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Stressful Music: A Look into the Challenges of Life as a Career Musician

Abstract

This paper will discuss various aspects of life as a career musician and the challenges faced while working in this field. It will refer to different levels of fame and how certain challenges are present within those levels. Oftentimes the general public is not aware of the degree to which musicians face stress from their line of work. Conflict with bandmates, record labels, and sometimes the public often compound other issues musicians are already dealing with. The pressures of touring and low income can be emotionally draining for many. On top of all that, there is a culture of partying that accompanies the life as a musician, which often leads to addiction and substance abuse. These challenges frequently lead to, result from, or worsen mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. Those that have a higher amount of fame also face these hardships while the public is watching, adding to the pressure. Although many musicians find their career choice to be very rewarding and fulfilling, it is by no means an easy, effortless profession.

Introduction

Many often think that musicians have it easy and are living the good life when in reality, this is far from the truth. Being a career musician takes a lot of hard work and dedication (Jassi). In fact, it can be a very stressful job, with musicians having higher rates of anxiety and depression than those in the general population (“Can Music Make You Sick?”). There are many aspects of life as a musician that lead to stress, including band drama, heavy touring, substance abuse, low income, unjust record deals, and life in the public eye. In order to be successful as a career musician, it takes a lot of commitment and devotion to fight through the challenges and cope with the accompanying stresses of the job.

Band Drama

Contention and drama between band members can often be a very big point of stress in the lives of musicians, so much so that sometimes bands will go so far as to hire a therapist to help them work out their problems. This was the case with Metallica when, during the making of their 2003 album, *St. Anger*, they hired a life coach named Phil Towle. This point in their career was chronicled in their rockumentary, *Some Kind of Monster*, which showcased a great amount of disagreements, arguing, and conflict (Berlinger). In a radio interview with System of a Down bassist Shavo Odadjian in October 2018, the possibility of System of a Down hiring a therapist was brought up. Although all the band members would like to release another album, they have difficulty agreeing on material. The band considered a therapist as they haven't released an album since 2005 due to creative differences (Kennelty).

If one were to attend a concert of the rock band, Foo Fighters, it would be easy to think that they all get along perfectly and always have. Although in recent years, they seem to be in a

great place and really enjoying their music, that hasn't always been the case. For the first decade of their career, they faced many obstacles, some of which almost ended the band altogether (Moll).

Their first album was written and recorded entirely by former Nirvana drummer-turned-singer/guitarist, Dave Grohl. Since he needed a band in order to tour, he ended up pulling people together from various punk bands in Seattle. Everything seemed to be going well during their first tour. It wasn't until they started the writing and recording process for the second album, titled *The Colour and the Shape*, that they began to run into problems. Grohl was the principal songwriter and, according to him, when he writes songs, he has a clear vision of how he wants the drums to sound. The drummer at the time, William Goldsmith, wasn't playing the songs the way that Grohl had envisioned them. Guitarist Pat Smear described the situation as Goldsmith having been a good drummer, but not good enough to live up to the reputation that Grohl had built for himself. After the band recorded most of the songs for the second album, Grohl decided that he wasn't happy with them and wanted to redo them. They ended up re-recording most of the songs on the album in California with Grohl playing the drum parts himself, all while Goldsmith was in Washington and had no idea that anything was happening. Upon hearing that all of his parts were being redone, Goldsmith was not happy. Grohl told him that he wanted him to stay in the band but that he would now be doing drums for the album; Goldsmith quit the band (Moll).

Shortly after, the Foo Fighters found a replacement in Alanis Morissette's former drummer, Taylor Hawkins. The bassist, Nate Mendel, didn't like him in the beginning because he felt he had too much energy and was a "spazz." He described Hawkins as a "Southern

California surfer dude.” These two are an example of two very different personalities existing in a band, which can often lead to conflict. On the first day of rehearsal with their new drummer, guitarist Pat Smear quit the band, causing Hawkins to believe it was because of him. In reality, Smear was tired of touring and wanted a break, saying, “I was just so sick of the whole thing. I didn’t want to go out on another bazillion show tour” (Moll).

Smear was then replaced by Franz Stahl, a guitarist who had previously been in another band with Grohl, called Scream. Grohl called him while he was touring in Japan, and the next day, Stahl flew to Radio City Music Hall in New York to play his first show with his new band. Upon completion of that tour, they began writing for the next album, where they ran into more problems. Grohl said that he, Mendel, and Hawkins all connected, whereas Stahl “just didn’t seem to find his place in all of that.” They decided that it wasn’t working with him in the band and, because they had all become friends, it was very difficult for all of them. They all got on a conference call and told him they were going to get a different guitar player, which he was not pleased to hear. Looking back on the situation, Hawkins asserted, “there’s just no nice way of saying ‘you’re out of the band’” (Moll). This is a perfect example of the fact that sometimes, musicians have to go through the difficult task of firing their own friends if they feel things aren’t working out (Moll).

Once bassist Nate Mendel heard that his former band was getting back together, he quit the Foo Fighters, immediately regretting it and rejoining the next day. The Foo Fighters recorded their next album as a three-piece with Grohl being the only guitarist before deciding that one guitar just wasn’t enough. They held auditions and instantly bonded with Chris Shiflett, who was chosen to be the next guitarist. Following that, there were a few times that their first

guitarist, Pat Smear, would call saying he wanted back in, nearly replacing Shiflett. However, when it looked like it might actually happen, Smear would get scared and back out. He had enjoyed his time with them and felt like he was missing out when seeing them perform without him. However, his experiences with prior rigorous touring cycles are what caused his hesitation and inability to make up his mind. Eventually he started to make his way back into the band by performing with them on an acoustic tour from 2005-2006. Several years passed with Smear as an occasional touring musician before he fully rejoined the band as a third guitarist in 2010 (Moll).

It was when the Foo Fighters began making their fourth album, *One by One*, that they hit the roughest point of their career. They bickered a lot and no one could agree on anything. Front-man Dave Grohl would listen back to what they had done and decide he didn't want anyone to hear it; none of the band members were happy with their work. When they completed the recording, their manager John Silva didn't think they'd be able to sell any copies. They all started to move closer to the idea of stopping. Grohl began touring with Queens of the Stone Age, which didn't help tensions within the band. Both bands were booked to play the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in 2002, with Queens of the Stone Age on one day and Foo Fighters on the next. During the Foo Fighters' rehearsal for the concert, there was an immense amount of tension; no one was talking to one another. As soon as guitarist Chris Shiflett eventually spoke up and asked what was going on, everyone began yelling at each other. They decided they would just play Coachella and then that would be the end of things. "If the Foo Fighters are over, then the Foo Fighters are over. And I'm okay with that," said Taylor Hawkins, recounting the ordeal in their documentary, *Foo Fighters: Back and Forth*.

Eventually they talked things over and decided that they weren't quite ready to call it quits yet. The band then re-recorded the entire album in seven days in Grohl's basement, and *One by One* then went on to win two Grammys and be certified Platinum (Moll). According to Grohl, most bands go through these difficulties and "growing pains" before they become famous. For the Foo Fighters, all of their drama happened in the public eye, with everyone watching. When the band would get interviewed, people would ask, "okay, who's in the band now?" (Moll). The Foo Fighters are just one example of the amount of tension and stress that can exist within a band; countless others have also gone through similar experiences.

Touring

Many people may not realize how difficult touring can be due to the fact that most musicians primarily showcase the positive side of things on social media. In reality, touring can actually be quite stressful and take a heavy toll on the musicians involved. They have to manage travel and sleeping arrangements along with trying to stay healthy and make sure that they're earning enough money to get by. On top of everything is the uncertainty of success that many have to deal with almost constantly. Of course, some of these problems are mostly present with musicians who have yet to make it big and may be struggling to bring in a sufficient income (Duncan). According to Liam Duncan, of the band The Middle Coast, "The reality is that an artist's life is often filled with the kind of stress that many people would find very difficult to manage."

The above-mentioned artist, Liam Duncan, spoke to various other musicians about life on the road and found that one topic kept popping up: the difficulty of returning to life at home

after touring. When on tour, musicians often get used to the structure and constant scheduling. Everything must be planned out because there is usually somewhere to be. Duncan spoke of the repetition, stating that most days consisted of the following: "Drive, radio, load-in, sound check, supper, show, load out, hang out, sleep, and do it again." It's tough for the musicians to transition from a constant schedule to nothing at all. For Jadea Kelly, another artist interviewed by Duncan, going home causes her to fall into depression for a week or two. According to Kelly, she has struggled with anxiety her whole life, and losing the routine of touring is difficult. She claims that being on tour is full of adrenaline and can be compared to a "high." Upon returning home, things move much slower and it can be difficult for her to process (Duncan).

One very large aspect of touring is the effect that it has on relationships, both good and bad. Through touring, Duncan has been able to reconnect with old friends that have moved away, visit family from around the country, and even make new friends. When speaking to other musicians, he found that many other people had similar experiences. They made many new friends that they had things in common with as they were also musicians and creatives. However, this nomadic lifestyle also strains relationships with friends and family back home. Jadea Kelly explains, "a lot of my friends at home start to become the kind of long-distance friends that I have around the world, because I only see them every once in a while" (Duncan).

Being away for so long and living such a different life than those at home can cause artists to feel like they can't connect with anyone. Kylie Miller of The Beaches, who is college age, explains that she notices the problem is especially persistent among people in her age group. Most of her friends back home are in college and working part-time jobs, both of which she has never experienced. As these people get older and settle into their lives, with new jobs

and new families, the gap widens between musicians and their non-musician peers. Kelly states that she hates discussing her career with extended family members because everyone has a different idea of what success means. Some feel that her chosen field is not a “real job,” which makes it difficult for her to have conversations with those people (Duncan).

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of maintaining relationships is the difficulty with maintaining romantic relationships. Another artist, Micah Erenberg, feels that going on dates can be hard because his thoughts are almost exclusively about music and touring. He says that he’ll come home and realize that he hasn’t really been mentally “in” the relationship anymore. Duncan claims that trying to hold a romantic relationship both at home and on tour can be the greatest cause of stress in the lives of many touring musicians (Duncan).

Touring can be both good and bad for creativity. Some artists feel that they can be very creative on tour, finding inspiration in many places for their songs. While being interviewed on the *Kris Fade Show*, British musician Example mentioned a time where he was speaking with Ed Sheeran about songwriting. Sheeran told him that he had written about two-hundred songs while on tour (Virgin Radio Dubai). Many artists use their experiences on the road as inspiration for new songs. However, for other musicians, the busy rigid schedule can often make it difficult to find time to create. For Roman Clarke, another musician from the band The Middle Coast, being on the road is very restrictive creatively. He prefers being at home where he has access to a vast array of equipment. Not having everything available causes him to feel less creative and often frustrated. His bandmate, Liam Duncan, says that there have been times he had a great idea but couldn’t do anything about it because he was in the middle of a long drive (Duncan).

Although some artists like the repetition and structure of touring, others feel that it can grow old. Referring to the Foo Fighters' first tour as a band, guitarist Pat Smear said, "We played, like, eighteen-thousand shows in one year. I'm exaggerating, but it felt like [sic]" (Moll). As mentioned previously, excessive touring was the reason that Smear initially left the band. Front-man Dave Grohl also felt that, although it's fun in the beginning, it can get a little too repetitive at times. He said that all the arenas started to look the same and compared the experience to the movie *Groundhog Day*, in which the main character relives the same day over and over (Moll).

Some artists have gone as far as deciding to outright quit touring altogether. Perhaps one of the most well-known cases was when The Beatles decided to quit touring in 1966, going on to release six more albums in the following four years before eventually breaking up (Giles). Another artist who quit touring was Swedish DJ and producer Avicii. Due to the stress of touring combined with too much partying, he ended up getting hospitalized multiple times, for things like appendicitis and needing his gallbladder removed. In order to focus more on his health, he decided to stop touring in 2016 (Vozick-Levinson).

Mental Health, Partying, and Substance Abuse

Unfortunately, the decision to quit touring wasn't enough to help Avicii's health. After suffering from alcoholism, anxiety, and depression, he committed suicide on April 20, 2018, at only twenty-eight years old (Mayoras). Suicide is not an uncommon occurrence in the music industry. Countless musicians have decided to end their lives including Kurt Cobain, Chris Cornell, Chester Bennington, and Keith Flint. Chris Cornell fought depression nearly all of his life

before it took him in May 2017 (Brow). According to a study conducted by psychology professor Dianna Kenny from Sydney University, on average, musicians tend to die about twenty years earlier than those outside of the music industry. The study investigated the lives of nearly thirteen-thousand career musicians from 1950 to 2014, finding that the life expectancy lies around sixty years old. Contributing to the mortality rate, both the suicide rate and depression rate are much higher than those of the general population. Kenny's study also found that the rate of suicide for musicians is about two to seven times higher than average (Pearlman). A study conducted by the MIRA (Music Industry Research Association) found that, although less than a quarter of the general population said that they had experienced "feeling down, depressed or hopeless" at some point in the last two weeks, that number was much higher for musicians, with fifty percent reporting feeling this way, sometimes for days at a time. The same study also found higher numbers for drugs and alcohol usage among musicians (Yglesias). In 2016, researchers from the University of Westminster conducted a survey to find out just how pervasive mental health issues are within the music industry. They received 2,211 responses, 71.1% of which said they had encountered panic attacks and anxiety. At a slightly smaller number, 68.5% said that they had depression ("Can Music Make You Sick?").

Substance abuse is a pervasive issue within the music industry. There is a culture of partying that goes along with making music and being a so-called "rock star." In the Foo Fighters documentary, *Foo Fighters: Back and Forth*, drummer Taylor Hawkins discussed the drug problem that he developed during one of their tours several years prior. He had previously thought that in order to be a "rock 'n' roller," one had to party. "That's the only way it's real rock 'n' roll," he said in the interview. As a result of his partying, he developed a severe

addiction to drugs, and it caused some serious problems for him. He eventually overdosed and ended up hospitalized and in a coma. He almost died from this incident and thus used it as a learning experience (Moll).

Unfortunately, not everyone has the sort of “wake-up call” that Hawkins had from drug/alcohol abuse. Former Slipknot bassist Paul Gray struggled with drug addiction for many years of his career. He discussed the time that his addiction seemingly hit its lowest point in 2003 while Slipknot were recording their third album. While recording his parts for the album, he would often fall out of his chair or even fall asleep in the middle of playing. He claimed to have spent “half the time in the bathroom shooting up.” Despite having the desire to quit and his band members staging an intervention, he couldn’t bring himself to actually stop. The withdrawals were too severe, and he felt trapped, eventually placing himself in rehab midway through the recording of the album. For a few years after that, he appeared to have gotten clean and put his life back together. However, he relapsed in 2010, once again spiraling back down the drug-filled rabbit hole. In May of 2010, Gray checked into a hotel following another intervention from his family. After being unable to reach him for two days, his family contacted the hotel to check on him. Hotel staff found his body beside a hypodermic syringe and pills scattered around the room. His death was later ruled as an accidental overdose from morphine and the painkiller known as Fentanyl; a large amount of Xanax, an anti-anxiety medication, was also found in his body (Wiederhorn).

As discussed earlier, the stresses of touring can appear to be amplified for those suffering from anxiety and/or depression. According to producer Mat Zo, “It’s easy to let your mind and body slip into decay. For those with anxiety, hotel rooms are like prison cells.” Many

experience a stark contrast between the highs of the performance and the lows that follow, with the highs and lows reaching more extreme levels than those experienced by non-musicians in normal day-to-day life. This phenomenon has become such an issue that it has been given the name “Post-Performance Depression,” also known as PPD (Britton). In addition to the depression and anxiety that some musicians experience, many feel that they can’t approach others about these issues. Matthew Johnson of the band Hookworms spoke of his experiences with reaching out for help, stating that it is often difficult because people don’t understand his situation. Even when speaking with therapists, people often expect him to have an amazing life. Fortunately, there are some efforts to make things easier for struggling musicians. In Britain, a help line has been created called Music Minds Matter, which offers help to those fighting mental illness (Marshall).

Income, Exposure, and the Internet

The rise of the internet has radically changed the music industry forever. Artists’ music is now much more easily accessible (“How The Internet Changed Music”). In fact, with all the tools that are available to artists online, record labels aren’t even always necessary anymore (Seydel). However, despite the newfound ease of accessing music from rising artists, the internet has given rise to a new problem for musicians: it is much more difficult to make money off of their music. Because of piracy and streaming services that pay low royalties, many artists can no longer make a living selling their songs/albums. Many have to turn to frequent touring in order to bring in a sufficient income (“How The Internet Changed Music”). Even the larger acts, like U2, the band that brought in the most money in 2018, make the bulk of their money from

touring. They made about fifty times more money from touring than from music sales, and the discrepancy is even greater when compared to income generated by publishing and streaming (Cross).

For smaller acts, touring often isn't enough to pay the bills; some artists have to get side-jobs to make ends meet (Uzeki). A survey from the MIRA (Music Industry Research Association) found the average musician in the United States earns about \$20,000 to \$25,000 annually. Sixty-one percent of respondents stated that their living expenses were not covered by their music (Yglesias). Even worse, some artists will go on tour only to return with a negative balance. In 2014, the band Pomplamoose went on a 28-day tour in which they lost nearly twelve-thousand dollars. Although they made just under \$136,000, the touring expenses reached almost \$148,000 (Conte).

Record Labels

The relevance of record labels in the age of the internet is a heavily debated topic. There are a great many articles online arguing for both sides; some say that labels are no longer necessary (Circa, Pacheco, Seydel), with some even going as far as to say they should be avoided altogether, while others say that labels can still do for artists what cannot be done independently ("5 Reasons Record Labels Still Matter," Neilstein, Trakin). Either way, there's no denying that the existence of the internet has caused a shift in the role of record labels forever ("How The Internet Changed Music"). Record labels were once the driving force behind successful artists' careers as they were in charge of the vast majority of promotion and distribution of an artist's music. With the internet, artists no longer depend on record labels to

become known. In order to compete with independent internet promotion, record labels now offer what are known as “360 deals” (McDonald, “The Record Label’s Role”). These deals allow labels to make money off of everything the band does, even if the label did not make a contribution (for example, ticket and merchandise sales, as opposed to solely record sales). In return, the label will promote the artist longer and search for new opportunities for the artist, effectively acting like a manager. This way, the label is overseeing the artist’s career, rather than focusing on the records (McDonald, “How 360 Record Deals Work”).

One major complaint that artists have about record labels is their severe lack of transparency regarding the way things are done. Singer David Byrne says that he has tried asking various labels and online content providers about the workings of their payment system only to be given a vague answer from all of them. According to Byrne, Spotify has tried to be more transparent than others, claiming that of the money they receive for their services about seventy percent goes to the record labels, while only about fifteen percent goes to the artist(s) (Byrne).

One very common complaint artists have about many record labels is the lack of control they have over their own music. Over the years, there have been many artists struggling with legal disputes with their labels. In 1992, singer George Michael claimed that his label, Sony, treated him like “no more than a piece of software.” He took them to court because he felt he had very limited control over his music (Cole). The next year, musician and singer Prince was in the midst of a dispute with his label, and he often performed with the word “slave” written on his face. When he released his 2015 album *HitNRun*, he decided to make it exclusive to the streaming platform Tidal, which is owned by rapper Jay-Z. His feelings towards record labels are

so strong that he went as far as to compare recording contracts to slavery. "I would tell any young artist... don't sign," Prince said about the matter (Kreps). In April of 2017, the band Five Finger Death Punch took their label to court in an effort to be released from their contract because their label wouldn't allow them to release an album that they had completed ("FIVE FINGER DEATH PUNCH").

Life in the Public Eye

Depending on the level of fame, many artists have to deal with living life in the public eye for much of their lives. Some of the more well-known performers practically live under a microscope with the public analyzing and commenting on everything they do. For example, most people are familiar with the time that Britney Spears had a meltdown and shaved her head because it was all over the news and tabloids for a long time (Floorwalker). All of the members of the metal band Slipknot wear a mask each time they perform. Singer Corey Taylor claims that the anonymity gained from hiding their faces "allow[s] [them] to kind of let that animal off the chain. It allow[s] [them] to be free on stage" (King).

Perhaps one of the most famous and severe cases of a musician living life in the public eye is Michael Jackson, who was thrown into the spotlight at the mere age of five, performing with his brothers in their family band, The Jackson 5. Everyone watched as he rose to fame and subsequently collapsed under the pressure. Some called him "Wacko Jacko" due to the peculiar habits he began to pick up. It was believed that many of his actions, such as owning a pet chimpanzee named Bubbles and purchasing the amusement park Neverland Ranch were attempts to reclaim the childhood that he missed out on because of life in the spotlight

("Michael Jackson: A Life in the Public Gaze"). Due to his fame, his struggles with insecurity over his appearance were very public. Jackson had the skin condition known as vitiligo, in which the skin begins to lose its pigment. He had many cosmetic procedures done to change his appearance, including skin bleaching, plastic surgery, and tattooed makeup. Those with vitiligo often fight embarrassment, insecurities, and discrimination under normal circumstances. These things were even worse for Jackson due to his fame (Harris).

More recently, many famous musicians have spoken out about the struggles of living life in the public eye. Both Miley Cyrus and Selena Gomez have expressed having difficulties with dating due to the publicity. Cyrus explained that when trying to have a normal date, people would take pictures and post them in the tabloids talking about the "mystery man" ("8 Problems Only Famous People Face"). A very large number of people were obsessed with the relationship between singer Ariana Grande and actor Pete Davidson when they were engaged after dating for only a few weeks, only to break up after approximately six months. Something that should have been a personal and private thing was made very public, resulting in Davidson "getting online bullied and in public by people for nine months" after the split. Shortly before her relationship ended with Davidson, Grande's ex-boyfriend, rapper Mac Miller, died from a drug overdose. Grande then disabled the comments on her Instagram posts because people began commenting hateful things and blaming her for his death (Yahr). Another musician who has faced a lot of public criticism is Justin Bieber who, when he was only sixteen years old and was first becoming famous, faced growing "anti-Bieber mania," with regular internet pranks arising that claimed he had died (Purcel).

Conclusion

A great deal of hard work and dedication is required of working musicians in order to overcome the job-related stress and challenges and be successful in their career. There are many sources of stress within this field, some of which aren't commonly talked about in the general public. From living life in the spotlight and fighting problems with substance abuse to disputes with record labels and low income, many musicians have a lot to overcome. In addition, drama with bandmates, rigorous touring schedules, and mental illness also add even more hardships to the already difficult career field. Those that do successfully navigate the sea of challenges are a testament to the immense effort and devotion it takes to triumph in this industry.

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