CHAPTER 3

The Status of Work

> Music is a meritocracy
> *Equality & Diversity Charter for Music*
> —UK Music (2012)

In this chapter we will explore how musicians today understand and try to make sense of the musical work that they do, asking themselves challenging and at times uncomfortable, even destabilising, questions about value, self-worth, definitions of success and the role this work might come to play in their futures. These findings all fundamentally relate to how contemporary musicians manage and make sense of – or indeed fail to – the challenges and contradictions of their unique form of creative labour. We call this first finding: 'The Status of Work'. At the heart of the findings we outline here is the impact of financial precarity on a musical career. Certainly the suggestion that artists can be poor is neither novel nor surprising. Indeed, Abbing (2004) suggests that what he calls 'the exceptional economy of the arts' necessarily makes this so. What our interviews uncovered was the complex and unsettling ways that financial instability interacts with ideas of self-definition and self-worth. For musicians who so embody their labour, such financial instability is used as a prism through which they define and make sense of their lives.

What follows is a discussion about how these music makers are engaging with a terminological and conceptual struggle to both define their working practices as labour and then further assess their work's success given that all of this impacts on how they experience their lives. There is an uncomfortable tension between the imperative in musical careers to believe in yourself, keep positive and be original, that can collide headfirst with a very real anxiety about the role this work plays in musicians' immediate lives, let alone their future. The temporal characteristics of music are ever present and ever changing. The

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chapter will conclude by outlining the contradiction which exists in a musical career between the idea of music as a democratised method of participatory social justice that we all can – and indeed *should* – join in with, (encapsulated in the quote above from the Music Managers Forum), butting heads with the stark reality of work that does not provide what those trying to build their careers as musicians had hoped for, even expected.

3.1 Financial Precarity and Defining 'Work'

3.1.1 Work, Work, Work

In order to contextualise this chapter on contemporary musical work and its relationship to wellbeing and mental health, it is important first to outline what it is that musicians actually do. That is, what does musical work look like? In its most simple form, musicians of course make music. This can take a variety of forms all largely rooted in practising their instrument(s) of choice – vocals, guitar, drums, or using production software like Logic Pro or Pro Tools. This was common to all our interviewees who would always define what they 'do' with reference to the music first. We heard from musicians who defined themselves as: 'A keyboard player, composer, producer and musician' (Musician, M, Pop/Soul, London [1]),[6] 'a freelance singer-songwriter, band member, session vocalist' (Musician, F, Jazz/Soul, London [3]), 'a drummer and percussionist' (Musician, M, Jazz, Birmingham [5]), 'a self-taught pianist and I've had a lot of training as a singer – both a degree and a Masters' (Songwriter, F, Pop, London [12]), 'studio work… remixes, sample work' (Producer, M, Dubstep, London [18]) or 'as a musician, and a vocalist' (Musician, F, Pop/R&B, Manchester [28]). However, musical work is far more than this. Alongside songwriting for themselves, many of our interviewees wrote music with or for other musicians and were also actively engaged in recording music. Some of those we spoke to recorded themselves in bedrooms, garages or attics and thus had to learn how to use and manipulate recording software, while others used professional studio spaces where they still often had detailed knowledge of equipment, mixing, vocal waveforms, microphones and other technologies. In addition, music performance is key. This can be as 'simple' as standing on stage and performing songs or DJing original material, but is often more complicated. Many of our interviewees organised their own live shows acting essentially as promoters. One told us: 'We literally built the stage we were going to perform on and pulled it back down after we played the gig' (Musician, F, Jazz/Soul, London [3]). Another said: 'We would book a theatre for ourselves… and promote it ourselves… Just trying to promote myself because you know, there are no other ways to do it. And we thought that if we book this venue, it sells out, then we can pay the band and we can pay the hire [fee]' (Musician, F, Jazz, London [7]). For a producer we spoke to, when referring to having a

venue to DJ in, he said: 'Say, I'm putting on the event, I'm the promoter basically' (Producer, M, Dubstep, London [18]) with all of the logistical know-how this entails of paying for the venue, hiring the photographer, paying other DJs, etc. There are multiple considerations and skill sets needed here. For example, one musician told us that there was a 'political infrastructure behind why I do gigs, and where I do them, and why, and how many tickets am I going to sell and what it's going to look like' (Singer/songwriter, M, Folk, London [24]). For many of our interviewees, performing involved being on tour. Where self-organised, this too required logistical and organisational skills and knowledge.

Many of those we spoke to had a wide variety of roles within their musical work. For instance, some of the roles we heard about alongside music making and music performance involved artist management, starting their own record labels, teaching music or running workshops, applying to third-party agencies for external funding, consulting, having a radio show or podcast, making music for television or adverts, running choirs or producing for theatres. The work can be hugely varied. As a dance producer and DJ told us: 'Sometimes it involves touring with six or seven people, other times it is quiet in the studio, endless nights in front of the computer' (Musician, M, Dance, London [15]). However, a central feature our interviewees all shared was the need to promote their music and themselves. Often on a daily basis, artists from across all contemporary music genres will be filming, photographing, writing, posting and sharing. They do this as they travel to rehearsals in the day, auditions, TV shows or radio broadcasts, or when they go to work out at the gym. All their work commitments (and indeed their private lives too) are also capable of becoming 'content' as they are continually recording and communicating, while also working and being open and available to others and for other opportunities. They are on and open at all times and are often actively working to cultivate networks and get their music into what they believe are the right hands. As one interviewee told us: 'I access Facebook and Twitter every day without fail' (Songwriter, F, Pop, London [12]). Another couched this as: 'I seem to be on there all the time waiting for a message to come through so I can be like, "Cool. I'm straight on this opportunity as soon as it comes up." But then it's fucked because I'm on my phone all day long, and I hate that' (Producer, M, Dubstep, London [18]).

Becoming your own brand and presenting what you have to offer in the digital sphere has become a full-time occupation. This is a key feature of contemporary 'music entrepreneurship' (Dumbreck and McPherson, 2016). Between musical genres, and particularly between classical and contemporary music, online activity certainly differed. It is clear that at the top end of pop and in genres such as hip-hop or electronic music, and for all emerging artists wanting to catch the attention of a live agent or make it on to the annual BBC Introducing list – or preferably both – having an active online presence is mandatory. If one is already working as a professional musician or signed to a label, then online work for many was part of a daily routine, although they may then be in a position to have additional digital media support. Digital and social media

managers want to see their clients actively creating interesting content that is relatable and engaging because all online activity is measurable.

We interviewed a broad range of musicians. We spoke to MOBO Award winners, Mercury Prize nominees, artists who had sold over a million albums, artists with number one singles and artists with tens of millions of views on YouTube. Equally, we spoke to artists who were scraping together a living performing in local venues in small UK cities, looking forward to self-releasing a debut album or a new single, travelling up and down the country performing and supplementing their music making with teaching, and slowly growing their profile. However, these features of musical work were things the majority of them shared. One of our interviewees succinctly and clearly described their work, and the work of almost all of those we spoke to, as: 'I am a singer-songwriter… My job, I guess, consists of writing songs predominantly for myself, singing them at gigs, recording them and releasing albums, singles, covers and distributing them into the world' (Singer/songwriter, M, Folk, London [24]). For those with musical ambition, musical work is far more than just making music: it is 'the performance, the interviews, the travelling, the touring' (Producer/Songwriter, M, Pop, London [19]), rehearsing, creating content, negotiating, networking, and building a reputation.

3.1.2 Money and Meaning

Nearly all the musicians we interviewed spoke of the difficulty of making ends meet and the intense financial struggle that defined a great deal of their working lives, both the more financially secure ones as well as those at the start of their careers. As one interviewee put it: 'I wake up in the morning, and the first thing I think about is money… It's constant stress' (Producer, M, Dubstep, London [18]). Certainly, this finding relating to the economic plight of artists is not particularly new nor revelatory. Indeed, the recent global coronavirus pandemic (which occurred several years after our interviews took place and was just beginning at the time of writing) has acted as a particularly brutal reminder of the vulnerability of those working in music and in other creative sectors. The fact that financial precariousness is a primary source of anxiety for musicians is well known, and borne out by several recent research projects including Eynde, Fisher and Sonn (2016), Vaag, Giæver and Bjerkeset (2014), Long (2015) and Umney and Krestos (2015), as well as historical and biographical music literature. However, what our research began to uncover were the many different ways in which this financial precarity manifested. Firstly, the nature of the impact depended on a musicians' career stage insofar as it was experienced by both newly emerging artists in the expected ways but also by more established artists who felt economically precarious as their money might vanish very quickly. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, this precarity produced an existential questioning of the intrinsic value of the work these musicians were doing.

It is obvious that financial instability goes hand-in-hand with anxiety, but this particular precarity demands a more fundamental questioning of what it means to be a musician. The question of how to define what one does as 'work' circulated all the time in our interviews, with the critical definition often being that work must equal economic value in some way, but that conversely it was always not just that alone. In an environment of often negligible economic returns, to what extent could musicians reasonably think of what they did as work – or even more formally, as a career – and how might others, whether peers or friends or family, view their labour? The central concept was that without an economic exchange value this work might not be recognised for the labour it is either by musicians themselves or others. However, for musicians, music making is work of course, but it is more than a narrow economic definition of work.

This is the definitional existential crisis produced by high levels of financial precarity; if one's labour does not earn money, can one meaningfully refer to it as one's job or career? How do musicians know if musical work is, in fact, work? For some of the musicians we spoke to, the relative lack of financial value attributed to their work could cause others to question the merit of what musicians do. One told us: 'People's attitudes towards musicians are pretty shitty. They will ask "Are you still doing your little music thing?" Well, yes. Are you still doing your little banking thing?' (Producer, M, Dubstep, London [18]). He sounded almost angry and resentful. He believed that his work *did* have value but struggled with the fact that others did not always see this. However, for others we spoke to, this judgement (or even just potential for judgement) by others could lead them to genuinely question the value of their work. As a Welsh folk singer, herself having played at Glastonbury and having numerous critically acclaimed releases, said: 'I meet someone and they say: "What's your job?" There is that hesitation… and you think I better mention the other stuff I do because maybe it sounds more valid. Maybe it *is* more valid?' (Musician, F, Folk, Cardiff [21]). Her answer itself is indicative, as even within her response she questions the validity of her creative labour given its lack of financial value. She was openly questioning the extent to which her musical work could reasonably be thought of as work. The previous interviewee echoed this when asked 'Do you think of this as your job?':

> Yeah, but I almost feel like I'm bullshitting people when I say that because I'm not earning enough money to call it my job, really… This is my job, but I'm not earning proper money from it… It's hard to explain. It just feels like it's a lie to say that it's my job because the money doesn't reflect that.
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> —Producer, M, Dubstep, London [18].

This challenge was also clearly stated in an interview with a London-based opera singer when she said: 'I've come off stage from a show – they know we're on a tour because they booked us to sing at their venue – and we're at the function afterwards and they will say, "Oh, this is a lovely hobby you've got". I

just… I want to kill them' (Singer, F, Opera, London [23]). She articulates here the difficulty in how others define her work, and thus simultaneously how she defines her own work. We wondered, too, to what extent her comment might have been understood as a case of what has come to be termed 'everyday sexism'. This tension was taken to the next level by a live studio-based songwriter who suggested that judgements such as these can impact on how musicians see themselves in terms of their self-esteem: 'I believe [music is] not considered a proper job, unless you're in the top ten per cent: you're a star. And I think that has a major impact on confidence and self-esteem' (Songwriter, F, Reggae/Soul, Manchester [9]). Statements such as these chime with the insights of Frith (2016: 111) who notes that the idea of what constitutes 'work' for musicians can itself be variable according to status as 'some musicians are considered to be workers, others are not.'

3.1.3 Pleasure and Self-exploitation

This process is complicated by the non-fiscal rationale behind music making. The musicians we spoke to were contemporary agents engaged in a struggle between creativity and commerce which is well understood; even though these artists wanted to make this work their career i.e. they wanted to be paid to make music or at least be financially rewarded for their efforts, they also said they make music because they love it. Although it is difficult to measure these feelings, it is possible to examine their relative value to the individual in terms of a matrix of investment and perhaps loss (or even deficit). It would seem from our research that musicians measure their individual commitment in terms of what they 'put in' i.e. time and money, and what they 'give up' in terms of relationships and potential alternative, more stable life choices. They feel a deep and passionate drive and desire to create and this is at the heart of the work they do. Indeed, McRobbie (2016) likened this attachment to one's creative work, particularly among young female creatives, as being akin to romantic attachment. Crucially, they do this work because they love it and it brings them joy, despite the challenges it presents. This appears as a duality, encapsulated here by an indie artist who also produces musical theatre who told us: 'I love working, absolutely freaking love it, but it's not sustainable to have to work all the time and… not knowing every month that you're going to be able to pay your rent' (Musician, F, Indie/Musical theatre, Belfast [6]).

This combination of attachment and absorption has been identified as being central to the expanding service, knowledge and information service economies. It may seem more obvious to identify an overlap between the knowledge and information economies within musical work. However it is within an analysis of the expansion of the characteristics of *service* economies that we might better understand the changes that have impacted contemporary musical work. Whilst Attali (1977, 2014) concentrated on the economic patterns

that music might reveal and indeed predict, his analysis underplayed, or worse, failed to recognise the fact that music is much more involved and entangled in patterns of social and emotional labour. Music is much more significant to social reproduction as part of the service industries than it has ever been part of economic structures. Music's use value is its utility; its ability to communicate and to connect and move, to flow through and without images or language. Music's value is that it can affect emotional states, both external and internal, and its ritual value serves to bring people together, reinforcing bonds of community and solidarity (Gilbert, 2014).

In this respect, Hochschild's (1983) work on the commercialisation of human feeling and McRobbie (2016) on the expansion of the 'smile economy' and passionate work, offer a sharp lens with which to discuss the impact of contemporary musical working practices and to understand the paradoxes and contradictions that musicians articulate. As Federici (2006) points out, it is within the hidden world of free labour that capitalism's great expansions were borne. The material circumstances of social reproduction and women's labour – whether it be reproductive labour, care work or housework – has been naturalised under capitalist modes of production by gendering, concealing this work into a duty or a privilege. Likewise, the work of musicians in the new knowledge economy has been feminised: concealed as a service, a duty or a pleasure i.e. work that one is happy to do and feels is a privilege to do. As one interviewee remarked: 'Doing something that you love doing is a blessing' (Producer, M, Dance, London [20]). However, this mode of production is always open to exploitation and relies on divisive social ordering along class, race and gender lines. Federici's contributions are important because they highlight the material realities of so-called immaterial labour that are often embedded within left thinking. These developments are underpinned by rhetoric within the creative industries that focuses on the potential and playfulness of musical work while failing to acknowledge that its privileged position as a site of pleasure and creativity masks a darker world of inequality, division and exploitation. In this new environment Dean (2009) suggests that exploitation caused by these models of work can be understood as voluntary and thus self-inflicted: the damage is self-harm. All one need do is change one's attitude – to be positive, to believe in yourself and to follow your dream.

3.1.4 Professionalism and Value

Many of the working conditions of musical careers further complicate the idea of work, for musicians or non-musicians alike, specifically regarding what is often understood as the informality of their work. For example, one of our interviewees said: 'I think just in terms of gigs and stuff, they're kind of antisocial in a way. Things happen late at night or you're rehearsing late, or there is a culture of drinking that's part of the music world' (Musician, F, Folk, Cardiff

[21]). Defining gigs as being antisocial was interesting terminology. One of the features of a musical career which is often seen as so attractive is the apparent informality of it, and indeed this dissolution and blurring of the boundaries between work and leisure has been examined in other studies of the creative industries (see Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011a). However, some of the social and cultural norms of musical work would seem wholly incongruous in other professional fields. For example, being paid for your work in alcohol would be rare in other industries, but is frequently part of the compensation – and sometimes, especially for emerging bands, the only compensation; the quality of the rider will reflect the status of the act performing in the live music area.[7] This is one of the ways in which this musician felt that gigs could be 'antisocial'.

The relationship between musicians' lives and work on tour, for instance, and alcohol consumption has recently been explored in more detail in a study by the University of Glasgow which looked at alcohol's pervasive use as way to mitigate work-related stressors (Forsyth, Lennox and Emslie, 2016). Additionally, there is historical research which suggested that alcohol was used as way to manage performance anxiety (Wills and Cooper, 1987). This relationship has also been explored in a special issue of *Popular Music* (Negus and Street, 2016). Other studies have suggested alcohol use among musicians is driven by social expectations (Wills and Cooper, 1987), or that the use of substances such as alcohol or cocaine were perceived to promote band cohesiveness (Groce, 1991). There are few other industries outside the creative sector where, for example, cocaine use would be acknowledged to be relatively common and perhaps even encouraged; investment banking is perhaps a notable exception (Freedman, 2009). Indeed, in the newspaper interview with Benga back in 2015, the artist had mentioned how recreational drug use within the party scene he was part of, he felt had contributed towards his development of schizophrenia. Outside of the media and arts industries it is hard to think of other professions that have drug and alcohol use so structurally embedded within their working practices and so woven into its mythologies. The use of drugs and alcohol amongst musicians has certainly been argued to be genre-specific. In the field of jazz, research has suggested that there was a history of drug abuse based on marijuana and heroin (Becker, 1951, 1955; Winick, 1959; Winick and Nyswander, 1961; Cambor, Lisowitz and Miller, 1962), that may be different to, for instance, alcohol and amphetamine use in rock music (Curry, 1968). However, literature on contemporary music suggests that alcohol and drug abuse are prevalent in all areas of music making, from dance floors to recording studios to festivals. Investigating the impact of drug and alcohol consumption was beyond the scope of our research. However, it was clear from our interviewees that these issues *complicate* how musical work is experienced, and also impact how this work is defined as 'work' either by musicians or by others. These issues were reported to impact the work/leisure distinction, undermine how our interviewees felt about their work, and problematise how they felt others understood their working conditions.

Even if musicians do cross the initial hurdle of defining what they do as work, how can they *know* that they are *professional* musicians? Numerous, often rather arbitrary, measures are employed by a variety of organisations; music as the main source of income being a popular one. However, this is hugely problematic as our interviews uncovered. Many of the musicians we spoke to were signed to major recording contracts but music alone was not necessarily their main source of income; indeed, for many, it earned them little or no money at all. This did not mean they did not see themselves as professionals. Likewise, many musicians do have music as their main source of income, but their relative lack of perceived status within the wider music industries might not lead people to define them as professionals: for example, musicians who play in function bands at weddings or on cruise ships, or even regular session musicians. This is further complicated as careers are fragmented and supplemented, dressed up in the celebratory terminology of 'portfolio careers', which is common in the music industries (Throsby and Zednik, 2010). It appears that musicians are professionals because they define themselves as such: for them, being a musician involves much more than simply economic return. Musicians can be Googled and written about by journalists. A jazz musician in his forties we spoke to is, in musical terms, illustrious, and yet he was only able to live comfortably because, as he put it, 'my wife has a very good, well paid job' (Musician, M, Jazz, Birmingham [5]). Value is entirely measured in terms of relevancy and there is no absolute value; you might be famous, but you need to do some things for free. As Gross (2019: 482) notes, 'Being a professional in the music sector often means working for free, and it is equally clear that many "non-professionals" also work with music.' There is then a fantasy of 'intangible success'. Success is linked to matrices of value, value is linked to worth, worth is linked to self-worth, and thus definitions of self become implicated in one's emotional state, one's sense of wellbeing, and one's mental health. The music industries are belief-based industries, where one must both believe in oneself, believe in one's peers and believe the myth of the music industries. When boundaries blur and the world dissolves, what you believe in is all that matters. This debate, however, presents a second existential question facing musicians in an environment of negligible economic returns alongside terminological and definitional imprecision about what does and does not constitute work, and this relates to how to define 'success'.

3.2 Musical 'Success'?

Jeff and Todd Brabec – brothers who are respectively vice president of business affairs at BMG Chrysalis and Professor at USC Thornton School of Music, and former ASCAP Executive Vice President – in their book *Music, Money and Success* (Brabec and Brabec, 2011: 1) suggest that success is based on a combination of experience, knowledge, talent, representation, and luck. However, the

question we are interested in exploring here is not how to achieve success (we will turn to this in the next chapter), but how to make sense of what success *looks and feels like* to musicians. As Hennion stated back in 1983, 'At the heart of the frenetic activity of the record industry and of all the conflicting opinion to which this activity gives rise, lies a common goal: popular success' (1983: 159). But what is 'success' for musicians? The term is defined by musicians in ambiguous and nebulous ways (Hughes et al., 2013). Indeed, as Gareth Dylan Smith notes, 'success for most musicians has yet to be determined' (Smith, 2014: 196), because success in musical work is made up of competing sets of individual matrices that bear differing weight according to the specific musical genre and geo-socio-historical setting alongside the individual bent of the musical subject. Given this, it can appear imprecise and hard to grasp.

3.2.1 How to Define Success

Musical success has, for contemporary musicians at least, classically used numerical measures such as album sales or chart positions, or today perhaps in terms of streaming numbers or YouTube views. Metrics such as these act as a way of converting plural tastes, shifting social relations and institutional power into a single numerical figure. Often, these measures largely correlate with economic barometers given that an album sale or even a stream, hopefully, means money earned. However, as suggested, musicians do not simply make music for economic reasons (Letts, 2013). Numerical barometers – whether financial or otherwise (see Zwaan et al., 2009 for an interesting approach seeking to quantitatively conceptualise musical success outside of fiscal parameters) – have only limited applicability in a subjective universe. Therefore, although what is of relevance here is not how others define the success of musicians but how the subjects define their own success, it is difficult to see how such entangled elements could be clearly understood. That is an even more problematic and anxious task.

Many of the musicians we spoke to from all musical genres clearly felt, and some could evidence, that they had spent a huge amount of time in becoming a musician. They had invested hours of practice, rehearsals and lessons, and often university fees, several having studied to Master's level. However, they were all plagued, one way or another, with self-doubt and anxiety about how they were valued not only by their fellow musicians but also the fans, the audience and the wider music industry. Questions were raised by respondents concerning either their inability to define success, or in defining success in non-financial terms e.g. being free to express themselves, or by having people know their lyrics. As one artist poignantly told us: 'I still think the best musical thing was to hear a four-year-old child going down Market Street with his Mum in hand, singing a song that I wrote. That was like, I just stopped and cried. That still is *the* moment to me: the best (Performer/producer, M, Hip-hop, Manchester [4]).

For artists, what is success and what is value? Each of the artists we spoke to wanted to be successful, but few knew what success precisely consisted of. Musical appreciation or value is not like *The Great British Bake Off*: if Paul Hollywood tells you your cake is soggy, and therefore bad and unsuccessful, you have to believe him. Music doesn't work like this. For some, simply being able to 'be' a musician was success for them whilst for others signing a record deal or playing a particular festival or collaborating with a particular hero of theirs was their holy grail. Likewise, if someone in a powerful position, such as a journalist or in A&R (Artists & Repertoire)[8] says something derogatory, this might just be dismissed as their opinion. Given that the music industry is 'based upon opinions' (Producer, M, Dance, London [20]), one interviewee told us that this meant 'no one can tell me what I can and can't do with my art' (Songwriter, F, Pop, London [12]). The issue is constantly one of balancing what one considers success in one's life – such as financial stability which is tangible, or happiness which is intangible – alongside other barometers such as prestige, creativity, acclaim, or indeed financial stability too. The reality is that often the music barometers and the life barometers are not always in sync.

3.2.2 Capital, Image and Illusion

One might reasonably argue that financial precarity and terminological ambiguity in defining the nature of work and/or success pre-date digitalisation. So, what is new here? It is important to unpack the ways in which the digital environment exaggerates existing conditions and produces entirely new ones. For example, trying to ascertain what success 'is' is made more complicated by the fact that for some of our interviewees their image, often helped by their social media and public relations (PR) team, of often great economic success did not always match the reality. The inability to turn what appeared to be reasonable levels of perceived success into actual financial peace of mind deeply worried some of these musicians. This was exemplified in an exchange with an internationally acclaimed dance producer, who within the previous twelve months had been nominated for a BRIT Award, had a number one record internationally, and had platinum records: 'Because of the way the music industry works, it's all sort of sold to people. It's smoke and mirrors… From the outside, and the way you have to promote yourself through social media, most people would think that, you know, some people think I'm a millionaire! [But] I live in my Mum's loft' (Producer, M, Dance, London [20]). In Bourdieusian terms there is an acknowledgement that it is often incredibly difficult to convert what might be enormous reserves of social and institutionalised cultural capital, which could now be acquired and communicated online very publicly, into economic capital i.e. to translate their music's ritual and social value into economic value. This is a process we have referred to as 'the illusory nature of capital transubstantiation' (Musgrave, 2017). In economic terminology we might say that this form

of creative labour suffers from a return on investment dilemma. Another musician we spoke to put it like this: 'There's people that I know or people that I've met and you'd put them in the upper echelons of UK underground music or whatever. I know they go through periods where they're struggling, and they're touring around the world all the time. And it's like, "how the fuck does this make sense?"' (Producer, M, Dubstep, London [18]).

Musicians, as we have been exploring, often define success in non-monetary ways which might be understood as the acquisition and maximisation of Bourdieusian cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), whether institutionalised in the form of support on BBC Radio 1 or being released by Universal Music, or otherwise. These subjective barometers are critical, and they are acquired by a double investment of economic capital: paying for their musical equipment, of course, but also the opportunity cost of not working in alternative paid employment, and harnessing and exploiting social capital which they are increasingly able to cultivate online. Social networks and formal and informal relationships are invested in as music is shared in Spotify playlists or YouTube uploads or plays on the BBC or any other similar platform. This performative nature of a musical career demands projecting an image of success – being on TV, being on the radio, being featured in magazines, etc. The issue then becomes one of interconvertibility or what Bourdieu would call transubstantiation: how do musicians convert these outwardly visible signs of success into financial stability? How do musicians know their labour is work, and how do they know, or perhaps even more importantly *feel*, that this work is successful?

We have conceptualised this phenomena in previous works as follows: 'This process of acquiring cultural distinction, understood through the prism of Bourdieu, is representative of creative practice that exploits cultivated social capital, existing cultural capital, and investments of economic capital, in order to maximise privileged cultural capital… [C]ontemporary processes of capital interplay can be illusory in the manner in which they allow for the projection of high levels of apparent successes in the form of institutionalised cultural capital, despite artists experiencing financial hardships (Musgrave, 2017: 64). We spoke to musicians like the one quoted above who were, in many eyes – and most notably to their fans – certainly successful, but who still lived at home with their parent(s). Are they successful? Equally, we spoke to musicians who sustained themselves throughout their careers and made a living, but within a specific niche within which their substantial cultural capital reserves might be recognised. Are they successful? I might look successful, but what if I don't feel it? Or, I might not look successful but what if I *do* feel it– is that okay?

3.2.3 Failure, Responsibility and Identity

If successes are hard to define, then failures were reported as seemingly intolerable to bear. These failures often stemmed from the difficulty in defining

what constituted success in the context of trying to make music their career and the inevitably huge difficulty this entailed. An even more troubling concept of failure for our interviewees was the idea of giving up music altogether and no longer defining themselves as musicians. This was viewed as profoundly disturbing despite all the difficulties they spoke of during the interviews. In an exchange unforgettable for its honesty and emotional poignancy, a singer-songwriter spoke about how she felt after lengthy legal disputes, along with the other challenges this book identifies, left her wondering if she could make music anymore. Her interview is one which stayed with us for months afterwards, and in this extract she talks about how her dealings with lawyers and record companies – what she called 'the industry' – drained all of her energy to the point that she felt she couldn't even make music anymore, and the dreadful impact this had on her. She told us that this experience was akin to being in mourning: 'The level of like depression and anxiety I had was like a mourn from the industry. A hundred per cent. I felt like I had just died. I'm not sure how I'm going to get back alive. I'm not sure. Like, to feel like I didn't want to do music anymore was an indescribable feeling, like I can't describe how I felt at that time when I was like "Yeah, fuck this! It's done." The industry overpowered a gift' (Musician, F, R&B, London [22]). For her, as for others we spoke to, not being a musician was tantamount to being deleted entirely, such that being denied one's identity was a source of even greater anxiety than existing as a musician. The anxiety in this case lies in the real threat of separation between the musical identity one has forged and the frightening 'other' non-musical identity that awaits when and if this world collapses.

What happens when artists cannot define whether they are successful and therefore don't feel that they are a success? When answering this question it is crucial to understand how musicians assign blame for success or failure – what is referred to as attribution of causality. In other words, what are the factors musicians identify as contributing to success in a musical career? What is perhaps most interesting here is the consistency with which research has answered this question. Empirical evidence suggests that musicians consider ability and effort as causal attributions for success or failure in music i.e. that what matters is you and your abilities and effort; what we might call a meritocratic view of artistic social justice. The two-dimensional conceptualisation of Attribution Theory, developed by Weiner (1974), proposed that people can explain success or failure on an achievement-based task according to four causal categories – ability and effort on the one hand, and luck and task difficulty on the other. The categories of ability and effort originate inside the individual – that is they have an internal locus of causality – whereas task difficulty and luck are understood as causes outside of the individual. Early work by Asmus (1985) on sixth grade music students examining why they thought some succeeded and others did not, indicated that students attributed success and failure in music to internal reasons: ability and effort. This was repeated the following year when

he suggested that 'students tend to cite internal reasons for success and failure in music' (Asmus, 1986b). These findings have been echoed in work by Leggette (1998, 2002), as well as Madsen and Goins (2002).

What does this tell us? It suggests that musicians identify their successes or otherwise as being dependent on individual internal factors relating to them and their efforts and talents, albeit in a slightly different context to our own research – 'success' in the research above is taken to mean musical proficiency as opposed to career success, although there is the common perception that these things are linked. This idea that musical ability is thought of as being 'individual' chimes perfectly with the conflation of ideas surrounding participatory culture and meritocracy insofar as talented individuals will have an equal opportunity to shine and the most talented will shine the brightest (see Taylor and O'Brien 2017). This can be seen in the quote from UK Music which began this chapter, taken from the foreword to their Equality and Diversity Charter for Music – that 'music is a meritocracy'. This fantasy of participation (Dean, 2008) has serious consequences for those participating when it comes to social justice. However, this presents to us a similar problem to the issue that lies at the heart of meritocratic thinking – if you assume that the best are justly rewarded, what does that mean for those who are not rewarded? This may explain why the interviewee above categorised her pain as being akin to 'mourning' (as she called it 'a mourn'), because musicians have an internal locus of attribution for success, that of course is necessary for failure too. Perhaps even more importantly – and this may be one of the features that distinguishes creative labour of this kind from various other forms of precarious labour – because musicians so *embody* their labour this is experienced particularly powerfully. As one interviewee told us: 'The work for me is about emotion, it is just total emotional connection it really is – there is so much of me in the music' (Musician, M, Dance, London [15]). Another told us: 'Basically, all I've got at the moment is my music. It's everything. When I wake up in the morning it's the first thing I do – go to a computer and start making music, writing lyrics. If I hear something, I could be watching a programme, a TV programme, and I hear something and I think, "I've got to write lyrics about that." And I'm off straight away. It just consumes my whole life basically; which I love, but yeah: *it is me*' (Producer/Rapper, M, Hip-hop/Spoken Word, Manchester [27]).

Those last three words are particularly striking: 'It **is** me.' Musicians define their existence through the prism of their musical work, and it defines who they are as human beings. As a vocalist from Manchester told us: 'Art is to do with the self' (Musician, F, Pop/R&B, Manchester [28]). This characteristic may be common to all creative labour, but it is qualitatively different from other forms of precarious labour, for example Deliveroo riders who might not feel that their work defines and represents who they are as people. This means that some of the features of a musical career defined by financial precarity, such as prolonged

periods of time living in unstable rental accommodation or living at a parental home, creating what is, for many, seen as a kind of extended adolescence where they struggle to attain crucial markers of adulthood, so deeply harms their self-esteem leading to feelings of both anxiety and depression. The younger musicians we interviewed spoke of seeing their peers achieving crucial life goals such as buying a house, getting married and going on holidays, and their creeping sense of self-doubt leading to feelings of depression. These comments highlight how the millennials in our research saw their own prospects and futures in comparison to the previous analogue generation of music makers and their parents, but also to the 'golden' age of record sales; a rosier past that contrasts harshly with the current vision of a darker future – even a 'cancellation of the future' (Fisher, 2014) – as all thoughts of a 'golden' future that an earlier era seemed to promise, are obliterated.

3.3 Expectations and the Myth of the Future

> Stress and anxiety directly resulting from my career and the challenges of it all have definitely been part of my life… I didn't go to university, I'm not qualified to do anything else. And that's probably one of the biggest things that's weighed on my mind is that niggling… 'what would happen if the artist you're working with did get dropped or a song didn't come out or you didn't get any cuts and how would you support yourself this time next year if your publisher didn't extend your deal, and no one else wanted to sign you? What would happen if…'? That's what my anxiety's always been. What if I got to my mid-thirties for example and my career wasn't going the way I wanted it to and all of a sudden it wasn't paying my bills? I honestly would have no idea what I would do, having never really had a proper job, having not really any qualifications to work in any other field. You just have that feeling that all your eggs are in this one basket… How will I support myself this time next year?
>
> —Producer/Songwriter, M, Pop, London [19]

It is important that we consider the three-part discussion in this chapter – the distinction between what is and is not work, the difficulty in defining artistic success, and the challenge of achieving some kind of economic stability – within a much broader discussion of anxiety linked to the idea of failure. To do that we need to explore the concept of 'the future' within the lives of musicians, and how this future is articulated by the music industries. At the beginning of this book we talked about the myths that permeate the music industries – in particular the need to stay positive. We need to understand these myths, and one of the most profound myths is that of the future.

3.3.1 The Achievement-Expectation Gap

One interviewee, in a tone of genuine despondency told us: 'It is soul-destroying to work so hard on something you care so much about, and getting absolutely nothing back' (Producer/Songwriter, M, Pop, London [19]). Music, for our respondents was not always giving back to them what they had imagined it might. Likewise a performer and producer from Manchester used an interesting phrase of needing to 'deliver' i.e. to both deliver a great song and performance, but also for that song to deliver the career they had in mind or that they had hoped for. They told us: 'Watching a person, what they give to the music, to make the music, and then to not see it deliver… when it doesn't give back, it's like "I've got to let this go"' (Performer/Producer, M, Hip-hop, Manchester [4]). What these interviewees seemed to be communicating was the very real sense that a musical career was not developing in the way they had envisaged, or even in the way they perhaps felt they had been promised in an environment which told them to believe in themselves. Many we spoke to were concerned about the role that musical work might play in their future, given the struggle to achieve meaningful economic stability. One interviewee put it like this: 'I might want a kid at some point; I don't want to be a deadbeat Dad… That's the shit that keeps me up at night because I think and I'm like "I don't have a fucking plan"' (Producer, M, Dubstep, London [18]).

The concept of an achievement-expectation gap – the subjective evaluative gap between high expectations and perceived levels of low achievement – is useful in helping us to understand the inability of our interviewees to imagine what the future might look like, and how this might lead to high levels of anxiety and depression. Labour market research from the mid-twentieth century, for example, suggested that high levels of goal striving within certain ethnic minority communities led to profound feelings of failure and disappointment if or when their ambitions were not realised (either due to perceived discrimination or other disadvantage) (Kleiner and Parker, 1959; Parker and Kleiner, 1966). This lack of equal opportunity and systemic racism has been hypothesised by some as an explanation for higher incidences of schizophrenia being diagnosed and reported amongst African-Caribbean communities in the UK compared to the White British population (Mallett et al., 2004; Reininghaus et al., 2008). For musicians, the link between expectations and pressure can create an anxious and often solitary existence. One of our interviewees captured this by saying: 'There is something of the loneliness of the long distant runner here' (Musician, M, Dance, London [15]) – a phrase that tellingly mirrored a film of the same name from 1962 which partly drew on the frustration with, and indeed lack of, working-class social mobility.

What does this achievement-expectation mismatch look and feel like for musicians? Perhaps the clearest way of thinking about this is by drawing on what Émile Durkheim called anomie, defined by Standing (2011: 19) as 'a listlessness associated with sustained defeat.' Indeed, Standing's idea of

precarious workers suffering from ‘a precariatised mind’ defined by anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation is a fascinating one. There is certainly a sense of deep anomic discontent and frustration when the promises of the music industries – fulfilment, economic sustainability, self-actualisation, status, meaning and so on – clashes with the often less fulfilling reality. From day one, musicians are told that what they do matters, that the tools for their success are entirely in their hands, that they just need to believe in themselves and stay positive and ‘it’ – whatever ‘it’ is – will happen. One interviewee told us: ‘We’ve recently seen a guy who on YouTube has, because he sung “Another Day Will Come” he’s ended up on the Letterman Show or the One Show, just because of the power of his voice. And I take that as the last thing you have, potentially as a human being: sound’ (Performer/producer, M, Hip-hop, Manchester [4]). This interviewee, embodying and essentialising his labour so explicitly, in reducing his idea of humanity to the power located in the sound of your voice which has the power to transform your life, reflects in some sense the optimistic logic that music is a meritocracy and if you sound good, you can make it too. What happens if either you never get there when you were told you could, or if you do get there and discover the world is not, in fact, what you thought it might be? But of course, these are the unspoken truths: the reality hidden beneath multiple layers of positivity and belief, participation and democracy, fun and fulfilment and faith which must outwardly define musical ambition.

3.3.2 Music as Social Mobility

At the heart of the world of musical ambition inhabited by our interviewees is the centrality of future thinking and positive thinking; being what we might call ‘future positive’ i.e. having the right mental attitude. Musical ambition today is seen as a vehicle of social mobility that is potentially more inclusive, and may involve less training and prerequisites, than being an actor, author or filmmaker. We see the dreams of young people trotted out each Saturday night for television judges to sneer at or to applaud and, of course, crucially to monetise, in a way that we simply don’t on the same scale with other creative industries. Aspiring musicians are encouraged to queue up and apply to have their lives changed with three minutes of magic which might turn them from a nobody from Cheshire into Harry Styles in what has been described as ‘the digital economy of hope’ (Cvetkovski, 2015). This is one of the things which differentiates music from other forms of art or literature. Today, the story goes, there are a myriad of alternative routes to musical training, and apps that can help from Garageband and YouTube or Soundcloud or Bandcamp (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2019) or the BBC Introducing uploader – a service that allows musicians to upload their music and have it sent to DJs and producers to listen to and hopefully play on air. Today, once you have a finished

song, it can be given to a digital distributor to send to Spotify and pitch to a playlist which you might get a place on 'if you're good enough'; the internal locus of success attribution fusing perfectly with the belief-based ideology of the music industries. In the fantasy of participation founded on the myth of meritrocracy, the music industries continue to promote and project these ideas. We need to critically interrogate the UK Music quote at the top of this chapter: 'Music is a meritocracy'. Many in music genuinely believe this. The argument that cultural production should or could be a model of social justice is critiqued by Banks (2017), who reveals a very different reality, and more recently in work by Brook et al. (2020) which so damningly illustrates the point. This world of music, Banks, Brook et al. and others' research suggests, reflects existing social inequalities far more than it is presumed to challenge them. Once examined, the presumption of meritocracy is revealed to be part of the fantasy of participation.

The participatory culture of the music industries has become deeply embedded in popular discourse surrounding the expansion of the knowledge economy in the UK. Creative careers are espoused as vehicles of social mobility, driven by various rules. The 'rules' of these creative careers – rules we have observed from music industry professionals coming in to speak to our students, week in and week out – go something like this:

1. Any musically talented and hard-working individual has the potential to be a star: just stay focused and believe in yourself.
2. You need to meet the right people and persuade them to believe in you too.
3. You are your own brand.
4. The internet has made this all much easier for you.
5. If you believe in all this, you have to ignore all the adverse and exploitative contracts and industry practices and just keep smiling.
6. Be yourself but make sure you are original and different.
7. You should not be too different because the audience will not understand you.
8. Be young.
9. Be sexy.
10. Be strong – but if you are female try to have the strength to be vulnerable too.

As Chertkow and Feehan (2009) stated a decade ago, 'there has never been a better time to be a musician,' and so there is no reason to make it complicated, difficult or uncomfortable, which is exactly what happens if you start asking questions; if you start interrogating this space. If you start to look closely, if you pick up the carpet, it starts to look a lot messier, as was amply reflected in the working lives of the musicians we spoke to.

3.3.3 'Deification and Demolish'

The future is not just a source of anxiety for musicians starting out on their careers: the same sense of dread was felt by those who appeared to be enjoying reasonable levels of success. A producer we spoke to, in his mid-thirties, who had had a successful music career for fifteen years (both financially – he was a home owner in central London – and musically, with numerous gold- and platinum-selling records) stated: 'I still feel [my entire career] could disappear within eighteen months… You feel the wolves at the door at any moment' (Producer/Songwriter, M, Pop, London [19]). By this he meant that although he may have acquired a certain financial cushion by owning a home, his success was extremely precarious because once his advance had been spent (the up-front payment from recording and publishing contracts), he would then either need another big 'cut' (a production credit on a hit album which might earn him royalties), or be able to negotiate another publishing or recording deal and get another advance to last him a few years. This creates an environment of constant instability and pressure. One interviewee described this as 'that constant feeling that you're treading water' (Musician, F, Indie/Musical theatre, Belfast [6]). Precariousness and the anxiety this produces is clearly about not only the present but also the future, and is fundamental to the lives of musicians. It does not vanish when financial concerns are lifted, and in some respects may get worse. Instability for musicians transcends financial precariousness; the industry itself seems predicated on blurred lines and perennial uncertainty.

Our research showed that the achievement-expectation gap held true even for overtly successful musicians where expectations and hype from record labels did not always convert into reality. An interviewee from Manchester told us: 'We made the record and it ended up on [BBC] Radio 1 being heavily tipped to be a hit. They did a lot of promotion and spent a lot of money on the video. It didn't go to number one, it went to number twelve, thirteen – which I would've thought was really good … [But] you have a lot of people … having expectations …; expectations of what that record was and what they want it to achieve. That was a real eye-opener for me' (Performer/producer, M, Hip-hop, Manchester [4]). Succinctly, a manager we interviewed suggested that 'when there's instability, anxiety and depression will creep in…[and] this is the most unstable career that I can possibly imagine someone being in' (Manager, M, Pop/Various, London [29]).

Our interviewees told us that success in terms of popular acclaim can come and go extremely quickly. One of our interviewees outlined this when he pointed out that 'the dangers of the performing world have always been there: the highs are very high and then there is a kind of built-in obsolescence that means the lows are very, very low' (Musician, M, Dance, London [15]). This quote speaks of the thrill and difficulty of performing to audiences on successive nights and then the sadness experienced when it was all over. This

pattern tends to intensify as careers grow: as the stages, audiences, applause and acclaim grows larger and louder, the contrast with the silence and stillness of home life becomes ever more acute. This precarity of success could also be seen when musicians told us about being 'hot' or in demand, and how this could come and go as genres or tastes changed, perhaps inexplicably.

> There are artists that are bottom of the industry jokes one minute and then could turn the corner the next. I remember the first hit song I wrote … that was a hit in the UK. It went to number two… and sold half a million copies. The same artist… sold half a million copies. I remember reading the statistics that it was the twelfth-most successful single of that calendar year. That same artist was dropped by Christmas. [That] song was number two that summer, pretty much the whole of the summer, and the guy has never been seen again since.... I've literally not heard his name in a music industry context. I remember seeing a poster saying he was playing a gig at a little bar.
>
> —Producer/Songwriter, M, Pop, London [19]

The speed at which fortunes can change and the apparent randomness of fashions and subjectivity within the labour markets these workers inhabit is disorientating. What is popular and in vogue during a BBC Radio 1 playlist meeting this week – rock bands or rappers or female R&B singers etc – might no longer be popping next week. Hoskyns (2012) describes this process as 'deification and demolish'. The fickle nature of creative success means that musicians have a conflicted relationship with their work: they may be working as hard as they can and yet this may or may not have a role in their futures. Of course, this is complicated by the fact that creative careers are not fleeting at all; what can appear as an 'overnight' success often has years, even decades, of hard work behind it. This, as per many of our findings, is a long-understood tension within creative labour which digitalisation compounds and exaggerates in complex ways.

3.4 Conclusions: Take Part, Make… Content

The findings in this chapter have been threefold. Firstly, the work that musicians do is far more than just the practice of music making. Forging a career in creative production is all-consuming, involving the musicians' time, personality and identity. At the same time, social validation for this activity is difficult if judged according to the normative structures of, and expectations around, employment and its rewards. This leads musicians to question the value of what they do, which is further complicated by behavioural norms that blur the concept of professionalism. Secondly, musicians struggle to meaningfully define what success is. This all takes place in a setting in which representations both of

self and of others is in overdrive. Coupled with endless demands for musicians to provide a constant flow of self-referential media, it all muddles what being successful looks and feels like. The musicians we spoke to were acutely aware of the 'authenticity' of their own and their peers' mediated representation. This reflexivity left them in a constant state of doubt that was particularly destabilising as it challenged their identity and what they believed in, even more so if they perceived themselves to have 'failed'. Thirdly, musicians are anxious about the role their work might come to play in their futures. This occurs both for those at the beginning of their careers who struggle to monetise their work, and also for those with more established careers who feel everything might vanish almost overnight. The closure of all live music venues following the global outbreak of Covid-19 crystallises concerns such as these in a terrifyingly harsh fashion (Spahn and Richter, 2020; Trendell, 2020). What would they do next? Many found that impossible to even imagine let alone to articulate.

This embodiment of one's work is one of the central features of a musical career: it is more than just work, and certainly more than just economic work. It is a method through which these workers articulate themselves and give meaning to their lives (as per DeNora, 2000). Understanding this work solely through the prism of 'economic return' is necessarily problematic and insufficient. The experience of music making is at the heart of this insofar as it is based on reflexive and repetitive practices (the French word for rehearsal is *répétition*), and requires discipline. Musical practices, no matter the genre, involve close listening, watching, doing, feeling, and thinking in order to continuously learn. They involve repeating the same part over and over again. They involve listening over and over again – such as when creating drum loops using computer software – and they involve correction. They require self-discipline and are disciplining, although some genres may perhaps appear to be more reliant on '*rehearsing*' than others. There would appear to be something in this model of practice that maps on to the behaviours demanded by the new apparatus of communicative media with which most of us now interact daily (Bunz and Meikle, 2018). The practices of messaging and checking and monitoring, sending information out into the world, looking for incoming messages, monitoring numbers and deliberate, conscious self-promotion, as well as more playful approaches that are 'everyday', informal, but recorded are becoming integrated into all forms of life, but they remain central to contemporary musical practices.

What does it feel like to *do* this work; to *be* this work? What does it feel like to work so hard at something which you or others might not consider work per se, which produces outcomes which are hard to make sense of and which often contradict each other? Work that reaps such wonderful rewards but has them taken away in an instant, and which relies on a belief and positivity that you have to produce from within yourself when all around you seems so difficult and at times negative? When looked at like this, is it any wonder that the work which musicians do makes them so anxious, and is it any wonder that the inevitable failures both of the present and the future so internalised in this fluid

and unstable world, produce such feelings of despair? The first proposition of this book therefore in seeking to explain the high level of self-reported anxiety and depression among musicians lies in the nature of the work itself whereby employment-based precarity translates into psychological or existential precarity. The issue becomes one of persistent and profound uncertainty. Of course all careers have challenges and stressors, and features of musical work outlined here are shared with workers in other fields, both creative and intellectual. What is interesting about musical practices is the way that all of these factors come together and are amplified by the conditions of digital labour; they interact, intersect and collide to create working conditions which seem to create the perfect storm for anxiety and depression. However, musical work exists within more than just the economic matrices explored in this chapter – there is also the question of its cultural and social validation, and it is this feature of musical ambition we will examine next.