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# The Misattuned Music Industry: An Intersubjective Perspective on the Music Industry's Mental Health Crisis

Jonathan Fricke  
*University of Denver*

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# The Misattuned Music Industry: An Intersubjective Perspective on the Music Industry's Mental Health Crisis

## Abstract

Research shows that professional musicians tend to experience higher rates of mental health challenges compared to the general population. While there are a number of underlying factors and historical experiences that may help us to better understand these psychological struggles, I will be examining the relational system between musician and the music industry beginning at the time in which an amateur musician transitions to the professional realm. With this transition comes incredible demand and pressure from the industry. Professional musicians are at the mercy of grueling tour schedules where they spend months away from loved ones, must be "on" at every performance to win over audiences, and are harshly judged on their creative output. All of this occurs within a notoriously fickle and competitive industry. If you aren't willing to do all the "right" things, the industry will find someone else that will. What's more, even if you do all the "right" things, there is still no guarantee of success. This relational dynamic between musicians and the music industry is fertile ground for pathological accommodation and psychological struggle.

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## First Advisor

Michael Karson, Ph.D., J.D.

## Second Advisor

Kim Gorgens, Ph.D.

## Third Advisor

Sarah Lukens, Psy.D.

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THE MISATTUNED MUSIC INDUSTRY:  
AN INTERSUBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVE ON THE MUSIC INDUSTRY'S MENTAL  
HEALTH CRISIS

A DOCTORAL PAPER  
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGY  
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

BY  
JONATHAN FRICKE, MA  
24 MARCH, 2023

APPROVED: \_\_\_\_\_  
Michael Karson, PhD, JD, Chair

\_\_\_\_\_  
Kim Gorgens, PhD

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sarah Lukens, PsyD

## INTRODUCTION

Popular musicians are often viewed through the trope of the “tormented artist,” a narrative that romanticizes and glorifies psychological distress. Through this narrative, substance abuse, unstable interpersonal relationships, and volatile mood swings are normalized in musicians. In fact, many believe that these psychological struggles facilitate great art. However, several recent suicides and drug overdoses of high-profile musicians, such as Mac Miller, Chester Bennington, Chris Cornell, and Tim Bergling (“Avicii”), leave many reevaluating the state of mental health in the music industry.

In the wake of these tragic events, there seems to be an increased focus on mental health in music. Other popular musicians, such as Billie Eilish, Bruce Springsteen, Ed Sheeran, Katy Perry, and Kendrick Lamar, among others, have openly discussed their personal struggles with mental health in efforts to raise awareness and decrease stigmatization. Further, several non-profit organizations (i.e. MusiCares, Backline, Music Minds Matter) were founded to provide resources to musicians and crew members struggling with their mental health. These resources include referrals to mental health professionals, online support groups, and psychoeducational materials on the importance of sleep, diet, and exercise. Last, there is a growing, albeit limited, body of research examining the prevalence, perceptions, and cultural considerations of mental health in the music industry.

While these developments are promising, there is still little available research on how the nature of the industry itself may exacerbate mental health challenges. To shift the conversation of mental health in the music industry from a reactive stance to a proactive stance, we must examine the music industry on a systemic level. In doing so, we may improve our conceptual understanding of musicians’ unique challenges and identify structures within the industry that

may promote psychological distress. To better understand the relational dynamics and effects between the musician and the modern-day music industry, we will utilize intersubjective systems theory (intersubjectivity) and the notion of pathological accommodation (Brandchaft, 2007).

Intersubjectivity, which was developed out of self psychology and holds many similarities, is a contemporary, relational, affect-oriented theory that focuses on an individual's unmet emotional needs in relational systems. In contemporary practice, intersubjectivity and self psychology are often viewed as one-in-the-same. As such, for the purposes of this paper, I will use "intersubjectivity" to refer to both intersubjective systems theory and self psychology.

The theory argues that individuals are inherently motivated to maintain a cohesiveness of experience. In doing so, they will operate and organize themselves similarly across relational contexts. Although much of an individual's organization is influenced by their infant-caregiver relationship, subsequent relational systems, such as the musician-music industry dyad, continue to influence an individual's way of being. In other words, an individual's organization continues to evolve across the lifespan.

Pathological accommodation is a way of being that occurs when an individual is organized around the needs of another. This occurs in relational systems in which caregivers are unable to provide an attuned response, or misattune, to an individual's affective needs. With repeated misattunements, the individual begins to adhere to their caregiver's needs to maintain necessary attachment ties and, in doing so, neglecting their own needs. This way of being limits emotional experiencing as the individual has learned that certain needs and emotions are unwelcome. This results in increased psychological distress.

While there are a number of underlying factors and historical experiences that may influence an individual's choice to pursue a career in music, for the scope of this paper, I will be

examining the relational system between musician and the music industry, beginning at the time in which an amateur musician transitions to the professional realm as a recording artist. With this transition comes intense demand and pressure from the industry. Professional musicians are at the mercy of grueling tour schedules where they spend months away from loved ones, must be “on” at every performance to win over audiences, and are harshly judged on their creative output. All of this occurs within a notoriously fickle and competitive industry that often leaves the musician powerless. If you aren’t willing to do all the “right” things, the industry will find someone else that will. What’s more, even if you *do* all the “right” things, there is *still* no guarantee of success. Although skill and work ethic play a part, success really comes down to luck. This relational dynamic between musicians and the music industry, which refers to the ways in which industry personnel behave when they have power over musicians, is fertile ground for pathological accommodation and psychological struggle.

It is important to note that the dynamics of pathological accommodation in the music industry are not entirely unique to that industry. Across a variety of professional settings, employees navigate similar struggles in negotiating the competing drives of individual authenticity with organizational belonging. However, I tailor this paper towards musicians to better understand their unique stressors and with the hopes that the arguments I draw better connects with that population.

To better understand the musician-music industry relationship, I will begin by examining the current state and functioning of the music industry. Then, I will review research on the prevalence of musicians with mental health challenges and common stressors for professional musicians. Specifically, I will be discussing professional recording and touring musicians in this paper. Next, I will provide an overview of intersubjective systems theory and how pathological

accommodation comes to be. I will then integrate this information in a theoretical analysis that identifies how systems of pathological accommodation, and ensuing psychological distress, may develop and be maintained in the musician-music industry intersubjective field. Using this information, I will identify systemic issues in the industry and include suggestions derived from intersubjective systems theory, aiming to promote musician wellbeing through both structural change and therapeutic intervention. My hope is that this theoretical conceptualization will highlight ways to foster positive change in musician wellness.

## **STATE OF THE MODERN-DAY MUSIC INDUSTRY**

The music industry has undergone drastic changes in the last 30 years, much of which can be traced back to the movement towards digitization. With the advent and development of the internet, the way that music is produced, distributed, marketed, and consumed has shifted. Correspondingly, so too has the financial landscape of the industry. Revenue is generated through novel channels (i.e. streaming platforms) and directed towards new stakeholders (i.e. Spotify, Apple Music, Google Play). However, despite all these changes, there is one major consistency: musicians have and continue to produce the product that others distribute, market, consume, and profit from. As such, from the musicians' perspective, it is the way in which musicians *interact* with the industry that is new.

Before the movement towards digitization, music was predominately produced using acoustic instruments in a recording studio. This required an individual to not only have technical skill of their instrument, but also resources to access and book time with a studio and audio engineer. As we can see, there was substantial overhead to recording music. These barriers

limited the number of musicians able to record and produce their music. However, that has since changed.

Advances in computer science brought with it a plethora of free and low-cost software programs that allow individuals to create music on their laptops and record at home. Without the need for studio time and audio engineers, music production became much more accessible. The number of individuals able to record and produce their music dramatically increased. While not necessarily a bad thing, this poses challenges to those hoping to make a career as a musician. The increased supply of recorded music creates a more competitive landscape, making it difficult for musicians to stand out to listeners and thus build a career.

New distribution channels have posed similar challenges to professional musicians. Prior to the development of the internet, musicians *needed* to work with record labels and distribution companies. To reach consumers, labels and distributors would rely on their relationships with disc jockeys (DJs) to secure radio time for their musicians' music. Additionally, they would help with placement of physical copies of their musicians' records, tapes, and compact discs (CDs) in brick-and-mortar stores. Essentially, labels and distributors were the gatekeepers. Without their buy-in, it was virtually impossible for a musician to gain commercial success. This is no longer the case.

With the emergence of the internet and direct-to-consumer platforms, record labels and distribution companies are no longer the gatekeepers. Platforms like Myspace, SoundCloud, and YouTube enable musicians to upload their music to the internet and share with audiences at no cost. While this has enabled exponentially more musicians to share their music, it has also led to an extraordinarily crowded and competitive landscape. Like with production, the increased



supply of recorded music available to consumers makes it tough for musicians to distinguish themselves and build a viable career.

The way that musicians are marketed and advertised has also undergone significant changes in the last few decades. Historically, musicians had relatively little to do with the marketing and advertising of their music. They might appear in some television and radio interviews, but the record label would handle the vast majority of the marketing and advertising. The musicians were mainly responsible for creating, recording, and performing their music. Social media changed that.

Today, social media is a major channel of marketing and advertising. It enables musicians to market themselves and reach fans in a more personalized and direct manner on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. In their posts, they may share personal opinions, explain their songwriting processes, or have reactions to current events, among other things. However, for marketing success on social media, a musician must craft a digital persona that is consistent with their stage persona (Ferri, 2010). Neither of these personas are necessarily representative of *who* the musician authentically is. Nevertheless, to stay relevant, musicians must regularly share content that is in line with this persona. This is the best way to form, strengthen, and maintain relationships with audiences (Margiotta, 2012). Social media has expanded the scope of musicians' professional responsibilities.

While there have been substantial changes to the way music is produced, distributed, and marketed, there has been no bigger shift in the industry than to the way recorded music is consumed. Historically, recorded music was consumed physically (i.e. records, tapes, CDs) but has since moved to digital streaming (i.e. Spotify, Apple Music, Google Play). This move has

upended the music industry's financial workings and significantly changed how musicians relate to the industry.

To understand this change, we must first examine the financial state of the industry. Prior to streaming, musicians would make a significant portion of their income from sales of recorded music (i.e., CDs, LPs). However, streaming platforms pay musicians very little for their music (Prior, 2018) and have led to steep declines in musicians' income (McKinna, 2014). Thus, we may find ourselves wondering how today's musicians are able to make a living from music? The answer: live performance and touring.

The demand for and profitability of live performance is as high as ever (Wiebe, 2020). One possible explanation for this is that there is an element of experiencing live music that cannot be digitally replicated, which continues to drive demand. Further, unlike with streaming music, there is a finite supply regarding live performance (i.e. number of shows, geographic location, venue capacity). With increased demand and limited supply, live music has become highly lucrative. As such, in today's industry, touring and live performance is the largest contributor to musicians' incomes (Wiebe, 2020). In fact, the band U2 reported that 95% of their income in 2017 came from live performance and touring (Delfino, 2018). Since performance offers many musicians a better chance of making a viable living, there is tremendous pressure on musicians to increase their number of live performances and tour dates (McKinna, 2014). This means more time on tour away from friends and family, living out of suitcases in hotel rooms, having to be "on" at nightly performances, navigating irregular daily schedules, and dealing with inconsistent access to basic needs, such as bathrooms, food, and sleep. Touring is grueling, but also an essential source of income for today's most successful professional musicians.

Digitization has led to significant industry changes in the way music is produced, distributed, marketed, and consumed. These shifts have altered the financial landscape of the industry, which, in turn, affect how musicians interact with the industry. They face increased competition and new job demands, like the creation of a social media brand and substantially more time on tour. With these changes, industry executives may be more concerned with the finances of the industry. However, we must not ignore how these changes impact musicians. Afterall, they are the backbone of the industry and, without them, the industry ceases to be.

## **MUSICIAN MENTAL HEALTH**

Relative to the general population, professional touring musicians experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, and alcohol abuse (Berg et al., 2022). However, only recently has research begun to focus on the prevalence and specifics of mental health challenges in this population. Although limited, this research is an important step in better understanding the state of mental health in music. In doing so, clinicians and industry personnel may find ways to better support musicians' wellbeing.

The growing body of literature on musician mental health reveals high rates of mental health challenges among musicians. For example, one study found that 73% of musicians self-reported suffering from mental illness (Record Union, 2019). Interestingly, this same study showed that the reported prevalence of mental illness in musicians negatively correlated with age, with the 18–25-year-old age group reporting the highest prevalence at 80% (Record Union, 2019). Of the musicians that self-reported mental illness, only 39% sought treatment and only 19% of those surveyed believed that the music industry is working to create a sustainable climate

to promote health in musicians (Record Union, 2019). There is a clear need for increased mental health support and access to mental health resources in musician populations.

Claims of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation are common in the music industry. For example, one study surveying musicians found that 68% said they struggled with depression and 71% said they experienced anxiety and/or panic attacks (Gross & Musgrave, 2016). Another study concluded that the rates of anxiety and depression reported by musicians were three times higher than in the general population (Kruger, 2019). Musicians were also found to have higher rates of suicide than the general population (Prete et al., 2001) and popular musicians' lifespan is an average of 25 years shorter than the general population (Kenny & Asher, 2016). This research highlights the specific mental health challenges musicians face and offers clinicians insight into the types of issues musicians often live with.

Substance abuse is another significant problem among musicians. In fact, musicians have a greater likelihood of dying from drug and alcohol abuse than the general population (Chertoff & Urbine, 2018). One study of over 1000 pop musicians found that drug and alcohol overdoses accounted for 28.57% of pop musicians' deaths, making it the most common cause of death in this population (Bellis et al., 2007). Other studies also found compelling evidence of a substance use crisis in the music industry. Record Union (2019) found that 51% of musicians reported that they self-medicate with drugs and alcohol. Forsyth et al. (2016) found that 45% of musicians in the United Kingdom (UK) reported personal issues with alcohol use. Additionally, a study in New York state found that musicians displayed significantly elevated substance use compared to the general population (Miller & Quigley, 2011). Last, a review of autobiographies and memoirs by rock musicians showed that, in 62% of these works, the musician discussed their personal struggles with addiction (Oksanen, 2013). Although we cannot definitively say whether

substance use among popular musicians is due to cultural norms or mental health struggles, it is clearly prevalent. To prevent more overdoses, suicides, and exacerbation of mental health struggles, musician wellness deserves more attention from musicians, clinicians, and industry personnel alike.

## **THE IMPACT OF PURSUING A CAREER IN MUSIC**

There are some important distinctions to be recognized in playing music at an amateur versus popular professional level. Although engagement with music is shown to have some positive effects on an individual's emotion regulation and wellbeing, research shows that *pursuing a career* in music is detrimental to an individual's mental health and wellbeing (Musgrave, 2022). In part, it is the nature of being a professional musician that is responsible for the high incidences of anxiety and depression found in this population (Gross & Musgrave, 2017). "Making music is therapeutic, making a career from music can be traumatic" (Gross & Musgrave 2020).

While there are a number of factors to consider in the relationship between mental health struggles and professional popular musicianship, I argue that touring should be central to the conversation. In a study conducted by Help Musicians UK (2015), 71% of musicians reported touring to be a major stressor. Further, touring musicians have elevated levels of stress and depression, and are at much higher risk of suicide than the non-touring community (Newman et al., 2021). The statistics are startling. Newman et al. (2021), found that 50% of touring musicians met criteria for clinical depression compared to only 4% of the general United States population. Further, the risk of suicide in touring musicians is five times more likely than the general population (Newman et al., 2021).

Touring also seems to augment substance use in musician populations due to the stresses of the touring environment mixed with ready access to substances of abuse (Raeburn, 2000). Newman et al. (2021) found that nearly 70% of touring musicians reported drinking alcohol on a weekly or daily basis and 33% reported using marijuana on a weekly or daily basis (2021). Raeburn (1984) found that 20% of touring musicians self-identify as “problem drinkers” and 30% reported daily drug use. Of note, 25% of touring musicians reported reliance on prescription medications, such as beta blockers, to quell performance anxieties (Lehmann et al., 2007).

While alcohol and drug use are relatively common in the United States, research indicates that it is especially common in the arts and entertainment industry (i.e. music industry) (Bush & Lipari, 2015). Research shows that the arts and entertainment industry accounts for the fourth highest rate of heavy alcohol use by industry, second highest rate of illicit drug use by industry, and third highest rate of diagnosable substance use disorders by industry (Bush & Lipari, 2015). Although musicians are only a part of the arts and entertainment industry, this research offers some compelling evidence to highlight how substance abuse may be especially pronounced in musician populations.

Although amateur engagement with music is shown to have positive effects on wellbeing, professional pursuits in music have just the opposite. Professional musicians report elevated levels of mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, suicidality, and substance use compared to the general population. Further, touring musicians report mental health struggles at elevated levels. Special attention and consideration should be given to the nature of touring and how traditional touring systems may exacerbate mental health struggles in this population.

## **STRESSORS OF BEING A TOURING MUSICIAN**

Pursuing a career in music is difficult. Before gaining any professional notoriety, an individual must dedicate an immense amount of time and energy towards practicing, composing, recording, networking, booking gigs, developing an online presence, and performing, among others. With the right blend of talent, work ethic, and luck, a handful of musicians from this pool will be able to pursue their craft at the professional level. However, things do not necessarily get easier at this point. Just because they have had their “big break” does not mean they are now coasting on easy street. In fact, the most challenging aspects of their career may still lie ahead.

Research shows us that professional touring musicians experience increased levels of mental health challenges, and it is the pursuit of professional musicianship that is partly responsible (Gross & Musgrave, 2017). To better understand how to better support musicians’ wellness, we must first examine the nature of musicians’ professional pursuits. In identifying the stressors unique to this population, we may then recognize the systems and circumstances in which mental health problems exist and persist, thus allowing clinicians and industry personnel to intervene accordingly. Gross and Musgrave (2020) identified the main psychological risk factors for professional musicians to be broken down into the following areas: the status of work, the status of value, and the status of relationships.

The status of work refers to the nature of being employed as a musician. Many of the stressors in this area are tied to financial precarity, which is an extraordinarily common stressor with musicians. In fact, in Record Union’s study (2019), 59% of musicians reported that they believed financial insecurity to be a prominent cause of their experiences with depression, anxiety, and/or panic attacks. Sources of uncertainty in this domain include “their sources of

revenue, their professional status, their understandings and definitions of success, their performance and reception thereof, and their future and ability to survive” (Musgrave, 2022).

For many musicians, they pour all their resources into pursuing a career in music with no guarantee that it will amount to any monetary return. Even for those that do start to see a return on their investment, a lingering fear often persists that this income will not last. Due to the gig economy in which they work, income is inherently unstable. That is, they are only paid for the gigs they play and can only play gigs to the extent that venues are willing to book them. In an industry that is notoriously fickle, where executives and audiences are always looking for the next great thing, there is an enormous amount of precariousness in musicians’ status and financial wellbeing. Accordingly, 58% of musicians believe that their negative emotions are a result of an immense pressure to succeed (Record Union, 2019). However, success has an amorphous quality. How does one know when they *have* succeeded? This is a tremendous source of anxiety.

The second risk area, the status of value, denotes the ways in which a musician, their music, and their performances are ascribed worth by others (Musgrave, 2022). The great challenge with musical value is that it is inherently ambiguous. There is little clear rhyme or reason as to why one song may receive critical acclaim and another goes unsung.

As previously mentioned, the volatility and financial precarity in the music industry contribute to the tremendous pressures musicians experience to have their work appreciated. After all, positive evaluations by others bodes well for financial security and career longevity. A musician will only be able to continue booking shows and earning an income to the extent that people enjoy their musical output and are willing to buy tickets, merchandise, and engage with



their recorded music. It is no wonder that 44% of musicians felt that evaluations from others was a main proponent of their anxiety, depression, and/or panic attacks (Record Union, 2019).

Another consideration in this domain is the personal meaning to the musician for their work to be accepted or rejected by audiences. In many ways, pursuing a career as a musician is an attempt at self-actualization (Holm-Hadulla & Bertolino, 2014). Meaning, musicianship may be a way in which individuals work towards their full potential. In doing so, they share intensely personal feelings and ideas in a public manner, whether through the voice, instrument, or composition. Their artistic work is often central to their identity and sense of self (Musgrave, 2022). As such, sharing their work is a vulnerable thing to do. A negative evaluation of a musicians' work may be felt "as a rejection of their whole identity, of themselves as an artist and human being" (Saintilan, 2019). Accordingly, 67% of musicians endorsed "fear of failure" as the main driver of their negative emotions (Record Union, 2019). If their *music* fails to gain traction, *they* have failed. It is highly personal. As such, there seems to be a dilemma between self-actualization and external approval, which is an enormous source of stress and anxiety in this population.

The third psychological risk area musicians face is the status of relationships (Gross & Musgrave, 2020). This domain pertains to the way that personal relationships in a musician's life may suffer due to the nature of professional musical pursuits. These musical pursuits often include long hours practicing their instrument and rigorous touring schedules away from home. These job requirements may disrupt relationships with family, friends, and loved ones, while contributing to isolation and loneliness (Detari et al., 2020). It is this "total commitment demonstrated by musicians to their craft [that] can have negative ramifications on their closest

relationships” (Musgrave, 2022). Much of these negative ramifications may be attributed to the necessity of touring.

Today, hypermobility and demanding travel schedules are essential to surviving as a professional musician (Zendel, 2021). The industry has shifted from a “capital-labour relationship to a capital-life relationship” (Lazzarato, 2004). This all-encompassing work demands that musicians spend more and more time away from their family and friends at home. This dynamic isolates musicians from their personal support networks, which often leads to increased feelings of loneliness (Zendel, 2021). According to Record Union’s study (2019), 51% of musicians feel that loneliness is a major source of their negative emotions. Further, nearly 40% of musicians would like support with their negative emotions but feel they do not have anyone to talk to (Record Union, 2019).

The totalized nature of touring also places great stress upon musicians. Musicians have limited autonomy in their day-to-day lives on tour. Due to the demanding travel schedules, even ordinary aspects of life, such as eating, sleeping, and using the bathroom, among others, must be negotiated (Zendel, 2021). As a result, a musician’s personal agency is minimized in the touring milieu, causing immediate daily needs to take priority over other aspects of life. When faced with these daily challenges, home life and outside relationships seem unimportant and unnecessary (2021). Some musicians refer to this phenomenon as “tour brain.”

“Tour brain” is a direct result of the subsuming and pervasive essence of touring. While on tour, virtually all aspects of the musician’s life are controlled. Even on days when they don’t have a show scheduled, they are still living out of a suitcase away from family and friends (Gregg, 2011). As such, the boundary between living and working becomes blurred (Zendel, 2021). It is the constant dislocation and displacement on tour that facilitates a totalized working

subjectivity without room for any constitutive other (Sheller & Urry, 2006). In other words, the musician's lived experience is consumed by the touring apparatus, such that the musician is unable to integrate other aspects of life, such as personal feelings or relationships with loved ones back home. Their subjective experience is centered around the demands of the tour.

This dynamic may facilitate increased feelings of isolation and loneliness both on tour and at home. On tour, the musician may feel helpless due to the totalized nature of touring and the need to tour to earn an income. They may experience feelings of frustration, anger, or helplessness but feel unable to voice them, fearing it will jeopardize their professional status. At home, they may feel disconnected from their family and friends as those relationships took a backseat to the touring demands. There is a pervasive sense of misunderstanding, and ensuing loneliness, that helps to explain musicians' high rates of mental health issues.

## **INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND PATHOLOGICAL ACCOMMODATION**

Intersubjective systems theory is a contemporary, relational, affect-oriented, present-focused, contextual psychoanalytic approach derived from self psychology. It deviates from more traditional psychoanalytic approaches as it places greater focus on the individual's subjective experiences and emotional needs in relationships rather than on theories of drive. Intersubjectivity posits that we form a sense of self based on our co-created affective relational experiences with others. As such, psychopathology often results from caregivers' repeated failures in meeting a child's emotional needs. The goal of therapy should be to understand the systems in which these unmet emotional needs occurred and to provide corrective emotional experiences through collaboration and shared meaning.

Intersubjective theory argues that people are primarily motivated to order and organize their experience (Trop, 1995). It postulates that human behavior is largely centered around a desire for a cohesive experience of oneself. In other words, how we experience ourselves informs how we function in the world at large. We automatically and unconsciously organize our experiences through the patterns that emerge in early relationships with caregivers, as well as subsequent relationships and life events. Aspects of these relationships are internalized to form a sense of stability (McWilliams, 1999). These patterns persist and illustrate our subjective reality and structure our future experiences (Buirski & Haglund, 2001). Intersubjective psychotherapy, as I discuss it here, focuses on understanding these patterns of being and providing a new relational co-created experience with the goal of forming new, updated organizations.

In intersubjective theory, we are interested in how someone came to be the way that they are. Stolorow (2013) argues that “affect – that is, subjective emotional experience – is something that from birth onward is co-constituted within ongoing relational systems” (p. 385). Meaning, our ways of being in the world develop out of relationships and the affect within those relationships. Our subjective self-experience, as it pertains to affect within these relationships, help us to structure a cohesive sense of self around which to organize (Stolorow, Brandchaft & Atwood, 1987). As such, origins of the emerging sense of self are rooted in the caregiver-infant relationship (Brandchaft, 2007).

When a child experiences various affect states growing up, the child’s ensuing relationship to the affect state depends largely upon the caregiver’s responsiveness to the child’s affective needs. For example, if a caregiver responds to a child’s anger with a nonjudgmental, attuned stance, it can facilitate integration of that affect state into the child’s being. If a caregiver consistently responds in this manner, the child internalizes this experience and organizes around

the notion that anger is an acceptable affect state, which leads to greater capacity for a comforting, soothing attitude towards oneself (Stolorow, Brandchaft & Atwood, 1987).

However, when caregivers are unable to provide an attuned response to a child's affective needs, the child becomes at risk for self-fragmentation, or the idea that certain affect states are unintegratable and must be sequestered from the child's self-experience to maintain needed ties to caregivers (Stolorow, Brandchaft & Atwood, 1987).

Bernard Brandchaft (2007) proposes that processes and organization around pathological accommodation start to appear when the child is mandated to adhere to the needs of the caregiver while sacrificing their own needs to maintain necessary attachment ties. The repetitive pattern of caregiver misattunement to the child's affect breeds developmental trauma (Stolorow, 2013).

This traumatizes the child so that similar subsequent affect states become frightening and painful as the child cannot rely on caregivers for comfort. The child then comes to feel that they are characterologically defective or bad and work to alleviate these feelings by becoming "enmeshed into a ritualistic system of 'fixing'" (Brandchaft, 2007, p. 674). That is, the child learns that certain affective states that were unwelcome are threatening and must be avoided, constricting the child's horizons of emotional experiencing (Stolorow, 2013). In such accommodation, the child's understanding of self and other becomes blurred, and the child's self-reflection is disrupted as they become other-oriented.

Patterns around which we organize our experiences in childhood often persist into adulthood on an automatic level. A core assumption of intersubjective theory that helps to explain the perpetuity of such patterns is that people strive for health and self-preservation (Buirski & Haglund, 2001). As such, we view behaviors that some may define as psychopathology instead as attempts to maintain a sense of cohesiveness in how we experience

ourselves. That is, the ways of being that helped us survive as children provide organizing principles that often carry into adulthood. According to Stolorow (2013), “recurring patterns of intersubjective transaction within the developmental system give rise to principles that unconsciously organize subsequent emotional and relational experiences” (p. 383).

The organizing principles that we carry into adulthood are prereflective, in that we are typically unaware of them (Stolorow, 2013). As such, our adult ways of being are tied to archaic bonds from childhood that impede our ability to learn from here-and-now experience. Our motivation for continuity of experience and cohesion results in the manifestation of these early organizing principles, which guard us against dysregulation through object loss of an early caregiver or fragmentation of self whenever transformative change might take place (Brandchaft, 2007). Further, Brandchaft (2007) posits that the templates through which we organize our experience to early caregivers organizes behavior in all meaningful relationships, such that these early ways of being will inevitably be reactivated in subsequent attachment systems. A primary objective of intersubjective psychotherapy is to bring these prereflective patterns of organization into reflective self-awareness. In doing so, it may allow for new, updated organizing principles to develop.

Intersubjective psychotherapy deviates from traditional psychoanalysis in that it does not place psychopathology solely within the patient. Instead, it focuses on the relational context and interactions of experience between patient and analyst. The patient’s transference towards the analyst and the analyst’s countertransference towards the patient form an intersubjective field (Stolorow, 2013). Orange (1995) refers to this concept as “cotransference.” Cotransference removes the idea that one party in the dyad has access to an objective reality. Instead, both

parties have access to their subjective experiences of themselves and of the other. This approach offers rich soil for investigation into a patient's experience of themselves in the world.

Drawing on the intersubjective field created between the subjective experiences of the patient and analyst, intersubjective psychotherapy works to integrate the co-occurring influences of mutual and self-regulation (Lachmann & Beebe, 1996). That is, therapy explores the contributions of both parties in the relationship as well as how each individual organizes their own patterns of behavior. An analyst's understanding of their patient will always be shaped by the analyst's own organizing principles (Stolorow, 2013). This subjectivity is something for analysts to be mindful of. As analysts work to understand patients from their vantage point, analysts may fail to recognize their own contributions in shaping the patient's experience (Orange, 1995).

As discussed earlier, affect is of central importance to intersubjective theory and plays a major role in intersubjective clinical work. We anticipate that the dyad's defenses against affect will arise in the therapeutic relationship. However, we must understand that such defenses are based in expectations that these affective states will be responded to in the same painful way that caregivers originally responded (Stolorow, Brandchaft & Atwood, 1987). As such, "empathically attuned verbal articulation...facilitates the integration of affective states...that, in turn, contribute significantly to the organization and consolidation of the self" (Stolorow, Brandchaft & Atwood, 1987, p. 73). The analyst's ability to articulate and hold patients' affective states in a calming, understanding manner can disconfirm strict, archaic expectations and promote newfound intimacy and trust (Lachmann & Beebe, 1996). With time and an attuned therapist, patients are then able to integrate these previously unintegratable affect states.

We may then connect patients' experiences of themselves to their developmental narratives to foster self-compassion. For example, a patient with a critical, overbearing mother may come to understand that they are inadequate. Through repeated attuned affect labeling and developmental connection in the therapeutic relationship, the patient may come to revise their narrative and see that they are not inadequate. Instead, they grew up with a critical, overbearing, emotionally unavailable mother. The patient's experience of themselves is altered as the therapeutic dyad examines the patient's organizing principles within a new context (Lachmann & Beebe, 1996).

Through affect articulation and exploration of the ongoing relational processes occurring in the therapeutic dyad, intersubjective psychotherapy aims to build reflective self-awareness. In this process, archaic organizing principles become weakened, new organizing principles form, and emotional horizons of experiencing grow within a context of human understanding (Stolorow, 2013). As such, the individual's emotional experiences become seamlessly woven into the fabric of who one is, thereby enriching one's sense of being in the world.

## **SYSTEMS OF PATHOLOGICAL ACCOMMODATION IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY**

There is compelling evidence suggesting that professional musicians experience elevated levels of psychological distress when compared to the general population. While intersubjective systems theory argues that much of an individual's organization, thus ensuing psychological distress, is rooted in the child-caregiver relationship, it recognizes that subsequent relationships across the lifespan continue to influence an individual's organization. Although musicians may enter the professional sphere with some degree of preexisting psychological distress, I argue that the relationship between musician and music industry promotes an other-oriented organization



that lends itself to pathologically accommodative tendencies. This framework provides insight into the dynamics that may promote musician psychological distress.

As previously discussed, pathological accommodation arises in a relational system in which one party (the child) is dependent upon another (the caregiver). To have their needs met, the child becomes other-oriented, in which they adhere to their caregiver's needs while sacrificing some of their own. Musicians work within a relational system in which they must conform to the industry's demands for career viability. However, this causes some of their own needs to go unmet, thus propagating psychological distress. In the musician-music industry relationship, the musician falls into the role of other-oriented child and the music industry plays the role of misattuned caregiver.

As discussed earlier, there are a plethora of demands and stressors placed upon professional musicians that limit their autonomy. Much of this is fueled by a crowded professional space with fierce competition and ambiguity as to who "makes it" in this profession. These factors, in turn, lead to financial precarity and questions of career viability. With these conditions, musicians experience significant pressure to *be* the musician that the industry *wants* them to be. This means pressure to be creative, maintain a social media presence, be hypermobile on long tours away from family and friends, and to be "on" at every performance. If they aren't willing or able to meet these demands, someone else will. They feel trapped.

It is as if they have no choice but to adhere to these aspects of a career in music. In fact, musicians will often mask their own struggling wellbeing out of fear that it will hinder their reputation and employment prospects (Nichols, 2017). Further, Record Union (2019) found that 40% of musicians would like support with their mental health but feel they have no one to talk to. Given this, it seems that the music industry misattunes to musicians' needs. Musicians have

developed an understanding that they will be punished for openly discussing their struggles. As such, they often elect to hide them. This is motivated by fear that the musician will lose their much-needed attachment ties to the industry as caregiver. The musician then marginalizes and rejects their feelings associated with their struggles, such as anger, frustration, sadness, and loneliness. These affect states are then internalized as indicators of their inner wretchedness.

On tour, the boundary between living and working becomes blurred (Zendel, 2021). It facilitates a totalized working subjectivity without room for any constitutive other (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Meaning, the musician's experience is consumed by the touring apparatus, causing other aspects of their life to be neglected. The touring apparatus is the source of both the musician's livelihood and stress. However, they must adhere to its demands for career viability. As such, the musician learns to reject their own feelings of anger, helplessness, and loneliness, instead prioritizing the needs of the tour as they become other-oriented. Within this dynamic, the musician enters into a ritualistic system of "fixing," in which they pathologically accommodate the tour's demands to defend against their own unwelcome affect states.

As discussed earlier, musicians struggle with elevated rates of substance use as compared to the general population. The framework of pathological accommodation may offer an important perspective in better understanding the rampant substance use in the music industry. In fact, substance use and addiction may be better understood as ways in which an individual copes with feelings of anxiety and depletion propagated through pathological accommodation (Jones, 2009). While use offers a temporary sense of relief, it is also a way in which an individual may reject their reflexive compliance and assert aspects of their own disavowed authenticity (2009). Through this lens, we can see how systems of accommodation in the musician-music industry dyad may promote substance use and addiction in musician populations.

The music industry is a competitive, cutthroat field that places heavy demands upon musicians. Additionally, the research shows us that musicians experience elevated levels of psychological distress relative to the general population. In applying a theoretical lens of intersubjectivity and pathological accommodation, we may better understand the interplay between these two factors as it pertains to the musician-music industry intersubjective field. Within this dyad, musicians organize around meeting the industry's demands, thus cutting off aspects of their own affect states. I argue that this dynamic contributes to musicians' elevated levels of psychological distress, and may help us to better understand the prevalence of substance use among musicians.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR MUSICIANS' WELLBEING**

Only 19% of musicians believe the music industry is working to create a climate that promotes health and wellbeing (Record Union, 2019). Clearly, there is tremendous room for improvement. Here, I will draw on intersubjective systems theory to offer several suggestions of how to promote wellbeing in musician populations.

First, a key element of intersubjective psychotherapy lies in affect attunement. When individuals enter into a relationship in which the other is able to empathically attune to and verbally articulate another's affect states, these affect states begin to be felt as acceptable. It is essential that these affect states are held with calmness and curiosity to promote a sense of being understood and acceptable. As such, it is important that musicians identify individuals with whom they may express feelings of frustration, anger, sadness, and loneliness. This could include touring personnel, such as tour managers or bandmates, loved ones, or mental health professionals. With this open, non-judgmental, empathic stance, musicians may begin to feel that

their professional stress is more acceptable and manageable. One potential idea would be for industry stakeholders, such as artist management companies or record labels, to hire mental health professionals to work with musicians prior to going out on tour, identifying who makes up their support system.

Another potential alternative would be for industry stakeholders to hire mental health professionals to work with their roster of musicians. This could mean contracting with mental health professionals as outside consultants, or alternatively, hiring an in-house mental health professional to run workshops and provide mental health support. Perhaps musician unions, such as the American Federation of Musicians (AFM), could advocate for these changes in their negotiations with industry stakeholders.

Another way in which we may work towards creating a more mental health-friendly music industry is through musician-focused support groups led by mental health professionals. In these groups, musicians may be able to connect with one another over the unique challenges of being a professional musician. With openness and a foundation of shared experience in this type of therapy group, musicians may begin to feel a sense of connection with others around their challenges. This connectedness destigmatizes personal struggle, which, in turn, promotes a sense of acceptability and self-compassion, such that the stresses of professional musicianship become more manageable.

The aforementioned interventions (workshops, contracting with mental health professionals, support groups) all work towards the same thing: welcoming and normalizing feelings of frustration, anger, sadness, and loneliness. Through these interventions, musicians may then begin to experience these feelings, thus themselves, as more acceptable. As they build

self-compassion, other mental health challenges will likely begin to subside, and career satisfaction and longevity will likely increase.

While intersubjective-based interventions will likely be beneficial, there are several structural changes to the industry that may also prove useful in promoting musician wellness. These suggestions draw on the theory of pathological accommodation.

As previously discussed, pathologically accommodative individuals are typically organized around another's needs at the expense of their own. Through this dynamic, they often lack a sense of agency or autonomy in their lives as they consistently respond to the needs of another. This promotes mental distress which may be self-medicated through substance use (Jones, 2009). I argue this dynamic exists in the music industry between the industry itself and musicians, and I believe that the industry can mitigate this dynamic by working to find ways to promote musicians' autonomy. While there are a plethora of ways in which the industry can promote musicians' agency, I identify a few ideas below.

One potential idea is to include musicians in their own career planning. Labels and management companies will often come to musicians with ideas on what they *should* wear, *should* do on social media, *should* record, *should* release, and *should* perform, among others. This industry-driven dynamic seems to strip musicians of their personal agency as they are responding to industry-driven needs. Perhaps a shift in which industry personnel respond to musicians' ideas would be a worthwhile starting point. Musicians may choose their wardrobe, how they engage on social media, what type of music to release, and how to structure their performances. This same notion may translate to touring as well.

Instead of the industry dictating where a popular musician tours, where they stay, and what their food options are, perhaps the music industry can infuse more choice into the hands of

musicians. This can be as small as choosing where they stop for food, though should also include other aspects such as input in travel itinerary, flight times, and daily schedules. This does not mean that things will necessarily *be* just as musicians request. Afterall, industry personnel will likely be balancing a multitude of differing requests. However, I contend that infusing some personal choice from musicians and reducing the industry's power in such matters will have positive effects on wellbeing and job satisfaction.

Last, a systemic shift in the financial landscape of the music would be powerful. While this would be difficult, it would also likely lead to the greatest positive change in musician wellness. As discussed earlier, most musicians make the majority of their income on tour as recorded music is no longer as profitable. However, if we found a way to direct more revenue to musicians for their recorded music, it would likely lessen touring demands and increase agency. One possibility is that industry stakeholders (i.e. streaming platforms, record labels) restructure their financial models such that increased revenue goes to musicians. Alternatively, perhaps musicians could be compensated through stock. While recognizing these stakeholders would probably be resistant to this change, legislation regulating musicians' contractual rights would be a welcome support. One potential option would be for musicians' unions, such as AFM, to negotiate revised compensation structures that favor musicians more than the current structures do. Additionally, streaming platforms could institute a feature in which listeners can "tip" the musicians they most enjoy to aid in financial support. These are just a few ideas, though many more likely exist to restructure the financial landscape such that musicians are better protected and advocated for.

## CONCLUSION

Although musicians are often viewed through the trope of the “tormented artist,” I argue that it does not have to be this way. What’s more, it seems that there is growing interest in the mental health and wellbeing of touring musicians. Numerous programs and nonprofit initiatives aimed at supporting musicians’ mental health have been developed in recent years, with more on the way. While this is all well and good, I believe it to be essential that we examine the dynamics within the industry that may be propagating mental distress so we can shift from a reactive to proactive stance.

Drawing on concepts in intersubjective systems theory and Brandchaft’s notion of pathological accommodation, we can clearly see how the relational field between the music industry and musicians limits autonomy, exerts control, and creates a dynamic in which musicians’ wants, needs, and feelings must be suppressed for career viability. This is exacerbated by touring; other kinds of workers go home at the end of the day to meet their needs. This, in turn, may better explain the high rates of mental health challenges and substance use among musicians.

Utilizing this theoretical framework, I call on industry personnel and researchers to reflect on the current practices and systems within the music industry. How might we better support our musicians? How can we promote autonomy? How can we make space to welcome in musicians as complete people and not merely performative parts of themselves? My hope is that these structural changes will not only prevent future overdoses and suicides, but also lead to an enhancement of musical output.

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