**In Pursuit of Harmony: Mental Health in the Music Industry**

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**Identification of the Issue to be Examined**

The music business has long been plagued with instances of mental health problems within its ranks. Why does being in this industry often seem to go hand in hand with a multitude of mental health issues such as alcohol and substance abuse, depression, and anxiety? The very nature of being a professional musician is a laundry list of causes: long and inconsistent work hours, an unpredictable income stream, extended periods of time on the road apart from friends and family, and business pressure to continually maintain a successful output of content (Gross & Musgrave, 2020).

The lifestyles inherent in being a music professional are often at odds with healthy life choices. Musicians who abuse drugs have to manage staying awake throughout the night, alcoholics perform their music in bars, and many people have to make the decision, for financial reasons, to spend months on the road, jeopardizing family coherence.

Until recently, the subject of mental health was quickly brushed away and ignored by people in the industry, even as they navigated the ongoing instances of deaths of successful and well-known musicians (Raine, 2021). The combination of financial pressures with the perception of leading successful creative careers has resulted in the industry ignoring mental health issues that jeopardize the very people who create the value that the industry promotes.

Social work practice often focuses on working with populations who have been marginalized, overlooked, and have struggled with finding mental health support. Billions of dollars a year are generated by the music business on the backs of people who do not feel they can be open about their mental health issues, and often have to manage these problems in the public eye. The myriad of stressors that are known to contribute to mental health challenges are rampant in the lifestyles that are expected from musicians and others in the industry on the road and in the studio.

This paper will investigate what it is about this profession that fosters mental health challenges, and what changes the music and mental health industries can make to address them. It will focus on a range of issues, from performance anxiety, ongoing public scrutiny, financial insecurity, imposter syndrome, extensive travel resulting in lack of familial bonds, and being responsible for the financial well-being of a myriad of other people and institutions. Finally, it will propose what the music industry and mental health providers can do to encourage an open conversation and provide easily accessible tools for mitigating negative outcomes.

**Literature Review**

**The Pressure of Performance**

Being a music professional means maintaining high standards of performance in order to continue to get gigs (Dobson, 2011; Harrison, 2018). Musicians are under pressure to please their audience and critics who can publicly state that a performance is lacking. Consequently, musicians must be able to carve out enough time in a busy schedule to practice to maintain those levels of performance. There is also the perception that the use of drugs enhances creativity, improving musical output (Miller & Quigley, 2012).

The mood-altering effects of drugs and alcohol often are used by musicians to create a more favorable situation in regard to the experience of live performance. Researchers in Glasgow studied 24 musicians and other entertainers and reported that using drugs and alcohol helped to mitigate psychological stress related to performance (Forsyth, et.al., 2016). Musicians have also described the use of drugs as a means to help them improve their performance in a study of 35 musicians based in the United States (Groce, 1991). The use of alcohol allows players to have less awareness of their audience, calming stage fright and increasing the chances of a less inhibited performance (Groce, 1991; Miller & Quigley, 2012).

While up to a certain point, musicians use substances as performance enhancers, improving their mood and their creativity, many are cognizant that after a certain point, drugs and alcohol begin to have a negative effect on both their professional and personal lives. Studies have shown that long-term use of cannabis caused memory loss, and excessive amounts of cocaine and alcohol produced a lack of physical control necessary for playing and performing (Groce, 1991).

Developing musical talent often starts at an early age. The pressure to pursue a musical career when a child shows talent can often be the source of mental health challenges as an adult. Young children who are driven by caregivers to excessively practice and compete can develop attachment issues later on (Harrison, 2018). Being taught to always avoid failure leads to an inability to see failure as a normal part of life.

**Financial Insecurity**

Inherently, the music industry is a field of gig workers, where the opportunities to make an income can be sporadic. There are times when people are making a lot of money, and other times when there is no income at all. Significant stressors arise when faced with this financial insecurity, especially when combined with the generally low income of the average musician (Dobson, 2011; Harrison 2018). Even many musicians signed to major label record deals did not make the bulk of their income from music, if it made them any income at all (Gross & Musgrave, 2020).

In addition, there is no centralized place for musicians to get health insurance, which leads many people to have no insurance, even with mentally – and physically – challenging jobs. This can result in allowing nascent problems to increase and get out of control without the financial resources to find clinical help (Harrison, 2018). Low income is also a factor in the choice of food that musicians consume. Not having enough money can result in poor and irregular eating habits. In Kapsetaki and Easmon’s report on eating disorders in the music business (2019), they found that 41.8% of musicians would change their diet if their income was higher.

Beyond the amount of actual income generated by music is the question of the actual definition of a career. So much musical work goes unpaid; if your labor does not earn money, does it actually qualify as a job? In the capitalistic worldview, there is a requirement for certain free labor to uphold the society, whether that be the free labor of women – childcare and housework – or the free labor of artistic creation, which is seen as a privilege to do, rather than as work (Gross & Musgrave, 2020). This position of inequality and exploitation is couched in the idea that this is a voluntary choice, and that if you follow your dreams you can achieve success (Gross & Musgrave, 2020).

**Social Identity**

Musicians can struggle to create a social identity in a career that is predicated on how you present yourself to your audience and the world. Use of drugs and alcohol can be an easy path to a social identity, developing a persona that fits a predisposed idea of what it means to be a professional musician (Groce, 1991). The use of alcohol and drugs can be a way to connect and network with peers, resulting in a community that revolves around drug use (Miller & Quigley, 2012). Substance use helps to define what the culture is and who is a member of that culture (Dobson, 2011). There is also a financial benefit to this: in order maintain a working schedule, musicians must network and form relationships with other people in the industry, which pressures them to adhere to these existing cultural norms (Dobson, 2011).

Irregular schedules contribute to a lack of control over how music professionals spend their time. Musicians can often be very busy, or they can have copious amounts of empty time due to sporadic working schedules. Musicians report that the stress of this downtime contributes to their decisions to use alcohol and drugs as a way to lessen boredom and have something to do (Forsyth, et.al., 2016; Groce, 1991; Grønnerød, 2002).

As careers progress, and more pressure is added to maintain that career, drug and alcohol problems reflecting these additional stressors often increase (Forsyth, et.al., 2016). Subsequently, there is often little intervention as mental health issues multiply with increased success, with the use of drugs and alcohol chalked up to a normative lifestyle choice (Groce, 1991). This might eventually wear itself out however – one study indicated that older musicians who had been in the business a longer time were less likely to use substances than their younger colleagues (Patsika & Malliori, 2021).

Studies showing why the general population abuses alcohol and drugs closely replicate many of the reasons that the music industry population does. The particulars of the industry lifestyle create opportunities for these issues to be magnified. When one study asked a group of 16–24-year-old non-musicians why they use alcohol and drugs, the responses were indicative of the same reasons why musicians say they do as well: to stay awake at night to socialize, to alleviate depression, to relax, to become intoxicated, and to enhance an activity (Boys, et.al., 2001).

**Existing Mental Health Disorders**

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study showed a direct correlation between traumatic events that happened in childhood and mental health problems that develop in adulthood. For instance, in adults with four or more ACEs, there was a 7.4 times higher risk of alcohol abuse, a 4.7 times higher risk of substance abuse, and a 12.2 times greater risk of attempted suicide (Bellis et al., 2012). In investigating the life histories of rock and pop stars, the Bellis et al. study (2012) showed both a history of ACEs and the mental health conditions that can develop from them. 47.2% of the musicians they included in their study who died from substance use or other risk-related behaviors had at least one ACE, compared to 25% of those who died from other causes (Bellis et al., 2012). That raises the question: are people with dysfunctional or abusive childhoods attracted to the risky lifestyle of a professional musician? There is also the indication that even unlimited financial resources cannot counteract the consequences of a deprived childhood (Bellis et al., 2012).

Some studies have indicated that certain mental health disorders, including schizophrenia and affective disorders, occur in higher numbers with artists than in the population at large, and that musicians who are diagnosed with these illnesses will often self-medicate with drugs and alcohol (Miller & Quigley, 2012). Musicians who have been diagnosed with depression often use alcohol and drugs to alleviate their symptoms (Dobson, 2011). They will frequently indicate that there are external, rather than internal, factors that cause their negative feelings (Dobson, 2011). One study showed that artists in general were 125% more likely than the general population to have a risk of suicide (Stack, 1996). Suicide levels were especially high in musicians younger than 40, with instances three times more prevalent than in the general population in that age group (Newman, et al., 2021). Higher levels of mental health disorders might also explain the elevated use of drugs in this population, suggesting that musicians are using substances as an unhealthy way of dealing with unresolved emotional issues. In studying the drug use of musicians compared to non-musicians, studies indicated that there was a significantly higher use of cannabis, cocaine, hallucinogens, and stimulants in artists than in non-artists (Patsika & Malliori, 2021; Miller & Quigley, 2012).

One study showed that musicians who sought out mental health resources were ten times more likely to be diagnosed with anxiety and five times more likely to be diagnosed with depression than the general population (Harrison, 2018). The study also indicated that musicians were more likely to show symptoms of being a Highly Sensitive Person (Harrison, 2018). These are people who have full inner lives but can be overly aware and attuned to their environment, which can lead to social isolation and mood disorders (Harrison, 2018).

Mental health disorders can ironically often help the artist in the creation of their art. Some artists feel that their depression, rapidly changing emotions, or hypersensitivity allows them to get more closely in touch with the existential questions about life that help guide their art (Stack, 1996). Ninety percent of artists interviewed in one study claimed that their intense moods, which might otherwise be diagnosed as mental health disorders, were integral to their creation of art (Stack, 1996).

**Public Perception and Validation**

The music business, as with many of the professional arts, inherently places people in a position to be publicly judged on a regular basis. This constant stream of feedback and criticism by the audience, the press, colleagues, and others creates an often untenable loop of insecurity. There is increased stress that comes when one’s worth is continuously measured, and when one is always in a competition for increased value, both financially and culturally (Dobson, 2011). Substance abuse in particular is a preferred form of stress alleviation when one is worried about how they’re being perceived by their audience and whether or not their performance or product has positive regard (Forsyth, et.al., 2016; Groce, 1991). This takes the individual out of normal society and places them somewhere else as an object to be judged. In fact, one study reported that musicians felt different from the rest of society, experiencing more self-involvement and isolation (Dobson, 2011).

At the same time, the need to be valued as an artist is juxtaposed with societal devaluation of artistic work. There is the perception that being a musician isn’t a “real job” (Harrison, 2018). Even musicians themselves devalue their own work (Raine, 2021). But many musicians see their career as not just something they *do*, but something they *are*. Subsequently, professional struggles reflect personal shortcomings, and this overidentification can result in the feeling of lack of personal value (Harrison, 2018).

With the development of social media as a marketing force, artists now have the ability to interact directly with their fans, creating a more personal connection. This can create a more intimate kind of fandom, where there is no longer a middleman between the artist and the consumer. Everything a musician does has the potential to be “content,” whether it’s something directly related to their career, or something unrelated about their personal life (Gross & Musgrave, 2020). They are under pressure to live their lives constantly in the public eye, in a continuously measurable way through likes, shares, and views.

This increases their influence over their fans, especially easily manipulated young ones. Many well-known musicians may promote positive messages about health and youth behavior, while simultaneously being known for drug and alcohol misuse (Bellis et al., 2012). This can be heightened by the inclusion of brand associations and sponsorships with alcohol companies (Bellis et al., 2012).

A study looking at the link between artists and suicide noted that many artistic products, such as music, are rejected by the audience after they are released (Stark, 1996). This rejection can be felt as a personal dismissal, the work as a reflection of the creator. This rejection, and the feeling that one is performing below one’s potential, is a precursor to suicide in the artistic population (Stark, 1996).

**Working Conditions**

 Musicians’ workplaces often create and increase the chances that someone with a mental health issue might turn to drugs and alcohol. Many musicians perform in bars and other venues where alcohol is not only served, but is the main income generator for the establishment. These clubs use live music to increase bar sales, and often ask musicians to encourage their audience to buy drinks (Grønnerød, 2002). In addition to helping the bar make money, that is a way that band members connect with the audience – we’re all here drinking, we’re all here having a good time (Grønnerød, 2002). There is continuous exposure to alcohol at these workplaces (Forsyth et.al., 2016). Not only is the alcohol physically there, but musicians are often given free drinks to supplement their financial compensation, or are just paid in drinks (Grønnerød, 2002; Forsyth et.al., 2016).

Musicians reported resenting being put into a position where they are expected to drink or do drugs when performing at these venues. They expressed frustration at an industry that exploited them and treated them unprofessionally (Groce, 1991). Drinking often becomes an obligation for work (Dobson, 2011). However, studies have shown that when the performance venue isn’t alcohol-reliant, musicians alter their habits (Forsyth et.al., 2016). In businesses such as wedding venues or coffeehouses, where sales of alcohol are not the main source of income, musicians feel less pressure to drink during their time working there (Forsyth et.al., 2016). Gigs held during the daytime, where there is less social expectation for both the audience and the band to drink, also results in musicians feeling less pressure to consume alcohol (Forsyth et.al., 2016).

Musicians often make the bulk of their income from gigs, traveling on long tours with little free time between shows, and spending months away from family and friends (Kendall, 2008). Financial pressure dictates these schedules in order to draw as much net income as possible in the time allotted, so as to make a profit for both the musicians and the support staff, often consisting of hundreds of people (Kendall, 2008). Touring specifically has been shown to increase the use of alcohol – in one study, 3.7% of musicians surveyed said they were addicted to alcohol, but 6.1% of touring musicians said that they drink more than two alcoholic drinks every day (Kapsetaki & Easmon, 2017).

The Newman et al. study (2021) looked at the entire touring population, including both musicians and crew. They found that a full 50% of touring professionals show a high risk for depressive disorder, compared to only 4% of the general U.S. population (Newman et al., 2021). Of the touring sample that was studied, 67.9% used alcohol and 32.7% used marijuana on a daily or weekly basis, which could contribute to the overall higher level of stress, depression, and suicide risk than the population at large (Newman et al., 2021). When breaking down this population between artists (a band, solo artist, DJ, or songwriter) and other music industry workers (live crew, management, audio production), studies showed that 75.82% of artists reported anxiety, as compared to 65.95% of workers (Gross & Musgrave, 2020).

Other maladaptive coping mechanisms are present in this non-traditional working environment. Unpredictable schedules result in the practical challenge of irregular meal times which can result in an increased likelihood of developing an eating disorder (Kapsetaki & Easmon, 2017). As these stressful travel schedules can directly lead to mental health challenges resulting in loneliness, anxiety, and depression, the combination of that and the cycle of irregular and unhealthy eating makes an eating disorder all the more likely (Kapsetaki & Easmon, 2017).

Eating disorders were also reported to be higher in soloists than in musicians who were part of a group or band, as well as higher in musicians who traveled internationally versus those who only traveled domestically (Kapsetaki & Easmon, 2017). The takeaway from the data shows that the risk is greatest among people who do not have the social support of fellow musicians who are working with them, combined with the stressors of traveling long distances.

It's also important to note that the stress of being a musician comes from far more than just playing music. Most musicians, especially those in the early stages of their career, have to juggle multiple jobs. They work as their own manager, start their own label, teach music, and make music for television or advertising, all while being their own promoter (Gross & Musgrave, 2020). They are tasked with making their product, finding ways to sell it, and looking for additional income streams to make a living.

**Gender Roles**

 Men and women in the music industry experience mental health challenges very differently. Women reported much higher instances of anxiety and panic attacks in a 2020 study – 77.8% of women experienced these issues, compared to 65.7% of men (Gross & Musgrave, 2020). Regrettably, a 2019 study of 725 musicians reported that 50% of the women surveyed were sexually harassed, and 85% of those who were did not report it (Gross & Musgrave, 2020).

Men were more likely to abuse substances than their female counterparts (Patsika & Malliori, 2021; Miller & Quigley, 2012). Women were more concerned that their use of drugs and alcohol would be likely to disrupt their careers than men were, creating more social pressure to stay sober (Oksanen, 2013). Reflecting society’s gendered roles, women musicians railed against the misogyny and sexism prevalent in the music industry, observing that male musicians with substance abuse problems are considered “authentic,” while addicted women are perceived as “lost cases” (Oksanen, 2013). Women feel that they are judged more harshly for aberrant behaviors, as society holds them to a different standard than men (Miller & Quigley, 2012).

 The cultural perception of attractiveness targets people who are in the public eye, and musicians, particularly female musicians, feel the brunt of this pressure. The idealization of thinness through the eyes of the media is a risk factor for the development of an eating disorder (Kapsetaki & Easmon, 2017). Many musicians are very young when they enter their career, and puberty is a particularly sensitive time for people’s body issues. Pressures from the media, peers, parents, and teachers can push a sensitive musician, going through the transition of puberty, to become hyper-aware of weight and physical appearance (Kapsetaki & Easmon, 2017). Studies have shown that eating disorders in musicians appeared most frequently during teenage years, a data point that reflects the time most eating disorders occur in the general population (Kapsetaki & Easmon, 2017).

**Recommendations**

We have to remove the challenges that exist in providing mental health resources to the music industry. In a 2016 British study of 2,200 musicians, 57% of the respondents reported that they did not seek any help for their mental health issues, and over half said that it was difficult to receive help (Raine, 2021). Another study in Sweden in 2021 of 1,100 musicians found that while 73% struggled with their mental health, less than 40% had sought professional help, and more than half chose to self-medicate with drugs and alcohol (Raine, 2021).

Musicians report that they hesitate to alert anyone to potential mental health issues because of pressure from managers, and the fear of derailing their career (Kapsetaki & Easmon, 2017). Artists felt the music industry was not making conditions better for their mental health (Raine, 2021). Therefore, it’s vitally important that mental health professionals recognize the challenges and warning signs within the music profession and note the existence of disorders.

Peer support has proven to be a protective factor in regard to mental health. Musicians in bands tend to show fewer mental health issues than solo artists. One reason may be that the spotlight of fame might be disseminated throughout the band, rather than on just one person. Another might be that the mutual support of a group can help everyone get through stressful situations (Bellis et al., 2012). In much the same way that positive mental health outcomes can be achieved with groups for people experiencing grief, substance abuse, eating disorders, and other issues, the industry must find ways to provide peer support through the availability of groups specific to the music industry.

Mental health clinicians who work with professional musicians must also keep in mind that the competitiveness inherent in the population does not limit itself to other musicians, but also to peers outside of the music business. When people in their circle achieve life status events, such as buying a house or starting a family, it can bring forth feelings of not moving forward in life or career, resulting in self-esteem issues and self-doubt (Gross & Musgrave, 2020). How do people build a future when their present is so precarious? These are issues that need to be addressed.

Mindfulness interventions can be a solution to mental health problems in this population. When looking at suicidality rates among touring professionals, those with high suicidality rates showed high levels of depression but low levels of mindfulness, and those with low suicidality rates scored lower on depression and higher on mindfulness (Newman, et al., 2021). Consequently, utilizing mindfulness-based therapy such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MCBT) on a regular basis could help alleviate mental health problems. With the stress of constant traveling, setting up, performing, breaking down, and moving on to the next venue, there is not a lot of time for music professionals to simply take the time off to decompress and work on self-care. Incorporating mindfulness into the work schedule would help because being present and mindfully aware can be an integral part of managing their day-to-day responsibilities, which includes taking care of their mental and physical health.

Mental health professionals need to help musicians separate their ego identity from the relentless demand the industry puts on them to make their whole lives available online. The pressure of living your life in the online public eye, navigating criticism by fans, journalists, and the media, results in magnified self-criticism that does not have an opportunity to abate. Social workers need to help manage social media demands – providing the space to allow musicians to be their true selves without the public eye measuring and commenting on their thoughts and actions. The public persona must be tempered with the human need to have a private, personal life.

The mental health of music professionals cannot be fully addressed without involving family members. Family stressors, especially when combined with long periods away from home, must be tackled with the help and advisement of a social worker. Open communication about what each family member is thinking and feeling, how career activities are affecting the entire family, and the opportunity to be open and forthright about concerns and difficulties need to be available on an ongoing basis. The family might have no idea what the music professional is experiencing on the road, and the musician might regret missing out on family life while they’re away. Keeping the lines of communication open allows for stressors to be addressed before they become unmanageable.

Social relationships in the music business can be fraught with complexities. Music professionals are often surrounded only by other music professionals – fellow band members, crew, label executives, managers, publicists. All these people are economically dependent on the musicians and each other. Professional relationships become social relationships, where no interaction exists without an economic angle. It can be difficult to pull apart the genuine care two people might have for each other when one is them is reliant on the other for their salary. Music professionals need to maintain relationships that are purely personal, where they can be their true selves without worrying about economic implications.

Ultimately, what musicians need is what most other people who seek therapy need – someone to listen to them, be present for them, and take their thoughts and concerns seriously. The business needs mental health professionals who understand what music industry professionals are going through, and who can empathize with the unique challenges of the lifestyle and what it means to labor in that business. This resource should be available across all tiers of the business, with the responsibility shared by the business structures upon which the industry is built – the record labels, the touring companies, the publishing companies, and management. Everyone has skin in the game, and these resources should be embedded into business practices.

**Implications**

As with any profession, there are stressors in the music industry that cannot be avoided – will people like my new song? Will my competitor sell more albums than I will? What will people say about me when I walk out on that stage? The question is, how do we help mitigate the reactions to those questions to avoid overwhelming feelings of anxiety, paranoia, or fear?

Increased awareness of this issue is starting to make an impact. In 2021, Canadian record label Royal Mountain Records developed a mental wellness fund for all its artists. Every act on their label receives a non-recoupable $1500 payment to use on mental health resources and addition recovery (Raine, 2021). This can start to be a blueprint to help the industry come together to address these problems.

Ultimately, a conversation on these issues will perchance arrive to a conclusion that many in the industry might not be expecting – is this indeed the career I want for myself and my family? The desire to create music is one that is formed deep in the soul and can be an innate and unremovable part of one’s self-identification. The commercial pursuit of a *career* in music, however, might not be as desirable as many people initially believe it to be.

We need to be honest with ourselves and our colleagues in the music and mental health industries. We have to separate the idea that choosing to not pursue the career because we wish to maintain our own mental health is not equated with failure. Rather, it should be presented as a strength that mental and physical health, along with strong family relationships, is valued over commercial success. To continue to pursue a career that we think we love, but that is resulting in suffering, is a conundrum that therapy can help untangle.

The mental health industry must also include professionals who are familiar with the complexities and unique challenges that exist in the music industry. Organizations like Backline.care are specially designed to connect musicians and others in the business with mental health resources and therapists who understand the lifestyles of music professionals. Social workers are taught to be culturally sensitive when working with clients, in that we allow our client’s cultural identity to help guide us in developing ways to help them. In much the same way, workers need to be open to the culture of the music industry, and the unique stressors that occur within it.

**Conclusion**

As I write this paper, the world has just learned about the death of Tyler Hawkins, the 50-year-old drummer of the band Foo Fighters. Hawkins’s autopsy is reported to have shown a mix of ten different drugs, including heroin, antidepressants and benzodiazepines. Hawkins was at the top of his career, a part of one of the world’s most successful rock bands, and had access to whatever mental health support he might have wanted. What had kept him from pursing the help he needed? He had previously suffered a drug overdose in 2001, landing in a coma for a week. How many people in the professional enterprise that is the Foo Fighters neglected to see the danger points along the way to this tragedy?

The sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll mythology around music is just that – a myth. There is no romance about a husband and father dying alone of a drug overdose in a motel room. The music industry needs to start taking this crisis seriously, not just with social media postings of thoughts and prayers, but with real, concrete, and economically supported tools to ensure music industry professionals get the help they need. Social workers can be on the front lines, providing space, empathy, and evidence-based solutions for clients who make their living in this creative, but fraught, space.

The high levels of depression and anxiety reported by musicians are caused by a complex myriad of problems based both on individual experiences and on the structure of the industry as a whole. If being a musician is considered a desirable, privileged profession, why is it rife with experiences that cause mental health problems? Social workers, especially those with experience in and around the music industry, can help music professionals work through, understand, and manage their stressors, finding healthier ways of dealing with the complexities of the business.

Music is a profound part of our overall culture, as well as our personal lives. Those who create it deserve to be able to have a career that can deliver mental health support and understanding when it is needed. Social workers and the music industry must come together to provide these professionals with the tools they require to create positive meaning in their own lives, as much as they create positive meaning in ours through their music.

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