

'It's Turned Me from a Professional to a "Bedroom DJ" Once Again': COVID-19 and New Forms of Inequality for Young Music-Makers

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Abstract

Given the unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and increasingly uncertain socio-economic conditions, cultural practice remains a stable canvas upon which young people draw the most agency and exercise a sense of freedom. This article reports on an international research collaboration, drawing on the voices of 77 young musicians from three countries—Australia, England and Portugal—who were interviewed about their music-making practices during lockdown. Despite reporting loss of jobs and income and the social distancing restrictions placed upon the ability to make music, most young music-makers were positive about the value of having more time, to be both producers and consumers of music. At the same time, however, our data also highlight increasing forms of inequality among young music-makers. This article argues that despite short-term gains in relation to developing musical practice, the longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on the music industry will affect the sector for years to come.

Keywords:

COVID-19, culture, employment, inequality, popular music, young people

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Introduction

Despite being heralded as the ‘new normal’, unprecedented social and economic conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are having a significant impact upon young people. Key concerns for young people included the effects on schools and universities (OECD, 2020), well-being (NYA, 2020) and work and household finances (UK YOUTH, 2020), with 76% of 25- and 29-year-olds reporting impacts on their work (Office for National Statistics, 2020). Young people, at a time of transition, are now uncertain of what steps to take in future (Beatfrees, 2020). Social isolation, the loss of routine and fears about the pandemic and the disruption to their futures have all increased pressure on young people, threatening their physical and mental health (YoungMinds, 2020).

This article reports on the experiences of young musicians during times of lockdown and social distancing. The restrictions that young music-makers have faced impact upon not only the ability to perform live but also to rehearse and collaborate, with many drawing on alternative and digital strategies to sustain their practice. Despite the benefits of being able to continue music-making through online participation and social networking, new forms of disadvantage have begun to emerge. This article explores the short-term and longer-term consequences of COVID-19 for young music-makers. We demonstrate that whilst a significant percentage of young musicians felt they benefitted from the time to ‘turn inwards’ to practice their craft, to work on the ‘business side’ and develop their social media profiles, the longer-term impacts present further economic instability and unemployment for years to come. We explore COVID-19 as a catalyst for broader change that accentuates and highlights the precarious nature of artistic careers in the area of popular music.

Following an exploration of recent research around the precarious careers of young musicians, we report on an international comparative research project which sought to understand the importance of music-making for young people (between the ages of 18 and 35) during the COVID-19 crisis. Young people’s experiences are voiced through data drawn from 77 young musicians from Australia, England and Portugal. Analysis has signposted some important themes in relation to having more time and undertaking different music-making practices, socially distant collaboration and moving music online. These are explored further in this article, where we argue that despite the ingenious ways music-making continued during lockdown, the longer-term impacts on the music industry mean that young people’s livelihoods and education will be impacted for many years to come.

Young Precarious Careers

‘Youth’ is a formative stage where discourses of risk and resilience are prevalent in the lives of young people. Many experience inequalities through schooling (Reay, 2017), social networks (MacDonald, 2008; MacDonald et al., 2005) and cultural practices (Brook et al., 2020; Oakley & O’Brien, 2016). Internationally youth policy depicts young people as either in need of protection or intervention (Riele, 2006) or to blame for social problems (Turnbull & Spence, 2011). However, these discourses fail to recognize the complexity of young people’s lives and the root causes of intersecting social and economic insecurities, which are typically not of their own

making. Times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 global pandemic, exacerbate these inequalities. Given the inequalities associated with musical and artistic careers (Upton-Hansen et al., 2020), all the more evident in the case of the young musicians portrayed here, we must consider them under the aegis of the ‘economy of talent’. McRobbie (2016), for example, highlights creative people’s anticipation of the future of their work and the ways in which careers are embodied, whilst artistic creation activities are increasingly seen as an advanced expression of new modes of production and new employment relationships (Menger, 2006). Thus, if we establish a relationship between the economic, psychological and social implications of COVID-19 and the employability systems that govern artistic activity, it becomes possible to envisage a possible future for this labour market vis-à-vis industry. Thus, the analysis of careers and the conception of the artist’s profession must be based on the ways in which the labour markets work, something that has changed profoundly due to the pandemic context.

Another aspect to be considered in the present is the consideration of inequalities as a reflection of the ‘excess’ supply of artists, i.e. there is a mismatch between supply and demand for music, causing them to create ‘permanent critical situations’ (Menger, 2014). The innovations, which have been assumed as a constant in the last 20 years, in the musical production, tend to contribute to the devaluation of the skills or the necessary requirements by the artists. Moreover, this devaluation of artistic creation accentuated by the pandemic is one of the main risks and barriers to artistic careers. In addition, the ‘pack of cards’ of inequalities happening in this pandemic context include: increasing income inequalities making cachés vary dramatically from musician to musician, but also accentuating disadvantages from the point of view of reputation and recognition. Indeed, COVID-19 has further emphasized a previously existing divide (Perrenoud & Bois, 2017).

The gig economy offers young musicians working patterns and practices that revolve around precarious self-employment. These have previously been exposed as problematic, class-based and at worst exploitative (Cohen, 2015; McKinlay & Smith, 2009; Mould et al., 2014). The precarity of careers in fields such as music, even before the pandemic, meant that young people need to take up different opportunities in order to survive. These kinds of working lifestyles are argued to be setting young people up for uncertain futures where only the most advantaged can succeed (Friedman et al., 2016) and are emblematic of worker identities within contemporary capitalism where entrepreneurialism and self-commodification are held up a response to economic uncertainty and precarious working environments (Mendick et al., 2018).

In terms of music careers only a minority of music graduates enter the music sector, and an even smaller group enters the broader creative economy (Comunian et al., 2014). Pre-COVID research reveals the prevalence of ‘portfolio careers’ for musicians, who supplement or subsidize their music-making with concurrent, usually impermanent roles (Bartleet et al., 2020; Teague, 2015). In the United Kingdom, of those who took part in the Live Music Census (Webster & Ansell, 2018), nearly half (49%) of their annual income as professional musicians came from performing live compared to only 3% from recording. In Australia, a nationwide survey found that only half of musicians received all of their income from music-related work, with performance fees, music teaching and grants being the most common sources, while 49% reported two or more paid roles in a range of occupations. Respondents were

disproportionately self-employed (44.35%) or in temporary part-time or casual roles, with only a small minority (5.99%) in continuing, full-time employment (Bartleet et al., 2020). For the Portuguese case, considering 2018, about 131,400 people were employed in cultural and creative activities and of this total (INE, 2018), since 2014, there has been an increasingly strong presence of young artists aged between 15 and 24 (about 11.1 thousand in 2018). With regard to wage inequalities and precarious careers, it can be seen that in 2018, only 22% of workers in the sector had an open-ended contract and of the remaining only half worked for green receipts,¹ 12% had a contract and, more importantly, 8% had no fixed-term employment relationship.

Such findings dovetail neatly into a broader focus on what have been referred to as DIY careers in music and associated cultural practices (Bennett & Guerra, 2018). Initially associated with forms of resistance to mainstream cultural production exhibited by punk and post-punk music (McKay, 1998). DIY culture now encapsulates a vibrant and complex sphere of cultural practice, whereby individuals utilize formally and informally acquired creative skills to forge career paths in a socio-economic landscape characterized by precarious lifestyles and the gig economy (Threadgold, 2018). In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a particularly dislocating effect, setting off new patterns of disadvantage in a sphere of cultural practice and production that was already fragile and inherently predisposed to fluctuations in the economy.

A Study of Youth and Music-making During a Public Health Crisis

The aims of our study are twofold: first, to understand the importance of music-making for young people, and second, to understand the perceived and experienced impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on music-makers. In this article, the focus is on the latter. Taking a comparative approach, qualitative interviews were undertaken in Australia, Portugal and the United Kingdom. In total, 77 young music-makers aged 18–35 years (mean age = 28) were interviewed across the three countries; Australia ($n = 18$), Portugal ($n = 37$) and United Kingdom ($n = 22$). Due to social distancing, interviews were conducted online using Zoom and other platforms such as Skype. The interview schedule was consistent across all the three countries to enable thematic comparison in the analysis stage. Participants were recruited through researcher links with local music groups and young musician's networks. There were also social media call outs for participants and snowball sampling. Interviews rather than a survey were chosen as the primary data collection method, as it was agreed by the research team that interviews offered participants a more in-depth opportunity to articulate their personal experiences of COVID-19 pandemic and how it has impacted their music-making ambitions and aspirations. Data were analysed thematically through the sharing of coded data among the international research project team.

The gender of the participants was split, with nearly 64% of the sample being male ($n = 49$), 33.8% ($n = 26$) female and 2.6% ($n = 2$) identified as non-binary. Participants from all countries were mostly located in major cities and majority reported being employed on full-time or part-time basis (75.3%, $n = 58$). Young musicians we interviewed practised a range of musical genres and practices from

session musicians and guitarists to vocalists, DJs and MCs with some also being promoters. A significant number of the musicians interviewed for this study practised multiple music-making activities. Of the total cohort 30% ($n = 23$) increased their music activity during COVID, 37% ($n = 29$) decreased with 33% ($n = 26$) having a mixed experience. In addition, 19% ($n = 14$) reported a positive impact of COVID-19 on their music career, whilst 37% ($n = 27$) felt that the pandemic had negatively impacted their future careers in music. Thirty-three participants (44%) felt uncertain about the impact for their musical career. Fifty-one participants (66%) reported a loss of income from music-making activities and a further 9 (12%) reported a loss of income from non-music-making income. Seventeen participants (22%) reported no loss of income.

Young Music-maker's Life Under COVID

Young musicians from Australia, Portugal and the United Kingdom reported positive benefits of music-making during COVID-19. This was in terms of not only well-being benefits but also productivity, with many research participants reporting that they had used time during lockdown to write and record new music. Young music-makers also valued having more time to be both producers and consumers of music, as well as turning their attention to the 'business side' of music, which they previously had not dedicated much time to. However, many young people were also aware that these short-term gains came at the detriment of longer-term aspirations. The adoption of such behaviours and practices constitutes an immediate response to the demands caused by the pandemic in the cultural and artistic sector, so we can say that we are faced with several and multifaceted forms of resilience. A few of our interviews took a sanguine view of this, feeling that they were in an advantageous position to be able to ride out the storm of difficult times ahead. This view is typified in the interview excerpt below:

I'm feeling very fortunate that I still have two years of my degree to go before I try and form a career. Because I'm seeing job losses at the moment, that industry is going to need some time to recover, even when it does re-start. In terms of the projects that I'm involved in now, I'm actually quite optimistic that when things return, this time that we've had has meant that we've been able to focus on making what we're going to come back with and making that as good as we possibly can. I think there will be an immediate sort of hunger for people to get back out and engage in music. And I hope that with that, the industry has maybe a little bit of a boom afterwards. Then there'll be more jobs to look at in a couple of years' time when I graduate. I'm just trying to stay as positive as I can about a career in the music industry right now. (Music student, UK)

For many other participants, however, the immediate and deep impacts of COVID-19 on the music industry, including lack of paid employment and the closure of venues, prompted an altogether bleaker view of the situation. Thus, as one of our interviewees observed:

We've gone from being in a relatively stable band and business to, I guess, overnight losing our income for the whole year. That's obviously meant that we're unable to be playing, we're unable to be meeting other people and getting inspired to write more music. In turn

it's meant we've all, including me, had to find other work and work more to make ends meet which means less time for making music. (Professional guitarist, Australia)

In the middle of lockdown, with the Spring already compromised, we realized that we would not have work in the Summer and that, only at great cost, there could be events for the rest of the year. And the prospect of another outbreak in winter greatly compromises the glimpse of Autumn and I fear that only next year will things be back on track for those who, like me, make life on stage. The phrase that is being repeated is true: the cultural workers were the first to be out of work because of the pandemic and will be among the last to return to work in full. They are also the most precarious. A whole industry of self-employed, and almost always seasonal, highly committed and skilled, but forgotten behind the scenes. (MC and Songwriter, Portugal)

These latter observations paint a graphic and broadly representative picture of the situation many young musicians now find themselves in. Since the early 1990s, the music-making landscape of youth has shifted exponentially from a previous model whereby young artists were forced to seek a recording deal (Cohen, 1991) to a new model in which artists have become used to a more DIY model of working that frequently involves self-production and promotion (Oliveira & Guerra, 2016). A proliferation of practical learning and other resource materials on the Internet, together with college and university courses in music-making, production, management and so forth, has produced a new generation of musicians and music industry workers who are more self-sufficient and self-directed. One critical effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, has been the undermining of this self-sufficiency at a point when it was beginning to gather critical momentum.

More and Different Music-making

Many of our interviewees reported being furloughed from their music-related and non-music-related employments. This obviously freed up a significant amount of time for music-making; however, some young people viewed this as a 'honeymoon period' for making music, before lack of motivation and lack of inspiration took hold. As well as more time to make music, young people reported more time to also listen to more music. This included trawling through old record collections and enjoying sitting listening to music as opposed to rushing around busy with life. Some musicians, in particular song-writers and MCs, reported that social isolation afforded time for reflection, which enabled more productive periods of writing, as described by this song writer:

I feel that it's been great because I've had that time to learn what I wanted to be, what I want to do, how I wanted to look and how I want my music. I guess I was just reflecting on the past year, and feeling like I'd not done as much writing as I wanted, so lockdown was perfect as it gave me that time to sit down and reflect and to go back to those things that I'd done and had happened. But it was just a time for everyone to sit back and to learn what they appreciated. I definitely did. I worked out what it was that I wanted to do and what I wanted to sing and how I wanted to spend my time. That was really important and I think that everyone needs to have more times like that where you can sit back from life as it comes so fast. (Song writer, UK)

Although some young musicians were disadvantaged by periods of isolation through not being able to play with band members, for others productivity in relation to releasing new music increased as they found the time to work on production and release new music without the interruptions of daily life and work. For a group of interviewees, especially those who combine music with other professional activity, the confinement and cancellation of concerts meant a highly beneficial mental and temporal availability for the creative process, allowing them to write/compose new songs or develop projects that had been stopped until then. This was also one of the strategies adopted during the pandemic, i.e. the release of albums or songs and subsequent dissemination on social networks (D'Amato & Cassella, 2020) as a way of remaining active and not forgotten by their audience:

I thought the opposite, that is, if I do nothing now and wait for better times to come back later to release my record, I'll be doing nothing for an eternity; so I decided to release a record during this time so that when there are concerts again they know I was active [during the pandemic]. (Sales Director and Musician, Portugal)

Although participants reported ceasing live music performances, music production and lyric writing 'went through the roof'. Due to the impossibility of carrying out rehearsals, some mention having focused on a more solitary and introspective component of musical composition (Smith & Thwaites, 2019), while others highlight the sharing of audio files through the Internet, from which they found alternative ways to speed up the processes of collective co-creation. For those working in bands, these musicians experimented with new ways of music-making, working more digitally and recording separate parts in isolation and releasing more music online. However, for these musicians, the difficulties experienced were enormous, since the physical component was missing. At the same time, many of the interviewees found themselves pushing the boundaries of their musical practice, without the end goal of playing live:

It's made me realise that because we've got extra time, we've not had that kind of distraction. We've been pushing ourselves a bit more without that element of playing live. So without that as another thing to do, we've all found ways of pushing the tracks a bit more. These streams that we've had over Spotify have actually been viewed a lot more. In fact, twice as much as we were expecting to get. I don't know if that's because people are consuming more during lockdown because they've had more time. So from that aspect, it's been good. (Guitar player, UK)

In addition, with the live element of music performance taken away, many young musicians appreciated the time to 'turn inwards' and to practice their craft dedicating themselves to new learning that had a positive impact on themselves as musicians and on their careers. There was also a selection of interviewees who, during the confinement period and following the effects caused by the cessation or slowing down of performance activities, took advantage of this time to draw up applications for national and European public funding to support creative activities. Music students in particular acknowledged the benefits of having more time for practising and creating:

When the quarantine started, the first thing I thought was: I'm going to record a new record. The second was: I'll invest in myself, in the time I never had, to be a better singer, to speak better English. I applied myself in classes, I trained my singing a lot and I started to have very good fruits of the time that I was forced to stay at home. Today I feel like an artist much more prepared than before the pandemic. (Singer, Composer and multi-instrumentalist, Portugal)

It is also interesting to note that for some interviewees, the loss of the dimension of live and co-presenting music (before the reopening of concert halls) also meant the loss of the physical experience of music as a source of sound. Especially as listeners and because of the inability to hear them from the concert hall sound systems, this led to a decrease in their interest in certain musical genres, such as electronic/techno music. In fact, this observation of the interviewees leads us to reflect and ask ourselves about the ways in which musicians, but also sound technicians and music programmers, can adapt their work to the conditions that currently guide live performances—places, physical distance between people, reduction of available places, among others. With that in mind, the absence of a live audience meant young musicians took the time to focus on music-making for themselves with more focus on well-being as a way to express feelings, to communicate, but also to combat isolation and uncertainty about their futures, as well as that of the music industry:

I would say that I tried to make music for myself, rather than for other people. Because before I was trying to produce for people and I'd always go out and try and see people. Now because I haven't been in contact with many people in person, and other musicians, I've been making music because I enjoy the music. I've made it for me, rather for other people to enjoy. (Guitar, UK)

Music-making became an individual rather than collective endeavour devoid of audiences, which enabled a change in relationship with the instruments that young musicians played. The individualization of the music-making process can also be attributed to the fact that an acceleration in the nature and pace of work in the cultural and creative sector has been felt, since the pandemic has intensified the logics of production, assuming a kind of competitive dynamic aimed at meeting the needs that were required:

It's changed my relationship with the decks as an instrument. And now I'm exploring the technical aspects in a way that I'd never dreamed of before. So I've spent the last 3 or 4 months practising in a way that I thought I'd never practise again because when someone is paid to do it every week, you don't need to practice. You'd be playing like 10, 15, 20 hours a week. You don't want to practice on your days off. But it's changed and it now feels more like going back to basics and learning things that you didn't have time to before. Which is really positive. Having the rare opportunity to have time to practice and to focus on the fundamentals of the artform and to eat a slice of humble pie and to think "I'm not better off than the world's best paid DJs right now". So, just having five minutes to breathe and to listen to your old music and to fall in love with it again. That's been a major positive that I don't think would have happened otherwise. (DJ, UK)

Our data also highlighted how existing forms of inequality among young music-makers took a new turn, for example, through different levels of access to musical

instruments and equipment which in turn meant that many were not able to take full advantage of the ‘home recording’ that others claimed was their lifeblood during lockdown. This individualization and the narrowing of the relationship between musicians and their instruments—in an introspective logic—may also come from the fact that inequalities in terms of resources have intensified, since the inexistence of a physical space as a workplace means that there is little time and few mechanisms to promote a certain collective engagement.

Socially Distanced Collaboration

An intense articulation with the proliferation of digital platforms, which afforded new models of musical creation, production and dissemination have acquired particular importance with the pandemic (Sobande, 2020). Besides highlighting the precariousness of musicians and artists, COVID-19 has challenged social and artistic limits. Given the uncertainty of the future, intensified by the pandemic, many artists today seek new strategies of performance, implementing new artistic practices, with the main emphasis here being on online collaborations. Several interviewees from all three cohorts mentioned that even in a post-pandemic context, they will make greater use of digital platforms and especially social networks to maintain contact with their followers and promote their projects, suggesting that many of the strategies mobilized at the time of the COVID-19 crisis may consolidate themselves as logics and modes of action in the music sector. In the United Kingdom and Australia, participants reported a sense that online collaborations served to ‘level the playing field’:

I’ve been lining up a lot of collaborations with artists that are in a similar boat. COVID’s kind of helped in the sense that people are so, other artists in particular, are so willing to connect. No matter how successful you once were, the playing field is levelled now. Everyone’s very open to collaborating and to working with you no matter how successful you were or how successful you’re not. So I’ve been able to line up some cool collaborations in the meantime. (Professional singer/guitarist, Australia)

As well as ‘turning inwards’ and music-making for their own satisfaction, participants described working on the ‘business side’ through developing social media and their presence on particular online platforms. For those, such as MCs and DJs, working with digital music forms, having time during lockdown to work on showcasing and promoting their work afforded them longevity as musicians. The interview excerpt below highlights young musician’s hopes that spending time to connect with fans during lockdown would boost audience members for future tours:

It’s definitely given us a bit of time to re-evaluate what, you know, what we need to do and what the kinda most important things we need to do as a band are. I guess how to engage our fans and connect with our fans a little bit more, which has probably been one of the most important parts in learning how to engage with our online database and make sure that when we do go back to touring that they will come and watch shows and still be a part of the band. (Bass player, Australia)

Musicians from all three countries admitted their weaknesses with media and social networks, either due to limited technical knowledge or previous lack of time to share

and promote their music. Young music-makers valued online collaborations and social media as a way to stay relevant and to stay connected with others, not only their fanbase, but also with other musicians and friends during this time.

Moving Online: A Mixed Blessing

During the initial months of lockdown much was made of the value of online technologies in allowing musicians, professional, semi-professional and amateur, to maintain an artistic presence. Leading artists such as the Rolling Stones and Neil Diamond performed streamed online versions of some of their biggest hits (Lehman, 2020), while music clubs and festivals planned a short-term shift to online events. With no obvious end in sight for the pandemic and repeating waves of the virus becoming increasingly commonplace across the world, musicians and music industry workers continue to negotiate the 'new normal' of online performance and consumption of music. Thus, moving live performances online and learning to work with streaming platforms has also been beneficial for some of our respondents, enabling them to earn money to replace income lost from live music:

I've helped start a virtual venue online, for Geelong ... The first week [prominent live streaming series] Isolaid came out I thought 'That's so great but us little fish down here aren't gonna get anything like that' so I started under the rug. And it really took off! ... Definitely to keep us Geelong folk a bit connected and interacting as we all need to be in this time. Also just to give an opportunity to be able to perform and have a reason to practice for something. I thought that was a bit of a struggle not having something to practice for. Also I don't think there's enough good venues in Geelong, so I've always had this little dream to actually start a venue. (Singer-songwriter, Australia)

However, many other interviewees who had participated in online collaboration and performance spoke about its negative side in comparison to physically co-present music-making, in terms of financial cost–benefit as well as immaterial rewards. Also for the Portuguese case, there is a critical and attentive look at the possible impacts of the proliferation of livestreams in live concerts, namely at the level of a possible devaluation/contestation of the payment of tickets to consume music (Marshall, 2019). This concern stems from the fact that many artists have performed free livestreams, and few have been able to get any kind of financial return from their online performances. At the same time, those interviewed were sceptical about the monetization strategies of multiple digital platforms, as the interview excerpt illustrates, which has also been made pressing by the pandemic, not only by the accentuation of the importance of these media, but also by the difficulties of subsistence experienced by musicians and other members of the musical ecosystem:

Then I even did a live stream concert for a scene from Antena3 but I thought it was terrible, it's very strange to give a concert for people you're not seeing and on top of that it was through their mobile phone, their Instagram...today we all live from that and nobody lives on music for selling albums, or selling yourself on social networks or good luck...it's super different and on stage it's a different mindset. (Singer and musician, Portugal)

Interviewees reflected upon how live streaming gigs seemed a lot more effort than playing a real show and held no financial reward for them. Online gigs lacked

atmosphere and felt unnatural as environments in which to enjoy music. However, many young music-makers believed that the future of the industry and their practice lay in digital technologies and live streaming events, which were deemed unlikely to go away in future. Again, however, our research findings illustrated that this new set of circumstances presents something far less than a level-playing field for everyone committed to maintaining a career in music during the pandemic.

COVID-19 as a Catalyst for Broader Change

With live gigs being cancelled and many young musicians suffering consequences of reduction to income in the short-term coupled with longer-term career instability and lack of opportunity for emerging artists, the respondents in our study were more susceptible to both financial and vocation insecurity. Many reported thinking about leaving music all together and the heavy reliance on their other forms of non-musical employment in their ‘portfolio’:

I will never take a gig for granted again. I will never rely solely on making money from music again. I’ve just gone and got a normal job, so I will work for them as well as making [music], being able to do, being able to perform. (Professional singer, Australia)

The longer-term implications of this include the de-monetization of music-making and the devaluing of some interviewees’ musical education to date. Despite many young people feeling optimistic that they could ‘ride out the storm’, the further reduction in opportunities and heightening in competition means that only the most advantaged groups of young people can survive in the professional world of music-making. This would close down many doors for amateur and working-class musicians, in particular, those who are self-taught like many of the participants in this study:

It’s turned me from a professional to a ‘bedroom DJ’ once again. And on a practical level, it’s de-monetised everything I do. Previously DJing was a way to make a living, to pay the bills. And as soon as the lockdown was imposed, that immediately went out of the window. (DJ, UK)

Long-term implications for careers in the music industry meant that young musicians in particular would struggle to enter those professions or maintain work that they already had. The closure of the music venues was a key example of this. DJs in particular reported losses of regular nights, residencies and the connections required to maintain those. The closure of small concert halls and the uncertainty about the sustainability of many others have strong negative consequences for musicians and other actors in the music scene, but also for those who are now entering the music scene. After all, the small venues that are at risk today are those that have the greatest availability to insert emerging musicians in their programming. They are also the ones with greater openness to program alternative and underground artists. These concert spaces, in particular the smaller ones, are part of a less institutional spectrum that is more independent and more underground. This is a situation that worries all the musicians interviewed, since it questioned their possibility to perform live, and was troubling for those for whom it constituted their main source of income. The

closing of many music venues was reported as a key concern due to the increased competition and the potential future ‘bottlenecking’ of previously booked bands. Fear about future performances included music promoters being less interested in ‘taking a risk’ on an artist:

There are spaces that have closed: for example [name of music venue] that we are going to miss a lot for all the energy they put into the project. Also small theatres that are stopped, plays that were put on pause, circuits of residence that no longer exist. These are important things so that there can be new music and music with some disruption. It can happen that this more disruptive thing disappears a little bit and gives way to things that have less risk. (Musician and designer, Portugal)

As well as reduced financial income in future, new and emerging musicians faced greater disadvantage in regards to booking ‘safer’ bands in future. One promoter described that:

I take calculated risks in a pre-COVID world, so I know that if I book this artist, in this location on that day, I can probably sell X tickets at Y price. And as you’re going along you build up that ‘play’ money – like a gambler would have. The knock-on effect of there being no cash flow this year, is that realistically next year, I’ve not got access to that capital, because there’s been no income. And that has a massive knock-on effect. You’re constantly looking ahead in events to what is the next payday. What is a guaranteed payday versus what is an element of risk. There’s an entrepreneurial aspect that is just kind of flattened by COVID because we’ve never had this degree of uncertainty in the industry. And what the knock-on effect is that those who can take risks are those who can easily afford it. So I think that your big promoters will probably be fine as they have cash reserves. But there’s a danger that it’s going to make independent entrepreneurialism in the music industry very fraught. So we might scale-down, we might see people doing small things. We might see people re-imagining the scale or the pricing. I don’t know how that’s going to look ... but, yes, a massive impact upon my career. And I think that the financial problems will last longer than the lockdown restrictions. (Promoter & DJ, UK)

Collectively, our data have wider implications for COVID-19 as a broader catalyst for change. We have demonstrated that the financial and vocational insecurity that young music-makers are facing accompanies a de-monetization of their primary or portfolio-based careers. Looking forward, this creates an environment in which only the most advantaged can survive within the post-COVID landscape of the music industry.

Conclusion

As in all creative sectors, work within the music industries involves a set of practices and activities that, due to the pandemic, have been highly affected. Indeed, creative work is by nature precarious and, as was the case during the 2008 economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted this condition. The global pandemic has had a particularly dislocating effect, setting off new patterns of disadvantage in a sphere of cultural practice and production that was already fragile and inherently predisposed to fluctuations in the economy. We explored COVID-19 as a catalyst for broader change that accentuated the precarious nature of artistic careers in the area

of popular music. In order to do this, we highlighted three key themes within our data: more and different music-making, socially distanced collaboration and moving online, which presented both short-term benefits but longer-term disadvantage for young music-makers. These elements significantly alter the landscape of the music industry today, making careers for young musicians untenable.

This article has explored the profound changes to the labour market due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including an analysis of the devaluation of artistic creation as one of the main risks and barriers to artistic careers. We demonstrated that increasing income inequalities vary from musician to musician, but disadvantages from the point of view of reputation and recognition were relevant to the cohort as a whole. When young musicians are already tasked with forging their own career paths in a socio-economic landscape characterized by precarious lifestyles and the gig economy, one critical effect of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the undermining of this self-sufficiency at a point when it was beginning to gather critical momentum. Nevertheless, some positive points can be mentioned, such as the positive impacts that have been felt in the relationship between music and well-being, since isolation has offered the possibility of creating the conditions and mental predisposition to compose, play and develop new projects; thus, allowing the exercise of an active role in artistic and creative terms. Given the conjecture that is being felt through the pandemic, it is possible to say that most of our interviewees—in all the three countries—were forced to adopt new strategies for the production and promotion of their work, giving rise to a reversal within the creative mainstream of independent music. Despite young music-makers believing that the short-term gains such as more time and the use of digital technologies have been beneficial, our research findings illustrated that this new set of circumstances presents something far less than a level-playing field for everyone committed to maintaining a career in music during the pandemic.

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Note

1. The term ‘green receipt’ is a common, generic name for self-employed workers. In other words, they are workers who do not have a formal hierarchy and must have autonomy to perform the service they have been hired to perform.

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