

Regulating in a Sea of Chaos: Emotional Survival in the Music Industry's Power Hierarchies

by Rachel Sacharoff, LMFT

The Scene: Chaos as Usual

It's 2:30. Load-in was supposed to start at noon. The dock is blocked, the opening act's gear is still everywhere, and someone is screaming about a missing case in the background.

You've been up since 5am. You "slept" on the bus. The venue just informed the production manager they rewired the stage power—so everything that was planned? Trash.

The lighting rig has already been re-aimed twice because someone moved a riser. You haven't eaten real food in days. There's no real plan. No explanations. Just egos, changes, and expectations stacked high and dumped in your lap.

And somehow, you're expected to stay calm. Regulated. Professional.

This is the music industry. It's a sea of chaos. And a wonder anyone survives.

Power Dynamics + Unspoken Rules

No one really addresses the power dynamics of the crew that supports the artists. Sure, we all know the stories of demanding band members who need a specific brand of water, a certain color of mood lighting, or their feng shui practitioner to rearrange the green room so they can "feel the energy." The artist ego is folklore in every corner of the world.

But outsiders to the industry have no idea about the *other* power players, the tour managers, production managers, venue owners, and staff who also wield massive influence over how a tour runs and who gets treated nicely.

Beneath them is a whole unspoken hierarchy- top lighting guys, FOH engineers, stage managers, guitar techs... all the way down to road crew and bus drivers. Everyone has a specific role. Everyone has a place in the pecking order. And while no one talks about it out loud, *everyone* knows exactly where they stand.

And because most of these roles are contract-based and temporary, and each one is a rung on the ladder moving upwards, there is constant pressure to stay in the band's favor, or at least management's. One misstep, one ego rubbed the wrong way, and suddenly you're replaced by someone else, or pushed out for someone "bigger and better." The work isn't just physically demanding, it's emotionally precarious. That fear of being replaced keeps a lot of people quiet, agreeable, and willing to push their own needs aside just to get through another leg of the tour.

It creates stress, because it's rare to have someone at the helm who makes everyone feel like they're actually on the same team. And the brief, intense burst of energy that comes during the show, when everything clicks and it all *works*, comes only after hours (or days) of pressure, miscommunication, and quiet power plays. That's the cost of making magic.

Common Coping Styles (and Why They Backfire)

The most common coping skill in the music industry? Substances. Whether it's stimulants to keep you going or alcohol to take the edge off, using something to regulate your nervous system is practically baked into the culture. Artists get the spotlight for it, legends are built around drugs, alcohol, and chaos as if that's the source of great art. But anyone working behind the scenes knows: it's not just the artists. It's *everyone*. And it's dangerous.

We all know how that story ends (see the 27 Club). But what most people miss is that substance use is a nervous system issue, not a moral one. And the road is a perfect storm- pressure, exhaustion, lack of control, and a culture that rewards endurance over regulation. So people use what works *in the moment*. Even if it wrecks them later.

Other coping styles show up too, people-pleasing is huge. So is anger. Neither one actually helps. I've worked with music industry professionals stuck in cycles of substance use and explosive outbursts who never realized their real issue was a lack of boundaries and the inability to say what they need. It's easier to numb out or blow up than to admit you're overwhelmed.

But that overwhelm doesn't just disappear when the tour ends. It piles up, and eventually, it breaks through.

The Reframe: Regulation ≠ Compliance

Power dynamics don't just shape jobs, they shape how people *feel* on the job. When you're not the one in charge, it's easy for every correction, glance, or shift in tone to feel loaded. A production manager's silence might spiral into "*Did I mess up?*" or "*Am I about to get replaced?*" These are cognitive distortions for sure, but they're also survival thoughts in an industry where employment can be fragile and reputation matters. The anxiety that comes with being lower on the hierarchy fuels reactivity. People snap, people shut down, people start making everything personal, even when it's not. That's why staying grounded is so essential: without regulation, power dynamics can hijack your nervous system before you even realize what's happening.

So if you want to keep your center in a system that's designed to knock you off balance, you need to actively manage your own anxiety. That means building emotional regulation into your toolkit, not as compliance, but as protection.

Number one rule: it's not personal. The tour manager's frustration? The missing case, even if you forgot to load it onto the bus? These are just things that are happening. People choose how they respond. If someone blows up at you, it's not solely your screw-up that caused it. It's their threshold for stress, and you just happened to be the straw that snapped it.

The truth is, you're not that important. I say this with love and to help you shift your perspective. You don't have the power to control someone else's thoughts, which is what drives their emotional response anyway. All you can do is own what you did, offer a solution, and move forward. Getting hurt or offended is sometimes just a convenient distraction from the real issue: you made a mistake. And mistakes happen. Getting defensive or reactive just furthers the negative and keeps you stuck. Being able to own your actions and move towards a solution helps reduce reactivity. We all have that ability and if you're grounded enough, you can use it.

The problem usually isn't *you* or *them*, it's *between* you. And when you stop taking everything personally, you gain a massive amount of space to stay grounded, regulated, and useful. One of my favorite internal mantras when someone's coming at me is to contemplate, is this a me problem or a them problem? And when it's a them problem, I say to myself (in my head, of course) "*that sounds like a YOU problem*". That

way I'm not internally starting an anxiety war between the parts of myself that like to point out all my flaws.

Another tool? Know your sensory needs and meet them. Regulation starts *before* the chaos hits. When your nervous system is fortified, through rest, food, movement, noise management, whatever keeps you sane, you'll have more bandwidth for other people's bullshit. And trust me, it's coming.

At the end of the day, we're all just people running around trying to do our best. Most people aren't trying to make your life harder, they're just overwhelmed, reactive, or unaware. When stress hits, shift into solution mode. Don't waste time on blame or backward focus. The music industry moves fast. You need your nervous system to keep up.

Practical Tools for Chaotic Systems

Fortify your nervous system (before, during, and after).

Start your life with a full tank. Get sleep. Eat real food. Pack your comforts- clothes that feel good on your body, your favorite snacks, headphones, whatever helps you regulate. On the road, take breaks from the chaos, even if it's just breathing in a corner or doomscrolling for five minutes. Stay hydrated. Bring tools that ground you. And plan recovery *after* the tour including days off, spa time, or just permission to fully collapse. Another tip- you're not alone out there, so find a buddy. Someone who knows your limits and can check in if you start to lose the plot. And offer to do the same for them. Bonus tip- stay away from substances. They don't help. Ever.

Know your boundaries, and actually say them out loud.

You're not a diva for communicating your needs. You're doing your job *better* when you tell someone, calmly, "Hey, while I'm setting up the board, I get overwhelmed if I'm interrupted. Unless it's urgent, can we hold questions until I'm done?" Framing your boundary as a strategy for doing your best work helps people receive it without defensiveness.

And if they forget? Don't take it personally. People are distracted, stressed, and human. Gently remind them. Don't spiral. You're not that important, and that's actually freeing.

Have fun and remember why you're here.

No one joins the music industry because they *have* to. They do it because they *want* to. You chose this. It was your dream job, your fantasy, your passion. Don't let the grind overshadow the glitter. Celebrate the chaos and the beauty of what you're part of.

Even when it's hard, even when you're tired, you're helping make something unforgettable. You are part of the magic and don't you ever forget it!

Survival Is a Skill (And You Can Learn It)

Power dynamics exist everywhere- in families, friendships, relationships, and jobs. Learning how to navigate difficult people, chaotic situations, and not being high up in the hierarchy is hard. But it's not impossible. With the right tools, the right mindset, and clear communication (that isn't blurred by alcohol or drugs), you can move through this work with grace and regulation.

Everyone in this industry starts at the bottom. Very few people step into leadership roles without having been in someone else's shoes first. So when someone's being condescending or cold, pause and ask: *Am I taking this more personally than I need to?* Most likely, you are because you're likely doing the best you can with what you have in the moment.

If someone's dysregulated, give them space. Ask what they need if the situation could benefit from it. And remember- the way you want to be treated? Model it. Be the example. Fortify yourself. Be present. Boundaried. Clear. You can't control the chaos, but you can control how you show up inside it.

And if you melt down? If you lose it? Welcome to the club. Change isn't linear (and nobody's perfect). Even explosive meltdowns are part of the rock and roll lore. The beauty of this job, and of this life, is that you can always start over tomorrow. So get out there and have fun!