marling and [NoSo](#)) because it's a platform where they can delve deeper into not just their music, but also many aspects of themselves," says Connie Rose, Director of Audience Development at Partisan Records.

"Often, artists can feel boxed in and restricted by what they can express on social media platforms or traditional mailing lists, due to the marketing based nature of them or the short-form snippets of content that audiences are wanting. Substack is a place where people are used to spending a lengthy amount of time. People read long articles or consume multiple notes from authors, rather than watching short 15 second clips and feeling like they need to force themselves to get out of the algorithm. The platform is also one that hosts so many different areas of discourse, that often our artists feel like they can step outside of the music-shaped box they're sometimes put into on traditional media platforms."

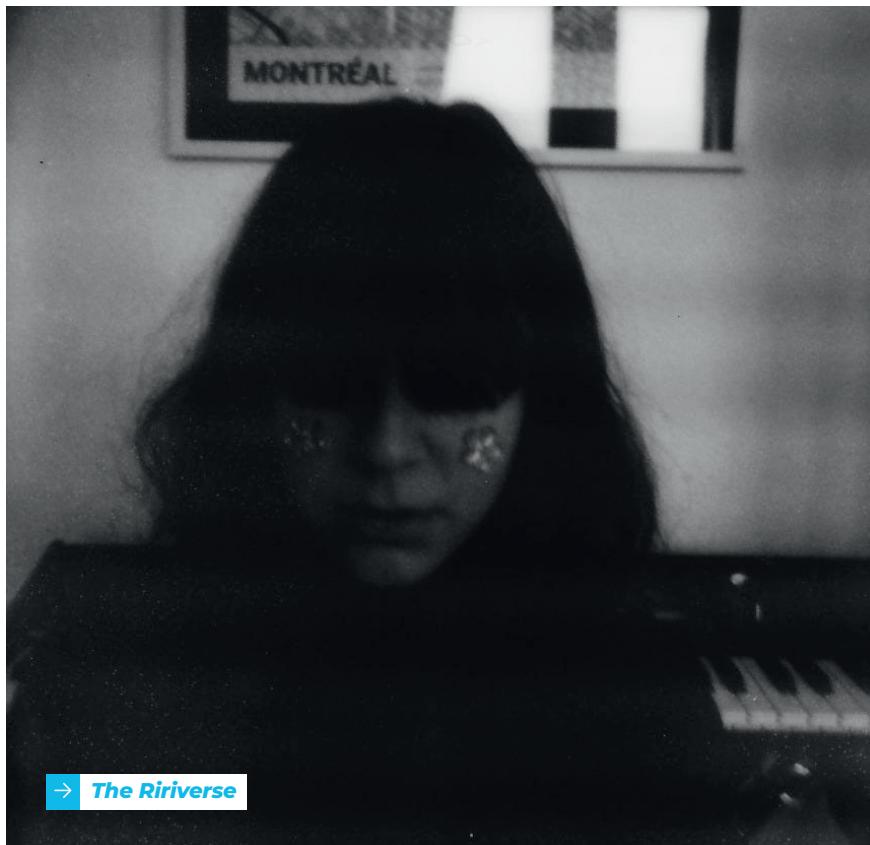
Subscribers are able to easily access each and every update from the profiles they follow, as well as receiving emails to ensure that no updates go unmissed. "For our artists, Substack is a place where they can nurture some of their most loyal fans;

"Our artists feel like they can step outside of the music-shaped box they're sometimes put into on traditional media platforms...."

this is where our artists like Laura Marling have made the most of the subscription model on Substack and have rewarded subscribers with exclusive content." From guitar tutorials to sharing unreleased music, paying subscribers to Laura Marling's Substack, [Patterns In Repeat](#), get exclusive access to the inner workings of their favourite artist's processes, while paying a monthly subscription fee that goes directly to the artist - a source that if correctly handled, can produce a significant additional revenue stream.

As with any fan-facing platform, the key to success is found in engaging consistently and authentically, and for many artists, Substack provides a flexible space for them to share content, context, deep dives, videos and prose created directly by the artist - cutting out the hard-sell marketing narrative, and instead, embracing authentic story-telling and conversation.

For some artists, it's the perfect fit. "Laura Marling has been using Substack for a while," Rose continues. "After speaking about it with her, it became somewhere that she really felt she could reflect on songwriting in a way that she hadn't been able to before online. Laura used the platform so naturally that it didn't become a form of marketing for her; she has so authentically written about songwriting (which she's been doing for the best part of 20 years!) and the things that inspire her, and as she's found her own ways to reward subscribers on the platform - we didn't need to ask anything of her."



Early adoption

"We encourage our artists to use Substack well before they have started releasing new music," says Partisan's Connie Rose. "Firstly, this is so that they can find their rhythm on the platform and find the areas of the platform that feel most organic to them. Second, it's about finding a basis on what sort of content they'll be producing, and introducing the music in a way that feels authentic to both the artist, their team and their audience."

"The most compelling artist substacks aren't growth-hacky, they are authentic to the artist and their audience," adds Emily White. "One super interesting thing I've started to notice is Substack-native artists who are starting their career on the platform. For example, The Ririverse is a songwriter who writes [Fear of Music](#) on Substack and already has 400+ active subscribers even though she hasn't released a single track yet."

Finding a voice and format

"I have noticed more artists embracing the multimedia capabilities of the platform," says White. "[Walter Martin](#) hosts a weekly all-vinyl radio show on Substack, and [Tegan and Sara](#) share voice notes."

"I would mostly recommend using Substack in a way that feels natural to you, as an artist," Rose adds. "Some of our artists will really pull back on the amount of newsletters they're posting

and use notes in the same way they once used Twitter, whereas others will be quite frequent with their mailers and really delve into aspects of their music they don't on other platforms. Making sure you're rewarding any paid subscribers is important, with some never seen content or early viewings of music videos or songs."

Clear calls to action

"It took us a minute to work out the best way to use Substack when we had something we needed to announce with a specific call to action, as it's more set up for longer pieces of writing than something like MailChimp which is more regularly used for that kind of mailer," says We Are Scientists manager Kat Kennedy. "We needed a bit of a kick from the band's label to remember to do things like include a clear CTA in the subject line and make sure there were pictures and links to things near the top of the mailer and not assume that fans are all going to read a bunch of text. Dividing it so that we had the paid tier for more 'niche' content worked well for this."

"Don't try to explain too much"

And above all else, keeping things simple and engaging with fans remain golden rules for getting the most from



the platform: "Just write loud and clear and don't try to explain too much," says Robyn Hitchcock. "Respond to others, and re-post them if you like what they've written."

Opportunity continues to grow

Substack's reach is growing, and as more artists and marketing teams seek out the most direct and impactful routes to fans, subscribers and audiences, this growth looks set to continue. "Both the additional revenue streams and direct to fan offerings for our artists have been massive draws of Substack," says Connie Rose of Partisan. "It's also a platform that is used globally and by a wide range of ages, so being able to cater for so many different demographics whilst really feeling like you're connecting with them is amazing."

Looking to the future, "more music integrations, more monetisation options, and more diverse music scenes" represented on Substack

would be key areas for development, suggests Emily White – while further exploration of existing tools should also be explored.

"We Are Scientists recently did a livestream via Substack and though we had some technical issues, I'd love to see more of that kind of thing being done via the platform," says Kat Kennedy. "I think it's a really

"Both the additional revenue streams and direct to fan offerings for our artists have been massive draws of Substack..."

– Connie Rose, Partisan Records

underused tool for musicians and artists, and anything that can build a community of music fans

reading bands' content is totally welcome. I feel it's an important counterbalance to the social media platforms' emphasis on short attention spans and constant scrolling – a place where fans can really get to know the artists they love in a deeper and more meaningful way."



Substack's Best Practices

With 5 million paid subscribers and counting, Substack creators are exploring the most effective ways to use the platform's tools and offerings to their maximum potential. These are the tips Substack shares for engaging with subscribers:

1. Build community through consistency

Posting regularly – whether it's weekly, biweekly, or monthly – helps create a rhythm your audience can rely on. Many musicians and artists find success by weaving together updates, behind-the-scenes content, early previews of work, or even

reflections on their creative process.

2. Make it personal and conversational

A direct, authentic tone helps strengthen the artist-fan connection. Using the platform's features such as Live Video and Chat, if used well, can help develop those deep relationships.

3. Use paid subscriptions strategically

Offer exclusive content for paid subscribers – such as unreleased tracks, demo journals, visual drafts, or livestream links. Artists can also experiment with tiers, bundling merch, or offering limited-time perks – and choose whether to keep your Substack

free / open to all, and maybe switch to a paid tier at a later date.

4. Make the most of your archive

Link back to past posts, create themed series, and use tags to help subscribers explore your creative journey over time.

5. Stay connected with Substack and your peers

Substack's own publications On Substack and The Substack Post – and the platform's Creator Resources page – could be useful as examples of creators using the platform well. There are also examples of how music artists have collaborated on The Substack Sessions.

CASE STUDY 2

WE ARE SCIENTISTS



A Substack masterclass



With over 10,000 subscribers, We Are Scientists have found a home in Substack that provides multiple engagement routes towards a fanbase that they've carefully nurtured throughout their 20+ year career. "We were looking for a new mailing list platform that would allow the band more creative freedom than something like a regular mailing list that's very sales and marketing-oriented, and a way to create a community of the band's fans that needn't necessarily involve us asking them to pay a subscription," says the band's manager Kat Kennedy, MD at Big Life Management. "We wanted something that allowed us the community-building that a platform like Patreon has, but that also works for the more casual fans who just want to know when the album is out and how they can get tickets for a tour, and so [Slow Descent Into Radness](#) was born."

Feeding fans with regularly updated content features and news, the band and their management have developed strategies for free and paid subscribers alike, ensuring that paying fans are served with exclusive content, while non-paying subscribers are continually kept up to date on tours, releases and news. "We use the paid tier as a way to ringfence content that is mostly relevant to the most hardcore fans, like unreleased demos, acoustic covers and longer pieces of writing, then the free tier has more regular mailing list content like merch drops or tour announcements," explains Kennedy.

"When we have straightforward things

to announce like a new single, a merch drop or a tour announcement we use Substack as the band's mailing list - and throughout the campaign we'll use the paid tier as a way to delve deeper into the process of making the album or share unreleased demos or acoustic versions. For the band's upcoming album Qualifying Miles we've given paid Substack subscribers access to a whole acoustic version prior to release which is only otherwise available with tour pre-orders of the album, it's a great way to reward the loyal fans."

To retain engagement both during and outside of release and tour cycles, We Are Scientists have developed a suite of regularly updated content formats: "Great Apes is where they do covers of other bands' songs, and 'Stoop Chat' is where they record a conversation, sometimes with guests, that's shared unedited on Substack - it's like you're getting a voicemail from the band, or joining in a conversation with them. One of the most fun things about being We Are Scientists' manager is getting to hang out with them, as they are so funny all the time, and I love that the Stoop Chats allow the fans to overhear some of their conversations as well. It all makes fans feel included in the gang which is really important.

"They also have written 'conversations' between Keith and Chris where they discuss such important things as what are the best power ballads of all time, and remember certain key moments in the band's history and give the fans an insight into what it was like to be there. These can run whether the band is in campaign or not, so it helps to keep the fanbase engaged all the time."

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music:ally helps companies with marketing insights, strategy and education. We do this by researching and publishing news and the latest trends, startups, tools and best practice across the industry and around the world; then taking what we know and turning it into hands-on training for marketers, managers and others. And behind the scenes we also work with select clients on their own marketing campaigns and ideas too.

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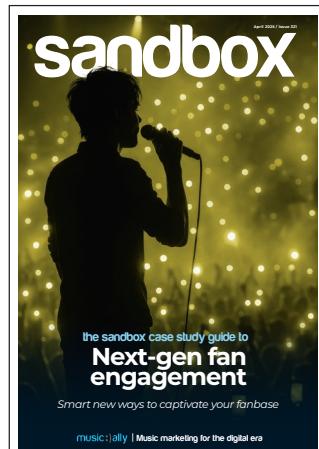
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