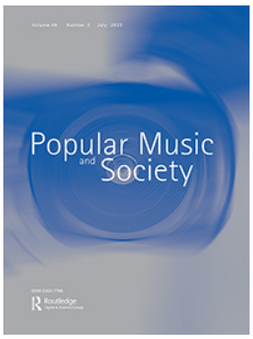

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Popular Music and Society

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpms20

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To cite this article: Martin Cloonan & John Williamson (02 Oct 2023): Musicians as Workers and the Gig Economy, Popular Music and Society, DOI: 10.1080/03007766.2023.2231266

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2023.2231266

Published online: 02 Oct 2023.

POPULAR MUSIC AND SOCIETY
https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2023.2231266

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Musicians as Workers and the Gig Economy

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen notions of the "gig economy" become widespread. Hitherto most analyses of this phenomenon have centered on first defining the phenomenon, then tracing its extent and effects before considering the policy implications. However, few previous accounts have concerned themselves with the origins of the word "gig," and none have focused on those workers whose lives revolve around gigs—musicians. This article seeks to address this lacuna and argues that a study of musicians' working lives has much to teach those interested in the development and implications of the gig economy, but also that the peculiarities of musical work so mean that such lessons have to be learned selectively.

KEYWORDS

Music industries; musicians as workers; precarity; the gig economy

Introduction

This article builds on growing interest in the prevalence of precarious employment and what has been termed the "gig economy." It first outlines the increasing interest in this phenomenon, then turns attention to a particular set of workers whose work has long been associated with gigs—musicians. Building on our previous work (Cloonan, Cloonan and Williamson, Williamson and Cloonan), we consider musicians first and foremost as workers, as people seeking employment in their chosen field. In order to illustrate the nature of musical employment, in the third part of the article we provide three brief examples of musical workers spread across seventy years. We note that for musicians many of the features of the gig economy have long been a characteristic of their working lives. In particular, the issue of changing technology—the very thing that has enabled and unleashed the modern gig economy—has been an ongoing concern. We then locate musical work in the wider context of changes in the study of work in late capitalism and particularly within the creative industries, noting theories of affective labor and outlining the key similarities and differences between musical work and those forms of work most associated with the gig economy. We conclude that both the differences and similarities suggest a need for a regulated labor market that guarantees workers the sorts of protections that an unbridled gig economy appears unlikely to produce.

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The Gig Economy

The development of the gig economy has caused some confusion, with Donovan, Bradley, and Shimabukuro, suggesting that "the gig economy, and the labor and regulatory issues associated with it, is not well understood" (14). This section attempts to offer some clarifications. It first discusses the origins of the term "gig" before moving on to discuss previous analyses of the gig economy. Two things become immediately apparent. The first is how a term—"gig"—that has had currency in the musical world for around a century has recently taken on a wider meaning. The second is that there has been relatively little exploration of the connection between musical gigs and the gig economy. We deal with each in turn.

There are a number of different meanings for the word "gig," and by the late nineteenth century the term was being used in connection with a spear-fishing tool.[1] Within music, Nunberg claims that the word "goes back more than a century as musicians' slang for a date or engagement" and that its meaning was extended by "hipsters and the Beats" in the 1950s. As an example, he cites Jack Kerouac writing, in 1952, about his "gig" as a brakeman for the Southern Pacific Railroad. In the U.S.A, the term had become common currency among musicians in the 1920s and 1930s, and it was in use within the British Musicians' Union (MU) by the early 1940s (Williamson and Cloonan). While "gig" is now widely used to refer to any musical engagement, its main usage comes in live music where musicians play and audiences attend gigs. Importantly, getting—and playing—"the gig" is *the* central part of musicians' working lives. For example, since 1965 the MU has campaigned to "Keep Music Live"—in other words, to keep providing musicians with gigs. The Union has long realized that, as performers, musicians *need* gigs and has sought to maximize the opportunities for paid live performances. As COVID-19 showed all too vividly, without live music gigs musicians struggle to survive. Elsewhere we have argued that the fact that "a term that has its origins in popular music culture [] is now associated with precarious and exploitative employment . . . should provide food for thought for musician and fan alike" (Williamson and Cloonan 493). It is salutary that employment practices that have long characterized musical employment are now regarded as emblematic of precarious working.

While the term "gig" may only be a century old, musicians' working patterns are much older. If, as will be shown, the contemporary gig economy is characterized by temporary working, insecurity of tenure, and lack of employment and social rights, then it is noticeable that these are the very same things that led to, first, the formation of many benevolent societies for musicians down the ages (Rohr) and, subsequently, the founding of musicians' unions in the 1890s (Ehrlich). Importantly, the origins of musicians' unions predate the advent of recording, and in many ways their subsequent history can be seen as a series of attempts to deal with changing technological developments such as recording, radio, cinema, and television. Within live music, technology has seen cinema musicians replaced by the "talkies" and prerecorded music replace live musicians in various settings. In sum, gigs have been changed by technology, and the working life of playing gigs can illustrate a number of issues.

It is therefore somewhat surprising that most analyses of the gig economy have ignored the musical origins of the term. There are some exceptions to this and, for example, Friedman notes that "the term comes from the employment of musicians to

play for a particular set" (172), and Abraham acknowledge that the term is "[b]orrowed from the music industry" (3). In a more detailed account, Gross, Musgrave, and Janciute have outlined some of the effects of such an economy on musicians themselves. However, other authors working on precarity in the modern labor market, and whose work is drawn on here, have been largely indifferent to the term's origins and have not sought to examine the economy of gigs. Meanwhile the notion of a gig economy has been described as being "a very 'hip' topic at the moment" (De Stefano, "Introduction" 461), and within the burgeoning literature on this economy five themes recur—definition, extent, the technology that enables it, effects, and policy implications. Each will be briefly considered here.

While various attempts at a *definition* of the gig economy have been made, Brinkley rightly notes that "there is no agreed definition" (5). The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes the gig economy as "[a] labor market characterized by a prevalence of short-term contracts and freelance work, as distinct from permanent, full-time employment" (www.oed.com, accessed 19 June 2023). Within journalism, Hook explained it as "the freelance economy, in which workers support themselves with a variety of part-time jobs that do not provide traditional benefits such as healthcare." The UK government's Taylor Report into modern working practices gave a more precise definition, relating the gig economy to new technology and business models that are "based around matching sellers and buyers of goods and services" (M. Taylor 25). It distinguished this from other types of nontraditional working, including part-time working, self-employment, agency work, temporary work, zero-hours contracts, and having multiple jobs, while noting that all these often overlap. A report for the U.S. Congress defined the gig economy as "the collection of markets that match providers to consumers on a gig (or job) basis in support of on-demand commerce" (Donovan, Bradley, and Shimabukuro 2).

Another issue has been determining the *extent* of the phenomenon. From a U.S. perspective, Aloisi comments that "it is unrealistic to exactly count how many persons work in the gig-economy" (659), while in 2016 *Time* suggested that the phenomenon encompassed around 14 million American workers (cited in Cherry and Aloisi 641). However, Friedman has noted that "the great majority of American workers continue to be employed under traditional arrangements at jobs with fixed hours" (176). In the UK—"the country with the highest incidence internationally"—the gig economy has been estimated to constitute around 3% of the workforce (Rubery et al. 511), and Taylor suggested that 63% of UK workers are full-time employees, a percentage that has barely changed in more than twenty years (33). However, De Stefano argues that while "[e]stimating the numbers in the gig economy is difficult . . . [r]ecently collected data . . . show that this is clearly a non-negligible phenomenon" ("Rise" 472).

As to changing *technology*, services such as Uber, Deliveroo, and Amazon Mechanical Turk are cited as prime examples of the contemporary gig economy. Such companies use apps in brokering work and claim that their workers are self-employed—and are therefore not entitled to the basic employment rights generally associated with employee status. The fact that such brokers set standards for workers, while claiming that they are not their employees, has important implications, some of which will be explored further below. Nonetheless, technology has unleashed the gig economy, which is "enabled by IT and make(s) use of the internet to match demand and supply of work and services at an extremely high speed" (De Stefano, "Rise" 475).

The main *effects* of the gig economy can be seen in workers' employment status. This has spawned numerous legal cases that have served to magnify the debates around the merits or otherwise of the gig economy. A report for the U.S. Congress noted that "[h]ow workers in the gig economy should be classified . . . is an open legal question" (Donovan, Bradley, and Shimabukuro 49). Aloisi has outlined disputes over drivers' rights in California and suggested that in the U.S.A the classification of such workers has mainly been as independent contractors, who are not covered by such things as minimum-wage legislation, overtime, and antidiscrimination laws (Aloisi 663, 668–73). In 2021 Uber's UK arm lost its final appeal against an Employment Tribunal ruling that its workers should be classified as employees with a right to the minimum wage and other employment rights, as the Supreme Court dismissed its appeal.[2] Cherry and Aloisi have noted numerous legal cases against the brokering tech companies in the U.S.A, as well as litigation in Italy and Spain. De Stefano writes that, because workers in the gig economy are generally classified as independent contractors rather than employees:

> businesses and customers do not normally bear costs like social security contributions, sick and maternity pay, and statutory minimum wages whilst workers in many cases risk being excluded from freedom of association and collective bargaining as well as protection against discrimination because many jurisdictions reserve these fundamental rights to employees. ("Introduction" 463)

In sum, the gig economy is an employment model dominated by various elements of self-employment or temporary employment on a subcontracted basis. Individual workers engage in a succession of time-limited engagements for which the engager pays a range of fees, usually brokered via an app or online intermediary. The gig economy is characterized by insecure working conditions, which often include being liable to instant dismissal and a lack of "benefits" such as holiday pay, sick pay, paternity rights, pension contributions, etc. In addition, the brokering firms seek to avoid paying the social security costs of having employees by simply denying that those brokered *are* employees. In its most explicit form, the gig economy "establishes highly precarious work as the 'new norm' in various sectors of the economy" (Alberti et al. 451) and furthers "the normalization of precarious work" (Rubery et al. 510). The fact that such companies also deny that they are employers makes it harder for trade unions—which have tended to be based on bargaining with employers—to organize such workers.

Lobel argues that the overall gig economy can be seen either as something that can "increase economic efficiency, reduce idleness," and encourage "entrepreneurial spirit" or as an "uber-capitalist system that commoditizes every transaction" (2–3). Donovan, Bradley, and Shimabukuro have suggested that there can be good sides—such as flexible working patterns—and bad—especially having few employment or social rights (1). De Stefano notes that "some features of the gig-economy can significantly exacerbate the effects of . . . commodification (of workers)" ("Rise" 477). Friedman has suggested that while some praise the gig economy as a spur to entrepreneurship that benefits some workers, the motivation behind it is more likely to be a desire to cut costs and reduce employers' exposure to unfair-dismissal cases (172–78).

In the area of *policy implications*, various remedies have been suggested to problems of the gig economy, especially with regard to ensuring that workers' rights are protected. One suggestion has been that of introducing a new legal category of

independent worker between employed and self-employed worker (Aloisi 685). However, Aloisi argues that introducing such a category into a legal framework is inherently risky (688), and De Stefano cautions that it is not a real solution to the problems that the gig economy has engendered ("Rise" 499). What is more important is that employment status is often tied to social security rights in state legislation, and it has been argued that one need is to "de-couple welfare protection from employment" (Alberti et al. 453). Thus, governmental action remains a key concern, and this theme will recur here.

Overall, the existing literature shows that while some analysts have seen beneficial sides to the gig economy, most have suggested that it acts to the general detriment of workers. We now turn to a particular group of workers.

Musicians as Workers

Interest in the working lives of musicians has increased in recent years. This has included our own work (Cloonan, Clloonan and Williamson, Williamson and Cloonan), special issues of journals (*Popular Music and Society*, volume 40, number 5, 2017; *Musicultures*, volume 41, number 1, 2014; and *Volume!*, volume 18, number 1, 2021), edited collections (Golding), the development of a research network (www.wim.hypotheses.org), and recent work on film composers (T. Taylor). Such interest has built on previous work that has charted the ups and downs of "the profession" and the social status accorded to musicians, such as Ehrlich, Loft, Kraft , Nott, Roberts and Rohr. Here we highlight some features of this literature including the struggle to have musical work recognized as *being* work, problems of definition, the nature of the music industries, precarious work, and working patterns.

Historically musicians have struggled to achieve social recognition of their work as actually *being* work. For example, during the early twentieth century the UK's Trade Union Congress included many who were contemptuous of the idea that musicians were workers, viewing them as "double jobbers" who, when not enjoying the cosseted life of playing music, were competing with "real" workers for temporary work (Willamson and Cloonan 46). Cottrell's more contemporary account of London's orchestral musicians (2004) is full of musicians reporting that their work was not being regarded as "proper" work because its practitioners were evidently enjoying themselves. Recognizing this problem, the MU has had a longstanding Work Not Play campaign that seeks to have the work of musicians recognized as exactly that—work (www.worknotplay.co.uk).

There are also definitional problems around the term "musician." The *OED* has defined it as being a "person who plays a musical instrument, especially as a profession, or who is musically talented" (cited in O'Reilly, Larsen, and Kubacki 68). O'Reilly, Larsen, and Kubacki have highlighted debates about what the term means (67–68), and O'Neill has noted that "there is no agreed definition of what constitutes a musician" (79). Our own approach has been to "treat musicians not simply as workers, but as particular sorts of workers seeking employment opportunities in industries wherein freelance working—often on very short contracts—is the norm" (Williamson and Cloonan 10). But musicians are also characterized by a great diversity of practices, and previous research for the MU has noted:

> There is no such thing as a typical musician. The blend of roles, patterns of paid employment status and working hours vary across musicians and across different periods in their careers. Developing a portfolio career, made up of a number of different jobs, is a necessary characteristic of many musicians' careers; this invariably involves developing non-music skills such as business, marketing, teaching and community engagement. (DHA Communications 5)

We return to this below and here note that the Union itself has also encountered definitional problems and has had to decide whether people such as skiffle players in the 1950s or 1980s DJs were indeed musicians and thus eligible for membership (Williamson and Cloonan 146, 188). O'Neill notes that being a musician has been found to go beyond simply musical prowess (79), and here O'Reilly, Larsen, and Kubacki have suggested that such attributes might include having a "professional attitude and [a] professional network" (74). Musicians are also under constant review. They need to be relied upon to turn up for shows and recordings and then perform on demand. This is paralleled in the gig economy, within which the constant monitoring of workers' performance via customer rankings is a key characteristic (De Stefano, "Rise" 492).

It has long been recognized that music is not an easy profession in whichb to seek work. Ehrlich describes the late-1700s music profession as "a cut-throat marketplace" (2). Rohr notes that, as history progressed and musical careers generally moved from being located within a system based on patronage to one in which market forces were predominant, "[m]usic rarely proved to be the source of wealth that some musicians seem to have hoped for in the early years of their careers" (164). In addition, "[b]y the twentieth century music was still a labor-intensive activity, dependent on cheap labor" (Ehrlich 60). Peterson and White noted the scarcity of well-paying "gigs" in Nashville is the late 1970s. The story told in success accounts is largely one wherein the huge commercial success and earnings of a highly visible—but numerically negligible—few often hid from the public a situation in which the vast majority of musicians struggled to achieve even average wages in a profession characterized by "low earnings potential, uncertainty and a tax and benefit system that is ill equipped to cater for musicians" (DHA Communications 4).

If technology has given birth to the gig economy, it has also been perhaps the key determinant of musical employment. Former MU General Secretary John Smith suggested that "the *continual* battle with technology" was *the* emblematic issue within the Union's history (Williamson and Cloonan 110, emphasis Smith). During its 130-years' history the Union has ultimately been powerless to stop the development of such things as the replacement of live musicians in cinemas when the "talkies" arrived in the 1920s, the rise of discos replacing live musicians in the 1970s, the controversy surrounding the impact of file sharing on sales of recordings (Oberholzer-Gee and Strumpf), and the recent necessity for emerging acts to have a social media strategy (Haynes and Marshall).[3] In each case, the Union has sought not simply to resist the new technology but to try to harness its potential for employment, especially within live music.

Musicians have long been a casualized workforce, and by 2017 it was reported that 90% of the MU's members were freelance workers ("Organising"). As workers responding to changing technology, musicians have often been hampered by being part of a fragmented workforce, something that militates against a unified response. For musicians, technology is always a double-edged sword, potentially ending one form of gig

while simultaneously engendering new forms and extending artistic possibilities. As workers, musicians seek not only to secure a gig but the right *type* of gig—one that pays well enough to compensate for those things self-employed workers generally lack, including holiday, sickness, and paternity pay and unemployment benefits.

Precarious employment is another characteristic of the gig economy, and it should again be noted that this has been a characteristic of much musical employment for centuries. Thus our history of the MU portrays its battles to limit the effects of precarity. This was often done via the securing of publicly funded employment in places such as the B.B.C and orchestras, wherein live music was the key income source. The MU sought to Keep Music Live because it has always been highly aware that live music has perennially provided the bulk of income for most musicians. It has thus also sought to provide as many opportunities as possible for live music, including via restricting the use of recorded music (Cloonan).

So, while it may be hard to define what constitutes a musician, observations can certainly be made about the employment patterns of those who seek to work *as* musicians. The majority of such people work on a succession of time-limited contracts for a range of employers in the live arena. Even those who secure a recording contract are generally not employees of the record company but are subcontracted workers providing products (such as recordings) and services. Here again, patterns of the modern gig economy working can be seen as having been characteristic of musical employment for many years, something that we now evidence further via three musical lives.

Exemplifying Working in Live Music

The three examples that follow cover three periods—the 1950s, the 1970s, and the present day. Given the enormous diversity in musicians' working lives and employment patterns across time and place, the selected examples are neither exhaustive nor representative and may even be seen as idiosyncratic. However, taken together they illustrate some of the ways in which musicians have long interacted with the economy of gigs.

The cases were chosen for five reasons. First, all of these careers were dominated by live music. Second, they allow a closer examination of the working conditions and key issues surrounding musical workers based in different parts of the UK at different historical points. Third, they allow for comparisons to be made and for the drawing of wider conclusions about changes in musicians' working conditions over some seventy years. Fourth, we suspect that these musicians will be unknown to most readers. They thus foreground the type of "hidden" musicians (Finnegan) who make up most of the musical workforce rather than the stars who tend to dominate both public perceptions and academic studies. Finally, they afford a common methodological approach within analyses of musicians' working lives, wherein diaries containing work commitments are used to illustrate broader trends (cf. Preston). It should be noted that all the musicians here are white and mainly sought work in live, rather than recorded, music. Such variables would, of course, have affected their career options and choices.

Our first example is John Patrick, who began playing in bands in the late 1940s. He was chosen in part to reflect how technological changes—notably the competition to live music from records and the advent of television—have impacted musical work. The second is percussionist Anne Collis, who was chosen to illuminate the position of

women musicians in the classical music world of the 1970s. Finally, we discuss Michael John McCarthy, a contemporary musician and composer known to us for several years. His career path shows how freelance musicians can still prosper despite the industrial and economic problems surrounding contemporary musical work.

John Patrick—The 1950s, Big Bands, and Changing Technology

John Patrick[4] began his musical career toward the end of the Second World War when, while still in his early teens, he accompanied his father at some of his gigs in and around Birmingham. According to Patrick himself, he became a professional musician at the age of 19 in 1950, when his father, an engineer and part-time piano player, allowed him to leave his office job. In part Patrick's admitted motivation was that "I didn't like getting up in the mornings."[5]

An accomplished pianist, Patrick initially picked up gigs of his own in the early 1950s before moving to London in 1954 and joining the Basil Kirchin Band.[6] Working regularly within this dance band represented an advance in security and pay compared to the intermittent work in Birmingham. By now Patrick was married and living with a relative in London's Willesden Green. The Kirchin Band had a residency at Tottenham's Royal Ballroom—a venue owned by the largest chain of dancehalls in the UK, Mecca. Patrick described the work as "a strenuous job. You played seven nights and two afternoons a week," thus illustrating the reality behind the seemingly glamorous world of live music.

In 1955, the residency ended and subsequently the band went on the road, meaning that Patrick was away when his son was born. By then his family was living in a caravan in South Merstham, Surrey. Though his wages increased, Patrick described touring as "just a job . . . a boring job . . . . You played the same thing every night," again providing insight into the reality of live performance. Professionally unsatisfied, and with a young child to support, in 1956 Patrick moved the family back to Birmingham and joined the Sonny Rose Band, which mainly played in and around England's Midlands.

Patrick's subsequent career shows how he was something of a victim of one technological advance—records—and the beneficiary of another—television. As records began to replace bands on the Mecca live-music circuit, Patrick recalls that during the breaks in the band's performances "a guy would put on records." Increasingly, dancing to records became more popular than dancing to bands, heralding the beginning of the end of the postwar boom in live musical employment in dancehalls and ballrooms. However, for Patrick this was merely the start of his musical career. If records harmed his career, television was to secure it. Following the passing of the Television Act (1954), independent television came to the UK in 1955, and by the early 1960s Patrick was able to procure regular work as a musician and musical director with ATV, the Birmingham-based part of the UK's new commercial television network. He worked for ATV on a freelance, but nearly full-time, basis from the early 1960s until 1983, when he finally became a contracted member of staff.

During this period, he received a good income from working on shows such as *Lunchbox*, *New Faces*, and *Tiswas*. He also continually performed and was heavily involved in MU activities, including serving as Chair of its Executive Committee for many years. By writing the theme music for several ATV shows—notably *Bullseye*—Patrick also had a lucrative additional income from the royalties he

received for the use of his music. In his role of Musical Director at ATV, he was also a major *employer* of musicians, something that rankled some MU colleagues. Although he retired in the early 2000s, Patrick continues to play occasionally with the John Patrick Trio.

Anne Collis—The 1970s, Women in Orchestras, and Gender

Despite the advances of recorded music, by the 1970s musical work for live performers was still plentiful. However, some musicians—particularly women—faced discrimination in their attempts to access such opportunities. In the UK's music profession much of the discussion around discrimination concerned the orchestras. Focused on playing live concerts, these were one of the few places where musicians could get full-time, secure employment. However, they were also bastions of *male* employment. In 1974 the four London symphony orchestras employed around 400 musicians between them, of whom just 28 were women (Hambleton 44). At the same time, fewer than 10% of the MU's members were women.[7] The exclusion of women extended to all forms of musical work across all genres and included issues such as pay, the peripatetic and precarious nature of the work, child care, and deep-rooted prejudice from established, male musicians (Hambleton 44).

It was in this context that Anne Collis entered the music profession. Born in Preston in 1943, she moved to London to study at the Royal Academy of Music between 1962 and 1964, a time when, she recalled, "there were no women on any instrument except the harp in any major London orchestra."[8] After auditioning as a pianist, Collis chose to study percussion, meaning that the Academy had to create a new faculty for her—as, prior to this, percussion had not been taught for either men or women.

Collis's then-unique qualifications certainly created employment opportunities when she left and worked in "touring ballet companies, visiting opera companies needing an orchestra, chamber music or stiffening amateur orchestras who were planning to give concerts, but had no-one to play percussion." By the late 1960s more prestigious work came with the English Opera Group and at The Old Vic, though Collis recounted that despite being "kept busy with lots of very satisfying work, the world of the major, established orchestras was firmly closed to us women."

By 1970, Collis had—in her words—"nagged" her way into regular work with one such orchestra, the Royal Philharmonic—"much against the wishes of the board." Tellingly, she was not granted full member status but worked with them regularly, and the orchestra's PR department was happy to use the novelty of a female percussionist to pitch stories to the tabloid press. Her non-permanent status gave her the freedom through the 1970s to also perform live with many of the other orchestras and ballet and opera companies as well as appearing on records and on television.

In 1984 an accident curtailed Collis's career as a musician, though not in music. She initially moved into education as a Junior Professor at the Royal Academy. She also composed and conducted, frequently with the National Symphony Orchestra, the renowned scratch orchestra, of which she was managing and artistic director when she died in 2013. In this role, Collis acted also as an orchestral fixer, matching freelance players with musicians, record companies and film producers with orchestras.[9] Thus, like John Patrick, Collis moved from being primarily a musician

to serving as a facilitator of gigs for fellow musicians. Her story is one of how gender and industry structure mitigated her search for gigs and the sorts of gigs she subsequently got.

Michael John McCarthy—Contemporary Theatrical Work

Michael John McCarthy (www.michaeljohnmccarthy.com/) was born in West Cork in 1982 and moved to Glasgow in 2004 for ostensibly academic, but also musical, reasons. McCarthy had an embryonic musical career in Cork, making an album with the band Elephant, who also toured across Ireland. Aged twenty, he got his first professional gig, writing and performing music for a theater production called *Soap*. Following his move to Glasgow, McCarthy completed a master's degree but also began playing with other musicians whom he met via the university and by playing open-mic nights. In 2006, McCarthy formed the band Zoey Van Goey, who were active until 2012. They released two albums and toured widely—an activity that subsidized their record making.

McCarthy became officially a self-employed musician in May 2007 and recalls that "the very first thing I was paid to do in Glasgow, as a musician, was to compose and perform music for a play."[10] Such work continued, and McCarthy describes his current work as a mixture of composer, performer, and musical director for theater. He has written widely for theater, including having work performed at Ireland's national theater—the Abbey—and having several National Theatre of Scotland commissions. Within Scotland he is often seen as the "go-to guy" for several theater companies.

McCarthy's rising status was shown when he appointed an agent, who now brokers work for a percentage of the agreed fee. In interview, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, McCarthy reported having a relatively full diary but also made two major admissions. The first was that "I don't have a sense of how many hours I put in a week. If you were to average my hours over the course of a year . . . and then break that down [into] an hourly rate, it might make for some uncomfortable reading." The second, when asked whether he sees himself as part of the gig economy, was to note the importance of the *quantity* of "gigs:" "I'm not sure how sustainable it is for me to get paid the same or less. How much I get paid per gig has been pretty much static for the last three or four years. So, if my income had gone up it is because I'm doing more gigs, it's not because I'm getting paid more per gig."

McCarthy pointed to the importance of government actions and funding as, in addition to the effects of austerity generally, he also highlighted the pressure on publicly funded arts (on which many of his employers are dependent) and the dangers of the Brexit. He also cited the fact that the UK's National Health Service is still free as a major factor keeping him there and not returning to his native Ireland and its costly health care. In his career McCarthy has moved from being both a performer and composer to primarily working as a composer, employed on a series of short-term contracts writing for a range of theatrical productions within which he or others perform his music live. In common with Patrick and Collis, the nature of McCarthy's gigs and his role within them have evolved over the years, but they have also been continually focused on live performance.

The Economy of Gigs

These three examples illustrate some of the perennial issues facing musical workers working within the economy of gigs. While chosen to describe and reflect on musical work across a span of seven decades in different places and circumstances, there are a number of important similarities in these careers that magnify our arguments about musicians and their gigs. Here, four things can be highlighted.

The first is the importance of live music. While Patrick's main earnings came from compositions for television, it was live music that gave him his break and that he continued to play. His role also incorporated managing others' live performances. Collis's career relied on live orchestral performances, and McCarthy's is now reliant on theatrical performance. In all three cases, government action was important—it established the independent television network from which Patrick benefited and indirectly funded much of the orchestral and theatrical work that provided employment for Collis and McCarthy.

Secondly, all three musicians had to move to pursue musical careers and to varying extents lived nomadic existences. Patrick initially had to move to London and become part of a touring band before achieving enough success to return to Birmingham. Collis had to move to London to study and then traveled extensively for work before returning to London and the center of the orchestral world. McCarthy moved for a combination of musical and educational reasons but admits that "it would be much, much harder for me to make a living in Ireland than it is in Scotland." His work still frequently takes him away from his Glasgow base. While a complex array of push and pull factors are at play here, for many musicians the lack of a permanent base is as much a feature as the lack of permanent work.

Thirdly, the three examples illustrate a tradeoff between the flexibility and variety of work afforded by various forms of self-employment and its accompanying insecurities. A degree of success can engender both the ability to choose work and—vitally—the ability to decline it. McCarthy reported that "if someone approaches me with a project that I'm not interested in, I can sort of turn them down" but admitted to being "still not confident enough" in his continuing employment prospects to reject proposals outright, so that he makes excuses rather than simply declining. Thus, while all our musicians can be viewed as artistic or creative successes, crucially they have not always enjoyed a degree of financial security.

Finally, making a success of such precarious work requires some personal characteristics and sometimes accidents of place and time. What is striking is the adaptability of all three musicians and how they sustain(ed) lengthy musical careers by reducing the amount of performing they did for other activities as employers, musical directors, conductors, and composers. Such flexibility and dexterity are also longstanding phenomena, as Ehrlich has shown that in the early 1800s a portfolio career was necessary in order to be a success in music (33). While education perhaps plays an increasingly important part in sourcing opportunities, personality and reliability are at least as important as talent in securing reemployment. Throughout, the ability to perform or to produce work on time for performance remained key.

Importantly, opportunities for musical work are not available equally to all musicians, with gender, race, technology, education, and geography amongst the factors that play

a part in either opening or restricting such opportunities. We could speculate about how Patrick's career would have progressed without television, what opportunities Collis would have had were she ten years older or younger, and whether McCarthy could have pursued his career without the expansion of postgraduate education that has characterized contemporary UK higher education. However, despite their differences, the three examples provide insight into a world of work that has long been based on the procuring and playing of gigs.

The Bigger Picture

Thus far we have attempted to unpack both the nature of musical work in the form of the economy of gigs and the nature of the gig economy. However, all this needs to be located within more general discussions of work and, more specifically, cultural work in capitalist societies since the late twentieth century. Here it is important to recognize important shifts in critical accounts of capitalism. These changes have brought about increased interest in work that falls under labels such as "immaterial" and "affective" labor, with their origins in writings by autonomist Marxist theorists, particularly Hardt and Negri (*Empire*; *Multitude*). For Hardt ("affective"), affective labor is a form of immaterial labor, something that produces "an immaterial good, such as a service, knowledge or communication" (94). He acknowledges that this phenomenon is not new, as feminist analyses have long recognized the importance of various forms of caring labor. However, he suggests that what *is* new is the dominant position that affective labor holds in the modern international economy, arguing that there are three important things about modern immaterial labor—"industrial production that has been informationalized," "analytical and symbolic tasks," and "the production and manipulation of affects" (97–98).

Music-making clearly involves the production of immaterial goods and attempts to manipulate emotions, and Hardt rightly describes the creative industries as being "focused on the creation and manipulation of affects" (95). Here it should be noted that one characteristic of the gig economy is the emotional work that workers have to undertake with customers (De Stefano, "Rise" 478), and this is again characteristic of musical—and other creative—work.

Accounts of affective labor have inevitably examined the creative industries, with Gill and Pratt suggesting that the idea of autonomous labor has both "added insights and thrown up tensions" (20). Overall, they suggest that the concept lacks coherence, falls in the face of experience, and is "not sharp enough to see the ways in which cultural work is both like and not like other work" (15, 20). As will be shown, this is something that is true of music. Additionally, Angela McRobbie has suggested that Hardt and Negri both exaggerate the changes in capitalism and remain masculinist in their outlook (cited in Pitts 617). Here the example of Collis cited earlier shows the importance of gender, something that has been marginalized in debates around the gig economy, although it has engendered a rich literature within studies of music.[11]

Thus, while music can be seen as a form of affective labor, the role of that labor in the gig economy remains largely unexplored. Moreover, music has played a relatively minor part in accounts of the creative industries in the era of the gig economy. As Hofman notes, only recently has music become part of "the energizing empirical scholarship on

affective labor practices as part of the recent 'turn to labor' in cultural studies" (29). It seems that music's role here is to serve both as an example of affective labor and as an example of some of the issues surrounding the gig economy. During a debate on flexible working at the Scottish Trades Union Congress conference in 2017, MU member Stephen Wright proclaimed "the gig economy: welcome to our world! More and more workers are finding they have to manage a number of activities with corresponding income streams. This has been the case for people in the entertainment industries for some time" (cited in "Organising").

For music scholars the idea that musicians invented both the word "gig" *and* the gig economy, thereby providing lessons that other workers should learn, may well be an appealing one. Certainly, as has been shown, the similarities between well-established employment practices in music and the gig economy exist. Indeed, for some musicians, including those who are our examples, such arrangements can be their preferred way of working. For John Patrick, freelance work and having no single employer was a way of maximizing his income from music. New technology—television—allowed him to do so. For Collis, the nature of her work was usually down to how the societal norms of the time were played out in the music profession. Her career at least coincided with advances in equalities that had some positive impact on parts of the music profession. Michael John McCarthy reported finding himself in a position where taking four- to six-week contracts in the theater allows him both to generate an acceptable income and to play a bigger part in bringing up his child than might otherwise be the case. In such instances, there are various factors that drive musicians toward working in different ways, and, for some, nontraditional ways of working may be preferable.

It should also be remembered that, as noted earlier, the category of "musician" embraces a wide range of genres that have varied working practices. Being a DJ is quite different from playing in an orchestra, and things such as genre-based working practices affect musicians in myriad ways not always replicated in the wider gig economy. So it is also necessary to recognize that making music within the economy of gigs is also different in key ways from "the gig economy" more generally. We therefore urge some caution in characterizing musical work as being part of the gig economy. At least four important aspects of working in music prevent it from being fully part of the gig economy.

First, a limited amount of musical work is available, and a relatively small number of musicians are capable of doing it. The relative career successes of our three examples were due in part to the fact that they were deemed to have unique talents. This means that there is no great advantage in the type of technological solution to high demand and supply for a service that typifies the gig economy. Thus, it seems unlikely that orchestral fixers will be imminently facing a challenge from any start-up branding itself an "Uber for musicians" or that an app will replace the agents who are responsible for getting musicians live gigs. Secondly, the elements of the music profession that *do* resonate with theorizations of the gig economy are historically fixed. The itinerant nature of the work, its sometimes long and antisocial hours, and its exclusive and exclusionary nature can be traced back well beyond the start of industrialized capitalism. Thirdly, the nature of musical work cannot be easily compared to that of Uber or Deliveroo drivers. That work is often "on demand," whereas booking musicians is often done months in advance. Fourthly, many musicians have the opportunity to design the output of their labor themselves (albeit often in conjunction with others). This is obviously not true of taxi drivers or delivery workers. In sum, while

musicians work within an economy of gigs, they may only be part of the gig economy when supplementing their musical work by delivering takeaways, driving taxis, or working in call centers. Thus, the paradox may be that an increasing number of musicians use work within the gig economy to supplement their *actual* gigs!

Conclusion

Noting the differences and similarities between musical employment and the wider economy only takes us so far. It is also important to learn the lessons of history and draw conclusions from musicians' experiences. Our previous work has suggested that what benefited musicians most were public provision of musical employment, government intervention to secure work, and the protection of employment rights (Williamson and Cloonan). The case studies above produced similar conclusions, with all three musicians having benefited from government intervention—to set up independent television, to fund orchestras, and to fund theater.

Our musicians sought security of income and were highly aware of their own employment contexts—Patrick as an MU activist, Collis as a woman, and McCarthy as an immigrant. Given that the wider gig economy serves to undermine secure employment, one lesson is that an online world requires *more* labor-market regulation rather than less. Our own work, the existing literature, and the examples here all suggest that governments need to nurture and protect both those playing gigs and those working in the gig economy. Examples of how this might be done include more sympathetic unemployment practices in France (Umney) and recent governmental attempts to nurture live music in Australia post-COVID (Gallagher). History also shows that the market alone is unlikely to produce the fullest possible range of musical employment (Williamson and Cloonan). Thus, the musical economy of gigs and the larger phenomenon of gig economy are, both, too important to be ignored by those governments that are genuinely interested in improving working conditions and nurturing workers' talents.

Notes

1. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this point. See also https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/gig.
2. See Browne; "Press Summary."
3. For recent debates about the impact of Artificial Intelligence on musicians see https://musiciansunion.org.uk/news/mu-assistant-general-secretary-discusses-concerns-about-ai-and-songwriting-on-bbc-newsnight.
4. See also https://livesinmusic.libsyn.com/lives-in-music-john-patrick.
5. All Patrick quotes are from an interview with John Williamson in Birmingham, 19 Feb. 2014.
6. Kirchin was an English composer best remembered for his soundtracks and library music written after his work as a big band leader. See Williams.
7. Compared to around 32% now (www.tuc.org.uk/unions/mu, accessed 28 Jan. 2023).
8. All Collis quotes are from Collis's "The Only Girl in the Orchestra."
9. "Fixers" arrange deputizing and other short-term work within orchestras and work closely with musicians in doing so.
10. All McCarthy quotes are from an online interview with Martin Cloonan, 21 Nov. 2017.
11. See, for example, Bull; Leonard; Scharff.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This article benefitted from support from the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council [AH/1027215/1].

Ethics

Ethical approval for this work was given by the University of Glasgow.

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