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Woolley, Jason and Christie, Fiona (2021) Musicians' work : creativity, community and insecurity. In: Decent Work : opportunities and challenges. Emerald, pp. 113-128. ISBN 9781801175876 (hardback); 9781801175869 (ebook)

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**Downloaded from:** <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/627299/>

**Version:** Accepted Version

**Publisher:** Emerald

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80117-586-920211009>

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Please cite the published version

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## **Chapter 9: Musicians' Work: Creativity, Community and Insecurity**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter examines the evolving nature of work patterns and income streams for contemporary Musicians in the UK. It explores the experiences of independent, portfolio career Musicians working in the Rock/Pop/Indie/Jazz Live Music scene. The Music industry is reported to contribute £5.2bn in GVA to the economy, of which according to UK Music (2019) £2.5bn is generated by 'Creative Sector' workers, which includes performing Musicians. Despite these high revenues, UK Music (2019) consistently reports that many Musicians earn below the average working wage of other professions. Challenges to Musicians' work and income streams have been compounded by changes in consumption of Music due to digitisation, a lack of systematic support from Government for Grass Roots venues, and unequal revenue distribution. In this context, we reveal findings from research interviews with Musicians, which were conducted just before and during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic (mainly in the North of England and Wales). Our research discovers how these Musicians utilise informal community mechanisms to navigate poor working conditions, value 'dignity' and 'meaningfulness' above remuneration, and often default to individualist assumptions regarding career success.

**Key words: Musician; decent work; self-employment; meaning of work; creative industry; trade union; gig economy**

## **Introduction**

As authors, our initial interest in undertaking the research for this chapter was a curiosity about Musicians' relationship to the gig economy. The term 'gig' is believed to be derived from the word 'gigue' (an Italian Dance), and for Musicians, gig has been embedded in popular language (long before the advent of the modern gig economy) to refer to a one-time contractual engagement such as a one-off paid Musical performance. There is not a clear consensus about definitions of the gig economy. In a recent government report, the 'gig economy' was defined as the "exchange of labour for money between individuals or companies via digital platforms... on a short term payment by tasks basis" (BEIS, 2018, p. 4). However, definitions elsewhere can be more generic including other types of casualised work. The BBC have used a wider description: "a labour market characterised by the prevalence of short-term contracts or freelance work, as opposed to permanent jobs" (Wilson, 2017). Work for many performing Musicians shares such insecurity and our research discovers how Musicians navigate such working lives, how they secure work, what Musical work they will or will not engage with, how they benchmark the terms and conditions of the work they accept and what they consider to be Decent Work. We also wanted to consider if and to what extent, the original 'gig' workers may identify themselves and/or become more clearly identifiable members of the modern gig economy? The research project participants were from a wide range of Musical genres, and our study included Musicians who were vocalists and instrumentalists performing professionally at public venues before the Covid-19 emergency.

Beyond our interest in Musicians and the gig economy, we also wanted to use the lens of Decent Work to illuminate the nature of Musicians' working lives, as we were aware that both the Musicians Union (MU) and UK Music consistently highlight challenges to conditions

of work that are prevalent in the Music business. The MU has sought to establish benchmarks for fair pay for Musical work including gig rate advice. The MU's 'Work Not Play' campaign is aimed at both Musicians and those that offer performance opportunities, such as promoters. The MU have identified providers, including the London 2012 Olympics, who they argue have exploited Musicians to work for low pay and the promise of greater exposure. They express considerable concern about the "growing trend of professional Musicians not being paid for their work" (Musicians Union, 2020c). Although the MU actively discourages them from doing so, Musicians often have little choice but to accept low pay (even no pay) and reduced conditions in the hope of this leading to better quality work. Their working choices cannot be depicted as convenient and flexible, as some propose is the appeal of general gig economy work. The level of commitment needed to accrue Musical skills means that becoming a Musician is often an 'active career choice'. It is hard to imagine an Uber driver working for free as a means of gaining greater exposure.

Within the Creative Industries, it is not only Musicians who experience insecurity of working conditions. Although this study contributes to literature about this occupational group, we believe our chapter adds to debates about Creative Industry workers, especially those in the wider Performing Arts. Through thematic analysis of data collected via research interviews, we extend understandings of the lived human experience behind some of the numbers and challenges reported upon by UK Music (2018, 2019) and the MU (2020b, 2020c). In doing so it will be possible to understand more about how Musicians make sense of working conditions, which raises concerns for us as authors about Decent Work.

## **Musicians' work**

The Music by Numbers report (UK Music, 2019) categorises Music Performers within the ‘Music Creators’ Sector which also includes other practitioners such as composers and producers. As successive reports have highlighted (UK Music, 2018, 2019), on average many Music Creators earn significantly less than other professions. A continuing theme is the remuneration gap between earners in the Music industry: “A small proportion of creators in the industry do earn exceptionally well”, but regardless of the headline figure for the Music Industry’s contribution to GDP, “...these figures do not reflect the financial struggles of many Music creators” (UK Music, 2019). For example, it has recently been widely reported that Dua Lipa<sup>i</sup> amassed earnings of £25 Million in 2019 (Bullock, 2020), whereas the average Music Creator’s annual wage in 2019 was £23,059.

According to UK Music (2019, p.11): “many Music creators still find it hard to sustain a full-time career. This has resulted in a workforce where many juggle multiple roles within the industry”. They go on to report that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) has calculated that 72% of workers in the Music, Performing and Visual arts are self-employed, which contrasts with ONS figures of 15% across the whole UK working population. This is a remarkable contrast and as Haynes and Marshall (2018) suggest, whilst self-employed creative industries workers are often ‘associated’ with autonomous and creatively fulfilling working lives, they also often face job insecurity and financial instability, which leads them to draw upon multiple income streams.

Musicians are beginning to secure work through platforms and websites, but the development of this appears patchy. Alongside subscription based ‘notice board’ and community platforms like Media-Match.com, there are some emerging app and web based platforms such as San Diego start-up ‘Gigtown’, Boston based ‘Groupmuse’, UK based ‘Encore Musicians’ and also the Australian based ‘HomeMadeJam.net.au’ and ‘Parlourgigs.com’. We wanted to find out to what extent such platform approaches to work had

encroached upon established Musicians' working lives. Musicians' activities do align with the more highly skilled subcategories of gig work definitions in that they deliver "high-skill creative ... tasks", with a delivery method which is usually more akin to "manual service work... that is carried out on a customer's premises", rather than delivered "electronically from anywhere" (Huws, Spencer, & Joyce, 2016, p. i). Websites and platforms for Musicians' work are similar to platforms for the highly skilled such as Upwork and Malt rather than Uber or Deliveroo.

### **Musicians and Decent Work**

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) have been championing Decent Work as an instrument of international public policy for two decades with variable success. The concept is recognised widely and is now one of the UN's 2030 Sustainability goals. A recent Global Commission on Work has renewed the debate with calls for urgent action and practical recommendations (ILO, 2019). Arguably, this international movement has influenced national policy to improve working conditions, e.g., in the UK, central government has commissioned work to explore the concept of 'Good Work' (Carnegie UK Trust & RSA, 2018; Taylor, Marsh, Nicol, & Broadbent, 2017). Political leaders in the UK have stated their commitment to improve worker conditions especially for those in what is described as atypical work, eg, in the more recent evolution of the platform-based gig economy as well as more established atypical workers such as freelancers, although legislation has not yet been enacted.

Many Musicians who are self-employed can be broadly categorised as being in atypical work and their working lives bring alive discussion points of relevance to Decent Work. Similar to other industries, trade union membership is relatively small and only a small proportion of Musicians are members of the MU. Industrial relations writing about musicians has highlighted

the tension between trade union membership and ‘meaning of work’ issues as musicians often reject the idea that the union can have a role in regulating conditions of intrinsically motivated creative work (Umney & Coderre-LaPalme, 2017). In 2018, the MU represented around 31,000 Musicians and in the same year UK Music (2018) published an estimated 91,153 full time equivalent roles that they classed as ‘Musician’ in the UK. The MU has established campaigns (Musicians Union, 2020a) such as ‘The Musicians Passport’ as a response to the challenges Musicians face due to Brexit, and also ‘Fair Pay for Musicians’, ‘Keep Music Live’, ‘Support My Music Teacher’ and ‘Fix Streaming’ to name a few. The Covid-19 emergency has highlighted the greater vulnerability of such atypical workers, especially in sectors where social distancing has stopped activity. Urgency with regard to the social protections required by workers has been argued for. As Live Music events and venues have been closed, Musicians are one group where the risks of precarious/insecure and unequal incomes are amplified. At the same time, the crisis highlighted the important contribution to Arts make to public entertainment and wellbeing, which is separate from the economic value the sector brings to the nation. The MU have argued for this in their ‘Donate to support Musicians’ campaign (Musicians Union, 2020b).

Musicians are a good example of workers who may not have security of income or even minimum wage at times, but may be successful on their own terms. The importance of creativity and meaningfulness problematises definitions of Decent Work which emphasise objective measures only (Blustein, Kenny, Di Fabio, & Guichard, 2019). The tradition of Musicians’ work resonates with a protean career model of work that is influenced by intrinsic values and subjective success criteria (Hall, 2004; Hall, Yip, & Doiron, 2018). The significance of having a creative outlet and getting recognition for one’s work rather than a secure or lucrative income may well be a feature of many Musicians’ lives (Dries, Pepermans,

& Carlier, 2008). In addition, Beech, Gilmore, Hibbert, & Ybema, (2016) have reported upon the complexity of a Musical identity which goes far beyond earning a living making Music.

Academic literature about Musicians illuminates some of these issues. Umney and his co-authors have reflected critically upon the working lives of Jazz Musicians in particular, though highlighting issues of wider relevance to Musicians working in other genres (Umney & Kretsos, 2014, 2015). They have identified important themes in how Musicians manage insecurity. They explore the importance of a passion for Music, work/enjoyment blurring, individualism and self-expression, and how some Musicians purposefully opt against regular work. They also reveal how individual Musicians make choices about stability which may be associated with subordinating a passion and also highlight how socioeconomic backgrounds are crucial in order to cope with insecurity (Umney & Kretsos, 2015). In their research, they also evoke tensions between creative autonomy, entrepreneurialism, collectivism, community, as well as a fatalism about poor work conditions. The importance of a unique set of collective values was observed by Coulson (2012) although Umney (2017) argues that competition threatens this. There are complex issues to navigate in Musicians 'moral economy' with tensions between market vs moral values, between Musicians and a surrounding network of venues, Agents, Fixers<sup>ii</sup>, and Bandleaders. The use of technology via platforms for organising work could further disrupt this. In a similar vein to Umney and his co-authors, Haynes & Marshall (2018) describe Musicians as reluctant entrepreneurs and highlight that their model of work has epitomised how modern working practices have developed with individuals just being paid for the work they do rather than having salaried jobs with the benefits of sick pay and holiday pay. In Music education literature, the emphasis for new Musicians to think of themselves as entrepreneurs and needing to develop business and transferable non-Music skills (Bennett & Bridgstock, 2014) has emerged as a pragmatic recognition of insecure work.



## **Methods**

This research draws upon thirteen interviews conducted between November 2019 and June 2020 with professional and semi-professional Musicians from locations in the North of England and Wales. One participant was based in the Czech Republic but had extensive experience of working in the UK. All participants were active performers before the Covid-19 pandemic and regularly performed Music to live audiences in professional venues. Participants' activities cross a broad range of Musical styles including Jazz, Indie, Rock and Pop Music, and whilst a number had experience of 'function' or 'corporate' performance activities, many had experience of performing their own 'original' Music and some were engaging with both corporate and original activities. All the Musicians interviewed had work activity profiles we might class as 'portfolio' (Handy, 2011), and whilst some demonstrated Music only related portfolios (e.g. performing, instrumental teaching, Music classroom teaching, Music related lecturing), for a number of participants their portfolios contained non-Music related activities such as work in the retail sector or teaching in different subject areas. This small sample follows the approach of other authors writing about Musicians (Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Umney & Kretsos, 2014) and the lead author's role as a practising Musician gave valuable insider access and credibility to this community. We sought a small sample that could illuminate in depth the lives of many Musicians who may struggle to earn a basic and secure average living wage from Music despite being highly skilled. Notably, as will emerge in discussion of the findings, some in our sample had chosen portfolio careers to avoid the hardship, insecurity and precariousness of professional performance careers.

The age range of participants ranged from late 30s up to early 60s and whilst efforts were made to reach a more diverse sample, the majority interviewed were white male (n10) compared to white female (n3). Recruitment to the research was done utilising a 'snowball' method. Interviews were semi-structured and questions sought to explore the following;

working practices, including how they secured work, what conditions they were willing to accept for performance work and what they felt Decent Work looked like in the Music industry. Furthermore, we wanted to understand whether, as the original ‘gig’ workers, whether ‘gig’ working platforms similar to those that have gained traction in industries such as Transport and Food Delivery have begun to penetrate the Music Industry. Some further additional discussions after interviews occurred which sought to find out about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst we do offer our insights later in the discussion, we are also clear that this was a small-scale qualitative study that does not offer generalized claims beyond what the participants shared with us of their own experiences. However, our findings seek to raise questions of wider general interest.

## **Findings and discussion**

The following is a discussion of participants’ responses relating to three thematic areas, which emerged as important, and of relevance to our desire to focus on issues surrounding Decent Work. Many of the participants in this study reported a portfolio of work activities, including undertaking additional roles, both Musical and non-Musical, to support their Music performance activities and life commitments. All were established and had secured ways to navigate their work as Musicians with a reasonable level of success. Participant quotations were selected as illustrative of key themes and are anonymized in our discussion and each one is given a number to identify them.

### *The Musicians Union; ambivalent perspectives*

In the UK report *Measuring Good Work* (Carnegie UK Trust & RSA, 2018), trade union membership is recommended as a job quality measure relating to Voice and Representation.

This follows the ILO's commitment to trade unions as important for 'Social Dialogue', which is one of the four pillars of Decent Work. Historically, trade unions are considered the key 'mouth piece' of organised workers in securing the range of decent worker conditions and rights.

We asked our participants if they were members of the Musicians Union (MU) and the reasons why they were or were not. Six of thirteen were not current members of the MU. As Umney (2014) found with Jazz musicians, insurance was often mentioned as the most crucial reason to be a member.

The main reason that I am in the Musicians union is the public liability insurance. And I think that you would find most guys that I know will probably give you the same answer. It's just the public liability insurance (A1).

Some indicated that they had been able to access additional support such as legal advice and recuperation of non-paid fees. Occasionally participants were critical of the Union, e.g., the setting of what they perceived as unrealistic gig rates for Live Performance.

I think probably they [Gig rates] are quite high, I don't think you could really get that as an original Band in the UK, I think you'd probably struggle to get that kind of amount. (A13)

In discussion some felt that MU gig rates were London-centric, and more applicable to Theatre or Orchestral work rather than the fees likely to be secured at grassroots venue live scene. Others expressed the view that the MU itself directed its resources badly, e.g., one participant expressed scepticism of the glossy production of the MU members' magazine<sup>iii</sup>. However, at least two non-member participants gave the impression of regret or embarrassment at not being members despite being active on the Live Scene and being politically disposed to Trade Union

Membership: “I should have done it. I knew the guy who was the main MU guy; I should have gotten around to it” (A6).

What was clear in some responses was that some participants felt that the informal Musicians’ community, particularly, those communities that have been established via Social Media and older channels such as printed DIY Fanzines, were more effective in enacting the Musicians’ voice in managing worker conditions. A faith in being able to trust fellow Musicians emerged. This seem particularly so in instances where it had been reported to the community that a Musician or Group of Musicians had been treated unfairly by a venue or promoter. The Community responded by actively encouraging Musicians to avoid taking work from the offending entity.

There was a lot of talking, you know, in those days at least in Fanzines, these days it is probably on the internet chat things [social media] ... “a promoter in [city name] or in [city name] ripped me off in this way, don't play there”.’ (A6)

Participants also reported that some Agents provided private online fora that allowed Musicians to post reviews of venues. This mechanism allowed a community of Musicians to support each other in some of the practicalities of performing at a given venue. For instance, it afforded Musicians the opportunity to identify which members of the venue had been most helpful or unhelpful during a particular engagement. On this facility, one participant commented:

...it's dead open on there because it's all Musicians [posting] so there would be like, “the manager’s a b\*\*\*, you want to talk to the other guy instead, he was loads better. (A1)

Such collective resistance of poor practice is also done formally by the Musicians Union who support active boycotting of organisations that have been identified as failing to honour agreements for services.

It would appear that the MU's ability to offer a collective voice in terms of support and action against poor working conditions does not offer the incentive to join as it might have done pre-internet and social media. Although as an organisation the MU clearly offers something more than informal social media interactions, in terms of representing the voice of the Musician, one participant was quite scathing of what power they personally felt they have. Although a MU member, he demonstrated limited faith in the ability of the MU to protect the interests of their members.

[They are] pretty useless when you've got a problem and you go to them. I've got friends who they've helped with, but it seems like they kind of go as far as like sending the solicitor's letter and things like that, that would have cost you money. But if it goes further, it's kind of outside of that track of what they want to do. So legal issues are difficult. (A1)

However, a trust in informal relationships and networks does not have the strength of a more formal union organisation, and may lead to an erosion of working conditions for Musicians. None of our participants indicated they joined the union to in order to improve working conditions, which is similar to what has been reported elsewhere (Umney & Kretsos, 2014). There appears to an acceptance that conditions will vary and in some instances will be bad, and this is just part of being a Musician, an endurance of which can sometime be construed as a badge of honour. With this 'fatalistic' viewpoint, the Musicians in this research certainly

do not have an inclination that being part of a formal collective voice can influence an improvement in pay and conditions for some of the performance work they undertake.

### *Networks of trust in securing work*

In light of the growth of platforms, we asked participants about how they secured work. For our group of participants, platforms for Musicians are peripheral and not a vehicle they use to find work. They have an elaborate network of Fixers, Bandleaders and Agents which they engage with, all underscored by the importance of personal reputation and recommendations. They were resistant to the idea that platforms could replace this. Many of our sample that played in groups had either worked as a Fixer, worked with a Fixer or had experience of both, as well as having shared the 'fixing' responsibilities within the Band: "We kind of do the work between us. Bookings come through various different people in the Band" (A11).

Our participants had their own criteria about what work to accept and what remuneration was acceptable. Relationships of trust underscored many of their choices. Generally, when playing corporate or function type gigs Musicians always received financial remuneration. The only exceptions to this were occasional charity gigs and when the Musician felt that a live rehearsal would be beneficial to them: "...we've done it occasionally if, essentially, we wanted to have a practice in front of people" (A3). However, some participants were reluctant to give services free, including charity work:

I've done charity work yeah, but very occasionally. You get asked to do charities all the time. My take on it has always been when I've been doing it for a living, is that if you give somebody Saturday night for free, it's a lot of money. I wouldn't go and put that sort of money in someone's charity box. (A2)

Generally most participants, who performed original Music, had at some point worked for free or for low pay particularly when they felt a gig offered a career benefit such as playing at a prestigious venue for exposure or working with a well-known artist. Although one participant had come to dislike and avoid such arrangements particularly with venues and promoters: “ ‘Oh come, you will get loads of exposure.’ And I'm not saying I haven't exactly ever done it, but I just really dislike the idea” (A10). Musicians reported other flexible practices with regard to remuneration. For example, some participants discussed accepting trades with promoters or venues instead of monetary payment, such as crates of beer in exchange for performing at the venue. For others, the values of the genres they were active within influenced their approach to career and work conditions. One participant whose early performance experiences were as part of the Punk scene reflected:

...in terms of actually making loads of money like beyond what's required for kind of survival, I suppose, it always seemed not very much like the thing to do really, you know, it was always about.... Punk was so anti- society careerist. (A6)

It appears unlikely that faceless platforms will secure an easy footing with Band Musicians, with their complex array of ways of securing different types of work. Platforms often function on a low overhead model undercutting competitors, a system that does not align with the moral economics of Band member relationships. Many of the participants of this study indicated that they had acted as Fixer and in doing so appear to have established long standing and trusting relationships with either Agents or repeat clients, which gave them with the ability to secure work. However, the notion of the client or Agent as ‘outsider’ was also often evident. In being established in their Careers, our participants appeared to have become accustomed to seeking out their own markers of trust when choosing who to transact with, including one participant who chose to begin working with their Agent and considered them less of an ‘outsider’ due to a history as a Musician. Interestingly, an emerging platform for Musicians,

‘Encore Musicians’ (2020) explains on its website that every member of their team is a Musician in their own right. Their published ethos is:

We’re driven by a genuine desire to help more Musicians earn a living through their craft. We’re also Musicians ourselves and regularly hold informal jam sessions in the office after work. (Encore Musicians 2020)

In contrast to the early career Musicians of other studies (e.g., Umney & Kretsos, 2014) our participants were more established and had strong networks they relied upon. Some had more secure aspects to their working portfolio (e.g., teaching and lecturing), and therefore had the ability to choose to work or not work as a performer. Thus, the penetration of platforms such as Encore Musicians may be greater amongst newer Musicians, but for most of our sample, platforms had made no impact. Most were not even aware of any of the existing platforms. Only one had signed up with Encore Musicians, but had never accepted work from them. One participant indicated that he would prefer to avoid platform-based work: “I would do if I was desperate. I would only do it if I was desperate” (A6).

In summary, securing work from someone who was trusted was a factor in making decisions. Musicians developed their own ways to judge whether work was acceptable using varied criteria. Some reflected that they had got much better at working out what was fair as they got older. Others were inclined to do their own informal checks with Agents and venues to ensure their ‘cut’ (A6) was fair by estimating ticket sales and comparing to the cut they received. In an industry where there appears to be a large gap between top earners and low earners, is it any surprise that Musicians tend to be cautious of working with third parties, and that anonymous platforms are not attractive?



### *Defining Decent Work*

During research interviews, we asked our participants how they define Decent Work. Responses were varied and included subjective aspects related to respect, dignity, creativity as well as more objective measures of remuneration and equality. With regard to a secure living wage, we were keen to understand what Musicians felt were acceptable conditions for paid and unpaid work. In discussions, it emerged that for some, the word 'work' had negative connotations which influenced how they made judgements about getting paid:

... long [Folk] gigs sometimes feels a bit like work. But if I'm with a bunch of people that I'm enjoying being with, and I get to do a lot of improvisation, then it doesn't often feel like work (A10).

...I don't see it as work... I was very idealistic when I was in my youth. And the ideology being you know, that it shouldn't be work, that Punk is something else other than kind of work (A6).

Some articulated that the more creative the opportunity, and personally rewarding, the less it felt like work and this value was an important determinant on whether to engage with activities including those that were low paid or unpaid. All participants demonstrated some element of a portfolio framework to their work activities and generally, unpaid work was an element of this. One participant indicated that especially early in their career they would perform original material extensively in venues across the UK, regardless of whether the activities were well paid, low paid or unpaid. However, as many had gotten older, and their financial and family

commitments had grown, this influenced their ability to engage with low or unpaid performing activities. They could no longer afford to engage with these activities because much more of their time was focused upon activities in their portfolio that returned greater financial reward. This type of filtering through work offers in order to navigate a balance between 'life course' and Musical activity was commonplace.

I think when I was 18, we did 250 gigs a year. Yeah, we just, you know, we, we dropped out of college and that's what we decided we were going to do. So we played every single gig we could possibly, some of those were just utterly pointless, you know, and as I've got older and obviously got family and stuff now it's, you know, there has to be... I have to see the benefit of, of that particular gig. In terms of the corporate stuff, primarily, it's how much I'm gonna get paid. (A3).

Some participants expressed fears of discrimination based on age. A number articulated that age might be a barrier to securing work. Although their Musical ability to perform remained relatively unchanged (and potentially improved), one participant indicated that in their Musical genre there was an expectation that the female performers would be younger than 40-49 age bracket she occupied. This appears more from a marketing perspective rather the Musical quality of the activities she delivered. Another participant indicated that they considered age would eventually limit the opportunities to secure function gigs such as weddings because clients tended to book younger looking Bands.

Only one participant raised gender equality issues, and reported that this was a particular problem when working in some overseas countries in her genre. In these scenarios she had experienced being side-lined in business and organisational discussions with venues and promoters in favour of her male counterparts and was not sure that she always received the same treatment in terms of remuneration.

I have known that I have been paid less than Bandmates because I was a woman. So sometimes that was hard. And sometimes, you know, I've been on the road in different countries where, you know, I'm expected to just shut up and sit at the back and do as I'm told, mainly by the locals. (A13)

This participant had learnt to navigate these negative scenarios by establishing trusting relationships with other Musicians and providers of work, and had kept to these channels when accepting work. As authors we are also aware that the bias of our sample group is an indicator of structural gender inequality issues in the Music business, whereby some of our male participants may be able to continue with their Musical careers, which demand flexibility, due to having partners (often female) who can support them both financially and domestically. The absence of female Musicians continuing with more established Musical careers may be an indicator of enduring structural problems in this industry.

Other reflections upon Decent Work in Music ranged from remunerative rewards to conditions of work, including subtle indicators of respect and dignity. One participant commented: "I like it when we get treated nice" (A1). When asked to elaborate, the participant indicated things like a "rider" including "a warm meal and just general politeness from venues". Other participants expressed that audience recognition and appreciation (especially from knowledgeable Musical audiences) was an important aspect to them in their work with one participant expressing that Decent Work included a "Good response from the audience" (A10). The same participant also expressed that Decent Work for her was when she found the work activity creatively challenging:

So it relies on my creativity and being able to react to a situation on the day. Usually you don't get any warning. You rock up and you play to what you hear. And I like, I like the challenge of that (A10).

In summary, participant reflections upon Decent Work do go beyond objective measures such as protection from discrimination and exploitation. Subjective considerations surrounding creativity, and the rewards and meaningfulness of performance work emerge strongly.

## **Conclusions**

Many of the Musicians had broader value systems than just remuneration, and use ‘intrinsic motivations’ (e.g., Hall et al., 2018; Umney & Coderre-LaPalme, 2017) to evaluate offers of poorly paid work when they arise. As highly skilled workers, Decent Work for some Musicians could include some types of badly remunerated work, in which ‘dignity’ and ‘meaningfulness’ were valued more than remuneration. These findings support what Umney & Coderre-LaPalme (2017) have observed with regard to the complex nature of ‘meaning of work’ issues for Musicians as well as what Blustein et al. (2019) have described as the significance of meaning and purpose at work. For the majority of participants, Decent Work is connected to the success of their interaction with their audience, more opportunities to be creative and for it to be a challenging activity. Appreciation of their skills appears high on their agenda, whether that is articulated through respect implied by good conditions at venues (such as changing rooms, food and drink), or a more responsive audience. Such varied success criteria align with literature which illuminates varied values about career success (Dries et al., 2008; Hall, 2004).

A Decent Work lens has been useful to illuminate and critically evaluate Musicians’ work. Our findings support patterns reported elsewhere and lead us to build upon discussions about Musicians and organised union activity (Umney & Coderre-LaPalme, 2017; Umney & Kretsos, 2014). ‘Intrinsic motivations’ are at the centre of our participants’ approach to work and this presents challenges as their search for ‘meaning of work’ can conflict with the MU’s

ability to act to secure better work conditions for all. This explains why the target of some MU campaigning is the engagers of Musicians rather than Musicians themselves. We found that although these Musicians are part of what might seem an unfair reward system where the most commercially successful ‘stars’ take the greatest reward, whilst other equally highly skilled Musicians earn below average UK wages, they have a fatalistic acceptance towards this structural system in their business. Furthermore, there appears limited engagement and faith with traditional frameworks for the enactment of worker rights and an acceptance that change will not be driven by legislation/regulation, and that union intervention on perceived poor working conditions is perceived as ‘interference’ (Umney & Coderre-LaPalme, 2017). Our participants imply that the only way they can improve their conditions is through greater audience interest with the assumption that this will lead to economic viability. They accept the ‘door money’ economic model in that the greater their audience size the better their conditions will improve. We, therefore, think that within our sample, even if it is unconsciously, especially when playing original Music, the Musicians appear to feel that it is a normal part of Musical careers to have to accept poor pay and conditions. For them, the only way to better their situation is to support performance activities with other elements of their portfolio, or by gaining bigger audiences at their gigs. It follows that if they do not progress positively they themselves feel responsible for the insecurity of their situation. As such, they do appear to have embraced passively or actively neoliberal individualist assumptions about meritocracy that risk responsabilising workers, and ignore structural inequalities. The improvement of their own careers appears to demonstrate an entrepreneurial/individualistic outlook which is not always compatible with the explicit collectivism of Trade Union membership, although widely associated with notions of expressive creativity.

When securing and undertaking work, our sample actively looked for markers of trust from partners and those more likely to act by ‘moral’ as well as ‘market’ principles. This

perhaps contributes to explaining why online gig work platforms have yet to significantly disrupt existing working practices in this group. However, according to the Encore Musicians website over 31,000 Musicians are signed up which illustrates growth. There is every possibility that emerging platforms could disrupt industry norms as there is little central regulation of pay and conditions, and many Musicians rely on informal networks.

Many performing Musicians navigate tensions between insecurity of work and 'life course' changes by shifting focus to parts of their portfolio which offer more consistent earnings. All participants have accepted low paid or unpaid work at some point in the hope that the opportunity would lead to the positive development of their careers, although many had clearly become more cautious of accepting these conditions as they became older. In our sample, the participants all demonstrated advanced development of other aspects of their portfolio and this was in order to balance or eradicate insecurity for their changing 'life course'. We might argue that in resolving economic challenges through development of other aspects of their portfolio, another 'insecurity' perhaps arises in the paucity of time to realise creative/ expressive activities, whatever type of performance activity this might be.

Some of the approaches to the labour market described here appear to have worked for our group of established Musicians. However, questions are raised especially in light of Covid-19 as to whether more needs to be done in active labour market policy as well as within the Musicians' community itself to insure that individual Musicians of all career stages have reasonable levels of social protection. It is clear from interviews that took place during the ongoing Covid-19 emergency and in a number of post-interview follow-ups that our sample were able to rely upon or adapt other elements of their portfolios to support themselves during lockdown. A number had received UK Government grants for the self-employed and were adapting teaching practices to online delivery with some success. However, although some were managing to engage with online performance activities, it is clear that frameworks for

remuneration for these sorts of performance activities are still in their infancy both for performers and for their audiences.

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<sup>i</sup> Dua Lipa is an English singer and songwriter signed to the Warner Music Group who has won Brit Awards and Grammys for her chart topping music.

<sup>ii</sup> A 'Fixer' is defined as someone, usually a member of a Band, who negotiates work for the Band.



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<sup>iii</sup> The Musicians Union magazine has now become a digital distribution due to the Covid -19 emergency.