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## Benji Rogers On Music, Blockchain, Virtual Reality And How A New Codec Could Change Everything [w/GEORGE HOWARD]



Here **George Howard** speaks with **PledgeMusic** founder and CEO **Benji Rogers** about **Blockchain**, **Virtual Reality**, and how a **new codec** could potentially **replace the complex licensing systems currently in place** when combined with these two technologies.

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*Guest Post by **George Howard** on [Forbes](#)*

**“I want 2016 to be the year that we do not discuss payouts ever again.”**

So says, Benji Rogers, Founder and CEO of PledgeMusic. I couldn’t agree more. In part one of our free-wheeling conversation, we discuss how a combination of Blockchain technology and Virtual Reality could lead to obviating these types of discussions.

Part two of the conversation focuses on the more granular specifics of Mr. Rogers’ approach.

I took a similar two-part approach – first an overview and then specific details – in my articles with Imogen Heap:

- [Imogen Heap’s Mycelia: An Artists’ Approach for a Fair Trade Music Business, Inspired by Blockchain](#)
- [Imogen Heap Gets Specific About Mycelia: A Fair Trade Music Business Inspired By Blockchain](#)

Big ideas from smart people require more time and words than the “tl;dr” treatment which is de rigueur, and I’m pleased to present them to those who care in the format they deserve.

Given the fact that the thousands of words that Ms. Heap and I foisted upon the world have also generated not only thousands of views, but also the foundation for the entire Blockchain for the Arts movement to build upon

(quite literally: see [Ms. Heap's launch of Mycelia](#)), I'm encouraged to keep plunging the depths.

Mr. Rogers and his ideas are certainly worthy of this depth-plunging treatment. Benji Rogers very much epitomizes the notion of finding solutions to problems, rather than just moaning about problems and pointing fingers at real or imagined villains. The solutions that Mr. Rogers finds tend to involve using technology to help artists create sustainable careers on their own terms.

As Mr. Rogers noted during our recent conversation ([full interview available in audio form here](#); part one transcribed below), both he and I share **“an unhealthy vision or idea that better is possible, and we have yet to achieve it. And, it's driving us both fucking crazy.”**

Mr. Rogers is right that he and I do share this vision that better is possible, and it does tend to lead us both to something resembling megalomania in terms of the amount of time and attention we devote. However, he sells himself short by saying he hasn't yet achieved it.



*Benji Rogers discusses how a new .bc codec focused on Blockchain technology and Virtual Reality can impact the music industry in a positive manner. (Photo by Matt Furman)*

While there are many miles to go, Mr. Rogers has achieved a lot. He is the founder and CEO of [PledgeMusic](#), which is the premiere direct-to-fan music platform, and as such has made tremendous progress towards this goal of enabling artists to have sustainable careers on their own terms.

**Technologies such as Blockchain, as well as a recalibration of music as an integral part of a more expansive offering – such as, through deeper connections to services like music therapy ([which I've written a lot about in this space](#)) – provide reasons for optimism with respect to music's potential for financial health for a wide number of participants.**

Mr. Rogers' own form of optimism manifests itself via a combination of the above. Recently, he published a fantastic piece that makes the point that as VR emerges, music will axiomatically play a key role.

As such, the VR industry will desire the most efficient mechanism to integrate music into their offerings. The current approach for music in VR would involve an expensive and time consuming licensing process that, generally, cannot be done at scale, and thus will only be affordable to larger players.

A system that obviates these high transaction costs, while not violating the existing copyright laws, would create a more expansive market both for the VR companies and musicians. Mr. Rogers' solution for how to get there involves utilizing Blockchain technology (I've written dozens of articles on Blockchain and have organized them here should you want to learn more) and an entirely new codec for music.

**In summary, rather than having songs encoded in .mp3 or .AIFF formats, those musicians and labels who desire to have their music more easily ingested into VR applications would use Mr. Rogers' ".bc" codec. This .bc codec would allow artists to utilize smart contracts to ascribe a set of rules and rates for how and at what cost their songs could be used.**

The genius of Mr. Rogers' idea, in my opinion, is that, rather than fighting the massive amounts of institutional and technical debt surrounding licensing of music from incumbents, the .bc codec would provide a simple option in solution: Use the .bc codec and set your own rates and rules, and thus facilitate your music's usage, or don't. If you don't...fine...you can continue to license using the existing methods. Best of luck.

In this manner, of course, it will be those who have the most to gain and least to lose – independent artists – who jump on the train first. This avoids the often fatal process of trying to get incumbents to adopt a new technology. If these first movers find success, and a two-sided market between those offering their works using the .bc codec and those ingesting their works for VR applications emerges, the incumbents will still have the opportunity to come along for the ride.

**The final crucial point about Mr. Rogers' idea is that the VR application of the .bc codec is really a Trojan horse for a broader application. As more content holders embrace this codec in order to have their music used in VR applications, the codec will gain traction in other applications as well. At that point, music users/consumers of all stripes will have a choice to make: Do we use music that we know – because of the .bc codec – is authenticated by the artist/rights holder, and that stipulates how and at what rate it could be used, or do we ignore this, and recode it in whatever way we choose.**

**In this way, a spectrum emerges with .bc representing a "Fair Trade" music source on one side, and other codecs representing "sweatshop" music sources.**

Mr. Rogers articulates all of this in our conversation below, which has been edited only lightly for clarity and grammar. In Part 2, Mr. Rogers gets specific about the .bc codec. and how we solve the problem of the 40 million songs already in existence.

**GH:** Alright. Great. So, I am psyched to be talking to my friend and sort of partner-in-crime in terms of trying to help artists build sustainable careers on their own terms, Mr. Benji Rogers. Benji, introduce yourself for me, please.

**BR:** Hi. I am Benji, CEO of a company called "Pledge Music. Frequent flyer and coffee drinker.

**GH:** I think we are both highly caffeinated at this point. Alright. So, I don't want to talk about Pledge Music. I love Pledge Music. I use Pledge Music. Thank you for starting Pledge Music. Artists everywhere are in your debt. However, you and I both share a...

**BR:** ...Unhealthy.

**GH:** You and I both share an unhealthy... what? What is the unhealthy thing that we share?

**BR:** I think it's an unhealthy vision or idea that better is possible, and we have yet to achieve it. And, it's driving us both fucking crazy.

**GH:** You got it. That is it exactly. And over the past two years for me, and I don't know how long for you, the unhealthy obsession that might lead to this "better" involves a technology called blockchain.

And there are an enormous amount of articles out there explaining it. So, I don't want to go through the whole thing about the distributed ledger and all that.

I want to talk about a specific sort of impetus that you are working hard on, that you have written about, and that you and I have talked about. So, describe the vision that you have got for this .bc codec

**BR:** The idea for a .bc codec arrived in my head when I was trying to solve the problem of creating a data set that was attached to, and that could not be removed from, its content. So, if I made music and I want to ascribe attributes to it. If I want to say that I owned it; say that I could be paid here; say that this was who the publisher was and the songwriter was – there was no way to do that in which it [all of that information] couldn't just be stripped out and the music still be played.

**GH:** Let me break that down for everybody. So, right now, you take a song and put it into a format...MP3... what have you. Right. You are not able to ascribe or delineate any specific right – who wrote the song, who is the owner of the samples in the song – any of those things. It's just a blob of ones and zeroes around the song itself.

**BR:** Exactly. One of the cruelest things that you could do to someone back in the day, was that you could basically hit Command-I all on their iTunes library and you could change all the metadata on their music.

**Now, that's been happening for years and years. And so, what that means is the MP3 or ACC or WAV or MP4 or these formats that are used are inherently changeable, and that's the reason that most of these pirate sites exist – because they are not subject to anything that, that data says.**

**GH:** Because you can change it.

**BR:** Because you can change it. Yeah.

**GH:** I remember this. So, I go and hit Command I on a song and there is all of your metadata tagging whatever the hell you want.

**BR:** You could add a new picture, lyrics...whatever you want.

**GH:** I wrote "Imagine," not John Lennon. And that gets tethered to the songs, and then I upload it and somebody downloads that song and says, "Wow, I didn't know George Howard wrote 'Imagine.' I thought John Lennon did first."

**BR:** And, for a while you were getting porn pushed into song files at certain times. What it was, was that it was inherently unstable.

And, then I was kind of pontificating: what if you could create a format that was basically under the moniker of "fair trade," and it was where an artist could say: "I am expressing my music into this format. And, attached to that format is a set of rights...the minimum viable data set. And, once those rights are in there, I would like for any player that comes across this codec, or this format, to be unable to play it, unless it references those

rights.”

**So, if you strip the music away and try and play it somewhere else, you would have to move it to an MP3 or ACC or a WAV. That would mean that the .bc or dot blockchain codec would become the “fair trade” version making the dot MP3 a kind of sweat shop version, as in: it hasn’t got my rights expressed into it, therefore I choose not to.**

**Now, as an artist, you could also, say, “Copy to an MP3 if you want, that’s your choice.”**

**GH:** I’ve got to unpack it, because it is great and it is dense. So, you are saying...the term of art for this, would be a “smart contract,” you as an artist, just like in the old Command I manner for Apple iTunes, you would say, “OK, these are the rights around this song. This is what one can do with it. This is what one can’t do.”

And, then you create — you used the word “codec,” — and what people need to understand is that could be AIFF or MP3, but this one is on the blockchain, and it would only play on devices that could read this one, and because of that, you are sort of doing this handshake that says: “I, the person who is playing this music, value the music in a fair trade way, in the same way as I drink fair trade coffee, I value the producer of it.” It doesn’t mean that you can’t strip it out, and play it as an MP3, but if you are doing that, you are just sort of affirmatively saying, “I don’t value fair trade music, I value sweat shop music.” Is that right?

**BR:** Yes. You are going against the specific wish of the artist, who has chosen to use a format that is fair and equitable to all. It will still sound great. It will still play on your player.

It will still do all of those things, because what happens is when an artist creates something they often want it to go as wide as possible and, that’s absolutely fine. But, there is no way to track it; where it has gone.

Whereas in this case, if the player syncs to the blockchain, and checks out what is possible for this album or this entire body of work, you can do it. It’s not just about the one song. It is about all of your output.

Then what you can do is ascribe a monetary value that is fair and equitable to you as the artist.

And, what I think this solves is platforms like Youtube and Soundcloud and Spotify... they don’t ever get questioned about anything anymore. Because if they are supporting these formats, then they can basically pay exactly who needs to be paid, when they need to be paid. It is not a question of finding any of that information.

**You know, I want 2016 to be the year that we do not discuss payouts ever again.**

**GH:** And so if they are to be believed, [Spotify, et al.] are saying: “We want to pay people. We just can’t figure out how.” Right? And, my line on that, to some of them, is: “Yeah, you are Google. You can figure this out.”

**So this would obviate that. This would then be the grail that I and Andy Weissman and a lot of people have been tilting at for a long time: assume no change in copyright; create smart contracts that are machine readable; allow people to set prices for it, and then a blossoming of the music business emerges. This isn’t a new idea.**

What you’ve done — your iteration on this is, “Yes, great George. Great Andy Weissman... but you need a unified codec and structure...a unified protocol.”

And, that protocol that you have come up with is this .bc protocol.



**BR:** It's the .bc protocol and one of the big problems that the creation of or change to any new database (whether it is distributed or not) has surfaced is "the day zero" problem. Right? Which is how do you go back to forty million songs?







**GH:** You don't.

**BR:** Ultimately.

**GH:** The answer to that is that you don't. And by that, it doesn't mean that you don't care about that, I just mean that you tried to do that as every unified database that anybody has ever tried to pull off and failed, has shown.

So, it has got to be a leading edge moving forward and then sucking those things back to into it. How are you going to do that?

**In Part 2, Mr. Rogers gets specific about the .bc codec. and how we solve the problem of the 40 million songs already in existence.**

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