

# 'FX, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll': Engineering the emotional space of the recording studio

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## Abstract

Recording studios are distinctive spaces in which artists are encouraged to expose their emotional selves in intimate moments of musical creativity and performance. In this paper we focus on how music producers and recording engineers engage in the performative engineering of this musical creativity and performance. Through emotional labour performances, producers and engineers re-cast recording studios as emotional spaces as opposed to distinctly technological sites of reproduction. This process of performative engineering through the use of emotional labour is often referred to as 'creating the right vibe' (Watson & Ward, 2013). We argue that these workers are skilled in disguising the intensity and complexity of both the performativity and technicality of sound engineering and music production in that they make the studio a site of 'serious play'. Drawing on 19 very frank accounts of sound engineering work we also present a picture of the 'precarity' of rock n roll, in the form of the lived reality of the emotion work that is undertaken in the presence and under the influence of drugs and alcohol and often in anything less than glamorous working conditions. Our contribution, then, is that music producers and sound engineers are becoming increasingly entrepreneurial in their employment relations with clients and are becoming skilled in creating special 'emotional FXs' as they re-cast the recording studio as a site of creativity, excess and escape to help artists achieve their desired musical performance and to forge their own career in a highly competitive cultural industry.

**Key words:** emotional labour, performativity, creativity, sound engineers, music producers, leisure, precarity

## Introduction

The cultural and creative industries are seen as privileged sites for exploring the roles, function and impacts of innovation, imagination and changing work practices and conditions (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008). Drawing on Rojek's (2010) construction of 'leisure' from a cultural and social theory perspective, it becomes apparent that in many ways the ideas, or ideals, of the cultural and creative industries and the *avant garde* cultural policies that enshrine their status in the developed West, are not too dissimilar to theoretical appreciations of 'leisure'. Rojek (2010:1), for example, states that leisure is '...considered and culturally represented, to exist in a state of voluntarism'. Rojek challenges and critiques the extent to which freedom and autonomy ever really exist even in contexts of leisure and pleasure. For Rojek the most significant questions for leisure studies are 'freedom from what?' and 'freedom from whom'? Following Baudrillard (1970) he explores the extent to which consumer capitalism dictates our appreciations of what might constitute pleasure and fun, that is to say the extent to which we are "bedazzled into enthusiastically colluding in our [sic] own disenfranchisement" (Linstead et al 2014: 172). Such an argument has strong parallels with debates regarding autonomy in the cultural and creative industries. Ross (2003), for example, suggests that such industries often promise their workers 'oodles of autonomy' and 'warm collegiality'. Yet Ross (2003, 2009) and others such as Banks (2007), and Holt and Lapenta (2010) have questioned the true autonomy of workers who are subject to "punishing regimes of self-regulation, self-exploitation, flexibility and precarity" (Bennett et al. 2014: 140). Such debates have pointed to a situation that is more complex than workers simply being 'duped' by the glamour of the creative industries.

Drawing upon these two parallel strands of thinking, this chapter seeks to re-analyse our own data set of interviews with those whom work in the cultural and creative industries as music producers and sound engineers. The music industry is defined by stereotypical images and media representations of excess, pleasure, intensity and play, which have given rise to a folklore of 'sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll'. By applying the 'leisure lens' to our qualitative study of sound engineers, we seek to challenge and explore two main questions: 1) To what extent is the lived reality of working in studio contexts with creative artists

reflected in the stereotypical representations of 'rock n roll'; and 2) To what extent is the 'rock n roll' vibe an organic, voluntary state of creativity or a facilitated 'emotional FX' elicited by studio staff to enhance particular musical performances? In doing so, we seek to also address the "surprising lack of qualitative studies of working conditions in the cultural industries", and the general neglect of the labour process and individual subjectivity in the cultural workplace (Banks, 2007).

We start our exploration of this normally closed and hidden world with a brief review of the contextually relevant literature on emotional labour, followed by a discussion of the contemporary recording studio sector and specifically the changing employment relationships of sound engineers and music producers with the studio infrastructures. Next, we provide a brief methodological explanation before moving on to present the voices of those working in studio environments, paying particular attention to three key themes; emotional FX, drugs and 'rock n roll'.

## **Music Production**

The global music industry is, and in many ways always has been, in a constant state of flux. Watson (2013), however, marks the last half a decade as being characterised by an intensification of instability and technological change. In particular, through the late 1990s and early 2000s, issues around intellectual property rights and the illegal distribution of music coded in new digital file formats (see Leyshon 2001 2003; Leyshon et al. 2005) would tip a music industry already on the verge of crisis into a full-blown 'crisis of reproduction' (Leyshon 2009). The recording studio sector has been hit particularly hard, as the resulting crisis in funding across the musical economy has impacted negatively upon the recording budgets of record companies. Further, the availability and usability of high quality digital software for home-recording, and the means for distributing and promoting this music online, such as social media, means it is now possible to circumvent traditional music production processes and facilities. Consequently, the recording industry has seen a

significant financial decline as the ability to control both production and distribution has become far more amorphous and complex.

These changes have led to transformational changes in the nature of employment relations in the music industry, and particularly for those engaged in recording work. Watson (2013) explores these changes in detail however, for the purposes of this chapter the key change has been the dramatic reduction in the demand for studio time. Notably, this has led to “a spate of studio closures, redundancies, and underemployment within musical agglomerations” (Leyshon 2009: 1309). For those studios that have survived, they find themselves in an industry markedly more precarious, and to which the response has been the emergence of a culture of entrepreneurialism that is re-shaping employment and work in the recording studio sector in a variety of ways. Perhaps most significantly is that given falling recording budgets, professional recording studios can now rarely afford to employ engineers and producers on permanent contracts. Contracted salaried positions are now rare in the recording studio sector, even in the largest of studios. Rather, we are seeing an increased shift towards more flexible and freelance models of employment, in which engineers and producers are brought-in to work on recording projects as and when their particular expertise is required.

Whilst for studios having the ability to recruit staff in this manner has allowed for an increased level of flexibility and control and reduced overheads, it also marks the beginning of a new relationship with the employees that is transactional, contractual and short-term. This, combined with the emergence of increasing numbers of self-employed engineers and producers working from home-studios or small project-studios that require much less investment and maintenance and so have much cheaper rates, means that competition for work between these freelance, project-based workers is often tough. The result is a precarious labour market marked by insecurity and anxiety as to where the next piece of work is going to come from (Entwistle and Wissenger, 2006), and in which bulimic patterns of working (Gill and Pratt 2008, 17) are common; as Leyshon (2009 describes, periods that are light on work - resulting in little or no pay for freelance engineers - are mirrored by periods of punishing overwork when studios are busy.

Against this backdrop of precarity in relation to changes in the employment relations of recording studio work, there have been significant changes to the nature of the actual work itself. Yet, while in recent years a body of literature has emerged that considers issues of freelance work and employment insecurity across the creative and media industries (see for example Arvidsson et al. 2010; Blair 2001 2009; Blair et al. 2001 2003; Christopherson 2002 2004; Dex et al. 2000; Gill 2002; Henninger and Gottschall 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010 2011; Lee 2011), as Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010: 5) note, there have been a “surprising lack of qualitative studies of working conditions in the cultural industries”. For Banks (2007), corresponding with the general neglect of the labour process has been a ‘lack of attention paid to the issue of individual subjectivity in the cultural workplace’ (2007, 27; emphasis in original). It is the subjective issues around work and employment, namely the impact of changing employment relations on the workers and resulting changes in the nature of the work they perform, that is the focus of our research interest. In this chapter, we explore some of these changes, but with a particular interest in the nature of the emotional labour in recording work.

### **Emotional Labour**

Emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) is the term used to describe the process by which emotions and feelings become organisational commodities with an exchange value. ‘This labour requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others’ (Hochschild, 1983:7). Importantly, this type of labour not only requires workers to manage their own feelings but also those of the customers, patients or other employees they encounter, often in very difficult and challenging circumstances (see Ward & McMurray, 2015). There is no surprise then that over thirty years of emotional labour studies have tended to focus on customer service roles, however, a growing interest in the established body of literature from across disciplines has seen a diversification in sites of study – including the cultural and creative industries (Hesmondhalge & Baker, 2008; Wissinger, 2007) and the recording studio itself (Watson & Ward, 2013).

In the cultural and creative industries having the ability to ‘produce the proper state of mind in others’ (Hochschild, 1983:7) is key in that it gives you the ability to elicit appropriate emotional responses from others that enhance the performance, persona or participation of those involved in the project (Hesmondhalge & Baker, 2008). However, what is often overlooked or marginalised is the extent to which such emotional special effects are achieved through the management of personal emotions, reactions and behaviours as an employee in exchange for a wage.

While there has been a growing academic interest in the relationships between music and emotion (see Wood and Smith, 2004; Wood et al., 2007), and in particular the emotional and bodily performances of musicians and audiences (see for example Holman Jones (1999) on women’s music; Morton (2007) on Irish traditional music; and Duffy et al. (2011) on festival spaces), little has been written either on the emotional labour of others working in the music industry, or on recording studios as distinctive spaces of music making (exceptions include Watson & Ward, 2013). Re-visiting this idea again in this chapter, we focus on music producers and recording engineers, working in recording studios, as one such group of people performing emotional labour, to elicit appropriate and desired emotive musical performances. The recording studios then are interesting sonic and cultural spaces in which emotions are ‘routinely heightened’ (Anderson and Smith, 2001) and where “the emotional content of human relations is deliberately laid bare” (Wood and Smith, 2004: 535).

In this chapter, we explore the ways in which engineers and producers in recording studios deliberately manage their own emotions in order to influence, support and elicit desired performances from artists. Emotional labour performances in these settings often aims to re-cast the technological, and often stark, physical space of the recording studio as a site of autonomy and play (referred to by Watson & Ward as ‘creating the right vibe’) – characteristics more akin to leisure contexts than work contexts. These emotional labour performances, then, that are designed to turn the recording studio staffs’ work spaces into sites of pleasure and excess are performed against a backdrop of intense, unsociable and sometimes uncomfortable working conditions for the producers and engineers. It is this intersection of ‘work’ and ‘play’ in the one physical space that makes the recording studio such a rich site for exploring the complexity and multi-faceted nature of emotional labour.

## **Methodology**

An empirical data set of 20 semi-structured interviews form the basis of the discussions presented in this chapter. Interviews were conducted between June 2010 and May 2013 with UK-based recording studio producers and engineers, all but one of whom were based in London. Interviewees were from a range of employment categories (freelance, contracted to a recording studio, or owner-operator of a studio) and worked in studios that ranged from very small project studios to large, internationally renowned recording facilities. Aside from two of the interviews which took place in cafes, all interviews were conducted at the recording studios in which the interviewees worked. Reflective of the nature of the diversity of 'music production' contexts and workplaces the recording studios in which the majority of the interviews took place ranged from large, internationally renowned professional studios through to small, domestic studios in converted outbuildings. Interviewing within the 'context' allowed us a window into what is otherwise a famously closed and protected environment – one we all know exists and can all imagine but few of us have the opportunity to experience. Interviewing in these spaces facilitated a deeper emotional and aesthetic appreciation of the work involved in music production, allowing us to envisage the stories and accounts regaled upon us with some contextual resonance.

The identity of all participants has been protected with the use of pseudonyms; however, ages and genders remain unchanged. It is important to note and acknowledge that all 20 interviewees were men aged between 20-65 years of age. Rather than seeing this as a gendered bias, we argue that given the relatively small sample size, this is representative of the occupation, the world of music production; recording and engineering continue to be dominated by men. Some of the participants had University qualifications in sound engineering and/or music whilst others had no formal sound-engineering qualifications but rather had learnt their skills 'on-the -job' having begun their careers as runners and tape operatives, working their way up to become engineers and/or producers.

All interviews followed a pre-established schedule of questions; however, there was a high degree of flexibility to explore interesting ideas and issues that emerged from the discussions. The purpose of the interviews was to establish an appreciation of the nature of creative work in the studio including the role of technology in the creative process, social capital building and the political and economic landscape of music production. The emotional labour of music production was not, then, a pre-identified focus of the process – instead the emotional nature of the work was a strong emergent theme across the data set. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and systematically coded; from which a number of key themes emerged – and have been the focus of specific publications (Watson & Ward, 2013; Watson, 2013, 2014). In this chapter we seek to draw together three key foci from our existing publications, namely ‘creating the right vibe’ with the help of ‘emotional FX’; ‘drugs’ and ‘rock n roll’ to offer an alternative appreciation of music production work and its associations with perceptions of pleasure, self-expression and risk-taking, in various guises, all three of which we argue are connoted with both leisure and precarity (Beer, 2014).

## **Emotional FX**

Recording studios are a very unique and particular site of musical production. They are most often small, dark, insulated spaces, within which music is produced under conditions of intense collaboration. Brian, an experienced male engineer and studio-owner in his fifties, describes how working in a recording studio is:

...quite an intense process ... you are all basically in a small room together for 18 to 20 hours doing this thing and living it. You basically live with these people for a really intense period of time sleeping very little, working in a really focused kind of environment.



In such an environment, it is essential that studio engineers and producers are able to build friendly, collaborative and constructive working relations with their clients. Central to this is the ability of the engineer or producer to manage their own emotions in such a way as to facilitate the building and maintenance of relationships of affinity and trust. This type of relational work, termed as 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) in academic literature, was to the producers and engineers interviewed understood to involve 'people skills'. In many instances, these people skills were considered equally important, and sometimes even more important, than the ability to perform competently a technical role and operate complex studio equipment. As John, an experienced producer-engineer in his forties from a major London recording studio described, "It's probably more people based than it is technical... you've obviously got to deliver on the technical but it's not really the essence of the job". The importance of personal skills is also emphasised by Terry, a male studio engineer in his thirties:

It is a very personal thing for some people... I would say the social aspect of it is probably about 50% of the whole side of making records... I think a lot of the artists that I work with are really looking to build a relationship massively with a studio and an engineer. So I would say that's a massive, massive factor in it.

Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) argue that in the performance of emotional labour there are interactive effects between the work context and content, and the emotional state of the individual. In the case of studio work, work content refers to the particular music recording project and the genre of music being recorded, while the work context refers to the studio space and the relationships between studio workers and musicians. Following this line of argument, we would expect that the manner in which a studio worker displays feelings to musicians recording in the studio will have a strong impact on the attractiveness of the interpersonal climate within the studio. Put simply, the better the ability of a producer to manage their own emotions, the more likely personal relationships of trust will be developed. This is alluded to by James, a male engineer-producer and studio owner in his forties, who describes his own difficulties in this regard:

Having a good way with people is vital. But the thing is I don't really have such a good way with people, which is a major problem for me. It's harder for me to win people's trust than a lot of producers.

Yet, in order to fully understand the necessity for this kind of emotional labour however, it is necessary to consider recording studios not only as technical and social spaces, but also as spaces of musical performance. As we have seen above, the recording studio is not only a physical setting, but also a social setting, and it is the social setting that acts to determine the meanings being generated by a given performance. Musical performance is a setting in which the emotional is routinely heightened (Anderson and Smith, 2001), but as Small (1998) notes, performing under certain circumstances generates different emotions and different meanings from performing them under others. Recording studios are unique spaces of music performance, in the sense that the emotions of performances and relations are experienced in a very insulated space, often under conditions of intense collaboration. In this sense, the atmosphere and ambience that producers and engineers work to create through their emotional labour – which we have previously termed as 'creating the right vibe' - is crucially important. Nervousness, tension, and a lack of confidence in artists when faced with recording in a formal studio space, for example, can often be prohibitive to artists producing a desired performance or a 'good take'. Getting a performance from a musician is often not about 'forcing' a performance by putting people under pressure; rather, it is about creating a relaxed atmosphere and teasing out a performance, often by being relaxed and easy-going and putting tense and nervous musicians at ease. As Ben, an experienced producer in his forties, described:

Sometimes once that red light goes on people do tend to tense up a bit so getting the best performance isn't about going out there and throwing tea cups at the wall like Alex Ferguson ... You've really got to get the atmosphere right and get everybody relaxed...

An open, relaxed atmosphere which encourages emotional expression through performance will come from projecting a relaxed and friendly disposition, which might often contradict the personal feelings of a producer or engineer. Emotional labour is then a key part in creating a particular atmosphere in the recording studio

Furthermore, unlike in truly live performance settings, studio performances occur without an audience present. In the studio, the producer or engineer becomes the audience. The emotional labour performed by producers and engineers is also important in this respect. In giving feedback on a performance, as Hennion (1990) describes, the producer will not only draw upon a set technical criteria, but also more importantly upon their feelings about the music and the physical sensations they experience because of it. They must also feed energy to performers in the absence of an audience, in an attempt to reproduce the dynamic and emotional nature of live performance within the studio. Being able to capture the dynamic and emotional nature of a 'live' performance on record is crucial as listeners who will buy a recording will not be part of a 'live' performance; rather because they will use the recordings to create their own event, it becomes necessary for musicians and producers/engineers to create performances on record that will serve the purposes of these contexts. As producer Frank Filipetti describes:

In the end the performance is the thing. There are very few people who will buy a record because of the sound of it... Ninety-nine percent of the public buys a record because it does something to them, it moves them, there's an emotional impact, it moves their mind, it moves their body, it does something to them (quoted in Massey, 2000; 198)

For Jarrett (2012; 129), producers work hard to enable and to record sounds that, when listeners hear them, convey the impression of having "escaped the clutches of production

and the constraints of recording technologies. Eliciting emotions in performance, and capturing these emotions on record, is then a key aspect of the emotional labour of producers and engineers.

As Wood et al. (2007) note, musical performances are about intimate encounters with, and the sharing of an emotional experience with, other people involved in the performance. In many instances, songs, and in particular, lyrics will be loaded with feeling and emotion drawn from particular emotional experiences of musicians and recording artists. For producers and engineers, displaying sensitivity and empathy towards these emotional performances is imperative. This empathetic emotional labour (Korczynski, 2003) involves efforts “to understand others, to have empathy with their situation, to feel their feelings as part of one’s own”. Terry, a resident engineer at a medium-sized studio in northwest London, noted the need to be very sensitive:

...it is a very exposing experience for a lot of artists to come into the studio and say here’s a song I’ve written because they trust you to not turn around and say it’s crap, your voice sounds terrible, your lyrics are awful and you’ve just told me the whole story about your failed love life and I’m going to rip the piss out of you about it.

On the other hand, often studio producers and engineers must attempt to elicit strong emotions from the musician or recording artists to capture an emotive performance. Particularly with regards to vocal performances, it is often necessary to get a recording artist into a particular emotional state in order to achieve a ‘believable’ performance. Getting this performance may involve creating the type of relaxed atmosphere described in the previous section; however at times it might also require a producer or engineer to make a musician uncomfortable, or even to upset them. Parallels can be drawn here with Grindstaff’s (2002) and Hesmondhalgh and Baker’s (2008) accounts of television workers being required to elicit the strongest possible version of the emotions felt by contestants on confessional talk shows and talent shows respectively.

As Watson (2014) outlines, in response to the significant challenges that professional studios are now facing from home studios, professional producers and engineers often seek to defend the 'value-added' that comes from recording in a professional recording studio. It is common to point to the limits of the technical abilities of home recordists (see Cole, 2011) when compared against the 'experienced technique' (Zak, 2001) of professionals. Further, the importance of having the experienced, and objective, ear of a producer on a record is often emphasised as a key benefit of recording in a professional studio, and one which is essential to producing commercially successful music. But, based on the above discussion, the 'value-added' of the professional studio, we would argue, is not limited to technical prowess or musical taste. It also includes the emotional support, encouragement and critique that is so crucial to musical performance within a studio context. As Jack emphasised:

...a lot of people record alone in bedrooms these days, they just stick a mic or a guitar into their computer and that's it, they don't have anyone to bounce ideas off, so they get a lot out of working with somebody else.... a lot of it is to do with getting the performance out of them as well.

## **Drugs**

I don't know whether I'm allowed to say this or not...it's just amazing that you can do that many drugs and actually come out of it with something at the end...I've seen that table covered in coke...and...you do a three day session and everyone's on E's...

(Anthony, male producer, forties)

Luke's confessional exposé on the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol upholds the stereotypical images of 'excess' synonymous with the music industry (see Shapiro, 2003; Raeburn et al, 2003; Miller and Quigley, 2006 for examples of substance abuse by artists across a range of genres). Not only can the (ab)use of these substances be something of a status symbol in popular musical culture, but they are often considered to enhance the musical creativity of artists, performers and musicians. Elsewhere, we have briefly alluded to the way in which drug and alcohol use often played a significant role in creating the 'right vibe' in the studio (Watson & Ward, 2013) and therefore required those working within these musical settings to be tolerant of, or even partake in their consumption. Paul, a male engineer in his thirties, explains just how tolerant he has to be and why he feels this is an important part of the creative and social process of creating music:

I suppose they need to be comfortable. So if they need a couple of beers to be comfortable then that's fine. I suppose it is a bit weird because ... you're working with people who you've never met before or only met a few times so if you need a couple of beers to relax then that's fine, but then you also get late night sessions where there's more people around here than need to be here. Especially with the hip hop stuff. We've had 20-30 people out there and they start having a party and you're in here and they'll come in one at a time to do their bit of recording ...

This account of studio work epitomises the connections and disconnects between music making, or '*musiking*' (Small, 1998) and leisure. Whilst the artists and performers have clearly redefined the physical space of the recording studio as a party venue, it continues to be James' workspace. For James this is where he comes on a day to day basis to develop his craft and toil to produce best possible results whilst the artists to which he refers, see this as a space of leisure and enjoyment. However, for some of the sound engineers and producers we interviewed, separating 'work' and 'play' became virtually impossible. Anthony, an experienced pop music producer in his forties, told us of the fact that, despite initially resisting, he had 'succumbed' to taking drugs as part of the social act of music making, an addiction which would last seven years. Anthony then could no longer

separate his 'work' from 'play' as his own role in re-casting the rules and norms of acceptability within the space of the recording studio became a lived reality for him beyond the boundaries of the studio sessions. For those who resist temptation they perhaps have a more complex and subtle relational challenge, as they have to continue to build relationships, trust, credibility and authenticity within the music industry and yet distance themselves from such a culturally dominant practice. Paul made it clear that there was a fine line to be treaded in this regard, and that his approach was one of tolerance rather than totalitarianism: "I don't tend to go round saying 'Well don't have any more drinks!'" . Anthony's take on the use of drugs and alcohol was similar in many ways to that of Paul's with regard to him tolerating the practice; however, it also presents an interesting interplay of the emotional, practical and technical justifications for his approach to managing the use of certain types of drug use:

There's no 'No Smoking' signs in the studio. Generally, people just smoke outside but every now and then someone will turn around and say, 'Is it alright to smoke?' and generally what I say is "You can't smoke cigarettes in here because cigarettes just make so much smoke." Although I have got £2000 extractor fans that can clean the air in here...but some clients I still allow them to smoke joints...but it's a pain because when they do you have to Hoover the studio every night....but I do think if a client feels happy and comfortable they are more likely to be creative aren't they?

For Luke artists smoking cigarettes and marijuana is not difficult or problematic from a moral standpoint but from a purely practical one, in that their use required him to vacuum the carpet after the session. And yet, this had to be weighed against his view that artists partaking in these activities in some way improved their creativity. The interplay of these practical and creative issues problematises stereotypical rock 'n' roll images of pure excess. It is to this issue that we now turn in our analysis.

## **Rock 'n' Roll**

As Beer (2014) notes, it is surprising how little is actually known about the work of recording engineers by those outside of the music production community. In this section we extend our exploration of the 'unknown' to physical space of the recording studio and the nature of the work undertaken in studio contexts. Recording studios are spaces that very few will ever have entered or are likely to, and while a number of music producers have become as famous as the recording artists they work with (for example Mark Ronson, Pharrell Williams, and Timberland), the actual practices of recording work very rarely make headline news. Artistic, creative and technological abilities of sound engineers are purposefully hidden and unspoken in that the work they undertake is designed to enhance that of the artists, not to be seen or heard 'centre-stage'. Beer (2014:191) eloquently makes the point that they are "concealed agents making often unknown contributions to the sonic properties of culture". In contrast, artists, musicians and performers of various kinds often make headline news and invite the public into their private and professional lives in pursuit of fame and fortune. What these often highly-orchestrated, sneak peeks present us with are images of wealth, excess and glamour stereotypically associated with 'rock n roll'.

However, despite the growing celebrity status of a number of music producers (such as Mark Ronson, Timbaland, and Pharrell Williams), and the importance of recording studios within the overall value chain of the recorded music industry, the working lives of producers and engineers continues to be marginalised in academic research, which has tended to focus on the effect of changes in the industry upon record companies (exceptions include Leyshon, 2009; and Gibson, 2005). Building on Watson's (2013) study of work and employment in the studio sector, we present a somewhat subversive image of 'rock n roll' through the voices of those who work in the industry and how they feel about what they do. As Andrew, an experienced male engineer in his sixties noted, "Some people see it as a very glamorous job, but in fact, it isn't really". Further, as Ben describes, music recording is often not as 'exciting' or as 'rock 'n' roll' as one might think may suggest: "You see it's kind of easy for bands because they do one record and then they go on tour. Then they're excited to come back in but you're in the studio all the time".



Undertaking qualitative research with engineers and producers within their work settings has, as researchers, given us an invaluable insight into the working conditions of producers. Aside from the major recording facilities (what are informally termed within the sector as ‘pot-plant’ studios because they have a formal reception area, adorned with indoor plants, for welcoming clients and guests ) studios are most often dark, small, insulated spaces. Many of the studios in which interviews were undertaken were in converted outbuildings of residential properties, or within a small industrial/storage unit. Aside from recording equipment, these studios are generally relatively sparse with little in the way of creature comforts (other than a couch and a fridge), natural light or fresh air. It is within these spaces that engineers undertake often repetitive and time consuming tasks, over very long hours of work. As Jack, a young engineer in his twenties at a major London recording studio describes:

Most studio days are twelve hours in a session... so let’s say you can start recording at 10am and record until 9pm but you have to be in early at 8am the next day and finish at 10pm and then you’ve got to set up for the next day... so it is pretty rough...

(Jack, male engineer, twenties)

As with any other sectors of the cultural economy, the intensity and precarious nature of the work means that work needs to be done when it is there (see Watson, 2013), and thus there is little tolerance for turning down work or overrunning with work as this has a detrimental effect on the day’s schedule. This can result in periods of ‘punishing overwork’ when studios are busy (Leyshon, 2009).

Furthermore, within these small, insulated spaces, recording studio workers are often subject to the “brutal power relations” (Leyshon, 2009: 1316) that frequently play out in recording studios. Ben described his experience of these power relations playing out in recording studios in the 1980s:

...work in a studio was equivalent to now working in a kitchen with Gordon Ramsay. It was that type of environment, where you'd have an engineer producer who was just a complete b\*\*tard and get upset about the smallest things that didn't matter.

As Richard, a young engineer in his twenties, noted, "I think one of the most important things for people that are coming into the business and want to be engineers and want to work in studios, there's a very distinct hierarchy" (Richard, male studio engineer, twenties). The hierarchy consists of, at the top end, studio managers, producers and chief engineers, down through senior engineers, engineers, and assistant engineers. At the very bottom of the hierarchies sit tea boys/runners, who do a range of jobs from setting up microphones and looking after the phones to making tea and cleaning the toilets. As Richard goes on to explain, "... as a new assistant working in studios you've got to be very ... you've got to be there when you're needed. You might go and set up a mike or make a cup of tea, so it's quite hierarchical".

For many junior engineers, whether they have any formal training/education in sound engineering or not, their 'formal' career in the recording studio sector begin right at the bottom of this hierarchy as a runner, or 'tea boy', with high demands being placed on them to perform both technical and menial tasks and work exhausting hours. As Jack goes on to explain of his own experience:

So I started here and as you do when you're twenty one fresh faced and got no ties... you have a social life but you don't after you start working here and eventually I was doing ninety hours a week for probably about the first six, seven years of working here... I was very enthusiastic it was averaging ninety hours some weeks would be a hundred and fifty, a hundred and twenty hours some weeks would be a bit quieter like kind of forty...

Ben suggests that these long hours are “almost kinds of rites of passage to burn” for young studio workers. Such quotes emphasise that the nature of studio work is most often unglamorous and hard. Further, as the quote below from James highlights, it is also very often physically and emotionally demanding:

I was freelancing at [studio] for a couple of years and then I didn't exactly have a nervous breakdown; I had a physical breakdown, which is like... I over did it and it completely destroyed me. Long hours, a lot of stress and it was very, very difficult...

## **Conclusion**

It is evident from the above discussion that recording studio work is clearly demanding, unspoken, unglamorous, often repetitive and unexciting, and most certainly precarious. It is also emotionally charged; on the one hand workers must manage their own emotions in such a way to build relationships and elicit emotional performances from artists; on the other, they can be subject to physical and emotional stresses from the work, including long hours and exposure to alcohol and substance abuse. These accounts of the ‘dark side’ of organisational life (see Linstead et al, 2014; Ward & McMurray, 2015) within the music industry stand in stark contrast to the aspirational stereotypical images of the rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle of excess enjoyed by those working in the music industry. In closing this chapter, we argue, then, that recording studio work is less about FX, Drugs and Rock ‘n’ Roll and more about engineering the emotions of self and artist, to create illusions of freedom, excess and pleasure associated with leisure. We have sought to emphasise the reality of recording studio work is, as is so often the case across the creative and cultural industries more widely (see Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011), considerably less glamorous than rock ‘n’ roll folklore and popular imagination might suggest.

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