



# Musicians & Substance **abuse**

Scoping out the unusual pressures that influence their  
vulnerability to drug and alcohol dependence

## Summary

This article scopes out five pressures that influence the vulnerability of musicians to alcohol and drug dependence: the pressure to be creative; the pressure generated by performance anxiety; the challenge of managing emotional turbulence, including doubts and fears, in a hectic and pressured life; social, cultural and workplace pressures to drink or use drugs; and dealing with identity issues (public persona versus private self, subcultural identity, and issues with fame and celebrity). Academic research and biographical material are woven into the article to explore and substantiate points being raised. The article concludes with a request for unpublished recovery stories from musicians that discuss the pressures, the way they used alcohol and drugs to deal with them, and how they recovered. The article potentially has relevance to visual artists, novelists and other creative people.

# Introduction

Should musicians be considered 'special' in terms of their vulnerability towards substance abuse? The answer is 'yes', as has been borne out in numerous academic studies. Musicians are far more likely to die from alcohol and drug abuse than non-musicians (Chertoff & Urbine 2018). To cite only a selection of the studies that have been conducted:

- In one survey of UK musicians, 45% reported problems with alcohol (Forsyth, Lennox & Emslie 2016);
- One study of 226 musicians in New York State found that substance use was "*markedly elevated compared to general population samples*" (Miller & Quigley 2011, p. 401);
- One study of 168 significant and famous jazz musicians found that their mean age at death was only 57.2 years (Patalano 2000);
- One study of the autobiographies of rock musicians reported that 62% contained a description of the artist's personal addiction story (Oksanen 2013). It's worth noting that while addiction may have been taboo when Johnny Cash wrote about recovering from addiction to amphetamines and barbiturates in 1974, for famous musicians, the confessional recovery memoir is now an established and popular genre (Oksanen 2013; Forsyth, Lennox & Emslie 2016);
- In one study of established European and North American pop and rock stars, they experienced double the mortality rates of 'normal' people and over one quarter of the sample died from drug and alcohol problems (Bellis, et al. 2007);
- A study of the '27 Club' showed that famous musicians were as likely to die at 27 as any other age, but the same study found that "*the risk of death for famous musicians throughout their 20s and 30s was two to three times higher than the general UK population*" (Wolkewitz et al. 2011, p. 1).

If you're a musician who has just wound up in rehab, you have joined an illustrious club that includes: David Bowie, James Brown, Glen Campbell, Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, Kurt Cobain, Alice Cooper, David Crosby, Pete Doherty, Eminem, Boy George, Eddie Van Halen, Billie Holiday, Whitney Houston, Michael Jackson, Elton John, Courtney Love, Keith Moon, Ozzy Osbourne, Wilson Pickett, Iggy Pop, Keith Richards, Britney Spears, Keith Urban, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Dionne Warwick, and Amy Winehouse (Largo 2008).

So, it is reasonable to ask why? Why do musicians have such enormous vulnerability? This article aims to scope out some of the pressures that they experience, whether they are session musicians, amateur bands, orchestral players or major stars. It is important for the music industry to address this problem, because for the vast majority of musicians who have suffered from addiction issues, the addiction turned out to be a negative for the artist both personally and creatively. For most jazz musicians, substance abuse was a negative for their careers (Tolson & Cuyjet 2007). In an early study of writers, artists and musicians, alcohol proved detrimental to creative productivity in 75% of the sample, particularly in the latter phase of their drinking (Ludwig 1990). While drinking or drug taking may start off as a way of managing or self-medicating problems, over time the substance eventually becomes a problem in itself. The relationship with the drug of choice usually changes over time as tolerance builds. When first taking a substance one may experience brief states of soaring confidence and limitless horizons. But over time these experiences can become tantalising and unsatisfactory. Greater and greater quantities are needed to achieve the same effect, and the experience becomes blunter and coarser. In the case of a successful artist, this experience can take place simultaneously with the pressures in their life increasing.

With musicians, as with any human being, there can be a number of contributory factors in the creation of an addiction problem, which can arise from family history, genetic predisposition, personality, and mental health. Psychologists have reported a higher than normal prevalence of mental health disorders among artists and musicians (Smalley & McIntosh 2011, Vaag et al. 2016). In one study of Norwegian rock musicians, they had twice the level of anxiety of the general population (Stormer, Sorlie & Stenklev 2017). Brian Wilson of The Beach Boys experienced auditory hallucinations from the age of 22, and self-medicated with a number of strategies, from drugs to writing music, and found writing music was the most successful (Wilson 2016). Jim Morrison of The Doors first used creative work to deal with a childhood trauma (Holm-Hadulla & Bertolino 2014). So both drug use and creative work can be employed by a musician to process trauma.

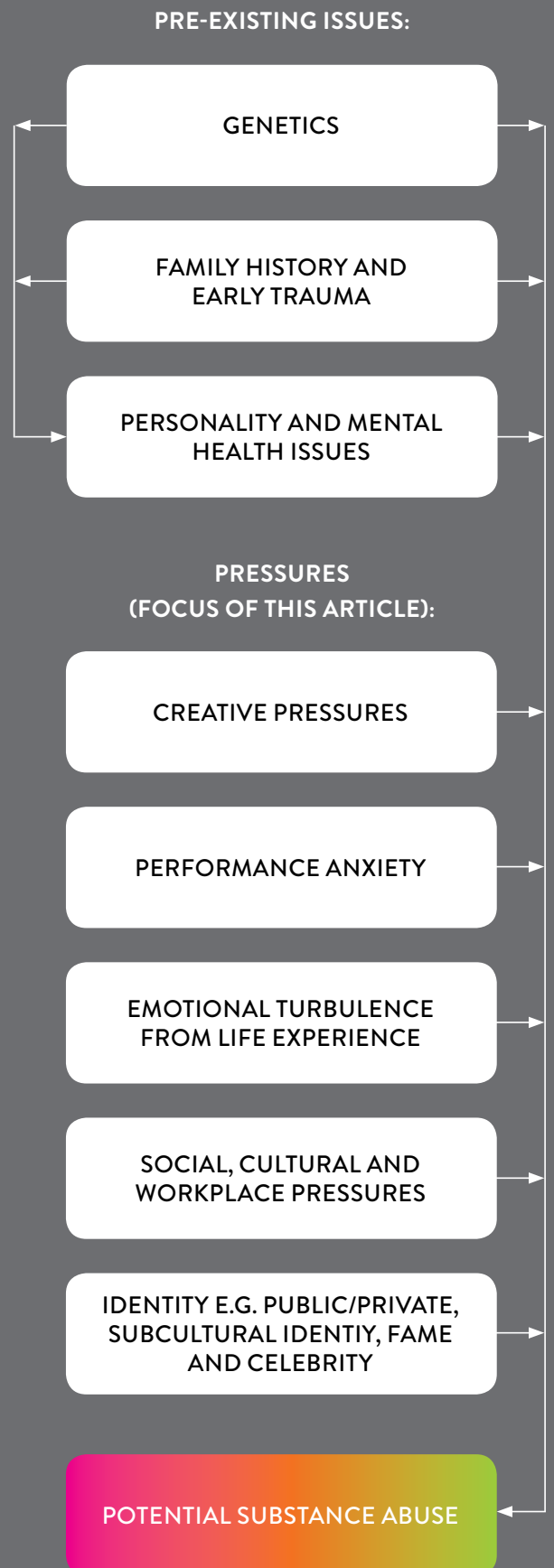
Daily life is full of emotional turbulence, which can arise from relationship breakdowns, health fears, death and illness affecting those we love, professional disappointments and rejection, or financial difficulties. All of these are problems that affect us all. But being a musician brings its own additional pressures. This article will explore five dimensions of the problem, in terms of pressures which add to the risk and vulnerability of musicians compared to the general population:

- The pressure to be creative and original;
- The pressures created by performance anxiety;
- Trying to manage emotional turbulence generated by life experiences, often accompanied with negative media coverage;
- Combatting social, cultural and workplace pressures to drink or use drugs;
- Dealing with identity issues (public persona versus private self, subcultural identity, and issues with fame and celebrity).

The diagram (right) depicts the overall picture, with pre-existing issues being impacted by environmental pressures to increase the chance of substance abuse. While this article does touch upon tensions and risks created by personality issues, because we can't go back in time and change genetics or family upbringing, the focus is on the things we may be able to change ie the pressures and the way we manage them.

Is this just a soft, contemporary problem? Were famous composers in other centuries 'old school' musos, who just sucked it up without drugs and alcohol and got on with making great music? Not really. Beethoven used alcohol to self-medicate depression resulting from his hearing loss (Breitenfeld et al. 2017). Tchaikovsky did the same thing in relation to depression resulting from being homosexual in a society that did not recognise homosexuality (Breitenfeld et al. 2017). Debussy sought comfort in drugs such as morphine and cocaine and Satie died in hospital as a result of cirrhosis of the liver, arising from alcoholism (Breitenfeld et al. 2017). While pain and suffering occur in the life of anyone, at any time, the twenty first century is also a tougher place for artists given the additional media scrutiny they face.

The next section will look at the pressures placed on musicians to constantly create new, original work, and the role that drugs and alcohol have played in terms of creative inspiration.





**1**

**Creativity,  
Imagination  
and Originality**

Both art and the heavy use of alcohol and drugs can involve an attempt to generate new experiences, to develop new ways of seeing, to unveil hidden realms, to extend boundaries or to access states or parts of the psyche that are hidden from 'normal' people leading humdrum 9-5 lives (Knafo 2008; Hill 2010). To stand at a strange angle to the universe, to attempt to touch the sublime, to see things more freshly or deeply, is a natural aspiration for poets, artists, and mystics, as well as alcoholics and addicts. Given the similarity in these aspirations it's not that remarkable that art and addiction should find themselves entwined in this way.

One of the pressures of being a popular musician is the need to constantly create new material. Drugs have been employed in a number of ways by musicians to assist creativity and imagination: cocaine and amphetamines have been employed to increase energy levels, creativity and focus (Groce 1991; Trynka 2011); alcohol and marijuana have been employed to relieve creative anxiety or lack of confidence (Belli 2009; Groce 1991) and alcohol has been seen to access deeper truths, as in the saying '*in vino veritas*' (ten Berge 2002); heroin was the drug of choice for creative inspiration by bebop musicians (Spunt 2014; Tolson & Cuyjet 2007); drugs such as LSD have been known to create a sense of unity and connectedness with the universe, an increase in awe, reverence and sacredness, illumination and transcendence (De Rios & Janiger 2003). LSD can also facilitate greater intensity and abstractedness in visual creativity, which can be interpreted as more 'creative' (Janiger & de Rios 1989).

Does it work? Most scientific experiments into drugs and alcohol have found that in large doses it generally has a negative impact on creative productivity (O'Dair 2016). For jazz artists working in the US from 1940 to 1960, substance abuse "*rather than being the road to creative genius, was the pathway to premature death*" (Tolson & Cuyjet 2007, p. 537).

Brian Wilson employed cannabis and LSD with the explicit intention to enhance creativity, though the impact was perhaps less direct than some imagine. It resulted in him employing denser sound production and orchestration rather than composing catchy tunes and lyrics (Belli 2009). Jimi Hendrix employed LSD with creative intent, and his comment to friends that he played colours not notes (referred to as 'synaesthesia') can be seen as psychedelic thinking related to his acid trips (Cross 2005). Hendrix's death at 27 did not relate to his LSD use but ingesting a cocktail of drugs including the sedative Vesparax that resulted in him choking to death on his own vomit (Cross 2005). While this last point may appear unnecessary, it is worthwhile reminding ourselves occasionally of the brutality of drug addiction.

Cocaine was believed in some circles to assist creativity though it had a personally destructive effect on musicians such as David Bowie, Ron Wood and Iggy Pop (Trynka 2011) and has been criticised by musicians because it "*fucks with your sense of rhythm*" (Groce 1991, p 370). Marijuana has been criticised by musicians as causing short term memory loss and creative laziness (Groce 1991). Alcohol has been praised for assisting the generation of original ideas, and bringing strange ideas to consciousness, but criticised for damaging the ability for more detailed, patient scoping of creative work (Knafo 2008). At extreme levels of intoxication very little gets done - when Jim Morrison of The Doors was drunk or under the influence of drugs he could not write at all (Holm-Hadulla & Bertolino 2014).

It is ironic that Salvador Dalí, who created imaginative, surrealist dreamscapes and objects like The Lobster Telephone, all of which look drug-induced, wished to have nothing to do with drugs and alcohol: "*I don't do drugs. I am drugs*". "*Take me, I am the drug, take me, I am hallucinogenic*" (Salvador Dalí in Murphy 2009, p772). He created objects that are frequently used to symbolise creativity such as a sofa in the shape of Mae West's lips. His public rejection of drugs could be interpreted as an ego-driven wish to ensure that his creativity was seen to arise from his own unique creative powers, and not from a chemical agent.

A common phenomenon in the creative arts is to see the creative pressures on artists increase as they become more successful, and the quantities of alcohol and drugs increase due to tolerance, culminating in rehab or death. The more successful an artist becomes, the more new creative work might face negative comparison with past work, and the more public will be the critique. Often in popular music, a singer/songwriter's first foray into recording involves working with material that has been developed over a number of years. If success hits they find themselves commercially pressured to generate more material in vastly reduced time. If you start as a musician using alcohol to 'get into the zone' and subsequently find success, it is common to want to stick with a successful formula. Why change something that's working? And if it's working creatively, does it really matter if it's not that healthy? Artists usually believe that they get one shot at realising their dreams, they're going to give it a damn good shot, and if drugs and alcohol are going to help them get there, then that's what they're going to do (Just et al. 2016). The inner voice of criticism – suggesting you are falling short of standards or failing to beat previous standards can build over time as audience and media expectations increase (Bryant Smalley & McIntosh 2011). For failing artists, the gulf between their dream and reality gradually widens, which creates growing distress.



2

# Performance Anxiety

Performance anxiety is experienced by most musicians. In a survey of 552 UK musicians conducted in 2014, 75% had experienced some form of performance anxiety in their careers (Help Musicians UK 2014). Another study estimated that around half of all performing musicians suffer from performance anxiety, with sufferers including John Lennon and Barbra Streisand (Lehmann, Sloboda & Woody 2007).

Performance anxiety symptoms include: general tension, trembling of various parts of the body such as shaking hands, pounding chest, negative or catastrophising thoughts, excessive sweating, and clamminess, hot or cold flushes, adrenalin rushes, nausea, dry mouth and 'butterflies in the stomach'. Other symptoms are increased breathing rate, shortness of breath, severe apprehension, distracted thoughts, memory blanks, eye focussing problems, isolating behaviour and increased visits to the toilet (Lehmann, Sloboda & Woody 2007; Roland 1994; O'Dair 2016).

Treatment can include slow, deep breathing and muscle relaxation techniques. However, in certain professional groups of classical musicians, approximately one quarter use beta blockers to control their anxiety (Lehmann, Sloboda & Woody 2007). As well as using beta blockers, musicians can self-medicate using marijuana and alcohol (Roland 1994). As a general observation, classical musicians are more likely to use beta blockers and non-classical musicians other drugs. Alcohol is used by both groups, as interval drinks and post performance drinks are very much part of orchestral life. Pre-show drinking can be an established way of self-medicating against performance anxiety for popular musicians, helping settle their nerves (Forsyth, Lennox & Emslie 2016).

Deep down, all artists and musicians fear public embarrassment. In a 'normal' job, the worst that is likely to happen to us if we screw up is a reprimand from our supervisor. But in live entertainment, if an artist screws up there is a risk of public humiliation, which can breed fear and psychological stress. Negative public reactions, critical comments in the media and social media commentary (eg trolls) can be distressing for artists. Amy Winehouse's infamous Belgrade concert, where she used drugs and alcohol to self-medicate performance anxiety (as had become habitual for her), resulted in audience boos and a 'train crash' performance. A month later she was dead. We need to understand that 'putting yourself out there' can bring enormous dangers for artists.





# Managing Emotional Turbulence

Musicians who abuse drugs and alcohol invariably use them to manage the emotional highs and lows in their life. Stressor can include too much or too little work, self-criticism, work insecurity, career development fears, financial pressures, creative self-doubts, emotional vulnerability (by opening up your innermost thoughts), and loneliness (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011). Artists and musicians experience greater financial insecurity than people in other careers. When the phone doesn't ring for freelance musicians, it can breed self-doubt and depression (Cooper & Wills 1989). In some cases, as with black jazz artists in the twentieth century, there were structural injustices around discrimination, poverty, and oppressive working conditions.

In a study of non-professional rock bands in Finland, alcohol performed a range of emotional management functions: it relaxed performance anxiety, it combatted boredom while they were waiting around to perform, and it allowed them to relax and unwind after the performance and socialise with the band (Grønnerød 2002). Heroin was used in jazz circles in the bebop era to extend the highs, to wind down at the end of performances, and to soften the edges of the hard world in which they worked (Tolson & Cuyjet (2007).

Touring can be a lonely life. Grammy-nominated singer/songwriter James Blake has spoken of feelings of isolation, anxiety and depression on tour (Hertweck 2018). Neil Young found touring life a complex and stressful business, where night after night, in a series of different venues, you need to get the sound right, hope you have a great audience, and play the most appropriate material for them. Afterwards you find your most humiliating moments faithfully captured on YouTube (Young 2012). Musicians can do 'one nighters' where they arrive after a long period of travelling at a venue, and have little time to get composed for the gig, and use alcohol or drugs as a pick me up to freshen up and get focussed (Tolson & Cuyjet 2007, Singer & Mirhej 2006). On tour a musician has no real home to go back to, and can wind up drinking until 5am (Forsyth, Lennox & Emslie 2016).

The musicians I know hold uncompromising standards in terms of the meaning that they want to draw from their life's work. They want their life to be as personally meaningful as possible. Pursuing an artistic career can be seen as a struggle for self-actualisation (Holm-Hadulla & Bertolino 2014), an attempt to realise your ultimate potential and transcend the finite nature of your existence by leaving something behind. You're also 'a long time dead', and so why not do something that you love? Once a musician decides to pursue their dreams they will usually suffer criticism from others for doing so. As one musician commented to a researcher: "*I dislike people who think music isn't a real job*" in spite of the fact that Elton John is probably bigger economically than British Steel (Cooper & Wills 1989, p. 27).

If you decide that artistic popularity and success is the very meaning of your life, that it is the only thing that will validate your sense of self-worth, you have also placed yourself in a very vulnerable situation. You will begin to experience criticism and rejection in an intensely personal way, because you have invested so much of yourself into the work and so much is at stake. A 'succeed at all costs' / 'make or break' ethos, and the intrinsic satisfaction and enjoyment people draw from creative work can mean that enormous numbers of hours are poured into one's work with little immediate success. There can be a failure to place boundaries around professional time and personal time, leading to fatigue and burnout (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011).

Success brings its own pressures – it can result in the artist and management feeling under siege, inundated by media and other requests. Promotional commitments start to impact the time available for songwriting and creative development. This can exacerbate feelings of pressure and stress, leading to self-medication of the stress through substance abuse (Frasco & Hetherington 1978, 2004). A sudden experience of success can also see money flow in, which provides a financial enabler.

Stresses can arise from personality issues, which compound problems. Many successful artists are introverts, and experience an inner tension when trying to force themselves to be more extroverted and outwardly energised as performers. In the documentary *Avicii: True Stories*, Avicii remarks that reading the work of Carl Jung made him realise that he was an introvert who had spent his life feeling pressured, because he was always being encouraged to be an extrovert, the life of the party. The psychological toll of his extensive touring is believed to have been a factor in his premature death. In Kurt Cobain's suicide note he professed jealousy for Freddie Mercury, in that Mercury's personality allowed him to bathe appreciatively in the love and adoration of the crowd, in a way that Cobain never could. He felt uncomfortable about it, because he didn't want to fake it (Hamilton, 2016).

Both elite sportsmen (eg the former English football captain Tony Adams) and musicians (eg Eric Clapton) have observed that their obsessive personalities were a key factor in both their success, and their predisposition towards addiction (Schumacher 1995, 1998).

Long term, heavy drug use can result in artists becoming more and more isolated and antisocial (Knafo 2008). Lost in a tunnel, anaesthetised, increasingly remote from empathy with others, they bunker down in their pain, completely dependent upon their drug of choice.



**4**

**Social,  
Workplace  
and Cultural  
Pressures**

*“The band is like a family, and the family works better when everybody is in the same mood. And this mood is easier to reach if everybody takes a couple of pints”*

— Finnish rock band member quoted in Grønnerød 2002, p 433.

The social, workplace and cultural pressures on musicians to use alcohol and drugs are far higher than for most other professions. Let's examine each in turn.

## **SOCIAL PRESSURES**

Drinking with band members is part of band bonding, socialisation and group cohesiveness (Groce 1991). It can help musicians relax, get into 'the zone' and allows members to wind down at the end of a gig, or sustain the high as a shared experience. In some types of musical employment, socialising professionally with alcohol is seen as a key expectation, a necessary part of networking in an industry that is driven by personal networks (Dobson 2010).

Although drinking with band members might be seen as a technique to encourage group cohesiveness, in advanced stages of drug abuse, substance use tends to have the opposite effect, exacerbating tensions between musicians (O'Dair 2016). For example, Jim Morrison eventually turned mean on alcohol, which damaged group productivity (Holm-Hadulla & Bertolino 2014).

## **WORKPLACE PRESSURES**

Jazz and popular music have been performed historically in venues such as nightclubs, bars and pubs that rely on alcohol sales as part of their business model. In fact entertainment, alcohol and hospitality are economically interdependent (Forsyth, Lennox & Emslie 2016). Alcohol income is part of the economics of the live music industry, and makes performances profitable for venues. It also breaks down inhibitions and can get people dancing. In the music industry, unlike other industries, 'drinking on the job' is normal for musicians and encouraged (Forsyth, Lennox & Emslie 2016).

Elvis Costello observed that if he drank everything he was offered he would be dead (Spunt 2014). Free drinks can come from four different sources: venue managers, fans, peers and alcohol sponsors (Forsyth, Lennox & Emslie 2016). Brian Welch from the band Korn recalled at one point the band received a Jägermeister endorsement which resulted in one of the band members over indulging on the free product and throwing up in the tour bus *“almost every night”* (Welch 2007, p.67)

Musicians can be asked to encourage audience members to drink (Groce 1991). In pubs and at festivals, DJs and musicians can be encouraged by venue managers to promote drinking to the audience, or to promote a new drink, and the audience can be encouraged to throw down shots with the DJ (Forsyth, Lennox & Emslie 2016).

In one study, musicians argued that it was important to match their intoxication level to that of the audience, which placed greater pressure on headline artists than those up first (Forsyth, Lennox & Emslie 2016). For a musician to match the drinking levels of audience members is a problem in itself, because for the audience member it might only be one night or a weekend, but for the musician, it can be every night, as it's their job.

In terms of other workplace pressures, as has been observed with touring, the industry also has unsocial, irregular hours. Jazz artists historically have been seen as nocturnal creatures leading vagabond lifestyles. These irregular hours create their own pressures, such as playing havoc with sleep patterns and relationships outside the workplace.

To conclude: in what other workplace would it be considered normal to be plied with alcohol while doing your job?

## CULTURAL PRESSURES

At a cultural level, there are a number of culturally supported ideas which encourage drug abuse in the music industry. The whole ethos of rock 'n' roll from the 1950s was about rebelling against conventional society, and drug use became part of that. So rejecting mainstream values, embracing a degree of hedonism and flirting with illicit substances was part of the whole ethos of popular music in the twentieth century. There are other supportive beliefs which encourage self-destructive behaviour from artists such as:

- That the music industry is about “Sex & Drugs & Rock ‘n’ Roll” as Ian Dury and the Blockheads sang in 1976;
- That “great art comes from pain” and “you need to suffer for your art”;
- That it is romantic to “live fast and die young”, never having to grow old, captured forever in time as someone young and beautiful like Marilyn Monroe. Another angle on this is that some artists are too sensitive, too beautiful for this world;
- That artists are meant to lead forbidden lifestyles, secretly admired by people working humdrum 9-5 existences;
- That the artistic persona needs a “charismatic flaw” to be interesting (Goodwin 1973, p. 35);
- That “you’re only as good as your last gig” – which heaps further pressure on artists;
- That the industry lives by the motto of “Whatever it Takes” [to be successful] - this was the official war cry of Casablanca Records, which subsequently collapsed due to its excesses (Dannen 1990);
- That ‘alcoholics’ are people passed out in gutters who lead low functioning, unsuccessful lives. Yet many, many people in the recovery community, led outwardly successful, high functioning lives, but alcohol became a negative in their life rather than a positive, and they eventually gave it up for that reason. They consider themselves to have been alcoholic because of this. Musicians can be high-functioning addicts/alcoholics (Eminem refers to having been such a musician in one TV interview).

Over many decades, record companies have routinely facilitated drug use among artists as part of their artist relations support. The instances of this are too numerous to mention, but by way of example: Atlantic Records in the late 1960s was supplying marijuana and cocaine to artists, disc jockeys and journalists (Goodman 1997); A&M supplied hash brownies, alcohol, marijuana and mescaline to artists (Goodman 1997); in the late 1970s, Casablanca Records in LA had a large drug budget, the office was filled with people chopping coke, dropping ludes and drinking beer, and employees would receive, on a daily basis, a visit from a woman who took their drug order for the next day (Dannen 1990). Although these are old examples (and in my own experience with record companies drug use is nowhere near as flagrant), in a recent book published on Atlantic Records (Carvello 2018) the legendary record company executive and founding Chairman of Atlantic Records, Ahmet Ertegun, was portrayed as a hard core alcoholic and drug addict in the final years of his career who enabled a drug culture within Atlantic, which included facilitating the drug use of musicians. Bad behaviour among industry leaders has been common. Walter Yetnikoff, the former head of CBS Records (Sony), with huge international power, fell into a spiral of alcohol addiction that culminated in him going to Hazelden and then into Twelve Step recovery (Yetnikoff 2009).

I don't believe that artist management companies and record companies want to see their artists suffer from addiction problems. Addiction problems can be a pain in the ass for record companies, blowing release schedules, and sabotaging projects. But record executives themselves get addicted and they will seek to share their addictive behaviour with others. Executives also want to get a job done and meet commercial deadlines and expectations. If the odd illicit substance will grease the wheels a little, remove the odd speed bump, then it optimises business outcomes to provide that support. Record companies also compete with one another for creative talent, and so there may be competitive pressures to be more supportive (enabling).

5

# Identity Issues

(Public persona versus private self, subcultural identity, and issues with fame and celebrity)



It is common for artists, especially those who achieve a high public profile, to experience angst from identity issues. These typically arise in three ways: a tension forms between their public persona and private self (Bryant Smalley & McIntosh 2011); drugs and alcohol are part of a subcultural identity which it pains them to reject (Ward & Burns 2000); and fame and celebrity bring their own pressures (Spunt 2014). Let's examine each in turn.

## PUBLIC PERSONA VERSUS PRIVATE SELF

*"public selves war with core selves, creating painful self-focus that the celebrity seeks to escape, often through alcohol and drugs"*

— Bryant Smalley & McIntosh 2011, p. 392

In the film *Whitney: Can I Be Me* (and the title of the film itself is significant), Whitney Houston was initially positioned to appeal to a white audience, which led to huge commercial success. However, a consequence of this success was that she began to be seen by black audiences as having 'sold out'. This became clear when she was booed at the 1989 Soul Train Awards, an experience that she found emotionally devastating. It led to a deep discomfort with her public persona and she attempted to reposition herself. This type of experience is also related to the quest for 'artistic authenticity', the fact that artists will want to feel that they possess authenticity, integrity and credibility and fans will want to see this or will brand the artist a fake. Houston was complicit in the creation of this mainstream image (Davis, 2012), and benefitted from it financially, but it did not make the subsequent rejection and humiliation any less traumatic for her.

Janis Joplin suffered from a tension between her public and private personas, which was a contributory factor in her descent into addiction, ultimately dying from a heroin overdose at the age of 27 (Oksanen 2013 B). The documentary *27: Gone Too Soon* raises the issue that for Joplin, as for some other artists, the emotional sensitivity that makes them great artists can create problems dealing with the pressures of their performing life, and that *"she had a layer of skin missing"*.

When most people screw up in the office, it is usually their work that will be criticised – you didn't perform this task correctly. However for a performing artist this criticism will be seen, as with the Whitney Houston example, as a rejection of their whole identity, of themselves as an artist and human being. And it takes place on a mass scale. It is hardly surprising that artists reach for artificial means to deal with this trauma.

The achievement of fame means that the public begins to project onto you things that may have absolutely no relationship to you as a real person at all. The artist can become alienated, with fans loving a fantasy object often quite removed from the reality of the star's self-identity, which then makes any sort of real and meaningful communication between the artist and audience unlikely.

## SUBCULTURAL IDENTITY

*"Heroin was our badge...the thing that made us different from the rest of the world. It was the thing that said, 'We know. You don't know.' It was the thing that gave us membership in a unique club, and for this membership we gave up everything else in the world."* — Bebop trumpeter Red Rodney (Ward & Burns 2000, p. 358).

Dick Hebdige's book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* showed how punk style items such as safety pins and ripped clothing derived their meaning from being rebellious symbols of subcultural identity. There is no question that drug use has been part of music subcultural identity. Bebop was a subculture, a black rebellion against injustice, conformity and 'squares', with sunglasses, hipster goatees and heroin as the drug of choice (Spunt 2014; Tolson & Cuyjet 2007). Saxophonist Charlie 'Bird' Parker was the symbol of heroin-fuelled genius, and his drug taking influenced a whole generation of jazz musicians (Spunt 2014). His legendary ability to create fluid improvisations while having consumed vast quantities of drugs and alcohol prior to performing (sufficient to kill most human beings) was emulated in many quarters (Spunt 2014). Hip hop subcultural identity brought a harder, rougher, more criminal edge, with street drug dealing a big fixture (Singer & Mirhej 2006). Drugs authenticated hip hop subculture (Smiley 2017) and the drugs of choice went from alcohol and marijuana to cocktails of pharmaceutical drugs.

If drug use is part of subcultural identity, a consequence of this is that an artist who gives up alcohol and drugs places their membership of the subculture in jeopardy. Yet this subculture is their home, their tribe.

Ever since rock 'n' roll, one of the angles which has lent a frisson of excitement to artists is the flirtation with deviance and transgression. Musicians often take on the role of the 'romantic outsider' appealing to the 'lost souls' in society (Lopes 2005). We should have the honesty to acknowledge that the audience loved Jim Morrison's excesses and there appeared to be a fatalism that he would die, which Morrison played up to in his lyrics and imagery as sacrifice and destiny (Holm-Hadulla & Bertolino 2014). Amy Winehouse and Kurt Cobain gave voice to angst and dysfunction in a way that resonated strongly with audiences, and was indeed part of the core attraction of the music. Keith Richards' stories of excess, such as that he snorted his father's ashes with cocaine (Glendinning 2007) have created endless media joy. There is no question that the resulting publicity has been good for the Rolling Stones brand. One of the unhealthy truths is that drug use has been made central to the subcultural identity of the artist being anti-conformist, the rebel (Singer & Mirheg 2006) the anti-nerd, and this can be attractive to people. "I go to bed at 9:30pm after a nice camomile tea" although very healthy doesn't quite cut it like "I wake up at dusk, drink 11 shots of whiskey, mainline a little heroin, and then go into a subterranean nightclub where I play and hang until 5am." (ie the type of life Charlie Parker led). This is a big issue in recovery as the artist will fear subcultural rejection if they drop the alcohol and drugs. They may try techniques such as bringing bottles of vodka on stage filled with iced water, trying to cut back on the excesses without appearing to have done so. It is hoped that the string of high profile artists who have gone into rehab and recovery, and have continued their careers without drugs, will make this easier for those who follow.

## OTHER ISSUES WITH FAME AND CELEBRITY

Fame and celebrity bring other pressures, as both Amy Winehouse and Whitney Houston observe in the films *Amy and Whitney: Can I Be Me*. Fame is scary. Brian Wilson of The Beach Boys spoke of the rise to fame being a scary process that mixed feeling excited with feeling sick (Wilson 2016). Nerves and fear of failure creep in. People start swarming around you wanting a piece of you with their own agendas. It makes it difficult to find true, new friends.

Artists who are under siege from fans and the media need a protective bubble wrapped around them, which a good artist manager or record label will attempt to facilitate. But if you don't have a protective bubble, it is tempting to use drugs to create one (Knafo 2008). In a pressured, hot house environment, where privacy is hard, a drug like heroin can wrap you in a blanket, creating the space you crave (Spunt 2014). Keith Richards disliked aspects of celebrity life and found that heroin helped him handle it (Spunt 2014).

What also happens is that if and when an artist decides that they do need some professional help handling a dependency issue, instead of it being a confidential, private matter, as would be the case with most human beings, it is played out under the full glare of a media spotlight. Even journalists themselves are starting to call for higher standards in the way celebrity addiction is covered in the media:

*"Currently, the way the press covers addicts is barbaric, like bear-baiting or throwing a witch in a pond to see if she will sink or swim"..... "the current trend towards 'open season' on high-profile substance abusers is cruel, inhumane, shameful and an appallingly bad example to a society that needs, quite urgently, to understand addiction, and how to combat it." — (Orr, 2011).*

Celebrities who publicly stumble because of substance abuse problems can also suffer a backlash from audience members who believe that artists are always seeking to maximise their own publicity, and so the artist may be using their drug misadventures to capture media attention. So the resulting media splashes from Amy Winehouse meltdowns elicited a level of cynicism among some audience members that it might be a ploy to generate self-publicity (Shaw, Whitehead & Giles 2010).

Finally, there is the issue of coping with the loss of fame and celebrity, which happens eventually to almost every artist. The movie *Sunset Boulevard* captures the pain experienced by a once-famous silent-movie star who loses her fame with the advent of talking motion pictures. It is a poignant reminder that time passes, that life is transient, careers are ephemeral, that once huge trends and developments give way to the next trend and development, often leaving artists fading from public awareness.

In a story that illustrates the difficulties of overcoming a short period of fame, Paul Vaessen was an unknown footballer who one afternoon came off the reserves bench for the English club Arsenal in a huge European game. It was towards the end of the game, with his team facing elimination from the competition. In the final seconds he scored the winning goal, catapulting him from invisibility to international attention. Shortly afterwards his career ended through injury. He failed to adjust to his new circumstances and after a period of drug addiction committed suicide. The book *Stuck in a Moment: The Ballad of Paul Vaessen* (Taylor 2014) is a thoughtful exploration of this inability to move on, when he could no longer do the one thing he wanted to do, the one thing that gave his life meaning.



## Conclusion and a request for assistance

This article has scoped out some of the pressures that make musicians so vulnerable to substance abuse. Frankly, when you look at all the pressures that are there for musicians, it's a miracle anyone out there is sober.

There are many superstar artists who have showcased how it is possible to get beyond addiction and re-discover creative and professional success along with personal happiness, such as Elton John, Eric Clapton, Eminem (etc.) However, I would love to receive unpublished stories (even anonymously) from recovered musicians (eg 5-20 pages), which, if there was sufficient interest, we could post on a website or package into a book. Copyright in submissions would be licensed non-exclusively, not assigned, so you would retain copyright in your work. What would be particularly interesting is instead of very detailed discussions of how much alcohol or substances were consumed over what period, is how the pressures that have been outlined here felt (and perhaps pressures that haven't even been covered here), how substance use functioned to alleviate and manage these problems, and the concrete remedies, techniques, practices, knowledge, support (etc) that enabled recovery. What advice would you give those who want to intervene in an artist's addiction and help them recover (like record labels and artist managers)?

Maybe one of these stories could be yours. Please email me at [paulsaintilan@gmail.com](mailto:paulsaintilan@gmail.com) if you are interested in contributing to this project.

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*Avicii: True Stories* (2017) Documentary on Avicii produced and directed by Levan Tsikurishvili.

*Sunset Boulevard* (1950) Directed and co-written by Billy Wilder, produced and co-written by Charles Brackett. Stars William Holden and Gloria Swanson.

*Whitney: Can I Be Me* (2017) Documentary on Whitney Houston. Directed by Nick Broomfield and Rudi Dolezal. A Lafayette Films, Passion Pictures and Showtime Networks production.

*27: Gone Too Soon* (2018) Documentary on 'the 27 club' directed by Simon Napier-Bell.

[Watch out for: *The Creative High* (Forthcoming) - a documentary directed by Adriana Marchione. It focuses on recovery through artistic expression and how artists re-create their lives to live free of addiction.]

## ORGANISATIONS SEEKING TO ASSIST MUSICIANS WITH ADDICTION ISSUES

- Artists and Musicians in Recovery  
<https://artsrecovery.org/>
- Help Musicians UK  
<https://www.helpmusicians.org.uk/>
- MusiCares (Recording Academy)  
<https://www.grammy.com/musicares/about>
- Rock to Recovery  
<http://rocktorecovery.org/>
- Road Recovery  
<https://www.roadrecovery.org/index.php>

## ABOUT THE WRITER

Paul Saintilan studied with the late Australian music composer Peter Sculthorpe and went on to work as an international Marketing Director at EMI Music and Universal Music in London in the 1990s. He partied hard, and then decided to drink his way through a marriage breakup in 1999. This triggered an addiction problem that was ultimately solved through AA initially teaching him some hard lessons about addiction, and then finding Buddhism which sublimated sobriety and made it beautiful for him. In 2008 he hosted a gathering at Cannon Beach, Oregon, of Buddhist teachers, psychiatrists, psychologists, and addiction researchers, interested in using Buddhist practices to address the suffering caused by addictive behaviours. This meeting ultimately led to the creation of the Buddhist Recovery Network, a non-profit international organisation. He served as the inaugural Chairman of the organisation, during which time a website was established, <https://www.buddhistrecovery.org/> and the organisation was incorporated with IRS tax deductible status in the USA. He also co-hosted the 2009 International Buddhist Recovery Network Conference at Against The Stream in Los Angeles. He is 16 years sober [as at 1/19]. Feel free to contact Paul at [paulsaintilan@gmail.com](mailto:paulsaintilan@gmail.com)

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