

# Music platform CEO says AI is not the enemy

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BandLab CEO Meng Ru Kwok thinks AI is no substitute for a real musician.

Musicians around the world have described artificial intelligence as a threat to creativity, but the CEO of one popular platform told AFP he thinks critics are looking at it all wrong.

BandLab, a mostly free online music workstation and distribution platform based in Singapore, has more than 100 million registered users.

It recently incorporated an AI music creation tool dubbed SongStarter, which generates song ideas from genre, key, tempo and lyric prompts.

For BandLab founder and CEO Kuok Meng Ru, whose company bought music magazine NME in 2019, AI is no substitute for a real musician.

"It's not called SongFinisher. It's called SongStarter. It's not trying to replace people's creativity... (with) a vending machine approach of a magic button where you press and a song comes out," Kuok said in an interview with AFP.

"You still need to use your human creativity to build on that, to turn it into something."

Proponents of easy-to-use apps like BandLab say they have revolutionized the music industry by allowing artists to be their own producers, and by bringing cheap bedroom recordings into the charts.

But many musicians are concerned that AI will be used to replicate voices and sounds, and also that it will become even harder for professional artists to sustain themselves in a brutally competitive industry.

Kuok, a Radiohead fan from a billionaire family, believes there is no going back from the shift towards more self-production.

One of BandLab's biggest successes came via American lo-fi indie artist David Burke, better known as "d4vd".

Relying totally on the app to record and master the track in his sister's

closet, d4vd's song "Romantic Homicide" recently surpassed one billion Spotify streams.

"He did that on his phone with just headphones. It's ultimately his talent. We're more like someone's guitar, you know? We're an instrument," Kuok said.



The 35-year-old's father is a palm oil tycoon, and his great-uncle, Robert Kuok, is Malaysia's richest man.

## 'Doomsday scenarios'

"The definition of music creators will change. In the same way previously not everyone thought of themselves as a videographer or a photographer. Today, with a mobile phone, everybody is a hyper-casual photographer," he added.

Among the newer AI functions being rolled out is Voice Cleaner, designed to enhance the quality of vocal recordings.

Kuok wants AI critics to look at the tech not as an end to human creativity but as a tool that enhances it.

"There are a lot of doomsday scenarios for every sort of innovation in technology, right? So, if you look back historically, what's happening with AI is, in my opinion, a technological evolution and it's not as simple as a simple evolution," he says.

The Cambridge mathematics degree holder uses the invention of the phonograph -- later called the gramophone -- as an example of how new technology once instilled fear when musicians thought it would be the end of live performances.

## **What would Radiohead say?**

Kuok learned to play the guitar as a teenager and was a fan of bands like Radiohead and The Strokes.

Later on, he became obsessed with the classics, from singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell to blues icon BB King.

Asked how he would pitch BandLab to Radiohead's Thom Yorke, Kuok says he would try to get the band on board with the app's social features.

The 35-year-old's father is a palm oil tycoon, and his great-uncle, Robert

Kuok, is Malaysia's richest man.

Kuok also owns Swee Lee, one of Asia's top musical instrument retailers.

"My mom will always joke that my son sells guitars," he says.

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