
4 Musicians

Introduction

Being a musician can be like playing the Lottery – many try it, almost all enjoy the thrill, but very few win the jackpot. The reasons why someone decides to become a musician can be puzzling: it offers irregular and, on average, rather low income, is a competitive job market with low barriers to entry, entails a need to rely on financial support from others and the necessity to subsidise artistic work by taking jobs outside the music industry, and relies on self-proclaimed music experts who vote with their money and can make or break the musician's career. And although practically everyone, at some point in their lives, has known at least one person who has claimed to be a musician, still only one out of thousands achieve any financial stability. Of those lucky ones who sign up with a record company, only about 5% break even (Seifert and Hadiba, 2006), and those who manage their own careers often end up spending more time on non-musical activities than they do actually playing music. Most musicians find it impossible to support themselves from their creative work alone. The old economic models tell us that no rationally thinking individual should decide to become a musician (Nagel, 1988).

Yet despite the financial worries troubling so many musicians, especially those who are at the early stages of their career, the industry is not facing a shortage of new talent. So why do these aspiring artists 'behave[e] in an irrational manner' (Gray, 1986: 231)? The opportunity to realize their dreams motivates young and emerging musicians to pursue their ambitions in search of internal satisfaction, artistic fulfilment, and potential financial rewards and fame. As discussed in Chapter 2, the

Noughties have witnessed some of the most important technological developments in the music industry, creating many opportunities for musicians to market themselves using social networking websites and the Internet in general to find their audiences in the online space. Such changes have turned many musicians into online entrepreneurs, who are recording, producing and distributing their music independently of the traditional music industry. And as many successful examples show us, perseverance and a little bit of luck are often the only determinants of success (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Ferguson, 2002). Last but not least, there is also an image and lifestyle associated with musicians: as Wassall and Alper argue, ‘the public stereotype of the artist is of a person who is in many ways different from the “rest of us”’ (1984: 213). Musicians are surrounded by a magical aura of mysterious creative processes, bizarreness, fans and fandom, not to mention wealth associated with commercial success. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the many dimensions of being a musician in the contemporary music industry. It therefore begins with an attempt to provide an understanding of who a musician is, and the main types of musicians. The chapter then outlines the role of formal and informal learning in becoming a musician, and the main challenges of being a musician. It is followed by an overview of musical hierarchies and identities. The chapter concludes with some observations on music groups.

Who is a musician?

The occupational label ‘musician’ is nowadays applied in many contexts quite freely to describe a wide range of people and their activities. One may talk about people composing their own music, and people performing music written for them and others; there are composers who never perform, and there are DJs and music producers who never compose *sensu stricto*; there are also professional and amateur musicians, recording musicians and sessional artists. Although requiring different musical skills, they are all engaged in the same activity – creating music. Making music is undoubtedly a form of artistic engagement, yet even such a commonly used concept as art provokes vivid discussions among theoreticians who cannot agree on a single

understanding of it (O'Reilly and Kubacki, 2009). It is beyond the scope of this book to engage in this kind of discussion, and therefore our assumption is that all musicians are artists, and all music is an art form. The *Oxford English Dictionary's* (2012) definition of a musician seems somewhat narrow to adequately capture all types of music-making activities mentioned earlier, as it refers to 'a person who plays a musical instrument, especially as a profession, or is musically talented'. If one takes a closer look at the definition of an artist proposed by UNESCO's International Art Association, and considers music as an organized use of sound and silence, it is possible to obtain an understanding of who a musician is and what they do (Burgoyne, 1990: 29):

- ▷ 'any person who creates, or gives creative expression to, or re-creates works of art' – to be a musician one needs to create using sound and silence;
- ▷ 'who considers his/her artistic creation to be an essential part of his/her life' – to be a musician one needs to consider music an essential part of their life;
- ▷ 'who contributes to the development of art culture' – to be a musician one needs to be actively engaged in the musical life of society, the music industry, and art culture;
- ▷ 'and who asks to be recognised as an artist, whether he/she is bound by any relations of employment or association' – to be a musician one needs to represent oneself as a musician.

Musicians are also both producers and consumers of their work; they are created through a continuous process of production and consumption of art. Using their creative artistic labour, artistic codes, their life experience and social context they infuse their music with meaning, contributing to the discourse of art which in turn reciprocates by providing their own lives with a sense of artistic identity and purpose (Meamber, 2000). Musicians can be products of a very strong artistic culture, as in the case of classical musicians, or products of the manufactured pop industry. Musicians can be shrewd commentators on the social world and harsh critics of the market, yet their engagement with it creates many opportunities to articulate their views. Many