Chapter 2
‘Losing Work, Losing Purpose’: Representations of Musicians’ Mental Health in the Time of COVID-19

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Abstract Driven by a growing academic and professional interest in the subject over recent years, discussions concerning the mental health and emotional wellbeing of musicians have been prevalent in popular media over the course of the coronavirus pandemic. Much of the recent research into how musicians have coped emotionally during COVID-19 has been driven by the professional and charitable sectors. This chapter—building on work by Brunt and Nelligan (Media International Australia 178:42-46, 2021)—draws on media representations of the mental health of musicians based in the United Kingdom over the first year of the pandemic between March 2020 and March 2021, examining key themes from newspaper articles/websites, online web seminars, musicians’ own blogs and social media. It suggests that musicians’ mental health challenges were broadly presented in two key ways: (1) employment-related anxieties concerning loss of income, how their work was being treated vis-à-vis self-employed income support and fears about their futures and (2) status-based existential anxiety relating to a loss of meaning in their lives. This duality has been encapsulated as losing work and losing purpose (Littlewood, HuffPost UK, 2020). The chapter concludes by interrogating what these anxieties tell us about how musicians and musical work are seen and understood.

2.1 Introduction

The impacts of the global coronavirus pandemic have been, are and will continue to be profound and long-lasting. However one chooses to try to quantify these impacts, the numbers will be simultaneously both overwhelming and necessarily incomplete. Behind the dizzying figures quoted in daily news bulletins of millions of deaths or billions of pounds in lost national income are, of course, human stories and lives.

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Following the outbreak of COVID-19, many of these stories were framed by the differing experiences of various groups in society. In the United Kingdom, for example, this was seen in discussions around the impact of the pandemic on working mothers (Fulweiler et al., 2021) or parents of young children now having to cope with the challenges of home schooling (Aznar et al., 2021), in public articulations (and venerations) about who was considered a ‘key worker’ (De Camargo & Whiley, 2020) or in the ‘Clap for Carers’ campaign where citizens would stand on their doorsteps every Thursday evening to applaud the efforts of healthcare professionals (Manthorpe et al., 2021).

These examples represent the articulation of debates about not only who was impacted by COVID-19 but in what ways they were impacted. Much of this discussion was framed in terms of privilege and the nature of the impact, for example, those who were able to follow ‘work-from-home’ orders more easily (and were therefore less at risk) compared to those who worked in sectors which necessitated face-to-face contact (ONS, 2020). What these debates highlighted was that, whilst COVID-19 impacted everyone in some respects via nationally imposed lockdown measures, the impacts were experienced differently and in different ways by different people and groups in society.

Alongside considerations of the impact of the virus on physical health—which is both entirely obvious (death, in its worst case) and worryingly misunderstood (as seen in uncertainty around the treatment of what has come to be called ‘long COVID’; Lancet, 2020)—the impact the virus has had (and continues to have) on mental health has been of increasing academic interest (Cullen et al., 2020; Kumar & Nayar, 2021; Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). Again, the nature and experience of the impact of the pandemic on mental health has often been framed with reference to groups of people and/or sectors of employment and the particular COVID-related stressors which might engender emotional distress in those groups. Examples have included stress amongst healthcare workers trying to cope with increased patient numbers (Greenberg, 2020; Usher et al., 2020), loneliness and fear amongst those in care homes unable to see their loved ones (Velayudhan et al., 2020) or anxiety amongst young people following school closures and exam cancellations (McCluskey et al., 2021). The particular group of interest in this chapter are musicians, and the focus is on the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of musicians and how these emotional outcomes have been represented in the media.

### 2.1.1 Musicians and Mental Health

Better understanding the mental health of musicians has been a growing area of academic enquiry over the previous decade. An emerging body of evidence suggests that musicians experience higher levels of mental ill health than other occupational groups (Detari et al., 2020; Gross & Musgrave, 2016, 2017, 2020; Loveday et al., 2022; Middlestadt & Fishbein, 1988; Vaag et al., 2016; Wills & Cooper, 1987) and may even have lower life expectancy (Bellis et al., 2012; Kenny & Asher, 2016). A
range of factors related to the psychosocial working conditions of musicians have been cited as potential sources of emotional distress (Musgrave, 2022) including financial precarity (Parker, 2015; Berg, 2018), performance anxiety (Kenny et al., 2004; Kenny, 2011; van Kemenade et al., 1995), anti-social working hours (Dobson, 2011), the prevalence of alcohol or substance use (Forsyth et al., 2016), high levels of pressure to succeed (Shorter et al., 2018), the negative impact of musical work on family life (Vaag et al., 2014), missing loved ones whilst touring (Kenny & Ackermann, 2008; Kenny et al., 2012) and the particular challenges and stressors faced by female musicians (Conor et al., 2015; Gross & Musgrave, 2020). Early evidence suggests that many of these emotional stressors were exacerbated by the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent disruption caused to this occupational group.

Whilst some scholarship has pointed towards the capacity of musicians to respond to the challenges of lockdown, for example, by embracing new technologies to facilitate songwriting (Cai et al., 2021) or via new methods of performance such as livestreaming (Rendell, 2020), other studies highlight the challenging nature of this period. Academic evidence is only just emerging, but challenges have included financial distress and concerns around the future viability of their profession amongst orchestral musicians (Cohen & Ginsborg, 2021), and Spiro et al. (2021) reported an 85% increase in levels of anxiety amongst more broadly defined arts professionals (including musicians) following the initial lockdown in the United Kingdom. Early in 2021, the charity Help Musicians released findings from a self-reported survey of 700 musicians which suggested that 87% felt their mental health had deteriorated over the course of the pandemic (Moore, 2021). This chapter will examine how these mental health challenges were represented in the popular media over the course of the first year of the COVID-19 outbreak to try to better understand what these representations tell us both about the mental health of musicians and also about the nature (and potential future) of contemporary musicianship in the United Kingdom.

Why is understanding the emotional experiences of this group of cultural workers vis-à-vis their mental health meaningful, and why is understanding their emotional responses to COVID-19 important? In this first instance, this chapter does not seek to advance an argument rooted in a kind of musical exceptionalism which sees the mental health challenges of musicians as worse or somehow more worthy of enquiry than other groups in society. Indeed, seeking to make a claim like this is both methodologically problematic in terms of comparing relative mental states and I suspect somewhat unpopular.

However, the ways in which musicians’ careers have been emotionally experienced and understood during the pandemic are worthy of enquiry for several reasons. In the first instance, the music industries—and particularly the live music industry—were one of the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic, with live music venues being amongst the first to close and the last to open. In this respect, the experiences of musicians can tell us a great deal about how workers emotionally respond to a sector in crisis. Secondly, recent decades have seen a positioning of knowledge and creativity as central to the United Kingdom’s post-industrial
In the years leading up to the outbreak of COVID-19, sectors such as the music industries were heralded as sources of both economic value and international soft power, and thus how workers in this sector of such apparent political, social and economic importance experience their work matters.

Finally, as per the insights of Attali (1977, 2014), and more recently the work of Noone (2017), the work musicians do and how they experience their work can often foreshadow changes in the wider (cultural) economy. That is, where musical work goes, other work often follows. Therefore, by understanding musicians’ experiences of their work, we might derive insights about the working conditions of other workers who share characteristics of their form of creative labour—entrepreneurial, creative, precarious, reliant on networks and the development of a brand, etc.—which are increasingly common to many workers in the United Kingdom and globally.

2.2 Method

This chapter draws inspiration from a commentary article by Brunt and Nelligan (2021) first published in August 2020 during what was, at that time, the summer in the United Kingdom before the second wave of the virus returned. This short but insightful paper offered one of the first glimpses into the experiences of musicians during the coronavirus pandemic by examining the ways in which Australian musicians’ mental health had been reported and represented by various forms of media in the early months of the outbreak. Their work articulated the emergence of a series of prevailing narratives around loss, forms of support, the ‘new normal’ and life after COVID-19.

Building on their conceptual and methodological architecture, and with the benefit of time having elapsed, this chapter will explore the media narratives surrounding the mental health of musicians in the United Kingdom over the first year of the pandemic—from March 2020, when the first lockdown was announced, to March 2021. Data were gleaned from a variety of media sources including newspaper articles and websites, online web seminars, musicians’ own blogs and social media. These were analysed using a grounded theory approach of constant comparative analysis to identify shared incidences in the media reports, which were then coded to reveal the emergent themes. The reports analysed were from UK media on the experiences of UK-based musicians.

This chapter will outline the two prevailing narratives, both of which tell us a great deal about the experiences of being a musician in the United Kingdom, as well as encourage us to ask challenging questions about the future of professional musicianship. Musicians’ mental health challenges were broadly presented in two ways: (1) employment-related anxieties concerning loss of income, how their work was being treated vis-à-vis self-employed income support and fears about their futures. These concerns speak to the uneasy co-existence between musicians in the
United Kingdom and the government, whereby forms of support remain a topic of contention. In this respect, revealing the ways in which musicians’ anxieties were presented during this time helps us to better understand the nature of this ongoing debate around state support for the arts, as well as highlight an ongoing debate around sources of musical income and the viability of music as a career. The second theme identified was (2) status-based existential anxiety relating to a loss of meaning in musicians’ lives. These concerns highlight the close relationship between musical work and identity, the role that belief plays in the careers of musicians and the importance of understanding how musicians construct their identities. This duality in musicians’ representations was perhaps best encapsulated in an article by classical musician Amy Littlewood (2020) for the publication *HuffPost UK*, in which she described her experiences during the pandemic as ‘losing work and [losing] purpose’. Each of these narratives will be explored below.

### 2.3 Losing Work, Losing Purpose

#### 2.3.1 Losing Work: Employment Anxieties

**2.3.1.1 Live Music and Musicians’ Earnings**

Perhaps the clearest way that the anxieties and emotional distress of musicians were represented during this period relates to employment-based anxieties, that is, conceptualising music as work and the financial impact of COVID-19 on this occupational group. One of the most obvious financial impacts on musicians over the first year of the pandemic came from the near complete closure of the live music and events industries. Nightclubs, festivals, arenas, pubs, concert halls, theatres and almost all venues where large numbers of people gathered to hear music being played or performed, and where social distancing measures necessitated by the government could not be ensured or maintained, were closed. Indeed, even as cases of COVID-19 fell and sectors of the economy began to re-open (and then subsequently close again as cases rose) throughout 2020 and into 2021, the live music sector faced a series of profound challenges, from trying to hold socially distanced shows, which were described in the press at the time as ‘absolutely awful’ and ‘a nightmare’ (Bulut, 2020), to struggles with insurance (IQ, 2020).

The impact of this on the careers of musicians as well as on their mental health was enormous. Media representations highlighted that this shutdown triggered feelings of fear and uncertainty for musicians, with one article featuring musicians who suggested it was ‘really, really scary. For a minute, we thought it was game over’ (Halls, 2020), singer-songwriter Eliza Shaddad suggesting she was, at times, ‘inconsolable’ (Hitchcock, 2020), and Olly Alexander (who performs as Years & Years) reporting in *The Guardian* that the loss of musical work meant that ‘it all just kind of crumbled and fell on top of me’ (Bakare, 2020).
It is important to contextualise the economic role of live music (or at least the perceived economic role of live music) in the careers of contemporary musicians. It is well understood that musical ‘work’ encompasses a great deal more than playing music (Gross & Musgrave, 2020, p. 42). Indeed, much of the literature around creative labour amongst musicians in the field of popular music has sought to make sense of contemporary musicianship using the idea of ‘multiple job holding’ (Menger, 1999) as a method of strategic risk management in an environment of uncertainty (Krueger, 2019). Musicians, conceptualised in this approach as cultural or creative entrepreneurs (Dumbreck & McPherson, 2015), are increasingly required to engage in the creation and exploitation of multiple forms of content and revenue generation as part of their role as musicians. This might include sharing media online via a cultivated social media platform (and if a following is large enough, being paid for posts), running a record label, writing songs for other musicians and/or generating income via streaming. Indeed, streaming income has become a contentious issue in recent music industry scholarship and in the wider music industries vis-à-vis its effectiveness at generating income for artists (Hesmondhalgh, 2020, 2021; Hesmondhalgh et al., 2021).

However, live music as a primary (even principal) method of income generation has gained increased prominence in the minds of musicians and within music industry economics (Naveed et al., 2017). The economic logic went that in a post-digital creative landscape where content—i.e. music as digital content—could be duplicated and replicated at zero marginal cost, the ability to create scarcity and thus derive economic value from music itself (and its associated digital content) had become increasingly squeezed for all but the most famous musicians. Therefore, against this backdrop, live music—as a non-duplicable, experience-based form of cultural practice—acted as a bulwark against digitalisation and thus something that could be sold, and indeed sold profitably. In other words, playing live was understood by many as the basis of musicians’ economic lives, a phenomenon which Holt (2010, p. 243) described as ‘the new economic centrality of live music’.

Certainly, live music is not just an economic phenomenon. It is also a social and cultural experience which produces social and cultural value (van der Hoeven & Hitters, 2019) from which musicians derive more than financial reward. Whilst I will explore these intangible and symbolic forms of ‘profit’ in Sect. 2.3.2, for the purposes of the analysis in this section, the economic role of live music in the careers of many musicians cannot be understated. Whilst it is worth interrogating the validity of the idea that live music can be, and is, a financial panacea for musicians engaged in precarious artistic work (which of course for many musicians it is certainly not; Williams, 2020), live music has nonetheless become a central characteristic of the economic lives of many musicians. Following the discussed closure of live music venues, a survey by Help Musicians in 2020 suggested that 96% of respondents had lost the majority of their income as a result of COVID-19, and 55% of their respondents were currently earning no money at all from music (Music Ally, 2020). A similar report from UK Music (2020a, p. 7) suggested that live music revenues would fall by 85% in 2020, translating into a two-thirds loss in musicians’ income. One of the narratives that emerged in media representations of musicians
publicised alongside these early studies concerned anxiety and uncertainty emanating from the ways in which this loss of income translated into other feelings of loss: a loss of (perceived) control, a loss of confidence, a loss of a social group and so on. In this context, Littlewood (2020) suggested, ‘a fear of the unknown can be a major trigger of anxiety and stress’. Musicians described being ‘heartbroken’ (Macdonald, 2020) as their income fell ‘immediately and brutally’ (Ralston, 2020) in a situation described by one musician as ‘totally catastrophic financially, emotionally, socially and creatively. Everything I’ve worked so hard to achieve has just crashed to the floor’ (Whitby, 2020).

2.3.1.2 Musicians, Money and the Government: Are We Viable?

The loss of earnings from live music highlights one of the other central features of musicians’ anxieties during this period, namely, that, if one of their key forms of income has been removed as a result of government policy, to which forms of government support might they (or should they) be entitled? The United Kingdom enacted one of the most comprehensive systems of state support of all OECD countries over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic known as the ‘Furlough Scheme’ or ‘Job Retention Scheme’, whereby the state effectively stepped in to pay a percentage of the average salary of workers whilst their employers were, at least in theory, temporarily unable to pay them. For employees with demonstrable hours and salaries under the pay-as-you-earn system of taxation in the United Kingdom, this scheme was relatively straightforward to administer using taxation records available from the UK tax office (known as Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs).

However, almost as soon as the scheme was announced, concerns were raised around how this would be administered for self-employed workers, which includes most musicians (UK Music, 2020a, p. 7). The resulting manifestation was the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS), which was open to self-employed individuals or partnerships registered as trading in the two previous tax years, with profits of no more than £50,000. However, it quickly emerged that a large number of musicians (and other creative workers) were not eligible for support under this scheme for a variety of complex reasons (UK Music, 2020b). Indeed, data from the Musicians’ Union (2020a) suggested that as many as 45% of musicians did not qualify for any kind of support whatsoever under the SEISS and were therefore reliant on only basic forms of unemployment benefit (known as Universal Credit) or statutory sick pay if they were themselves unwell.

The resulting collision of the loss of income from live music and widespread ineligibility for government support engendered a squeeze on musicians’ earnings, which were already low. A report for the Intellectual Property Office by Hesmondhalgh et al. (2021, p. 7) suggested that, even before the pandemic,
more than a third of musicians (37%) reported earnings of £5,000 or less from music in 2019 and nearly half (47%) earned less than £10,000. 62% earned £20,000 or less from music in 2019... Median reported income for women in 2019 was £13,057, whereas for men it was £20,160.

For many musicians, the situation was represented as entirely intolerable, with many reporting difficulty coping. In 2021, Help Musicians presented findings from a survey which showed 70% of respondents feeling unable to cope financially (Bienstock, 2021) and some reporting feelings of having been ‘abandoned’ by the UK Government (Higgins, 2021). Musicians reported the challenges of having to ‘live life on a financial knife-edge’ (Macdonald, 2020), and classical musician Miriam Davis told Classic FM: ‘on top of the sadness and anxiety of the virus situation, every musician I know is now facing bankruptcy’ (Macdonald, 2020).

The response by the Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak to economic concerns and anxieties such as those discussed here, and the subsequent backlash to his response in much of the media, highlights the tense and uneasy relationship between creative workers and the state. In his Winter Economy Plan speech, delivered in the House of Commons on 24 September 2020, the Chancellor stated: ‘We need to create new opportunities and allow the economy to move forward and that means supporting people to be in viable jobs which provide genuine security’, adding that the first role of government interventions was to ‘support viable jobs’ (HM Treasury and Sunak, 2020, emphasis added). Many people working in the music industries were understandably upset at the implication that their work was not viable.

This upset turned to anger on social media when a government advert from 2019 resurfaced showing a picture of a ballerina tying her pointe shoes alongside text which read: ‘Fatima’s next job could be in cyber (she just doesn’t know it yet). Rethink. Reskill. Reboot’. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport was forced to distance itself from the advert and described it as ‘crass’ (Jordan, 2020). Many musicians responded with anger, with jazz saxophonist Binker Golding telling the Financial Times: ‘I’m angry... I cannot fathom the level of idiocy involved. It shows how much disrespect they have for the arts’ (Fildes, 2021). The #WeAreViable hashtag emerged on Twitter, which eventually grew into an organisation which sought to represent and work with, in their words, ‘ALL sides of the live entertainment industry’ (We Are Viable UK, 2021). Across social media and in the wider popular and music press, musicians expressed their fury, hurt and upset at the suggestion their profession was not economically viable, with some tweets from this period including: ‘Rishi Sunak can f*ck right off if he thinks I’m going to retrain’ (Hayhurst, 2020), and ‘Retrain my arse. Been training for this my whole life. #WeAreViable’ (Volpe, 2020).

However, this debate raises a fascinating question: Is musicianship, in fact, economically viable? As per the findings above, nearly half of musicians in the United Kingdom earn less than £10,000, a figure which has been relatively stable over the past decade (Musicians’ Union, 2012). Indeed, this suggests that, for many, music making is not economically viable. Indeed, more broadly, has musical work ever been economically viable? If we trace the ways in which musicians have...
historically earned money and survived, we can see that patronage either by the church, royal courts or the state was required to financially support musicians (Blanning, 2010).

In recent history in the United Kingdom, musical production has often relied on systems of state support to facilitate it in the absence of viability. Some of this support has been direct, such as the New Deal for Musicians scheme under New Labour in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Cloonan, 2002, 2003), whilst other forms have been more indirect, such as the notion that ‘the dole [a colloquial term for unemployment support] made Britain swing’ (O’Rorke, 1998) or the fact that council housing and state-funded youth clubs were central to the development of grime (Hancox, 2018). Certainly, there is a suggestion that streaming has increased the number of musicians for whom a career is economically viable, with 1723 artists in 2021 (solo musicians and groups) calculated to achieve the ‘one million UK streams per month . . . minimum threshold for making a sustainable living out of music’ (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2021, p. 8). Data such as this led Lee Parsons (CEO of Ditto Music and Opulous) to suggest in Music Business Worldwide in January 2021 that ‘there’s never been a better time to be a recording artist’ (Parsons, 2021). And yet we can see that, for many musicians, music alone does not provide a sufficient income for them to live, which when exacerbated during the pandemic necessitated increased reliance on forms of support including friends/family/parents (Barnes, 2021), direct or indirect state support, grants and bursaries (many of which provided a lifeline for musicians during the pandemic such as the Help Musicians Coronavirus Financial Hardship Fund) or complementary forms of employment such as teaching. The challenges faced by musicians during the COVID-19 crisis however lead one to wonder what the relationship with the state as a mechanism for financial support should be. In other words, how should we support musicians, if at all? That is, when we value music, should we be driven by financial metrics and the economic value of music or broader (but less tangible and harder to measure) concerns of music’s social, cultural, human, ritual and symbolic value? And, indeed, what would this look like in practice?

### 2.3.2 Losing Purpose: Status Anxieties

For many of the musicians seen in media representations over this period, the financial strain brought about by the loss of live music and difficulties in accessing state support produced fears and anxieties which were profound and existential, and often linked to a loss of identity and meaning in their lives. As Szostak and Sulkowski (2021) describe, this period triggered an ‘identity crisis’ amongst artists. It is worth pausing here to briefly reflect on this conceptualisation of COVID-19 as having triggered a ‘crisis’ amongst musicians, something which has recently been explored in the work of Ptatscheck (2021) and her study on the impact of the pandemic on electronic dance music musicians in Germany. Bringing together key contributions in the field such as the work of Simmich et al. (1999) and Dross (2001),
she draws on Cullberg’s (1978) definition of crisis as ‘a situation of a generally painful nature that suddenly arises due to a crisis occasion with subjective valence and that suddenly threatens psychological existence, social identity, and security’ (as quoted in Ptatscheck, 2021, p. 41). In doing so, she suggests that understanding how musicians define and understand their ‘social identity’ is key to understanding the ways in which they responded to the crises engendered by COVID-19. This section will draw on what we know as being central characteristics of a musician’s social identity.

In what form did we see musicians’ crises of social identity—what I have referred to herein as status anxieties around a loss of purpose—represented in the UK media during the first year of the pandemic? The first of these concerned the loss of the joy derived from the sociality of music, whether this was playing live or songwriting as a collective process. As suggested earlier, there is a social and ritual value to playing live, which musicians say brings them great joy, meaning and healing. This very practical loss of the physicality of being a musician led a Plymouth-based musician to report that ‘it’s hard mentally to feel like a musician anymore . . . I don’t feel like a musician when I’m not playing live’ (Green, 2021). Music as live performance and the shared ritual of music being produced socially, whether writing songs at home in a bedroom or large-scale group recordings in expensive studios, are well known as central sources of joy in musicians’ lives and are often spoken about as the moments of deep and profound connectivity between music makers and their audiences (Gross & Musgrave, 2020, p. 71). The removal of this musical sociality represented a significant absence in the working lives of musicians, with classical musicians in the summer of 2020 suggesting ‘we are numb to the possibility of not having the beauty of sound and of expression’ (Roberts, 2020) and singer Emily Barker saying it left her ‘feeling purposeless’ (Fildes, 2021). Indeed, scientific evidence has pointed towards the phenomenon of ‘social flow’ (Keeler et al., 2015) whereby group bonding via collective singing has been seen to reduce stress and arousal measured in levels of plasma oxytocin and the adrenocorticotropic hormone.

Recent work by Daffern et al. (2021) on the experiences of group singers in choirs moving their work online during COVID-19 suggested that the online space struggled to meaningfully replicate the benefits—what they described as the ‘magic’—of in-person music making. Indeed, as suggested, we saw many musicians over the first year of COVID-19 respond innovatively by performing live online or conducting songwriting sessions over Zoom, with findings from Australia, for example, suggesting these transitions online had only a limited impact on musicians’ activities (Quader, 2021). However, media reports from this period suggested that, for many musicians, the experience was one of loss. The musician Roisin Murphy (from the duo Moloko) in an interview with Sky News at the time powerfully said that the loss of musical livelihoods for musicians meant ‘you might as well kill a part of them’ (Hitchcock, 2020). A Brighton-based DJ and producer told the organisation Youth Music that he experienced what he called ‘a musical depression where I really didn’t see the point in making anything’ (Robinson, 2020).

However, perhaps even more powerful were the anxieties experienced by musicians over this period concerning their fears that they might not be able to be
musicians anymore. Much of this related to the practical economic realities of undertaking a form of creative work which was already highly financially precarious, the vulnerability of which was painfully exacerbated following the effective closure of the live music space. The scale of the problem certainly varied depending on the survey, but figures from the Musicians’ Union (2020b) COVID-19 Impact Poll found that 34% of musicians were considering leaving the industry, a figure which was as high as 64% in a survey of 568 musicians by the organisation Encore Musicians (Venell, 2021). Building on these sets of data, Help Musicians reported in a survey of their members that 66% felt that they had ‘no purpose’ anymore (Hildebrandt, 2021).

This speaks to perhaps the most central social identity musicians have: their identity as musicians. Being a musician is understood to be one of the core ways in which musicians understand their identity (Ascenso et al., 2016; Beech et al., 2016), and in this sense they very much embody their labour; their musical practice defines their human identity. As King and Pierce (2019) found in their study of rock musicians and identity: ‘music is life’. In this context, the concept of a sense of self emerges as a helpful one to make sense of these experiences of loss amongst musicians over this period. Oyserman and James (2011, p. 117) describe the concept of a sense of self in their work on possible identities as a ‘mental concept, working theory about oneself, stored in memory and amended with use. It is a working theory about who one is, was and will become’. A musicians’ sense of self is tied to their musical identity. There is then, for musicians, a clear link between work, identity and meaning, and a fracture or breakdown in this link will inevitably lead to challenging feelings and the triggering of emotional stressors around self-worth. In other words, if I cannot be a musician anymore, then what will I be? Indeed, who am I? What am I?

The identity a musician forms as a musician, which is forged over years and even decades of emotional and financial investment, and the relationship they have with music making and the (imagined) role it plays in their life and future, is not one they can let go of easily. Indeed, this attachment to creative work has been conceptualised as sharing certain similarities with passionate forms of romantic attachment (McRobbie, 2016). In this context, Oyserman and James (2011, p. 125) go on to note that ‘once a possible identity has been formed . . . it is only let go of with great reluctance’. Their work, and that of others on the psychology of identity, can help us better understand why this crisis was experienced as so emotionally distressing for some musicians by acting as a conceptual bridge between the economics of musicianship during COVID-19 and the ways in which this was seen to impact musicians psychologically.

If being a musician is central to a musicians’ sense of self, then imagining a ‘possible self’ where one is no longer a musician is necessarily painful. Musical careers are, in many respects, reliant on the suspension of disbelief, the harnessing of a quasi-religious faith in ones’ own abilities to realise one of the most intangible human creative forces to produce a few minutes of magic. It is, in many respects, ironic that a workforce that so often uses a piece of musical computer software
named Logic performs work that often seems to defy logic. Therefore, musicians are encouraged to believe in themselves, and belief is central to musicianship.

But what happens when economic reality shatters psychological belief? Being concerned that one might no longer be able to be a musician necessitates the construction and imagining of an undesired future self (that of a nonmusician), and studies have suggested that a discrepancy between an individuals’ current self (in this case, a musician) and an undesired or feared future self (a nonmusician) can impact wellbeing negatively (Carver et al., 1999; Ogilvie, 1987; Phillips et al., 2007). In other words: ‘feeling too close to an undesired possible identity is worse for wellbeing than feeling far from a desired possible identity’ (Oyserman & James, 2011, p. 140). Simply put, imagining life as a nonmusician—and giving up an identity as a musician—can be destabilising and upsetting, and the representations of the struggles of musicians over this period suggest that COVID-19 ultimately forced many of them to engage in this upsetting act of imagining.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to delineate the prevailing media narratives around musicians’ mental health challenges over the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United Kingdom. Certainly, much of the media coverage during this period reported the surveys conducted by organisations such as Help Musicians, UK Music and others, which rapidly and powerfully sought to capture this mood and communicate their findings. The findings presented here have been taken from a smaller body of UK-based press reports which featured the voices of UK musicians themselves and might be thought of as adding a new or extra dimension to these existing reports.

It has been suggested herein that the challenges of musicians were principally related to employment challenges and identity challenges, captured by Littlewood (2020) in her article for the *HuffPost* as a loss of work and a loss of purpose. This duality was also wonderfully captured in a piece for *Sky News* during this period as: ‘Shattered livelihoods ... [and] shattered dreams’ (Hitchcock, 2020), and by Australian flautist Ana de la Vega as it being a period of time defined by ‘nothing financially and nothing for the soul’ (Macdonald, 2020).

It is worth highlighting that the pieces analysed for this chapter did not only show musicians’ mental health as being negatively impacted by the pandemic. Indeed, a number of pieces included musicians reflecting on the ways in which the year in question had been helpful and had a number of unexpected benefits. Examples of this included being free from ‘being tired all the time’ or relishing the time ‘to breathe, to slow down’ (Halls, 2020). Others spoke of the wonderful sense of community which developed amongst musicians as they collaborated and helped each other or described the year as a ‘wake-up call ... to find this balance’ (Barnes, 2021). Indeed, academic work by Szostak and Sulkowski (2021) drew on the artistry-creativity-entrepreneurship matrix in order to highlight entrepreneurial responses to the crisis by musicians, a concept reflected in the popular music
press, with organisations such as MIDiA reporting that ‘there have been signs of resilience and creativity in the face of adversity’ (Mulligan, 2020). Many musicians responded to the first year of COVID-19 in innovative ways and reports featured them seeing the lockdown as a time of great opportunity, and it is important to acknowledge this balance. However, the prevailing narratives were the more negative impacts outlined in this chapter.

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