Soundset Studio
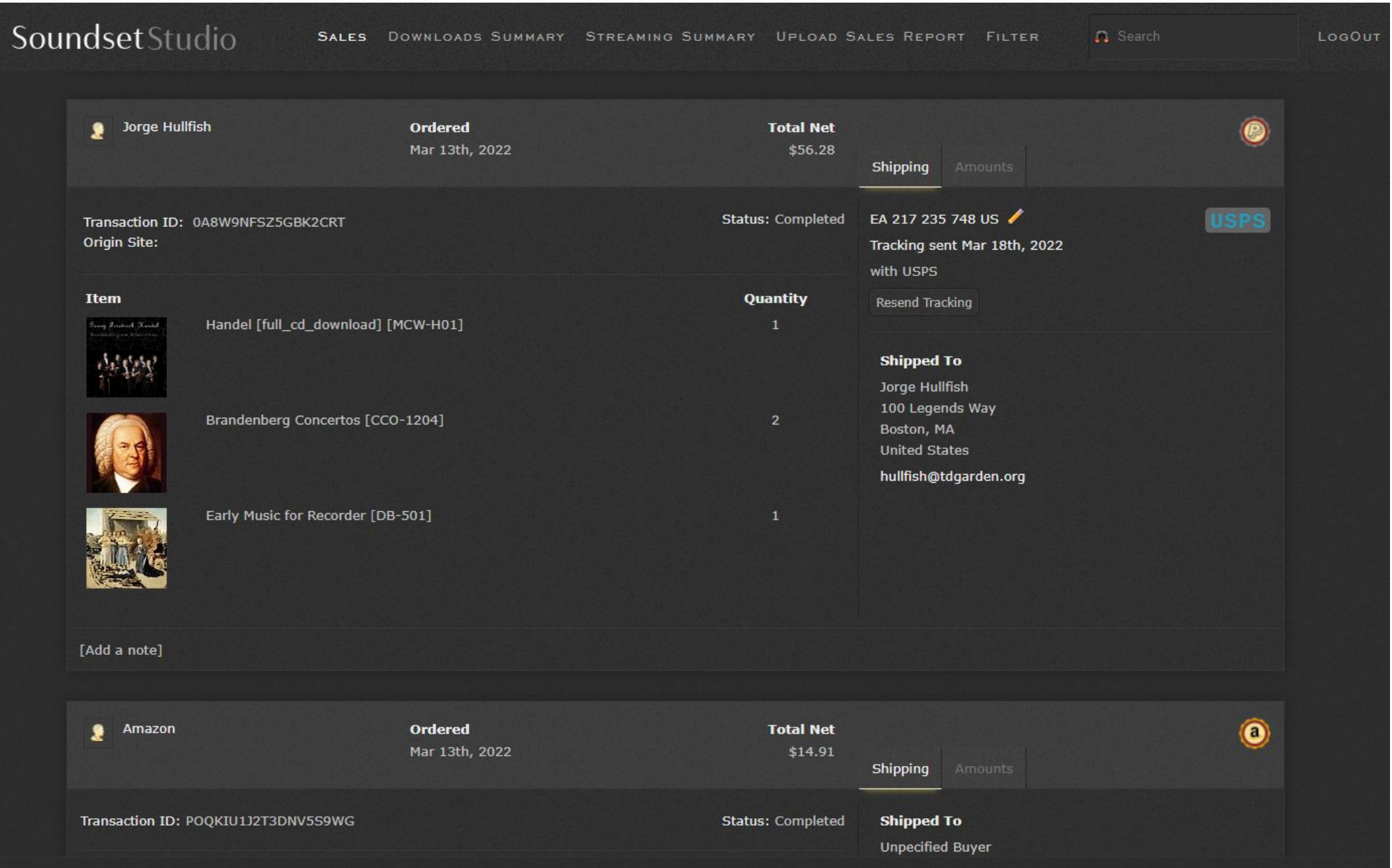
Practical Management Tools for Independent Music Labels

The Main Dashboard Large Buttons Represent the Main Areas of the App

The Sales Overview Page - Representing Imported Sales Data

Thomas Archibold

Duration: 6 months

Tools:

Whimsical | Miro | Zoom | Lookback | Figma | Zeplin

Mobbin | Gimp | MS Visual Studio Code | Google Fonts

Challenge or Problem Overview

Independent music label managers are faced with a complex set of tasks, and a large amount of data, particularly around music licensing and streaming sales data as it pertains to artist royalties.

Each of the labels in this study operates with a small staff (usually one or two individuals) to manage the bulk of the work around key areas of the business, cobbling together a scenario that involves spreadsheets, online platforms such as Bandcamp, CD Baby, The Orchard, the Harry Fox Agency, and others.

Without any kind of central dashboard to access, organize, and streamline their process, this work absorbs much time and energy, and results in inefficient practices and additional stress upon management.

This is a competitive business, and the barriers to entry have largely fallen. Labels that are managed effectively are able to survive and establish themselves in this landscape, with management devoting more time to creative, enjoyable areas of music making.

Discovery: Research & Analysis

I interviewed five independent record label owners to learn about their processes and challenges, and to determine the level of interest and enthusiasm for an app-based solution to some of their most tedious and time consuming responsibilities.

Based on the notes from these sessions, I created a chart in Whimsical, illustrating the common scenarios, challenges, and pain points for these label owners, as well as possible solutions that could be implemented within a web-based app.

The key finding is that among the many challenges faced by labels, two stand out as particularly troublesome:
1. Fulfilling music licensing requirements.
2. Processing sales reports from distributors, such as The Orchard.

This finding focused the design of the app primarily toward addressing these challenges.

Link to Whimsical & Miro Boards: [Whimsical Board](#) / [Miro](#)

Interview Notes

Common Scenarios, Challenges, and Pain Points
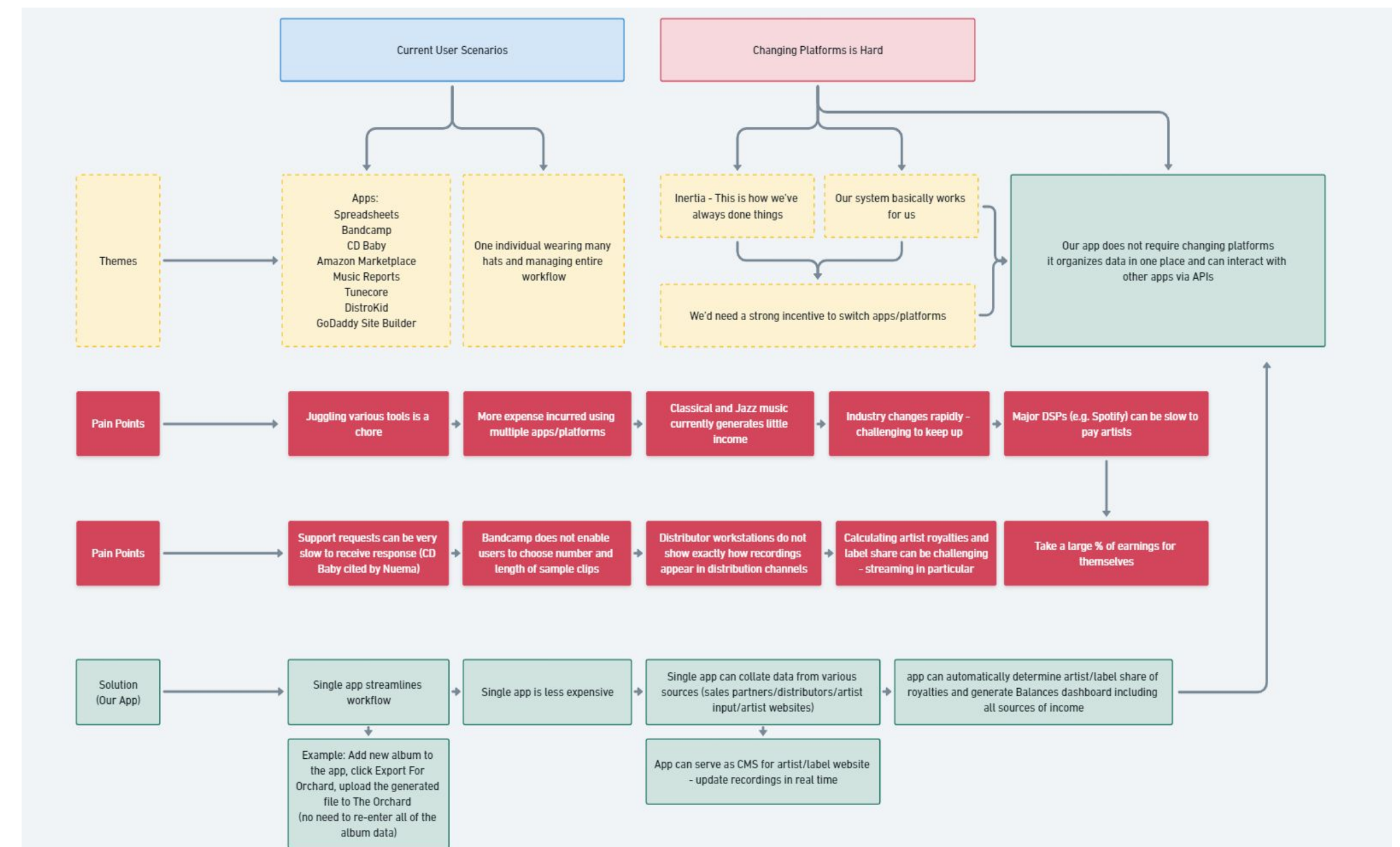
Design: Concepts & Sketching

I spent time considering the interview findings, and made some basic sketches for the app layout. I also used the Crazy-8 technique to explore ideas.

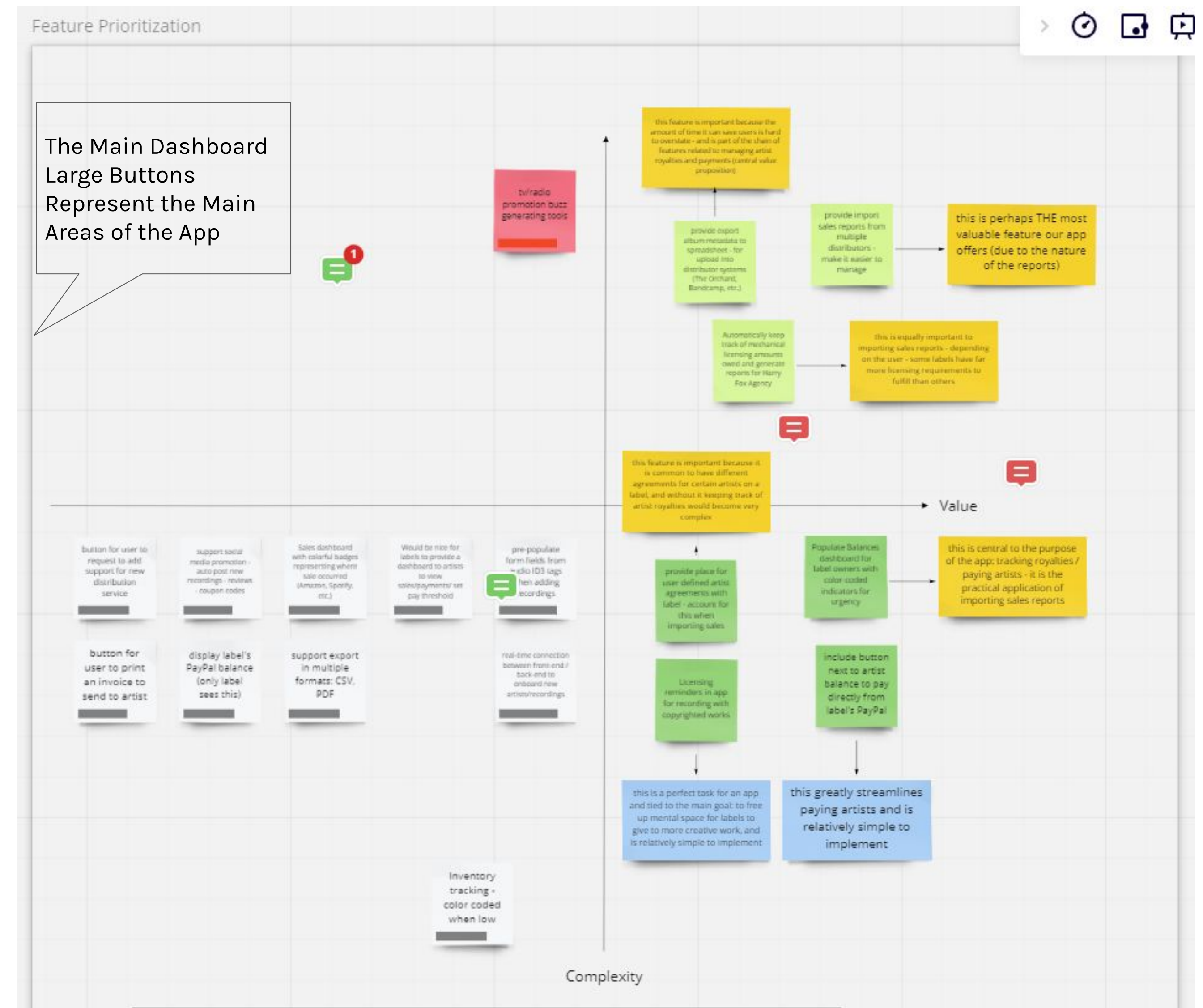The research notes were synthesized into common scenarios, inefficiencies, and pain points in order to further refine the direction and priorities of the app. A Feature Prioritization Matrix was set up to visualize the organization and priorities of the design.

A Miro board representing the desired user flow through a given task was created.

[Miro Board](#)
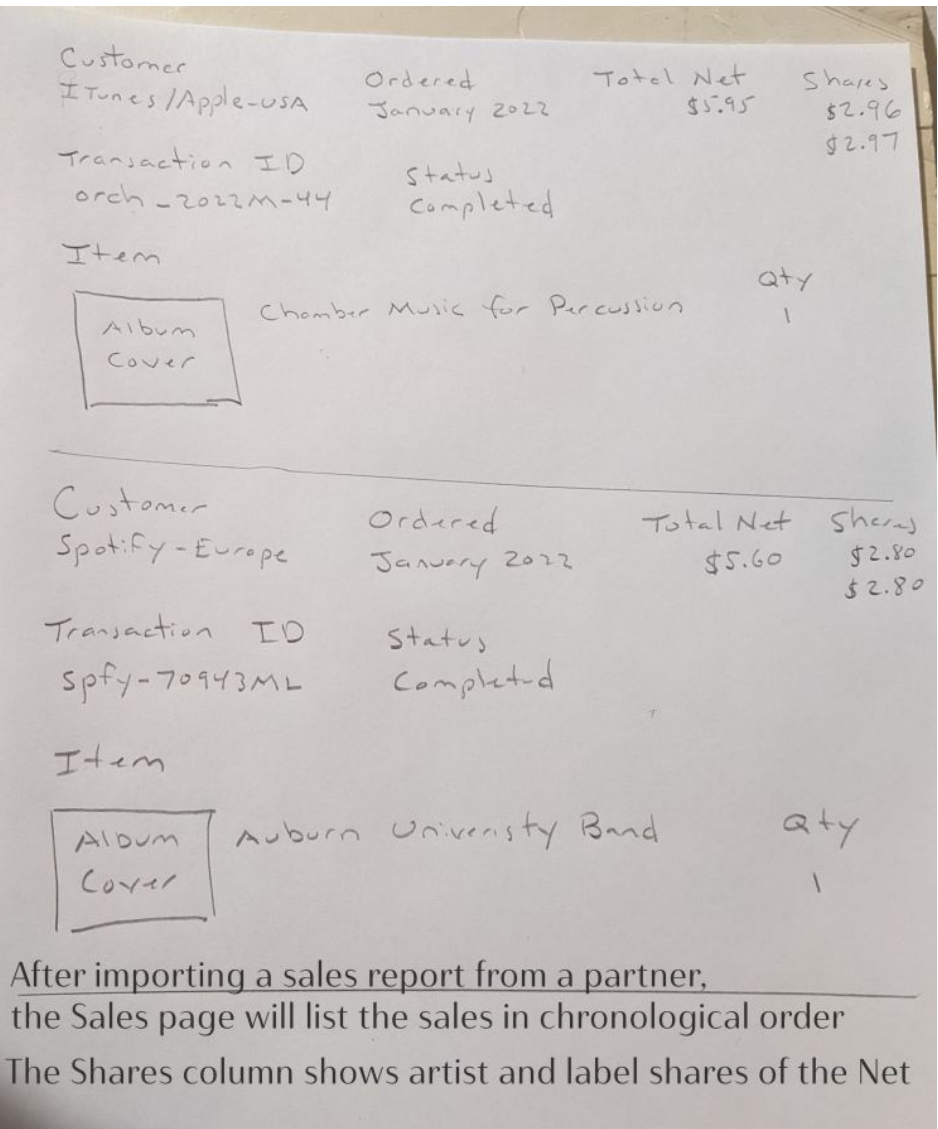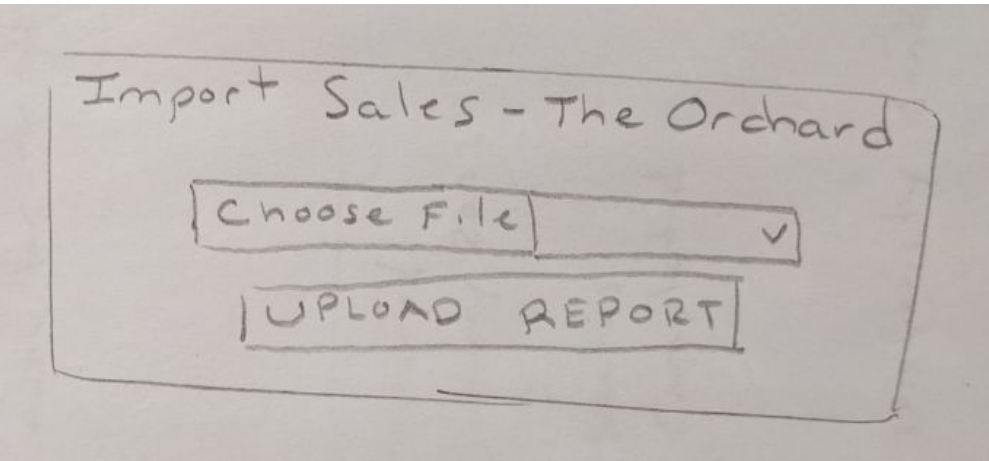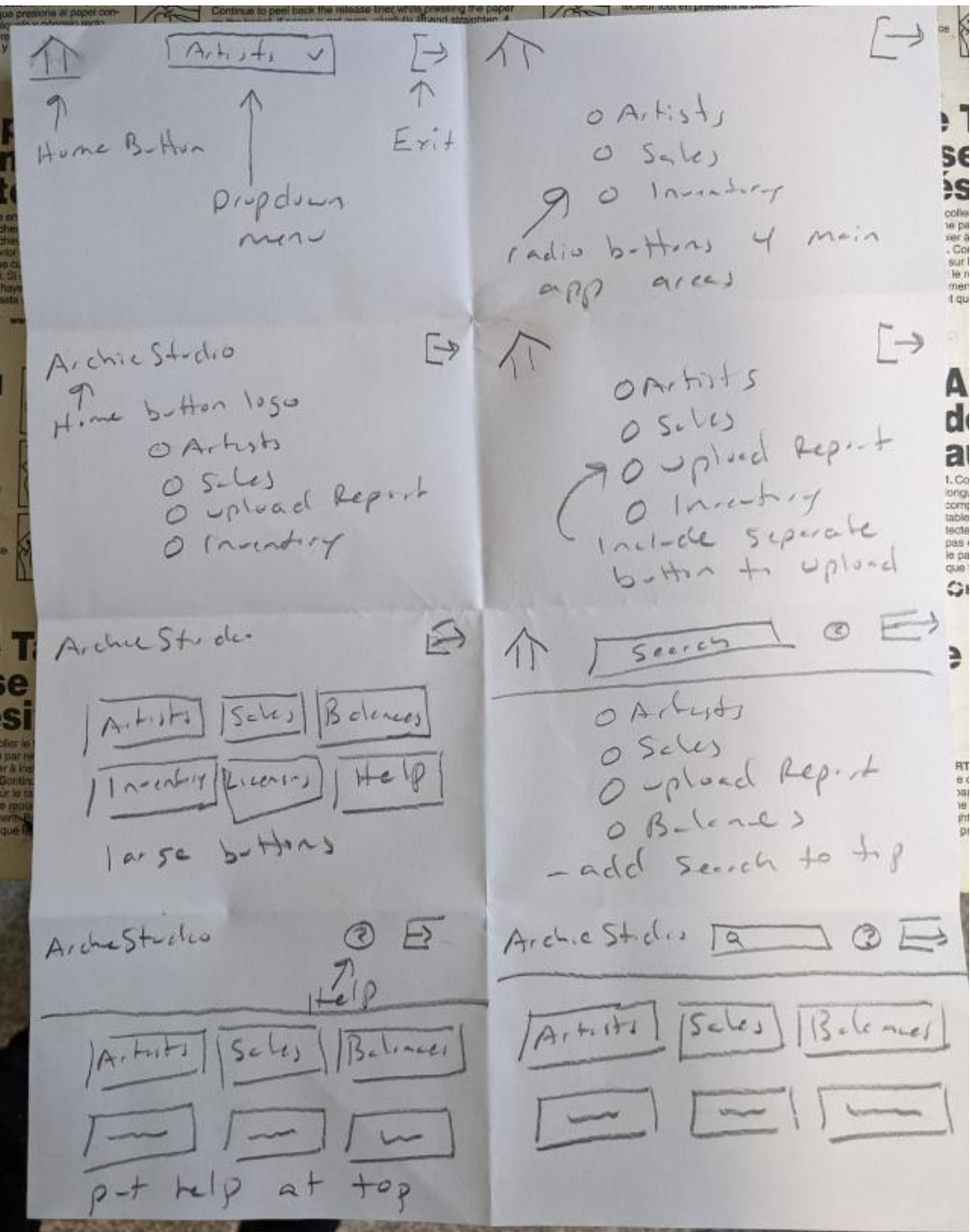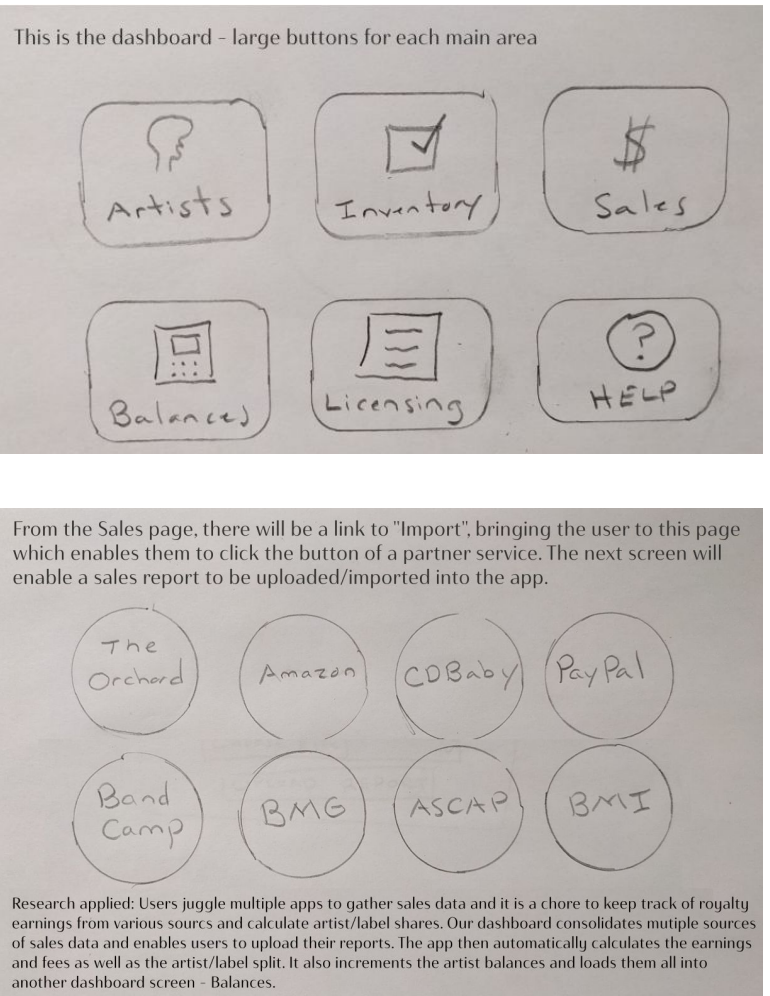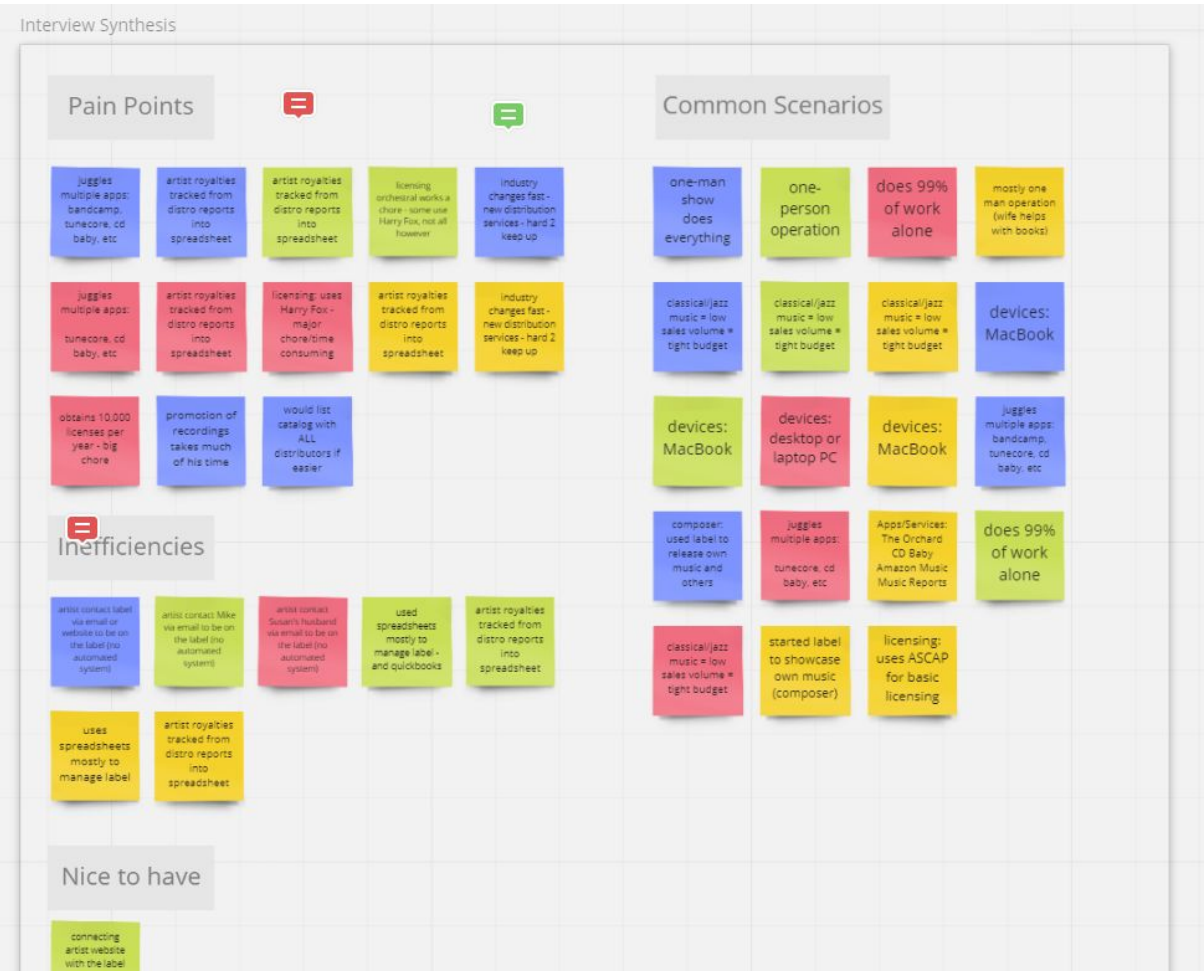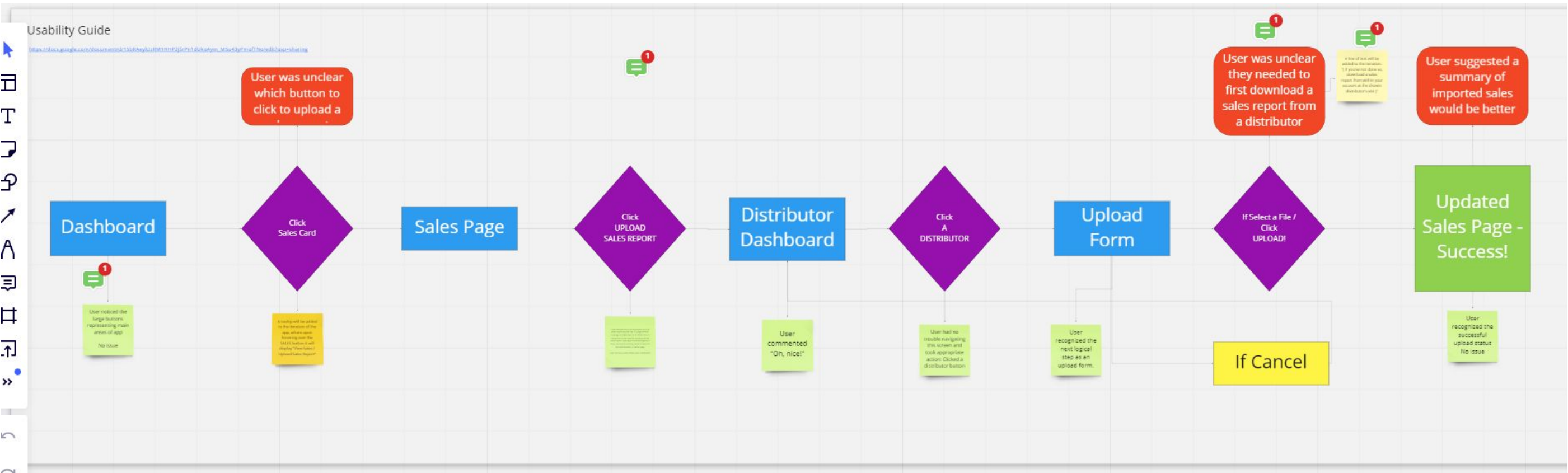
Feature Ideation - Feature Prioritization Matrix

Miro Board

Develop: Prototyping

A basic, functional prototype was developed using Figma:

[Prototype](#)

The prototype focuses on a single user flow within the app:
Uploading a sales report from a distributor such as CD Baby.

This flow was chosen because it represents core-functionality of the app, based on user research. It also provides a view of the basic structure and design of the app, which serves as a template for other areas the app will offer.

Note: Although both desktop and mobile devices will ultimately be supported, the prototype uses a desktop layout because research indicated that desktop and laptops are preferred almost exclusively by the target users.

The Dashboard Prototype
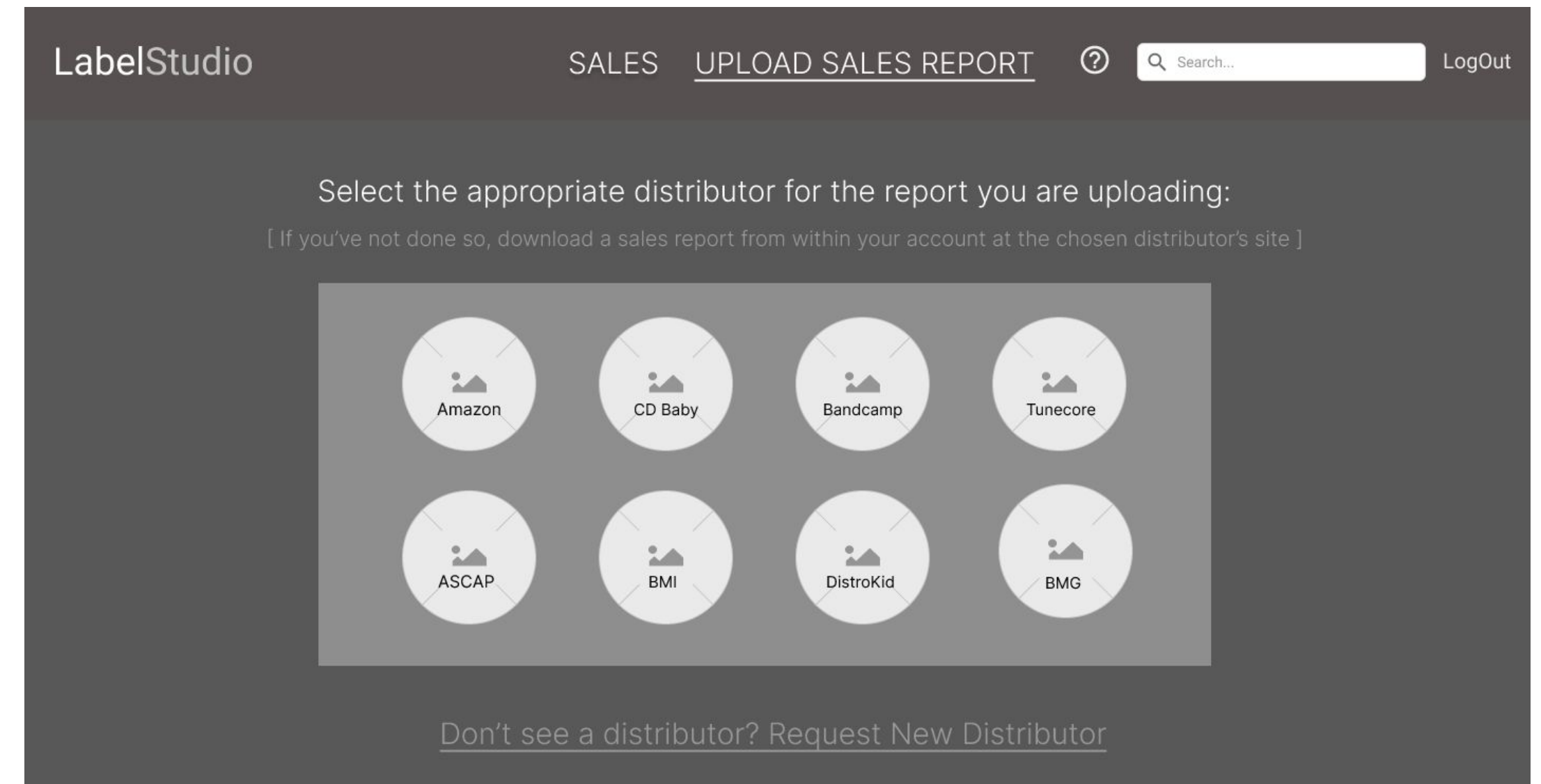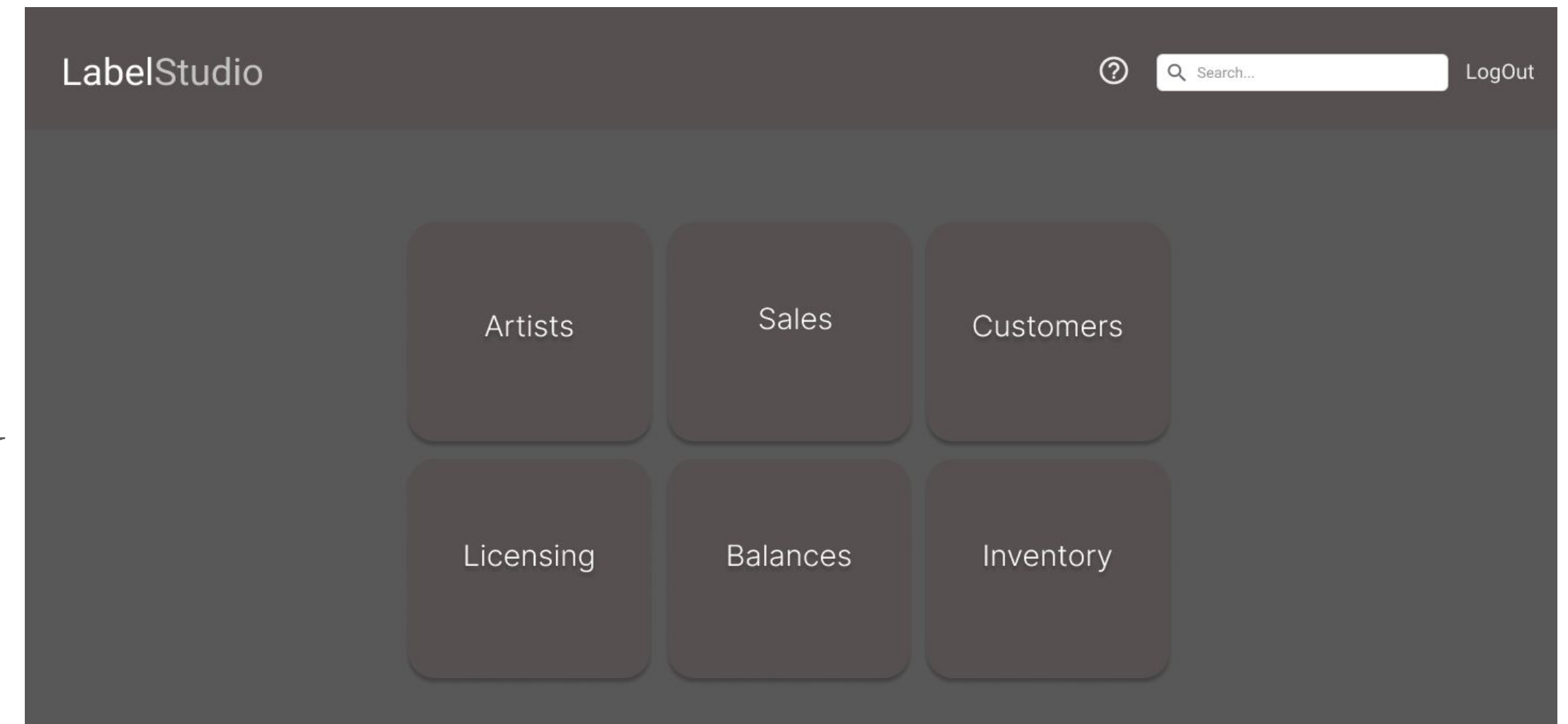
The Select Distributor Screen

Test: Validation, Usability, Feedback

Users were recruited to test the prototype using the Lookback tool, which records user interactions with the app, providing information upon which to iterate the design and improve usability, as well as to validate the basic direction of the app.

It was found that 40% of users hesitated or experienced a moment of ambiguity upon landing on the SALES page, with a goal of uploading a sales report from CD Baby.

20% of users took more time than anticipated before clicking the "UPLOAD!" button on the page that presents an upload form.

These issues were addressed by adding tooltips to icons and buttons, and using contrasting colors for standout elements such as UPLOAD buttons.

A Usability Session Using Lookback

User Testing

Hesitation / Ambiguity: 40
No Hesitation: 60

■ No Hesitation   ■ Hesitation / Ambiguity

meta-chart.com
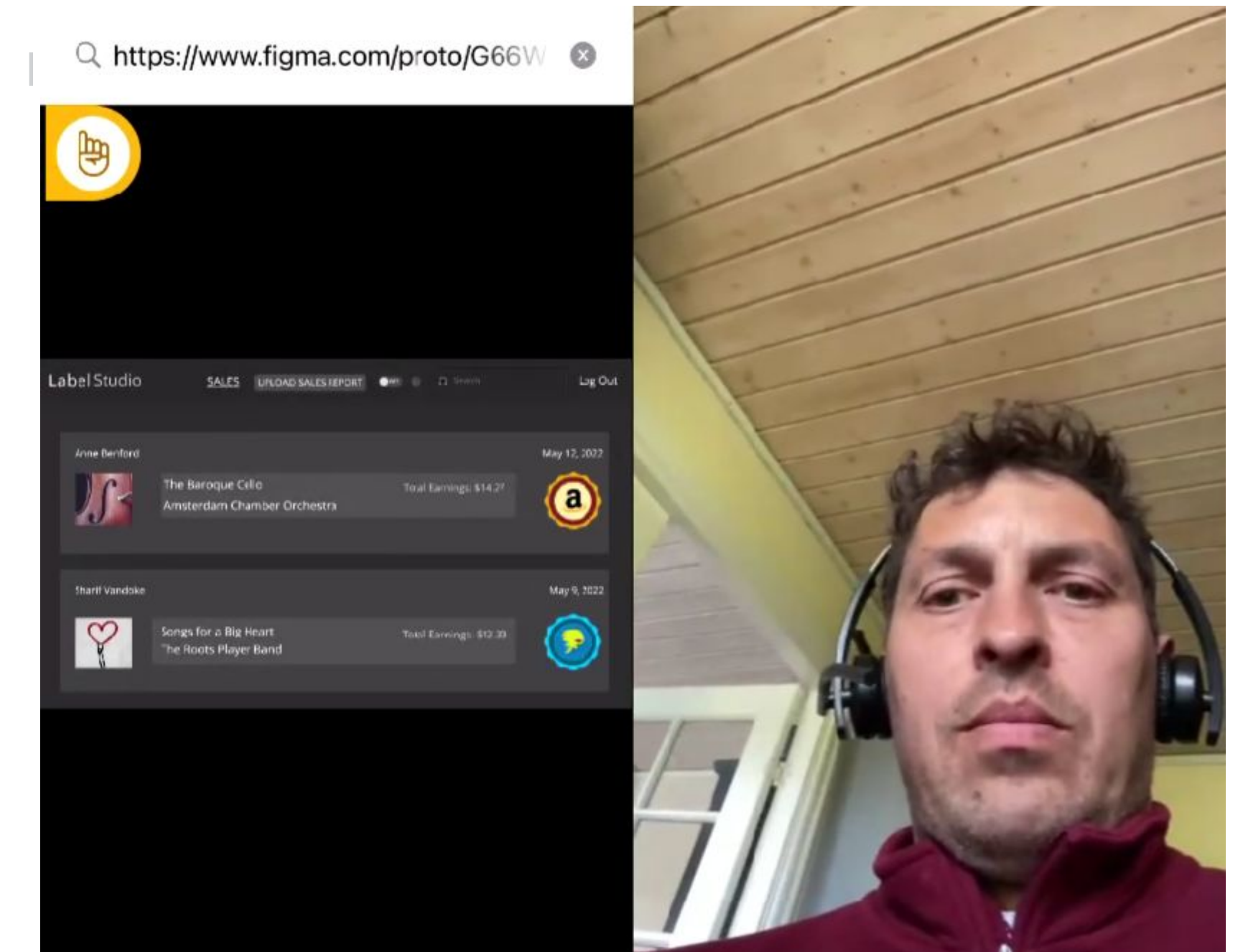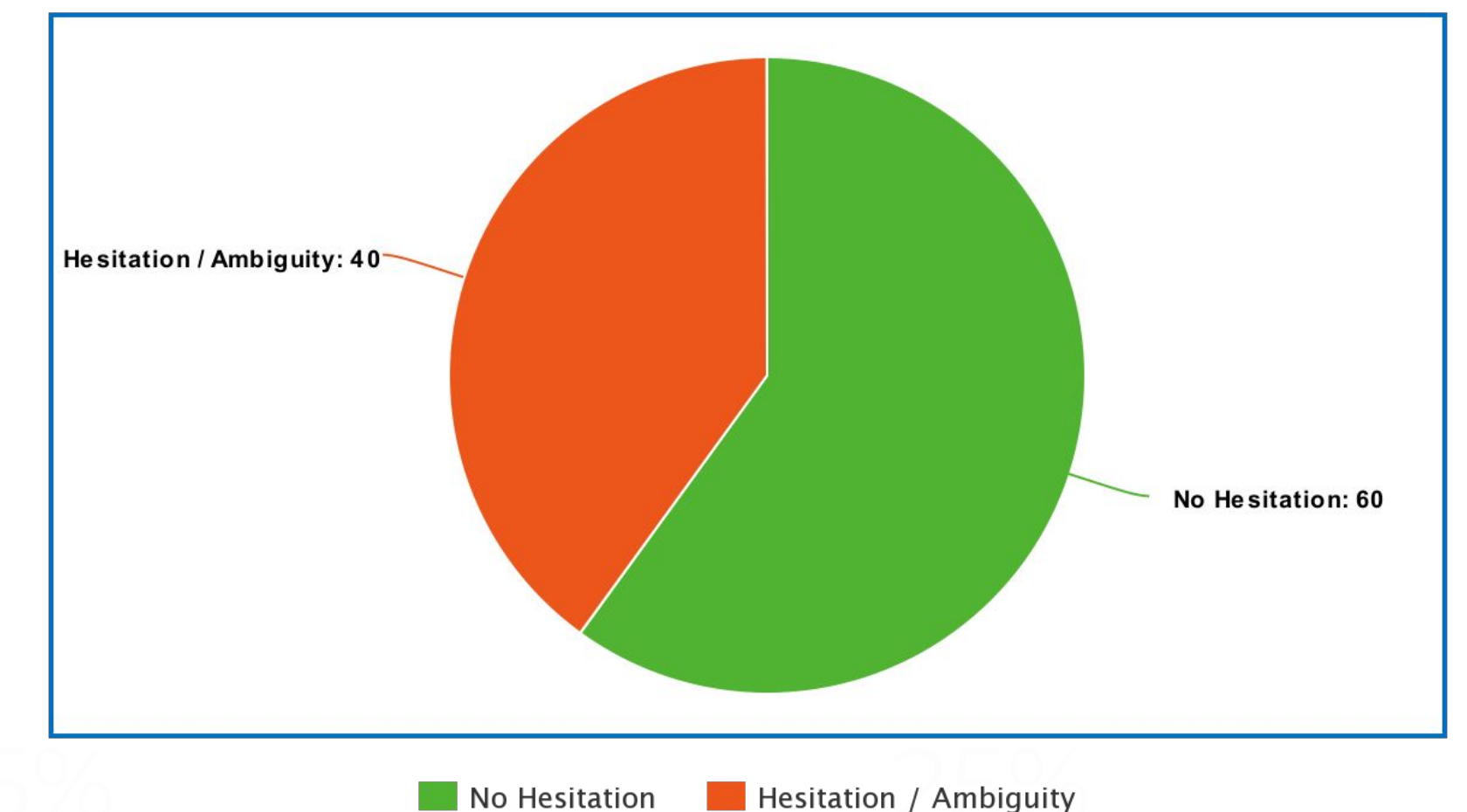
Design: Iteration

To improve usability, the UPLOAD SALES REPORT button at the top was made more prominent, an outline was added around the upload field, and the "UPLOAD!" button was distinguished with a contrasting color.

The "Select Distributor" page added a button representing all of the major distributors, with a link to add additional distributors if needed.

A Dark Mode / Light Mode toggle button was added at the top of each screen, providing users who prefer a high-contrast interface with a better user experience.
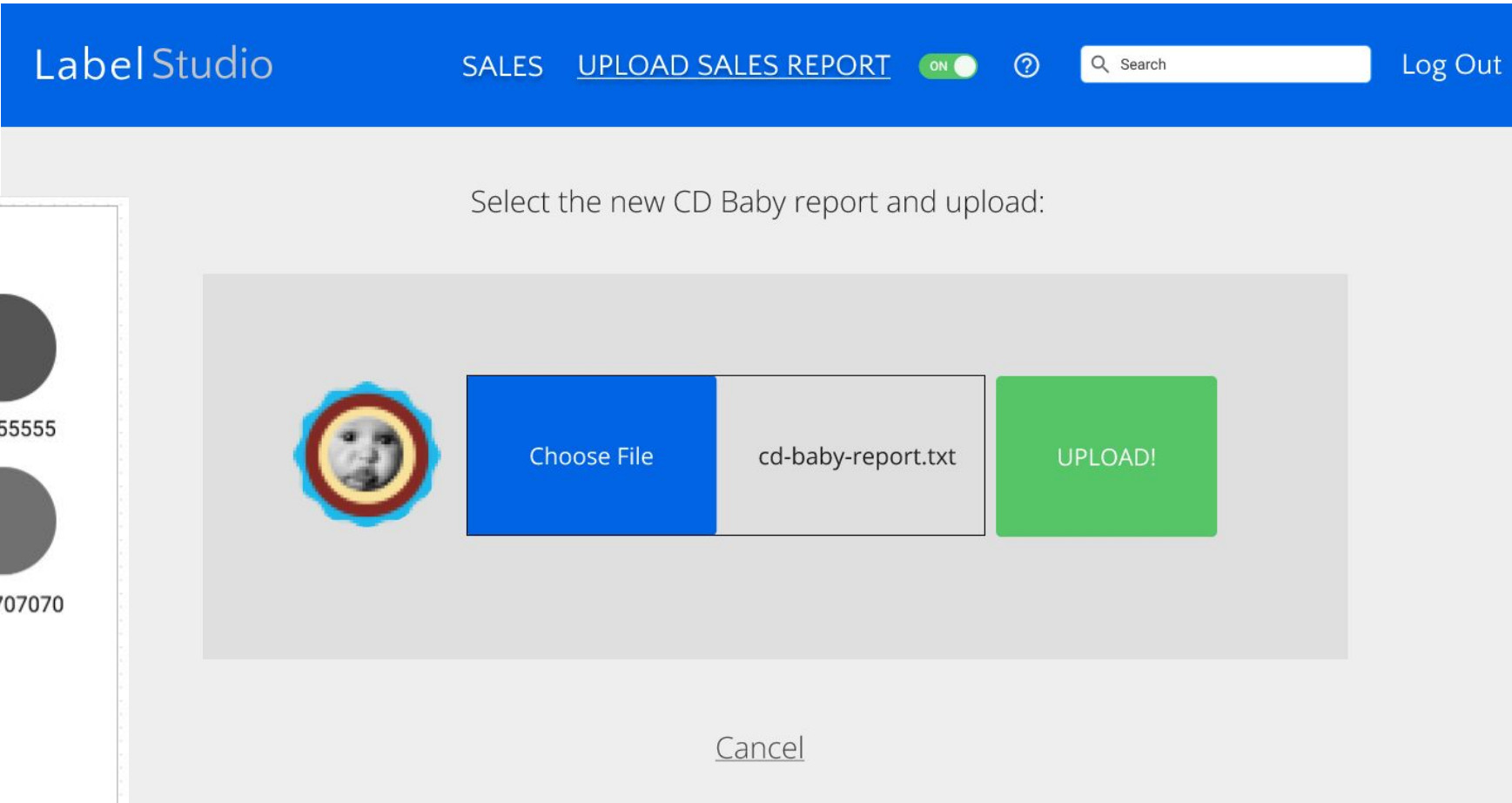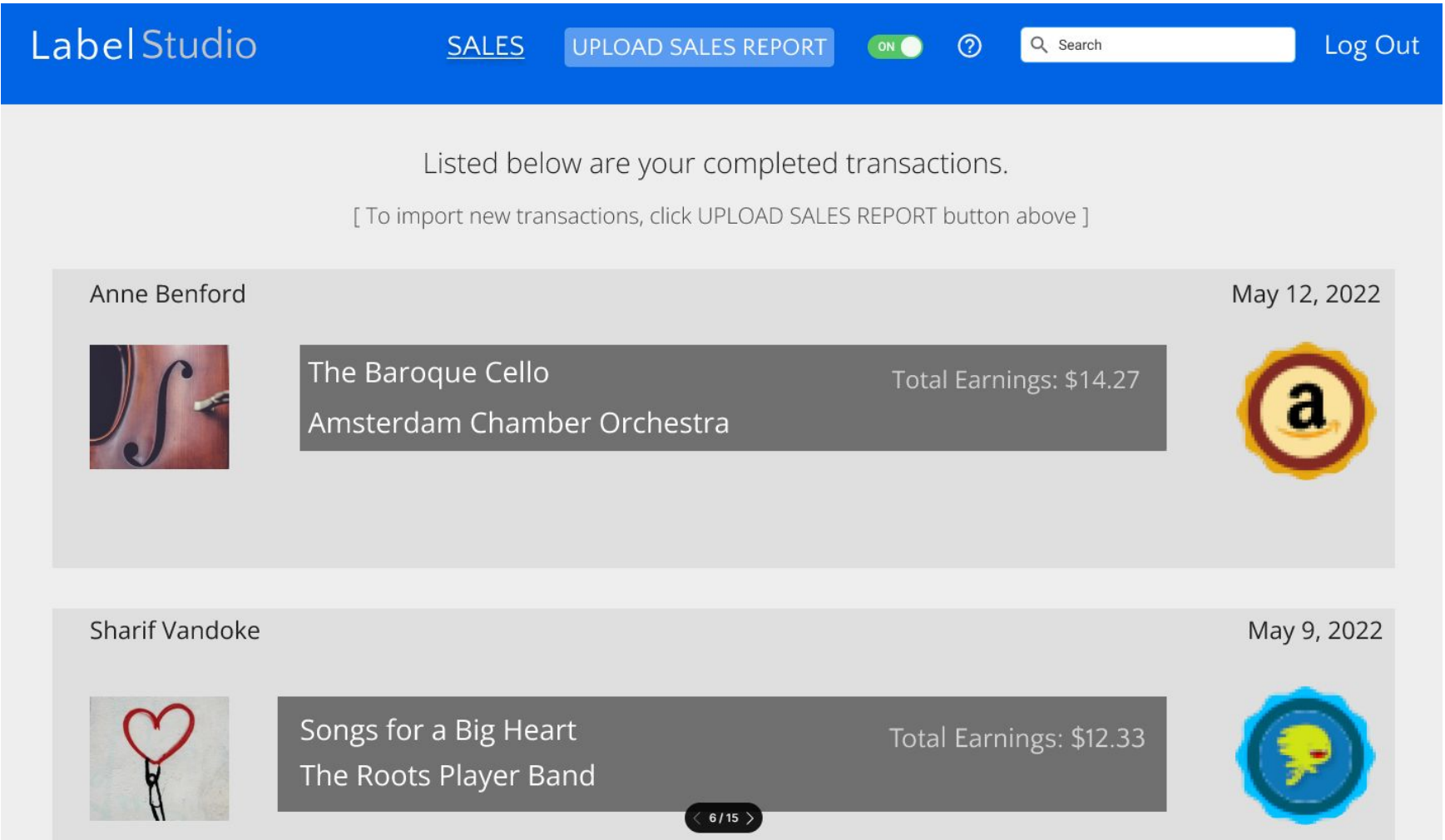
The dark/light theme elements were documented in a style guide.

The Sales Overview Screen Using Light Mode

LabelStudio   SALES   UPLOAD SALES REPORT   ON ●   ⑦   🔍 Search   Log Out

Listed below are your completed transactions.

[To import new transactions, click UPLOAD SALES REPORT button above]

Anne Benford   May 12, 2022

The Baroque Cello   Total Earnings: $14.27
Amsterdam Chamber Orchestra

Sharif Vandoke   May 9, 2022

Songs for a Big Heart   Total Earnings: $12.33
The Roots Player Band
‹ 6 / 15 ›

The Upload Screen Using Light Mode

LabelStudio   SALES   UPLOAD SALES REPORT   ON ●   ⑦   🔍 Search   Log Out

Select the new CD Baby report and upload:

Choose File   cd-baby-report.txt   UPLOAD!

Cancel

The Style Guide

TYPOGRAPHY

Top Logo: Quattrocento Sans Regular 400 42px
Header Text: Quattrocento Sans Regular 400 28px
Body Text: Open Sans Regular 400 24px
Body Sub Text: Open Sans Light 300 22px

ICONS [Dark Theme]

COLORS [Dark Theme]

HEX 282828   HEX 313131   HEX 555555

HEX C4C4C4   HEX FFFFFF   HEX 707070

HEX 585858
50%

ICONS [Light Theme]

COLORS [Light Theme]

HEX E5E5E5   HEX 0064E5   HEX 555555

HEX 222222   HEX 000000   HEX 707070

onents ⌄

The app was given the less generic name: SoundsetStudio, as suggested by a user.

Solution & Impact Overview

Having worked closely for a number of years with Soundset Recordings, addressing the issues it faces as an independent music label, and having developed other apps for small businesses, it is clear that niche users are poorly served by off-the-shelf tools provided by large corporate entities that attempt to be all things to all people and garner market share. They produce "solutions" that are only vaguely matched to the actual problems of users, who may resort to ad-hoc workarounds to accomplish their work.

These users would be better-served by an app crafted around their specific needs and uses.

The high-fidelity prototype implements all of the best design solutions and refinements for a specific user flow, based on feedback and data gathered from user interactions with the app.

High-Fidelity Prototype
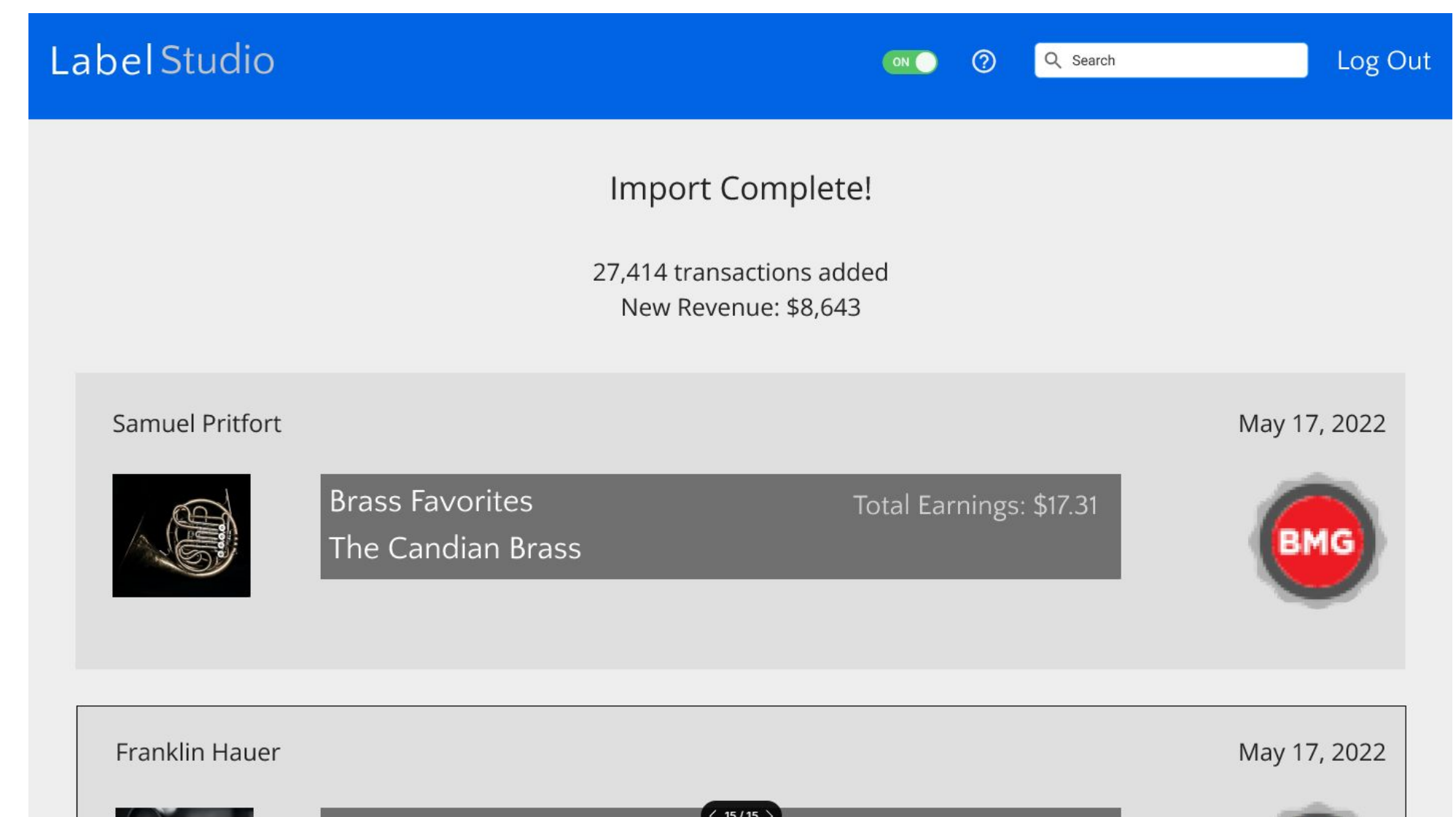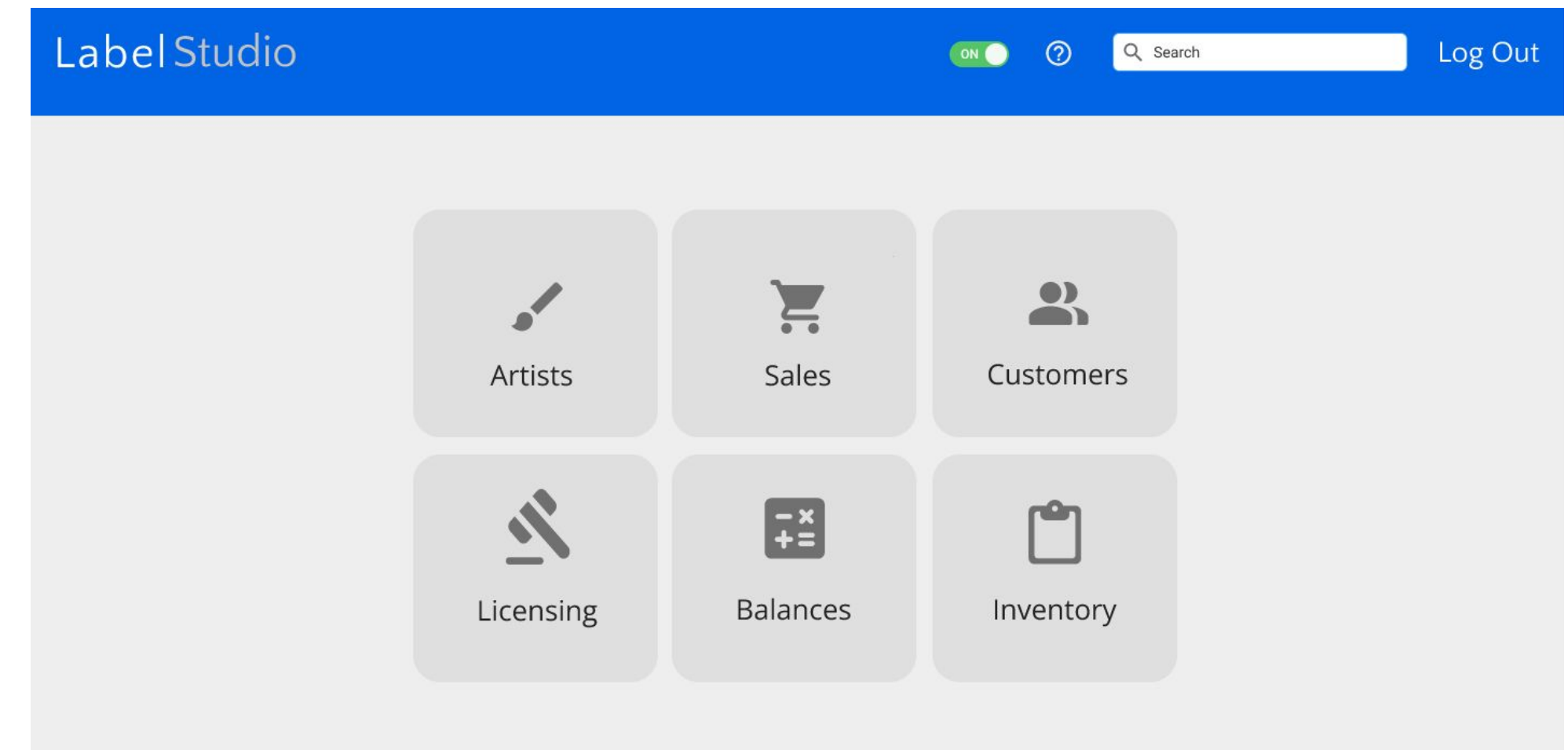
The Final Iteration of the First and Last Screens of the User Flow

About Me

My temperament and outlook resemble the artists and musicians that this app is aimed toward, more than it resembles the businesses and marketing groups that provide many of the tools being used by independent music labels.

I began software development as a graduate student of music performance. My involvement with the arts, combined with my working-class background, informs my work with an appreciation for design and its underlying principles, as well as a pragmatic, human-centered approach to problem solving.