

When Music Speaks: Mental Health and Next Steps in the Danish Music Industry

*Part 3 – Danish Music Creators' Working
Lives and Mental Health Wants*

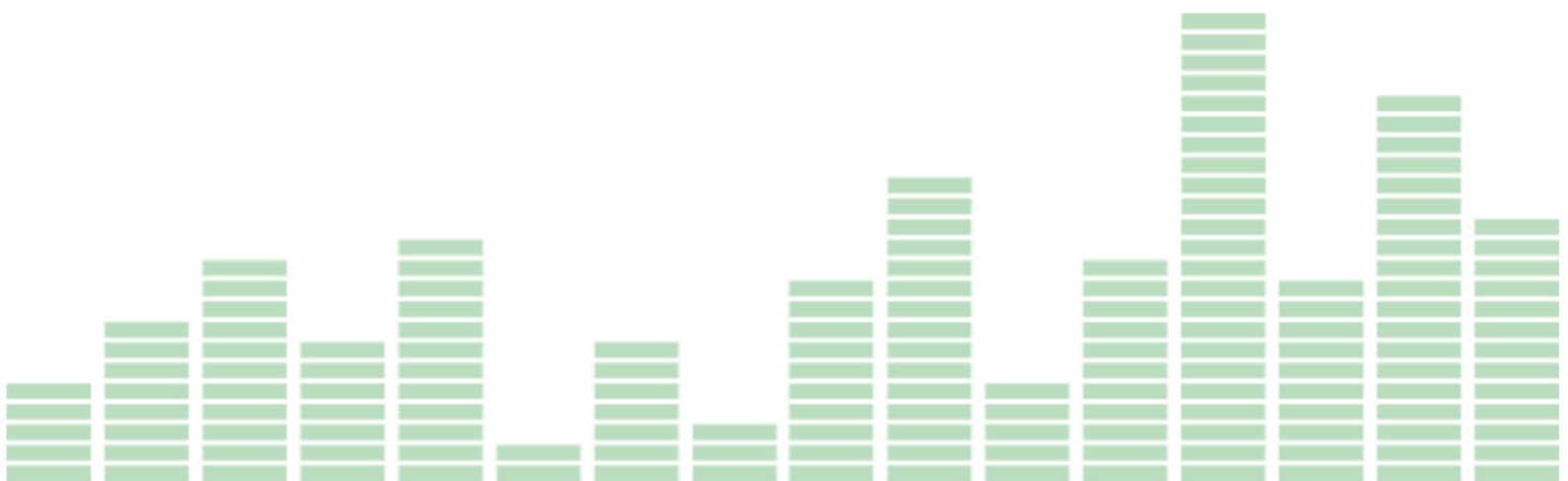
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Executive Summary:

- This report contains findings based on interviews with **seventeen music creators** living and working in Denmark, **all of whom saw music-making as their main career**, encompassing a range of genres, ages, career stages, levels of anxiety and depression, and levels of subjective wellbeing.
- Interviewees reported a number of **psychosocial challenges** emanating from their work as music creators. **A predominant theme was that of loneliness**, understood herein as a feeling of isolation and a lack of support.
- **Female music creators** suffered specific challenges related to **sexism, misogyny and ageism**.
- **Features of Danish society and the Danish music industry** were highlighted as factors. These were:
 - **Fragmentation** across the music supply chain in Denmark.
 - **Socio-cultural norms** of Danish society.
 - Challenges they felt they faced within, or when exiting, the **music education system**.
- Music's **healing abilities** and the **positive role it plays** in people's lives was also highlighted.
- Interviewees highlighted two areas of reform which they felt might offer tangible improvements to their mental health and wellbeing. These were:
 - 1) **Structural reform** and improvements in their working conditions. Three forms were noted:
 - **Changes to methods of government subsidy** for music creators.
 - **Changes to better support the self-employed**.
 - **Changes to music industry working practices** to emphasise cultures of care and understanding.
 - 2) **Initiatives to foster community, togetherness and knowledge sharing**. Two forms were noted:
 - Easier access to music business information to enable career development.
 - Spaces for peer support.
- Interviewees were clear that they valued forms of mental health intervention where it was undertaken by those with **shared lived experience** of music creators' working lives.

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Introduction

For this third part of '*When Music Speaks*', we will be hearing directly from musicians, artists, composers and performers (and more) whom we refer to as music creators: a broad and inclusive term drawn from the work of Hesmondhalgh et al. (2021: 7). We interviewed these music creators in order to understand more about their experiences. Specifically, our aim was to hear what these music creators felt and thought about mental health and wellbeing provision in the music industries and in Denmark more generally. Additionally, we wanted to hear what the music creators themselves might want to improve mental health and wellbeing. In August and September 2023, seventeen interviews were conducted with a cross-section of respondents drawn from our earlier survey.¹ The aim of the interviews was to hear from music creators about both the challenges they face, as well as what they might *need and want* in the context of their mental health.

The ambition for these interviews was to collect qualitative insights alongside targeted, actionable ideas which could be combined with the earlier survey data and review of models of mental health interventions² to offer a triangulated dataset from which to make our recommendations to the *Danish Partnership for Sustainable Development in Music*. Listening to musicians is at the heart of our research practice, and these interviews, focused on key thematic areas of enquiry, allowed us to spend time with music creators, in Denmark, so that we could better understand the areas of concern in their lives. We want to thank our interviewees for generously offering their time and sharing with us some of their most private anxieties and experiences. Their honesty and candour were often moving, and always insightful.

Methodology

Our approach in undertaking this qualitative component of the research was to speak to a range of interviewees, drawn from our earlier survey. We did not seek to speak to interview participants who *reflected* or mirrored the survey data which had a heavy male bias; in order to get a more representative cohort we weighted our interview participants to ensure an even gender split. We wanted to draw participants from the survey data who could elucidate the most salient themes of analysis which our quantitative data had revealed. We excluded all respondents who answered 'No' to the survey question: 'Do you see music as your main career' i.e. we excluded those for whom music making was primarily understood as a form of recreation, leisure, personal private practice, or other rationales. This was because answering 'Yes' or 'Don't Know' to this question was seen to more strongly determine mental health outcomes and wellbeing scores.

Full details of how interviewees were chosen, including our inclusion and exclusion criteria, and approach to participant selection, are outlined in the methodological appendix at the end of this report.

¹ Musgrave et al. (2023)

² Musgrave et al. (2024)

Interview Structure

Participants were asked an identical set of questions and given as much time as they wished to answer each one. This allowed them to digress and discuss areas of specific interest in greater detail. The questions asked concerned three key themes which will guide our analysis below. After asking the music creators to contextualise their music career, our primary areas of focus were:

1. The ways in which music creators psychologically experienced building their careers, and the challenges they face in terms of their mental health.
2. The nature of their previous mental health treatment (where applicable and if at all), how easy (or not) this was to access, as well as the ways it was (or was not) useful.
3. What kinds of interventions they would like to see to support music creators with their mental health and wellbeing.

Where possible, interviews were undertaken in English, face to face, by the lead researchers in Copenhagen in August 2023. Due to scheduling constraints, some interviews were conducted online in both August and September 2023. Two interviews were conducted in Danish, for which the pre-agreed questions were put to them by a native Danish speaker and the interview transcripts then translated into English for analysis.

Interviewees

Participant Number	Gender	Age	HADS-A	HADS-D	Cantril wellbeing	Genre
1	Female	>50	Moderate	Moderate	Struggling	Film music; indie rock
2	Male	36-40	Moderate	Normal	Thriving	Pop; Rock
3	Male	30-35	Normal	Normal	Thriving	Metal
4	Female	25-29	Mild	Normal	Thriving	Ambient; Improvised music; Indie; Jazz; Classical Music; Pop
5	Female	41-50	Mild	Normal	Thriving	Electronica; Indie; Pop
6	Male	18-24	Normal	Normal	Thriving	Disco; Hip hop & rap; Indie; Pop; Punk; R&B; Rock
7	Female	30-35	Moderate	Normal	Thriving	Electronica; Pop
8	Male	41-50	Moderate	Moderate	Suffering	Other
9	Non-binary	41-50	Mild	Normal	Thriving	Classical; Other

10	Male	25-29	Severe	Mild	Suffering	Drum and bass; Funk; Fusion; Hip hop & rap; Improvised music; Jazz; Pop; R&B; Soul; World
11	Female	36-40	Normal	Normal	Struggling	Rock
12	Female	30-35	Moderate	Normal	Struggling	Funk; Jazz; Pop; R&B; Soul
13	Female	30-35	Moderate	Mild	Struggling	Ambient; Film music; Folk; Improvised music; Indie; Pop; Rock; Soul; Other
14	Male	18-24	Moderate	Mild	Suffering	Hip Hop & Rap
15	Male	30-35	Moderate	Mild	Suffering	Blues; Disco; Hip Hop & Rap; Pop; R&B; Soul; World
16	Male	18-24	Moderate	Normal	Struggling	Ambient; EDM; Folk; House; Indie; Pop; Punk; Rock
17	Female	25-29	Mild	Normal	Struggling	Hip Hop & Rap; Pop; R&B; Soul

The following tables delineate the characteristics of interviewees based on the outlined selection criteria:

Gender of interviewees:

Gender	Frequency
Female	8
Male	8
Non-binary	1

Age of Interviewees:

Age	Frequency
18-24	3
25-29	3
30-35	5
36-40	2
41-50	3
50+	1

HADS-A (Anxiety) Scores:

HADS-A	Frequency
Normal	3
Mild	4
Moderate ³	9
Severe ⁴	1

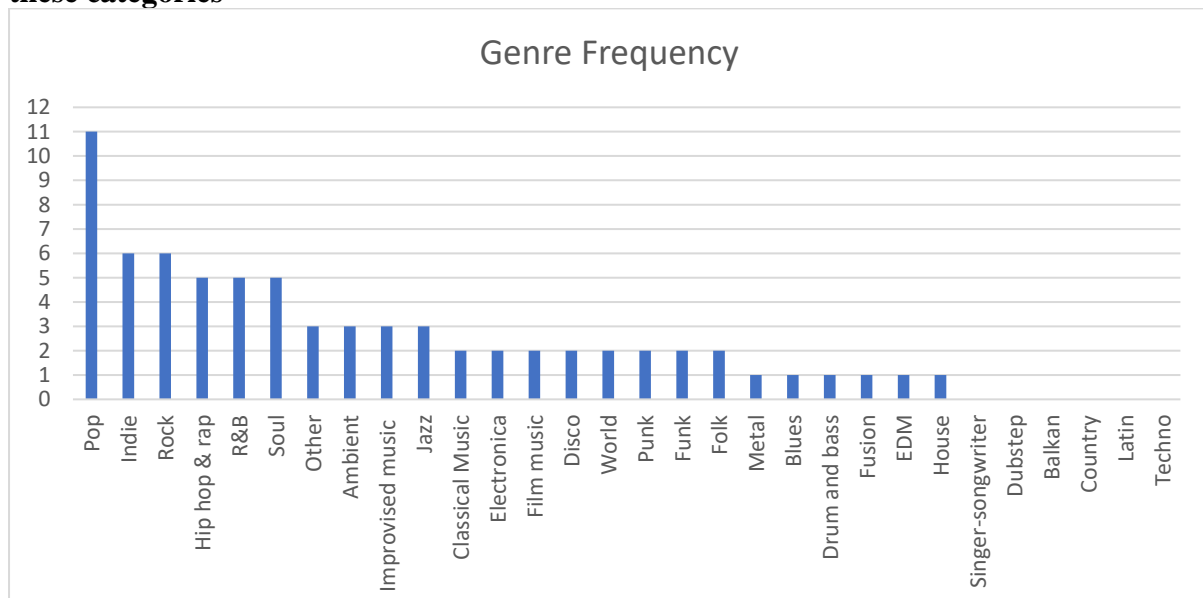
HADS-D (Depression) Scores:

HADS-D	Frequency
Normal	11
Mild	4
Moderate ⁵	2
Severe ⁶	0 ⁷

Cantril's Ladder (Subjective Wellbeing) Scores:

Cantril Category	Frequency
Suffering (0-4)	4
Struggling (5-6)	6
Thriving (7-10)	7

Genre Frequencies i.e. interviewees who described their own music using one or more of these categories



³ Suggests levels of anxiety of clinical significance.

⁴ Suggests levels of anxiety of clinical significance.

⁵ Suggests a level of depression of clinical significance.

⁶ Suggests a level of depression of clinical significance.

⁷ It is worth noting that only 13 survey respondents received scores indicating severe levels of depression and as such it was challenging to find these respondents given our specific inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Findings: Music Creators' Psychosocial Working Lives and Mental Health Wants

"I am very alarmed by the state of the Danish music industry"

- Participant 1.

"I think it's like this:

*This business is the most challenging business you can ever choose,
and I wouldn't recommend it for anyone"*

- Participant 17.

It is important in the first instance to more specifically contextualise who our interviewees were. That is, the quantitative tables above reveal the shared and contrasting composition of interviewees in terms of gender, age, musical genre, and subjective wellbeing and mental health scores, but these do not necessarily tell the whole story. Whilst the majority of the music creators we spoke to stated music to be their main career, it became clear in the interviews that many of them were juggling many different roles – from parenting to alternative forms of labour. The music creators we interviewed included students still studying music in a conservatoire, young up-and-coming gigging acts struggling to get by, long established musicians who were well-known within their specific subcultural niche, and nationally and internationally renowned music creators with hit records or film soundtracks. What united them was their *perception* of music as their main career. The majority could be described as freelancers or self-employed. As per the majority of respondents in the survey, they also described themselves as DIY or self-releasing artists. By this, interviewees meant that they were singularly responsible for the production and promotion of their music, and therefore, in this sense they are all to an extent micro businesses and music entrepreneurs.

Interviewees demonstrated an astute and articulate understanding of their own physical and mental health and could situate these understandings in the context of their creative lives. More specifically, the music creators we spoke to could identify *what* they were feeling, *why* they were feeling it, and *how* things might change to yield meaningful improvements. They were extremely sensitive at all times to the complexities surrounding a musical career. They understood that being a 'professional' musician was seen by many as being a privilege and that this idea was part of (and even central to) some of the challenges they face. Their understanding of these issues gave them a heightened critical knowledge that was not so clearly seen or understood during our original work on mental health in music in the United Kingdom in 2016 and 2017, for example.

Our findings below are split into two sections. These are:

1. ***Danish music creators' psychosocial working lives.*** Here, we delineate the key features of working as a music creator which interviewees felt presented specific affective challenges, foregrounding our analysis on three key areas: pressure and loneliness, the specific challenges faced by women, and the challenges presented by working in *Denmark* and by *Danish cultural norms* specifically. We also highlight a fourth area of focus, namely the capacity for music to, at the same time, act as a source of strength and healing in interviewees' lives.
2. ***Mental health interventions: experiences and wants.*** Here, we outline the kinds of mental health services accessed by interviewees and when they found them helpful, and then delineate two areas of focus which they suggested might help their health

and wellbeing. These are: Structural solutions and reform, and generating community and togetherness, particularly in three areas – career support, safe spaces with those with lived experience and understanding, and spaces to hear stories of musical careers.

Part 1. Danish Music Creators' Psychosocial Working Lives

The ways music creators psychologically and emotionally experience their careers is complex and multifaceted. As per other international evidence in this area, the challenges faced by music creators are various and intense, often placing pressure on their mental health and subjective wellbeing. At the same time however, being a professional career musician is also experienced as joyful. Below, we delineate the principal psychosocial experiences faced by the music creators we interviewed into four key areas, which might (at least in part) explain the high levels of anxiety and low levels of subjective wellbeing in our earlier survey data. These are:

- (a) Career-specific challenges, notably the pervasiveness of loneliness or feeling alone;
- (b) Gender-specific challenges faced by the women we interviewed, and, connecting both;
- (c) Challenges which are specific to being a music creator in *Denmark* specifically.
- (d) The joy and wellbeing-benefits of being a career musician.

A) Career-Specific Challenges: Projects, Pressure and Loneliness

1.1 Projects and Pressure

A significant number of interviewees highlighted the fact that a predominant source of anxiety in their creative lives concerned the requirement to undertake *multiple roles* and juggle *multiple projects* which many reported as being exhausting, overwhelming, and outside of their creative domains of expertise.⁸ As one interviewee stated: “You have to be other people and have other jobs... You have to multiply yourself into all these different positions, which is very stressful... Doing five jobs is exhausting, especially when I don't really know how to do them” (Participant 12). Many interviewees shared similar sentiments and echoed that which has been highlighted by prominent cultural theorists: an injunction to balance multiple creative projects in a precarious creative career which is symptomatic of what has been described as a ‘projectariat’,⁹ typified by competition, inequality and fear. Interviewees told us:

“I can only survive in the arts by putting ten projects on top of each other”
(Participant 9).

“In my situation, I have so many different bands, so at times I have to learn like sixty songs in two weeks or something like that” (Participant 10).

“There are just many things around being a musician today that isn't just being a musician” (Participant 17).

⁸ Participants: 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 16, 17

⁹ Szreder (2021)

This intense workload faced by music creators contributed to feelings of uncertainty and, at times, ferocious pressure in the context of musical careers which were described as very hard to navigate. One interviewee spoke about career musicianship being defined by the need to capitalise on fleeting moments.¹⁰ Many music creators expressed uncertainty over the idea of career development and felt, at times, lost.

This high pressure was felt by music creators at all levels of their careers. For those enjoying what might be considered high levels of success, or at least sustaining their music career over many years, that success was itself experienced as precarious and even vulnerable, creating anxieties they often have to manage themselves. As one told us: “Every time I’ve had a song that’s been played a lot or reached number one or something, and it’s suddenly not number one again, then that ‘I’ve lost it’ feeling starts immediately... a fear of ‘it’s over’” (Participant 15). He went on to explain how he experienced a constant pressure of needing to produce: “I find it difficult to have ‘genuine’ time off, you know, because I feel that if I just take a week off and don’t get any new ideas going, well, then all sorts of other people might be writing all the great songs while I’m here taking a break” (Participant 15). Others shared similar sentiments:

“Even if you’re not out playing or doing anything, you’re still thinking about everything constantly. There’s no free time as such. You don’t take time off as such. Like, you don’t work actively every single moment, but you constantly think about it” (Participant 8).

“You can’t stop when things are going well... You have to keep on pushing and keep on writing the way when you have a good period” (Participant 17).

Of course, for many, this pressure manifests financially, and the financial pressure is connected to the loading of multiple projects. As one interviewee phrased this: “If you cannot pay your bills [and have] financial stress, it will push you to maybe pursue more opportunities and never have a break” (Participant 3). Interviewees told us of their struggles with a lack of long-term security, the instability of their contractual arrangements (where they even existed), the feeling of being underpaid, the anxieties of having to care for dependents doing work which paid so poorly, and the worries at having to invest so much money and emotion in projects where outcomes were so uncertain, and which was not (many felt) valued or ascribed with the requisite status by wider society.¹¹ These anxieties were common and reflect global findings on this subject. Examples from interviews included:

“I just want to have better jobs with better pay... making enough money so that I can sustain my life in a way that’s meaningful” (Participant 5).

“I always have a feeling that I’m on the edge of falling over a mountain... I could free-fall at any time” (Participant 9).

“I’m feeling stressed and then I sometimes take a look back in my calendar and I see, okay, you’ve been working twelve hours a day without any days off for three months or something crazy... I don’t get paid that much... 13,000 DKK a month or something like that.... People expect a lot without paying you for it... When will I be able to buy an apartment, have kids, buy a car, like, do

¹⁰ Participant 17

¹¹ Participants 5, 10, 11

something that's a bit more grounded? Because I feel, where would the money come from and where would the certainty around this whole life, how would that look?" (Participant 10).

"I have definitely experienced a lot of ups and downs and I've also asked myself, actually, a lot of times: why am I doing this? Because emotionally and mentally, and sometimes physically, it is quite challenging to be a musician because you have to give a lot and you have to invest a lot, and you never know what the outcome will be" (Participant 13).

1.2 The Centrality of Loneliness

Unifying these ideas of multiple role holding and the related feelings of pressure, a very significant number of our interviewees articulated that they felt they had to face and negotiate these challenges alone, and thus loudly **expressed their sense of loneliness**.¹² A high number of interviewees used the word 'lonely' or 'loneliness', showing that this represented a significant source of anxiety in their lives. As one interviewee told us in their earlier survey answer: "[Music is] an environment where we often stand alone with responsibilities that few of us are equipped to handle" (Participant 2 [survey comment]). For example, interviewees highlighted uncertainty around challenges such as how to negotiate fees for performances¹³ or understand contracts. This speaks to the individualisation and responsibilities of musical careers where music creators felt these multiple projects, responsibilities, financial strains and more, were very much *their* responsibility and *theirs alone*. A core finding of our interviews was that music creators felt that their musical lives, and the pressure which came with trying to be (and in sustaining being) a music creator, was a lonely or isolating experience. We interpret interviewees' use of the term 'loneliness' or being 'lonely' as meaning something specific i.e. not loneliness in the sense of a lack of social contact, but more having to share the singular burden of producing musical work meaning that they alone assume this responsibility and must shoulder it. A number of extracts below from interviewees all communicate this shared theme:

"Because I'm proud, and I want to be able to handle things myself and not feel weak or like someone who needs help – there's something cool about just being able to handle it all yourself – it just makes things fall apart once in a while in such a way that I now, in the last 3-4 years, have developed anxiety, and I have had some definite anxiety attacks, which I have never experienced in my life before, and I think this is very much about this desire to manage it all myself" (Participant 2).

"Loneliness. It is hard to make any money from the kind of music I make and having to do everything yourself and not really knowing how to do it. I think I sent, like, twenty emails trying to sell my music, and I just felt completely empty by the end of the day, because it was this constant, like, trying to convince someone that you're great and you should be paid to deliver your music somewhere" (Participant 4).

¹² Participants 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 13, 16

¹³ Participant 6

“As a musician, if you don't have a close working team that most people don't have in Denmark, then you have to do that for yourself” (Participant 5).

“When nothing is happening, you feel like it's your fault and it might not be, but that's how you feel. There's something wrong with my music. There's something wrong with the way I look. I'm too old.... I'm not working hard enough. I'm not posting enough. I'm not getting enough likes... You know, it just takes a really big toll” (Participant 12).

“You have to be your own biggest fan and you have to be the drive that makes you continue because there are so many things in your surroundings that will stand against you” (Participant 17).

It is interesting to note that this expression of loneliness, which indeed also featured in recent work on Danish musicians by Henrik Marstal (2023), strikes us as potentially saying something specific about *Denmark*. That is, in our research in the United Kingdom music creators rarely (if ever) used this term. This is an area for further research and enquiry, but it strikes us that this foregrounding of loneliness and isolation speaks, perhaps, in some respect to the characteristics of Scandinavian social democracy i.e. that wider society *should* care, and that there *should* be systems of social support to not render individuals to feel so isolated. This feeling might be thought of as being mirrored in music creators' desires for structural reform, even at a Governmental level, as explored on p.20 below.

1.3 Drugs, Drink and Addiction

Finally, alongside loneliness, another feature of musicians' working lives highlighted by a specific sub-section of interviewees was the impact of the normalisation of alcohol and drug consumption. This feature of career musicianship tended to be foregrounded by rhythmic musicians working at a specific level i.e. the small number of interviewees who were signed to record labels, enjoying a relatively large amount of critical acclaim and had travelled reasonably extensively in their careers. These interviewees powerfully articulated the destructive role played by substances in the working lives of either themselves or those around them.¹⁴ As one told us, speaking of the relationship between career musicianship and substance use: “It's an extreme environment that becomes normal when that's all you see” (Participant 3). Another couched this as: “Every time you go to work, you're in the middle of a party” (Participant 15). Interviewees spoke powerfully of their own battles with addiction,¹⁵ and the devastating impact alcoholism had had on those around them, even resulting in death.¹⁶ Certainly, as suggested, these comments were not evenly distributed across our interviewee sample, and suggest a complex inter-relationship between specific experiences of success, and perhaps even fame which is understood in scholarly literature to potentially be an important mediating factor in musicians' mental health outcomes and even mortality,¹⁷ but it nonetheless suggests that this sub-section of musicians might face this as an additional psychosocial stressor.

“When I started with the band, quickly I was quite overwhelmed by the amount of alcohol and pills and stuff like that that people were taking, and quickly I

¹⁴ Participant 3, 6, 15

¹⁵ Participant 15

¹⁶ Participant 3

¹⁷ Bellis et al. (2007)

realised, okay, this is not normal... The last few attempts we had touring with him was a disaster, because like, it was actually me putting my foot down in the end and saying that he's not going to tour with us anymore because he's going to end up dead in his bunk in the bus" (Participant 3).

B) Gender-specific challenges: Sexism, Misogyny and Ageism

The women we interviewed could clearly articulate the complex ways in which misogyny, sexism and ageism impact women's musical careers and status in the music industry. Indeed, we saw in our earlier survey that rates of anxiety were much higher amongst female music creators than men: 65.4% of female survey respondents received scores indicating abnormal levels of anxiety (of which 41.2% reached the threshold of clinical significance) compared to 39.1% of male respondents. The women interviewed were able to divide the issues they faced into matters of more general societal/structural inequality and specific characteristics that are part of being a music creator from a minoritised group. The women we spoke to, as a minoritised sector of the music industry, appeared to have more in common with the under 40s from our survey than they did with men in their own age group. Their answers shone new light on international literature on this subject which has highlighted features including: sexist attitudes within major record companies and spaces of technical music production,¹⁸ challenges of access to spaces of power,¹⁹ sexual assault and other forms of abuse and victimisation within the live music space,²⁰ poor representation from Spotify playlists to festival stages,²¹ alongside powerful advocacy for change.²²

The women in this section come from a range of musical and social backgrounds and all, as per the men, identified music work as their primary and central occupation. In describing themselves as artists they conflated a range of musical and production roles they occupy that include, for example, performer, singer, composer/songwriter and often record producer. It is significant that many of these women described themselves as both artists and producers because the traditional role of music/record producer in the world of commercial music is extremely male dominated: under 4% of music producers are female²³ and the role of 'artist' has historically been attributed to male songwriters/performers. The majority of female interviewees were members of Koda and were fully aware of the importance of royalty income; it was important to them that they were seen as authors of their music, and being understood as a composer or songwriter appeared to hold significance beyond merely the economic. Many of them also had experiences of working as session singers on a 'work for hire' basis and also being part of a band, choir or orchestra.

The majority of the women sang in English even though they were often frustrated that the streaming algorithms displayed baked-in biases that kept their music in regional playlists, thus comparing them only to other Danish artists. All the women expressed an interest, and often ambition, to be able to perform their music outside of Denmark and Scandinavia. Several of them had experiences of working internationally. However, only a few of them had a professional music manager or live agent or publisher; generally, they fulfilled these functions themselves.

¹⁸ Wolfe (2019)

¹⁹ Gross (2022)

²⁰ Fileborn et al. (2019)

²¹ Werner (2020)

²² Raine and Strong (2019)

²³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/801248/share-producer-music-industry-us-gender/#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20study%20on,approximately%2096.6%20percent%20were%20male.>

1.4 Ageism and the next new artist

The issue of ageism was very much at the forefront of the challenges the women felt they faced. Ageism for them was linked not only to how women were represented in music and the ways in which they are sexualised, but also to the ways in which the circuits of music promotions were highlighting 'new' talent. This meant that for women who were further along in their career, but not on the top of the charts or included in existing playlists on radio and on the live gig circuit, they felt themselves to be passed over in favour of 'new' – which invariably meant young – talent. As one interviewee told us: “They wouldn't play my music on the radio, and it was absolutely because of the material, because it was, like, a grown woman putting out music, and there was not a space for that” (Participant 1).

“If you're a woman, you have to look a certain way. You have to *be* a certain way just to be recognised... You have to look twenty. I'm forty-one now. You have to look twenty all your life!” (Participant 11).

This focus on new artists means that the voices of older women disappear from the airwaves. As one told us: “It's a democratic problem. You know, it's a problem of democracy that we don't see females in music above the age of like twenty-seven or thirty-four” (Participant 1). These women realised this and explained that it also meant they were offered fewer opportunities to play during the festival season. They become trapped in a vicious cycle: without press or radio coverage they are excluded from the live circuit, all of which then impacts their streaming numbers, and impacts their ability to make a living. This all feeds into how these women experience *time* within their careers; they become sensitive to the idea that time may be running out and that their window of opportunity to 'make it' is very narrow. If they don't make the most of every opportunity, they may never get another one. This all impacts on their stress and anxiety levels. They have a feeling of losing out, or losing time, because they are unable to keep the momentum going as explained here by this interviewee who was herself both young and had international attention. This was a compelling part of our interviews and captured connected feelings of pressure, expectations, time, meaning and loneliness wonderfully. As she explained:

‘You have an asset of time where you are supposed to succeed, and it continues to follow you all the time: being afraid you missed your moment because you did not make the right decision because you did not know what to do... I think it's such a pressure on yourself and the development of your music and, sort of having that, uh, not goal, but sort of pressure... [There is] this feeling of having to push through, rush things and always be ready for more... It continues to follow you all the time... It generates this feeling of, that I sort of had my time” (Participant 7).

The struggle to earn enough money to live on was another theme that women reported as impacting the value of their work both within their domestic sphere but also in a wider social sense. They felt that being a full-time music creator involved a lot of hard work but is not recognised by society as a proper job. This led several of them to feel that they always have to 'defend themselves'. For women who wanted to have children or were already mothers, these challenges become acute. They described themselves juggling their domestic and professional lives and how the struggle to find time to create music competes with the demands of family life. As one told us: “It's a business where it's not good when you want to have a family ... It's a problem, especially for my female colleagues... How can I grow old in

this business in a way that's productive and feels safe?" (Participant 1). One of the women compared her struggle to assert the importance of her work as a musician with her husband's job as a highly paid executive. She felt that because she could not compete economically with her husband, he and her wider family did not take her work seriously. She explained: "My husband makes a lot of money here and it's easy. I have a way longer education than him, and I'm pretty sure I invested more time practising and more money and more of my life in doing what I do" (Participant 5).

C) Denmark-specific challenges

Many of the challenges Danish music creators articulated are experiences shared by musicians around the world and echo findings from other global studies on this subject. However, in this research project we were able to observe geographically specific concerns relating to music career building in *Denmark*. Thus, our third finding concerns the ways in which anxieties relating to loneliness, and the challenges faced by women, intersects with (and are influenced by) the characteristics of *Danish* society and the *Danish* music industries.

A key challenge, highlighted many times by interviewees, concerns the fact that while musicianship is hard to sustain at the best of times in large, highly developed creative economies, this challenge is particularly acute in a country like Denmark, which is a small music territory, and which therefore – our interviewees thought – lacks the audiences and investment to support small and niche musical scenes.²⁴ Interviewees suggested that the size of the country acted to homogenise musical production to ensure that Danish artistic output was often tailored towards a safe, middle-ground audience where greater returns could be secured. One interviewee captured this as: "The problem in Denmark is you need to go into like the middle, the mainstream middle, because otherwise you're not going to be able to survive", and she suggested that this middle-ground was "over-populated, not interesting, and not representing society" (Participant 1).²⁵

In addition, music creators suggested that even if they wanted to access some form of mental health help, the structure of the music industry in Denmark was so highly fragmented that music creators would not know how to do this. The musical landscape in Denmark was described as *highly fragmented*, leaving many lost and unsure about where to turn for help when they had questions.²⁶ As one interviewee said: "We have so many organisations [in Denmark], but they have difficulties in working together" (Participant 1). One might imagine the Musicians Union would be that place and that voice of representation, but several interviewees suggested they were not members, often citing cost as a primary factor preventing them from joining.²⁷ In this sense, the loneliness felt by many interviewees was exacerbated by a Danish music industry landscape which was felt to be lacking in unity and collectivity, and where information was disparate and hard to navigate. As one interviewee told us: "If I needed help, where would you even turn? I wouldn't even know who to contact!" (Participant 17).

Alongside this, a number of socio-cultural challenges were suggested to specifically impact women in Denmark in two ways. Firstly, some interviewees suggested that in the context of Danish society, ideas of modesty and egalitarianism (The Law of Jante/Janteloven) meant

²⁴ Participant 9

²⁵ Also: Participants 11, 13, 16

²⁶ Participants: 1, 8, 9

²⁷ Participant: 6, 9, 17

that women are “afraid to be themselves... and cannot dream big” (Participant 11). She further explained: “People are actually afraid in Denmark of being themselves... You have to wear the same clothes. You have to live in similar houses. You have to have three kids, you know. Everything is just so in boxes” (Participant 11). Another told us: “[In Denmark] you cannot speak as if you’re great...[and] you have to talk yourself down. So how can you sell yourself? (Participant 4). This inevitably changes how music creators assess their own abilities, and encourages self-doubt: that is, how can you convince others to *pay* you for your work, if you feel you cannot vocally champion yourself? Female interviewees felt that they were under pressure to conform to social norms, which several of them described as being a form of Danish conservatism. They spoke about the ways in which the Danish normative culture of modesty conflicted with, for example, the social media and music business demand for self-promotion and self-aggrandisement, feelings which interestingly were recently shared by Danish musician Erika de Casier in an interview with the UK newspaper *The Guardian*.²⁸

Secondly, the gender gap in music is internationally found across all musical genres and has been widely recognised to have excluded women and impacted women’s career development and earning power as it has led to them, for instance, missing out on songwriting and composer credits, or what is commonly referred to as publishing income. This is just as true in Denmark as anywhere else, and the irony of Denmark being one of the most equal societies in the world was not lost on the women we interviewed. If anything, it was a source of even more frustration.

Finally, while all the women we spoke to performed in English and saw themselves internationally, this was more ambiguous for male interviewees. Amongst the men, there was an observable tension over whether to perform in English and ‘internationalise’, or restrict yourself to the small Danish audience.²⁹ As one interviewee told us: “Speaking your mother tongue creates a whole new level of connection. And yeah, truth I’d say” (Participant 14). This represented an area of negotiation for interviewees.

Thus, music creators’ loneliness was *exacerbated* by the fragmentation of the music sector in Denmark, their financial precarity likewise was *exacerbated* by Denmark given the difficulty in carving out a career in such a small territory, and the challenges faced by women were *exacerbated* by strict understandings of social conformity. On the one hand, interviewees understood that in Denmark things are often much better than in other developed parts of the world, and indeed felt that Denmark ought to be better, and was perfectly placed to *be better*. As one interviewee phrased this: Denmark has “all the luxury” and “should be the best of the best” as they “have everything in place” in terms of the music industry infrastructure, and this made the challenges interviewees faced all the more difficult (Participant 1).

1.5 The Powerful Role of Danish Music Education

“In Danish music education, you have to do it ‘this’ way, or it doesn’t ‘count’”
- Participant 4.

Nearly all the interviewees spoke about the role of Danish music education in their lives, the ways in which they felt it shaped societal views about music as a career, and the ways it impacted them. Interviewees painted a picture of a music education landscape in Denmark,

²⁸ Cragg (2024)

²⁹ Participant 16

from højskoles to 'MGK' to conservatoires and other forms of music colleges, which was, in our assessment, unusually powerful in what one interviewee described as "their shaping" of musical practices (Participant 9). This was particularly the case amongst our younger interviewees (defined in this case as those under the age of 40), the majority of which had received some form of musical education.³⁰ This was less common amongst older interviewees – which was possibly because the range of music education had not been available to them at that stage of their lives and careers – although was present amongst music creators who identified as being part of a classical tradition. Many praised the education they received, not least the mental health counselling and wellbeing support offered by specific institutions.³¹ However, many also described educational establishments which lacked this kind of desperately needed support,³² which were described as highly conservative in their approach to music-making, and – in some cases – as stifling musical creativity. Many interviewees, particularly the men, felt that their music education in Denmark had been conservative, restrictive, and "narrow minded",³³ with a female interviewee also suggesting they had experienced it as gendered in its imposition of masculine values – such as telling one interviewee to "take the 'girlyness' out" of her music (Participant 5) – or not presenting a vision of music creation which was compatible with family life once they graduated.³⁴ One interviewee powerfully described their experience at a jazz school, where they had a "young, naïve, but beautiful dream to be the best drummer in the world" (Participant 10), and then being crushed by the realities, expectations and pressures of the school, which they suggested contributed (at least in part) to them leaving music for two years and the development of suicidal thoughts.

Why music education occupies such a dominant cultural space in Denmark is perhaps beyond the scope of what we are reasonably able to infer, although some interviewees suggested that the schools were a mechanism of cultural capital or validation in the eyes of parents; symbols of professionalism and status in the context of a career path which was misunderstood or not taken seriously by many.³⁵ This, alongside the fact that this education in Denmark is heavily subsidised and students not only do not need to pay to attend but often receive payment to attend (in sharp contradistinction to the United Kingdom, for example), within the parameters of a career which is hugely difficult to sustainably monetise, makes it an understandably attractive option for young people.

As suggested, some of our interviewees told us that they felt the conservatism of their music education was restricting, limiting and unhelpful, and this for some of them was a source of anxiety in their lives. It is important to note that comments such as these speak to interviewees' subjective experiences of their education, and is not a review of the education system in Denmark per se. As educators on this subject working in Higher Education in the United Kingdom, we are acutely aware of the challenges, subjectivities and sensitivities surrounding collecting data on graduate satisfaction and student feedback. Indeed, some reported that these institutions allowed them time as music-makers to work on their musical craft, and others suggested that many newer institutions are taking great steps to acknowledge

³⁰ In our earlier survey (Musgrave et al., 2023), 64.3% of survey respondents under 40 had received some form of formal musical education compared to 55.9% of the over 40s, with only 35.7% of the under 40s describing themselves as self-taught only, compared to 44.1% of the over 40s. This is likely, at least in part, due to the expansion of music education provision over the previous decades. Likewise, female music creators were far more likely to have had some kind formal musical training (74.6%) than male creators (53.3%). In addition, males were more likely to describe themselves as 'self taught' (46.7%) than females (25.4%).

³¹ Participant 4

³² Participant 3

³³ Participants 1, 4, 5, 10, 16

³⁴ Participant 1

³⁵ Participants 7, 16

the affective challenges facing musicians, embedding forms of support which they felt were very important and hugely welcome. This chimes with our experiences and is bound up with various subjective concepts and individual desires, not least, the notion of *expectations* i.e. what it is music creators come to *expect* when they leave education after years of training into a small musical territory which is unlikely in its current form to offer them the financial security they so clearly desire. It may be the case that what we observed among interviewees was what we might call an *expectation gap* i.e. a gap between the lives they might hope for, dream of, and even expect after years of education, and the reality of what living and working as a music creator is actually *like*. This is an area requiring further research.

D) Music careers, joy and healing

A final finding from our interviews speaks to the importance of developing initiatives which can offer help and support for music creators as they struggle in various ways. That is, some interviewees compellingly foregrounded music as a powerful force of *healing* in their lives. As our work too has always sought to emphasise, and which was articulated in insightful ways by interviewees, thinking of music-making as one's career might confer specific psychosocial stressors which might negatively impact wellbeing (as we have delineated here), but it can *also* act as a meaningful *source of wellbeing* too. This chimes with international literature on the subject which, for example, has shown elevated levels of mental ill-health occurring alongside high levels of job satisfaction among electronic artists³⁶. This duality is part of the complex ways in which music *works* and musical *work* coexist – the positive, creative and healing impact of music-making works to enable the music makers to develop resilience in the face of affective and economic challenges. In many interviewees' testimonies, music was a great passion for them and a driving force. They described experiences such as: "Music ... healed my heart, it healed my life, and every time I played music, I was at peace. I got no symptoms... And that bubble of peace made me able to get some strength because my body could heal" (Participant 11).

Relatedly, interviewees told us how much they deeply loved music, and thus by extension *want* working as a musician to be better, and articulated this powerfully. One told us: "Music is my life, you know. Right up there with my children. It's one of the things that brings me the most joy and richness in my life" (Participant 15), and another as: "[Music] is such a deep passion that music is part of your whole being. It's part of your spirit and I would never be able to give up music because it's such a big part of me. Music has been my friend since I was a kid. It makes us strong – we have a church inside us – but it makes us fragile as well. We have two giants that fight each other" (Participant 1). It is for these reasons that interviewees **want working as a musician to be better** – they want to reorient the joy and centralise the wellbeing *benefits* of career musicianship so the imbalance between these benefits and the negative impacts can be redressed. Music is emotional labour; to make music one has to be able to tune into the emotional. It is certainly possible that this sensitivity or attention to emotion makes musicians more susceptible to emotional distress, but the very real material challenges musicians face, they told us, were the sources of what they felt was causing them problems, and indeed for this reason, they were passionate and insightful about how to overcome these challenges. This what we will explore in part two below.

³⁶ Kegelaers et al. (2022)

Part 2. Mental Health Interventions: Experiences and Wants

A) Experiences of Interventions

In response either to these psychosocial stressors and/or other personal sources of stress in their lives and histories, the vast majority of our interview participants had accessed some form of mental health treatment. The range of treatments our interviewees told us they had accessed included, in their words:

- Psychologist (talking therapy)³⁷
- Psychiatrist³⁸
- Working with a music industry coach³⁹
- Group therapy⁴⁰
- Appointments with a family doctor⁴¹
- Wellbeing counsellors in an educational setting⁴²
- Counselling⁴³
- Physical therapy⁴⁴
- Career counselling⁴⁵
- Online therapy⁴⁶
- Web resources⁴⁷
- Body therapy⁴⁸
- Family therapy⁴⁹

We can thus see a range of mental health interventions being used by the music creators we spoke to. However, within this diversity it is possible to ascertain thematic areas of similarity which point to when these interventions worked well, and when they were less successful.

Firstly, when music creators spoke favourably of their treatment, specific features were foregrounded as being particularly beneficial. These included providing them with new perspectives beyond their immediate peer group and family,⁵⁰ and providing them with dedicated time and space to explore challenges in the company of those who they felt truly understood their anxieties.⁵¹ This latter point is key and chimes with international literature on the topic;⁵² interviewees noted that their experiences with mental health treatment had fallen short when they felt that professionals working with them had not understood the nature of musicianship⁵³ and that, as such, help was felt to be most effective when delivered

³⁷ Participants: 1, 2, 4, 7, 14

³⁸ Participants: 7, 10, 11, 15

³⁹ Participants: 3, 5, 13

⁴⁰ Participants: 7, 10, 15

⁴¹ Participants: 2, 7, 9

⁴² Participant 4

⁴³ Participant 11

⁴⁴ Participant 4

⁴⁵ Participant 5

⁴⁶ Participant 12

⁴⁷ Participant 12

⁴⁸ Participant 13

⁴⁹ Participant 1

⁵⁰ Participant 3, 10, 13, 15

⁵¹ Participant 4, 10

⁵² Berg et al. (2018); Bird et al. (2014); Eynde et al. (2016); Faulkner (2017); Gross & Musgrave (2016); Leamy et al. (2011); Steigman et al. (2014)

⁵³ Participants 2, 4

by those with lived experience,⁵⁴ described by one interviewee as “core understanding” (Participant 3). We will return to this below.

Secondly, in discussions around mental health care in Denmark, it was suggested that being ‘diagnosed’ and securing a clinical diagnosis was crucial in accessing additional support of various kinds.⁵⁵ While practices of accessing care following a diagnosis were praised for being fast and often hugely helpful, this was more difficult for those who were not able to ‘demonstrate’ their anxieties through the prism of a formal diagnosis, particularly when these feelings might fluctuate greatly.⁵⁶ As one interviewee phrased this: “You don’t get help based on the average, you get help based on the last two weeks” (Participant 4). Another suggested: “[In Denmark] if you’re sick enough, they will support you” (Participant 7), but conversely, another told us “it’s very difficult if you don’t have a diagnosis, to just get help for your mind” (Participant 10).

B) Danish Music Creators’ Wants and Needs

In response to interviewees’ experiences of this mental health landscape, we asked them what they felt would help their mental health. That is, we wanted to hear from music creators about what they felt needed to change in the context of working as a music creator in Denmark which they felt might offer tangible benefits for their health and wellbeing. Interviewees were highly reflexive and emotionally intelligent in being able to identify two specific areas in which they felt change would be helpful. These were:

- (i) Socio-political/structural solutions for mental health, and;
- (ii) Forms of community to facilitate togetherness.

(i) Structural ‘Solutions’ for Mental Health

“I feel like mental health is kind of a side effect from some of the other issues in the business”

- Participant 4.

“Fixing individuals is not what fixes the problem... My struggles are a healthy aggression towards the system”

- Participant 9.

When asking music creators what they wanted to support their mental health, **interviewees often mentioned structural or political reform, not just individualised solutions.**⁵⁷ This was the most significant finding in terms of the number of interviewees who mentioned it. Whilst individual mental health mitigations were highlighted, and indeed musicians’ experiences of them often applauded, it was overwhelmingly felt by those we spoke to that negative mental health and wellbeing was, to a large extent, infrastructurally determined, thus necessitating infrastructural reform at the level of wider society and the music industries themselves. That is, the stress and feelings of anxiety our interviewees experienced, or the challenges they had with respect to their wellbeing, were responses to a series of structural fault lines which, they felt, needed to be collectively challenged, and that their feelings of

⁵⁴ Participants: 3, 5, 7

⁵⁵ Participants: 7, 8, 10

⁵⁶ Participants 4, 10, 11

⁵⁷ Participants: 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13

angst related to these challenges were entirely understandable. As one interviewee told us: “I’m super pissed [off], and I’m proud of it!” (Participant 1). Our interviewees suggested that this structural reform might have three component parts, each of which will be delineated below:

- Direct government subsidy,
- Reform and the freelancer economy
- Broader, behavioural, ethical music industry reform.

2.1 Direct Governmental Subsidy

“Financial stability is under-rated as a factor in good mental health”

- Participant 4.

As seen in the first part of our findings, a central source of anxiety for many of the music creators we interviewed was financial precarity.⁵⁸ To an extent, this is unsurprising. Artists being poor, and lamenting this reality, is not new and indeed cultural economists have empirically demonstrated that poor earnings amongst music creators is a long-standing historical norm⁵⁹ in a creative economy dominated by oversupply, income inequality and a “winner takes all” logic.⁶⁰ From one perspective, therefore, this is endemic.⁶¹ The economics of musicianship i.e. of supply and demand in a small music territory (much like the economics of professional sports, or the economics of acting) is such that, in fact, very few music makers will be able to achieve their dream, and the dream expressed by many of our interviewees; to earn a sustainable income (even a small one) from their creativity. The majority of music creators will earn very low incomes, if any income at all. Data on music creators’ earnings in Denmark is not currently available, but recent data from the United Kingdom suggests that: “More than a third of musicians (37%) reported earnings of £5,000 or less from music in 2019 [approximately the equivalent of 42,800 DKK] and nearly half (47%) earned less than £10,000 [approximately the equivalent of 85,600 DKK]”⁶² per annum.

One interviewee described this financial reality as meaning that music creators “have to live completely on the edge” (Participant 3), while another described their music career as “fundraising to pay rent” (Participant 4). Some scholars have further suggested that practices of digitalisation which allow increasing numbers of young people to make music for very little cost has only further diminished music creators’ likelihood of earning a living from music.⁶³ Interviewees’ responses reflected the well-understood challenges of musical abundance - with one describing releasing music as being like “drowning” in a sea of content (Participant 13) – and the quest for achieving some kind of recognition amongst the competition as brutal. One described it viscerally as follows: “It feels like screaming under water sometimes, like hello? Is anybody there? Is anybody listening to me?” (Participant 12). It is in many respects therefore unsurprising that music creators are anxious, and that financial anxieties are central to their overall poor wellbeing; they are understandably worried about being able to sustain themselves as creative workers, and the harsh reality is that many of them will not be able to. Indeed, some interviewees, particularly those who were older and more experienced, understood this well, with one suggesting: “Denmark is so

⁵⁸ Participants: 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10

⁵⁹ Hesmondhalgh et al. (2021); Krueger (2019)

⁶⁰ Caves (2003)

⁶¹ Abbing (2004)

⁶² Hesmondhalgh et al. (2021: 18)

⁶³ Deresiewicz (2020)

small: It's only a very few who are mainstream enough to actually make a living off it" (Participant 5).

As explored above, the size of Denmark presented a challenge to interviewees concerning the ability of a territory of this size to support niche musical scenes and styles. At the same time however, interviewees suggested that Denmark's smallness of scale provided opportunities and advantages around how the arts *could be supported*, and that indeed given the challenges relating to struggles to support small music scenes in a territory of this size, *should be supported*. Denmark has in relative international terms an expansive welfare state and therefore there was, amongst some interviewees, the sense – and for some the *expectation* – that the government *could* or even *should* do more to support more people to be artists.⁶⁴ The challenge, of course, is that many music makers will not be able to sustain themselves. In this context, interviewees felt there needed to be further intervention that supported, more evenly, the spread of musical genres across Denmark, and specifically there needed to be support for women, as they are underrepresented across all age groups and genres.

This is a question of political economy, democratic decision-making, and even one of ethics, morality, and artistry – which is beyond the scope of our analysis – concerning *who* should support the arts, and *how* they should support the arts. For some interviewees, certainly, the answer was that the government should support them, and that this support should take the form of direct subsidy. Many, of course, would disagree with this as a method of resource allocation, whilst others see this as the only sustainable way to support the arts, particularly in a relatively small global music territory.⁶⁵ Some interviewees⁶⁶ praised the *intermittent du spectacle* scheme in France as an example of European direct support for the arts.⁶⁷ Evidence of the wellbeing impacts of interventions such as these points to them being favourable. Studies which have looked at the impact of pilots of Universal Basic Income (or UBI-type schemes) have suggested that direct and unconditional cash transfers are indeed, perhaps unsurprisingly, positively associated with improvements in mental health.⁶⁸ Studies on music makers *specifically* in receipt of these transfers and their impacts on wellbeing are scant given their relative paucity globally. However, a recent impact assessment from the Basic Income for the Arts pilot scheme in the Republic of Ireland found, as hypothesised by earlier research,⁶⁹ improvements not only in artists' life satisfaction but also demonstrable improvements in both anxiety and depression.⁷⁰ The public policy challenge in the case of our interviewees' answers lies in the extent to which societies think it is just, fair or reasonable to single out artists as being *particularly* worthy of transfers of this kind (predicated perhaps on the argument that the market alone cannot support them in Denmark), whether they should be more universal in nature, or if in fact the arts should be supported by alternative means. It is hard for us to comment, but the voices of the music creators we spoke to on this topic were clear and unequivocal. Interviewees recognised that to have a sustainable music career, they need to have some sort of economic stability. It was interesting to hear how all of the interviewees downplayed what such an income should be; what was most important to them was that they could focus on their music.

⁶⁴ Participants 4, 10, 11

⁶⁵ See Rushton (2023) for more on this debate.

⁶⁶ Participants 4, 10

⁶⁷ See Buchsbaum (2015) for more on the benefits, limitations and somewhat exceptional nature of this scheme.

⁶⁸ Wilson and McDaid (2021).

⁶⁹ Gross et al. (2018)

⁷⁰ Feldkircher et al. (2023)

“I think being able to have a life in music; it doesn't have to be swanky or, you know, luxurious... but being able to pay your bills, and take care of your children, and, you know, make the music that you love” (Participant 1).

“It should be possible to choose another way of life because some of the things I found very difficult are also because of money that I had to make money in other ways. That steals focus and energy from my music project. So, I'm actually in a time of my life right now where I'm trying to create a life that I can better breathe in – a simpler life – and that that also means that I am and indeed, you know, choosing maybe other paths” (Participant 13).

2.2 Reform and the Freelancer Economy

“It's a strange system that no one thought many years ago, well, actors, musicians, artists, all of us types, that some framework should be set up for this, because they can't manage it themselves. So, they end up losing their home, or losing their minds”
- Participant 2.

Beyond direct subsidy, other more specific financial changes which might ease the administration and financial burden, and therefore by extension (either indirectly or directly) the mental health burden, on music creators are being discussed globally. One example of this concerns changes to the way that streaming platforms makes payments to songwriters by reclassifying streaming services as broadcasters; the approach advocated by the #BrokenRecord campaign in the United Kingdom, for example.⁷¹ Likewise, our interviewees were able to precisely identify a number of specific regulatory changes they felt would help their financial plight, and by extension, their anxieties. Most notable were comments concerning the challenges of self-employment, and, more specifically, changes to the tax system.⁷² This was mentioned most often by music creators who were either older (and therefore had a longer career to understand the role taxation could play over a lifetime) or had achieved significant commercial success exposing them to the challenges presented by tax (and large tax bills). In particular, it was noted that the existing forms of taxation and unemployment support were not suited to those who have highly fluctuating and unpredictable incomes, such as musicians.⁷³ Indeed, as per other countries around the world, it was noted that the Covid-19 pandemic did much to expose the shortcomings of existing forms of legislation and wider support as they apply to the arts, and the spectre of Covid seemed to hang like a phantom over many of our interviewees' creative lives, with its financial ripples still felt to be resonating.⁷⁴ Put simply, as one interviewee told us: musicians want help to “earn their own kind of living and not be punished for it” (Participant 13).

“I live in a one-room apartment. I have a rent of 3000 DKK a month. I don't have a car. I don't have a wife, or kids, or a dog, or anything that costs money, really. So, I live on an existential minimum and could easily fit into the system if I earned enough.... The Danish state doesn't believe you can live off 150,000 DK a year. I have earned 100,000 DK a year for the last five years” (Participant 8).

⁷¹ See Hesmondhalgh (2020) for a critical perspective on the role of music streaming services (MSS) as sources of income for musicians. This topic has also been a focus of an inquiry by the Competition and Markets Authority in the United Kingdom as well as the UK Parliament's 'Economics of Streaming' inquiry.

⁷² Participants 2, 8, 13

⁷³ See Capiou and Wiesand (2006) for more on the challenges of European forms of social security for artists.

⁷⁴ Participants: 7, 8, 9, 13

2.3 Reform and Responsibility

The final area of structural reform musicians saw as crucial to engender generativity and improvements in mental health concerned the reform of music industry practices. Certain interviewees, notably those working at a specific level within the music industries in a specific domain of rhythmic music, foregrounded their treatment by those within the music industries, notably those understood to hold significant levers of cultural and financial power (such as record labels or major publishers) as being detrimental to their wellbeing, and that by extension these music industry professionals needed to have greater ethical/moral understanding around their responsibilities when working with music creators.⁷⁵

Interviewees shared a number of powerful testimonies in this respect. One shared their heart-breaking experience of a close musician friend who had died by suicide and their feeling that the musician's label and live booking agent had pushed them too hard and had shown limited understanding or empathy.⁷⁶ Other interviewees framed publishers or labels as exhibiting an uncaring attitude towards music creators when abruptly cancelling contracts or changing their minds about their involvement in projects, often leading to feelings of enormous loss and, in one instance, anxiety which resulted in them being unable to work and needing to move onto unemployment support.⁷⁷ A greater ethic of care and of humanity was a prominent plea of music creators⁷⁸ who felt they were unprepared for the relational challenges which could come from working with major music institutions e.g. the heartache of being 'dropped' from a deal and people no longer picking up the phone.⁷⁹ One interviewee described music careers as follows: "Music, in general, it's my life. It's my biggest passion and love.... [but it is] an excruciating industry to be in" (Participant 2).

"It's something where many people get burned, in the sense that they're shocked when they realise these people who were so nice before suddenly seem completely uninterested and won't answer the phone or respond" (Participant 15).

"Those young kids who are just thrown into it because they're good at writing a melody, or whatever it may be, it's actually more about getting them properly prepared. And give them some kind of ballast to be able to withstand whatever it is that they're going to experience" (Participant 2).

Reform was also highlighted as crucial by the women we spoke to. What they wanted was clear: they want equal opportunities, they want to be able to be visible at all stages of their careers, and they want the opportunity to have longer careers. *How* this happens, is a larger question. They know and can identify the structural issues they face as intersectional, and that many of them need to be addressed as such. Simply, they want change. They told us that part of this was reforming music industry working practices towards: "More equality, a kinder, softer, more caring music business that was more inclusive across the board and allowed musicians to make a living", and they acknowledged that this was very challenging when, as they described it, "the business is run by men, or females who want to be like men" (Participant 1).

⁷⁵ Participants: 2, 9, 10, 15

⁷⁶ Participant 10

⁷⁷ Participant 9

⁷⁸ Participant 7, 11, 17

⁷⁹ Participant 9, 15

(ii) The Desire for Togetherness and Community

“The only person you have to support you, is yourself”
- Participant 17

As outlined above, a significant number of our interviewees loudly expressed their sense of loneliness,⁸⁰ and in this context they shared their desire for offerings which could foster a sense of community.⁸¹ Alongside the need for structural reform and expressions of loneliness, the longing for solutions which might bring music creators together was the most numerically significant finding amongst our interviewees concerning the solutions music creators wanted. Certainly, offerings which could cultivate togetherness and a musical community might take a variety of forms, and interviewees were able to delineate a number of different functions community-development might take, and what the rationale for them might be. Three kinds were discernible in interviewees answers, and we outline them below.

2.4 Career support

One of the clearest things musicians wanted was effective career support to mitigate some of the challenges around loneliness and the fragmentation of the music sector, which they said often left them feeling confused about where to turn for help. Interviewees suggested that spaces which could allow music creators to network and meet others in the industry to share skills and resources would be both professionally useful and supportive. This in turn might mitigate some of the worst excesses of the kind of lonely, project-based way of working which was so typical for many.⁸² Although several of the female interviewees were part of women in music groups already, they felt more could be done and that there was an urgent need for more support and career advice. Many of the interviewees were members of a Musicians Union or a rights management association and they spoke favourably of help they had received, yet it was interesting to hear that they wanted something else or something different. Overall, they communicated this as a need for more knowledge about what to do to improve their careers *and* a community space to exchange and share ideas. Music creators explained there were times where they “don’t know where to go with my music” (Participant 16), and wanted a community around them to learn from, or what one interviewee called a “sparring partner” (Participant 16). Interviewees explained that they wanted guidance and support for “finding your own path” (Participant 15). As others told us:

“I think the hardest part for me was the promotion, because how do I do that? Who do I call? How do I, you know? Do I have to pay for a video?... I didn’t know how to promote it... and it was stressing me out because I had no clue how to do it... I’m actually thinking that [we need] some sort of way for, like, younger people who want to become managers... It could be a ‘learning by doing’ thing, but you know, for managers and bookers and young people who are studying in the music industry and social media people, whatever... We could grow together instead of me trying to do everything” (Participant 12).

“I think we’re very much taught, that if you’re doing music then you have to have a lot on your plate at all times... I think it would be very nice for people to get

⁸⁰ Participants 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 13, 16

⁸¹ Participants: 4, 5, 7, 12, 14, 16

⁸² Participant 12, 16

guided in like what they should actually focus on, if that makes sense” (Participant 16).

One interviewee told us that being able to see role models to inspire young music creators was crucial because “you need to be able to see a life in music. To see people and say: that could be me” (Participant 1), and that it is important to see the journeys musicians go on, and how they negotiate and understand concepts like ‘success’ over a lifetime.⁸³ These spaces of support were also, it was felt, key in showing the practical reality of a music career beyond myths or oversimplified narratives, but instead focused on practicalities on the ground.⁸⁴ As one told us: “There is a vibe or an idea that everything should come to you naturally” (Participant 7). Here, she was reflecting that there is a vulnerability associated with being *honest* about the prosaic, practical reality of working as a music creator. Working in music often, our interviewees felt, foregrounds romantic narratives or stories which are *myths*, and having spaces to come together to break down these myths was seen as important. Another phrased this as follows:

“I’ve been doing music for twenty-two years, or twenty-four, and it’s just a long life. And I haven’t really spoken to anyone about it. Well, I have, but not for real, because I think musicians tend to... only show the good stuff... It’s not that people are lying, but they only tell, you know, the perfect titbits that kind of sound bigger than they are” (Participant 5).

2.5 Sharing with peers

While different interviewees highlighted positive experiences with a range of mental health interventions, notably formal therapy, it was felt that initiatives aimed at fostering community could offer genuine help too. It was suggested that it was important to have: “Groups [and] nurturing a sense of community... to nurture a way of talking about mental health” (Participant 4); in other words, help to develop mental health literacy in a space that it felt safe to do so in. In this context, live talks, workshops, seminars, or even discussion groups were mentioned as opportunities not only for learning, but for feeling part of a community and to share with peers. This kind of approach was beautifully described by one interviewee as being “idea work” (Participant 7).

“What really helps is having a network that are able to understand the same type of obstacles that you have...[and where you can] meet others that are in the same situation... [and] dare to be vulnerable” (Participant 7).

As outlined above, the challenges faced by women music creators were prominent in interviews. Certainly, many of these require structural reform, but it was also suggested that many might benefit from opportunities for women to come together to support one another.⁸⁵ As one interviewee told us: “Women need to help women in this industry” (Participant 17), and another phrased this as “you need ways of coping to be a woman in this world” (Participant 5). Another told us: “I decided to stay in the business because I found sisters” (Participant 1). One interviewee powerfully phrased this as: I just want someone to “support me to be me” (Participant 11).

⁸³ Participant 5

⁸⁴ Participant 7

⁸⁵ Participant 1, 5, 17

2.6 The importance of lived experience

Echoing the finding noted earlier of interviewees feeling that they are screaming underwater, music creators expressed to us that they want, fundamentally to “just be heard”, and have someone to “just listen” (Participant 10). However, what was also clear is that where support for health and wellbeing was concerned, interviewees also valued speaking to those who meaningfully understood their lives as music creators. As one explained: “If you talk about dreams and visions for your life and your goals, then you also talk about what *didn't* happen, and why” (Participant 5), and interviewees wanted to do this with others who *understood* the dreams and goals of musicians. As one told us: “You need someone that understands that world in order to really understand” (Participant 5) and “have an insight” (Participant 9). One interviewee phrased this as a need for: “AA [Alcoholics Anonymous]-type meetings for musicians” (Participant 8), chiming very much with our earlier analysis which highlighted peer support as offering an area of interest. Just like literature on peer support such as AA, speaking with someone with lived experience was crucial to our interviewees, and this was a finding repeated again and again. Examples include:

“When I’ve had conversations with my doctors about [mental health], it becomes so general what they can see... It doesn’t really apply to my situation. Especially when I compare it to, for instance, the psychologist [I saw] who was, like, at the academy, and she talked primarily with musicians, so she knew a lot about what was going on...I feel a difference when I’m speaking to someone who *knows* about being a musician” (Participant 4).

“You need someone that understands that world in order to really understand.” (Participant 5).

“A mental support program with someone who has read a lot about it, who understands what's going on in your head, but who has never experienced it themselves and seen what it actually does to you?... I think the problem with many of these mental support programmes related to the music industry is that...I don't know if any of them have actually experienced what it's like to be on the other side of a big hit or to come down after a big concert... I think it's important to be somewhat critical of these mental support programs that I've heard about before. What has he or she actually done that makes them qualified to advise people on these kinds of things? I've just been a little sceptical about whether it's someone who has actually experienced it themselves... If you need coaching in something, I really think it's important that it's someone who has actually been through it themselves” (Participant 15).

Conclusions

Via interviews with music creators living and working in Denmark who had responded to our earlier survey, working in a range of genres, from a range of career stages, and with a range of experiences vis-à-vis mental health interventions, a number of findings became apparent via our thematic analysis. To restate, they were:

1. Firstly, that the psychosocial experiences faced by music creators are complex and multi-layered and include:

- a. Intense pressure (financial and otherwise) around career management which was often experienced as deeply lonely.
 - b. Women face particular challenges around sexism, misogyny and in particular ageism, which act as specific stressors.
 - c. Socio-cultural norms of Danish society, the extreme fragmentation of the Danish music industry, and the conservatism of some Danish music education serves to exacerbate many of these challenges.
 - d. Music careers are a source of joy and healing.
2. Secondly, music creators had two clear areas of focus for the development of effective mental health interventions. These were:
- a. Structural interventions aimed at creating systemic change, notably;
 - i. Changes to government support for music creators
 - ii. Changes to the ways freelancers and the self-employed are supported Denmark
 - iii. Changes to cultures of working by those in the popular music industries.
 - b. Systems of community to facilitate togetherness, specifically;
 - i. Forms of career support
 - ii. Spaces to share amongst peers facilitated by those who had lived experience and understanding of music creators' lives, and,
 - iii. Spaces to hear stories to break down the myths of music careers.

The final part of the '*When Music Speaks*' project will seek to combine these compelling interview insights with our earlier survey data, review of models of musicians' mental health interventions, and insights gained from our many meetings with stakeholders in Denmark over the previous twelve months, and use these to inform recommendations.

Methodological Appendix:

Participant Selection:

Our interviewee selection criteria took a three-stage approach.

In the first instance, we had two exclusion criteria.

- Firstly, survey respondents who answered 'No' to the question 'Do you see music as your main career' were excluded. This was due to the centrality of answering 'Yes' or 'Don't Know' to this question in determining mental health outcomes and wellbeing scores, and to remove those for whom music making was primarily understood as a form of recreation, leisure, personal private practice, or other rationales.
- Secondly, survey respondents who had ticked 'Yes' to the question 'Are you *currently* undergoing any form of *medical* treatment for a mental health condition (e.g. medication, hospitalisation)' were excluded for ethical reasons.

Secondly, of the remaining survey respondents, we sought to ascertain the following:

- That the survey respondent had consented, in the survey, to take part in a follow up interview (n = 272)
- That of those, all of the mental health and subjective wellbeing fields in the survey had been completed (n = 252)

Finally, from these 252 eligible interviewees, we sought to ensure diversity based on five selection criteria:

- An even spread of male and female interviewees, and the inclusion of a non-binary respondent where possible.
- A greater focus on participants under the age of 40 given the greater levels of mental ill health and poor wellbeing amongst this cohort.
- A greater focus on participants who have had some kind of mental health treatment in the past to better understand their experiences of this intervention.
- A range of anxiety scores (based on HADS-A i.e. normal, mild, moderate and severe), a range of depression scores (based on HADS-D i.e. normal, mild, moderate and severe) and a range of subjective wellbeing scores (based on responses to Cantril's ladder i.e. suffering, struggling or thriving).
- That as many of the genres highlighted by survey respondents were included amongst our interviewees, and where possible ensuring an over-representation of those working in genres of popular (or rhythmic) music given the higher levels of mental ill health amongst this demographic.

From these variables, we needed to decide how many interviewees it was appropriate to speak to. A recent systematic review by Hennink and Kaiser (2022) examined what is known as the 'saturation point' for qualitative research; that is, "the point at which gathering more data about a theoretical construct reveals no new properties, nor yields any further theoretical insights about the emerging grounded theory".⁸⁶ Hennink and Kaiser suggest that this takes place between 9 and 17 interviews, and that this is particularly the case where study populations are relatively homogenous and where objectives are narrowly defined. With reference to these two criteria, it was decided that the objectives were relatively narrow

⁸⁶ Bryant and Charmaz (2007: 611)

insofar as interviews concerned, principally, seeking to understand (i) music creators' psychosocial working lives, with particular interest in sources of anxiety in the lives; (ii) music creators' experiences of mental health interventions where appropriate (or reasons for not engaging in other cases), and; (iii) needs and wants in terms of mental health interventions for music creators. On the other hand, whilst the population was relatively homogenous insofar as they were all music creators drawn from the same self-selecting survey sample pool, it was diverse in other respects (age, gender, career stage, mental health states, etc). As such, we decided to schedule interviews at the top end of the saturation point range, and arrange seventeen interviews.

By inputting our selection criteria, we were able to produce four groups, with seventeen potential candidates in each, which contained the spread of characteristics we were seeking in our interviewees. This created sixty-eight potential interviewees whom we could mix and match between the groups depending upon availability and response rates. In total, forty-six of these sixty-eight music creators were invited to be interviewed, of which seventeen were eventually confirmed.

Analysis of interviews:

Interviews were analysed by employing a grounded theory approach.⁸⁷ Interview transcripts were thematically coded based on commonalities in interviewees' answers. Through a process of constant comparative analysis, these conceptual categories were synthesised and refined in order to provide the overarching analytical headings which form the basis of our findings. This was undertaken by both of the lead researchers for the project and the research assistant independently from one another to allow three separate and distinct perspectives to emerge in the data analysis, with different areas of emphasis given the different disciplinary areas of specialism. Interview synthesis sheets, and independently arrived at coded findings, were then shared and compared by the lead researchers to arrive at the final set of findings to bring all the analysis together.

⁸⁷ Glaser (1978, 1992).

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