



Episode 715: Libertarian Musician Leah McHenry Builds an Audience from Zero

Guest: Leah McHenry

WOODS: The other day I was in the car, we were listening to some of your music — and by "we," I mean my 13-year-old daughter and I — and, you know, there are some great independent musicians out there that I've gotten to know and really like, and there are other independent musicians where you say to yourself, I think I see why this person is an independent musician. But we listened to your music, and we loved it. We looked at each other and said, okay, she's good.

MCHENRY: Oh, thank you.

WOODS: So, yeah. I don't want to have to come on here and make things up (laughing). I like to be able to tell people honestly I really enjoy what you're doing. And I notice that with quite a few of the songs that we played, you know, you've had quite a few listens and views on YouTube, so you've managed to make a bit of a name for yourself out there. So there are a lot of different angles I want to take here. I want to take the angle of being an independent musician in the age of the Internet; also you and I seem to have very compatible political views, so I certainly want to get to that in a little while. But tell me first of all, give us some background. How long have you been in music, and how long have you been in music where you've been really using the Internet as a tool to become better known?

MCHENRY: Yeah, so I've been a songwriter since I was about a teenager. I've done a lot of songwriting. But it's funny; I didn't really pursue music as a more serious hobby, which is kind of what I still consider it, until after I was married and had kids. And so it's funny, because I feel like my whole career has been completely backwards compared to the typical progression of what musicians would normally do. Normally they tour while they're young and see the world and do all that, and then later on they'll settle down with family life. Well, I've done it completely backwards, and so I just think that — I'm still trying to — I still pinch myself at the fact that anything's even come of it. Like, it's amazing to me.

WOODS: Tell us a little something about what your music is like. Assume you're talking to people who are unfamiliar with you. How would you describe it?

MCHENRY: So my fans coined the term "the metal Enya," and so I think that really summarizes the genre nicely, where it's like *Lord of the Rings*, fantasy-inspired stuff

combined with some of the elements of rock and heavy metal, and creates kind of an ethereal metal experience.

WOODS: Now, when you say metal, though, and you say there are some aspects of metal, you don't mean what a lot of people often associate with metal, which is the growling voice.

MCHENRY: Right. So yeah, these days — so within any genre, you have a lot of subgenres and even subgenres below that. And so metal, just like you would say country music has — it can take on all kinds of forms. So when I say metal, I'm just talking mostly about adding the guitar and drum aspect of it, and my vocals are completely the opposite of what you would find in a lot of heavy metal, which is, you know, my vocals are very ethereal, very feminine, very angelic-style. And so I'm combining that world with some of those aspects of heavy metal, so just my favorite parts, I'm putting them together.

WOODS: So how much music have you produced that you've released to the public?

MCHENRY: I've done two full-length albums, and I've done one EP and a few singles.

WOODS: Okay, and have you just finished something; are you working on something now? What stage are you at?

MCHENRY: I'm in the writing stages of possibly my next album. I definitely plan on continuing what I've been doing, but because I have such a busy family life — I don't know if you knew; I have five kids all under the ages of 10, so because of that I chip away at things, because we've got lots of other stuff, lots of life happening. So I work on it as I can, and my fans are very understanding, and they love it.

WOODS: Well, I have five children as well, ages 13 and under, and we had three under three at that point; all three of them were in diapers at the same time, so —

MCHENRY: Ah, I've been there (laughing).

WOODS: I think we can share a lot of stories in that regard. All right, so that again makes you unique. I mean, you already said that you follow the career a bit in reverse compared to how most musicians would, and you have a fan base that understands you have five children. Typically when you record an album, I mean, you've got to reserve a studio somewhere, and you've got to just go out there and bang it out as quickly as possible because you're being charged per hour to use the studio. Isn't that right? How do you make all that work? I mean, in other words, you can't just sneak away for an hour here and there.

MCHENRY: Yeah, well, actually I do a lot of it at home, and in fact, my last album was kind of an international collaboration. I had players in Europe, and my mixer was in Germany, and I had a player in Holland, and just people all over. And so a lot of the writing we did at home, a lot of the pre-production, and then by the time you go into

the studio — actually, the drums were recorded in Germany, so I wasn't even there. And I personally went into a local studio here to record all my vocals, and for that it was, like, three or four days of just — and actually I was seven or eight months pregnant with my fifth baby when I did that too. So at that point, my husband took over the household. He's awesome with our kids; I just love him. So I had his support that way, so I could just go in and really do my best job in the studio.

WOODS: So now here's the big question: being an independent musician in this day and age, I can think of ways in which that — today's a great time to be an independent musician, because even if you get locked out by big labels, big deal. I mean, you have your own channels to reach people. But at the same time, on the other hand, the trouble with that is the supply has multiplied, precisely because everybody knows they have YouTube and they have other ways of delivering their material, so the competition is more intense. So is it a mixed bag, the Internet, or is it just overwhelmingly positive?

MCHENRY: I am a huge fan of the Internet for musicians right now. You know, in this age where everybody says the music business is dead and all of that, I couldn't disagree more. I really believe that, yes, there is more competition, but all that does is really help — you know, the cream will always rise to the top. And there's a couple of things with that, though. It doesn't always just rise to the top just because it's good. It's like any market, any business out there; you have to have a great product, so what it does is encourage people to get better at what they do, because they've heard there's 100,000 other musicians out there all trying to do the same thing. There's a bunch of wannabes.

So you have to have a better product, better quality, and you've got to actually start digging down into a niche, just like a lot of other businesses do. You have to home in on a very specific target audience, and that's what I've done. So I'm actually a businesswoman too, and I think you have to be if you're going to be successful in the Internet age as a musician. You have to be an entrepreneur as well. So that has really, really helped me, is being able to understand that, know that it's got to be good. In fact, it has to be the best that I can possibly make it, and I have to know my audience, and I have to have a niche.

WOODS: All right, I want to go back to when you were releasing your very first album. At that time did you already have a following, maybe from, I don't know, maybe more informal music that you had done? Or were you really starting at ground zero when you released that first album?

MCHENRY: It was totally ground zero. I mean, I put my music up on YouTube and hoped for the best. That was my marketing strategy.

WOODS: That was just what I was going to ask you. So then what? Then what happened?

MCHENRY: So here's what happened: nothing. Nothing really happened, because it was the myth of "if you build it, they will come." And this is where I see so many other musicians doing this, that, hey, if I have amazing music, something miraculous is going to happen. I'm going to go viral; someone's going to stumble across my music; I'm just going to get discovered. And that is not true. It does happen to a very small percentage of musicians out there.

But I take a far more strategic approach, and now had I started back then I would have done things differently. First of all, you know, you do need some music to work with. If you want to market your music in the Internet age, you do need some good quality music to put out there to the world. But then I really started digging into my niche. I just can't stress enough how important that was for me, was discovering that. Now, it took me a long process, but now that I've done it, you know, my niche can sometimes vary a little bit. I actually call it my micro-niche, because I'm going even deeper, and it can vary from project to project.

But that was the second thing that really propelled me, was I started to know exactly the market that my music would best serve, and so I started looking at other bands that were similar to me. What do those demographics of people look like? What are they reading? What websites are they hanging out at? What is the subculture associated with that? And I mean, I started studying marketing, really, and it just propelled the little success that I've had, and to the point now where I make a full-time living doing this. So I mean, it really, really — I just want to encourage musicians out there listening to this that, like, don't abandon the business side. Art and business work very well together, and they don't have to be conflicting.

WOODS: Was there a particular moment, a particular thing you did that suddenly just the floodgates opened and you said, okay, this was the trick, or this was the thing that really, really opened the doors for me? Like, what was it that was different from what you'd been doing before of just putting music out there and crossing your fingers?

MCHENRY: There's definitely some layers to that, because I started studying a lot; I started studying a lot of business; I started studying a lot of marketing and things that were working in Internet marketing, and I started translating that into what I was doing with music. And so one of the things I would say has been absolutely life changing for me was not putting music up on YouTube, it wasn't building Facebook and all these social media platforms. In fact, I probably don't do enough of that.

But what was really a turning point for me was building my email list. I mean, you would think, how boring is that, but I'm telling you, just like a lot of other businesses out there will tell you that the size of their email lists directly correlates to how much money they'll make. And so it's still true. Email isn't going anywhere. And so the fact of the matter is that anything could happen to one of these social platforms, and you don't own those platforms; you don't own your page on YouTube; you don't own your page on Facebook. You could get hacked. They could do anything. It's a private website, a private business, and you could get shutdown; you could get hacked.

So the bottom line is the only thing you really have is your email list. That's the only thing you can directly control, and they can't take that away from you. And so now I've really shifted my focus to doing that one thing, and there's a number of ways I do it, but that has really transformed everything, because when I went to go do my last crowdfunding campaign, I raised over \$27,000 with just basically my email list and some social media. That was it.

WOODS: I was going to ask you that, because on my smartphone here, I knew I had seen that, and yeah, I just called it up. You did an Indiegogo campaign that was, as you say, more than funded. It went over the amount that you were even asking for. And I was curious to know how you did that. I'm so glad that you said that thing about the email list, because I wonder if my listeners' eyes glaze over when I talk about stuff like this from time to time. That really is the key, is building that — is learning how to build a list, first of all, because a lot of people don't want to give you their email addresses. You've got to give them a reason to do that. And then once you have that list, you have to know what to do with it. It's not enough just to have a bunch of names. Now what do you do? So let me ask you: how do you build a list? You don't just put a little form on your website that says, "Join my newsletter for updates." Do you give them a free song? What do they get?

MCHENRY: Yeah, so there's a number of ways you can do it, but basically what I teach, and I don't know if you knew this, but I teach other musicians to do what I'm doing right now, and there's a few ways, and one is — everything you do in social media should all be driving people to your email. That should be the one call to action that you always have. And that can change from time to time, but that's really the one action I'm encouraging right now, is joining the email list. And that's where you really want to build relationships. People are tired of being spammed in their inbox. What they want is an experience, and so my job as a musician is to give them that experience.

And part of this is knowing my niche, because I know that my music is all about escapism and that when they listen to my songs, when they look at the photos and all that, they're looking for a certain kind of experience, and that is going to vary from genre to genre. But generally people listen to music to feel better and to stop thinking about their stressful day, and so I have to create that kind of relationship through email. I tell them about myself; I tell them about my life. I'm open and honest about who I am. They know I have kids.

And I used to shy away from that stuff. Before I thought, well, that's not very cool. And now I realize that very thing that kind of made me feel shy is the one thing I really need to incorporate into who I am, because in this Internet environment, people just want transparency. They want to know who you really are. They want you to be authentic. And so I incorporate that into my email strategy, into my social media. But building relationships and community and actually culture is really what has given me any success at all.

WOODS: Now, this crowdfunding, was that for your second album?

MCHENRY: It was for my latest album, so yeah, my second full-length. That's right.

WOODS: All right, so by that point you had built up a following, and you thought to yourself, I've seen a lot of people use crowdfunding — and by the way, we've all seen very worthy projects fail to meet the goal, and we've seen completely frivolous projects way more than meet the goal. So no matter how good you feel about what you're doing, you have to enter that with a little bit of hesitation. So when you clicked to start that thing going, did you have an expectation in your mind or fear or hope? What were you thinking?

MCHENRY: That one campaign was a total act of faith on my part. I've learned so much since then, and I'll tell you something that I just actually am doing right now because I'm thinking of doing another one, and what I've learned about it. But with that campaign, oh yeah, I was terrified and it was a huge risk, and I also set it to the setting where I have to raise all of the funds or I get nothing. So I was really going out on a limb there. But I was communicating with the fans: hey, I'm thinking about doing this; what do you think? And I actually asked them what do you think, what would you like, what are your ideas, do you think this is a good idea. And I get feedback first. It's like running a test market before you actually go create the product that nobody actually wants, and I think that's a huge, important part of what musicians should be doing.

WOODS: It's funny; before we went on I left out another musician I've had on. I've had on a guy named Steve Hogarth from a British band named Marillion. And they basically in the 1990s, when the Internet was nothing compared to what it is now, they pioneered the idea of crowdsourcing. They basically said to their fan club, would you be interested basically in helping us fund our new album, and we'll put your name in the sleeve and you'll get it before everybody else, but you have to buy the album before we even produce it. If you're interested in that, send an email to yes@marillion.com, and if you're not send one to no@marillion.com, and that way they didn't even have to read the emails; they just had to count them. And they got so many that they went ahead and did it, and the response was terrific.

And these are things that, now it seems obvious, but then they were just giving it a try and it just worked astonishingly well. And that was also a case where they were a European band. They couldn't seem to make American tours work, so their American fans used crowdfunding to get them over to the US. And they said, here's the money to get you here; we'll still buy tickets once you get here.

So if you are producing a good product and you build up that fan base and you know how to promote yourself, those three things, it seems to me that the Internet is a tremendous tool and that when you have these wonderful successes — it's just one of these moments when you can just be thrilled to be alive at a time like this.

MCHENRY: Absolutely. If it weren't for the Internet, nobody would know who I am. I'd still be writing songs in my basement, and that would be the end of it. So I mean, who would have thought that a homeschooler with five kids would be making a living from

her music? And I don't have to leave my house. That would never have been possible even 15 years ago.

WOODS: Yeah, totally not possible. Now, you describe yourself as a libertarian?

MCHENRY: Yes.

WOODS: All right, so tell me a little bit about that. And of course, to me — I personally see a link between libertarianism and people who become entrepreneurs and who work for themselves and who carve out some kind of a space for themselves. They figure out how to do it, and they don't take anything from anybody. I see that there's a kind of commonality between those two things. In other words, the way you're living your life and your views about the way the world should be are not a million miles removed from each other.

MCHENRY: No, I totally agree. I see that, and I think there's a lot of musicians out there who, maybe they don't know they are kind of libertarian, but they're living the lifestyle, and they're making choices that kind of are.

WOODS: So does that have any bearing in your music, or is your music just sealed off from your political views?

MCHENRY: Oh, it definitely affects my music and lyrics and all of that. I believe that whoever you are, whatever your beliefs are, I do think that comes through your art. It's pretty hard to separate the person from the art that manifests from the person. I think that's pretty difficult to do. So yeah, you'll notice some libertarian themes in some of my lyrics. You'll notice my faith in my lyrics. I think all of that comes through the art.

WOODS: What are some of the things that you write about?

MCHENRY: A lot of times, you know, I'm just going to a different place. I'm escaping from "diaper land" in my world, and so I'll go to my imagination; I'll get inspired; I'll do research on places or historical events, and I kind of use that as a springboard for lyrics. And so yeah, I'll write about fantasy themes. On my last album, there were a couple of songs that were inspired by the *Narnia* series that I was reading to my kids at that time; we were going through that series. So just some of the visual pictures that I get will inspire a whole song. But it's not necessarily directly about the books or directly about a character, but it just inspires me beyond my normal, you know, homework and washing dishes type of life.

WOODS: Do you ever do live performances?

MCHENRY: Very rarely these days, and there will come a day when I actually tackle that, and I'll really be focused on it, but I have to have priorities, and so right now my family and young kids are my priority, so I decided to purposefully just be a recording artist at this time, and I will embrace that one of these days.

WOODS: All right, I think everybody acknowledges and respects that. It makes sense in your situation. Tell me about — let's say I'm an independent musician and I'm just doing it all wrong. I'm putting my music up on YouTube and I'm disappointed that I have only 10 views. What are two pieces of advice you would give me? What are two — and not two abstracts; specific action steps that I can take.

MCHENRY: I think, assuming that you're talented and assuming that you've got a good product, you need a marketing strategy. You need a plan, and the very first thing I tell my students is they do need to be focused on discovering what their micro-niche is, because until you can figure that out it's going to be really hard to do any kind of promotion to the right kind of people. As I said, you can have a great product, you can have amazingly talented music, but if you don't know your audience, you're not going to be able to connect those two things. So you could put your music up on YouTube, but there's a thing on YouTube called tags where you can tag your video with certain keywords.

So one of the things that I do, and this is a tip that I teach, is you've got to know the keywords that your fans are actually searching for up in the YouTube bar, search bar, because YouTube is actually the second biggest search engine to Google. So people are looking for things actively, every single day, so you have to know what are they searching for that will rank my video at the top. And so you've got to know that, and until you know your micro-niche and what they're actually searching for in very specific terms, your music is just going to get buried. So that's a really big one to know.

And the second one is direct all traffic to your email. You've got to start building that email list, building relationships with people. And it doesn't — I mean, there's all kinds of nuances in these things, but that's as simple and basic as it gets. It's not hard to do, but it does take time and effort to get all those things in place, and of course experimenting a little bit. So YouTube ranking and knowing how to tag, knowing your micro-niche, and building your email list.

WOODS: Now, if somebody is brand new to your music, is there something you'd want them to hear first that you think is the best or most accessible to a newbie? Where do you direct people who are listening to you for the first time?

MCHENRY: Actually, all my music is up for free streaming on LeahMcHenry.com, so they can browse all my albums and singles there, and I have options to purchase, options to donate different amounts. So yeah, I'm kind of experimenting with that. But it's all there, and you can definitely browse through it.

WOODS: All right, how about this: is there a particular — have you noticed there's a fan favorite among your songs?

MCHENRY: Hmm, I know that they like one of my latest singles — okay, so if I have to choose from my last album, there's a song called "This Present Darkness," and there's a lyric video for that one, and that's on LeahMcHenry.com. "This Present Darkness," it's

from the album *Kings and Queens*. I'd say from my EP, *Otherworld*, which is really popular in Europe, the song "The Northern Edge" is one of the most popular songs on that EP. And then from *Of Earth and Angels*, my first debut album, "Old World" is one of the most popular songs on that one.

WOODS: So the website is LeahMcHenry.com. Of course I'll link to it at TomWoods.com/715, this being Episode 715. Let's see. Now, when you said homeschooling, do you mean you yourself were homeschooled or your own children are homeschooled — or both?

MCHENRY: We homeschool our five kids.

WOODS: So that is — you must be extremely busy.

MCHENRY: I am. That's why I don't tour.

WOODS: (laughing) Yeah, exactly. I was just wondering if, maybe in the local area or whatever, if you did that from time to time. But so you homeschool them, and you're in Canada.

MCHENRY: Mm hmm.

WOODS: I'm curious to know; I don't know anything about Canada and homeschooling, but my instincts would be that it's a little tougher, there would be more hoops to jump through in Canada than in the US — or am I wrong about that?

MCHENRY: Actually, it's quite shocking. Here in BC we have some of the most open homeschool laws that exist. We actually have a ton of freedom. So basically all we have to do is register with a school here, just acknowledging the fact that — and it can be any school; it can be a private school. You just acknowledge that, yes, we are educating our kids. And that's it. Total hands off. And we have complete, 100% — we don't have to report number of days of attendance or anything like that, so it's actually incredibly — and I hope it stays this way — incredibly free. And there are government programs as well that support distance learning, but I'm shocked at how much freedom we actually have here in BC. Now, the other provinces, they vary a little bit, and there were some attempts in Alberta to really start cracking down and regulating homeschool stuff, but there were enough homeschoolers that rallied against that that it didn't work, so we're thankful for that.

WOODS: Well, that's great. Now, I know this is sort of a personal question, but I can't help asking. In deciding to homeschool your kids, what were the main one or two motivating factors?

MCHENRY: I'd say one of the main reasons was the realization — and this happened actually while my firstborn was still a baby. We just happened to hear some sermons and lectures on this that really opened our eyes to the fact that education is actually a parental responsibility. It's not the role of the government to educate. And just that

opened our eyes when we realized that. I mean, it completely affected every decision that we made from there on out. So learning what proper roles are and why, and what is the standard for that and who says, and pros and cons of all that, that informed our choices from there on. So from the time our son was a baby, we considered, hey, we're homeschoolers.

WOODS: Well, very interesting. And yeah, it is funny how sometimes you can just get a raw insight like that and realize, hey, wait a minute, if I really absorb and internalize this insight, it really is going to affect the way I have to live my life, and that includes the way my own children are educated. Well, I'm thrilled for your success, and you have such a unique story, and you're right that letting people know who you actually are is actually something they want, and it's unique; it's not some phony baloney manufactured product, but it's a real person. So it sounds to me like you're going about it in exactly the right way, and I have no advice to give you because you already know what to do, so all I can say is thanks for your time and best of luck, and I'm going to try to drive you some traffic over at LeahMcHenry.com.

MCHENRY: Oh, thank you so much. And I also would just love to add too that if there are other musicians out there who are wanting to do what I've done — I mean, I've been very strategic in this whole process and building a fanbase to where my husband was able to quit his construction job, and we're doing this together. We mind the business; that's what we do now. So now we're both working from home, and we're with our kids all the time. It's amazing, and I never thought that would be possible in the Internet age, but it is. So if anybody is wanting to be encouraged, I do have some free training over on our website. It's SavvyMusicianAcademy.com. And I also have a free webinar where I dig into the specific five ways that I actually have created multiple streams of income from music, and that is at ExplodeYourFanbase.com.

WOODS: All right, we're going to put all those links up at TomWoods.com/715, so check those out there and pay Leah a visit, and Leah, thanks again for your time today.

MCHENRY: Thank you so much for having me.