

# Psychological Safety in High-Performance Teams within the Music Industry

What are the barriers to psychological safety in high-performing teams at the creative core of the music industry, and what strategies can be implemented to overcome them?

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*This master's thesis is carried out as a part of the education at the University of Agder and is therefore approved as a part of this education. However, this does not imply that the University answers for the methods that are used or the conclusions that are drawn.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

While music producers, songwriters and musicians are struggling to make their artistic voices heard in an increasingly saturated attention economy, research on how creative teams are able to gain and maintain high performance is picking up steam. This paper aims to explore the cultural and organizational structures that impact psychological safety in high performance teams within the music industry, and identify potential barriers preventing a safe and supportive work environment. It also seeks to evaluate strategies on how to overcome such obstacles for better team performance and sustainability.

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## 1. Introduction

Music has always been an important part of my life, and I still vividly recall how it led to one of my proudest childhood moments. My mother, who used to drive me to kindergarten every morning from the age of two, had developed an appetite for Swedish hit songs. Every week she'd bring a new Cheiron-produced<sup>1</sup> CD for us to enjoy, punishing the speakers of her fuel hungry VW Golf GTI with crispy drum sounds and catchy melodies. I was hooked. Upon leaving kindergarten to embark on the new educational challenges of a young man- elementary school, a big graduation party was scheduled to take place. As this evening came about, fellow children were called up on stage one by one, to receive a personal diploma for their attendance and character. Each one was also given a nickname to fit their impression on the kindergarten staff. As my name was finally called up (last name starts on W, which always keeps me waiting in anticipation), my mother's Swedish influence had come full circle. I was elected Mr. Twinkle-Toes,<sup>2</sup> and danced my way up on stage to receive my diploma. As the evening grew lengthy and large quantities of snacks and soda were consumed, I came to realize that I was happy. I was happy dancing and listening to music, and I was happy that it had shown.

Fast forward 18 years, and I had finished my degree in economics in Oslo. It felt good, but not as good as winning a diploma for dancing to catchy Swedish hit songs. I knew that something had to change, and instead of pursuing a career in business, I decided to embark on a new adventure. Music creation. With no prior experience except listening to music consistently for the past two decades, I knew I was up for a challenge. Luckily, I had absolutely no concept of how much of a challenge it would be. From learning how to DJ in sweaty nightclubs and managing unsolvable creative conflicts across WhatsApp, to entering some of Spotify's biggest playlists as an artist and writing songs with Grammy winners. This journey has taken me places I never knew existed and granted me access to savvy music entrepreneurs and academic masterminds. It has also provided me with a sneak peek into the rich and seemingly bottomless pool of musicology which albeit stormy and perhaps inconceivable, led me to new ideas and directions of academic exploration. It is by the edge of this pool I find myself today, with only a few toes submerged in the lurking waters below.

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<sup>1</sup> Cheiron Studios in Stockholm, Sweden was home to the legendary producers Denniz Pop and Max Martin. The Cheiron sound would define many of the top artists of the 90's, including Britney Spears, Backstreet Boys, Celine Dion and many more (Cheiron, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> In Norwegian, "danseløve."

This thesis is rooted in impacts of digitization on the music industry from around the turn of the millennium and onwards until today, as written on and heavily discussed by both Nordgård (2016, 2018), Wikström (2020), Hesmondhalgh (2006, 2019), Negus (1996, 1999), Frith (2001), Marshall (2004, 2016), and many more. What occurred to me while studying this field during my master's program at the University of Agder, was that although the economic impacts of digitization in the industry were vastly covered, I couldn't find much information on how digitization influenced the performance and team dynamics of the music producers, songwriters, and musicians at the heart of the industry.

To establish a framework on how to approach this topic, I revisited the curriculum of my previous path of education. During my years at business school, I had attended a few courses in organizational psychology. It was in one of these classes I was introduced to the work of Professor Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School, who had popularized the term "psychological safety" and introduced it to the global business community (Edmondson, 1999). Through her research, Edmondson had found that psychological safety was the most important factor with regards to team performance, a result later supported by Google in their research on teams (Duhigg, 2016). Edmondson defines the term as "a climate of a group, where people believe that candor is welcome." It is also referred to as radical candor or brutal honesty, and misconceptions surrounding the term have increased parallel to its rise in popularity over the recent years. She clarifies that psychological safety is NOT about being nice or feeling comfortable. It's about speaking up without fear and offering ideas without holding back, something which Edmondson says is crucial in a creative and innovative space.

This art of speaking up without holding back and offering honest opinions without repercussions, was something I had reflected on many times with regards to music creation. I had however never managed to fully grasp the dynamics of what was happening or what forces might influence creative behavior. The environment Edmondson was referring to, was shockingly similar to the countless songwriting sessions I had myself been a part of. Sessions where I had held back because I felt as if the "higher-ups" in the room expected a quick result. I also recalled how veterans in the business had treated my ideas nice, even though they hadn't necessarily yielded a result. Could this have something to do with psychological safety? It felt as if I had arrived the foot of a new mountain.

This thesis seeks to answer the following questions: what are the barriers to psychological safety in high-performing teams at the creative core of the music industry, and what strategies can be implemented to overcome them? The first part of this paper looks high-performance teams in both traditional and creative industries to disclose how teams are optimizing performance throughout major industry shifts and digitization. It also looks at the role of psychological safety and how this factor impacts team dynamics, especially in sectors characterized by high uncertainty and volatility such as the music industry. Parallels to the music industry are subsequently accounted for to establish similarities and differences that can help explain how industry dynamics impact psychological safety at the heart of the music economy. Interviews with top performers in the creative core of the music industry will then be conducted, so that industry barriers preventing psychological safety and high performance can be identified and strategies to overcome them can be discussed.

## **2. Theory**

There have been many books and papers written about the digitization of the music industry and the economics of change. How digitization has shaped the interpersonal aspects of how music producers, songwriters, and musicians work, has however remained somewhat hidden from the limelight. Although understandable, given the many years of turbulence and despair surrounding the restructuring of the business from the millennium well into the 2010's, the topic of team performance and creativity still lies at the heart of the music industry. While physical sales have been swapped for streaming numbers, and teenagers' obsession for polyphonic ringtones have been swapped with chipmunk-style TikTok music, creators have kept on making new songs and meet market demands (IFPI 2023). It is how these changing structures have impacted such creative teams' performance that is of interest. Although some related information in correlating fields exist, such as Nasta, Pirolo, and Wikström's article on a theoretical framework for investigating diversity in creative teams (Nasta et al., 2016) which briefly touches upon the dynamics of working in creative sessions with limited timeframes and no expectation of future collaboration, and how such team diversity leads to conflicting results on performance, it currently only serves as a stepping stone for further research in this context.

The frame of this thesis is based on established literature on how high-performance teams (shortened to HPTs) operate in traditional and creative industries. Research led by Professor Amy Edmondson (1999, 2012, 2019) as well as Google and their "Project Aristotle" (Duhigg, 2016) on organizational psychology and team performance is presented, as there is limited research available on the impacts of digitization on music industry creative teams. Literature on music industry structures and developments is subsequently accounted for to establish a clear connection between HPTs and the music industry. Lastly, interviews with top tier music creators are conducted to discuss team performance, potential barriers to factors leading to team performance, and how to overcome them.

### **2.1 High performance teams and psychological safety**



There is little available research on HPTs and their relation to the *creative core*<sup>3</sup> of the music industry. Organizational psychology and factors impacting high performance in teams across other industries have however received a significant amount of attention, especially in recent years. Although the rise of *knowledge intensive work*<sup>4</sup> and creative teams have driven the development of new organizational tools and models of performance and resilience across a variety of fields since the digital revolution of the 1980's and 1990's, it is only recently that such tools have entered music industry domain. As late as in February of 2021, Warner Music Group included the term “psychological safety” in their yearly rapport, making it a core part of their training program for their employees (WMG, 2021). Although including such terms in a broad agenda and shining light on the mental aspect of the industry is positive, acquiring an accurate understanding of what psychological safety is and how it works, has proven difficult across industries and businesses alike.

To understand psychological safety and high performance within teams, one must understand how organizations learn. Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, Amy Edmondson has spent several decades and most of her professional career studying the dynamics of HPTs, breaking new ground with her research on concrete cases in a variety of businesses ranging from healthcare to spaceflight.<sup>5</sup> She identifies psychological safety as the most significant factor when establishing high performance in teams, and states that organizations in fact do not learn. The teams of organizations do (Edmondson, 2019). In 2012, Google's Project Aristotle set out to answer the following question: “What makes teams successful?”. After two years of studying 180 teams, one factor emerged as the one of highest significance, and it supported Edmondson's previous research. This factor was indeed psychological safety (Duhigg, 2016).

### **2.1.1 What makes a high-performance team?**

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<sup>3</sup> The “creative core” is in this context referring to musicians, producers, songwriters, and artists as defined by Richard Florida as the “super-creative core.” Further explanations will follow later in this paper.

<sup>4</sup> “Knowledge intensive work” or just “knowledge work” is referring to the modern ways of working in creative teams, often solving complex tasks requiring specialized knowledge, as opposed to the simpler assembly line work of the industrial era.

<sup>5</sup> In Edmondson's book «The Fearless Organization» she elaborates extensively on both the famous hospital case (Edmondson, 2019, p.8-12) as well as the disaster at NASA involving the Columbia Space Shuttle (Edmondson, 2019, p.78-79).

“Teamwork makes the dream work” is a cliché used in collaborative efforts both at work and at home, yet few have in-depth knowledge on how teams are defined. In their article, “The Discipline of Teams”, Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith argues that not all groups are teams and lists several factors distinguishing teams from what they call “working groups”. Among the most significant differences are the working group’s individual accountability, vs the team’s individual and mutual accountability. Where working groups discuss, debate, and make decisions, teams additionally create collective work-output. Katzenbach and Smith describes this phenomenon as achieving collective performance levels that are more than the sum of each member’s personal best performance. They define a team as: “a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable” (Katzenbach & Smith, 2008, p. 8). Other distinctions are clear roles, specific team purpose and open-ended problem-solving meetings (Katzenbach & Smith, 2008, p. 52).

Such descriptions do not imply that other organized forms of collaborative efforts exclude high efficiency and prosperity. Businessman, entrepreneur, and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie built his industrial empire on concepts of scientific management, also known as *Taylorism*,<sup>6</sup> while also emphasizing the importance of cooperation, collaboration, and communication across departments, acknowledging the value of employee motivation and engagement for high productivity. Although most of his employees took part in simple assembly line work, one of his famous quotes were: “teamwork is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results” (Natemeyer, 2011, p. 108). However efficient the industrial style of Carnegie, new tasks and challenges have led to the development of new tools and strategies in the workplace. The relevance of team performance has proven especially important amongst knowledge workers of the modern era, operating in a more team-oriented and collaborative manner, often with a strong focus on innovation and creativity.

Marc Hanlan, Ph.D., in organizational management writes that HPTs originated as a strategy designed to foster “breakthrough change”. This strategy was developed to keep up with the technological transformation of the 80’s where major innovations such as the internet and general digitization led to an urgent need of new competitive advantage for a wide range of

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<sup>6</sup> Taylorism is defined as “a factory management system developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to increase efficiency by evaluating every step in a manufacturing process and breaking down production into specialized repetitive tasks by the Merriam-Webster dictionary (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

businesses. Hanlan defines HPTs as those teams that “achieve a quantum leap in business results in less than a year, in both profitability, productivity, customers service, and employee morale, all at the same time” (Hanlan, 2004, p.34-47). He lists several key factors that are instrumental to achieving high performance and writes that HPTs are best applied when breakthrough results are both required and desired by the organization. That HPTs are created and guided by people who understand the underlying dynamics taking place throughout the transition from merely a team to a team with outstanding high performance. He also writes that HPTs must be outwardly focused on the fundamental business criteria for success and inwardly driven by key HPT principles. Lastly, he writes that HPTs must be created by a fundamental shift in culture and that the leader of such teams needs to understand the principles of underlying change dynamics as well as principles for success (Hanlan, 2004, p.47).

In his book, *The Secret to Building High Performance Teams*, Dr. Stephen Kalaluhi emphasizes Hanlan’s point about the importance of leadership, by holding the leader accountable for team performance and centralizing the responsibility on the leader as one individual. Although emphasizing that teamwork demands team performance and collaboration, he also argues that the leader is the *limiting factor* in how well a team performs, and that HPTs needs constant reinforcement and nurturing by the leader in order to maintain continued growth, both in technical and relational terms. Kalaluhi also mentions a series of factors needed for a sustained HPT from the leader’s perspective. These are engaging and mobilizing team members, resolving conflict, fostering collaboration, clearing the path for the team to execute, and sustaining high performance (Kalaluhi, 2016, p. 25). There has however been one factor missing.

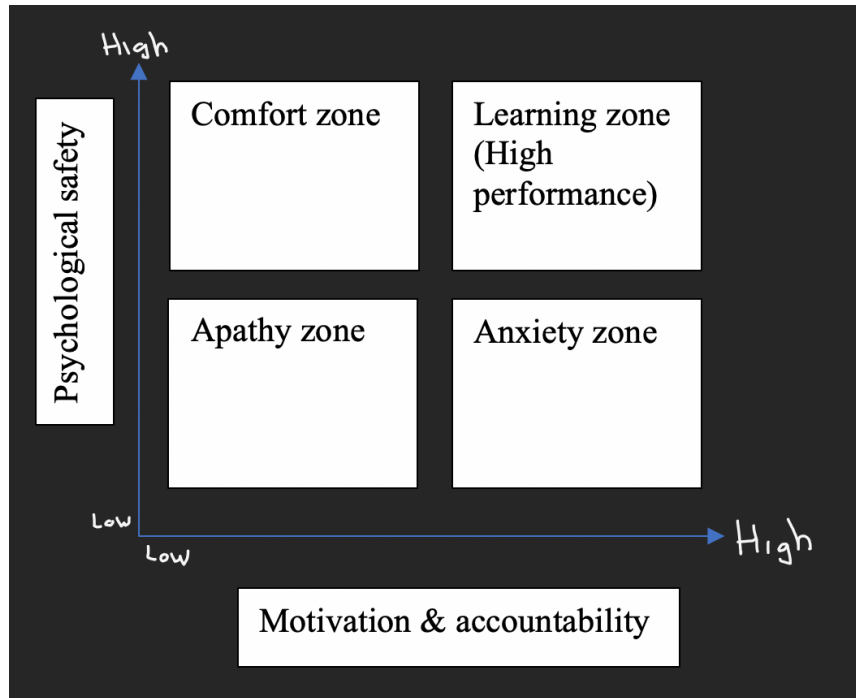
### **2.1.2 Psychological safety**

Professor Amy Edmondson, who popularized the term “psychological safety” through her 1999 research paper “Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams” defines psychological safety as “a climate of a group, where people believe that candor is welcome.” She also says that she would relabel it “permission for candor” if she were given the chance to do so, due to its accuracy in a time of misconception surrounding the term.<sup>7</sup> Edmondson has

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<sup>7</sup> Common misconceptions range from psychological safety meaning honest or nice, to politically correct, all of which not only undermines, but are often complete opposites of radical candor.

developed a matrix to help explain how psychological safety plays a key role in teams (Edmondson, 1999).



(Figure 1: Adapted from the work of Amy Edmondson) Psychological safety and motivation/accountability are two separate dimensions, both of which affect team performance in a complex interdependent environment.

Her matrix provides a simplified map to help teams navigate their situation. One can see how scoring low in both psychological safety and motivation and accountability leads to apathy. Likewise scoring high in psychological safety and low in motivation and accountability identifies the comfort zone. Scoring low in psychological safety and high in motivation and accountability leads to the anxiety zone, while scoring high in both dimensions lead to the desired learning zone. This is also called the high-performance zone as long as the two additional factors, uncertainty and interdependence are present. These describe a climate where challenges are approached with curiosity and positivity, and where team members are dependent on one another to successfully figure out a solution.

Although her matrix might seem evident, Edmondson states that psychological safety is rare. She says it challenges human nature, because humans instinctively want to look good in front of others and appear competent, especially when interacting in hierarchies where such forces

are exaggerated. These instincts tap into phrases like “better to be safe than sorry”, “don’t rock the boat”, and “no-ones been fired for being silent”. Consequently, work often becomes factory-like, even where creativity is key. Workers are supposed to know what to do, hit targets, reach metric goals, and bow nicely whenever given tasks that demand more than mentioned in their job description. Gradually, such forces pull teams away from the learning zone (McKeown, 2023).

To stay in the learning zone is instrumental, especially for knowledge intensive work. Edmondson says that even though individuals can be creative, it is team creativity which is the key to rapid innovation and a vibrant learning environment. The team must access the ideas and expertise of its members and bring them to life through continuous sparring. The learning zone is naturally where creativity, innovation, error catching and correction, and knowledge sharing can flourish. Such work depends on team member’s ability to generate and offer ideas, and to be radically open and candid in a professional manner. If ignored, two risk factors emerge. One of these is that an organization might have preventable business failure, which can be both dramatic and devastating. Another is that failure to innovate leads businesses to a slow and often painful death, as they lose connection to the market (McKeown, 2023).

Edmondson states that one can’t have too much psychological safety, but that there are misconceptions which might lead businesses and managers to think that psychological safety is a soft tool for making people feel comfortable. Instead, she says, it describes a belief that neither the formal nor informal consequences on interpersonal risk, such as admitting to mistakes or asking for assistance, will be punitive. It is a belief that candor is both allowed and even expected. This sets the stage for a more honest, more challenging, more collaborative, and thus a more effective work environment. It’s not about being nice or too polite or politically correct. It’s about radical candor (Tangen, 2022).

### **2.1.3 New trends in the workplace**

Working in teams across multiple corporations and industries have become increasingly common over the last several decades, whether one is working as a consultant, professor, entrepreneur, creator, or all the above. This shift from a static nature of work to a more dynamic

style has challenged both managers and employees to develop new tools and labels for achieving high performance in such work environments.

One such label is what Amy Edmondson calls *teaming*. She defines it as capturing the ongoing *activity* of collaborative work in teams that don't necessarily have the benefits of stable static structures. The importance of this being a continuous exercise is emphasized, as she describes an interconnected network of temporary teams performing effective problem solving and innovation. She goes on to write that such type of work requires everyone to be highly aware of others' roles, perspectives, and needs. To achieve teaming, Edmondson writes, both leaders and members must take part in the safe interpersonal environment described by psychological safety. This allows an increased focus on innovation and collective learning. Firm leadership is needed, as teaming often seeks to solve problems that include risk, potential failure, and crossing of boundaries. Such activities are rarely natural in large organizations, and therefore require a team-based approach demanding high performance and high-quality teaming skills to achieve any chance of success. She writes "fast-moving work environments need people who know how to team, people who have the skills and the flexibility to act in moments of potential collaboration when and where they appear. They must have the ability to move on, ready for the next such moment... Teaming is the engine for organizational learning". (Edmondson, 2012, p.14).

## **2.2 Music industry structures and dynamics**

The music industry has traditionally been difficult to categorize. In fact, even referring to it as "an industry" can be regarded as a simplification which undermines the dynamics and complexities of its inner workings (Nordgård, 2018, p.7). Based on the relationship between artist and fan however, the music economy is often divided into three main pillars generating the highest revenue streams. These are recorded music, live music, and music publishing (IFPI 2023, Pollstar 2022, CISAC 2022). Although continuously debated, Wikström sums it up quite neatly when labeling the music economy as a *copyright industry*, a description which puts protection of creative works at the center. He describes the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a time where controlling forces were maximizing revenue per piece of music, while minimizing any uncontrolled use of such works (Wikström, 2020, p. 6-14). Being able to control such "immaterial information goods" (Shapiro and Varian, 1999) or "experience products" (Hoskins

and McFadyen, 2004) naturally relies on the industry's ability to commodify music in a systematic manner even through major industry shifts and digitization. This aligns with the works of Simon Frith and Lee Marshall (2004), who emphasize that it was the mix of rapidly evolving new technologies and complicated law that shed light on the need for global "harmonization" of copyright during the digital transition (Frith and Marshall, 2004, p.1).

And copyright law is undoubtedly one of the fundamental building blocks on which recorded music and music publishing, rests. With over 100 000 new tracks uploaded to digital streaming platforms (often referred to as digital service providers or DSPs) such as Spotify, YouTube, Amazon Music everyday (Ingham, 2022), channeling rapidly growing revenue streams to the correct rights holders is dependent on good systems. The same goes for the rapid growth of social media platforms such as Meta and TikTok, where major labels have been able to secure deals granting access to enormous music catalogues (Solon, et al., 2022).

Alongside this development, music libraries and user devices are approaching an endless capacity of storage, granting the consumers unhindered immediate access to more music than they could possibly consume during the span of a lifetime. Alan B. Krueger acknowledged this trend in his book *Rockonomics*, by including the following remarks by David Bowie, originally quoted from John Pareles' article in New York Times (Pareles, 2002): Music itself is going to become like running water or electricity...You'd better be prepared to do a lot of touring because that's really the only unique situation that's going to be left." (Krueger, 2019, p.20). Although Bowie's prediction turned out to ring profoundly true, it shines light on only a fraction of the complex changes the music industry has endured since the millennium, not to mention the new realities ahead. To understand how such dynamics impact the way music is made, one must look to who the music worker is.

### **2.2.1 The music worker**

Traditionally the industry was characterized by tall barriers of entry, as both rare musical talent and large investments has been necessary to even start experimenting with high quality music production. Professional music studios, state of the art equipment, and skilled recording engineers have traditionally been of high expense, and the need for supremely talented musicians and artist has provided only the elite performers with any opportunity to prove

themselves in the business. Throughout the 60's, 70's, and 80's, however, the industry was dominated by records labels who controlled both production, distribution, and marketing of music, and therefore had significant and predictable revenue streams through continuous physical sales. This allowed record labels to invest heavily in a wide range of musical talent, providing valuable studio time and additional resources for long periods of time without demanding immediate results. Throughout the late 90's and early 2000's, digital innovations and illegal file sharing platforms disrupted this music industry machine, significantly decreasing record labels' willingness to invest in unproven talent (Spilker, 2018, p.87-114 and Wikström, 2020, p.68-86). This shift is still seen in today's music market, as social media followings and performers' ability to go viral is often weighted more heavily than their artistic expression and stage presence. A common saying in the music world today is that artists must make it on their own before entering a tier of the music industry where talent is even considered eligible for further discussion and potential signings.

The music industry can be divided into the creative core, such as musicians, artists, producers, composers and songwriters, and those occupations supporting these core activities, the managers, label executives, marketing staff etc. The definition can also be broadened to include merchandize designers, venue security and more, but these roles are oftentimes not relevant when discussing the music creation process in itself. Professor Richard Florida defines those who fully engages in the creative process as the super-creative core (Florida, 2002 p. 68). This class can be compared to those working in "aesthetic production" by Patrick Wikström (Wikström, 2020, p. 56). Florida also defines those who engage in creative problem solving as "creative professionals" and those outside this scope as members of the "service-class" (Florida, 2002 p. 71). Although distinctions can be made between the creative core, and supporting functions, it is worth noting that roles often overlap. An example would be a songwriter who also teaches songwriting, or a music producer who also does consulting as a music business expert. Today's digital environment also gives a lot of creators instant access to their own "marketing department" through ad-tools and collaborative video-creation tools, blurring these lines even further.

Music workers generally create music out of passion, and their creativity spring out of a drive to put ideas into the world. It is therefore logical that music workers will find ways to create music even though it might be known as an underpaid and tedious line of work. It is for example not unusual that session musicians participate and contribute musically to multiple bands or



recordings at the same time, across various genres, for little or no money at all. The sum of hours needed to make a minimum wage for such musicians far exceeds what would be acceptable in other traditional lines of work, but at the same time, musicians get the thrill of playing their instruments and expressing themselves. In *Rockonomics*, the drummer of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band states that "there's a reason musicians call it playing and not working." (Krueger 2019, p. 395). These tendencies are widely recognized, and Richard Florida points out that the creator seeks recognition for their work both in money and perhaps more importantly, acknowledgement for what one has created or the fact that one is a creator at all (Florida, 2002, p. 78). This need to be seen or heard is what Maslow defines as self-actualization, topping of his well-known pyramid. It includes activities which speaks directly to one's sense of self, creativity, acceptance, purpose, meaning, and the desire to become most of what one can become.

Such needs to create and have an output also applies for the session work many musicians attend while creating. Studio sessions can last anywhere from a half an hour to days and weeks, and the goal is often a demo or as close to a finished song as possible. Such work is often unpaid, and splits are divided so that potential economic gain can be received by contributors on the back end of release (Krueger, 2019, p.87-99). This naturally gives musicians incentives to contribute with whatever ideas they have that will lead sessions from the idea stage to a completed product which can be presented upwards in the hierarchy of labels, if not released directly by the artist (Florida, 2002). The urge to get things done might however have counterproductive effects on the quality of music created.

How musicians and songwriters contribute to each other's projects and bands, have also changed over the last decades. As the number of band members per band has decreased, the number of songwriters and creative contributors per billboard-charting song has increased significantly (Krueger 2019, p. 109). This ties in with data suggesting that most of the revenue streams occur at the beginning of music releases, adding pressure on labels and artist to create the "best" song possible and therefore validate song quality through multiple songwriters and producers before putting it into the world. Krueger also points out that the live income grossed by the top one percent has more than doubled from 1982 to 2019, adding fuel to the fire in the superstar economy. Naturally, the increased superstardom requires more content creation to keep the wheels turning in the creative core surrounding such stars (Krueger 2019, p. 30).

Head of Pixar, Ed Catmull, calls this “feeding the beast.” He says it’s good for the appetite of the enterprise surrounding mega projects, as it provides cash flow for a lot of people. It does however also lead to fear of “stepping outside the formula” of that which has become a proven success. He explains Disney’s lack of number one box office openings in the period between the opening of “The Lion King” in 1994 up until 2010 as a consequence of pushing the same agenda year after year. The company made numerous sequels and “safe” movies, only to fail at rapid innovation. At the time, Catmull was head of Disney’s main competitor, Pixar (which was breaking box-office records continuously), and observed what was happening closely. When Disney acquired Pixar in 2006, Catmull became their new president and subsequently turned the ship around (among one of his biggest successes were the 2010 release of Toy Story 3, a collaboration between Disney and Pixar which ended Disney’s dry streak). When he asked his new employees why they kept feeding the beast, they simply answered that they thought they had to (Catmull, 2014, p.130-131).

### **2.2.2 Team dynamics and digitization**

As with a lot of creative work, the music industry experienced a massive growth in both creative processes and revenue generating sales as technologic innovations entered the households of the general population over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The economic prosperity supported new professions such as studio engineers, songwriters, producers, and musicians, which enabled far more people to develop specialized skills and work in music. Musical innovations such as the synthesizer and the multi-track recorder enabled further experimentation and excitement among audiences and record companies, which in turn escalated growth and investments in creative teams. The recipe of discovering talent, giving them access to state-of-the-art equipment and studio facilities, and then mass-market their musical results, held water for a while. The success of one act could then subsidize many others, as they followed along the soon well-established footsteps set by the industry. The digital disruption in the late 90’s, with the mp3 players and file-sharing platforms, put an end to risky investments in unproven talent and everlasting studio sessions. Supporting numerous creative specialists were no longer financially possible, and the well-known team structures supporting traditional musical innovation and artistic growth in the creative core were torn. Although seemingly tedious at the time, digital tools and online marketing opportunities soon allowed the music worker access to the world from the comfort of their home (Spilker, 2018, p.87-114).

This development enabled DIY<sup>8</sup> methods to spread like wildfire throughout creative industries, and gave musicians, producers, and songwriters the opportunity to work with whomever they wanted, however they wanted. It also enabled creators to reach large audiences without the need of conventional marketing channels, such as the examples set by Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails. After his parting with Interscope Records, the band famously experimented as a completely independent artist, releasing their album “Ghost I-IV” directly on their website. They also provided stem packs for their fans and hosted a film festival of fan made visual content to fit the album on YouTube. According to Reznor, the album generated over 1,6 million USD during the first week (Wikström, 2020). Although Reznor was successful in his experimental efforts, many have tried to follow his footsteps without generating a superstar income.

Many aspects of the DIY-trend have been discussed since Nine Inch Nails released their mentioned album, but how these forces are shaping the working conditions of the creative music makers is arguably still a complicated matter. Nordgård notes that the DIY trend was long seen in a positive light, celebrated as it shook up the corporate industry (Nordgård, 2018, p.19). While allowing creators access to high quality samples for commercial use, and digital platforms to distribute and sell their music, it has also allowed traditional actors like major labels the comfort of watching what works in the market before they enter the conversations with potential new artists. This passive approach is summed up neatly by Nordgård, labeling the artists as “artreprenours” as they are building their own brands and taking on risk from the start of their careers.

This passive approach is however nothing new in the music economy. Spilker writes that while the industry was taking the backseat on tech developments and holding on to old ways of conducting business, essentially going to war on technical innovations instead of taking the lead, tech companies jumped at the opportunity for disruptive restructuring around the turn of the millennium. The music industry gave away control, paradoxically while trying to gain control (Spilker, 2018, p.179). With open terrain ahead, Napster, YouTube, Apple, and Spotify, became part of the industry. Tschmuck writes that “companies that had no prior or at best only weak links to the industry suddenly became a highly relevant part of it.” (Tschmuck 2016,

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<sup>8</sup> DIY stands for “do it yourself” and refers to the digital tools which allows creators to control entire value chains. From making music, to distribution, marketing, and monetizing.

p.13). Negus emphasizes that while the analog music industry is product oriented, generating revenue from sales, live performances, and the usage of rights. The digital industry is more focused on content, monetizing it and generating revenue from streaming, data, digital storage and ads. Negus also writes that the music industry has rested on “an enduring romantic sensibility,” which refers to continuous investments in artists as creators at the expense of developments of modernized systems and tech innovation. Both Negus and Spilker lifts this point, by stating that there is money in the music industry, but it lies in subscriptions, telephone and internet connection charges, computers, phones, speakers, headphones, electricity etc. all of which are innovations coming from tech, where music is utilized to sweeten the deals of signing up with different companies etc. (Spilker, 2018, p.180). The music industry solution to increased revenue has been by introducing 360 deals, where they take a percentage of the entire brand of an artist, instead of just music. This is however a tiny fraction compared to the tech companies, and it is coming out of artists’, not consumers’ pockets (Spilker, 2018, p.181).

### **2.2.3 Emerging pressures**

Even though technology is allowing creators of all tiers to upload their content to digital platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube, for free, data shows that the superstars of the music economy are increasing their market share in an already saturated market. As Krueger points out, fewer top artists are bands, and more songwriters are contributing on the superstar records than ever before. Additionally, the top artists are also collaborating with each other to gain attention during the important release (Krueger 2019, p. 110). Singer-songwriter Dan Wilson points to the convenience of global collaboration and compartmentalizing when explaining increased collaboration. He also points to the possibility in itself. He argues that it is easier to have ten people work on their own part of a song, than have ten people figuring things out in a physical room. He says that this type of collaboration also leads to simpler melodies, as they must fit other parts of a pre-recorded song, verse, or chorus. Musical contributions to a record are also broadly acknowledged today, whilst it often went under the radar during early years of recorded music (Krueger 2019, p. 111-114).

Although popular music tends to be catchy and effective for grabbing the listeners’ attention, access to libraries like Splice.com where the most popular sound kits are easy to find and easy to use, eliminates the heterogenous process of recording a unique drum-kit in a unique room,

perhaps experimenting with different recording techniques. In his book, “The Cultural Industries”, David Hesmondhalgh argues that the often-hierarchical structure of the music industries can impact team diversity and therefore the range of perspectives offered in the creative process. As music workers are often targeting music that has proven successful (ex. Billboard Hot 100 or Spotify Global Top 50) when trying to come up with tomorrow’s top songs, the forces of homogenous lists, songs, and sounds, only reinforce such trends. Hesmondhalgh also writes that this is a part of a larger issue in both creative and other industries, as globalization and growth of extremely powerful companies often leads to homogenization and erosion of alternative perspectives. This enables mass production of cultural goods on a global scale (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p.378-379). Spilker includes several quotes by media historian Niels Ole Finnemann in his book, who claims that information and communications technology lead to expansion of areas in culture that can be industrialized, which represents a sobering perspective contrary to what one might intuitively think (Spilker, 2018, p.111).

Other forces are shaping the economics of consumers’ most used music platforms. Spilker explains that CEO of Universal Music Norway (then, EMI), Bjørn Rogstad, called off the fight against piracy as late as in 2012, stating that the then new challenge was to exploit digital distribution and new business models (IFPI, 2016). Interestingly, exploiting models of digital distribution and paywalls have been tried and tested by both newspapers and movie streaming companies (examples are Norwegian newspaper VG, which have a VG+ edition behind paywall, and film streaming platform Netflix), without managing to create a sustainable revenue stream on their own (Spilker, 2018, p.104-105 and Gioia, 2022). This is by economist and music historian Ted Gioia explained by the flaw in so-called “closed systems”, which allows you to see much content which favors the owner of such platforms, and only a fraction of other content. In an interview with musician and producer Rick Beato, Gioia mentions how this might also have a lot of relevance to the streaming platforms in music, such as Spotify, which also has a cash problem (Sismanis, 2023). Being a music historian, especially interested in Jazz, Gioia found that the top tracks of a Spotify jazz list was consisting mainly of artists he had never heard of. He investigated the artists, only to find out that they all lived in Sweden, coincidentally the same country as the Spotify headquarters. Who controls these profiles is hard to tell, but Gioia says one thing is clear. Spotify loses money for every minute you spend listening to artists they must pay royalties to. That’s why they own their podcasts, and that’s why artists can exchange royalties for exposure (Kraftman, 2023). It is also why it could make

sense economically to place self-made jazz on the top jazz playlists, despite it being of potentially less musical value to the active listeners (Beato, 2022, 54.42).

In conclusion, the creative core in the music industry appears to be experiencing increasing pressures from multiple angles. While the global tech companies are continuously developing new platforms music creators must conquer to stay relevant, the industry actors have largely taken on the role of spectators, analysts, and gatekeepers to the bigger music industry machine (such as investments in artist management, marketing, and strategic partnerships). As creators continue to utilize new tools to build their music and fanbases, the forces demanding productivity are many. On all social media platforms, one is asked to “post more like it” whenever content is doing well. On Spotify, more followers automatically ensure more Spotify radio play. Tech algorithms is recommending music that “sounds like” other music, adding force to homogenous creative processes to ensure music products that sound like the “industry standard.”

With such industry dynamics present, one could argue that the importance of awareness surrounding team performance and key factors is increasing. According to the established theory, creative environments where radical candor is expected should contribute to more diverse and innovative teams. To foster such environments is on the other hand a complex task. This is partly because of the way creative musicians collaborate with many different people, not necessarily expecting to work again. This removes accountability, which Edmondson emphasizes about as important as psychological safety, since both must be present for high performance (see figure 1). Music creators’ willingness to create despite poor financial prospects could also feed into this negative loop of lack of accountability and honesty. When breakthrough performance is needed, psychological safety is said to be the most important factor for making that happen, but this isn’t even relevant if the perceived need for such performance isn’t present. As Bowie seems to have gotten his abundance theory right, one could make the argument that the creative core is showing traits of assembly line production.

### 3. Methods

Although there is little research on how music workers at the creative core of the industry experience psychological safety in typical creative music work, there are many well understood factors contributing to psychological safety and high performance within teams in general knowledge work. Psychological safety as a term and performance metric is also receiving increasing attention in both research papers and annual reports, as shown in Warner Music's yearly report (WMG, 2021) and figures presented in *The Fearless Organization* (Edmondson, 2019, p.27-28). How such metrics impact music workers through the music business field of research is however a question that remains largely unexplored. A qualitative explorative approach for theory development was therefore chosen, as it would fit the ambitions of the thesis and provide in-depth data.

A case-approach was used, combining narrowed literature research and one-on-one interviews of semi-structured nature with two highly accomplished music creators from my own professional network. As my thesis revolves around high performers with the records to prove it, I found it necessary to aim for the best performers I could think of. As this limits the pool of potential respondents, I turned to my own trusted network of music creators and music executives that I've been fortunate enough to work with. The chosen respondents were Grammy award winning songwriter Autumn Rowe, and highly credited producer and mixer, Christer George (detailed introductions are included further down in this chapter). Although it could be argued that having only two respondents for such a qualitative thesis might provide limited amounts of data, I found the opposite to be true in this case. Such a narrow scope allowed me to focus on getting the most competent respondents possible and granted me the opportunity to ask questions that demanded rich answers and time to explore new avenues. Both respondents also represent an international maturity of rare nature. Considerations to gender differences were also made.

#### 3.1 Quantitative vs. qualitative

Denscombe writes that "the purpose of analyzing something is to gain a better understanding of it". (cf. Denscombe, 2010, p. 235). He continues to write that quantitative data uses *numbers* as the unit of analysis, while qualitative data uses *words or visual images* as the unit of analysis

(Denscombe, 2010, p. 237). He also states that quantitative data has a more “objective” nature to it, given the numerical data that often rely on large sets of responses. On the contrary, qualitative data involves the researcher and is therefore dependent on his/her role in measuring the data. Put simply, quantitative analysis is more detached and specific, while qualitative is more involving and holistic (Denscombe, 2010, p. 237-238).

Denscombe goes on to write that there isn't a “one size fits all” solution for all situations which require qualitative data analysis, and that qualitative data can take on many forms depending on purpose (Denscombe, 2010, p. 272). He states that qualitative analysis is considered as iterative, meaning they evolve alongside the collection of data, that it is inductive, meaning it starts out in the particular and works its way to a more general state, and that it is researcher-centered, meaning it involves the researcher's interpretation of the process (Denscombe, 2010, p. 273).

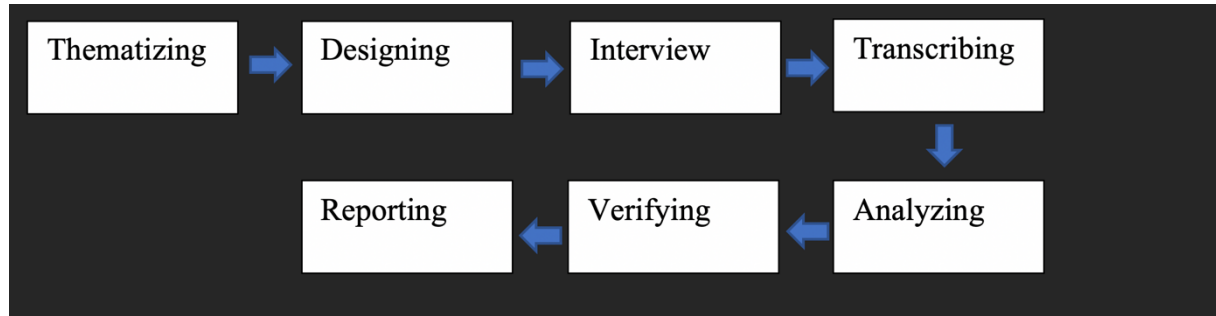
Although there is quantifiable data describing trends in musician mental health, song output on digital music platforms, and monetary income for creative core members, there isn't quantified data on how accomplished songwriters and music producers experience psychological safety and its attributes in relation to their craft. Although it could be both possible and interesting to collect such data, I don't see how my limited experience in this type of research alongside the relatively small scope of this thesis would allow such an experiment to be conducted in an appropriate manner at this time. Additionally, psychological safety and performance in creative teams such as musicians and music producers are not necessarily something easily quantifiable. To keep an open mind going into this relatively new and largely unexplored field of research, I saw it natural to let the insider experts talk openly about the topics discussed. This way I could perhaps discover previously undisclosed truths of how the creative core experience their own work, and how they might have experienced trends in how they work over their time in the business. Such results could even yield a more fruitful discussion, and perhaps help guide new research going forward. With literature at the basis of this thesis, I chose a qualitative path for the data collection from interview objects.

## **3.2 Interviews**



Kvale writes that “knowledge is created inter the points of view of the interviewer and interviewee” and that the interviews often are the most exciting and enriching process of the process (Kvale, 1994, p. 124). Denscombe (2010) writes that although interviews are regarded as an attractive proposition for the data gathering process, they must not be mistaken for mere conversations. Interviews typically involve assumptions and deeper knowledge in the field, which everyday conversations normally don’t have. He lists several interview forms, such as structured interviews, semi-structured, unstructured, one-on-one, group-interviews, and internet interviews, the latter having become highly familiar to many through the recent covid-pandemic. Since structured interviews are tightly controlled, like a survey with limited responses, and unstructured interviews are too loosely connected to the issues at hand, the semi-structured option was considered the most reasonable option for this thesis. This would allow issues to be addressed while remain flexible so that ideas could be developed further. They would also allow an explorative approach which gives room for theory development (Denscombe, 2010, p. 175).

Starting from the semi-structured option led me to the following interview guide: (Figure 2: Adapted by the work of S. Kvale, 1996)



Although most of these boxes might seem evident, I’d like to point out that thematizing involves establishing *what* one talks about in the interview, and *why* it is important. The box of verifying involves establishing the validity and reliability of the research, which is of the highest importance. Other interview styles were considered, such as a group session or an open round-table conversation, but I was concerned that the dynamics of a potential ad-hoc group might influence opinions and shape answers in a “filtered” manner. I simply considered the one-on-one solution to be more allowing for going in-depth into personal experiences in this case. Additionally, coordinating such group interviews would’ve demanded a lot of planning work which could’ve shifted my focus away from the main objectives of the thesis.

### **3.2.1 Strengths**

There lies strength in the way a semi-structured interview allows respondents to elaborate on a topic without being too restricted in their answers. It also provides a compass for respondents to follow, as the theme of the interview is well-established by the interviewer. The related branches the respondents explore upon giving their answers can subsequently be followed up by new questions or angles. In the case of this study, it was my sincere hopes that such reflections would lead the interviews down new and valuable alleyways, sparking later discussion and further research. Denscombe also lists several factors labelled advantages related to this type of data. These are “richness and detail in the data”, “tolerance of ambiguity and contradictions”, which is better translated in qualitative rather than quantitative measures. “Prospects of alternative explanations”, and that the data and analysis are usually grounded”. (Denscombe, 2010, p.304-305).

Although knowing my interview partners from before could be regarded as a challenge or weakness if linked to bias, it also provided an open approach to the topics at hand from what I experienced as a “friendly” and “honest” standpoint. Even when topics or questions were of the more personal or severe kind, such as talking about scenarios where top tier performers and creators failed to meet each other’s expectations and ended up leaving the studio altogether, the conversation flowed naturally as in a learning environment. My intuition tells me that continuing down such alleyways could’ve been more challenging if a personal connection hadn’t existed prior to this research.

### **3.2.2 Challenges**

Some well-known disadvantages of the qualitative research methods are the plausibility of less representative data, as fewer individual responses are gathered than in a common quantitative study. Additionally, the “self” of the researcher is a filter which all the information gathered must pass through. Decontextualizing, as well as oversimplifying data, which can happen through coding and decoding data (such as in transcription phases), as well as feeling pressure to generalize and “find a thread” through the research. Qualitative research also takes longer to analyze, as it isn’t applicable to statistics in the way quantitative data is. (Denscombe, 2010, p.304-305).

Just as there are upsides of having a relation to the respondents, these relations also come with potential downsides. One never knows fully what's going on in someone else's mind, or why they would want to respond in a certain way given any particular question. It is however common knowledge that people want to appear competent and nice. This might push respondents into giving lengthier responses to questions which they might not have reflected well upon prior to being asked, as in answering for the sake of answering. I do not have feeling that this was the case in this study, but it is something to watch out for nevertheless. Hidden pressures to hold back information about certain cases that could have been valuable to the research is also a possibility. Horror stories from terrible managers and ruthless artists do exist, although no such information seemed to alter the perceived truthfulness in the data collected. On the other hand, digging for data on such potential events might be more natural in a personal and physical setting, where one can read the room and body language cues in a different manner than through phone or mail.

Other challenges include having to shift the planned phone interview with one of my respondents, to a mail-correspondence, due to a compact schedule and several hectic flights and other unforeseen events adding to the equation. As this interview style would hinder my abilities to ask follow-up questions on the spot, I had to set up a written interview with follow up questions in an open-ended style, which in all honesty made me both insecure and curious because of my non-existing experience with leading a research project of this scope. I followingly made sure to list the questions chronologically and make explicit that reading through them beforehand was not permitted. This was to keep a similar flow of topics in both interviews, so that comparisons would be more accurate when reviewing the data. It is my sincere opinion that although challenging initially, the combination of written and recorded responses worked out very well. The comfort of answering on a flight in solitude, might actually have led to some additional reflection upon answering, even though it's hard to tell for certain.

Lastly, I would love to have done these interviews in person. Unfortunately, this was too impractical, but having the opportunity to pursue such conversations at a future time would be of high interest. Reading the room, seeing the body language evolve, and perhaps even conducting a group interview could yield interesting insights.

### **3.2.3 Ethics**

Confidentiality and anonymity are of utmost importance when gathering data from respondents in general, with this case being no exception. The added fact that this research contains qualitative personal answers from only two subjects, increases the pressure and perceived responsibility towards my respondents. It can be argued that the creative core of the music economy is a relatively small world, and with the two respondents already being in my professional and personal network, it is highly likely that they will eventually be made aware of each other's participation in this research, with their potentially differing opinions open to the public world. It is therefore incredibly important that data is presented in a professional manner, despite revolving around personal achievements and work philosophies. Both have decided not to remain anonymous, which indicates a willingness to speak up on the topics at hand.

### **3.2.4 Guide**

The interview guide provides an overview of the main questions, as well as the structure of the interview based on the foundational literature research. As suggested by my supervisor, an initial "warm-up" section was created to warm the respondents up before diving into the more complex and personal matters of the interview. These questions revolved around how long respondents have worked as creatives in the music business professionally, what got them into music in the first place, as well as goals and dreams when they started compared to now as these might have been accomplished.

The second phase was focused on time(s) in their professional career where they had likely achieved high performance, or breakthrough experiences. Since this could be interpreted as a somewhat vague term, indicators of such performance were linked to global audience recognition (such as large sales numbers or placements with the biggest artists in the world) or industry praise (such as winning a Grammy Award). After committing to this frame, a list of ten main questions were asked with regards to the work environment, teamwork, pressures, time-aspects, candor etc. These were linked up to Amy Edmonson's 7-question questionnaire (quantitative) which she uses to measure psychological safety in the workplace (these are listed at the bottom of this chapter).

The third phase revolved around time(s) where all the right pieces had been present, such as big artists, label support, top tier performers etc., but somehow things didn't work out creatively in the team environment. This would be despite most members of a team being in a state of high accountability and motivation. The goal of this frame was to isolate psychological safety in Amy Edmondson's matrix (as shown on page 10). The same ten questions as in the high-performance example were then asked to check for similarities and differences.

The fourth phase revolved around the respondent's everyday work. This frame was set to distinguish between the high-performance case, so that respondents might start to reflect on the pieces contributing to such a rare phenomenon as succeeding in the music business as a creator on the global stage. The same ten questions were subsequently asked with small variations.

Lastly, the respondents were asked a few direct questions regarding how they experience team performance, psychological safety, candor, openness etc., in relation to music industry pressures. They were asked how they would like to work if they could choose freely in order to once again reach the pinnacle of the industry (even if they'd reached the top fairly recently). To round off, they were asked about the future of the creative core, which also sparked interesting new conversations for a later time.

Amy Edmondson's seven guiding questions for measuring psychological safety are (from strongly agree to strongly disagree):

1. If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you.
2. Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.
3. People on this team sometimes reject others for being different.
4. It is safe to take a risk on this team.
5. It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help.
6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.
7. Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.

(Rework, 2023)

### **3.2.5 Choosing respondents**

There were conducted two interviews for this thesis.

The criteria were:

1. The respondent must've had at least ten years of experience in the creative core of the music industry. That is, the respondent must be a music producer, songwriter, musician, or performing artist.
2. The respondent must've been part of at least one breakthrough experience where high performance was most likely achieved (musical achievements that are recognized by either a national or global audience, or the industry).
3. The respondent must be open and honest and unafraid to speak up in the interview setting. If thought to be dishonest or manipulative for whatever reason, the interview must be excluded for the purpose of the research.
4. The respondents should have some differentiating factors amongst them. This could be geographical differences, gender differences, expertise differences (such as one being a producer and another a songwriter, even though the creative core often have overlapping skills).

The interview partners were Autumn Rowe and Christer George, both of which represent the top tier of the creative core in the music industry. These were chosen among a selected group of five potential candidates, all of which have experienced success as music creators on the global stage. Although I additionally planned for only two selected cases, I did hold a third spot open if one of the other three should have a change of heart (or an opening in their schedule) within reasonable time. This almost happened, but as you'll read further down on this page, the individual came short last minute. The data gathered was however deemed not only sufficient, but also rich and insightful.

#### **Autumn Rowe**

Autumn Rowe is an American singer-songwriter, DJ, and activist from New York. She has worked with the top tier of global artists consistently since her breakthrough hit song

“Happiness” in 2010, produced by Norwegian superstar duo Stargate<sup>9</sup> and performed by Alexis Jordan. Her credits span from Leona Lewis and Avicii to Fifth Harmony and Ava Max, and her most recent achievement was nothing short of the prestigious Grammy Award for “Album Of The Year”, for her contributions on the album “WE ARE” by Jon Batiste”.

### **Christer George**

Christer George is a Norwegian music producer, recording engineer, and mixing engineer with credits on records by megastars such as Drake, Tiësto, and 50 Cent. He is also an entrepreneur on the corporate side of music, currently building his own label and management-company, Gladstone Music Group, with top tier performers in the Norwegian music scene. His prior experience before pursuing a full-time career in music is of the unique kind, as he played professional football on the highest international level. He has both won the Norwegian series “Tippeligaen” with Rosenborg (four times) and competed in UEFA Champions League.

By the time my interviews were conducted, logged, and transcribed, I had come to realize how incredibly forthcoming and kind the respondents had been despite their busy schedules and differentiating time-zones. Although timing and scheduling was indeed a factor, I was caught off-guard by their determination to partake in this project once asked. For that, I am thankful. I am also thankful for the continued efforts of a potential third respondent, who despite an optimistic and energizing initial response, had to cancel last minute due to unforeseen circumstances. This person was touring Europe at the time, and simply had to prioritize the unforgiving demands of the rock & roll lifestyle.

### **3.2.6 Data**

The interviews were conducted both by recorded phone conversation (Christer) and mail correspondence (Autumn). The recorded interview was subsequently transcribed and aligned with the written response. As noted by Kvale, there is no one settled way of transcribing interviews (Kvale 1996, p.170). Information regarded as irrelevant was left out of the transcription process.

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<sup>9</sup> Mikkel Eriksen and Tor Erik Hermansen are known as the Norwegian producer duo Stargate.

Although there isn't a unified solution to conduct all qualitative analysis, there are guiding principles one should recognize and utilize depending on the form of data at hand. With regards to transcription of data, Denscombe notes that although tedious, it allows a close proximity to the interview conducted, which in essence brings it back to life. Transcribing also enables an efficient overview of potentially quite long conversations (Denscombe, 2010, p. 290-291).

As there are no absolutes in terms of "nailing" a qualitative research project, the term *credibility* is used, as opposed to validation (Denscombe, 2010, p.299). Measures can however be taken to reach a state of *reason* and *likelihood* of accurate and appropriate data. These are *triangulation*, which uses contrasting data to increase confidence in how the new data relates to existing research. This was taken into consideration and utilized so that statements made from both respondents could be compared to each other's isolated responses as well as literature in the field. *Respondent validation*, which enables the respondents to check the accuracy and understanding of previous statements. One must in this case be aware that there might be differences in how the researcher and respondent relates the data to generalized conclusions and other research. *Grounded data* is another step towards credibility, as qualitative data allows observations in the field which can be very rich on information (Denscombe, 2010, p.300).

*Dependability*, also referred to as *reliability* questions the influence of the interviewer, and whether other interviewers would have harvested the same response, if all else were equal (Denscombe, 2010, p.300). To counter the potential influence of the self, researchers must "show as much detail as possible" of how what methods were used, and the procedures for acquiring data. "The research process must be open for audit" (Denscombe, 2010, p.300). This was naturally held in high regard during the entire interview process by transcribing and categorizing data, in addition to continuously keeping track of the research so that it could be presented in a transparent manner.

The question of *generalizability* revolved around whether small amounts of qualitative data are truly generalizable and representative. This question is an acceptable one to ask for most researchers, who counter it by clarifying that generalization of such conclusions rely on mathematical probabilities (and therefore quantitative data) in order to truly be deemed representative on a larger scale. An alternative approach is to ask, "to what extent could the findings be transferred to other instances?". This is known as *transferability* (Denscombe, 2010, p.301). Although this was a challenge, presenting the two respondents in a case format given



their background and public track records enabled in-depth interviews to be conducted within a reasonable scope. This provided a rich amount of data which in all transparency could be compared to similar studies of top tier creative cases and presented to the field of research.

*Confirmability* also referred to as *objectivity* is also something one must be aware of when conducting qualitative research. The mentioned influence of the researcher is unavoidable in its entirety, but steps can be taken to address this role. Two main approaches are often used, one where the researcher distances him or herself from his/her normal opinions for the sake of the research. The other where the researcher comes clean about his or her beliefs and how it has shaped the research agenda. Another important matter is to “keep an open mind”, by avoiding neglecting data that doesn’t fit the analysis, and by checking rival explanations (Denscombe, 2010, p.303). For this study, the former was used.

## 4. Findings

The goal of this thesis was in part to explore the minds of consistently successful music creators and their approach to high-performance teamwork. It was also to gain a better understanding of how music industry structures and developments might impact psychological safety in creative teams. Lastly, it was about establishing strategies to overcome potential barriers preventing psychologically safe environments. This chapter will outline the general findings the first two points, while the next chapter will revolve around discussions on to overcome barriers preventing psychological safety.

As most of the literature on HPTs and psychological safety are derived from a different field of research than musicology, the combination of both reviewing extensive amounts of music industry literature, as well as conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with music creators, proved very humbling and insightful. This approach enabled a transfer of frameworks from organizational psychology to the core of music creation. The interviews also made it evident that there are industry barriers that needs to be addressed.

During the interviews and subsequent treatment of data, multiple threads emerged as interesting in relation to the theoretical framework of this paper. One of these were the experienced pressures of outside forces and constant changes impacting the aim of creative work. Both Autumn and Christer mentions how digital platforms come and go, and that the importance of creating content for such platforms must be held at a reasonable level. “Approaching music from too much of an analytical viewpoint hurts creativity” (Autumn Rowe). Another clear thread was the importance of working with people that can add value to a team, in an honest and interactive musical environment. Working over longer stretches of time, often with a project focus, was also of preferable. Autumn mentions her work with creatives of Grammy winning album “WE ARE”, and Christer mentions work with his trusted producer colleagues in “Twice As Nice.” (Examples will be elaborated on further down in this paper). They both also state that it isn’t the most talented creators who make it. It is those who keep going. This naturally also ties into a point which Christer emphasizes greatly; the value of continuous practice in competent environments, which also sheds light on the difficulties of valuable learning experiences in solitaire environments (such as a home studio). Although the interviews touched on many topics and potential alleyways, it is these main threads and their relation to

theoretical framework that remains the focus. Discussions on how to overcome the identified barriers preventing such work environments are presented in chapter 5.

#### **4.1 HPTs and psychological safety**

Autumn describes a specific atmosphere when asked to recall a time where she and her co-creators reached a state of breakthrough performance. Choosing freely from a wide pool of career highlights and learning experiences, she picked the process which led to her Grammy Award winning Album Of The Year, “WE ARE” by Jon Batiste.

“The environment for this was very organic. No managers, labels, or outside influences. We worked on most of this album in a small dressing room and built a makeshift studio. Usually, songwriters and producers focus on one song for an artist, but this was different. The focus was on a project and creating a sound and direction.” (Autumn Rowe)

This shows how the creative environment itself carries more significance than the facilities in which ideas are floated and music is written. This doesn’t mean that well-equipped music studios can’t enhance the sonic quality of music, or that new ways of using instruments can’t lead to inspiring studio sessions. It only emphasizes the importance of group dynamics when aiming to enter and stay in the learning zone where high-performance most often occurs.

Christer also emphasizes the value of working project-based to remain focused over longer periods of time in order to develop an artist or an album properly and reach a desirable outcome. When asked how he would build a solid artistic foundation, he replied:

“First and foremost, it’s about connecting the right people. These must be capable of coming up with interesting ideas, given their specific field of expertise. Secondly, the work should be project based to create a bigger sense of unity and purpose, both artistically in the music, but also for the team members and their perception of what they are aiming to accomplish. There must also be a level of dedication and commitment present, so that the project and its people can endure the challenge at hand.” (Christer George)

Working project based also mean that the core members of a project get a lot more time with each other, which can contribute to learning and efficiency. According to theory, however, it can also lead to comfort, apathy, or anxiety if issues and imbalances aren't addressed. Both Autumn and Christer mention how they've seen creators fall out of the business despite their evident will to succeed. This speaks to the complexity of entering and staying in the professional tier of the creative core in music.

## **4.2 Music industry structures and dynamics**

Autumn and Christer have worked in the industry on a professional level for well over three decades combined, and seen how globalization and new technologies have changed the business from an insider perspective. Such impacts have naturally also shaped the way creators create:

“...There is room for everything in the market. At the time of this project's release (the “WE ARE”-project) most labels were focused on TikTok numbers and streams, which makes passion and artistry suffer. It's important for creatives to know that music still matters, and that there is a lane for great artists. We're often told to not make albums anymore and that no one cares about them, but is that true? We didn't think so. Sometimes you build it first, and then the labels come around...” (Autumn Rowe)

Technology has also influenced the way attention is spent, especially shaping the social media behavior of young people. It is therefore expected to have tailored content such as music video snippets and teaser tracks ready for a variety of platforms long before the release of the full finished record on major streaming services.

“...I don't see it as one big change, but rather small incremental steps of continuous development. As for right now, TikTok is the big thing, but tomorrow it might be shut down. At the moment, I do a lot of additional release work because it's what's expected from a professional standpoint. You might have a song scheduled every release in three weeks' time, but until then a bunch of snippets must be made and edited, you'll need to have several mastered versions of the song ready for different

platforms. Now imagine that song is only one of ten songs every three weeks. Then I'll have to master at least ten extra songs only for TikTok..." (Christer George)

Releasing multiple versions of records to fit the different formats of internet platforms might be the factor which differentiates professionals from amateurs. In an industry with significantly eroded barriers of entry, competition is fierce. Christer states that even though opportunities to create and publish work is at practically everyone's fingertips, producing content like a bedroom music factory might not be a good long-term strategy.

"There's a lot of paths leading to Rome, and many of those will take you there without wiping you out as you go. But you've got to go hard at it, and you've got to bring your team and make sure they too survive the journey too. If you're a band for example, you've got to play together and get to know each other both personally and musically. You've got to practice your craft again and again and again. Let's look at popular music. You can do some carpentry at home and throw a song out into the internet. There are no gatekeepers, no quality checks like back in the days. You can record the song without proper equipment and make sound like this and that, but this isn't the professional tier of the music elite. Eventually, you'll have to give yourself that opportunity of working in a professional environment. If not, you'll never truly compete against the best in the business. By immersing yourself in a professional environment with high standards and gatekeepers, that's when you'll truly learn your craft. You must develop your skill, and that doesn't happen in a vacuum." (Christer George)

Autumn also elaborates on how fierce competition and the pressure to do "everything" and say yes to all knocking opportunities has pushed in the opposite direction, being much more selective in her projects.

"...It's what I do now. I only take projects I truly believe in. A few years ago, I decided to work like a very rich woman. That's because a rich woman wouldn't do anything she doesn't want to do, so neither do I. Projects have to excite me, and I'm excited by great voices and incredible musicianship, as well as interesting colorful personalities. If some project is "hot", but I don't agree with it, I'll leave it alone." (Autumn Rowe)

Although being selective in their work is a privilege, a lot of young creators might not be aware of the challenging and transformative journey such creators as Autumn and Christer have been on in order to succeed at the top level of the industry. Ready-to-go sample packs and gazillions of free sounds, in addition to the common belief that one could strike luck with a Spotify or TikTok release, almost resemble a casino game. Both Amy Edmondson and longtime industry players have acknowledged the decrease in grit among young people, not only musicians. If you spend your time always picking the low hanging fruit, you'll never learn how to climb a tree (Tangen, 2022).

## **5. Discussion – What strategies can be implemented to diminish barriers?**

After investigating how HPTs work within the creative core of the music industry, strategies on how to diminish barriers and improve psychological safety will be discussed. The following section builds on the qualitative interviews with Autumn and Christer, industry cases, examples from literature, and fundamental music industry theory. Although efforts and practical requirements on how to implement changes might differ, they will be discussed from a realistic insider point of view.

### **5.1 Emphasize psychological safety**

The definitions and conceptualizations of psychological safety have multiplied parallel to the rising popularity and use of the term (Edmonson, 2019, p.27-28). Although there is no correlation to job security, safe space, “nothing will hurt my feelings”, workplace comfort etc., it is important to strike down on such misconceptions as this form of politeness is often about face saving, which is the anathema to learning. And learning is the goal of psychological safety itself. In a recent podcast episode hosted by CEO of Norges Bank Investment Management (NBIM), Nicolai Tangen, Edmonson again reiterated that psychological safety describes a climate of a group where people believe that candor is welcome and expected (Tangen, 2022). She uses a case example of animation studio Pixar, which had a record-breaking streak of 17 number one openings, which is quite remarkable considering the complex creative field they operate in (computer graphics and storytelling). Former president of Pixar, Ed Catmull, describes several tools they used which he reckons was crucial to their success. One of these are the “Braintrust”. This was a room where anyone of the team members working on a particular movie would join in and have radically open and honest discussions on what worked and what didn’t at screenings and previews of scenes during the development process. It could be dialogue, it could be how animations moved in relation to dialogue, anything to make the finished product outstanding. In other terms, this was a room where psychological safety was absolutely needed and expected, despite it being fostered all across Pixar for high performance. They trained themselves to be unafraid of radical feedback and criticism revolving the evolving product. Catmull mentions one particular factor that for a long time had a negative impact on the level of candor in the room. This was a long designer table which prohibited people from interacting properly with each other from across the room, as it was more intimidating to break

through the physical barrier to say something. Such a simple thing as a table had an enormous impact. When he found out what effect the table had on the people present in the Braintrust, he got rid of it instantly. The point of having such a room for heated honest discussion was to sniff out the things that weren't working, so that audiences in movie theatres wouldn't have to (Catmull, 2014, p.93).

To have a "Braintrust" function while working in creative music sessions, might however not be as simple as stepping into a room of honesty and direct feedback. Christer describes how he works best with fast writers in sessions:

"The creatives that do session work need to have developed their skillset to a point where it just flows out of them naturally, like a waterfall. They need to flourish and burst with ideas. Sometimes the best songs are written in half an hour. You must not overthink. Someone will jump on the mic and lay down a song in ten minutes. There's no room for sitting around staring at the wall without getting a result in a whole day's time." (Christer George)

This is also something that Autumn commented on, labeling herself as "a fast writer". Although both acknowledge the different levels of meaning and layers in different genres and songs, the pressure to get to a finished product within a working day might impact the way people respond to ideas when time is of the essence. Being honest about expectations and time at hand can however be of high value when engaging in session work. By working project-based, which both Autumn and Christer preferred, there might be enough effort invested in the teams to have "Braintrust"-meetings on how things are developing and what underlying factors are pushing a project in this or that direction. Solely working session-based without any expectations or plans for future work (Nasta et al., 2016) might also take some of the accountability and motivation out of the equation, which pushes the working group out of the learning zone (Edmondson, 2019, p.18). There are however several other factors influencing performance and candor other than simply emphasizing the term and its meaning.

## **5.2 Foster collaboration**



Although both Autumn and Christer have persisted throughout long careers of countless working relationships, they've also managed to keep some key partners present along the way, which might speak to the level of accountability and candor needed for sustained success. Christer explains how he met his longtime partner while getting started as an engineer and producer in New York:

“After my professional football career, I attended a study program in New York to get back into music, which I had originally postponed when my professional sports career took off (Christer and his two brothers had a group named SCN, which released two albums before they split up to pursue different careers). We were given a lot of opportunity, and those who seemed the most motivated and ready to take a leap into the real world of music went even further. I remember being very humble and learning oriented at the time, which led to a bunch of really rewarding learning experiences. I started working with a production team named Twice As Nice, consisting of two producers from Australia. We just clicked right off the bat, and managed to get a placement with 50 cent right in the beginning. We decided to move to L.A. together to work with the best of the best, and guess what? It actually worked out. We're still close after all these years.” (Christer George)

This type of long-term efforts to achieve higher levels of performance are also described extensively in literature. A former director at Ford Motor Company, David Bohm, warns of what effect fragmentation can have on teams, organizations, and even entire fields of work. He notes that fragmentation is a contemporary thought, based on our simplistic view on complex matters. This leads to a search for simple fixes, which often only leads to short term solutions. He emphasizes that if teams seek to learn together, then they must go overcome hurdles together. Such repeated practice enables teams to handle the complexities of reality more efficiently than those who don't come along for the ride (Senge, 2006, p.222).

Christer also mentions a phenomenon in the industry which seems to be more common than it ought to be, and it might point to the seemingly countless opportunities lurking around every corner of the creative community.

“There were many times where we had top of the line people present in a room, only to have someone walk out because they weren't feeling the vibe. It might feel

awkward when it happens, and sometimes it catches you off guard, but these are artists and creators. Big egos are a part of that mix, and sometimes you can have the most skilled people slide right out of the top tier of the business because they never get over themselves. They can still make music, and they can still find new collaborators, but whenever push gets to shove, they run off and try to find someone else. Those who sit tight and endure difficulties in sessions and collaborations learn how handle such environments and personalities professionally over time.” (Christer George)

Autumn have also seen people come and go, and describes the sacrifices one must make of one wants to be among the best for a long enough time to reach global recognition for ones work:

“I will say that there are no shortcuts. Everyone out there who’s doing it big has worked incredibly hard and made sacrifices. This could mean not seeing your friends or family, not sleeping enough, working long hours, and at times feeling completely isolated from the normal world. I can’t give any examples of people with such a tremendous drive that haven’t succeeded. Everyone I know who didn’t make it gave up at some point, in one way or another. It’s not the most talented who make it, it’s the ones who keep going.” (Autumn Rowe)

These descriptions of grit and long hours also touch on Katzenbach and Smith’s distinctions between teams and working groups (Katzenbach & Smith, 2008). According to their theory, the challenges faced and conquered by both Christer and Autumn and their respective collaborators resemble the definition of teams as they consist of a few trusted people, committed to a common purpose who manage to hold each other mutually accountable for long periods of time. Although Autumn and Christer describe session work with a vast variety of collaborators over the years, one could make the argument that most of these non-project-based (or at least short-lasting) endeavors resemble the description of working groups and not teams. This could explain some of the lack of accountability and will described by Christer in those sessions where creators choose to leave a project instead of giving it their all.

Although reasons for such behaviors can be many, the availability of DIY methods for creating and releasing music without going through competent gatekeepers might trick

creators into perceiving the challenges of doing it alone as smaller than they are. As noted by Nordgård (2018), the thought of an “artrepreneurial” lifestyle might sound appealing to many creators who want to prove the world (meaning the gatekeepers and nay-sayers) wrong by creating and distributing music without going through the traditional hierarchies of the industry. After all, digital tools and high-quality sample banks can help creators sound “pretty good” pretty quick. Such an output-oriented focus could however diminish the birds eye view of the complexities involved in creating a sustainable music career. It might also silence the valuable candid voices a trusted team can provide.

### **5.3 Develop adaptive leadership**

As the music economy is evolving, the leaders of teams and organizations must tackle continuous change with both traditional and new tools. Edmondson states that it’s important for leaders to be open and talk about the passion, purpose, identity, the “why we’re here”, and “who we are here to serve” as a team, company, and as individuals. As leaders take on new challenges or teams, they must explain why they are excited, and do so in a humble and authentic manner. By setting a model for energy, humility, and curiosity, leaders can establish a culture of speaking up. They must however be all ears when asking questions. They must have a genuine interest in what their members and staff have to say and take it seriously. Edmondson also states that one must recognize that vulnerability is a fact, not a choice, and that the only choice is whether or not you admit it. By admitting mistakes and showing vulnerability, you establish trust. This includes situations when the company or team is at stake, and dire straits lurk ahead (Tangen, 2022).

Both Autumn and Christer are in essence leaders of their own journey in music. They’ve developed their skillset and built their toolbox to tackle concrete and abstract challenges, and they’ve managed to do so through working with many people in many differing circumstances. Christer describes gaining a deep understanding of the collaborative environment before moving from the US to build a company of his own.

“I had the experience. When working in L.A. I was given a lot of responsibility, and I took that responsibility seriously. By setting up sessions with interesting people, matching producers and songwriters, as well as artists and label-workers. I

didn't leave that responsibility to someone else and expect magic to happen. I made sure to constantly keep an eye out for hurdles and opportunities, so the company would prosper and grow into something meaningful for all of us running the show. You have to pull your weight and then some to reach a positive spiral of growth. When I moved from the US and founded my production company in Norway, I simply wanted to put all the knowledge I'd acquired and invest it in my own energy. I wanted to focus on long term strategies and partnerships with trusted collaborators, both artists and labels such as Universal Norway. I want to pick the projects I believe in and help them reach their audiences by applying what I've learnt over the years. So far, so good." (Christer George)

How such endeavors might develop is hard to predict, but having experienced dynamics which has led to success should provide valuable perspective when navigating shifting circumstances. Christer has already mentioned how his company has branched out into management and other roles to complete the ecosystem of the music economy surrounding artists. This type of behavior is what could be expected of the adaptive leader, perhaps especially in the music economy where many teams operate in shifting environments.

Although these characterizations might fit a general impression of teams in the creative core of the music industry, they might not translate so well to the "quantum leaps in business results" Marc Hanlan speaks of when discussing the foundations for HPTs. Developed to counter shifting business landscapes, much like in the music business, the traditional role of the strong leader is often focused on "breakthrough change," often with a strong basis on metrics (Hanlan, 2004). In creative music teams, the adaptive leader might be a musical leader, focusing more on the delivery of an emotion through instruments. Such a comparison doesn't make strong leaders and music creation mutually exclusive. Instead I would argue that it invites both sides of the table to the conversation, asking how the strong adaptive leader appears in creative music processes. Additionally, the factors mentioned by Kalaluhi as being vital for leader performance share similarities with strategies on how to create psychological safety as mentioned in this chapter. He mentions mobilizing team members, resolving conflict, fostering collaboration, and clearing the path for the team to execute. (Kalaluhi, 2016, p. 25).

## 5.4 Promote learning

Amy Edmonson says that learning is about forgiving each other and muddle through difficulties together. She also says that learning happens through conversation, but not of any kind. It must be constructive and is has to involve some kind of candid feedback mechanism. The quality of the conversation is what dictates the quality of the learning. Oftentimes defensive routines come in the way of learning. This phenomenon is called non-learning conversations by Chris Argyris. These are often characterized by too much talking by a person in position of power. As such people are often further away from the action than people not in positions of power, it's often more beneficial if those people in power practice more of the listening, says Argyris. He also makes it clear that being interested in the conversation isn't enough. One has to be truly curious to dive into the matter at hand and ask questions that contribute to learning. The precision of the conversations is key (Argyris, 1991).

For session workers, spending hours on getting to know each other before work really sets in isn't unusual. Especially if sessions with the same people run over the course of a couple of days. This time is usually about getting to know each other and what topics that lies near the identity of the artist (or performer) who will potentially sing the song on stage for the rest of his or her life. Although probably well intended, both Autumn and Christer mention the time consumed as something that isn't always necessary. Oftentimes people are being a little too polite as well, because they want to make a good impression on industry influencers. Christer explains:

“People want to get along. They want to be liked, and sometimes the perceived hierarchy is simply too powerful to stand up against. One simply falls into the habit of saying what people want to hear. Although this might be considered a loss for the honest characteristics of any given song, people are human. We work in groups, and we care what other creators think. I remember one time when a guy named Drew came in and asked me about my honest opinion on some songs he was working on. It was a new blend of hip hop drums and house music elements, and I remember telling him which sounded fresh and exciting, and which didn't. I just gave him my honest opinion, that's all he asked. He ended up doing pretty well on that new blend of his, and that's what music is about.” (Christer George)

What Christer is referring to is the producer duo “The Chainsmokers” and their hit song “Roses” along with the unique sound they were developing at the time. It’s hard to tell how history would have panned out if a dishonest opinion was given on that day, but the message is clear. Christer explains how honesty and personal opinions were highly emphasized as he worked with Twice As Nice in New York and L.A.

“We had to learn from each other, and we had to discuss the ins and outs of what we were doing. We were risking it all and going hard after our dreams. I remember constantly being asked by the two others how I liked these drums, what sound fitted best, which take is better etc. They expected and depended on an honest answer. The same goes for me when I asked them about stuff. We were in and out of rooms and session every day. I think we all benefitted tremendously from having an open culture of sharing back in those days. Incredible things happened on a regular basis, and we all just kept our heads down and our feet planted firmly on the ground while pushing forward step by step.” (Christer George)

Edmondson states that if one seeks to be excellent, one has to be learning oriented. This is because yesterday’s excellence isn’t tomorrow’s excellence. The targets keep moving, so we’ll have to keep learning. The only way to do this is to speak up and take risks and try new things.

There are however forces pushing in the other direction of radical honesty. As bedroom studios and accessible samples are allowing young creatives prefabricated musical foundations, such environments aren’t necessarily providing valuable tools for learning teamwork and musical improvisation amongst professionals. As those individuals who are most persistent are allowed new opportunities, they must also be allowed to fail. Failure experiences are what develops grit, says Edmondson (Tangen, 2022).

This also taps into the importance of staying in the learning zone, where continuous sparring creates a space of vibrant openness and idea sharing. These feedback mechanisms allow teams to be creative, as they are able to access different perspectives in an organic way and with a rapid pace. Instant alterations of free-flowing ideas also increase risk of quickly labeling some ideas as mistakes before they’ve truly been developed, so these types of innovative tools naturally also requires a certain amount of professionalism and skill. It is however important to

find a balance where one doesn't weight what one wants to say before throwing it out there says Edmondson (McKeown, 2023). Although having too much psychological safety in an environment is impossible, it could be argued that taking too many ideas into account or hearing everyone's opinion is a time-consuming activity. It is therefore positive to emphasize the points that both Autumn and Christer mentioned when discussing accountability. They stated that it is the repetition and dedication to your craft over time which enables success. Working with competent people is therefore a factor that should minimize the time spent on developing suboptimal ideas.

## **5.5 Embrace diversity**

Diversity can be of high value and contribute to groundbreaking ideas. It can also be time consuming and conflict generating. Finding the right balance is an art in its own. Edmonson points out that in organizations, it isn't the individuals that become more creative in a functional manner, but the teams do. This is because of the continuous synergy effects of bouncing ideas off each other while engaging in discussion. Especially in innovation, where teams become creative by accessing diverse expertise and ideas of its members. It is however important that team members aren't worried about how they might look when offering ideas. There must be free to speak up without holding back (Tangen, 2022). Autumn shares some interesting perspectives on how the ecosystem in the business impact diversity today:

“The industry isn't really set up for most creatives to fulfill their true potential. There are many reasons for this, but let's start with the ecosystem. To create our best work, we need to work from a place of truth and without limitations. This is hard when most music creatives are struggling to pay rent and need fast money. It makes more sense to focus on what's most likely to work right now as it's already working in the market. If you take a chance and create something totally against the grain it might have a bigger potential impact, but it's less likely to even hit the market in the first place. There's also an issue of typecasting, which means that you get hired for making a particular sound which puts you in a box it can be hard to get out of. The industry loves to label people and then task them with only doing that one thing. I personally try to break all these barriers, but being able to work like I do now has taken many years.” (Autumn Rowe)

Although such pressures shine light on the forces pushing music diversity towards a more homogenic creative space, it also leaves room for those who dare to be different. Initially without major backing, popstar Billie Eilish and her producer brother Finneas experimented with a vocal sound which contrary to trends of the marked, had very little reverb to it. When they released it to the world, it created attention which would ultimately lift both of them to the top of the music industry. Although such success stories are rare, they do show that it is possible to bring differing opinions to the table, even in the city which lies at the heart of music competition, Los Angeles.

Contrary to the above example however, trends in popular music shows a radical increase in the number of contributors on chart-topping songs (Kruger, 2019, p. 109). As rumination for such work rely on copyright, this means that more creators share the backend revenue streams (Wikström, 2020, p.14). There could be many reasons pushing the industry in this direction, one of which is the added pressures on the early stages of a new release. This incentivizes labels to “make sure” their songs have the highest probability of success, even before release. Since predicting hit songs have long been regarded an impossible art even for the wisest of musical wizards, involving many highly credited creators and assimilate proven hits might be the closest one can get to predicting song trajectory from a musical perspective. As discussed by Dan Wilson in Rockonomics (Krueger, 2019, p.111-114), this leads to less creative diversity, as each member of such collaborations fill in their spot in a pre-structured song. Diversity is arguably diminished when the music industry is investing in proven, rather than unproven talent.



## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore the dynamics of high-performance teams at the creative core of the music industry, and to identify potential barriers preventing psychological safety from happening. It was also to discuss strategies on how to overcome them. Through examining established theory on organizational psychology and music industry dynamics, an interview framework was developed. Interviews with industry professionals were then conducted, where it became clear that such inhibiting pressures do exist.

Some of these forces are driven by tech developments, which enables increased competition through lowered barriers of entry, but also leads to remote collaboration and lack of long-term interactive physical environments and therefore sparring and learning. The same forces also drive the many short-term collaborative possibilities of creative workers, which could lead to lack of accountability and motivation as new collaborations await around every corner. This could also lead to a false feeling of productivity and progression, since gatekeepers only reside among the professionals. Tech also creates an increased demand for tailored content for a variety of different streaming and social media platforms, which adds pressure on creators to customize more releases within shorter timeframes to fit the “industry standard.” Music industry pressures driven by the lowered barriers of entry and increased competition also push creators to acquire larger fanbases before attention and investments are granted. This further scatters the tasks of the creator, as it requires technical skills in social media and digital marketing, which is well besides the music making core.

More traditional forces, such as music industry hierarchy also influence psychological safety and creative performance. Within teams or working groups, it isn't uncommon that individuals who have attained a certain success in the past, also get to call the shots on what ideas should be devoted more energy. Although the power of hierarchy isn't new, the added pressure to get a song finished in a shorter time span, increases the forces of such hierarchies. If those working together in a session haven't worked with each other in the past, these forces could increase even further as no one wants to appear incompetent or difficult when working with new people. These factors also directly impact creative processes, as music producers are expected to find high-quality samples within a shorter amount of time than when such sample banks weren't available. As there are only a few popular go-to banks for all the sounds one might need, homogenous samples influence musical diversity. This is a spiral which might impact creators'

perception of what sounds like the industry standard, which further adds pressure towards homogenous creative processes. Working project based over longer periods of time could help counter such forces, as these often have clear goals and leave room for creative sparring, failing, and learning.

How these pressures shape the way creatives work in music making processes also depends on many other factors that might differentiate greatly given whatever circumstances teams are working in. These could vary from the financial muscles granted producers of a new album, allowing them to make creative choices without having to compromise their creative ideas. They could also be coincidental, such as the story of “Sugarman” Rodrigues, which became a hero in South Africa without them knowing he was even alive.<sup>10</sup> We can however establish that contributing to a psychologically safe environment is positive for learning and innovation in the creative core of the music industry. When Autumn took part in the creation of “WE ARE” she experienced a candor in the room which allowed the creators to openly discuss ideas without holding back. The same goes for Christer, recalling when he and his team at Twice As Nice landed placements with the biggest artists in the world. They wanted to work in music creation despite fierce competition and hard-to-reach deadlines. And they wanted to be open to new ideas and new collaborations with people they didn’t already know. They also understood that it required them to be continually open and honest with each other every step of the way, so that they could pick up on missteps and correct for errors. Without using the theoretically established terms, both Autumn and Christer described environments in learning zone of Edmondson’s matrix (figure 1, page 12) when discussing their breakthrough experiences. This is the high-performance zone teams achieve when both psychological safety and accountability are at high levels.

As I conclude this paper, I’d like to emphasize that although the research presented in this thesis is written with the best intentions, it serves only as a small piece of a bigger puzzle. A natural next step could be to do more one-on-one and group-interviews with accomplished music producers, songwriters, musicians, and artists. A very intriguing though would be to also investigate industry perspectives from the administrative side of the music economy, and to conduct in-depth interviews with managers, record label executives, artist developers etc. Such a comparison could hopefully contribute to a broader understanding of how this industry works,

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<sup>10</sup> See the documentary «Searching for Sugar Man» from 2012 for the full story.

and what factors contribute to high performance on both sides of the aisle. Furthermore, I sincerely hope that new insight will lead to new discussions, even if those discussions lead to differing paths along the unforgiving cliffs and edges of Mount Wisdom. As we pack our bags for new journeys towards truth, it is my recommendation that we bring a unit of psychological safety along. If found to be less useful at a later time, I also hope we throw it away in favor of new tools. Lastly, I'd like to include a quote I find both cheesy and sobering from author on leadership John Maxwell. With the confidence of an American leadership guru, he writes: "The greatest enemy of learning is knowing." (Edmondson 2019, p.187). Although this isn't news to most people, it might serve as a reminder of how valuable the learning process is. Thank you.

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