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Not a 9 to 5: The Benefits and Drawbacks of Pursuing a Career as a Musician

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Introduction

For all my life, I’ve thought I wanted to grow up to be a musician. When I was in elementary school, my class was required to make ‘About Me’ books to introduce ourselves to each other. I wrote that I liked the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Sonic the Hedgehog, and that I wanted to be in a band when I grew up. Now that I’m older, I’ve spent a lot of time around musicians, and I’m not so sure I want to be one professionally anymore. I’ve performed on stage many times, and I’ve been fortunate enough to also coordinate 50 different concerts from behind the scenes. I’ve met many interesting people because of these experiences, but when I started asking about their everyday lives, I noticed they went through similar problems. These professional musicians described a life that was meaningful (and they wouldn’t trade for the world), but also stressful and very, very difficult to sustain. After speaking to more and more of these musicians, I decided I wanted to learn more about the issue from an academic perspective. Were the experiences of these musicians I’ve spoken to representative of the experiences of musicians at large? If I decided to follow a career in the music industry, would this be my experience? If this was true, how would I navigate it so that I could lead a happy, sustainable life?

As I started to read more and more about musicians and their mental health, I noticed that the research pointed to a major problem within the industry. On the whole, surveys indicated that musicians experienced a greater prevalence of mental health problems compared to the general population and other groups, and these findings were replicated across several countries (Shenton, 2023). Musicians experience a higher mortality rate than non-musicians and are more likely to die young (Chertoff & Urbine, 2018). Musicians report disturbingly high levels of depression, anxiety, and alcohol abuse (Berg et al., 2022). Musicians also report as high as a
32.3% lifetime prevalence of eating disorders (Kapsetaki & Easmon, 2019). One study by the Record Union showed that 73% of the musicians sampled had experienced depression and distress associated with their music making, and 33% had experienced panic attacks (Record Union, 2019). These are abnormal rates of distress and mental disorder, indicating a major issue. Furthermore, some research suggests that there may be causal mechanisms in place linking a musical career to the development of these problems (Gross & Musgrave, 2020).

At the same time, musicians also tend to report a concurrent positive mental profile with positive reports of wellbeing. Wellbeing tends to be broken down into two main parts: hedonic wellbeing (feeling good) and eudaimonic wellbeing (functioning well). Musicians tend to report strong eudaimonic wellbeing – they tend to have a strong sense of identity, feel called to their work, and feel a strong source of meaning in their lives (Ascenso, 2022). They feel pride in being a musician and feel grateful for the experiences their musical career gives them (Ficek, 2023). When musicians say that despite its issues, they wouldn’t trade their job for anything else, this is why.

In this paper, I’m focused on figuring out a way to balance the numerous benefits of being a professional musicians with the downsides of this specific career. It’s clearly possible; many musicians have done it without feeling the need to change their lives entirely. The only way to be able to come up with solutions to the problem of negative mental health in the music industry is to fully understand what the problem usually looks like. We will investigate the different ways musicians struggle as a byproduct of their careers directly and compassionately. Then, we will investigate how musicians have been able to get it right, and what optimal functioning looks like in this population. Lastly, I will offer some suggestions for creating a sustainable and mentally healthy career as a musician that directly tackle some of the problems
I’ll have outlined. Some of these solutions focus on individual resilience, while others focus on changing your environment and the wider industry itself. These solutions, while based on research, are not universal and may not be right for any one particular situation.

**Musicians’ Issues**

**Financial Insecurity**

The common perception of musicians as ‘starving artists’ is no joke. The lives of many professional musicians are riddled with financial insecurity due to the unstable nature of their work. Financial precarity is one of the leading drivers of illbeing in musicians (Record Union, 2019; Gross & Musgrave, 2020; Berg et al., 2022; Fricke, 2023). This makes sense when you look at the limited amount of revenue streams musicians have access to. Currently, musicians only make a maximum of $0.003 for every time a song is streamed on platforms such as Spotify, Amazon Music, or Apple Music (UMAW). If a song is streamed 1 million times in a month, that means that these platforms only pay out a maximum of $3,000 in royalties. Really, musicians only receive about 15-50% of that total sum after labels and label partnerships take their share (UMAW). 1 million streams in a month should be a measure of success for an artist, but it only results in a payout of $1,500 in a best-case scenario ($0.003/stream, 50% share). These numbers fluctuate all the time – currently, United Musicians and Allied Workers (UMAW, a major union) estimates the real amount to only be $0.0017 for every stream. Musicians are forced to make up for this by putting more time into live events and touring, where they can generate more revenue. But how much money do they really come home with after a tour?
The answer: not much. Musicians seem to have very tight profit margins when they go on tour. High ticket prices don’t always lead to full shows; musicians often don’t get paid all of the ticket revenue. Less-established musicians often get paid for performances in the form of low flat guarantees, with the added bonuses of a portion of ticket sales (if the show sells above a certain threshold) and the ability to make money from selling merchandise (after the venue takes 15-40% of sales, of course). Not all deals and venues are like this, but many are, leading to musicians being underpaid for their work. In addition to the low amount of revenue, musicians also face a high burden of cost when going on tour. Musicians usually need to pay upfront costs for merchandise production, transportation costs (i.e. gas and maintenance), and lodging. Sometimes, musicians will be able to afford hotels, but often it’s worth the discomfort to just crash on somebody’s couch, especially if they’re in a large group. After splitting the remaining income amongst members of a band (if there is one), it’s really difficult for musicians to make enough money to support themselves.

Currently, these few income streams and low profit margins are just the realities of pursuing a career as a musician. They won’t change, so musicians just have to adapt, buckle down, and find a way to make it work. This can take the form of having a ‘day job’ that helps pay the bills, although many musicians reject this idea. More often, this just means working more. Musicians feel like they need to produce more content, book more shows, be more active on social media, and put themselves out there more in order to stand out from other musicians and potentially be noticed by a scout from a record label who could give them more job security (Gross & Musgrave, 2020). Most people believe that’s just how it works – it sucks for a while, but eventually the most talented people get noticed, get picked up and signed by a record label,
and ‘make it.’ The problems with this assumption are twofold: the most talented people aren’t always the ones who get noticed, and ‘making it’ doesn’t always last forever.

In their 2020 book (of which many of the findings in this paper are based), Sally Gross and George Musgrave call this the “myth of meritocracy.” Someone getting picked up by a scout from a record label from out of the blue isn’t as common as you might think. Really, many major record labels rely more on recommendations from artist managers and reputable artists than they rely on discovering talent out of the blue. At the end of the day, the music industry can be a very gatekept space that’s hard to break into if you don’t know the right people. One response to this reality from artists has been to forgo relationships with labels entirely and become independent instead. With the invent of streaming and digital audio workstations (i.e. GarageBand, Ableton, Logic), many artists feel that they don’t need a label to produce and release their music in order to be noticed – the track will speak for themselves. However, individual songs still need to pass through an additional layer of gatekeepers such as radio DJs and Spotify playlist curators in order to actually be heard by potential fans. Label relationships are incredibly helpful with getting music past this barrier because of the reputation and credibility that labels have (something independent musicians often don’t). Musicians still largely need labels in order to transition from an emerging artist to a professional one. It’s not just about talent anymore.

Even if a musician does receive major success and gets signed by a label, there’s no guarantee that success once will lead to success again. Musicians often feel as though their futures are random and unpredictable because of the inherent ups and downs that come with the career. Musicians’ work lives often fluctuate between busy, successful weeks filled with interviews and performances and slow weeks where not much is happening at all. In these slow weeks, musicians report feelings of anxiety about whether the successes will come again.
Remember, musicians don’t tend to have stable cash inflows from royalties, so they’re especially reliant on getting booked in the future. It can be incredibly stressful for musicians to keep putting effort into creating new content and promoting themselves without knowing if it’ll amount to anything. One musician aptly states, “I love working, but it’s not sustainable to have to work all the time… not knowing every month that you’re going to be able to pay your rent” (Gross & Musgrave, 2020, p. 46). Another musician says, “you can’t afford to stop creating” (p. 68) because there’s such a large pressure to stay relevant enough to keep getting booked for future performances. Examining how all of these pieces fit together paints a clear picture that achieving success and maintaining it is very financially difficult for musicians. This financial insecurity is closely linked to high levels of psychological distress and negative mental health (Berg et al., 2022).

Relational Sacrifices

Many musicians tend to respond to their financial insecurity by working harder and for more hours. This doesn’t come without sacrifice. Musicians tend to have difficulties keeping a healthy work-life balance; the more time they spend working, the less time they spend showing up to their other roles in life. As a result, musicians tend to report common themes of not being able to show up for their close relationships in the way they’d like to (Gross & Musgrave, 2020). This is especially prevalent when it comes to touring. On the road, musicians are leaving their family and friends for weeks – sometimes months – because they need to in order to make a living. It’s hard for them to keep in contact and build meaningful relationships across so much physical and emotional distance. Not only are they physically separated from their family and friends, but musicians also tend to be “emotionally ‘in different places’ from their loved ones when contacting them” (Shenton, 2023, pp. 85-86). This distance puts strain on the dyad between
the musician and their relational partner: strain that often, the musician doesn’t have the time and resources (emotional or physical) to meaningfully address. What can a musician do when their relationship is in a rough patch, but they’re hundreds of miles away for weeks at a time? In an interview conducted by Gross & Musgrave (2020), one musician speaks to this, saying, “when you’re really, really busy you hardly see the family, that’s when marital problems start. I’ve had terrible experiences of stuff happening while I’m away from home… A lot of trying to get home as soon as possible… latest flights out, earliest flights back” (p. 90).

These situations tend to weigh on musicians, leading to feelings of inadequacy, being a burden, guilt, and low self-worth. But despite the fact that these feelings of guilt are directly linked to their career as a musician, most musicians can’t ever imagine pursuing another career path. Being a musician is who they are; they couldn’t do anything else (Ascenso et al., 2017). Even though taking a step away from their career in music might be a solution to their relational problems, many musicians just won’t. Musicians experience this internal conflict consciously and end up blaming themselves for it: for being who they are and being so resistant to a career change, even it would be for the better (Gross & Musgrave, 2020). The longer this happens, the more these musicians internalize this story, and the more they internalize the associated feelings of guilt and low self-worth. This can have significant consequences for their wellbeing.

Difficulties Feeling in Control

It’s no secret that musicians are attached to their work. Musicians see their work as an extension of themselves; as with any creative art, the maker of a piece of work engages in a process to create something they feel proud of – something that didn’t exist before they made it. Musicians write compositions and create performances to express themselves – a process which can be incredibly rewarding (Ascenso, 2022). The problem comes when this process is
interrupted. For many musicians, their work is strongly influenced and changed by labels during the recording process. Songs are changed by label producers to include well-known samples, a feature from a prominent artist, or a catchy hook in the hope that it performs better among audiences (Gross & Musgrave, 2020). Musicians and their labels frequently clash over this process: the musician wants to retain their sound (they wrote the song, after all), while the label wants to make the song perform better as a product (they are the experts, after all). Of course, musicians want their song to perform well. But they also want their song to still be theirs when it's released for all the world to see.

This conflict becomes a problem when healthy compromising with labels turns into a loss of authenticity and self-censorship for musicians. Many musicians feel like labels force them into a sound that is incongruous to them and start to doubt their choices as a result (Ficek, 2024). Politics and power play a role here: musicians often don’t feel like they can speak up because they fear to damage the relationships they’ve created with label professionals, or they fear retaliative action if they don’t go along with what these label professionals want. Instead, they just say yes. This is most common with artists that are insecure in their own identities: they believe the people at the top know best, so they just acquiesce to their suggestions. After some time, these same artists tend to look back on these decisions with regret (Ficek, 2024).

Deciding to always acquiesce to what label professionals suggest can impact how musicians can view themselves. They feel personal incongruity; they’re releasing art to the world that doesn’t feel like their authentic selves. These musicians also experience a lack of autonomy in this process: if they aren’t constantly assertive throughout the recording process, label professionals end up running the show. But even though these musicians are frustrated with themselves for not taking control, they’re still so attached to their work that they internalize the
work’s successes and failures. If a musician and their label release a song that falls flat, musicians tend to think ‘this failed because I didn’t take control.’ Discussing this, one artist says that at the end of the day, “I manage myself; I decide what happens and I’m kind of the only one who’s accountable. There’s no one else to blame” (Gross & Musgrave, 2020, p. 84). Despite compromising so much in the recording process, musicians still blame themselves when their work doesn’t perform as well as their labels promised it would. This can lead to a negative self-image, which is a major risk factor for further mental health problems.

**Difficulties Being Objectified**

Many musicians report feelings of being viewed as an object by industry professionals. This is experienced by musicians as feeling like they’re interchangeable and they’re valued not for their unique humanness but for the product that they can give their label (Ficek, 2024). They don’t feel seen, they feel used and disrespected. The music industry is an environment with many power imbalances; industry professionals often hold the power to make or break a musician’s career, so musicians feel like they must play nice instead of advocate for themselves. In the day to day, this can look like putting up with misogyny, racist remarks, sexual harassment, and other forms of disrespect and harm (Gross & Musgrave, 2020; Ficek, 2024).

One example of a musician feeling like an object can be found in an interview conducted by Ficek (2024) with a black female bassist. She reports, “I’ve been called for gigs, and I’ve been told straight up in my face that the only reason why I was there is because I was black and I was a woman and I was just, you know, good for that thing in that moment… I was asking myself, okay, am I here because I'm good enough for this? Or am I here because I'm a black woman and now it is a trend to have a black woman in a band?” (pp. 5-6). This musician didn’t feel like she was valued for her actual musical expertise; instead, she felt interchangeable and
tokenized for the sake of industry politics. Additionally, she had to put up with harassment and disrespectful behavior, leading to feelings not being “good enough” or that she truly deserved the success she was experiencing. She was explicitly being told that her success wasn’t due to her own intrinsic value and achievements, but instead due to other, external reasons. It makes sense that she (and other musicians with similar experiences) would report feeling viewed as an object and not being seen authentically because of this.

Musicians also report feelings of being objectified by their fans. Musicians exist in the public sphere: they need to cultivate a public identity to promote themselves, to expand their fanbase, and to be able to sell enough tickets at their shows to make a living. To do this, musicians spend a lot of time on social media making content and sharing their day-to-day lives. This is a necessary part of a musical career; people want to feel like they’re connected to the musicians that they like, and social media is a big part of that. However, many fans take this connection to the next level and create parasocial relationships with musicians they follow. In many cases, fans obsess over musicians and feel like they have a right to comment on a musician’s everyday life (Gross & Musgrave, 2020). Sometimes, this can be benign; other times, this can result in hate speech and body shaming, and even stalking in extreme cases. Musicians experience this as being viewed as an object: they aren’t being seen authentically, they’re just put on a pedestal and held to an impossible standard. Musicians want to use social media to connect with their fans and to promote themselves, not to be viewed in this way. This experience can be disheartening to musicians, which can lead to feelings of not being good enough and not being seen and valued for who they really are. This too can be a driver for negative mental health.
Touring Stressors

One of the most cited sources of stress for musicians is touring. Touring is a huge part of being a professional musician, and one of the biggest ways in which musicians financially sustain themselves. Because of its financial importance, musicians typically book as many shows as they can when they go on tour. Given that touring comes with such heavy costs, musicians need to bring in as much revenue as they can. This can result in an experience on the road where the touring schedule completely defines a musician’s life for weeks to months at a time. As Zendel (2021) writes, “There are no days off. There are just days without shows.” This all-encompassing experience often has negative consequences on musicians’ relationships (as previously stated) and can have real impacts on a musician’s physical health and wellbeing.

It’s very difficult for musicians to maintain good health while they’re on tour. Firstly, musicians frequently report experiencing poor quality and little sleep while on tour (Shenton, 2023). Musicians also report struggles with nutrition: when they’re going from gas station to gas station, it’s a lot cheaper to get KFC and gas station food than it is to eat well (Senich, 2023). In tandem with this, musicians also report difficulties maintaining a regular exercise routine while on tour (Senich). Furthermore, musicians can’t take sick days when they’re on tour; when they have a fever or bodily pains, they go on stage and perform anyway (Shenton, 2023). It’s incredibly difficult for musicians to take care of their health in this environment, which can lead to lasting consequences.

Lastly, musicians frequently report feeling a loss of their ability to self-govern while on tour. Musicians tend to have all their decisions made for them on tour: where they’re eating, what they’re doing every day, what time they’re going to sleep (Shenton, 2023; Senich, 2023). Musicians feel like they lose their autonomy while in this environment. This is a stressful
experience for musicians; they’re constantly told how to be, what to do, and where to go because they have such a busy daily itinerary. It’s hard to adhere to all these demands, but musicians have to. This becomes especially difficult when musicians have their own struggles while on tour. To balance the demanding needs of the tour, musicians tend to suppress their own emotional needs instead of reaching out to their peers for help (Fricke, 2023). This tends to result in feelings of isolation, anger, and helplessness in touring musicians, resulting in major psychological distress.

Substance Use

Unfortunately, substance use is rampant within the music industry. Alcohol, marijuana, beta blockers, and even ‘harder’ drugs such as cocaine, MDMA, and heroin are all deeply ingrained into the history and the structure of the music industry (Saintilan, 2019). Musicians are pressured to consume substances from venue managers, peers, label professionals, and fans alike (Forsyth, Lennox & Emslie, 2016). Venue managers frequently offer free drinks to performing musicians; often, this is a built-in part of a musician’s performance compensation. Peers encourage going out after a show, performing while buzzed, and using substances to cope with the physical stressors of repeated performances. Label professionals have been known to purchase substances for musicians to use in the recording studio to ‘get the creative juices flowing.’ Lastly, fans love to send musicians free drinks or other substances as a gesture of their appreciation. Musicians get free drinks from everywhere; it takes a lot to turn away from the path of least resistance – saying yes.

Substance use is a massive part of the music industry’s culture and has been for decades. Substance use has been romanticized because of this: it has a certain allure that musicians are attracted to and that they believe is a necessary part of existing in the industry. It’s romantic to ‘live fast and die young,’ for example, which is what many musicians end up doing (Chertoff &
It’s more romantic to “wake up at dusk, drink 11 shots of whiskey, mainline a little heroin, and then go into a subterranean nightclub where I play and hang until 5am” than it is to “go to bed at 9:30pm after a nice chamomile tea” (Saintilan, 2019, p. 16). Many musicians perceive that if they don’t take part in this lifestyle, they lose out on an important subculture within the industry. They miss out on professional networking opportunities and chances to improve group cohesion and relationships within a musical group. Furthermore, musicians often feel that they have to take part in substance use in order to claim that they’re a real ‘rockstar’ or that they’re ‘punk.’ Substance use can be an important part of a musician’s brand, thus making it that much harder for musicians to abstain from (Saintilan, 2019).

Given these pressures, it’s no surprise that substance use disorders are so common within the music industry. Shenton (2023) says, “substance use disorders generally developed after starting a music career, stemming from usage as a coping mechanism” (p. 81). Musicians experience a multitude of stressors of varying kinds and forms, and substances are an easily available and socially accepted way of coping with them. Substance use is therefore an important mediator between the stressors outlined in this paper and the negative mental health profile visible in professional musicians (Chertoff & Urbine, 2018; Saintilan, 2019; Gross & Musgrave, 2020).

**Musicians’ Flourishing**

The picture that all of this research has painted so far has been a bleak one. According to this paper so far, musicians lead a very troubled, depressed life, with a mountain of issues that impact their mental health. But concurrently, research also paints a picture of musicians’ flourishing. Many musicians experience positive mental health as a result of their career.
Furthermore, this profile of wellbeing can exist alongside a profile of illbeing. Distress and flourishing are not perfectly correlated against each other; instead of existing on the opposite ends of a single continuum, research actually suggests that they both exist on their own continua in professional musicians (Ascenso, 2022). Being well is different than not being ill. Musicians tend to report high scores on measures of eudaimonic wellbeing – they report feeling an overall satisfaction with their lives, even if they don’t feel happy 100% of the time. For musicians, it’s all about balance. Balance between the intense stressors they feel as a professional musician and the intense positive psychological outcomes that the career gives them. Let’s investigate what some of these positive outcomes can look like.

Firstly, many musicians report feelings of personal growth when they describe their experiences as a professional musician. Over time, they tend to feel proud of how far they’ve come in their career compared to when they’ve started. Musicians feel that their career has given them an opportunity to expand their own personal limits and ‘level up’ (Ficek, 2023). Music making is a space for musicians to test themselves – to put their entire being into something and grow as a result of it. It’s hard work. When this experience is validated – when a musician’s work is successful – many musicians feel an intense sense of acceptance and of realizing their potential (Ascenso, 2022). You don’t get this in a normal 9-to-5; this is an experience unique to professional musicians, and it’s an intensely rewarding one. When a musician experiences success, it’s felt deeply.

Secondly, many musicians experience a strong sense of purpose in life because of what they do. Musicians frequently perceive themselves as ‘givers’ of meaningful, transcendent experiences to general audiences (Ascenso et al., 2017). They know that their work is valuable and matters to other people, and that helps keep them going. And not only is their work valuable
to others, but it’s valuable to themselves. The simple act of playing music with others is enough to make a musician feel connected to something larger than themselves – something that is incredibly important for wellbeing. Musicians are more likely to describe their work as inspiring and meaningful compared to the general workforce for this reason (Ascenso, 2022). They feel called to their work, and they experience intense feelings of personal fulfillment by engaging in it.

Engaging in musical work can do so much for a musician’s wellbeing. Music provides an incredible amount of joy to peers, fans, and musicians themselves. Even though musicians experience significant distress and feelings of exhaustion, the positive side of being a professional musician makes pursuing music professionally worth it to many. Most professional musicians can’t even imagine taking a step away from music, nor should they feel like they have to. Music connects people and brings a massive amount of artistic value to society. Professional musicians need to exist, and they should be as mentally well as possible as they engage in their work. But, while many of them experience positive mental health outcomes, they also are forced to balance them with a series of major stressors which impact their wellbeing. Something needs to change within the music industry to make being a professional musician a career that’s healthier and more sustainable for musicians. Whether this is in the form of policy change, the shifting of group norms, or the development of individual coping skills, I believe these following suggestions will help professional musicians balance the psychological benefits of their careers with the significant associated distress.
Suggestions for a Sustainable Career

Living Wage for Musicians Act

I believe that in order to make careers within the music industry more sustainable, there first needs to be broad policy change to improve the way the industry is structured. Building individual resilience can only go so far; a broader, top-down solution of policy change is the best way to improve the financial landscape of professional musicians in the USA. The most promising solution at this point in time appears to be the Living Wage for Musicians Act – a bill that was recently introduced to Congress (Tlaib, 2024). This bill, sponsored by UMAW (a musician’s union), would increase the amount of royalties musicians receive for every time their song is streamed to at least a penny per stream. Right now, this rate is $0.003 per stream at most; this has the potential to dramatically shift how much money musicians make from people consuming their work. This money would come from increased subscription prices from customers of services like Spotify or Apple Music – something that consumers, and congressional representatives, are hesitant to support. However, this bill could do a lot for the health of musicians. They wouldn’t have to work 24/7, because their income would come from multiple places – not just from live performance. Musicians could have a more balanced life and feel less pressured to be ‘on’ all the time if this bill was passed. Financial insecurity is consistently one of the top-reported stressors for musicians; this change in policy could significantly alleviate this and directly improve musicians’ health as a result (Berg et al., 2022; Record Union, 2019; Weller, 2014).
Setting personal limits and boundaries with work

My second suggestion is for professional musicians to set more limits and boundaries with themselves when it comes to their work/life balance. Many musicians, because they love what they do, will end up doing it all the time. They’ll be in the studio for hours on end trying to make their work as perfect as possible because they’re so attached and invested in it. Additionally, musicians tend to just say yes to any show that they’re offered because that show might be the one with the right person in the crowd. This can lead to musicians overcommitting themselves to their career, thus leaving less time for them to commit to other roles in their lives. Furthermore, this is shown to lead to relational stresses as well as difficulties with identity construction in musicians (Gross & Musgrave, 2020; Ficek, 2024).

When you love what you do, it’s easy for it to consume your day-to-day life and your identity. For professional musicians, I recommend actively trying not to less this happen by setting hard limits with themselves. Don’t be in the studio at 3 a.m. Make a recurring time every week where you commit yourself to a hobby outside of music, and another one (or three) that you dedicate to quality time with your close relationships. Research shows that the most successful musicians are those who know how to manage music’s simultaneous role as a self-definer and a professional, structured routine (Ascenso, 2022). You don’t need to step away from music entirely, but if you never step away, you’ll miss out on the other experiences life has to offer. If you make your work/life balance a priority, you’ll have more to give in both areas of your life.
**Become a ‘portfolio musician’**

One suggestion that I have for professional musicians experiencing difficulties feeling inauthentic in their musical identities is to try to be a ‘portfolio musician’ – to actively seek numerous different musical identities, groups, and roles, instead of just one. For musicians who feel like they aren’t in control when they’re working with labels, it may be worth it to give this a try. Maybe working with labels is just their ‘commercial side,’ while they also find engagement in a different ensemble or musical setting, or find engagement in a teaching role. There are many different ways a professional musician can relate to music, but it’s up to them to actively seek them out. By becoming a portfolio musician, musicians can experiment with what kind of musical identities they can take on and take greater agency in their careers. This way, musicians feel in control and that they’re pushing themselves beyond their comfort zones – something which is hugely important for musicians’ flourishing (Ascenso, 2022).

**Make the right norms on tour**

My next suggestion for professional musicians is to start conversations with their group and touring crew as they start every tour to explicitly define the norms that they will adhere to for its duration. Numerous musicians have reported that without intentional communication, group norms within a touring crew foster a culture oriented around substance use and feelings of disconnectedness from musicians’ personal relationships, which foster illbeing (Saintilan, 2019; Fricke, 2023). This outcome can be avoided with communication, and healthier norms can be developed instead. One example of a healthy norm could be for every tour member to have ‘family hour’ every once in a while: a dedicated time for each musician to contact their families
and close personal relationships (Senich, 2023). Norms like these are important things to talk about, and often go unaddressed.

To start a discussion around healthy norms in a touring group, here are some sample questions:

- When does it feel appropriate to use substances to celebrate?
- What are some rituals you can use to decompress after a performance that don’t involve substances?
- What are some expectations you can set early on to make time spent together feel more inclusive and inviting for crew members who are sober?
- What does it mean to hold each other accountable to these norms?
- What should members of your crew do if they’re concerned for another person’s mental health? How would you want others to approach this if you were the one struggling?

Seek professional help if you need it

My final note for professional musicians is to seek professional help from mental health services if they’re really struggling. At the end of the day, building coping skills and individual resilience can only go so far. There are many organizations that are specifically aimed at making therapy more accessible for musicians (Backline, MusiCares, and the Music Industry Therapist Collective, to name a few). Being a professional musician is notoriously demanding and time-consuming, but it’s important to make the time for therapy if you need it.

If I have one hope for professional musicians reading this, it’s that they recognize that they’re not the only people struggling with significant issues related to their career. Mental health issues are rampant within the music industry and aren’t discussed as much as they should be. But this is not a reason to give up a career in music. There is a way to make this career a sustainable
one – to balance the immense joy that comes with the job with the stress. Finding this balance is a long, difficult process, but it’s possible and it’s worth it to try.
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