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'It was great. I felt like I connected with an audience and I sometimes find that quite a difficult thing to do'. Professional popular musicians' experiences of pride, insecurity and pressure in their musicking environment

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Abstract

Interest surrounding musicians and mental health has burgeoned in both the popular media and academia. Although research has predominantly focused on classical musicians, there has been a slow move towards the phenomenological understanding of popular musicians in the context of their working environments. This study expands the occupational perspective and incorporates a broader overview that is accommodated through Small's concept of musicking (1998), including the nuanced experiences of both personal and professional music engagement and in relation to mental health.

The experiences of seven popular musicians were explored using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which resulted in three themes. The themes consisted of: pride and validation from successfully challenging their personal expectations; loss of self-confidence through musicking; pressures to not let people down. The study illustrated how the musicians experienced their musicking as a contradictory, fluctuating environment in terms of its impact on self-worth. The findings shed light on and develop the reductive polarisation of therapeutic versus destructive impact, where music-making is therapeutic, but pursuing a career in music is destructive.

Keywords: Popular musicians, musicking, mental health, music industry, self-esteem, phenomenology

1. Introduction

My initial inspiration for this study developed from ongoing personal experience of being a professional, popular musician in tandem with my joint role as a psychotherapist, working predominantly within this demographic. This overview of existing literature presented in the study, provides a macro, transdisciplinary perspective of the existing knowledge base surrounding popular musicians and mental health.

Within the domain of mental health and music, popular musicians have received little attention compared to classical musicians (Barbar et al., 2014; Kenny et al., 2014). In 2021, Visser et al. explored how popular musicians perceive, engage and respond to mental health strategies. The scoping review involved only six studies that met the criteria, highlighting the distinct lack of literature in this area. Although research into popular music, as a discipline, has slowly increased, the popular musician still lags behind (Matarasso, 2019; Raeburn, 1987), which means that despite their historical and academic significance, the musician, rather than the music, is the ‘battered and neglected orphan’ in the world of scholarship (Denisoff & Bridges, 1981: 50).

Popular musicians have been shown to be at an increased risk of suicidality (Kenny & Asher, 2016; Newman et al., 2022), substance use (Dobson, 2011) and psychological distress (Berg et al. 2018; Loveday et al., 2022). Recent US and European studies have highlighted high levels of anxiety and depression within this demographic (Berg, 2022; Record Union, 2019).

These alarming findings have also been greatly impacted by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and Brexit difficulties, resulting in touring problems and mass performance cancellations on a large scale (Taylor et al., 2020). The charitable organisation Help Musicians UK recently conducted a survey of 700 musicians and reported a deterioration of mental health in up to 87% of the respondents. CEO of the charity, James Ainscough, stated: ‘We can’t sugar coat these findings – we are facing a mental health crisis amongst musicians on an unprecedented scale’ (Help Musicians, 2021). These findings were also replicated in other performing arts studies, which revealed an increase in anxiety of up to 83%, together with 53% of respondents experiencing financial hardship through the loss of work and income, directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, this financial hardship is strongly associated with overall higher depression and lower wellbeing in the lives of musicians (Spiro et al., 2020).

2. Reviewing the transdisciplinary literature

This literature review echoes my integrative position as a clinician, musician and researcher, and draws on trans-disciplinary areas such as music psychology, music therapy, music identity and psychotherapeutic frameworks. In order to organise and contextualise my study, I examined five main thematic areas that are prevalent within existing literature. These themes include the popular musicians’ personality characteristics; music listening, playing and the impact on mental health; the occupational environment and identity.

For further context, I now offer a definition of the key terms used in this study. The definition of the popular musician in this study integrates conceptual frameworks drawn from Berg et al., (2018), Cooper and Wills (1989) and Frith (1996). Frith describes popular music as ‘any music that is not of the Western art or classical tradition, and that is not folk music’ (1996: 42). According to Berg et al., the popular musician is a performer of diverse styles (2018), who earns their living by playing music outside of symphonic or classical music contexts (Wills & Cooper, 1988).

Defining the term professional is contentious due to the lack of a widely accepted interpretation (Geeves et al., 2016). This paper endorses the musician-based definition embraced by Sanders, who describes a professional musician as a person who is ‘economically supported by his or her skill ... and acknowledged as a professional by members of the society of which she is a part’ (1974: 16). Visser et al. further define professional musicians as ‘individuals who receive financial remuneration of any kind (full-time, part-time, or freelance) for their emerging or established work’ (2021: 817).

Musicians and their experiences are often understood through isolated and artificially siloed topics involving areas such as the occupational environment, playing or listening to music, or even substance use. In reality, these experiences are more fluid, involving a subtle blending and crossover between many factors. The term *musicking* has been used to contain this wide field and to explore and integrate this extensive range of professional and personal, music related experiences. The cultural

musicologist Christopher Small coined the term *musicking* (1998) to describe the *doing* of music, being a verb rather than a noun. This term is further defined as the ‘taking part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, listening, rehearsing or practicing’ (1998: 9). The ambiguous nature of Small’s definition has prompted an array of interpretations, such as understanding the term to refer exclusively to playing instruments (Ekholme et al., 2016) or seeing it as an ecological bridge exploring a diverse range of music-related activities (Golden, 2016). In this study ‘musicking’ is understood to include any activity connected to the act of a musical performance within the modern environment of popular musicians. This wider and more inclusive framework of musicking has allowed me to avoid a priori restrictions or limitations on exploring the musicians’ experiences from their own perspectives. This range of activities could include many different peripheral roles, such as management meetings and compiling touring schedules, as well as the more fundamental aspects of music creation, production, or listening and rehearsing.

2.1. Popular musicians’ personal characteristics

Psychological studies involving classical musicians have previously linked creativity to personality traits and psychological difficulties, and they have further suggested that creativity is a prerequisite to musicking, with its inherent risk of mental health struggles and disorders (Akiskal et al., 2005). These assumptions position musicians, along with other creative artists, as potentially being genetically predisposed to mental health struggles due to their innate creativity (Berg et al., 2022) or harbouring common personality traits (Kemp, 1996; Marchant-Haycox & Wilson, 1992).

Research exploring the personality and identity of popular musicians is scant in comparison to classical musicians. This lack of research may be due to the ambiguous nature of the diverse genres that fall under the umbrella of this unique demographic or to the relatively recent history of the popular musician. However, the lack of research is surprising, considering the high number of musicians falling into this group.

Wills and Cooper (1987: 18) suggest that these ‘musicians possess emotional instability and signs of psychological disturbance along similar lines to other creative individuals’. Further studies report both popular and classical musicians as being more extroverted, arrogant and dominant compared to population norms, as well as exhibiting higher levels of neuroticism (Dyce and O’Connor, 1994; Gillespie and Myers, 2000) with a reduced stability of self-experience (self-esteem) (Szabolcs et al., 2017). This instability of self correlates with other research suggesting a greater vulnerability in the popular musician demographic (Raeburn, 2007) manifesting as self-doubt, and feelings of alienation (Dobson, 2011).

From the existing body of research surrounding this complex topic, it would appear that a potentially tentative correlation could be made between popular musicians’ personality traits and a higher vulnerability to mental health struggles, but it remains largely unknown to what extent this is the case (Woody, 1999; Cameron et al., 2015). Mental health struggles experienced by popular musicians are a complex interaction of personal characteristics and the social environment, along with the meanings subsequently constructed from them. This complexity remains largely unexplored in research studies. One further criticism that can be levelled against previous research is that the studies have focused on predominantly male samples (Rose et al., 2019), generating a limited set of results within the gender bias.

2.2. Music engagement

The correlation between music and emotion has been empirically validated (Juslin & Sloboda, 2011). Existing research often fails to separate the experiences of amateur, professional and non-musicians when exploring the mental health impact of listening or playing music.

Although existing research has explored correlations between personality traits and mental health difficulties, there is little evidence within the popular or classical musician tradition that highlights

how personal or professional musicking impacts these supposed personality characteristics and thus, mental health (Saarikallio et al., 2020).

Most of the psychological research surrounding how musicking influences emotions is framed within music therapy settings in the clinical population or in the non-musician demographic. These theoretical perspectives, alongside musicians' enhanced ability to articulate personal emotions more efficiently than non-musicians (Greasley et al., 2013), form part of the complexity of potentials surrounding mental health. Within this area, empirical, epidemiological studies exploring links between music and the risk to mental health are rare (for a review see Theorell & Kreutz, 2012), yet there is an abundance of evidence suggesting that mental health and emotional experience is impacted positively through music engagement (Juslin & Sloboda, 2011).

Woody and McPherson suggest how the two activities of music listening and playing 'share underlying motives' (2010: 403) and are potentially the same. Music listening is known to influence psychological states through various factors such as emotional regulation (Van Goethem & Sloboda 2011) and reducing stress (Baltazar & Saarikallio, 2019). This complex process also fluctuates depending on many factors such as genre (Cook et al., 2019), musical characteristics, or our nostalgic ties to important times and places (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008). Paradoxically, music listening can also be used as an unhealthy coping strategy (Silverman, 2020), where it contributes to an overly sentimental, nostalgic relationship to memories (Hesmondhalgh, 2013), serves as a stimulus for dysfunctional rumination (McFerran, 2019) and prompts undesirable behaviour (Kennaway, 2016).

Most of the research surrounding the area of mental health and music listening is situated within the music therapy or music psychology literature, focusing on the clinical or general (non-musician) population rather than musicians. Within the academic literature, there is a surprisingly limited amount of research on musicians and music listening, given their innate sensitivity towards musically evoked emotions (Athalia & Killis, 2020; Gaser & Schlaug, 2003; Mikutta et al., 2014)

2.3. Playing music

Active musical engagement involves playing, practicing, rehearsing or any other form of being physically involved with a music-making process. In the field of music therapy, non-musicians and the clinical population, participatory music engagement has been found to be beneficial in a multitude of ways. These psychological benefits include positive or useful factors, such as increased wellbeing (Daykin et al., 2018; Mac Ritchie et al., 2020), quality of life (Bonde & Theorell, 2018; Clift et al., 2010), positive influence on moods (Valentine & Evans, 2011) and facilitation of self-esteem (Chang et al., 2018; Perkins & Williamon, 2014). Additionally, within the general population, community aspects of musicking are often found to be the most profound in terms of subjective wellbeing derived from social factors (Loersch & Arbuckle, 2013; Weinberg & Joseph, 2017) or facilitating self-development (Perkins et al., 2020).

Despite these positive findings linking music engagement and wellbeing, Clift et al. argue for further critique on research surrounding the impact of the arts on health and challenge the extent to which the arts impact the promotion of wellbeing. These critiques extend a body of research that challenges the assumption that arts and culture have a purely positive impact on health and wellbeing (Grebosz-Haring et al., 2022; Mira, 2006). It is of note that these studies all omit the popular musician demographic.

From a popular musician perspective, Raeburn expresses how musical creativity and active engagement present a unique opportunity for musicians to emotionally regulate themselves and make meaning from previous psychological wounds (1999). Additionally, music may serve as a cathartic or even therapeutic process whereby popular musicians are able to purge negative emotions Dyce & O'Conner (1994) or develop a 'clear sense of self' within the classical demographic (Ascenso et al., 2017: 65).

The brief literature discussed above highlights the emotional impact of music listening and playing in both musician and non-musician demographics. Within these existing studies, there is a distinct lack of evidence about how popular musicians use music for their own mental health (Saarikallio et al., 2020) or even about how playing impacts their personal understanding and experience.

2.4. The impact of the occupational environment

General Occupational research has shown a strong correlation between mental health and the psychosocial work environment (Karasek et al. 1990; Van Der Doef & Maes, 1999). The specific and nuanced nature of the environmental demands on musicians' working lives has previously been researched using a variety of occupational health frameworks drawn mainly from a classical musician, quantitative perspective (Jacukowicz, 2016; Johansson and Theorell, 2003).

Historical studies have explored the lives of British and US popular musicians reporting high levels of stress emanating from significant factors including the precarity of work, low income, work overload, work underload (boredom), music performance anxiety, pressure within relationships, the musicians' lifestyle, and being treated as second-class citizens (Raeburn, 1987; Wills & Cooper's 1984, 1987, 1988). These occupational stressors were also mirrored in recent studies highlighting the negative mental health impact of hyper competition (Berg et al. 2022), touring (Parker et al. 2021) and sleep deprivation (Kegelaers, 2022; Van Den Eynde et al., 2016). The touring environment in particular poses significant distress (Newman et al, 2022; Zendel, 2021) due to the demands on the modern musician to perform for longer periods to offset the diminishing income of digital earnings (McKinna, 2014). These stressors are somewhat mitigated by social support and connection to others (Heyman et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2022)

The psychologically impactful modern music environment (Detari et al. 2020; Vaag et al, 2016) also prompts musicians to adopt an independent and autonomous behavioural approach to their portfolio, boundary-less careers significantly impacting mental health (Berg et al., 2022). Within this modern technologically pressured and insecure environment (Hracs, 2012; Parker et al. 2021; Prior, 2018), there is also a significant overlap between the more traditional definitions and identities of aspiring musician, working musician, celebrity musician (Raeburn, 1997) and superstars in regard to the demanding nature of social media and its impact (Margiotta, 2012). These identity struggles are thought to emerge as a result of the interaction between occupational stress and the pressure of commercial success (Raeburn, 2000) accentuated through the psychological inflexibility required to separate music and lifestyle (Macdonald & Wilson, 2005). These identity factors can contribute towards a major source of stress for musicians (Parker et al., 2021), mitigated through substance use and drinking which is often normalised and accepted as an inherent part of the hedonistic, rebellious and high-risk behaviour (Bellis et al., 2007; 2012) of the lifestyle (Groce, 1991; Ptatscheck, 2020; Raeburn, 1999).

Alternatively, research has shown how the identity of being a rock musician was an essential component of being a popular musician (King & Pierce, 2020). The research illustrated the value of musicking in enabling the musicians to understand themselves, their band participation, creativity, societal contributions and opportunities in relation to their sense of selves.

3. Methodology and Method

This research paper is situated within a critical, realist perspective (Bhaskar, 1975; 1998); this philosophical position assumes that there is a real world in which we all exist, but we all come at it from our own 'socially determined knowledge about reality' (Danermark et al., 2019: 16). Therefore, this approach to personal understanding is mediated by our own perceptions and interpretations assuming multiple versions of reality. There is something real, but we are critical of it from the perspective of the subjective, fallibility of our dynamic, idiographic life experiences and theoretical viewpoints.

This research was fundamentally concerned with how a particular group of participants view their musicking and mental health experiences. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to explore the musicians' salient experiences from an idiographic perspective and also by taking account of where these experiences converge for the group as a whole. The goal with IPA is to get as close to the participants' experiences as possible, in order to analyse and examine in great detail how the musicians have made sense of their own experience (Smith et al., 2021).

3.1. Participants

In May 2022, the Metanoia Institute and Middlesex University granted ethical approval for the research. Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) moral and ethical considerations of interviewing, alongside the ethical frameworks as provided by the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) for research in counselling professions (Mitchels, 2018), provided a practical, robust and ethical foundation for the data collection. These guidelines included factors such as informed consent, confidentiality, consequences, and the role of researcher.

The recruitment process involved contacting my peers within the music-based, mental health charities I am associated with and using the following inclusion criteria:

- 1: Self-defined popular musicians
- 2: Earning most of their income from music-based activities
- 3: Adult (over 18) and UK-based
- 4: They included performance within their musicking activities
- 5: Non-clinical population
- 6: Proficient in the English language

The final sample consisted of seven, self-identified popular musicians. The demographic consisted of three males and four females of mixed age, genre, race and ethnicity, including two non-white musicians and one participant with a self-defined *limb difference*.

Table 1. *The demographic of the seven participants.*

Participant	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
David	65-75	Male	White British
Bruce	65-75	Male	Black British
Anya	35-45	Female	Black British
Claire	35-45	Female	White British
Fiona	35-45	Female	White British
Ed	25-35	Male	White British
Gloria	35-45	Female	White British

3.2. Procedure

The data used in the study was generated through transcribing the semi-structured interviews. The use of the SSI in qualitative research has a proven and successful (Griffiths, 2009) record of acquiring

the in-depth, first-person accounts of experience (Kvale, 2007) that were crucial for my research question of: *How do professional popular musicians understand their musicking in relation to mental health?*

The interviews were conducted personally using a digital platform due to the availability and time constraints of the musicians. These recorded interviews were approximately one hour in duration and transcribed verbatim.

3.3. Data Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) consists of a loose set of stages used to gain insight into how people understand their lives. This ‘painstaking analysis’ (Smith & Osborn, 2008: 56) involved initial engagement with the individual cases, before embarking upon a cross case comparison of similarities and differences. The idiographic nature of IPA requires that each participant’s transcript is fully analysed on its own merit before moving onto other cases. This analysis involves making explanatory notes, identifying experiential statements from these notes, grouping and clustering, and finally constructing experiential themes into personal experiential themes (PETs) (Smith & Nizza, 2021). When this process is completed for all seven participants the analysis shifts to the development of emerging Group Experiential Themes (GETs). The criterion for these higher-order GETs was met by ensuring that they were present in approximately 70% of the sample, which in this instance meant being represented by at least four participants. The GETs were developed from the hermeneutic circle shifting between the higher order concepts of convergence, the PETs, experiential statements, and original transcripts.

3.4. Trustworthiness and reflexivity

Drawing upon Smith’s (2011) evaluative markers of quality in IPA, the strength and rigour of this data are evidenced through the explicit trail leading from the initial, rich articulation of experience through to the interpretations, analysis and subsequent formulation of GETs. The use of verbatim quotes throughout the different sections offered a robust thread of evidential material grounding the thesis.

Holding an intention of awareness and reflexivity regarding the ways in which my personal experience, race, affiliation, sexual orientation, age, gender, immigration status, responses to participants and many other factors impact the research (Berger, 2015) was crucial to this process. This awareness is made even more complex by my own identity bias (Roberts, 2013) as a musician with an exposed media profile. From my standpoint as an insider researcher, the acknowledgement and active use of my reflective position is a fundamental component of the double hermeneutic of IPA.

4. Results

This study illustrates the ways in which the musicians constantly grapple with their sense of self-esteem, value and worth in the turbulent environment of professional musicking. The shifting psychological and emotional impact of musicking experiences on a sense of self was apparent for every participant. The most salient of these experiences were grouped into the following three sub-themes below:

- 1) Pride in achievement and successfully challenging personal expectations
- 2) Loss of self-confidence through musicking
- 3) The pressure not to let people down

4.1. Pride in achievement and successfully challenging personal expectations

This sub-theme explores how the participants experienced feelings of pride in their musicking. This self-pride is evoked and evidenced through the musicians’ personal achievement in terms of

performance goals, cultural milestones, and embracing tangible evidence of success. The sense of pride they experienced is further enhanced when they exceed personal expectations, which reframes and challenges their self-narratives.

Within this sub-theme, five of the musicians were explicit about their feelings of pride evoked through their musicking. Below, Claire describes her experience of levelling up through a successful performance.

C: One thing is that I levelled up, because it's the first time I'd sung in front of like, you know, 2 to 3000 people at a time and I was doing lead vocals and erm, yeah, I felt like I, like I did it, I did it really well, and I was really proud of myself. So that was one of the things that really stuck with me for that tour (221).

Claire describes her feelings of improvement and achievement through levelling up. This accomplishment within a performing environment prompted Claire to feel pride, and this significant and validating event “stuck” with her for the duration of the tour. Her feelings of having performed “really well” within the difficult context of the large audience, together with the vulnerability of being exposed through singing lead vocals prompted Claire to feel that her success was even greater, as it had been achieved in the face of adversity. The extract evokes the sense of pride Claire derived through proving to herself that she could achieve success in difficult environments, which enabled her to level up as a performer.

This pride in achieving a performing milestone and challenging personal expectations is also echoed by Bruce.

B: It's like, you know, the first time we did Top of the Pops, you know, I mean, because, you know, that was even in our, in our dream, it's that dream you know, and we get up and do Top of the Pops, it's the biggest thing you know for me, that we've achieved something (238).

Bruce's experience of playing on the British television show, Top of the Pops, was a cultural milestone for his band evoking a personal sense of achievement and pride. At the time of Bruce's musicking highlight, performing on the programme was heralded as a beacon of success for musical artists in the United Kingdom. Bruce described how this initial experience of performing on the show provided him with tangible evidence of accomplishment through achieving his “dream”. From Bruce's use of the word “we” it could be suggested that he experienced a joint sense of communal success and pride for the whole band when they appeared on the programme. Achieving his “biggest” “dream” could also be interpreted as doing something that he had previously considered to be unattainable, realising an impossible expectation for both him or his band, thereby challenging a wider narrative of the exclusivity of musicking. This pride evoked by a communal experience is also described by Gloria in the extract below.

G: I know some people say the acoustics aren't good, but they were good for our music right at the time and you know, it just fitted really well. Like it just felt right... Yeah, excitement. Er, like it's sort of contentment really, you know, like, on a high afterwards but in a sort of really good way (480).

Gloria describes her feelings about selling out an important show in her career and how she subsequently experienced pride through feelings of “contentment” and being on a “high”.

The context of this performance is situated within the communal framework of joint achievement with her audience and the collective pride of both band and fans. The sense of pride is also enhanced through the previously inconceivable nature of this achievement, similar to Bruce's “dream”.

This personal challenge to previous expectations as well as Gloria's internalised narrative resemble Anya's portrayal of her elated feelings of surprise after writing down her musicking achievements for a funding application.

A: I surprised, I surprised myself. Yeah, it was surprising and also empowering. You know, because coming from a space of like, being not confident enough and struggled with like self-confidence even before starting to play music. All of a sudden, I kind of had on a piece of paper lay down reason why I should actually be proud of myself and like, feeling empowered (84).

In the above extract, Anya, like Claire, exhibits a sense of astonishment when acknowledging her achievements. This pride and empowerment are expressed against the backdrop of her underlying lack of self-confidence, which she had felt before becoming a professional musician. Like Claire, it could be surmised that Anya's great surprise at her accomplishments contributed to enhancing her feeling of achievement.

The extract illustrated how Anya struggled with recognising her worth as a musician and how collating tangible evidence subsequently justified why she "should" be proud of herself. The word "should" could suggest Anya's reluctance (and lack of acceptance) to embrace self-pride and could be linked with her psychological background of feeling inadequate. This interpretation draws on how Anya's feeling of pride was validated as a result of seeing her musicking achievements on "paper". The interpretation that Anya felt a sense of self pride was strengthened by other statements within the transcript such as "where that put me in my mental health? It just made me feel so proud" (572). In the latter half of the extract, Anya's phrase, "all of a sudden", suggests the immediacy of the sudden realisation of her achievements that had previously gone unnoticed. This explicit recognition of her achievements prompted a sense of pride and empowerment and emphasises the psychological challenge in Anya's previous narrative of chronic, low self-confidence and inhibited self-expectations.

Ed's experience of pride resembles Claire's response to her performing achievement and the pleasure Anya felt when she surprised herself by successfully challenging her low self-expectations within musicking.

E: I felt like it was a full room and I felt like I did a good job. I was like, you know what I, I mean, I felt like I won them over. And I was like, kind of happy with that. Because initially, I was like, shit, it's just me and the acoustic and this is a rock band. But yeah, it was great. I felt like I connected with an audience and I sometimes find that quite a difficult thing to do (398).

E: I think a lot of it is from writing, it's if you get, if you get something, you create a song that you think has merit, and you think it's good. You know, there's some sense of, you can believe in yourself and be proud of yourself (685).

Ed's feeling of pride is evoked by his description of how he did a "good job" in the face of perceived adversity and created a song "that has merit". In the first extract, Ed describes how winning the crowd over and connecting with the audience despite his sonic limitations enabled him to feel happy. Ed's description of his achievement suggests a level of pride in how he navigated the environmental adversity and his own fear (expressed through the word "shit") to connect and win the support of a potentially hostile crowd. Like Claire, who said that she lacked experience of performing to a large audience, Ed's description of how it was just "me and the acoustic and this is a rock band", suggests that his achievement had greater value because of his expectation of failure and his judgement of the performance as being a "difficult thing to do".

The second extract illustrates the sense of pride and enhanced self-belief that Ed derived from the creation of a song that had "merit", as he shifts tense to the use of "you" rather than "I". This change of pronouns could be interpreted as Ed's difficulty in connecting to his feelings of pride and achievement through the intimacy of his song writing rather than psychologically distancing himself from a fear of

performing. In the second extract, Ed's use of the word "merit" conveys how he derives self-pride from the personal emotional impact of his own compositions. Here, Ed diverges from the others in that his feeling of pride is internally validated rather than being based on the interpersonal impact described by the others. The extract illustrates how Ed's feelings of pride come from self-evaluation as well as his own musicking creativity and the positive external validation of performance.

This sub-theme has explored how the musicians derived a sense of pride from their musicking when they achieved success in the face of adversity and challenged their narrative expectations of failure. These experiences of pride are contextualised and evidenced through the personal achievement and levelling up described by Claire, the cultural achievement of performing on Top of the Pops referred to by Bruce, Gloria's selling out of a prestigious music venue, Anya's tangible evidence of her achievements and Ed's winning over of a potentially hostile crowd or writing a good song. The next sub-theme highlights how the participants experience the impact of their musicking on their self-confidence within the context of their overall sense of self.

4.2. Loss of self-confidence through musicking

This sub-theme highlights the impact of musicking experiences on the participants' self-confidence. Loss of self-confidence is predominantly framed within the relational contexts of comparison, cultural bias, vulnerability, exposure, confusion, hostility and ambiguity. Six of the participants made explicit reference to how their musicking experiences had impacted their self-confidence and self-doubt.

Below, Anya explores the paradoxical nature of how musicking negatively impacts her self-confidence.

A: Well, it impacts a lot. Like, as I say, yeah, it may be contradictory, but it also impacts a lot of my self-confidence like musicking when it comes to not really to performance but like, to create music and to play music with other people. I can't really count, I think, I think that a lot of artists are going through this like imposter syndrome, sort of thing where we feel that we're not good enough (188).

Anya describes the contradictory impact of her musicking and how playing with other musicians provokes feelings of acceptance, but also "imposter syndrome". From this contradictory relationship with other musicians, it could be interpreted that Anya feels competition, comparison and critical judgement when creating and musicking with others which could intensify feelings of shame and being "not good enough". This could be further interpreted as meaning that Anya's shift of focus to the wider lens of other "artists" also lessens her personal shame and self-doubt by identifying with other musicians and distancing herself from her own experience. She goes on to develop this communal dimension by describing how many of her musician peers also "go through" this "imposter syndrome" where "we" feel comparably inadequate within the occupational environment.

This sense of vulnerability, exposure and inadequacy through musicking is also apparent in Claire's extract below:

C: I've always hated people saying, "Oh, Claire, you can sing, sing us a song". You know, from being a kid. I've always felt like it's, it's kind of a really personal thing, and that I don't, I don't want to be put on the spot to start singing. I've always felt like my voice isn't what you think of when you think of a good singer. It's, it's powerful and it's authentic. But it's not got loads of vibrato on it, and you know, it's not Whitney Houston or whatever. So I don't, I've kind of always felt a bit self-conscious about sharing it, unless it's in the right context (486).

Claire expresses her chronic discomfort and feeling exposure at being "put on the spot" to perform or in "sharing" her singing for the light entertainment of others. The extract highlights the personal nature of her musicking as well as her insecurity about her abilities outside of the correct performing context. Claire's vulnerability and self-doubt is also shown through her self-deprecating

description of “I’ve always felt like my voice isn’t what you think of when you think of a good singer”, which conveys an assumption of critical judgement through the limited musical understanding of others. She describes her voice as “powerful” and “authentic” but swiftly moves to a negative self-comparison with the popular singer “Whitney Houston or whatever” to distance and differentiate her identity as an alternative artist. This sensitivity to other people’s popular assumptions about what makes a “good singer” could be interpreted as Claire’s insecurity and her need for the safety of expressing herself in the context of her own controlled environment. Her experience of professional musicking cautiously straddles a fragile sense of self, caught between others’ expectations and her own self confidence in her artistic identity and the security afforded to her through particular performing contexts.

This vulnerability to criticism is also mirrored in David’s performing experiences outlined below.

D: I’ve never been that self-confident anyway. Er, surprisingly, it might seem surprising, erm, and when you’re writing lyrics, they’re coming from you. And so if anyone criticises them or picks holes in it, that’s you, that’s your real, the inside you it’s not like when a plumber does a bad sort of join on a pipe, you know, that’s just a mistake. But if it’s your lyrics, that’s what you believe that’s, you know, your sort of being, and if someone takes the mickey out of it, then that completely crushes and that’s why I used to get quite aggressive. Erm, plus, there was endless trouble with bone heads and stuff in those days, but erm, I was always on the lookout, and if anybody took the piss out, I would really rip into them, you know, so it’s, for me, it was like a defence mechanism (80).

David describes the vulnerable and personal nature of his lyrics and their innate connection to his sense of self. He illustrates how his lyrics can make him feel like his “insides” are laid bare through exposure to scrutiny. Through his comparison with the objective and impersonal work of a plumber making a “bad join” or a generic mistake, David further illustrates the exposed nature of his job as a musician. This feeling of exposure that comes from musicking is evoked through his sensitivity towards anyone picking “holes” or taking the “mickey” and the emotional experience of being totally crushed that this evokes.

The plumber comparison suggests the persecutory nature of David’s feelings of exposure within the musicking environment and the personally destructive impact of any criticism. By making the comparison with a tradesman, David is also drawing attention to his nuanced misunderstood uniqueness of being a sensitive musician under scrutiny, which contrasts with the impersonal, detached and objective work of a tradesman.

Resonating with Claire’s description, David’s feeling of being misunderstood is further depicted in his assumption of how “people” (or perhaps I, the interviewer) may be surprised to discover his lack of confidence. This vulnerability is illustrated through his defensive position of aggression, and his hyper vigilance, self-protectiveness and readiness to attack anyone taking the “piss” or potentially ridiculing him. David’s extract conveys that his personal musicking is akin to a battleground derived from his sensitivity to criticism and his previous experience of the “endless trouble with bone heads” (skin head, youth culture rivalry).

David’s defensive aggression resonates with that of Ed, who describes the combined feelings of indignation, confusion and resignation within his own musicking relationships.

E: So my first feeling of it was like anger and then I had another feeling of like, oh, this person doesn’t believe in me. Why am I working with somebody who doesn’t really believe in um, that I can make this a viable thing? But then at the same time they’d say to me, you know, they clearly invested money and time into me so then it was very, it was a confusing thing but it definitely, like I felt, just, I maybe, you know I’m, I’m not good enough to do this. I can’t make it work (212).

Above, Ed describes his feelings of self-doubt, prompted by a confusing interaction with his manager. The extract conveys his bewilderment and subsequent self-doubt from feeling that although his managers supported him, they also lacked confidence in him. Ed based his feeling of external support and worth through the perceived time commitment invested in him from this manager. This support was fractured when the manager suggested he should find a job to subsidise his music income. His conflictual turmoil prompted Ed's feelings of inadequacy and left him questioning his own abilities as a songwriter, as shown when he said: "I'm not good enough to do this. I can't make it work". It could be interpreted from this that Ed struggled to feel confident in "making it work" both for himself and his manager. As with David, the extract illustrates the extent to which Ed's musicking is tied to his sense of self, yet his feelings of resignation and self-doubt differ from David's aggressive reactions.

Like Ed, Fiona also draws a correlation between external relationships and her sense of worth and self-confidence.

F: My confidence was like at an all-time low because of some of the stuff that he'd said and was quite hostile about things, to the point where, even like, recently, I've been in rehearsal rooms with people like doing some writing or production or whatever, not as a drummer, I then have to be like, just kind of uncertain to be like, I don't know, if I'm, if I'm annoying. Like, I know what you're talking about, and I like, I kind of got made to feel that way before and it's making me question myself and, and all of that. And that can kind of mess with you because you sort of get, end up getting in your own head, rather than just playing and trying to like, do the job that you're there to do (616).

Fiona describes how a previous close musicking relationship had an ongoing impact on her self-confidence, self-judgement and focus. Her previous experience of hostility and criticism impacted the way she viewed herself in other musicking relationships. Fiona alludes to how her previous "all-time low" experiences of "being made to feel" inadequate have been internalised and can evoke uncertainty about her current abilities. This internalised insecurity and self-doubt prompted her to question whether she annoyed people, suggesting a fear of being rejected.

From Fiona's comment describing how she was "made to feel" (that she is annoying), it could be interpreted that she struggles with a lack of agency and emotional boundaries with regard to how others can impact her emotionally, leaving her vulnerable to self-doubt. Fiona's insecurity therefore distracts her from doing her designated "job", producing a personal internal cycle of self-doubt and distraction. This insecurity is further illustrated through her description of how these experiences "mess" with her head, suggesting her fear and anxiety of experiencing similar critical conflict. The extract highlights Fiona's experience of mistreatment within a particular musicking relationship, prompting a vulnerability to shame and eroding her self-confidence. These feelings subsequently impacted the embodied fluidity of her playing, as she sought refuge in her "head".

Fiona's insecurity within musicking relationships is also resonant with Gloria's vulnerability to the fear of poor attendance at her shows, leading to cancellation.

G: Erm, what did it mean for me, less people? It meant less. It felt like it had always gone up when it was going down, and I'm sure that this is cyclical, and they can come back and different music means different things. It just felt like a really good place to stop. Um, but it was quite, the not knowing how many people that were there, would be there, made it quite difficult. Like I would love to be zen enough to let go of that and not care and just make 20 people have a lovely time but there's only so many times you want to do that (267).

Above, Gloria describes her decision to cancel a tour due to uncertainty about ticket sales. When further exploring the personal impact of low ticket sales, Gloria reflected on how her fanbase was decreasing rather than on her expectations of an increasing audience. This novel experience together with the uncertain, cyclic nature of the music industry influenced her current decision of it being a "really good place to stop". Gloria's philosophical reflection conveys her insecurity and the impact on her self-doubt

of the dwindling ticket sales and perceived loss of interest from her fanbase. Measuring her success and related personal value by the external validation of sales showed her vulnerability and exacerbated the difficulty of “not knowing”. This uncertainty and the cancellation of the shows could be further interpreted as a self-protective mechanism through which Gloria could manage her own shame at being explicitly undervalued or dismissed through diminishing interest. At the end of the extract she alludes to previous experiences of playing to a small crowd and how there are “only so many times you want to do that”, which conveys the frustration she feels without the forward momentum of a growing fanbase. She concludes by outlining her ensuing struggle and desire to be “zen” enough to “let go” of the reactionary feelings of self-doubt.

This sub-theme has explored the impact of musicking relationships and their potential to prompt internalised feelings of self-doubt, insecurity and low self-worth within the musicians’ overarching sense of self. These are illustrated through factors such as Anya’s “imposter syndrome”, Claire’s self-protective approach to using her singing voice, David’s vulnerability about exposing his inner self through his lyrics, Ed’s confused self-doubt about a managerial relationship, Fiona’s experience of a hostile relationship and Gloria’s struggle with a dwindling audience. The next sub-theme highlights the pressures to navigate self-worth and value through achievement and avoiding letting people down.

4.3. The pressure to avoid letting people down

This sub-theme describes how the musicians experienced the pressure to be of value and not let people down within their musicking journey. All the participants apart from Gloria said that they experienced a sense of obligation to avoid disappointing others. This pressure was framed through the commitment to audiences, underrepresented demographics, colleagues and music industry personnel. These experiences were idiographically impactful through factors such as pressure, resilience, ambivalent reluctance, mental conflict and emotional distancing.

Bruce and David experienced similar feelings of pressure and the continuous need to deliver an optimal level of performance for their audiences. Both musicians felt an obligation to their close-knit band and audience community. Bruce’s extract below illustrates his resilient approach to delivering a “one hundred percent” performance.

B: You know, you get up there. You give it one hundred percent every time. It doesn’t matter if you’re, if you’re sick, or whatever it is, you know, I feel like, you gotta go and give it 100%. Because, you know, the audience pay for that, and, you know, because at times with those, right, the audience was like, part of the band (327).

Bruce describes the pressure and need for a consistent optimal, “one hundred percent” effort “every time” he performs. By explicitly stating the necessity to play through any discomfort of being “sick or whatever”, he further outlines his view of the obligation to place the audience’s needs before any personal struggles he may be experiencing. He initially conveys this pressure to be of value through his statement of: “because, you know, the audience pay for that”. This viewpoint is suggestive of a hierarchical framework where his band is the service provider and the audience is the customer. This unbalanced relationship later shifts into a more communal perspective that illustrates the symbiotic connection between audience and band, which conveys the felt sense of obligation to the band’s musicking community as a whole.

David also shares Bruce’s sense of communal obligation and commitment as described in the extract below:

I know, It's a self-inflicted thing. But I can't not do it, Adam. Erm, and I think with that, you know, maybe I just pressurise myself, but I just feel that there's a pressure. You know, erm that, if I fuck up at a gig, I've let all those people down who spent all that money. You know, if they've

bothered to a hotel or get on a flight or to come to my gig on a shitty Wednesday, winter's night, you know, I've got to do the best I can be you know. I've got to be worth the money (458).

David describes his “self-inflicted” pressure to not let the people down. He frames this obligation to the audience within the context of the time and financial commitment they have made when attending the show, alongside his need to be “worth the money”. Like Bruce, David illustrates his compulsion to give “one hundred percent” by suggesting he “can’t not do it” in relation to the pressure of performing to the point of “burn out” (315) stated earlier in the transcript. He describes the internal and external pressure alongside the obligation to avoid the risk that he might “fuck up at a gig” and let “people down” through his sensitive, self-conscious awareness of any potential mistakes. David’s extract further conveys this sense of pressure and commitment through his need to be the “best he can be” for the audience. Like Bruce, David refers to this obligation to the audience but with the additional angle of considering their level of commitment, if they are “bothered to book a hotel or get on a flight or to come to my gig on a shitty Wednesday, winter’s night”. These feelings of accountability that David expresses also prompt him to feel the pressure of being “worth the money”, so that the perceived sacrifice of the audience can be justified and reciprocated. David’s use of the phrase of “maybe I just pressurise myself” further conveys his potential reflective awareness of the conflicted relationship between his internalised process and the external pressure from his fanbase.

Overall, David’s extract conveys feelings of guilt and the pressure he feels not to be anything less than the “best he can be”, owing to his fear of letting “all those people down”. This pressure could be interpreted as both a blessing and a burden for David, who places a high value on the “caring and sharing” (564) community ethos of his musicking. This feeling of pressure suggests that David has a special, personal affiliation with his audience that far exceeds the standard, distanced, performer-audience relationship and that results in overcompensation to limit disappointment.

Claire frames the pressure she experiences from her feelings of obligation in terms of representing people with a disability.

C: Oh, “she's got a disability”, so therefore, I'm representing everyone with a disability, and I kind of, I kind of feel that rightly or wrongly, I do feel that that kind of weight on my shoulders a lot of the time. And what I also feel that there's a real, there's a real power to me doing what I do (582).

Claire’s experience of feeling the pressure of obligation converges with David and Bruce through carrying the heavy weight of being perceived as a representative for the disabled community. Claire’s indignation, conveyed through the timbral change in her voice and her words “Oh, she’s got a disability”, reflects the level of objectification and obligation she feels at being viewed as a representative for the wider demographic of all disabled musicians. She describes this as a “weight on her shoulders”, which conveys the heavy burden of this projected assumption and the need she feels, to fulfil this role for others and not disappoint, similar to Bruce and David. Her use of the phrase “rightly or wrongly” implies that she has conflicting views on her representative role. Claire’s apparent ambivalence, where she sees her role both as a burden and a reason for gratitude, is later conveyed in greater depth through her explicit mention of the combination of pressure and empowerment derived from being a representative. Claire’s ambivalence could be interpreted through the wider lens of the paradoxical combination of positive and negative impact associated with being singled out for her disability, and the status and pressure resulting from this.

Fiona’s experience of pressure from her own nuanced perspective of not wanting to let people down also resembles the perspective of other participants.

F: But it was like, before I kind of set off, I was like, oh, man, I've just spent like five years building this and now I'm gonna fuck off like, so the mental part of that was, was actually quite difficult, which, again, you don't want to totally admit that to people, because you're like, it's, it's

an exciting thing. But also, when you've built something else, you're not going to just throw that away, or just leave someone else in, like in the lurch (371).

Fiona's experience is unique within the sample due to her focus on a musical friendship rather than a relationship with audience members or music industry personnel. In the extract she describes the "mental" conflict between being offered a special performance opportunity and the resulting impact this would have on her studio partner. She articulates this mental dilemma through describing the process of how she built up a studio business and experienced conflictual thought processes as she prepared to go on tour.

Such tension, conflict and mental stress are articulated through Fiona's statement as she questioned her actions and decisions: "I've just spent like five years building this and now I'm gonna fuck off". She provides further insight into this dilemma by stating that "you don't want to totally admit that to people, because you're like, it's, it's an exciting thing. But also, when you've built something else" which conveys the potential shame she may have felt towards her studio partner. The extract finishes with her articulating the impact she feels from experience resembles that of the musicians but with the additional factor of the relationship being one of a personally supportive nature. The increased tension expressed could also be interpreted as a fear of loss or abandonment resulting from her musicking choices as well as her sensitivity to people's expectations and her desire to avoid disappointing or letting people down.

This common theme also relates to Ed's experience when describing his disheartening encounter involving a publishing deal.

E: My publishing hasn't quite worked out like I would have hoped and all these things and I hate to feel like I'm letting people down, but feel like so much that I'm just not in control of, you know (237).

Above, Ed describes the personal discomfort and difficulty he experienced when potentially "letting" his publishers "down". He articulates the unease of "hating" to feel like he has disappointed people, but he manages to distance himself from any self-blame or responsibility through his strategy of philosophically acknowledging his lack of agency and control over any outcomes. This emotional distance is a clear divergence from the other participants. Ed's extract illustrates how his resignation to the lack of control enables him to limit any personal responsibility for disappointing others, thus alleviating some of the pressure experienced by the other participants.

This sub-theme has explored how the musicians experienced a felt sense of pressure from the need to avoid disappointing or letting people down. This relational pressure ranges from the communal obligation to audience members described by Bruce and David; Claire's ambivalent representation of inclusion; Fiona's "mental" stress of potentially disappointing close personal friends; and Ed's financial pressure to deliver results for his publisher.

5. Discussion

All three themes provide subtle variations on the ways in which professional musicking impacts the struggle to maintain self-esteem and an ongoing sense of self within the oscillating experiences of professional musicking. These themes provide a novel and fresh perspective to challenge existing research by illustrating the impact of the relationships within professional musicking rather than the music itself or (the often cited) practical factors of the occupational environment.

The initial theme of pride in achievement and successfully challenging personal expectations indicates the ways in which the musicians experience a sense of pride from their musicking. This pride is derived both from validating relationships and from personal achievement. The achievement experienced is further amplified through the way in which the individuals have challenged their own expectations.

Theme two illustrates the ways in which the musicians' sense of value and worth are negatively impacted through their musicking relationship and the inherent vulnerability within their professional roles. Theme three encapsulates the ways in which the musicians feel a pressure to avoid letting people down in order to maintain their sense of value and worth. The study outlines the constant challenge of grappling with a changing sense of self within the continual shift of the music industry.

Overall, the themes illustrate the *possible selves* (Schnare et al., 2011) that can emanate from professional musicking and how these can emotionally destabilise or bolster self-definition. Within the existing clinical literature, these shifting states of self-worth are commonly associated with a lack of internal locus of evaluation or struggles with self-esteem (Rogers, 1951). Although feelings of stress, inadequacy and deficiency are common in the popular music industry (Berg et al., 2022; Raeburn, 1999; Wills & Cooper, 1988), feelings of pride and bolstered self-worth are heavily neglected, reflecting a skewed bias towards the negative aspects of professional musicking.

Existing research within the general population or classical music demographic suggests that musicking can be a source of wellbeing, self-worth and enhanced self-esteem (Ascenso, 2016; 2017; Perkins & Williamon, 2014). The first theme expands existing research (surrounding classical musicians) suggesting that a 'clear sense of self' is a structural 'sustainer of wellbeing' (Ascenso et al., 2017: 65), thereby providing robust evidence of how popular musicians also experience this elevated sense of self. Furthermore, feeling pride in their achievements and challenging personal expectations were particularly important in the context of the diverse background of this particular group of musicians. The sample of musicians (unintentionally) consisted of under-represented demographics within the music industry in relation to race, disability, social mobility and gender. Additionally, this study also highlights the musicians' struggles with their diminishing sense of self-worth, influenced by the external validation of musicking experiences. This difficulty in maintaining a stable sense of self is commonly thought to be a core component in mental health distress, where people judge themselves according to how others perceive them as being either 'accepted or wanting' (Tolan, 2003: 5).

The third theme is closely aligned with this sensitivity towards external opinions, but with the added pressure to prioritise the needs of others. For example, some of the musicians expressed how they felt pressure to consistently provide optimal value to their audience, to the extent of putting the audience's needs before their own. This sense of obligation towards the paying fanbase emanated from the musicians' appreciation of the audience's continued, loyal commitment towards them as artists, and being valued as part of their community. This pressure to avoid negatively impacting others was also apparent in the occupational and music business structure, where psychological conflict was understood as not wanting to let people down. These examples of shifting states and intrapsychic pressures illustrate and evidence Small's description of musicking as a 'political matter in the widest sense' (1998: 13), as musicking relationships and communities offer opportunities for self-learning that are embedded within the power dynamics of social contexts.

5.1. A new way of looking at musicians

This study explores popular musicians in context and illustrates the positive mental health impact of professional musicking, offering an alternative lens to other siloed literature surrounding negative mental health impact. As an integrative psychotherapist (and active musician), my aim was to take a more holistic, pluralistic perspective when attempting to understand the nuanced lives of musicians, accommodated through the open concept of musicking and both positive and negative mental health experiences described by the sample.

A fundamental thread running through this thesis, and my findings in general, is the emphasis on holistic and integrative perspectives that emerges from the musicians' account of their experiences through the study. This provides a response to Small's criticism that performers and performance are overlooked in writings about the meaning of music (1998). Through the broader lens of this

transdisciplinary and phenomenological exploration based around musicking, I have given a comprehensive overview of how the musicians themselves understand their mental health, thereby at once providing evidence for and developing Small's concept of musicking. This study questioned the reductive, one-dimensional, distinctions featuring in other research and instead placed the musicians in context, generating rich accounts of personal salience.

The findings have also shed light on and moved beyond the reductive polarisation of therapeutic versus destructive impact, where 'music-making is therapeutic, but making a career out of music is destructive' (Gross & Musgrave, 2016: 12) in this seemingly paradoxical occupational environment (Ficek, 2016; Musgrave, 2022). It is this macro perspective that enables rich experiences to evidence and dispute this split narrative, and to challenge the age-old myth of the tortured artist (Schlesinger, 2012, Spelman, 2016) within the popular musician demographic.

6. Further research

Although the study provides insight into the meaning making and mental health of seven musicians, it does have several limitations connected with the diversity of the sample. The sample was representative and appropriate for the study, and included adult, performing, popular musicians, all of whom earn most of their income from music. It also included mixed gender, age, race, ethnicity and disability, according to availability at the time. In future studies, this sample could be tightened to make the participant pool more homogenous. This could include recruiting participants within a tighter age range, musical status, similar gender, race and ethnicity, where possible. The study also highlighted a distinctive sense of achievement within the under-represented demographics included in this thesis. Future studies could develop this area and explore the impact of musicking within under-represented communities of musicians, such as those who are neurodivergent, gender-diverse or who come from lower social mobility backgrounds. Future research within this demographic could also focus on developing a mixed methods study to explore the impact of the presented themes within a larger population of musicians.

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