



Taking care of business: The routines and rationales of early-career musicians in the Dutch and British music industries

Rick Everts

Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Jo Haynes

University of Bristol, UK

Abstract

This article explores a small sample of musicians in two European musical contexts – the Netherlands and the UK. It examines the relationship between the conditions of national music industries and the strategies used to negotiate a career in music and the extent to which musicians frame their careers as entrepreneurs. Interview data from two projects with early-career musicians form the basis of our secondary comparative analysis. We argue that their strategizing can be framed as a set of responses to their local structural conditions. However, neither set of responses produces market advantage. Instead, traditional power and economic relations that reinforce the logic of the hegemonic mainstream industry tend to prevail, whereby only a very small fraction of the aspiring musicians can sustain themselves financially in music.

Keywords

entrepreneurship, music industry, musicians, popular music, secondary analysis

Corresponding author:

Rick Everts, Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Burg. Oudlaan 50, 3062 PA Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

Email: Everts@eshcc.eur.nl

Introduction: negotiating music careers

Music continues to be an attractive career prospect to many young people (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011) even though research continues to highlight the precarious conditions of cultural workers within a variety of cultural industries including music (Oakley, 2013). The working conditions in the music industries¹ are shaped in part by the reconfiguration of two of their sectors. First, until recently, there was widespread speculation about music's future regarding the economic demise of the *record* industry due to the impact of digitization on the mediation and distribution of music (Zentner, 2006). Second, there have been more recent optimistic economic forecasts for the *live* sector, including the commercial emphasis on non-music merchandise (Frith, 2007). Alongside the shift away from the dominance of the recording sector, digitization and Web 2.0 gave rise to a sense of optimism about the potential for musicians to take back control and to construct a career in music without depending on traditional intermediaries (Haynes and Marshall, 2018a). However, competition for work/gigs, and the possibility of monetizing music and selling merchandise produces additional pressures. Whereas a music career was believed to be tied to a *recording* contract with a major label that took responsibility for delivering artists and their music to the market (Jones, 1999), negotiating a music career today involves taking on more financial risks as musicians are expected to perform new kinds of entrepreneurial tasks (Haynes and Marshall, 2018a).

However, even with significant changes, the record industry is not a homogeneous entity. Musicians' working conditions are also shaped by localized dynamics. In addition to being a 'global industry', according to Marshall (2013: 1) the record industry is better construed as a 'series of recording industries, locally organized and locally focused, both structured by and structuring the international recording industry'. This means that the restructuring of the relationship between the recorded and live music sectors is configured by the specific relations of the 'hegemonic mainstream' record industry.² In addition, these relations are shaped within the local circumstances of each context by factors such as country size, governmental policies (Janssen et al., 2008), and commercial and aesthetic logics (van Venrooij, 2011). Local markets are also considered to have become more significant as the global downturn in record sales between 1995 and 2010 has had a larger impact on the sale of 'international' acts than domestic repertoires (Marshall, 2013). Thus, contemporary music career pathways need to be understood in light of the structural and discursive conditions of the recording and live sectors in each context.

A comparison of musicians within the UK and the Netherlands, ideologically positioned within the 'hegemonic mainstream' (UK) and as tightly integrated with the mainstream but not the mainstream (NL) (Marshall, 2013), can provide insights into the practical and discursive strategies adopted. In turn, this will illustrate any variation in the perception of an alignment between entrepreneurship and work as a musician and the local conditions that produce this. In addition, a comparative focus on musicians in different settings is (ideologically) important as knowledge about the music industries tends to be informed by research on the Anglo-American industries (Marshall, 2013).

Therefore, a secondary comparative analysis is carried out on existing interview data with musicians from two earlier – separate – studies in the Netherlands (Everts et al., forthcoming) and the UK (Haynes and Marshall, 2018a). We argue that their strategizing

can be framed as a set of responses to the structural conditions within each context, while neither set of responses produces commercial advantage. The next section will address how discourses of entrepreneurship are used to frame opportunities for musicians. Following this, we present a critical comparative summary of the key factors shaping the local contexts in the Netherlands and the UK.

Entrepreneurship as discourse and practice

In recent years, how musicians frame their business activities alongside the creative dynamics of being a musician is an important consideration within the context of the discursive influence of entrepreneurship within the music industries (Bennett, 2015), higher education (Cloonan and Hulstedt, 2012) and in the wider labour market (Haynes and Marshall, 2018a). On the one hand, cultural work is framed through this discourse as offering opportunities for creative self-realization, as well as greater autonomy and flexibility in one's career (Bridgstock, 2005). In order to align their artistic work with forms of self-management, self-marketing, and low levels of income and other forms of insecurity, creative workers (including musicians) adopt a bohemian lifestyle (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2006) that is distinct from the bourgeoisie and typically associated with artists and intellectuals with 'unorthodox and anti-establishment viewpoints and habits' (Schediwy et al., 2018: 175). Within this discourse, which has been heralded within cultural policy, entrepreneurial traits such as innovation, resilience and flexibility are promoted and converge with the ideal of artistic self-expression as the key motivation behind one's work (McRobbie, 2016).

On the other hand, the opportunities believed to be offered by cultural work are critically understood to depend on workers having to be more self-reliant and accepting greater risks and little to no pay more routinely (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). In the same manner, transferring entrepreneurship onto musicians can be understood as an aspect of the industry's response to the above-mentioned shifts to externalize the financial risks onto musicians (Hughes et al., 2016). Research shows that musicians are disinclined to align economic and artistic value as they see themselves only reluctantly as entrepreneurs (Coulson, 2012) and perform such tasks out of economic necessity. More recently, Bennett (2018) suggests that the collapse of the labour market (post-2008) for young people, and their progressively worse position has prompted many more to develop a 'do-it-yourself' (DIY) career in music. Due to these conditions, DIY, once characterized as practices 'that embed an anti-hegemonic, non-mainstream ethic', now encompasses 'increasing levels of professionalization and entrepreneurialism' (Bennett, 2018: 142). However, the extent to which the influence of discourses of entrepreneurship varies depending on the local conditions, remains under-explored (but see Threadgold, 2018).

The conditions of the music industries suggest that musicians perform more business tasks in order to create artistic products and establish a career with typically limited financial support. In order to do so, these self-employed and often precarious workers (McRobbie, 2016) collaborate with industry actors such as labels, while remaining independent (Hughes et al., 2016). Consequently, musicians must perform a wide range of business tasks that can be construed as entrepreneurial. First, musicians need to create

their own business opportunities (Albinsson, 2018), as markets in creative industries demand career self-management (Bridgstock, 2005). In order to do this effectively, musicians need social and networking skills (Thom, 2016). In addition, a wide variety of more general business and managerial skills are required to effectively raise funds, distribute and market their music, and perform project management tasks (Ellmeier, 2003). While musicians are expected to perform more business activities themselves, there may be localized contextual variation in whether such activities are interpreted as entrepreneurship and align with their sense of being a musician.

Local contexts of music production

The Netherlands and the UK occupy different positions within the global music industry. By drawing on recent academic, industry and government research, we identify three ways in which the different conditions frame musicians' creative and business activities, and how their rationales for these activities are shaped by discourses of entrepreneurship.

The first is the size of each music setting. The British popular music market is one of the largest in the world. While the Dutch market is smaller, the decline of the global recording industry did not impact as significantly in the Netherlands as it did within the UK, falling 6% between 2006 and 2010 (Marshall, 2013), compared to the UK market for recorded music which in 2016 had lost 41% of its volume since its peak in 2001 (Tschmuck, 2017).³ The live music sectors in both countries, however, now exceed the contribution made by the recording sectors. In the Netherlands, live music contributed €581 million to the economy in 2018 compared to €385 million from recorded music (PWC, n.d.). In the UK, the live sector contributed £1.1 billion (GVA)⁴ and the recording sector contributed £568 million (GVA).

The second important difference relates to the localized infrastructure, which varies with regard to the stability and significance of smaller music venues and the role of popular music studies degrees. In the UK, smaller venues ensure that the music industries are healthy and foster the 'talent pipeline' (UK Music, 2018), and they are financially the most important for musicians (Webster et al., 2018). Since 2007, however, 35% of smaller venues have disappeared, due to noise complaints, property development and the increasing costs of licensing rates (Webster et al., 2018), making access to smaller venues an even greater challenge for aspiring musicians due to increased competition (DCMS, 2019). While there has been closure of small venues in the Netherlands also, it has not reached the same level of concern. As a consequence of governmental cuts in 2010, the number of pop venues attached to the Dutch interest group for venues and festivals (VNPF) decreased from 75 to 57 (a loss of 24%). Nevertheless, the Dutch pop music infrastructure remains characterized by a high density of venues (van Vugt, 2018).

Other career pathways are becoming more popular, with both countries seeing an increase in the number of popular music studies degrees, particularly in Europe, where the accreditation of such courses is well established. However, in the UK a DIY approach was prevalent until the 1990s, when some institutions began to challenge this sensibility, but did not fully eradicate it as scepticism about the impact of academia on developing authentic music careers persisted (Green, 2002). Nonetheless, the number of courses in the UK increased from 26 to 84 between 2002/03 and 2013/14 (Bennett, 2015) and there

has been a fivefold increase in graduates with these degrees. In the Netherlands, 1400 new students enrol in programmes at academic and vocational institutions annually (Bussemaker, 2013). Within these courses, entrepreneurship is believed to play a vital role in finding success. In 2011, Dutch popular music institutions gave entrepreneurship a central position in their programmes (HBO-raad, 2011) and in the UK, the British & Irish Modern Music Institute (BIMM) claims to develop the ‘skills, experience, contacts and confidence to make the music industry feel like a walk in the park’.⁵ While a recent survey of students at Dutch music schools revealed that they did not experience tensions between the artistic and entrepreneurial dimensions of their identities (Schediwiy et al., 2018), within the British context a degree of ambivalence is experienced about such an alignment (Coulson, 2012). Moreover, music degrees are also regarded with some scepticism by sections of the British media and industry, and musicians themselves (Cloonan, 2005; Muga, 2002). In short, in the UK there is pressure on early-career musicians as they depend more on access to a reduced number of small venues, and while in both countries we see an increase in the appeal of popular music studies, in the UK there is more scepticism and it remains a less typical pathway into music.

The final distinction concerns the government and industry support for music careers. At both local and national levels, the Dutch government has developed strong structural policies and subsidies for the development of the sector and individual musicians (Nuchelmans, 2002), even though budget cuts after 2010 impacted talent development initiatives and financial support for venues to programme popular music (Gielen et al., 2017). In addition, the industries provide opportunities for new acts to develop skills, or to acquire recognition and touring experience, by organizing regional pop competitions (Nuchelmans, 2002), seminars and conferences, and various showcase festivals such as Eurosonic Noorderslag that presents acts to a (global) audience (Van Vugt, 2018).

In contrast, while successive UK governments from the late 1990s recognized the economic and cultural significance of the UK’s music industries and worked with record industry representatives to protect their interests (e.g. piracy, copyright issues), support for musicians is less pronounced. The New Labour government did, however, attempt to champion young people starting a music career through mentorship with industry partners, training and some financial support (Cloonan, 2002). There has not been a similar form of support for aspiring musicians from successive governments since 2010, even though lack of ‘funding for musicians’ was recently recognized as one of the threats to the ‘talent pipeline’ (DCMS, 2019: 4). However, there has been new policy development to support the live music infrastructure by making it more difficult to force music venue closure (UK Music, 2018). Overall, government support has focused on the commercial interests of the recorded and live industries, rather than directly on individual musicians.

While the Dutch music industries are comparatively smaller, the discussion above suggests they are better subsidized by the state in conjunction with other industry actors at the point of access for aspiring musicians. The forms of training and recognition that the field offers provides an ‘institutionalized path’, consisting of a series of supported steps to build one’s career (Gielen et al., 2017), potentially offsetting being in a smaller market. Nevertheless, Dutch musicians remain financially insecure as their average gross income is €17,500 and more than half did not earn more than €9,000 (von der Fuhr, 2015). The majority of musicians in the UK do not fare much better as 66% of

‘professional’ musicians – those who make all of their income from music – earn less than £15,600 per year from live music (Webster et al., 2018: 20). In light of these different conditions, we compare whether the strategies and rationales of musicians differ as they attempt to develop sustainable careers. The next section outlines our methodological approach.

Methodology

Two studies were used as the basis for the secondary comparative analysis of qualitative interview data: the Dutch study investigated the work practices of musicians within the live music infrastructure; the smaller British pilot study focused on the careers of musicians and their use of social media. Pilot studies constitute an important way to define the scope of qualitative research especially in under-explored topics that require further scrutiny for the purposes of ongoing research (van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001).

Dutch methods and sample

This research incorporated 21 semi-structured interviews. The researchers aimed for musicians who were trying to build a professional⁶ career in the industry. Therefore, the targeted population was musicians who performed at the Noorderslag festival. Despite actively seeking a gender balance, the sample consisted of 14 participants who identified as male and 7 as female.⁷ The participants were between 18 and 35 years of age. All were in an early phase of their career: more than half of these musicians had graduated from a music academy, most had released their first EP or album, had been touring for a few years and had signed with a manager and booker. However, only five of the musicians managed to earn a living from music. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants with more information. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted 30–90 minutes.

British methods and sample

This study incorporated 43 online questionnaires⁸ with musicians about their music careers, followed by 10 semi-structured interviews. The research targeted musicians signed to record labels,⁹ as we wanted a sample that would be regularly involved in the business practices of maintaining a career. Twenty-three of the participating musicians agreed to do follow-up interviews, from which we chose a sub-sample of 10.

The research aimed for a balance of gender, genre and income for the follow-up interviews (see Table 2). Even though the number of music-industry courses is expanding in the UK, the sample of musicians had not graduated from such programmes. Fewer participants identifying as female agreed to be interviewed, resulting in a sample of three females and seven males between 18 and 35 years old. The sample incorporated early-career musicians: they were all signed to a label and had released at least one album, while only five made a living fully from music. Nine interviews were conducted face-to-face, the other via Skype, and lasted 45–90 minutes. In order to ensure anonymity, the data is referred to by study identifier and participant number, with for instance, a participant from the Dutch study (D8) and from the British study (B9).

Table 1. Overview of Dutch participants.

Interview number	Gender	Genre	Age	Label	Music education
1	M	Folk	31–35	Indie	No
2	M	Electronic	31–35	Indie	Yes
3	F	Indie pop	26–30	Indie	Yes
4	F	Rock	26–30	Major	Yes
5	F	Pop	26–30	Indie	Yes
6	F	Folk	21–25	Indie	Yes
7	F	Indie rock	26–30	Self-released	No
8	M	Pop	26–30	Major	Yes
9	F	Punk	26–30	Indie	No
10	M	Rock	21–25	Self-released	No
11	M	Rock	21–25	Indie / self-released	No
12	M	Electronic	21–25	Self-released	Yes
13	M	Psychedelic rock	26–30	Indie	Yes
14	M	Hip hop	26–30	Self-released	Yes
15	F	Folk	26–30	Indie	No
16	M	Hip hop	21–25	Indie	Yes
17	M	Pop rock	21–25	Major	Yes
18	M	Indie pop	21–25	Self-released	Yes
19	M	Pop	31–35	Major	No
20	M	Rock	26–30	Indie	No
21	M	Rock	31–35	Indie	No

Notes about the comparison

Although each study employed a different sampling strategy and, as one was a pilot study, had interview numbers befitting its overall size and purpose, the motivations were similar. Both projects aimed to identify early-career musicians committed to a career in music. Moreover, as shown in Tables 1 and 2, both samples were comparable with regard to the genres that musicians were active in (predominantly rock, folk and to a lesser extent pop and indie). In other words, the samples contained a comparable set of musicians and, as will become clearer, the differences in the sampling strategies to reach these early-career musicians can be understood as reflecting the variations in localized conditions and strategies to develop a sustainable career. Thus, the apparently incompatible sampling strategies used as the basis of comparison are actually very much part of the analytical inferences relating to the conditions of each context.

Our collaboration constitutes secondary analysis as both datasets were investigated to address a research question that was not part of the initial study, albeit one that is related to the original questions. Secondary analysis of qualitative data is becoming a more routine option for researchers, particularly as a way to frame the reuse of one's existing data for a new/different purpose (Mason, 2007). The preparatory process for our secondary (and comparative) analysis included an examination of both sets of interview questions, close reading of existing data and conceptual reflection on the purpose of each project.

Table 2. Overview of British participants.

Interview number	Gender	Genre	Age
7	F	Folk / indie	31
8	M	Folk / indie / punk / rock	32
10	M	Folk / acoustic / rock	23
15	M	Indie / rock	27
16	F	Folk / country	17
23	M	Indie / pop / rock / jazz	29
35	M	Electronic / techno	40
42	F	Folk / electronic / pop / lo-fi / RnB / dance	25
43	M	Folk / rock / blues / psychedelic / experimental / lo-fi	30
44	M	Folk / rock / psychedelic / dub / swing	27

While each project developed independent interview guides, our comparison of the questions revealed an overlap with regard to questions and themes, including their views on musicianship and on entrepreneurship, weekly musical and business activity, income, skills required, and social media. Examples of overlapping questions include: (NL) ‘Do you have to be an entrepreneur to achieve your goals?’ and (UK) ‘Do you think musicians need to be entrepreneurial to be successful?’ These areas of thematic overlap were used for exploration of the discursive formation of entrepreneurship in each context. An important aspect of our approach included ongoing scrutiny of the way the data was initially produced and subsequently recontextualized for this new purpose (see Bishop, 2007). This provided the opportunity to reuse the datasets for a comparative analysis that reveals differences in how musicians negotiate the local conditions of the music industries, how they frame their experiences and how entrepreneurship discourses have penetrated such views. The following section begins by detailing routine types of business activity.

Routine practices and strategic alliances

The data from both samples show that the musicians perform an extensive set of routine activities. They release and perform music and attempt to generate awareness by relying on a mix of marketing, public relations and social media. Moreover, they publish their music, perform business activities such as financial administration, have managerial responsibilities and carry out production tasks, such as the organization of tours and selling of merchandise.

Given this required range of routine activities, both samples have developed a ‘can-do’ attitude (i.e. if you don’t perform these tasks, no one else will); as they believe industry assistance comes only after achieving initial success. Musicians from both samples suggest that this attitude is necessary to create opportunities:

We must do things ourselves, otherwise nothing happens. If I don’t distribute posters, I have to hire someone . . . so I’d rather go there myself and do this in a day. (D17)

[I will] go out of my way to sort things out myself rather than waiting for other people to do things for me [such as] booking gigs. (B10)

Musicians thus strive to be self-reliant, which underlines literature that suggests labels are taking less responsibility for musicians (Hughes et al., 2016) and that musicians are required to be self-supporting (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). As argued elsewhere (Albinsson, 2018), this business activity is more than routine however, as it also requires innovative and creative thinking in order to ‘stand out from the crowd’ and to find new opportunities within a saturated field. These attitudes of self-reliance and innovation reflect the entrepreneurial discourse promoted within cultural policy (McRobbie, 2016). Therefore, much of this routine business activity that musicians carry out can be framed as entrepreneurial.

While all musicians perform entrepreneurial activities, most of them doubt whether it is possible to establish a sustainable career without the help of industry actors such as managers, bookers and labels. These actors can put musicians in touch with venues, create marketing campaigns or take over parts of the production and distribution process. However, the samples demonstrate some variation in the mechanism of enlisting professional expertise. The Dutch sample shows that these collaborations come at a price and, considering their small budgets, musicians need to make a cost–benefit analysis:

We have a lot of costs. We have to pay a sound technician. . . . We have our own driver . . . that costs money, and our management gets a percentage as well. So not much is left for us. (D13)

Several musicians expressed ambivalence about whether to collaborate in order to push their career forward, or to do more themselves to save costs. The British sample also acknowledged their responsibility for business activity to varying degrees and recognized that professional skills were essential within an industry reliant on new forms of mediation and digital expertise. One musician suggested that:

it would be almost impossible to be successful and solely manage everything, you wouldn't have enough time in the day . . . iTunes and LPs and stuff and write songs and keep an eye on your accounts . . . you're going to need some help somewhere. (B10)

However, for the British sample the need for help was linked to the recognition of their own lack of expertise (beyond music) and, importantly, the resources to do an effective ‘game-changing’ promotional campaign. One musician admitted there were risks associated with having to take responsibility for the business aspects of music: ‘there’s loads of examples where you realize that you’ve jeopardized something just probably because we’re not very good at doing business’ (B44).

For most of the Dutch sample, enlisting specialist services was not linked to a lack of skill. This perhaps can be explained by the fact that they were disciplined to be more entrepreneurial as they attended pop academies, where business and entrepreneurial skills are essential components of the syllabus (Toscher and Bjørnø, 2019), or took advantage of other opportunities for industry support concerning business advice and skill acquisition. For example, musicians praised the fact that they learned ‘how you can

market yourself as a musician' (D13), and 'how the promotion cycle works when you release a single' (D4). In contrast, the British sample were embedded within local music scenes, signed to small independent labels fostering collaborative forms of knowledge and skill sharing, thus demonstrating a difference with regard to the route taken into a music career, as emphasized here: 'you can't expect one person to have all of the skills, and I think that's what a lot of musicians struggle with . . . so that's why [record label] is so important for me because we share our skills . . .' (B7).

Moreover, while both samples of musicians recognize their precarity and thus dependence on industry actors, many expressed a determination to avoid self-exploitation. For example, while Dutch musicians look for collaborations with industry professionals, they are careful about accepting offers: 'we really doubted whether we should sign with a label. . . They cost a lot of money, is that worth it?' (D20). In addition, they complained about unsustainable financial compensation for live performances, which in several cases was not enough to cover costs. Musicians from the British sample criticized the ticket-selling tactics used by venues and promoters in lieu of commercial fees and stressed that it was important 'not to get ripped off . . . which happens a lot. . . So, don't go to a gig and they go "here's twenty-five tickets, you've gotta sell them", don't do that' (B10). Moreover, they acknowledged the need for payment not just for economic reasons, but because of the emotional impact and their professional standing: 'it's very important that we do get something and really that we break even at the very least, because that's like the bottom line' (B15). While the potential for self-exploitation exists, in light of debates about creative labour that suggest musicians allow self-exploitation because of the precarious conditions that define this work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011), an important finding here is that both samples acknowledge their attempts to circumvent this.

Our comparison, however, reveals two different approaches to avoiding self-exploitation. In the British sample, musicians try to establish a peer support network to compensate for the challenging market conditions and the limited support from the record labels they were signed to. One suggested that this was mutually beneficial, 'I do a lot of networking and I help people a lot and I do it . . . with the intention that sometime in the future I might be able to then rely on them and use their connections' (B7). With limited forms of government and industry support in the UK, musicians learn early that they will have to work more collaboratively to further their careers. This explains why being signed to small, independent labels remains an important aspect of the UK music ecosystem because they operate on a more peer-oriented, collaborative DIY basis. The historical prevalence of a DIY aesthetic in Britain is linked to the way in which subcultures (e.g. punks) expressed dissatisfaction with the mainstream orientation of the recording industry and thus participation in independent labels and scenes was encouraged (Bennett, 2018).

In the Dutch sample, however, instead of relying on peer support, musicians prioritized building a network that includes industry actors early on in their career. While several musicians came to terms with their marginalized position and opted for a career as semi-professional, thus putting themselves more at risk of exploitation, others tried to improve their situation. This group suggested that rather than negotiating better fees, they must get into more prominent circuits of the industry, where the fees are high enough

for them to make a sustainable living. In their perception, the Dutch music industries provide a pathway for talent development that offers performance opportunities and forms of recognition with the tacit promise to achieve success, and, as a result, musicians focus on getting recognition from the gatekeepers of these music industries. One musician explained that they tried to do this by signing a booker and management with a good reputation, and by ‘working hard on improving their brand awareness’ (D10). Because of the limited size of the Dutch industry, musicians have to direct their networking efforts at a small group of key gatekeepers such as programmers, journalists, label representatives and bookers: ‘the music world in the Netherlands is nowadays so “who knows who” that as a band you cannot email a venue yourself. . . . You cannot email the press. This way it is sewn up between labels and bookers’ (D7). These findings reflect research that showed that Dutch A&R (Artist & Repertoire) managers rely on their professional network to identify new talented acts (Zwaan and Ter Bogt, 2009), emphasizing the importance for musicians to connect with industry actors.

Of course, the musicians in the British sample also acknowledged the importance of key industry people, but they did so in relation to career development, rather than as a support network. The reason for this difference might be located in the moment in the musicians’ careers *when* relationships with these actors become important in each context: due to the smaller market size in the Netherlands it becomes prudent to be visible and get access to gatekeepers early, whereas in the UK musicians have to (or prefer to) work independently for longer before support is available. Here it becomes clear that the way in which both sets of musicians network is a result of their local conditions. Whereas the networking performed by the British sample reflects the strong DIY culture associated with genres such as indie rock and the collaborative aspects of the smaller, independent labels, in the Netherlands the smaller market increases the dependency on gatekeepers, which is reflected in the way musicians use the showcase festival Noorderslag to acquire recognition.

Converging musical and entrepreneurial sensibilities and activities

While entrepreneurship tends to be presented through either a celebratory or critical theoretical lens as suggested earlier, it is important to understand the empirical reality of musicians’ working lives in light of the prevalence of entrepreneurship discourse. Focusing on their rationales for the business dimensions of their routine labour enables us to understand how the different sensibilities and strategies are a manifestation of the local contexts.

For several of the Dutch musicians, being a musician means that you have to demonstrate an entrepreneurial sensibility: ‘You need to have an entrepreneurial attitude. That is just common sense’ (D13). Here, entrepreneurship is understood as a prerequisite for success and an entrepreneurial mind-set and artistic goals are aligned: ‘[entrepreneurship and music] reinforce each other. . . . Every time we’ve had a meeting . . . we are so enthusiastic that we want to start writing music’ (D13). Although music is believed to always come first, their entrepreneurial sensibility appears to be driven by the belief that it demonstrates a seriousness about their art and, in doing so, it potentially provides

greater access to the music industries. Nevertheless, some musicians showed signs of reluctance, as they suggested that entrepreneurial tasks are time consuming and feared that the intention to create commercial music might lead to 'bad', inauthentic art: 'it can give a lot of pressure if you want to make something commercial, and invest a lot of time in it and nothing happens. Then it feels like some sort of sacrifice' (D12).

The British sample demonstrated a preference to maintain a distinction between an entrepreneurial and a musical sensibility. While they felt that some of their *activities* may be construed as entrepreneurial, they were reluctant to accept the existence of any alignment between musicianship and entrepreneurship as the dominant sense of being a musician they conveyed is distinct from being an entrepreneur. One musician said: 'I'm definitely not an entrepreneur' (B8), while another said, 'I don't feel like an entrepreneur because it feels like an old game; I'm just writing three-minute pop songs and other people are kind of marketing them' (B15). One participant expressed a negotiated position between the two sensibilities by describing themselves as, 'an extremely reluctant entrepreneur' (B43). These findings are similar to the tension identified by Coulson regarding the business activity musicians were expected to perform and whom she thus describes as 'accidental entrepreneurs' (2012: 251).

Although the entrepreneurial activity of both samples is partially driven by necessity, for several Dutch musicians, entrepreneurship might be an expression of an urge to create their own success and to overcome the passive behaviour of waged labour. They associate entrepreneurship with 'positive' values such as autonomy, freedom, flexibility and personal responsibility: 'you can manage your own time schedule. . . . You are your own boss and that is a lot of fun' (D17). Such a positive valorization of entrepreneurship seems to reflect a more widespread conception in the Dutch industry that professionalism and the willingness to work hard predict career success (Zwaan and Ter Bogt, 2009). Furthermore, it echoes Leadbeater and Oakley's characterization of Britain's new cultural entrepreneurs, as at the vanguard of the de-traditionalization of work, who 'prize freedom, autonomy and choice' (1999: 15).

In contrast, the British sample tended to extol creative self-fulfilment linked to music-making above all else. One musician suggested that, 'music . . . is something that I'm kind of compelled to do, and get a lot of satisfaction from and do even when I'm not consciously trying to do it' (B8). In addition, although, as suggested above, some could understand how these business activities could be interpreted as entrepreneurial, for others these activities are better described as DIY, 'I'd call it DIY rather than entrepreneurial' (B15), while another attempted to downplay any entrepreneurial implications by suggesting that 'I just circulate stuff that makes you visible to people that you think count' (B8). The connotations of a DIY approach implied by the British data align more with independence, self-reliance and an anti-commercial strategy often associated with a DIY ethos (Strachan, 2007). In other words, a significant finding is that, whereas in the Dutch sample characteristics such as freedom, autonomy and choice are linked to discourses of entrepreneurship, in the British sample they are linked to DIY.

Here, the fact that most musicians in the two samples are active in rock, folk, pop and indie genres, adds credibility to the analysis, as explanations for differences in attitudes towards entrepreneurship therefore cannot be sought in diverging dispositions of different genres. For example, it was acknowledged by Haynes and Marshall (2018a) that

musicians working in other genres, such as EDM (electronic dance music) and hip hop, may be more at ease with and manifest a more positive predisposition towards entrepreneurship. Moreover, the different approaches in response to their local conditions explain the significance of the variation in sampling strategies. The alignment of artistic and entrepreneurial values for the Dutch sample, and the DIY approach of the British sample can be explained by the career pathways predominantly taken by each, the former more likely to be more confident in adopting an entrepreneurial approach due to training at pop academies and the latter through their embeddedness in local scenes and working with small, independent record labels. As both projects intended to target musicians who aspire to have a music career, it made sense in the British context to sample musicians signed to labels, because in the UK this expresses that commitment. As a result, this sampling strategy mirrors the centrality of local scenes, peer networks and independent labels and a corresponding DIY aesthetic. On the other hand, in the Netherlands a commitment to a career in music is expressed by participating in the showcase festival Noorderslag. The Dutch sampling strategy thus reflects the institutional embedding that musicians have in the Netherlands, in which Noorderslag is understood as the end point of an institutional pathway, leading to a more entrepreneurial mind-set.

However, even though these musicians have developed strategies to negotiate a career in music in response to the structural conditions within each context, musicians in both samples remain pessimistic about their chances to achieve this goal. For example, one musician mentioned, ‘I would like to earn money. Yes. But somehow I do not see that happening’ (D9) and another said, ‘It’s frustrating that the thing that I want to do is, at the moment, not a thing that is very viable’ (B15). Even though musicians in the Netherlands believe that their biggest chance for success is to rely on this institutional pathway, they acknowledge that this is unlikely to happen:

It remains difficult and insecure to earn an income. . . . It remains a game of ‘are you in or out’ based on whether . . . people think you belong. . . . In the Netherlands there are a few outlier bands who play in nice places but all the others do not get to do that. (D16)

In a similar manner, musicians in the British sample express a sense of pessimism regarding their chances based on their approach:

I wouldn’t want to be doing anything else. . . . I have worked in a few other jobs and I’ve been filled with doom, it’s a different type of doom, but it’s only because I care so much about what we’re doing. (B44)

While there are relative differences in the level of business or entrepreneurial skills musicians in each context believe they have, neither set of conditions provides any further commercial advantage or security against exposure to the precarious nature of cultural work per se. Irrespective of these different routes, most musicians in both samples remain in similar financial positions, where the sustainability of their careers is always in contention. This suggests that, in line with the work of McRobbie (2016), the large majority of musicians who operate on the periphery of the music industries remain in precarious positions, as self-reliance in their music careers – a quality promoted within cultural policy – does not seem to offset the insecurity of the market.

Concluding thoughts

In this article, we investigated music careers in light of the local contexts of the Dutch and British music industries, showing that the size and configuration of each music setting and government support affect the practices and rationales of musicians. While musicians are forced to adapt to the changing relations of the music industries, the structural and discursive conditions of the local contexts appear to shape how they respond to these changes.

Musicians' rationales on entrepreneurship are produced through different pathways of experience and knowledge, and are thus linked to the configuration of the localized conditions and normative expectations that shape music careers. For example, despite wider changes, the local Dutch infrastructure has benefited from a combination of initiatives of commercial and governmental parties aiming to support new acts. Hence, even though the chance of establishing a career is small, it makes sense for musicians to focus their entrepreneurial efforts on getting access to key actors and the circuits and funds they control. Conditions in the Netherlands therefore provide an 'institutionalized pathway' geared towards the production of commercial success, encouraging an alignment between entrepreneurial sensibilities and artistic goals.

In contrast, the closure of smaller music venues and reduced government and public funding of culture helps to explain both the significance of peer support networks and why views of entrepreneurship were infused with reluctance within the British sample. Indeed, as these musicians were products of local music scenes and signed to small independent labels, awareness of the material conditions of the music industry appears to strengthen a DIY approach as part of an ethical or critical response to the wider industry, expressed through their perceptions of it as 'broken' (B15) and a 'dinosaur' (B23).

However, as 'old' power/economic relations still prevail (Haynes and Marshall, 2018a) and only a fraction of musicians sustain a successful career, *neither* set of musicians is better off financially because of their strategizing. As a result, *neither* music career pathway provides advantage, showing that local contexts are not separate worlds and are in fact part of the same global industry. In addition, the opportunities that the music industries offer are inversely proportional to the number of young people wanting to pursue a career in music, and these low odds might have decreased even further due to Web 2.0 and digitization lowering the entry barriers to the music industries (Haynes and Marshall, 2018b). Moreover, the increasing number of popular music studies degrees seems to be at odds with this reality, as they 'are based on the premise that pop stardom can be just as much a matter of proper instruction and assessed achievement as a classical performing career' (Frith, 2007: 12–13).

Perhaps we need to think more about why, given these conditions, young people continue to choose music careers. Our analysis demonstrated that musicians are not unaware of the conditions of work in the music industries, where the majority of risk is outsourced to independents. Instead, their attempts to manoeuvre around possible exploitative practices suggests that the penetration of neoliberalism, and awareness of the precarious nature of labour markets generally, has produced a shift in career expectations and negotiations. As Christiaens (2020: 496, original emphasis) argues, 'instead of listening to the sound advice of economists pleading for prudent cost/benefit-analysis, they hope to

create their own future out of thin air *in spite of the odds*'. The decision to pursue a music career today, therefore, could be further framed within the context of the popularity and influence of reality TV shows like *Pop Idol* and *X Factor*, which, alongside the increasing number of pop academies and talent schools, coalesces around what Frith describes as the new demands of and commitments to music 'as a symbol of our individuality' (2007: 14). Younger generations are making different kinds of calculations with their careers, where even if music is recognized as more risky than other kinds of work, for many it is more closely tied to a sense of self, thereby reflecting the ideas of individualism and self-reflexivity that pervade neoliberal capitalism.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The Dutch study upon which this work draws was supported as part of the project Staging Popular Music: Researching Sustainable Live Music Ecologies for Artists, Music Venues and Cities (POPLIVE) by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and the Taskforce for Applied Research (NRPO-SIA) (grant number 314-99-202, research programme Smart Culture – Arts and Culture). Partners in this project are Mojo Concerts and the Association of Dutch Pop Music Venues and Festivals (VNPF).

The British study (Digital Entrepreneurs: Negotiating Commerce and Creativity in the 'New' Music Industry) received financial support for the research, authorship, and publication of this article from the British Academy small grants scheme, ref. SG122392. Thanks to Lee Marshall (Principal Investigator) and to Ellen Kirkpatrick for collaboration on the original project.

Notes

1. Williamson and Cloonan (2007: 305) argue that we should use 'music industries' to acknowledge the different sectors (e.g. recording, live and publishing), and reflect the 'organizational structure of the global music economy' and the commercial interests each sector has.
2. Marshall conceptualizes the ideological organization of the international recording industries as three concentric circles: the hegemonic mainstream as centres of power located in the US, UK, Japan, France and Germany; integrated countries such as Belgium, Canada and Singapore whose musical economies are 'very tightly integrated to the legitimate industry'; and periphery nations where 'the legitimated industry enjoys far less influence' (2013: 6).
3. The Dutch statistics were derived from International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) data and the British from the British Phonographic Industry (BPI) data, which supplies national data to IFPI.
4. GVA is the measure used to refer to all revenue totals. This figure is produced from 'final sales and (net) subsidies, which are incomes into businesses' (UK Music, 2018: 8).
5. See: <https://www.bimm.co.uk/employability/> (accessed 13 November 2020).
6. While it is difficult to make a definitive distinction between 'amateur' and 'professional' (see Frith et al., 2013: 66–8), here the term 'amateur' refers to musicians who make music for their own pleasure in their spare time, as distinct from professional musicians who are pursuing a sustainable income from music.
7. While the women who declined were too busy, the under-representation of women reflects how gender continues to affect music careers (Berkers and Schaap, 2018). Because it remains important to address this imbalance, one solution for future research is to include a booster sample to incorporate more women.

8. The online questionnaire was used as a way to identify a sample of musicians for the purposes of interviews.
9. The British research targeted smaller well-established labels (i.e. not huge corporations) that were not vanity endeavours run by a single artist.

References

- Albinsson S (2018) Musicians as entrepreneurs or entrepreneurs as musicians? *Creativity and Innovation Management* 27(3): 348–357.
- Bennett A (2018) Conceptualising the relationship between youth, music and DIY careers: A critical overview. *Cultural Sociology* 12(2): 140–155.
- Bennett T (2015) *Learning the Music Business: Evaluating the 'Vocational Turn' in Music Industry Education*. London: UKMUSIC.
- Berkers P and Schaap J (2018) *Gender Inequality in Metal Music Production*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing.
- Bishop L (2007) A reflexive account of reusing qualitative data: Beyond primary/secondary dualism. *Sociological Research Online* 4(3): 43–56.
- Bridgstock R (2005) Australian artists, starving and well-nourished: What can we learn from the prototypical protean career? *Australian Journal of Career Development* 14(3): 40–47.
- Bussemaker M (2013) *Nieuwe visie cultuurbeleid; Brief regering*. Available at: <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-32820-97.html> (accessed 13 November 2020).
- Christiaens T (2020) The entrepreneur of the self beyond Foucault's neoliberal *homo oeconomicus*. *European Journal of Social Theory* 23(4): 493–511.
- Cloonan M (2002) Hitting the right note? The New Deal for musicians. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 54(1): 51–66.
- Cloonan M (2005) What is popular music studies? Some observations. *British Journal of Music Education* 22(1): 77–99.
- Cloonan M and Hulstedt L (2012) *Taking Notes: Mapping and Teaching Popular Music in Higher Education*. York: Higher Education Academy.
- Coulson S (2012) Collaborating in a competitive world: Musicians' working lives and understandings of entrepreneurship. *Work, Employment & Society* 26(2): 246–261.
- Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee (DCMS) (2019) *Live Music: Ninth Report of Session 2017–19*. London: House of Commons.
- Eikhof DR and Haunschild A (2006) Lifestyle meets market: Bohemian entrepreneurs in creative industries. *Creativity and Innovation Management* 15(3): 234–241.
- Ellmeier A (2003) Cultural entrepreneurialism: On the changing relationship between the arts, culture and employment. *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 9(1): 3–16.
- Everts R, Hitters E and Berkers P. (forthcoming) The working life of musicians: Mapping the work activities and values of early-career pop musicians in the Dutch music industry. *Creative Industries Journal*.
- Frith S (2007) Live music matters. *Scottish Music Review* 1(1): 1–17.
- Frith S, Brennan M, Cloonan M and Webster E (2013) *The History of Live Music in Britain*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Gielen M, Van der Veen S and Van Asselt M (2017) *Talentontwikkeling en de poppodia*. APE.
- Green L (2002) *How Popular Musicians Learn: A Way Ahead for Music Education*. London: Ashgate.
- Haynes J and Marshall L (2018a) Reluctant entrepreneurs: Musicians and entrepreneurship in the 'new' music industry. *British Journal of Sociology* 69(2): 459–482.
- Haynes J and Marshall L (2018b) Beats and tweets: Social media in the careers of independent musicians. *New Media & Society* 20(5): 1973–1999.

- HBO-raad (Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences) (2011) *Focus op toptalent*.
- Hesmondhalgh D and Baker S (2011) *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries*. London: Routledge.
- Hughes D, Evans M, Morrow G and Keith S (2016) *The New Music Industries*. London: Springer.
- Janssen S, Kuipers G and Verboord M (2008) Cultural globalization and arts journalism: The international orientation of arts and culture coverage in Dutch, French, German, and U.S. newspapers, 1955 to 2005. *American Sociological Review* 73(5): 719–740.
- Jones M (1999) Changing slides – Labour’s music industry policy under the microscope. *Critical Quarterly* 41(1): 22–31.
- Leadbeater C and Oakley K (1999) *The Independents: Britain’s New Cultural Entrepreneur*. London: Demos.
- McRobbie A (2016) *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*. Cambridge: Policy Press.
- Marshall L (ed.) (2013) *The International Recording Industries*. London: Routledge.
- Mason J (2007) Re-using qualitative data: On the merits of an investigative epistemology. *Sociological Research Online* 12(3): 39–42.
- Mugan C (2002) We don’t need no education. *Observer* (Review Section, 4 Aug), p. 14.
- Nuchelmans A (2002) *‘Dit Gebonk Dient tot het Laatste Toe te Worden Bestreden’*. Amsterdam: Boekmanstichting.
- Oakley K (2013) Good work? Rethinking cultural entrepreneurship. In: Bilton C and Cummings S (eds) *Handbook of Management and Creativity* 145: 145–159.
- PWC (n.d.) *Entertainment and Media Outlook for the Netherlands*. Available at: <https://www.pwc.nl/en/industries/entertainment-media/entertainment-and-media-outlook-for-the-netherlands/music.html> (accessed 30 January 2020).
- Schediwy L, Bhansing P and Loots E (2018) Young musicians’ career identities: Do bohemian and entrepreneurial career identities compete or cohere? *Creative Industries Journal* 11(2): 174–196.
- Strachan R (2007) Micro-independent record labels in the UK. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10(2): 245–265.
- Thom M (2016) *Crucial skills for the entrepreneurial success of fine artists*. Working Paper, Institut für Mittelstandsforschung (IfM), Bonn. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/128493> (accessed 30 January 2020).
- Threadgold SR (2018) Creativity, precarity and illusio: DIY cultures and ‘choosing poverty’. *Cultural Sociology* 12(2): 156–173.
- Toscher B and Bjørnø AM (2019) Music students’ definitions, evaluations, and rationalizations of entrepreneurship. *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 49(6): 1–24.
- Tschmuck P (2017) The UK recorded music market in a long-term perspective, 1975–2016. Available at: <https://musicbusinessresearch.wordpress.com/2017/07/30/the-uk-recorded-music-market-in-a-long-term-perspective-1975-2016/> (accessed 13 November 2020).
- UK Music (2018) *Measuring Music 2018 Report*. London: UK Music.
- van Teijlingen E and Hundley V (2001) The importance of pilot studies. *Social Research Update* 35: 1–4.
- van Venrooij A (2011) Classifying popular music in the United States and the Netherlands. *American Behavioral Scientist* 55(5): 609–623.
- van Vugt J van (2018) *De waarde van pop 2.0*. Amsterdam: POPnl and VNPF.
- von der Fuhr S (2015) *Pop, Wat Levert Het Op?* Tilburg: Cubiss.
- Webster E, Brennan M, Behr A and Cloonan M (2018) *Valuing Live Music: The UK Live Music Census 2017 Report*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

- Williamson J and Cloonan M (2007) Rethinking the music industry. *Popular Music* 26(2): 305–322.
- Zentner A (2006) Measuring the effect of file sharing on music purchases. *Journal of Law and Economics* 49(1): 63–90.
- Zwaan K and ter Bogt TFM (2009) Breaking into the popular record industry: An insider's view on the career entry of pop musicians. *European Journal of Communication* 24(1): 89–101.

Author biographies

Rick Everts is a PhD candidate in the sociology of arts and culture. His research focuses on the careers of early-career pop musicians.

Jo Haynes is Associate Professor in Sociology. Her research focuses on popular music, race/ethnicity; entrepreneurship; and music festivals.