CHAPTER 4

The Status of Value

The longer you work in music, the more you get a sense of a real, tangible randomness… It would be nice to work somewhere a bit more logical.
—Producer/Songwriter, M, Pop, London [19]

Having moved beyond asking destabilising questions of what musical work is, what it means, and what 'success' looks and feels like, this chapter will examine the ways in which musicians seek answers to those questions. Navigating this landscape, musicians turn to alternative indices in order to make sense of their own professional status. We call this: 'The Status of Value'. This evaluation takes place in two key ways: firstly, online, and secondly in the reified and ill-defined music industries. The first section of this chapter will look at how musicians' relationship to technology – in the form of the online sharing and the consumption of their work – creates an environment of perpetual anxiety. This takes place as the emotional vulnerability inherent in receiving feedback for creative work, intersects with an injunction to participate in an exhaustive quest to maintain relevancy.

The second part of the chapter examines how musicians seek to engage with processes of value measurement offline, within the music industry itself. Here, we break down how in this environment ideas of luck, randomness and timing are understood and thought of as playing a key role in the careers of musicians, and how these 'unknowns' produce high levels of emotional distress and anxiety.

We conclude by exploring one of the most profound anxiety-producing tensions in professional musicians' lives, where the precarious and unpredictable workplace comes up against entrepreneurial notions of control. Our view is that contemporary ideas of artistic empowerment in the digital age are dangerous, as they reinforce an idea of individualised entrepreneurial control which is largely illusory.

4.1 Validation 'Online'

4.1.1 Feedback and Vulnerability

Musicians and fans have long appreciated that music has a value far beyond simple economics. History is full of great musicians, in every genre, who died penniless, unappreciated and often ahead of their time. Posthumous reappraisal or recognition is after all another central narrative or trope of Western musical and art history (Sullivan and Butler, 2017) and is part of the well-worn 'money versus art' debate. Therefore, it is unsurprising that most of the musicians we interviewed referred to alternative, potentially more meaningful ways to validate themselves and other musicians. While the health or otherwise of your bank balance is a reassuringly straightforward indicator of success, non-financial measures are more ambiguous. Their subjectivity is their indeterminism.

Aspiring musicians rarely embark on a musical career anticipating that their music will never be heard. Musicians generally believe that they are pouring their hearts into creating the purest and most elegant version of the artistic visions they see or hear inside their heads, and one of the primary motivations given by musicians is that they want their ideas to be heard (Klein et al., 2016); to be discussed, shared, enjoyed, engaged with and listened to by other people. The democratisation of music production and distribution has radically changed the experience for aspiring musicians by making it much easier for anyone to both make music and share it. What has changed for musicians over the past decade or so is *how* that sharing is taking place, and what the impact of that sharing is on their mental wellbeing.

The musicians we spoke to took their craft extremely seriously. One interviewee told us: 'Because of the way we work and what we have done, we are particular about what we want to do and who we work with. We want to do things as well as possible and so we have learnt that you have to do things yourself and keep going' (Musician, F, Jazz/Soul, London [3]). This artist, as with so many of those we spoke to, was articulating how passionately she feels about her work while at the same time being highly critical of it. As another interviewee put it: 'as a musician, you get obsessed with your music' (Producer/Rapper, M, Hip-hop/Spoken Word, Manchester [27]).

Musicians reflect on their creative decisions because they feel so committed to them, subjecting themselves to continual cycles of self-reflection which encourage doubt. However, musicians have to find a way to reconcile two apparently contradictory states: utmost self-belief, and conscious but controlled self-doubt. As one interviewee put it: 'My success is probably a result of not only my self-belief but my optimistic frame of mind that I've managed to build. But you're always going to have a doubt in the back in your mind' (Producer/Songwriter, M, Pop, London [19]). Musicians talk about this process whereby self-criticism and self-esteem are engaged in an endless cycle. This

disciplining practice has been suggested to be negatively correlated both with the pursuit of personal goals and with how individuals respond to setbacks in the pursuit of those goals (Powers et al., 2009). In addition, the perfectionist aims shared by our musicians in interviews are a typical feature of musical artists, resulting in high levels of internal pressure (Flett and Hewitt, 2002; Stoeber and Eismann, 2007). For example, one musician told us: 'I'm a perfectionist so you know, you read [reviews] and you're wanting five stars. You're wanting ten [out of ten] on *Pitchfork* [music website]. And if it's four, you know, you're okay. But I was getting a lot of threes and I've got an issue with three star[s], you know… I mean who gets out of bed for a three out of five?' (Singer/songwriter, M, Folk, London [24]).

This same passion, and such enormous investments both financial and otherwise in their music, leaves musicians vulnerable to the criticisms of others. As one interviewee evocatively put it: 'you've got to be careful because music is you, stark naked in the street' (Performer/Producer, M, Hip-hop, Manchester [4]). Where there is such personal commitment and often emotional exposure, and in which 'people are very protective over their songs' (Singer/Songwriter, F, Pop, London [2]), the feedback from an audience may be inevitable and indeed desired, but provoke strong feelings of anxiety depending on its form and nature. Social media, data, and the near perpetual necessitated online engagement referred to by Dean (2010) (and expanded on by Pedroni, 2014; 2019) as 'the logic of the count', means a reliance on metrics often comes to define the existence of aspiring musicians. A number of our interviewees suggested that their anxiety stemmed from the fact that their musical lives and careers took place within an online feedback economy of relentless opinion and criticism from a combination of fans, journalists, friends, blogs and what one interviewee called 'music Nazis' (Musician, M, Rock, Newcastle [14]). In typical workplace rhetoric, 'feedback' is often couched in positive terms such as learning how to improve. However, the manner in which musicians so embody and come to be defined by the work that they do, changes the nature of their relationship to this digital feedback. Indeed, we know from research concerning sharing feedback on creative ideas that the *way* this feedback is delivered has profound consequences for the way it is absorbed and used by those on the receiving end (Lerman and Borstel, 2003; Watling et al., 2014). Reflective practices are deeply embedded in musical practices: musicians criticise their own music, others criticise their music, musicians criticise themselves when comparing themselves to the successes of others, and in doing so, compare themselves to a version of themselves which they imagined they might be. In the hyper-mediated world of the internet, this critical feedback loop is infinite.

Of course, it is not only the music they share which can make musicians vulnerable. This process is frightening enough given that songs often represent the very deepest and most private emotions of which an individual is capable, and the result of being painstakingly pored over, refined and perfected.

However, musicians today must be more than this. One of our interviewees told us: 'fans feel like they have a *right* to know you' (Musician, M, Dance, London [15]). Musicians must therefore be, as per Negus (2019), content makers. Music on its own is no longer enough: the key buzzwords are 'engagement' and 'visibility'. A dance producer told us: 'in this day and age you want people to buy into you as *people*' (Producer, M, Dance, London [20]). Audiences want to see what you are seeing on Instagram and they want to hear what you are thinking on Twitter. They want to see inside your heart but also inside your living room. Indeed, much of what makes great music – shared emotional vulnerability – is what also makes for engaging social media content. As stated by singer-songwriter Meredith Brooks, great marketing and PR comes from 'finding your authentic voice, being vulnerable, and then putting yourself out there' (Scott, 2017). This injunction to share, to be honest, to put yourself out there and be vulnerable becomes a necessity: it is what makes an artist authentic, and the digital immaterial world craves authenticity rooted in material narratives that are preferably both relatable and emotionally charged. Sad songs sell, heartbreak is universal, and everybody wants a moment to be happy. Psychologically, one of the challenges faced by the musicians we spoke to was that of self-disclosure amid heightened reflexivity i.e. the relationship between internal and external life as they put their inner world on display.

The idea of the relationship between social media, exposure and vulnerability is one which is increasingly becoming understood outside of the musical sphere. One exhaustive review of literature conducted by Best, Manktelow and Taylor (2014), systematically examined 43 research papers published over a ten-year period which looked at the impact of social media usage on the wellbeing of adolescents. Their work paints a mixed picture of, on the one hand, increased self-esteem, perceived social support and increased social capital alongside increased exposure to harm, social isolation, depression and cyber-bullying on the other. This duality was reflected in the musicians we spoke to; social media had in many ways helped their careers, allowing them to exploit networking opportunities and cultivate their social capital in ever more exciting ways, and this was particularly important for those artists who lived far away from the epicentre of the music industries in London, or who were shy and struggled with in-person networking. This acknowledgment of the opportunities social media has afforded musicians is echoed in the wider narrative of the music industries; the message of the empowering of artists. Yet there was a simultaneous acknowledgement that social media was and is intensely damaging for them; a space where they felt they needed to, or were 'supposed' to, share their vulnerability and truths as part of creating authentic content, which left them feeling exposed and vulnerable to the opinions of others. Our interviewees, especially the women, were conscious of the gender dynamics on social media – a topic we will return to in the next chapter. Whether it was the time it uses up or the emotional toll it takes, social media

was identified by our interviewees as a source of much concern and many of them felt it to be anxiety-inducing to the point of being destabilising to their mental health.

Related to this, social media was often the vehicle through which our interviewees observed the achievements of others. Whilst this might not be unique to musicians per se, what makes these comparisons particularly challenging is that they occur, as discussed, in an environment where artists' own 'successes' are so hard to make sense of. As a Welsh folk singer told us: 'You look at people who did the same degree as you and you look at what they're doing now and you think "Oh God, so-and-so is some kind of top lawyer and this person is doing this" and it's always that temptation to think "I'm not really financially where a lot of my peers are". I think that can lead to a lot of anxiety' (Musician, F, Folk, Cardiff [21]). Here then we see how the status of work intersects with the status of value. This reality could harm the self-esteem of musicians who, as suggested, have often spent years or even decades struggling in an environment of insecure housing and negligible/non-existent wages, and who could, at times, view these discrepancies as profound failures given the aforementioned internal locus of attribution. Evidence pointing to the negative impact on self-esteem associated with social media usage has been well documented over the past decade (Valkenburg et al., 2006; Vogel et al., 2014; Andreassen et al., 2017), but it is the context of such ambiguity and imprecision in seeking to measure what constitutes success as discussed in the previous chapter which makes the relationship between social media and self-esteem particularly challenging for musicians.

4.1.2 Competition and Relevancy

There is however a second, broader and more conceptual challenge which musicians engage with as they navigate their digital careers relating to what the production of music both looks and *feels* like. Our interviewees communicated to us a sense in which their experience of the abundance of music and digital media in everyday life, which produces a perceived imperative to seek validation online for their musical outputs and themselves, created an environment that was anxiety producing. As a pop producer from London told us: 'Newness in the business is relentless. It's new songwriters, new producers, it's new projects…. You have to feed this beast... Music has become like a one-a-day contact lens... it's disposable' (Producer/Songwriter, M, Pop, London [19]). It struck us both when considering these comments, and imagining the contact lens being washed down the sink in the saline solution, that even the terminology of contemporary musical production and distribution – that of streaming, and 'the stream' – itself implies infinity. Records could stop being produced, but a *stream* suggests an endless continual flow. This is what

musical production is today. For many musicians, being a musician – itself a challenge in many senses – requires one to *stay* a musician. This means not only producing the engaging content demanded by their status as cultural entrepreneurs, but more fundamentally, and indeed more importantly, producing music *continuously*.

Oversupply is a characteristic common to all the cultural/creative industries and music is no exception. The growth of musical production was observed in the mainstream popular music industry in the late 1980s and early 1990s by Negus (1992). Negus noted the much talked-about A&R practices of major record labels, referring to them as 'throwing mud against the wall' to counterbalance the inevitability of commercial failure by most. More recently, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011a) described the recording industry's mentality of cultural overproduction and categorised it as a publishing or editorial 'logic'. However, the transformation of access to the means of production in the music ecosphere and specifically the explosion of cheap software and digital computerised technology, (Leyshon, 2009; Hracs, 2012; Tschmuck, 2017) – what economists call a reduction in barriers to entry – has greatly increased the amount of music being produced. For example, even in 2013 it was noted that over 12 hours of music were being uploaded to Soundcloud every minute (Graham, 2013) and by 2019 ICE – the joint venture between PRS for Music, STIM and GEMA that has the collective aim of developing the world's first integrated music copyright, licensing and processing hub – reported having 36 million songs on its system alone, with five new hubs worldwide. It is simply impossible to imagine what this means. There are 1,000 tracks per hour being pitched to Spotify directly for inclusion on their playlists today. Cherie Hu has described this environment as 'ubiquity'.

A producer and songwriter from London told us about his experience of ubiquity, where his experiences as a music consumer in this environment of oversupply added to his level of anxiety as a producer:

> If you've got an app on your phone that can access all the new music, every single artist in the whole world at the touch of a button, you don't actually need to commit, not even 79p to hear or own that song. I think that… furthers that feeling that these tracks, these pieces of music that people are creating, they essentially are disposable… If I look back on 2016 I'll struggle to find myself repeat listening to too many different pieces of work this year and it's getting more and more. I do listen to 'New Music Friday' in my car and things like that, so you're starting to feel like it's harder than ever for a musician. You can't afford to stop creating. You can't afford to take too long on what you're doing or get too attached to it because it's faster moving than ever before. And that just furthers that kind of sense of anxiety.
>
> —Producer/Songwriter, M, Pop, London [19]

This extract contains so much richness. It speaks to how the massive oversupply of music sits within an equally unimaginable stream of news and media information in the last decade, as Dean (2009) amongst others have pointed out. This has created an unquantifiable and unimaginable music market that begins to feel less like abundance or 'ubiquity' and more like what Steyerl (2011) calls an invasion and occupation. In this setting it is not music that is scarce but rather time and attention across the whole media landscape from consumers, prosumers, retailers, gatekeepers, etc. For the musicians we spoke to, the online, digital world moves at astonishing speed: too fast to make sense of. It is disorientating and anxiety-inducing whereby some of the musicians we spoke to were forced to adopt an 'on to the next one' approach i.e. this song is made and finished, it's time to make another one. Indeed, *Billboard* recently suggested that this rapid-fire approach to music making was 'the new normal' (Enis, 2020), whereby 'simply keeping an artist's name in people's minds can be incredibly difficult' and constantly releasing music becomes 'a way to maintain a presence in the conversation.' The sheer volume and abundance of music – or even simply its *perceived* volume and abundance (Musgrave, 2017) – is exhausting and overwhelming.

It is in this environment that the concept of relevancy, and the idea of maintaining relevancy online where attention is the key currency, becomes so central to understanding the working lives of musicians today. As the producer above puts it; 'You can't afford to stop creating' (Producer/Songwriter, M, Pop, London [19]). Another interviewee told us: 'When you see how difficult it is *and how many other people are doing it*… I think it's this whole big vicious cycle of, as your self-worth decreases, you become more anxious' (Musician, F, Indie/ Musical theatre, Belfast [6]). Immediately following the tragic suicide of EDM superstar Avicii in 2018, many questions were asked about his exhausting touring schedule and the impact this had on his physical and mental wellbeing. Of course, there were a wide range of reasons for this schedule, one of which being financial, but looking at his timetable of not only performances, but also radio interviews, television appearances, photo opportunities and 'meet and greets' along with everything that goes along with touring, we saw the most extreme and debilitating version of what our interviewees described: the need to stay relevant in an environment of competitive abundance.

It is one thing to try and work out if you are successful, but more than this, if you don't keep releasing music, how do you know you exist? You need to play this gig because if you don't, someone else will. You need to appear on this radio show because if you don't, someone else will. You need to get your song played and released and heard, because if you don't, someone else will. This quest to maintain relevancy within your musical network and the perpetual engagement facilitated by technology is one of the factors which the musicians we spoke to identified as contributing towards an exhausting workload which feels both constant and apparently endless.

> There's an intense amount of pressure and an intense amount of competition… You've got to have some kind of hunger to do it and drive to do it. And if you haven't got that don't bother, really, because it's not the job for you. And if you have got it then be prepared for it making you the most miserable person in the whole wide world.
>
> —DJ, F, Dance, Manchester [8]

This visibility was necessitated not just in terms of musical production, but in terms of being visible online too. One artist told us: 'You have to be a presence on social media, and it's something I'm still getting used to because sometimes I forget – I'll go a few days without going on it and that's a no-no in the social media world. You can't go two days without actually posting something. You just can't' (Producer/Rapper, M, Hip-hop/Spoken Word, Manchester [27]). Social media practices with their apparent ability to intensify anxiety coupled with hyper levels of competitiveness create a perceived need in many of the musicians we interviewed to maintain 'relevancy' i.e. to stay relevant and stay seen. Or as another interviewee said: 'If you see lots of musicians doing lots of things you kind of feel a bit like, I don't know, not great. Thinking "Maybe I should be doing that", or "Is this what I should be doing?"' (Musician, F, Pop/R&B, Manchester [28]).

4.1.3 Abundance and Communicating

There is an implicit, positive idea that the sheer *amount* of music being made is socially beneficial as it represents diversity, and a widening of communication and mass creative expression; evidence of participatory democracy in action. However, participatory culture and the abundance of music – as well as all kinds of other media – cannot simply be described in positive terms. For those working in and aspiring to work in the music sector, the amount of music is, our interviewees told us, part of the difficulty. When struggling to stay seen and stay heard, and in finding metrics to affirm and communicate different modalities of status, the questions which matter come to be: How many views does your song have? How many retweets did your tweet get? Nice track, when is the next one coming out? What's next? Today, sending messages and creating content appears to be all that matters, or is certainly a large part of it. This is what our interviewee earlier characterised as the fact that he 'can't afford to take too long on what you're doing or get too attached to it' (Producer/Songwriter, M, Pop, London [19]). However, this can be painful for musicians who so embody their labour, and who are often, personally, seeking very different things from their work.

In this environment of musical abundance, when does music making really come alive for musicians? One of the key factors, repeated time and again by the musicians we interviewed, was that music is truly at its best when it *feels*

good, and when they experience it as *meaningful* to them, and this often takes place socially i.e. when it connects. We can hear this in the extracts below, which come from across the UK and from a wide range of genres:

> Q: What's the best thing about being a musician?
> A: I would say expression and connection. Being with others and sharing feelings and emotions and connecting with other people who have had similar things. Just being together, there's nothing better than just playing music together. So, I would say connection and expression.
>
> —Musician, M, Folk, Glasgow [16]

> When we're on stage and we perform a concert and I have this feeling [that]… even if we're ninety people on stage, we become one. The music takes over anyone, everyone – the audience, the conductor, us – and it's just the music that is there to appreciate and feel. That sometimes gives me so much good and tears sometimes, when it's so great and when you have that contact. But it's [those] really rare moments, seconds, [that] I live [for]. When this happens and I finish a concert I think: that's exactly why I'm doing that job.
>
> —Musician, F, Classical, Birmingham [17]

> When I make music it's like I'm hoping to make people happy. I want to physically change your wellbeing when I make music. That's the joy to me.
>
> —Performer/producer, M, Hip-hop, Manchester [4]

> The best thing [is] when you're on stage and it's working really well and the audience love you… You're … almost addicted to people saying you're good.
>
> —Musician, M, Rock, Newcastle [14]

> I love creating. I think that's probably the bottom line for me: making something, and the connection that happens with music. I love working with people and I love seeing the effect it has on people or the impact it has on people.
>
> —Musician, F, Indie/Musical theatre, Belfast [6]

For the musicians we spoke to, being heard and feeling engaged is *central* to their musical life. However, as we have seen, seeking validation for one's work online and the process of building a career relies on more than this. It is rooted in the transformation of this emotional work into 'content' and contemporary musical abundance can make achieving this meaningful emotional connection increasingly difficult. We can see this reflected in the data. The classic theory of techno-positivism – the Long Tail (Anderson, 2007) – suggested that the democratisation of musical production, and the musical

abundance this would produce, would revolutionise the musical experience and allow small-scale music producers to establish healthy niche markets i.e. to find their audience and connect with them. Even at the time of Anderson's work in 2007, data quickly showed this to be untrue. According to Page and Budd (cited in Orlowski, 2008), 0.4% of music on Apple's iTunes Service (then 52,000 songs) was responsible for 80% of digital revenues, and 85% of all available albums on the platform did not sell a single copy during the 12-month time period of the study. Similar results were seen for the service Rhapsody (Elberse, 2008). In the subsequent decade the debate continued (Benghozi and Benhamou, 2010), but the data was consistent and perhaps even worsening. In 2014 it was reported that 1% of musicians accounted for 77% of recording music income, an increase from 71% at the start of the century (Mulligan, 2014). Data from America supports this too. According to Taylor (2014): in 1986, there were thirty-one number one songs by twenty-nine different artists; by 2008, six artists were responsible for almost half of the sixty-six songs that had risen to number one. DeFrancesco (2020b) noted that: 'Today, a major label backs every one of Spotify's top ten artists with the most followers'. Data such as this suggests that far from the ideal state of micro-entrepreneurs building their own micro-economies, the abundance of music has led to the *loss* of a healthy middle ground thus heightening the disparity between the heard and the unheard. In other words, achieving the connection which means so much for the musicians we spoke to, becomes an increasingly difficult task as being heard in such a crowded marketplace becomes harder and harder. A major record label executive that we spoke to employed revealing terminology when he suggested that many contemporary musicians feel that they are 'shouting into a vacuum. It's incredibly exhausting and frustrating' (Major record label executive, M, Various, London [30]). Trying to be heard and seen, and to evaluate one's 'status of value' amongst the tumult of musical aspiration online is an exhausting and often demoralising task. However, this method of seeking some form of meaning and validation for their work online is only half the story. When they move beyond this space and begin to engage with the music industry more broadly, musicians find new forms of precarity, and new forms of anxiety.

4.2 Validation in 'the Industry'

4.2.1 Reputation and Contracts

Within the matrix of validation, and as is common in all networked media, there are distinct hierarchies and so it is no surprise that validation by specific industry actors is significant in the lives of musicians. Accumulating validation to maximise positioning and therefore potential success is all-important. Although these things may be different according to genre, each genre will still

have a set of principal actors in distinct positions that can be aimed for. In order to qualify as a 'professional' musician, one might feel that one has to, at a very basic level, have a manager, a form of distribution and a live agent. A second level might be adding a major record company, a major publishing company, as well as a good selection of intermediaries and social media influencers and ultimately third-party sponsorship by a major brand like Nike or Dior. Musicians seek this validation from within the music industries themselves; '*the* industry'. In Bourdieusian terms we might conceptualise this as the pursuit of institutionalised cultural capital, that is, achieving a reputation or position of some standing within the musical and entertainment landscape by acquiring a set of meaningful indices whose component parts are, in themselves, not fixed. One interviewee sketched out a scenario thus: 'If you are a rock artist, and the guy who signed Bruce Springsteen came up to [you] and said, "Yeah, I want to sign you" … That is absolutely going to raise you in terms of musical aspiration' (Performer/producer, M, Hip-hop, Manchester [4]). Each musical genre will have its own internal code. However, all genres share these variable code sets in order to confer positions, recognition and identity onto an artist or their music. This is what Becker in 1982 referred to as 'reputational value'. Success, in this context, is synonymous with popularity (Lopes, 1992), but this begs the question: popularity with whom? The relationship between the acquisition of cultural capital and popularity is famously a fragile one. Hearing from musicians who were recognised in this way was a key element to our method.

Many of our interviewees made reference to some or all of these defining 'markers' in their responses in relation to how they feel about themselves, how they define themselves, and how they measure the progress of their careers. Achieving these markers is significant and, importantly, validates the individuals and/or their work. For this reason, many spoke of how certain people's opinions of their work was both crucial to how they were understood, but also a source of anxiety. One told us: 'If I send a song to someone and they don't get back to me, I can have hours and hours of self-doubt, panic… it's a continual feeling and I think that's quite normal that people experience that: … the fear of people not liking what you do. I have moments where it's less crippling, but there are times where I just have massive self-doubt and think, what am I even? You know, who am I kidding? You sort of swing between these two extremes of … extreme confidence to complete despair' (Singer/songwriter, F, Pop, London [2]). It is important to note and acknowledge the musicians who the findings in this book speak to. As the title suggests, this work seeks to understand the price of musical ambition: 'There's something to be said for people who… make music for a hobby because they're not controlled by the industry in that way, you know?' (Songwriter, F, Reggae/Soul, Manchester [9]). This was interesting phraseology, suggesting that for those who do not wish to make money and to have a career in music, things are likely to be very different in terms of their emotional wellbeing.

4.2.2 The Deal

It is in this environment, and for many other reasons not least short-term finan-
cial ones, that what is often referred to as 'the deal' can become so important
in the lives of contemporary musicians. A singer-songwriter from Manchester
recalled: 'I'm a writer. I feel for the artist and I felt the joy when the artist signed,
which for any artist is an elation. I'll never forget when we signed… that is
a great moment. It's a fabulous moment' (Performer/Producer, M, Hip-hop,
Manchester [4]). There has been much talk about this being the age of the artist
as musicians are 'in control' (Mulligan and Jopling, 2019). However, the previ-
ously forecasted great decline in power for the major record labels (Balto, 2012)
and specifically the recording divisions of Sony, Universal and Warner Broth-
ers has not come about. These labels are still here and still matter, and within
the hierarchy of validation, the music contract still symbolises a major turning
point in a musicians' career – not unlike a marriage, signalling a withdrawal
from the vagaries of the field (Gross, 2019). The point of commodification is
that it acts as a chain of symbolic stages, arrived at and gathered together to
validate the removal of doubt; each contract binds the artists into a network,
and this is validation in action. The process is self-perpetuating; the more peo-
ple that make music and the more crowded the marketplace is, the more people
there are competing for this magical contract (despite all the tensions and com-
promises inherent to signing up and 'selling out' (Klein et.al, 2016)). And yet
the contract gets further and further away, simultaneously making the contract
more valuable until 'getting signed' becomes seen, for many, as the ultimate
validation (Arditi, 2020). This is particularly interesting in the context of the
contemporary music industries' apparent fetishisation of independence – itself
largely illusory, since most artists people think of as 'independent' have deals,
or partnerships as they prefer to call them, with major record labels, albeit
not in the classic 'record label–artists' guise. Contracts act to freeze time: they
set in motion new temporal relationships that work to a clock that starts to tick
at the point of signature and stops when the more powerful of the *'equal'* part-
ners says so. Artists, even in this so-called age of the artist, rarely have the right
to walk away from contractual obligations. This is perhaps why one interviewee
described signing a deal as: 'getting in bed with the devil' (Performer/Producer,
M, Hip-hop, Manchester [4]).

   Contracts operate to temporarily stabilise the unstable world of musical pro-
duction and exchange, whilst at the same time seemingly offering both parties
some idea about control. The ending of contracts – what is often called 'being
dropped' – which happens when the contract is live but the music company no
longer wants to continue with the project, or the alternative form when a con-
tract is not renewed and the artist is now free to make new contacts however
their work does not follow them, can be moments of real tension for artists.
Some report feeling exhilarated and talk about being free. Others talk about the

terrible shock and rejection that these moments can bring. They often speak about them in terms of being destabilising or depressing. One interviewee told us: 'I've had the opportunity to see what happens when [artists] get signed and when they get dropped, which can be completely devastating' (Performer/Producer, M, Hip-hop, Manchester [4]). This experience is true of many musicians who told us that they might be offered a record deal one moment, only to have it inexplicably withdrawn the next. For one of our interviewees, this led to him developing what he called a 'defensive, cold sense of realism':

> There's a big thing amongst us in the creative industry that you never celebrate or never talk about something positive that's happening until it's actually happened because the industry itself is so unreliable … It's a device that you have to develop because you get so many disappointments, so many knock-backs …. We get up and come to work every day knowing that … what we're doing today will most probably fail and the optimism that you will have to draw from yourself to come to work every day thinking 'I'm going to try again, to do this incredibly difficult thing' knowing the odds are massively stacked against you and that somebody will probably completely deconstruct what I've done and criticise it or just not even email me back and tomorrow I'll get up and I'll do the same thing again. It takes such an incredible amount of mental resolve … if you don't design a mechanism in your head to be almost cynical about any kind of positive thing that's on the horizon. That's the way it is … [I've] just developed this really defensive cold sense of realism.
>
> —Producer/Songwriter, M, Pop, London [19]

The idea of the changeability and even randomness of the music industry links us to the idea of luck more generally and the role musicians perceive it to play in their lives.

4.2.3 On the Role of Luck

> It kind of fills you with dread and there's also this immensely competitive edge to it where you feel that so little seems to break through and work … You feel like you're [all] just jostling for one golden ticket. There doesn't seem to be any logic or anything you can apply as a set of rules to why things work and why they don't work. You know, there are factors that help things move quicker than others but essentially it's still down to this weird percentage of luck that we all have to factor into everything we do.
>
> —Musician, M, Rock, London [13]

Many of our interviewees saw their careers as being ruled by an almost mystical law of luck. For any degree of success (itself a loaded and contested term as we have seen), the majority of musicians we spoke to acknowledged that one requires not only musical talent, family support, the right connections and hard work – these being prerequisites, or 'a given' – but also always the necessary amount of good luck, randomness, timing, and circumstance. Success was described beautifully by one interviewee as 'lots of little bits of magic that come together at a certain time' (Performer/Producer, M, Hip-hop, Manchester [4]). This was perhaps most clearly explained by a producer we spoke to who broke down precisely what these 'bits of magic' are in practical terms. He told us: 'I may have written fifty hit songs that never came out because from the moment of creation to mastering, that whole process when you've got the record, after that that's when the real lottery starts: Is it going to the right artist? Where's this artist in their career? How are things shaping up for them? Is it the sound for radio right now? Who's their label? Who's their promotions team? Who's their PR? Who does their PR know? Does the plugger get records on the right radio [station]? There are just a million different hurdles' (Producer/Songwriter, M, Pop, London [19]). Releasing music, he explained, relies on writing the right song, at the right time, it being heard by the right people, played in the right place, on the right day, with the right marketing, in the right environment, with the right decisions being made, just for a song to even be heard, and at each stage of this process, anything can go wrong. As one songwriter told us: 'You write five songs for someone and then suddenly none of them get used, and those songs get lost' (Singer/Songwriter, F, Pop, London [2]).

It therefore appears that when musicians come to interact with what they define as 'the music industry' to measure their value, the nature of precarity evolves, and a creative career transcends merely being defined by financial precarity and comes to be defined by what we call 'the precarity of experience'. This is a multifaceted precarity. In the first instance this relates to the way in which musicians see the role of luck in their careers, and the frustration of not having any control over this process. As one told us: 'I've worked with artists that have not had the success that… they deserve or [have worked] for. Some just love to get on the radio, to hear their song on mainstream radio. And I absolutely know they're good enough for that and seeing them spiral because of the things they've done. Part of it is luck – luck and timing… and that's kind of frustrating because I've tried to move these things to make these things happen' (Performer/Producer, M, Hip-hop, Manchester [4]).

There is a second layer to this precarity of experience and this relates to how musicians feel about the process of writing, creating and then releasing songs, which was often described as a struggle or a fight, regularly with a record label (although not always). An R&B singer/songwriter told us about how the experience of being with a management company and signed to a 'deal' meant that a huge amount of her music was criticised and then never released, and her struggles at not being able to get her music out. She told us:

> I was like: 'I'm in a record deal, I'm with the best of the best. Why do I feel like this'? And looking back, it's like waiting for the validation of someone to tell you you're great. You're making song after song and you love it, and someone comes along and says 'No. I don't think it's all that [i.e. I don't like it/think it's very good]'. And then your whole spirit just changes about the song, even though in that minute you made it you thought it was incredible… But then you get used to year after year… session after session, this person saying no, this person saying it's cool. And then [the music] just … sits on the laptop. And then time's going past … like, what the fuck is this? Who am I? And it starts to make you sick because you're seeing everyone else prosper and you're like: 'what am I doing wrong'?
>
> —Musician, F, R&B, London [22]

Throughout the creative process, musicians told us that songs can be written and simply sit on laptops, never being heard as they are inexplicably lost in the system: 'It's heart-breaking when you… can pour your heart into a record, you can spend months perfecting it, and then one day it'll just dawn on you that this isn't… going to get out there. And it makes it so much harder to repeat that process, to pour your heart into it, to make it perfect' (Producer/Songwriter, M, Pop, London [19]). Speaking of the enormous delays as lawyers failed to answer her emails as she chased down her publishing deal while music sat, often for years, on her computer, one musician said: 'It crushed my whole spirit – it was psychological torture' (Musician, F, R&B, London [22]). There is then a tension between, as she put it, 'waiting for the validation of someone to tell you you're great', only later to lapse into feelings of depression from, as another interviewee told us, a 'kind of the worthlessness that comes with it when you work so hard on something and it doesn't pay off' (Musician, F, Indie/Musical theatre, Belfast [6]).

In a truly illuminating exchange, a producer from London drew an interesting comparison: 'Imagine you were a footballer and you were playing every day, but the goal was barely the size of the football, where every match is 0–0, and where people scored once every six months or once a year… People would be too depressed to get on the pitch. That's what it is like' (Producer/Songwriter, M, Pop, London [19].

In this sense, creating music, and then having this music heard is defined, for musicians at least, by a very real sense of uncontrollable luck and unpredictability. Artists will invest everything they have into writing and performing songs and composing music, wearing their hearts on their sleeve, only for their work to not quite 'work', or for careers to be held up in lengthy legal battles, all while their lives are effectively put on hold in pursuit of their dream over which they have very little say. As one artist said, 'Records can have their own actual momentum; they either do or they don't' (Performer/Producer, M, Hip-hop, Manchester [4]). No matter what they tried, how hard they had worked, or how

much they had believed in themselves, luck became, for many, the defining factor. This career turbulence is widely acknowledged across the music sector as problematic, but many see it as an inevitable part of hyper-competition. Many artists spoke of writing songs which people told them would be hits, and even celebrating with them, only for the buzz to simply fizzle away:

> There's examples that everyone knows where every label wanted to sign this one artist, to the point where the advance had gone up to a million pounds, one and a half million, and then they spent a million pounds making the album, and then that artist went on tour with the biggest artist and they put billboards up and everything. And for whatever reason the project didn't connect… Everyone was telling you 'you've made it', 'congrats', they'll be shaking your hands, and it turns out that artist gets dropped before they ever got to your single. And that's the kind of thing that happens so often, just when you think 'this is going to happen' the rug can get pulled right under you.
> —Producer/Songwriter, M, Pop, London [19]

4.2.4 Luck, Power and Privilege

The importance of the role of luck in musical careers was repeated again and again by our interviewees. However, it is important that we more critically interrogate this notion. Although it is evident that luck plays a huge part in career success it is nonetheless possible to see clear patterns emerging that indicate luck itself can be the result of pre-existing positions of privilege, that mean having access to the right connections and being part of the most relevant and influential networks (Banks, 2017; Brook et al., 2020). There has been much recent discussion in the popular media about the 'posh-ness' of pop (Price, 2014; Maconie, 2015), or inequality in the wider creative industries (Brook et al., 2020) and certainly the impact of class, gender and race are acute in the field of classical music for example (Bull, 2019). If luck was indeed the determining factor, then one would expect to see musical representation more diversely spread, and yet that is not what happens. Luck and good timing might be part of the equation, but they are, in many respects, more of an excuse to try and hide systemic inequality. This works well in some cases as it is easier to put something down to bad luck than to dwell on the reality of other obstacles. Running a race is essentially competitive because the race demands a winner. Playing music of any kind does not contain that same competitive imperative. Luck, if it were to exist as a random force, would conceivably operate randomly, striking across class, race, and gender lines. But luck is not gravity. It is impacted by infrastructures of power and by systemic inequalities. Luck is not random, and no matter what you are told you can't just make it. The myth of meritocracy and

the fantasy of participation rely on the myth of luck and good timing which serve to deny the existence of power networks, as well as economic, class-based, and racial privilege (Friedman and Laurison, 2019).

When musicians speak about luck, they mean on the one hand the luck of who one meets and who one knows – the old adage of 'it's not what you know, it's who you know'. However, they also speak to a much more fundamental idea of luck in a musical career and of musical production and distribution which relates to the concepts discussed above about communicating and the reception of messages. This is the luck that *their* message will both be heard and also *connect*. In a wider conceptual sense, creative production does indeed rely on an element of luck; musical production is based on notoriously temperamental forces of creativity (Toynbee, 2016), and consumption is based on tastes which are changeable (Caves, 2000; Krueger, 2019). At the same time, there are elements within this sphere that are controlled: how work is judged, say, by a record label deciding whether to sign it, or by a radio station whether to play it. It is not judged in a random way, but according to the networks that judge it. An example comes from a senior A&R executive from a very successful independent label who came to speak at to the University of Westminster MA Music Business Management class in 2013. He noted that his label finds bands via recommendations from managers they like in a process he described as the 'politics of tipping new music' and from other artists who he called an 'unpolluted source of A&R'. Their label had not, to his knowledge, signed a single artist from an unsolicited demo in the entire time he had been there. This is not luck. When we interrogate luck, we see that it has a connection to networks and networks have a connection to power. This has been revealed by how the apparently democratic judgement of art prizes in reality takes place within complex networks of power, for example (Street, 2005). In an environment of abundance where there is too much music to listen to, the network becomes even more powerful. In Dean's analysis, the fantasy of participation affords the musicians the hope that they all have an equal chance, whereas in reality the increased volume of messages has the effect of solidifying and intensifying network power as they become stronger and more condensed in this atmosphere. In this context, luck is a necessary myth, central to the belief process, and it is something we hear repeated time and time again on music industry panels. It is an excuse, it seems, that everyone can feel good about.

4.3 The Myth of Control and the Nature of Blame

There is a body of literature from blogs to trade journals, from *Billboard* to *Pitchfork*, that conveys a Web 2.0 rhetoric which speaks of digitalisation's democratising potential; a transfer of power from the reified Leviathan of 'the music industry' – the major labels of Kensington High Street and now Kings

Cross, the BBC and so on – to the musician. From the outset, in the new digital age, individual musicians and music makers would be, and are still said to be, newly empowered by digital production and distribution technologies. This logic suggests that control over the music industry has shifted from the corporations, the gatekeepers and new celebrity digital influencers to the artists themselves, some of whom perform all these roles now. As Wikström (2009) suggests, music firms in the digital era have lost their ability to control the flow of information, to control how copyrights are exploited, to control what happens to 'their' releases, and to control distribution. The suggestion is that artists are now empowered with ever-increasing control and will, alongside consumers, be the main beneficiaries of a new digital climate, reflecting the changing dynamics in wider society too (Shapiro, 1999). Indeed, a recent report published by Mulligan and Jopling (2019) for Media Insights and Decisions in Action Research encapsulated this in their title: 'Independent Artists: The Age of Empowerment'. We hear time and again how this is the 'Age of the Artist' (Mulligan, 2020a), how 'Musicians are Now in Control' (Rennie, 2014), and the landscape is littered with 'how-to' guides for these newly empowered 'savvy musicians' (Cutler, 2010). We see this in the popular conceptualisation of musicians as 'entrepreneurs' driven by a will to act (Litunnen, 2000: 296).

In one sense, technology has democratised the process of music making and placed ever greater creative and distribution power with musicians, a process which has been well charted over the last decade (Leyshon, 2009; Hrcas, 2012; Tschmuck, 2017). Our previous research too suggests that this heightened perceived level of creative control does create genuine feelings of *empowerment* among musicians (Musgrave, 2014). This is one of the things that individuals – from journalists and managers to music label employees – mean when they use catch-all phrases like 'the artist is now in control'. Many of the musicians we spoke to believed that the current digital climate of musical aspiration was better or easier than it was historically. One told us: 'It's easier nowadays. Back in the day it wasn't that easy. It's easier nowadays with social media; I'm not saying it's going to get you a deal immediately but….' (Producer/Rapper, M, Hip-hop/Spoken Word, Manchester [27]. This historical comparison is very difficult to measure; we lack the data to analyse the ratio across the past century not least because patterns of musical ambition and the changing patterns of work have not been the subject of much research. Nonetheless, the rhetoric is a powerful one. The music industries tell you: you have all the tools, you are in control, the best music rises to the top and that if you work hard, your life will change.

Many of the musicians we spoke to felt that they had a degree of control over their lives and looked up to musicians who were 'doing it independently'. As an interviewee from Manchester told us: 'Stories to a certain generation they are so powerful. [The American rapper] Macklemore is independent. [Those stories are] so powerful. [Young musicians today are] not looking to think "I've got to sign [a recording deal]" … They're thinking of marketing ploys to generate those income streams … Back in the day we were thinking "how can we get the

A&R guy to come to our gig" to love us. [Musicians today are] not even on that level anymore' (Performer/Producer, M, Hip-hop, Manchester [4]). However, as we have discovered, the process of seeking validation is complex, messy and reliant on networks. In a world of potentially unlimited choice, multiple consumption methods, and an exponentially increasing supply, consumers must have some method to find their music. Whether that is 'old-fashioned ways' like the radio, or newer ways like Spotify playlists, behind these methods of supply are people. The Spotify playlists – particularly their biggest and most influential which can attract millions of listeners – are often handpicked songs. It is no coincidence that *both* of the former Heads of Music from BBC Radio 1 (George Ergatoudis) and BBC Radio 1Xtra (Austin Daboh) have been central in curating the most influential playlists in the world at Apple Music and Spotify. For the music to get to these people, there is an entire ecosystem and a process of network consolidation; from the musician to their manager, to a coffee shop in Los Angeles or London where it is discussed with a hot blogger or a PR agent, to a radio plugger, to a conversation at a music industry party that night, to the Spotify or Apple email inbox with thousands of other songs, but where yours is opened and listened to earning its place in the upper reaches of the musical ecosphere. It is a process of networked atomisation, and it is here that the gatekeepers engaged in the processes of cultural intermediation still matter. While *making music* (can be) increasingly individualised, *making a music career* is a collective endeavour in a highly networked environment. It is a social experience in which the musicians need the validation and support of other musicians and a network of people to sustain them. In this sense, although musicians are told they are in control – in control of their music and therefore of their lives, and in control of their destiny – the reality is that they are not, producing work as they do in an environment reliant on consumers' tastes which are hard to predict, industries which are driven by networks of power and where your location in the existing hierarchy matters.

4.3.1 Symbolic Inefficiency and Stickiness

Evidence suggests that in an environment of abundance one needs to present things within a pre-existing power matrix in order to maximise the chances of connectivity. In an abundant environment of declining symbolic efficiency, people need a shortcut to find what they like: cultural products need 'recognition triggers' (Thompson, 2010). For example, songs might need a well-known sample placed in the introduction or have a featured verse from the current artist-of-the-moment in order to make the new artist stand out and connect. We see this time and again in the UK when a new rapper is signed to a major label and the first thing they often do is pay to get a hot US rapper as a guest feature for a verse. This is both about giving power to one's symbolic production, but more than this, it also reinforces existing power structures given that

one needs to position oneself within a power network in order to get attention. We have explored this process in a previous paper as follows:

> Symbolic recognition – this acquisition of cultural capital to use Bourdieu's terminology – becomes a distinguishing mechanism for artists seeking recognition in an anonymising marketplace of abundance… Far from the democratising potential of new digital technologies negating the importance of intermediaries, it has in fact increased their importance… It is a declaration of success-by-association; a process of cultural consecration. In an era of abundant content, proliferated with creative works and creative workers all ferociously competing to be heard in a crowd of raucous, deafening ambitiousness, the cultivation of conspicuousness becomes paramount, and it is this which is the role of intermediaries. They matter because they distinguish artists in an environment of hypercompetition where symbolic meaning matters.
>
> —Musgrave (2017: 59–62)

A helpful way of making sense of what this looks like can be found using Malcolm Gladwell's (2000) concept of 'stickiness'. Drawing on a biological metaphor, Gladwell suggests that the ultimate goal of marketing is that of contagion leading to an epidemic. Epidemics then are underpinned by three key features. The first is what is described as 'the law of the few', meaning that they are achieved socially by key, influential agents who cultivate social capital ('Connectors'), link users with selected products ('Mavens'), and sell these products to those who remain unconvinced ('Salesmen'). Secondly, in order for a message to connect it needs to have stickiness, meaning that it must be simple, memorable, engaging and relatable. This is complex and hard to predict, often contradicting conventional wisdom. Thirdly, context is key, meaning sticky messages communicated by the right agents need to occur at the right place at the right time (as we have seen in this chapter). Within this model, as per musical production, there are many unknowns, but the role influential people and practices play in trying to create stickiness is key. Stickiness is a central concept behind all viral and influencer marketing. However, it is also present in localised grassroots cultural scenes from punk rock to rave to drill. Here, these musical movements contain this element of connection as they are embedded within their communities, and they come out of social contexts with a close connection. It is much harder to replicate this kind of connection from the top down. For new music that does not emerge out of a scene or a place, the importance of powerful networks are especially key.

How much 'control' do musicians really have in this environment? One interviewee suggested that 'it's not up to you, these bigger decisions, you don't have full control over things. You just toil away… you feel like you've done all the work you've done and someone can turn around and be like "Oh, you haven't done enough" or "You need to do this again or do more of this" or "Do more touring".

It… just feels like in this endless cycle' (Musician, M, Rock, London [13]). Another way a lack of control was reflected, was when interviewees spoke of their experiences of songs as A&Rs became involved, and in pursuit of the record company's desire for stickiness, the musician lost control. A songwriter told us, 'Somebody can take your song and … destroy it in your eyes … I had it recently where I wrote a song with a girl that I really had a strong connection to, and I thought it had loads of potential. But we hadn't quite nailed the chorus. Then she went in with a producer and … did a new chorus… They produced it and they sent it to me and I just couldn't bear to listen to it… Another A&R person gets involved and suddenly they're making it, you know, a grime record or whatever' (Singer/Songwriter, F, Pop, London [2]). Another interviewee explained this process as: 'A&Rs are under so much pressure to deliver… When a major record label comes in… it goes into what I describe as a "glob-glob machine" and then it's on a conveyer belt. And when it gets on that conveyer belt, certain things just don't happen' (Producer/Performer, M, Hip-hop, Manchester [4]). The need to situate music within a wider, pre-existing power structure to achieve a connection in an environment of abundance plays out in the global music industries in a variety of identifiable ways. For example, one of the most lucrative sources of capital for music companies today are catalogue and heritage acts. One of the biggest earners in 2019 was not a new artist, but The Eagles (Greenburg, 2019), a band most famous for their 1977 hit 'Hotel California'. We also see this in which songs tend to be played and in the idea that 'simplicity sells' (Percino, Klimek and Thurner, 2014). There is evidence which suggests 'an important degree of conventionalism, in the sense of blockage or no-evolution, in the creation and production of contemporary Western popular music' (Serra et al., 2012), and indeed when consumers are swamped in the paradox of choice, we defer to what we already know, and too much choice appears to encourage conservatism in consumer decision-making (Schwartz, 2004). When there is so much potential for doubt, we are comforted by what we know, not what is new.

4.3.2 Do You Feel in Control?

While musicians might have a level of creative control in terms of production and distribution, they do not have ultimate control over how their work is received and how processes of intermediation play out. This is in stark contrast to contemporary musical production; being told you are in control, but feeling that luck matters too. As a producer told us, 'In the music industry there is always that element of luck and randomness that's out of our control. It's just timing. It's circumstances' (Producer/songwriter, M, Pop, London [19]). Being heard, as ever in the music industries, involves complex networks of intermediation that take place in the context of a decline of symbolic efficiency in which to achieve stickiness to attach to something – in other words, to connect – becomes key. It is this process over which artists have less control, particularly

if they are in areas of pop music production where managers and labels are the central figures. Because they embody their work so strongly – they are their work and their work is their life – this creates an uncomfortable relationship between responsibility and blame when things go wrong, and as all the data indicates, it *will* go wrong for the majority of aspiring musicians. We began the previous chapter with a quote from UK Music which stated that 'music is a meritocracy'. This myth of meritocracy is all-pervasive in the music industries and even though many of our interviewees were clearly able to articulate structural problems – they could call out sexism and racism and see how privileged networks operated within their industries – they still had hope. They still wanted to believe that even if not everybody has an equal chance, that everybody should be given an equal opportunity to be seen and heard. It is within this struggle that we can see how 'the status of work' overlaps and intersects with 'the status of value'. In this sense, musicians feel and experience the emotional stresses of a creative career and the existential tensions relating to value and measurement profoundly, because their 'failures' are simultaneously understood to be out of their control and as being somehow their responsibility – their own fault. 'I manage myself, I decide what happens and I'm kind of the only one who's accountable. There's no one else to blame' (Musician, F, Cardiff [21]). This idea of only having oneself to blame can also be reflected in musician's experiences of trying a get a deal. One interviewee told us:

> [My managers] made some comments about the reasons why I couldn't get the deal… that I wanted and kind of linked it to me not being good enough. So, I think that really affected me, because they were the people that were supposed to be looking after me and I really took that on and it's something that still today I really deal with that. That phrase 'just not being good enough'.
> Q: Your managers said that to you?
> A: Yeah they did… It just kind of fell apart and I think that was the start of the issues that I was really facing. I think probably because it's a total hit on your confidence really. And it made me feel like everything I'd worked for didn't really amount to anything after that. That was the time when I felt really, really low.
> —Musician, F, Pop/R&B, Manchester [28]

How does it feel when the world tells you you are in control, but in fact you are not? We found that for the musicians we interviewed their desire to have control, coupled with the lack of control in their working lives, was at the least a cause of frustration and at worse manifested in stifling anxiety, feelings of paranoia and even loss. Their experiences sit uncomfortably alongside a powerful media rhetoric that paints a picture of these musicians as creative entrepreneurs who *are* in control, and now that they have control over all the levers of their creative lives they are personally responsible for the outcomes – they only have to work

harder, or better, or longer, or faster. This is the demand, and this is struggle. This has been captured in the work of Han (2017: 7) when he writes, 'People who fail in the neoliberal achievement-society see themselves as responsible for their lot and feel shame instead of questioning society or the system … This auto-aggressivity means that the exploited are not inclined to revolution so much as depression'.

Even if musicians are no longer experiencing financial difficulties and have achieved a degree of success within the industry, the nature of the precarity and anxiety simply evolves as control is, once again, lost. For example, interviewees told us that as musicians become more well known and are travelling and touring, they first lose control of their diary, and ultimately, over their lives: 'At the bottom, the instability is not having any money; at the top, it's not having any freedom' (Manager, M, Pop/various, London [29]). When artists are experiencing a career buzz or success, they spoke of working all the time and having no personal life. This unpredictability can manifest itself in highly changeable diaries, with studio sessions, gigs, meetings or interviews all being changeable at the last minute: 'The insecurity of it can be really scary' (Singer, F, Opera, London [23]). As a platinum-selling, BRIT Award-nominated dance music producer told us: 'It's very hard to plan your future and things change regularly. So whilst not sleeping, touring every day, [and] having pressure from the label to come up with your next single or making sure your brand is building… the travelling, the no-sleep and being awake and DJ-ing at nightclubs at 3 in the morning… that all rolled in to one is a recipe for anxiety… The lack of control is essentially what it comes down to' (Producer, M, Dance, London [20]). Another interviewee put it like this: 'I remember David Bowie describing his first moment with fame as being in a car that somebody else was driving incredibly fast and you could not stop it and you were just being pushed back by the force of the speed but you kept going… That is a good description. It is frightening, and frightening for everybody' (Musician, M, Pop/Soul, London [1]). Indeed, control is a fantasy in the world of the musicians we spoke to. The idea of having some personal control really matters to these musicians, but in a precarious and blurred world, control can be as slippery as luck and just as hard to come by, and often as difficult to define as success itself.

4.4 Conclusions: Welcome to the 'You' Industry

This chapter has articulated what we found to be the second key feature of musical ambition that our interviewees reported as being damaging to their emotional wellbeing and mental health, which we have called 'the status of value'. Given that traditional markers of career stability and success appear to be elusive, musicians turn to the critical community of fans, other artists and industry representatives/tastemakers. Because of the personal nature of this work, this can feel like a painful process of self-exposure. The historical shift

here is in the quantification and constant background tracking of these forms of subjective value, through a range of digital platforms and data capture devices now added to all the traditional intermediaries, from news media and radio to the world of online influencers, bloggers, celebrity friends and fashion houses.

Fundamentally, our insights here are threefold. Firstly, as artists live out their musical lives increasingly in the public glare online, they report their sense of wellbeing being undermined. The vulnerability of being 'on display' they perceive as harmful as this is also coming within a feedback loop of appraisal and valuation. There is a link between extreme levels of competition in the marketplace and the need artists feel to maintain relevance within their musical genre and for the wider music industries. In this atmosphere of abundance, it becomes increasingly difficult to achieve the central aim of musical production – meaningful connection. Secondly, when artists engage with the music industry, high levels of anxiety might be explained by seeking contracts as a marker of status within an environment which musicians feel is often defined by luck. Luck, we suggest, is a myth that serves to obfuscate the reality of pre-existing power and network relations in the music industries; putting things down to 'bad luck' is, in a high-risk industry, an almost perfect excuse, letting everybody concerned off the hook. In this environment, musicians hope that their work produces the required stickiness to ensure that they not only get heard but that they can make authentic connections that allow their careers to grow. Thirdly, there is a complex and contradictory relationship between the idea of being in control and the impact this has on inevitable failures which were reported to be internalised despite not always being internally attributed. These three features of 'the status of value' demonstrate how artists in the contemporary music industries come to suffer when they begin the process of situating their work within the cultural field of production and the complex processes of valorisation necessary when one wants to be heard.

The musicians we spoke to felt that the challenges they face in their careers are not typical employment challenges; they are challenges which cause them to fundamentally question, and seek to make sense of, who they are as human beings. They feel the weight of failure as profoundly personal. In this sense, the struggles that these musicians shared in their interviews appeared as psychological challenges that impacted on their wellbeing as music making is, for them, the prism through which they make sense of their lives. This emotionally taxing predicament impacts not only the musicians themselves but spreads outwards to others in their lives. The potential for a musical career to be harmful then takes on another dimension – one which we will explore in the next chapter.