

A Pioneering Experience

Although ArtistShare is a fan-based funding platform developed for the music industry, a documentary filmmaker decided to break new ground by trying it out to fund his latest documentary. He shares his experiences in the following.

By Paul Devlin

The business of making films is changing fast, and independent artists must adapt quickly to a landscape in constant flux. New technology is erasing traditional funding models as quickly as it is creating new ones. One need only look to the recent collapse of the music industry to wonder how quickly and how drastically the film industry will be similarly transformed.

But does watching the music industry fall off the cliff first give the film industry an opportunity to soften our own inevitable fall? Can we learn from their mistakes and adapt their responses to our own unique challenges? I took a chance that a new innovative funding model for music artists called ArtistShare could also be adapted to fund a factual film. The risk, of course, is that pioneers are often identified by the arrows in their back.

My goal to completely finance my film *BLAST!* by adapting ArtistShare's fan-based funding platform was not achieved, but the model does show promise. I offer up the following analysis of the successes and failures we experienced so that other filmmakers can develop this model further.

Replacing Record-company Funding

New technology has gradually transformed the music business from a retail industry into a service industry. Internet downloading has permanently undercut CD sales, record companies are collapsing and live shows now eclipse traditional retail revenue for major artists.

Clearly the record-company funding model for emerging and mid-level artists is disappearing. So how will new music be created and distributed, and how will these artists get paid in this new landscape? In response to the changing landscape of the music industry, ArtistShare's CEO Brian Camelio developed a new funding model to allow fans to fund their favourite artists. Similar models have emerged in the meantime, but ArtistShare claims to be the first.

ArtistShare provides a web-based template through which musicians can offer their fans an opportunity to purchase tiered participation in the creation of their new work. For example a "Gold Participant" may pay a large amount of money to get an Executive Producer credit on the CD, access to recording sessions, a personal performance from the artist, and more. High-end offers emphasise access and exclusivity.

The lower cost offers may be as simple as a pre-release CD and email updates on the progress of the work. (For more examples of ArtistShare offers, visit www.artistshare.com.)

These purchases fund the project completely. In this way fans enable the artist to make the music they love, completely eliminating the need for traditional record-company funding. This is a good thing, as record companies may no longer be in a position to fund many of these artists.

Purchase rather than Donation or Investment

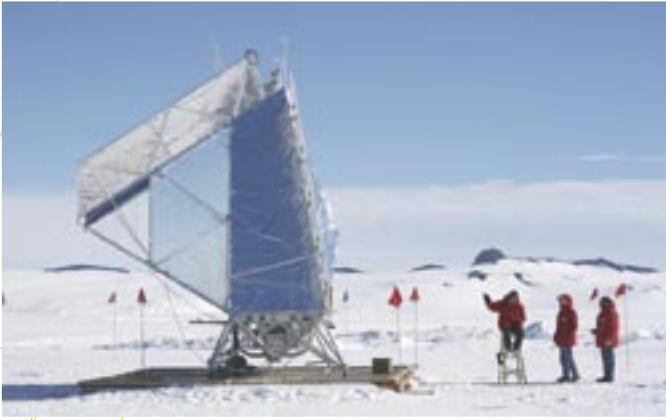
Except for announcements on their website, ArtistShare does not do any promotion for the artist. They may, however, engage in some distribution of the final product. ArtistShare's primary function is to provide the template and platform (no small task) and collaborate with the artist to develop an effective project. In exchange, they charge an initial set-up fee and a percentage of the purchases. It is up to the artist to tap into their fan base to complete the project successfully. ArtistShare has also carefully vetted the legal issues surrounding the model, clearing the way for these fan-payments to be purchases, rather than donations or investments.

CEO Brian Camelio describes ArtistShare as a Participant Model. Distinguished from the donor model, which turns the artist into a beggar, or the investment model which turns the artist into a liar (let's face it, factual films, for instance, rarely turn a profit), the Participant Model allows the artist to sell participation in the creative process. This is arguably more dignified for the artist.

Dozens of musicians have completely funded their projects using this model. The most celebrated example is Maria Schneider, a prominent composer who has won two prestigious Grammy Awards with CDs completely fan-funded through ArtistShare. The ultimate goal of ArtistShare is to develop a community of dedicated fans who will fund the artist from one project to the next. But ArtistShare is a tool, a platform, not a magic formula. It is up to the artist and his or her fans to make it work.

Adapting the Model to Independent Films

I discovered ArtistShare through a musician friend. Of course I wondered if the model could be adapted to independent films. I approached



BLAST! by Paul Devlin.



The BLAST! project on the ArtistShare platform.

Brian with the idea of funding my new film *BLAST!* through ArtistShare.

Produced by myself and Claire Missanelli, *BLAST!* is a risky scientific adventure story that takes audiences on a journey around the world and across the universe to launch a revolutionary new telescope on a high-altitude NASA balloon to discover the origins and evolution of our universe. The story reveals the truly arduous nature of scientific pursuit – the tragic failures as well as the transcendent triumphs. *BLAST!* gets personal, philosophical even religious, departing from many of the traditional conventions of material about science.

Based on the success of my previous films, *Power Trip* and *SlamNation*, ArtistShare was excited to take the leap with me. But it required almost a year of negotiation and execution to finally get the project up on the ArtistShare site. The way we adapted the model, it was almost like making a parallel film. To complete the effort, we hired a project manager, Amber Yoder, who efficiently executed the various elements.

Convincing People to Sign Up

Our project had tiered offers from the low-end of USD 19.95 for access to video production updates, all the way up to USD 150,000 for the Executive Producer offer. We tried to be imaginative with our offers and tailor them to the filmmaking aspects of the project and the scientific elements in the film. (To see a complete list of offers, go the www.blasthemovie.com and click on ArtistShare.)

The project revolved around the Production Updates. These short, well-produced video reports gave fans an in-depth view of our filmmaking process and allowed them to participate in the progress of the movie.

Once we had the platform in place, the challenge was to get the word out and convince people to sign up. This also proved much more difficult than expected. We targeted both the fans of my previous films and people we thought would make up a core audience for my new film. Amber worked on grassroots outreach and eventually we also hired a publicist. The hook of being the first film on ArtistShare resulted in some press exposure but did not generate many signups.

We targeted the filmmaking community as well, expecting some interest, at least at the USD 19.95 level, if only to check out what we were up to and how it worked. We received many compliments on our ingenuity, but the blankest stares when we asked people if they joined. I even had difficulty convincing my own family to sign up. The explanation in general was that people were very busy, had their own projects to focus on and did not necessarily have time to participate in ours.

On the other hand, we did identify people who wanted to participate. In the end, about thirty people signed up at an average price around USD 100. Many were friends and associates but also a significant number of people we didn't know. Our most successful outreach effort came from a live, two-hour interactive Internet broadcast about the film and ArtistShare on *The Space Show*, (<http://www.thespaceshow.com/detail.asp?q=864>) which resulted in several signups soon after.

Successes

Brian encouraged us to continue to identify things that worked and focus on how to expand on them. Here are the successes that came out of the project:

- Outreach efforts did identify a small, though enthusiastic market for the *BLAST!* ArtistShare project.
- The publicity that resulted from our ArtistShare outreach benefited the *BLAST!* film itself and generated valuable press for the movie even before its release.
- The production updates developed into fairly sophisticated magazine-like pieces that, taken as a whole, provided an important document of our filmmaking process. These could prove to be useful marketing tools in the future.
- ArtistShare project manager Amber Yoder became a valuable asset to our production company. She has transitioned into outreach efforts not only for *BLAST!*, but also for all our projects.

What Didn't Work

Analysing what didn't work has given us a better understanding of why this model has been so successful for music projects, but is much more challenging for film projects:

- **Educating people about how ArtistShare works**
We had trouble communicating to people that ArtistShare was asking them to make a purchase, not a donation or an investment. One colleague insisted that the offers represented elaborate ‘tote bags’ like the ones given away during PBS fund drives. Others asked what kind of return they would get on their investment. The press often misidentified participant payments as donations rather than purchases.
- **Starting ArtistShare late in the filmmaking process**
By the time we launched the ArtistShare project online, much of principal photography for *BLAST!* was complete. We had already established co-production partnerships and attracted a grant and were relying on these traditional funding sources as we got ArtistShare up to speed. The ultimate goal of ArtistShare is to cover the entire cost of production. Starting at the beginning of the process might be more attractive to participants and allow more time for them to sign up.
- **The relationship between musicians and their fans is much more personal than the relationship between filmmakers and their audience**
This may be the reason the ArtistShare model works well in the music business. Fans feel a personal connection to music artists through the emotion in their music. Musicians have opportunities to strengthen these relationships through live performances. With films, the fans relate emotionally to the story and the characters on screen rather than the invisible filmmaker. Filmmakers have fewer opportunities to connect personally and directly with their audiences.
- **Personal or celebrity factual films may work better with the ArtistShare model**
Filmmakers may find that films in which the filmmaker appears onscreen will have more success with the ArtistShare model, and celebrity doesn’t hurt either. Filmmakers such as Morgan Spurlock and Michael Moore might find more success with the ArtistShare model (though of course they are less in need of alternative funding sources). Moreover, films about pop culture or with celebrity elements may have more success on ArtistShare (as they do in any market).
- **Fans may be more interested in an individual film’s subject matter rather than a filmmaker’s body of work as a whole**
Fans of a musician usually know what to expect from one CD to the next. A filmmaker’s work, however, may include diverse subject matter. This can be especially true for factual filmmakers. A fan of one film may not be as interested in the subject matter of the next. The ArtistShare ideal of creating a dedicated fan base from project to project may simply be easier for music. For films it may require promoting interest in the filmmaking process itself, for example, or the personality of the filmmakers or some other element we have yet to identify.
- **Pricing offers for film is much more problematic compared to pricing offers for music**

Film budgets are usually many times higher than CD budgets. The ArtistShare goal is to cover the entire budget of a project with funding from fans. This is difficult for films.

Brian recommended that we shoot high on pricing, because no one had experience with the market and he did not want to undercut opportunities. However, our high-end Executive Producer offer, initially at USD 150,000, was up to ten times higher than many music CD offers. Just seeing this on the price list may have scared some people away. Eventually we cut our high-end offers in half and added mid-level priced offers.

- The investment in the ArtistShare project may be much more substantial for film than for music

My guess is that the *BLAST!* project in general, and our production updates in particular, required much more work than most musicians’ offers. Hiring a project manager for ArtistShare created an ongoing expense.

A Model with Potential

In the end, we invested approximately USD 10,000–12,000 in ArtistShare, which returned only about USD 3,000. We did identify a market though. The challenge is to maximise it. To paraphrase some sales wisdom, “If you can sell ten, you can sell ten thousand.” If only one of our high-end offers had been sold, the entire enterprise would have paid off.

So I am optimistic that the model has potential. Making it work will require more attempts at refining offers and pricing, identifying particular films and filmmakers that are well suited for the model and cultivating and expanding a fan base with efficient and effective outreach.

I believe it is important for filmmakers to share the specifics of their experiences as we experiment with new ideas. The cliff is approaching, and the forces that transformed the music industry are now also transforming the film business. As traditional models break down – sources of co-production financing drying up, downloading soon to eclipse DVD sales, etc. – we have little choice but to adapt. All independent filmmakers must consider innovations like ArtistShare if we are going to continue to fund our own work. ☒



Paul Devlin
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Different offers of purchase for *BLAST!* on the ArtistShare platform.





Because We Were Born

France/Brazil 2008, 90 min.

Director: Jean-Pierre Duret & Andrea Santana
 Production: Ex Nihilo & Kissfilms
 World Sales: UMedia
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 contact@umedia.fr
 www.umedia.fr

Concoda and Nego are boys in their early teens. They live in the parish of Nordeste in north-east Brazil and frequent the local truck stop with its garishly lit diner and never-ending parade of weary truck drivers and long-distance bus travellers. Like many other teenage boys, they dream of what they will do when they grow up. Enthusiastically they share visions of truck driving and seeing the bright lights of Sao Paulo. The boys come from families mired in extreme poverty, however, and inevitably their dreams are relentlessly weighed down by a reality of scarcity and deprivation. Almost as naturally as they talk about their future escapades, they exchange strategies for warding off hunger when their part-time begging 'careers' at the truck stop are unable to sustain them.

Predictably too, given their lives of hardship, the boys have been forced to grow up and confront the world's harsher realities. Nowhere is this more evident than in a scene where Concoda confides in Nero that he is not scared of anything except the 'liver eater'. His younger friend is at first dismissive of the 'liver eater's' existence, just like any teenager would dismiss a fairytale character he no longer believes in.

Concoda, however, hints at a much darker reality: the 'liver eater' is, in fact, someone who abducts street children for the purpose of procuring human organs for transplants for wealthy buyers. Here the filmmakers expertly juxtapose the shadowy adult world that the boys inhabit with the more innocent world of ghoulish fantasy and adventure that all children like to explore as they grow up.

Because We Were Born offers more than just a lament on child poverty, however. The boy's lives are intercut with the adversity facing Nego's mother as she valiantly battles to feed her ten children in the 'favela' they live in. Also intercut with the boys' story is the constant rhetoric of local politicians as they promise an end to the misery of the poor through recorded messages, television broadcasts and political rallies.

Stylistically the film is skilfully crafted. Largely shot with available light and in close-up, the film conveys an unmistakable intimacy with its main subjects, the two boys.

The film also makes liberal use of obviously-staged conversations between the participants. Rather than seem fake or contrived, however, these conversations clearly encapsulate the innermost feelings of the participants. One can imagine the filmmakers painstakingly wading through hours of filmed conversation to select the most poignant discussions. Despite their difficult lives, the film captures the touching innocence and optimism in Nego's and Concoda's uncomplicated dreams and, as a result, *Because We Were Born* is a triumphant attempt to humanise Brazil's urban poor.

Yask Desai

Z32

Israel/France 2008, 81 min.

Director: Avi Mograbi
 Production: Les Films d'Ici & Avi Mograbi
 World Sales: Les Films D'ici
 Tel.: +33 144 522 323
 courrier@lesfilmsdici.fr



A young Israeli and former elite soldier reveals how he killed a Palestinian in revenge, and now two years later, haunted by guilt, he is seeking forgiveness from his girlfriend and from the world. This story – subjected to a Mograbi-Brechtian treatment – constitutes Z32.

The actual event, a twenty-minute incident, is gradually told in many different ways. The film opens with the man and his girlfriend talking about how they are going to talk about the incident in front of the camera that they operate themselves. In the next scene, Avi Mograbi has pulled a nylon stocking over his head in his living room and is talking about how he imagines the film should start. From there the film continues with these elements, the conversation between the man and girlfriend alternates between him telling the story, him getting her to tell the story, him asking her if she can forgive him and hearing her thoughts about it.

The former soldier is also interviewed in Avi's living room and travels with Avi to the place where the incident occurred. Finally, the

most curious element is Avi's cramming an orchestra into his living room, and he himself singing elements of the story as well as about the circumstances around the film.

Brecht used the same elements to create a 'Verfremdungseffekt' (distancing effect) to prevent the spectators emotionally identifying with the action that would leave them pacified. Instead Brecht wanted to provoke the audience into rational self-reflection and into taking a critical view of the performance to transform this critical perspective of wrongdoings in the outside world and leave the theatre to effect change.

Though Avi gives a humorous tone to his Brechtian elements, it is obvious he has the same aim. Many docs work precisely to create a strong emotional identification with their unfortunate victims. Avi, on the other hand, invites us to take a critical look at the set-up of doc filmmaking and the story.

The whole film is rather absurd, from serious scenes of a soldier's struggle of conscience to making fun of the whole story. Exactly like war is absurd: innocent people are killed, but it is also innocent people who kill, who are driven by the situation and military training to perform acts they regret the rest of their lives.

Z32 is a brilliant new Mograbi film, and the scenes of Avi intensely singing highly un-poetic texts are unforgettable, implying that this whole conflict is like a bad play.

Ulla Jacobsen