

The dark side of optimism: Musical dreams, belief, and gambling

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Abstract

Being a career musician is typified by high risk. Despite low earnings, many musicians pursue their careers driven by self-belief, high expectations, and optimism. However, failure to obtain the success many optimistically aspire to has been seen to pose psychosocial risks relating to mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression. While studies have shown dispositional optimism as having many health-related benefits, it has also been conceptualized negatively in encouraging a tendency toward loss-making in one key area: gambling. In this article, we develop the argument that the risks of professional music-making are analogous to gambling, and the optimism displayed by many aspiring career musicians may therefore represent a form of what Berlant calls *cruel optimism*, with negative effects on mental health and wellbeing. In doing so, we draw on Berlant's theoretical position to examine the potentially harmful intersections between risk-taking behaviors and creative desire. Drawing also on our clinical experience, we consider when and how musicians who are emotionally struggling with their work might find it advantageous to reorient their careers, or even withdraw from the labor market altogether, to support their health and wellbeing, and the challenges around the loss of identity these can present.

Keywords

musicians, wellbeing, mental health, risk, costly persistence, cruel optimism

“You have to eat the dream.
You have to sleep the dream.
You have to dream the dream.
You have to see it when nobody else sees it.
You have to feel it when it's not tangible.
You have to believe it when you cannot see it.
You've got to be possessed by the dream”

—Meek Mill, 2017)

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In this article, we reflect upon empirically demonstrable poor mental health and negative well-being among some musicians. These are attributed in many studies to the psychosocial features of musicians' working lives (see Musgrave, 2023a, pp. 284–286 for a review). Our focus is on those for whom music-making is more than recreation, leisure, or a hobby but represents instead a desired career orientation. We are mostly concerned with musicians working in contemporary genres of popular music such as pop, rock, dance/EDM, hip hop, and others for whom recognition is derived from recording and sharing music across a variety of formats simultaneously, as opposed to one-time performances such as recitals given by a solo violinist, for example.

Popular music careers are typically associated with the concept of risk. For example, they are commonly connected with the risky use of substances such as drugs and alcohol, and occasionally linked to tragic early death (Holm-Hadulla & Bertolino, 2013; Kenny & Asher, 2016; K. E. Miller & Quigley, 2011). However, there is another—perhaps more prosaic—labor-market risk associated with music-making as a career. That is, the decision to pursue a musical career is economically risky given poor financial outcomes (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2022) and the prevalence of what Mulligan (2014) refers to as a *superstar music economy* with a low probability of career sustainability. This has led Moxey and Daniel (2023) to characterize musical careers as taking place within what they call an “unpropitious creative field, [defined as] a field in which a significant number of expert practitioners cannot establish a viable and sustainable career, despite sustained and skilful efforts to do so” (pp. 242–243). These uncertain career outcomes and connected subjective perceptions of failure have been demonstrated to be among the most important explanatory factors for another kind of risk or by-product of careers in music: high levels of clinical anxiety and depression (Loveday et al., 2023). In other words, evidence points to elevated levels of mental ill-health among musicians working in a range of genres (Détari et al., 2020; Gross & Musgrave, 2016, 2017, 2020; Kegelaers et al., 2022; Vaag et al., 2014, 2016a), and these high incidences relative to the general population might be explained, at least in part, by the risks associated with the various uncertainties that are connected with these poor labor market outcomes. Thus economic, market-based risks can have negative psychological consequences.

However, in the face of these economic risks and their concomitant psychological risks, unquantifiable numbers of young people dream of careers in which they can pursue their creative work as professional musicians. They do this in a context where they are increasingly supported by a growing tertiary educational infrastructure in the United Kingdom seeking to prepare musicians for careers in music (T. Bennett, 2015; Born & Devine, 2015). Driven and propelled by their love for music, their dreams, and their belief in themselves and their artistic abilities, young people are seemingly undeterred by the risks. As Menger (1999) noted, “[t]he attractiveness of artistic occupations is high but has to be balanced against the risk of failure” (p. 541). In this article, we view the potential causes of mental health challenges experienced by a specific group of creative artists through a psychosocial lens. We examine the implications for some musicians of pursuing their career dreams when confronted with the possibility of failure in the face of high risk, and the emotional losses and poor wellbeing outcomes this can engender. We explore these implications in three parts. We begin by highlighting three features of careers in music: first, the high-risk nature of the labor market; second, the high levels of optimism and self-belief often exhibited by musicians; and third, the contribution of failure to obtain the success one dreams of to poor mental health. In the second part of the article, we turn to the work of Gibson and Sanbonmatsu (2004) and evaluate the extent to which it is reasonable to conceptualize the risks inherent in the pursuit of a musical career as being akin to gambling, and, if so, whether gambling is relatively unusual in that optimism represents a

negative disposition, given the tendency to chase a loss. We then draw on the concept of *cruel optimism* (Berlant, 2006, 2010, 2011) to ask whether the optimism required to pursue a musical career—the belief in the quality of one’s own musical creations that drives musicians forward to produce music and be heard by audiences—might, in itself, be a source of suffering, in that it can keep musicians tethered to careers that might be harming them and others around them.

In the final part of the article, we draw on our combined experience as creative industries educators and a clinician to explore the potential usefulness of our argument for both clinicians/therapists/counselors and musicians themselves. We hope our analysis will facilitate meaningful conversations around approaches to musicianship and musical careers in order that musicians who are experiencing emotional stress might consider techniques for re-orienting their approach to their musical careers. They might do this by seeking alternative forms of work (musical or otherwise), or even by ceasing to view music-making as a possible source of income so that they can preserve or re-engage with the ways in which practicing and playing music is a positive force in their lives. We also reflect on why such re-orientations can be painful for musicians, given that they can entail a loss of identity connected with their musicianship. We hope our discussion of these issues might be used as a springboard for musicians who are suffering and the clinicians who are working with them, enabling them to consider the sources of pain in musicians’ lives, and how best to minimize it.

Musicians: Belief and identity

Aspiration and risk

Careers in music are understood to be risky in various ways. Most obviously, perhaps, an individual or group may write, record, and release a song, but the extent to which it is eventually enjoyed by audiences and successful in terms of metrics such as chart success, high streaming rates, or critical acclaim in the form of what Bourdieu (1993) calls *cultural consecration* is reliant on marketplace risks and uncertainties rooted in subjectivities vis-à-vis how a song will be received. Caves (2003) characterizes this as the nobody-knows principle or “the fundamental uncertainty that faces the producer of a creative good” (p. 74). In other words, songs are products that their producers cannot be sure audiences will actually like.

However, careers in music are also risky from the labor-market outcomes perspective. Brook et al. (2020) define cultural work such as music-making as “an exemplar of [financial] precariousness” (p. 145). In 2014, it was reported that, globally, 77% of income from recorded music derived from the earnings of 1% of musicians, an increase from 71% at the start of the century (Mulligan, 2014). More recently, work by Hesmondhalgh et al. (2022) on music makers in the United Kingdom suggested that “[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” (p. 18). Indeed, for Bourdieu (1993), creative work such as making a career as a musician should be understood as the “propensity to move towards the economically most risky positions, and above all the capacity to persist in them . . . even when they secure no short-term economic profit” (p. 67). This suggests that very few musicians who pursue music as their career will ever earn a sustainable living from their art. This feature of the labor market is true of many similar high-risk, high-reward industries with highly uncertain career outcomes, for example, professional football (Bourke, 2003; O’Donoghue, 1999) and even academia, given the increasing numbers of PhDs awarded annually alongside scant opportunities for employment as a researcher, lecturer, or professor (Kim et al., 2018).

Despite these risks, many people seek careers in music. A wide range of factors influence their decision to do so, including their “talent, motivation, parental encouragement, social conditions, resource availability, peer group, personality type” (Musgrave, 2023a, p. 286), and the availability of networks and connections (Längler et al., 2018). However, a critical psychological factor in the emergence of the aspiration to pursue a musical career and hope of eventual success is that of self-belief. That is, there is a low likelihood of success in this particular labor market, yet musicians have to be optimistic about their own chances and believe in themselves. The findings of empirical studies have suggested that high levels of self-belief in the form of musical self-concept are connected with subsequent high levels of musical attainment and proficiency (Asmus & Harrison, 1990) and have highlighted the central role of self-belief in the emergence of musical aspiration, expertise, and eventual career development (Dumbreck & McPherson, 2016; Hallam, 2017; Hallam et al., 2016; MacNamara et al., 2006). This self-belief needs to be sustained over extended periods of time and in the face of potential setbacks such as negative feedback (Creech et al., 2008). A central and related element required by musicians is that of self-efficacy, initially defined by Bandura (1997) as belief “in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3), and more recently as the individual’s faith and perceived feeling of agency in their own abilities and competence (Lewis et al., 2022; McPherson & McCormick, 2006); Schwarzer and Luszczynska (2022) define this simply as “optimistic self-belief” (p. 207). Drawing on the work of Pitts et al. (2000), Hallam et al. (2016) note that “[musicians] who give up playing tend to have lower expectations of success” (p. 530). Being a musician, then, requires optimism, which is bound up with musicians’ dreams and aspirations, encapsulated in the quotation from the rapper Meek Mill used as an epigraph to this article.

Failure and loss

While musicians may be optimistic when they hope for success, some researchers see *productive failure* (Thorley, 2018) as potentially beneficial for recording artists and producers, as it can foster self-reflection and the development of critical thinking. Likewise, uncertainty has been conceptualized as a creative asset, a feature of musicians’ work to be harnessed to spur artistic output (Ibert et al., 2018). Thus not only are musicians highly likely to fail but failure can actually be seen as evidence of progression, and even embraced in what Newsinger and Serafini (2019) call *romantic resilience* or the artist’s commitment to, and embracing of, suffering and setbacks in the pursuit of their creative career. In this sense, failure might actually contribute to the self-efficacy necessary for persistence as well as the rejection of risk. Musicians must therefore both reject the probability of marketplace uncertainty and embrace failure, placing their faith and trust in themselves and their abilities, while aiming high. Being a career musician is thus representative and emblematic of the kind of dream-based work conceptualized by Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) as *hope labor*, or by B. E. Duffy (2016) in her gender-focused reframing of this as *aspirational labor*.

However, the discrepancy between the high numbers of those aspiring to musical careers and the low probability of success (Krueger, 2019) means that many musicians are unlikely to realize the optimistic goals and ambitions they may once have set for themselves, with direct consequences for their health and wellbeing. Like others with unrealised dreams, such musicians often experience profound feelings of loss and inadequacy. As Nytech (2018) notes, “failure in music would represent a catastrophic failure to realize our deepest, most personal dreams and aspirations” (p. 4). Work by Loveday et al. (2023) suggests that musicians’ subjective definitions of failure are among the strongest determinants of mental health outcomes, such that

those who saw themselves as failures had worse mental health, as measured on the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale and World Health Organization Wellbeing Index, than those who saw themselves as successful, whether they were carving out long careers playing to small audiences but supporting their families, or performing to millions of fans on world tours. Musicians often continue to follow their dreams, striving for markers of success, driven by the one-big-hit logic (Neff et al., 2005), because they “are only ever three minutes of magic away from their life being changed” (Gross & Musgrave, 2020, p. 113), the 3 minutes representing the typical length of the one song that connects with an audience, goes viral online, or is streamed millions of times. For this reason, they continue to pursue their musical careers, even when both economic and affective outcomes appear unfavorable and remain optimistic.

Musical aspiration and career development are thus premised on ignoring risk, or, at the very least, managing it effectively (Menger, 2006), and harnessing faith; to quote Meek Mill (2017) again, musicians need to “dream the dream . . . see it when nobody else sees it . . . feel it when it’s not tangible.” Dobrow (2012) and Dobrow Riza and Heller (2015) have suggested that careers in music are rooted in the suspension of disbelief and a commitment to artistry and musicality. Artists more broadly have been characterized as having “a chronic underestimation of the risk involved and the chances of success” (Lingo & Tepper, 2013, p. 338), a point also made by Abbing (2002). Put simply, individuals must believe in themselves, have high hopes, and remain optimistic, if they are to make successful careers as musicians. The evidence suggests that the odds against success are overwhelming and that failure can have profoundly negative effects on health and wellbeing. This leads us to ask the question as to whether musicians’ optimism may be not only misplaced, but also potentially harmful.

Optimism and gambling

Is being a career musician a gamble?

The kind of optimism required by musicians can be seen as a source of significant psychological strength with many benefits. Carver et al. (2010) argue that a positive future orientation concerning expectations can lead to improvements in subjective wellbeing and mental health outcomes; resilience and persistence; coping strategies; adjustment to challenges over the life course; health-promoting behaviors; recovery from illness; and physical health and other biological outcomes including lower stress levels and mortality. The findings of several empirical studies suggest that optimism and a dispositional orientation toward perseverance in the face of hardship (cf. Creech et al., 2008) are positive traits not least in relation to mental health and wellbeing.

The fact that musicians must be optimistic, that optimism improves mental health and wellbeing, and that musicians as a population are thought by some to suffer from poor mental health and wellbeing is an interesting paradox. This leads us to consider, therefore, whether optimism can be counter-productive. Carver et al. (2010) suggest a specific example of optimistic persistence with high expectations for the future representing a negative trait, one that has been considered in work by Gibson and Sanbonmatsu (2004) as a “liability” (p. 157): gambling.¹ Part of what leads to positive outcomes for optimists is their belief that stressful events are controllable, resulting in solution-focused behaviors (Carver et al., 1989; Scheier et al., 1986). However, the outcomes of gambling cannot generally be controlled, so the gambler’s optimistic belief that they can exert control in such a high-risk environment is maladaptive. What makes gambling a problematic rather than a recreational activity is the gambler’s expectation that they will win, even when faced by overwhelming odds (Walker, 1992).

Given the evidence, we would argue that building a career as a musician is analogous to gambling because they both involve risk and risk-taking. As gambling offers “bleak odds” (Gibson & Sanbonmatsu, 2004, p. 150), so does the superstar economy of careers in music. “[W]ithdrawal rather than persistence is more financially prudent” for gamblers (Gibson & Sanbonmatsu, 2004, p. 151) and career musicians alike, going by the findings of research on musicians’ earnings (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2022). Finally, optimistic gamblers are more likely to “perceive losses as near wins” (Gibson & Sanbonmatsu, 2004, p. 151), mirroring the notion of musicians’ productive failure (Thorley, 2018). It is important to note that of course some gamblers do win—there are lottery winners around the world every week—and some musicians do write and record songs that go on to be global hits. In many respects, the odds of winning being so low is part of what makes the winning so attractive.

Other authors have also drawn similar parallels between building a career in music and gambling. In relation to the marketing of music by record labels and the quest for success in popular music, Hennion (1983) suggests that “the notion of a gamble is a fundamental one” (p. 190). In a list of jobs they describe as unusual and typically high-status careers (e.g., being a footballer, actor, racing driver, or film director), Hemsley-Brown and Foskett (1999) included careers in the performing arts such as music as “lottery jobs” (p. 427). Writing about the marketing of hip hop, the rapper Jay-Z (2010) notes that “[r]appers can be like gambling addicts who see a potential bet everywhere they look” (p. 70). Choosing a career in music has been conceptualized as a calling, “akin to [being] a compulsive gambler in that it fosters tunnel vision and obliviousness to risky decisions” (Dobrow, 2012, p. 448). Some of the live-music concert promoters interviewed by Cloonan (2012) saw their job as a form of gambling too, and Janosov et al. (2020) have shown that luck and randomness are crucial to some forms of success in artistic careers, including those in music. Finally, Oliveira et al. (2023) use the gambling analogy of hot streaks in their analysis of successful periods in popular musicians’ careers.

Careers in music are not, of course, the only careers that have an affinity with gambling. “[T]he dedicated scientist is exactly like a pathological gambler” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 29), in relation not only to the uncertain outcomes of funding applications, for example, but also the scientific endeavor itself. Indeed, many other areas of life are often described as being a gamble, such as romantic love (D’Aoust, 2013; Howard, 1993), as illustrated in the song *Taking a Chance on Love* (Fitzgerald, 1940). Careers in music are not entirely reliant on chance, however, but also on complex webs of networks, opportunities, talent, specific skills, and luck (Gagné, 2017). They nevertheless share many of the characteristics of gambling.

Taking risks in the form of gambling is not necessarily unhealthy; as a leisure activity it has a social function. In her work on the everyday sociology of gambling among working-class women who play *The National Lottery* in the United Kingdom, Casey (2008) describes it as a form of escapism, fantasy, and friendships via lottery syndicates. Gambling as leisure has been the topic of several studies revealing the capacity of bingo, for example, not only to present risks but to strengthen social bonds in Australia (Maltzahn et al., 2019), the Pacific Islands (Cox et al., 2022), and the United Kingdom (Mann, 2003). If being a musician is seen as analogous to gambling, it is not necessarily pathological. We can ask when it may become harmful and, if it does, when it is the right time to stop, for the prevention of harm either to the individual or others.

Costly persistence and cruel optimism

The potential harms to which we refer—the effects on mental health of being an optimistic career musician—have been identified particularly in research on the emotional challenges

emanating from careers in popular music. They include the disruption of family life (Détari et al., 2020; Vaag et al., 2014); the relational nature of work that can lead to the breakdown of relationships (Musgrave, 2023b); in certain genres and scenes, the social availability and acceptability of drug-taking and/or alcohol consumption (Forsyth et al., 2016); and long-term financial precarity with all the stressors and strains associated with prolonged economic uncertainty (Berg et al., 2022). These have been cited, among others, as potential psychosocial causal factors for heightened levels of anxiety and depression among this population. Nevertheless musicians often continue to stay optimistic, and pursue their dreams, not least because their career aspirations give them joy, fulfillment, self-actualisation, self-confidence, and friendship (Baym, 2018), thus promoting their wellbeing, as well as threatening their mental health (Kegelaers et al., 2022). However, some musicians may develop their self-belief and pursue their dreams to the point where they are in denial of the fact that their aspirations may be harming them and potentially those around them.

We have argued above that musicians who persist despite threats to their mental health are like gamblers facing overwhelming odds. Gibson and Sanbonmatsu (2004) describe gamblers as having “the tendency to attend to positive aspects of a situation and reframe negative situations in a positive way [that] may prolong their belief in their gambling abilities” (p. 151); they also found that “optimists are more likely than pessimists to maintain positive expectations and persist in gambling following losses” (p. 158). Lucas et al. (2015) describe such persistence as *costly perseverance*, a determined commitment to a course of action with potentially negative effects. In short, musicians pursue their dreams because they love making music and sharing it with others, and stopping would incur a profound sense of loss. In their Dualistic Model of Passion, Bonneville-Roussy and Vallerand (2020) distinguish between two types of persistence. People with harmonious passion for music, free from external or internal pressures, exhibit *flexible persistence* in music-making, compatible with a healthy family life, other interests, and ultimately increased wellbeing. Those with obsessive passion exhibit *rigid persistence*, pursuing music-making “to the detriment of other important activities, such as family events or even health [leading to] . . . negative emotions, anxiety, and lower levels of wellbeing” (p. 267).

The obsessively passionate musician may exhibit this rigid persistence because they cannot let go of the attachment they have formed to their dreamed-of life and career and because of the detrimental optimism we have described above. This has also been termed *cruel optimism* in that hoped-for outcomes are uncertain, impossible, or even a fantasy.

[People] who have x in their lives [e.g., the dream of a career in music] might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their wellbeing; because whatever the *content* [italics in original] of the attachment is, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject’s [sic] sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. (Berlant, 2010, p. 94)

Hoped-for outcomes provide people with a purpose but their inaccessibility may be harmful. Taking a specific historical and political standpoint, Berlant (2006, 2011) includes among these hoped-for but inaccessible outcomes the *good life* promised by postwar social democracies (e.g., a stable career with contractual employment rights, a home one can afford to buy, and upward social mobility). We propose that careers in music represent similar outcomes and that some musicians who persist, despite feeling that they are failing and in poor mental health, are suffering from the effects of cruel optimism, which keeps them “tethered to bad lives and unrealizable ideals that exhaust and defeat them” (Zembylas & Keet, 2019, p. 83).

Discussion: Clinical usefulness

Finally, we reflect on the potential usefulness of our argument for mental-health professionals. There is evidence that popular musicians, as a population, are often receptive, amenable, and responsive to psychotherapeutic interventions (Vaag et al., 2016b; Visser et al., 2022), particularly those in which the clinician demonstrates an empathic appreciation of the musician's lived experience (Berg et al., 2018; Gross & Musgrave, 2017; Heyman et al., 2019). Our argument gives rise to three sets of recommendations. First, both clinician and musician need to understand that healthy risk-taking requires a balance between the musician's career aspirations and the pressures of the environment, and it is important for clinicians to acknowledge in their use of language, for example, when formulating strategies to help musicians, that a degree of risk-taking is essential to building a career in music. This is also important for those developing policies for future practice in relation to musicians' wellbeing, particularly those targeting mental health professionals who work with musicians. One aim could be to develop ways of educating aspiring musicians and equipping them with the capacity to judge for themselves, or with others, when their risk-taking is and is not healthy, in the context of their work–life balance. To support the meeting of this aim it would be worth carrying out research from a sociological perspective to explore in greater depth when, how, and why musicians disengage from potentially detrimental risky behaviors, such as deciding to quit a stable job in favor of pursuing music full-time despite needing to support a family. In practice, we believe that such decisions should involve members of the musician's family or professional network, including a clinician or mental-health practitioner who could work with the musician to map their available strengths and resources for healthy risk-taking, as well as the barriers they face. Recovery Capital Theory (Cloud & Granfield, 2008), deriving from addiction science, could provide a useful framework for such a strategy (recovery capital comprises *collective life factors* available to individuals that can help them recover from addiction). Again, it would be worth investigating how musicians develop and maintain their capacity for healthy risk-taking, independently and with others. In practice, we believe that musicians should make decisions about taking specific risks with the help of peers and/or therapists.

Second, therapists can also work with musicians to determine whether and, if so, when their risk-taking has become harmful, and the potential for withdrawing from the pursuit of a career in music and building a different career instead. Withdrawal is likely to be hugely painful. Musicians embody their work; it is through being musicians that they understand, construct, and articulate their identities (Ascenso et al., 2016; Beech et al., 2016; Gross & Musgrave, 2020). A musician forges their identity over years if not decades of emotional and financial investment, or the relationship they have with music-making and its (imagined) role in their current and future; "once a possible identity has been formed . . . it is only let go of with great reluctance" (Oyserman & James, 2011, p. 125). Identity is strongly connected with sense of self, or a "mental concept [and] working theory about oneself, stored in memory and amended with use. It is a working theory about who one is, was and will become" (Oyserman & James, 2011, p. 117). For a musician, it can be deeply upsetting and destabilizing to walk away from an identity they have constructed and a life they have aspired to. Specifically, if an individual has dreamed of being a full-time musician and achieving markers of success (such as fame, money, a large and/or engaged audience, or other indicators), it can be acutely painful for these dreams not to be realized. Relinquishing them might represent the ultimate failure, forcing the musician to imagine an undesirable future self: that of being a nonmusician (Carver et al., 1999; Phillips et al., 2007). In practice, we believe that it is crucial for clinicians to understand this, and it could be fruitful for them to discuss with clients the ways in which they might

continue to find joy and meaning in music-making *per se* while moving away from it as a career orientation.

Our final recommendation is that a clinician working with a musician should seek to create a nonpathologizing and nonstigmatizing therapeutic environment in which they can attend to both the constructive and maladaptive aspects of maintaining a cruel-optimism outlook. In practice, the clinician should help the musician understand that their risk-taking represents part but not all of them. This will enable them to recognize that their perceived failures are not their identity, view their risk-taking with compassion, and find out why they are no longer served by identifying with apparent failure. Motivational interviewing (MI) (W. R. Miller & Rollnick, 1991), defined as “a directive, client-centred counseling style for eliciting behavior change by helping clients explore and resolve ambivalence” (Rollnick & Miller, 1995, p. 325), is an example of an approach of this kind that is often employed in contexts where clients are ambivalent or even reluctant to change their behaviour, such as gamblers. According to the results of a systematic review and meta-analysis by Rubak et al. (2005), MI had a significant and clinically relevant effect on the treatment of a range of lifestyle issues and diseases in 75% of 72 studies. It was effective in the short-term for the treatment of gambling, at least in terms of dollars spent and gambling frequency, although its longer-term effects are less clear (Yakovenko et al., 2015). Raeburn (2000) highlights but does not evaluate MI in the context of musicians and addiction, and Kok et al. (2013) suggest its use for addressing musculoskeletal pain in musicians. It could therefore be used by clinicians working with career musicians on the issues arising from risk-taking.

Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed relationships between optimism, risk, and the psychosocial determinants of mental health and wellbeing among popular musicians. While it is hard to measure the popular music labor market, we argue that it attracts workers driven by the desire to make a living from producing creative work. This desire attaches itself to and/or is supported by self-belief and hope or optimism. We have suggested that risk is endemic and the chances of failure are high in careers in music; musicians who hope to make successful careers in music must adopt an orientation of optimistic self-belief despite poor odds; setbacks pose risks to mental health and wellbeing; and finally, given that careers in music share many features with gambling, which is unusual in that optimism has unfavorable outcomes, the optimism displayed by many musicians may be described as cruel. We therefore conclude that musicians must learn to take healthy risks, on one hand, since risk-taking is integral to career-building in music. On the other hand, musicians must learn to recognize when their careers in music have become harmful to them (and/or others) and make the choice to withdraw because this is sometimes the most suitable and prudent course of action. We acknowledge that it can be hard for musicians to take such decisions.

The focus of our argument has been musicians' individual choices and decisions, but it also has implications for the political economy of careers in music. Collective, social organization for change may yield improvements to musicians' health and wellbeing by improving their working conditions. Such improvements could include an increased awareness by record labels and other stakeholders that they are potential sources of career stress and anxiety; a re-evaluation of the economics of streaming to mitigate financial precarity for the vast majority of musicians (as seen in campaigns such as #BrokenRecord); and a commitment to fair and transparent contracts.

Finally, we note the implications of our argument for music education. Educators must recognize that being a musician provides not only joy and fulfillment but also the threat of emotional damage. Nobody would want to stop young people from enjoying the many benefits associated with writing, making, and recording music, or to deny them the chance to dream; desire is hard to tame. However, educators, particularly in the higher education landscape, must manage young people's expectations. This is not an easy task; most students imagine that their degrees will give them the opportunity to make careers in their chosen field, while in music (and other forms of creative) education it is most likely that they will develop financially insecure portfolio careers (D. Bennett & Bridgstock, 2015; Latukefu & Ginsborg, 2018). Work on expectation management among performing arts graduates (D. Bennett, 2009) and students of classical music at conservatoires (C. Duffy, 2013; Latukefu & Pollard, 2022) showed how higher education institutions could change and adapt to meet the needs of students, accommodating the realities of their future careers. One strategy was to emphasize the benefits of music-making other than writing, making, and recording music: building communities, expanding horizons, and improving health. It would be worth carrying out further research to find out how relevant these and other approaches are to popular music students in particular. We suggest that this is a population demonstrably at risk of negative long-term health outcomes, and that those responsible for the education of the musicians of the future must confront the challenges associated with careers in music, and make a concerted effort to improve these outcomes.

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Note

1. The title of our paper is inspired by that of Gibson and Sanbonmatsu ("The downside of optimism"), although we have reframed it more negatively.

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