



# Collaborating in a competitive world: musicians' working lives and understandings of entrepreneurship

Work, employment and society  
26(2) 246–261  
© The Author(s) 2012  
Reprints and permission: [sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav)  
DOI: 10.1177/0950017011432919  
[wes.sagepub.com](http://wes.sagepub.com)



**Susan Coulson**  
Newcastle University, UK

## Abstract

Recent interest in 'creative' work practices has been brought about by organizational restructuring and the emergence of the creative industries as an economic power. Drawing on research with musicians in the North East of England, this article explores musicians' understandings of their working lives within the new entrepreneurial agenda. Musicians are shown to be enterprising in pursuing a musical calling in a difficult market and of particular interest is the extent to which they see themselves as entrepreneurs, whether they equate being self-employed with being entrepreneurial, and what relevance contemporary notions of individual enterprise have for those whose working lives are embedded in the essentially co-operative music world. Networking is regarded as an essential entrepreneurial skill and the concept of 'active networking' is introduced to help investigate what can be learnt about musicians' understanding of entrepreneurship through applying this model.

## Keywords

creative industries, cultural workforce, entrepreneurship, musicians, networking, non-standard work

## Introduction

This article investigates musicians' understanding of entrepreneurship in light of their place in the creative industries workforce. Previously known as the cultural industries, the creative industries were renamed and redefined in the late 1990s by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS, 1998),<sup>1</sup> extending beyond the traditional arts and media to include creative services such as architecture and electronic publishing. In little

---

### Corresponding author:

Susan Coulson, Newcastle University, 5th Floor, Claremont Bridge, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU, UK.  
Email: [s.coulson1@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:s.coulson1@ncl.ac.uk)

over a decade since this shift (see Garnham, 2005 for a summary of the implications), the creative industries have risen to a prominent position in the new economic order, boosted by claims about economic, social and policy-relevant benefits (Böhm and Land, 2009; Miles and Paddison, 2005; Oakley, 2006). In step with these changes, there are also altered expectations of the creative workforce, and a history of atypical, improvised and autonomous work patterns in the arts has meant that musicians and other artists have come to epitomize the new creative class of model entrepreneurs (DCMS, 2008; Florida, 2002; Leadbeater and Oakley, 1999). The DCMS (2006, 2008) extols the value of entrepreneurial skills in the creative workforce, characterized as 'new talents for a new economy' (DCMS, 2008). This signals a change in focus to a more economic agenda and the imperative for work in creative occupations to be harnessed to serve that agenda (Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Oakley, 2009; Work Foundation, 2007). Despite recognized difficulties in reconciling business and 'art for art's sake' (Caves, 2000; Haunschild and Eikhof, 2009; Taylor and Littleton, 2008), creative workers are expected to deploy entrepreneurial skills, motivated by competitive self-interest rather than co-operation (Hendry, 2004). There has been a tendency for polarized views to develop about creative work. Some of the more enthusiastic literature portrays it in an idealized way as free, autonomous and full of choice (DCMS, 2008; Florida, 2002; Leadbeater and Oakley, 1999); while others deplore its low pay, insecurity and generally exploitative tendencies (Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Gill and Pratt, 2008).

It is not inevitable that all creative workers will adopt entrepreneurship as a work mode. Weatherston (2009: 52) describes staff and students in a university music department as having a 'natural disinclination to be seen as entrepreneurs'. Caves (2000) notes of musicians that they may value some 'finesse of execution' more highly than another aspect of their performance that would be noticed by and appeal to the paying customer: 'Hence, the artist may divert effort from aspects of the task that consumers will notice (thus affecting their willingness to pay) to those they will neither notice nor value' (Caves, 2000: 4). Fenwick (2002) investigates the lives of women who have become self-employed, arguing that, despite the prevailing enterprise discourse, a complex mix of motivations and desires can influence the experience of self-employed work. Her research shows that the outcomes the participants sought from their self-employment were contradictory but not limited to growth and wealth. They also included quality of life, sustainability, constant learning and co-operative relationships. Fenwick provides evidence that some individuals' approach to enterprise shows resistance to dominant models based on competition. Some may 'transgress altogether norms of business development driven primarily by economic logic' (Fenwick, 2002: 718; see also Gill and Pratt, 2008).

Being proactive, in other words not waiting for work to come, is one of the means by which entrepreneurs can improve their chances of success (Hartshorn and Sear, 2005). Networking is a proactive strategy commonly used for getting work in a labour market such as music, where a lot of hiring happens informally through contacts. This article will investigate the research musicians' use of networking as a way of exploring just one aspect of entrepreneurial behaviour. Networks are created by recruiting and maintaining webs of contacts who may be able to offer work or job information (Blair, 2001, 2009; Granovetter, 1995; Lin, 1999). Blair (2009) investigates networks in the film industry,

another sector where almost no formal hiring methods exist, and offers the concept of 'active networking' as an explanatory framework for understanding the influence of social structure on network structure and individual action. In this approach, the process of forming networks is a deliberate action involving conscious consideration of the potential usefulness of the selected individuals in the network. The network is always in a dynamic state of change as less useful members cease to be contacted and new ones are added. The job seeker constantly aims to construct networks of those who have the most to offer, such as those in more senior positions. Quality of a network, Blair argues, rather than simply the quantity of contacts, can consequently have the most influence on chances of getting work. The ability to achieve successful networks, and thus increase work opportunities, is also affected by social structures, so that factors such as education, skills and family background can enhance, or create barriers to, success. Network formation is therefore determined by an actor's position in wider social structures, the place of contacts in the work structure and their own strategic actions.

Drawing on research about musicians' working lives, which is outlined next, this article investigates entrepreneurship in one group of creative workers. The concept of active networking is used to explore how musicians' use of such a strategy intersects with their sense of community, offering an insight into the ways in which musicians engage with the 'logic and imperatives of enterprise' (Storey et al., 2005: 1033). The conclusions will discuss some of the implications that can be drawn from this research.

## The research

In the North East of England, the decline of traditional industry has had a physical, economic and social impact throughout the region, leading policy makers to embrace new industries highlighting culture and creativity (Bailey et al., 2004; Cameron and Coaffee, 2005; Miles, 2005). Despite flagship cultural developments in many parts of the UK and abroad, the workforce on which such projects rely is under-researched (Hesmondhalgh, 2002). This article aims to fill one of the gaps in knowledge about cultural workers by bringing musicians' working lives under the spotlight. It is based on 17 in-depth interviews which formed part of a wider ESRC-funded CASE research project<sup>2</sup> carried out in conjunction with the Sage Gateshead music centre.<sup>3</sup> The aims of the project were to provide a profile of musicians practising in the North East of England, a theoretical framework within which to understand musicians' constructions of making a living from work of high intrinsic value, and policy-relevant insights into forms of support for musicians' working lives.

### *Identifying musicians*

The 17 interview participants were selected from those who had indicated in an earlier questionnaire survey phase of the project that they were willing to take part in in-depth interviews, or who were recommended by a survey respondent. Identifying and reaching a target population of musicians is difficult, hindered by the current mix of industry, occupation and employment status classification systems,<sup>4</sup> as well as data protection concerns.<sup>5</sup> It was eventually decided to use a snowballing approach (Atkinson and Flint,

2001; Heckathorn and Jeffri, 2001; Platman, 2004), beginning with three different sources<sup>6</sup> in an attempt to reach diverse networks of musicians. There were also questions about what constituted a musician. Numerous attempts have been made to define terms such as ‘artist’ or ‘musician’ (Elstad, 1997; IFACCA, 2002; Karttunen, 1998), the general consensus being that definition depends on context. For the research under discussion, the explanatory material for prospective participants stated that the focus of interest was musicians’ experiences of making a living from music, and all who volunteered to participate had been doing that for a large part of their working life. A musical livelihood was understood to include income from music-related activities, particularly teaching, which can form an integral part of a musical career (Mills, 2004; Rogers, 2002); but no participant had made a living solely from a music-related activity. This is an important feature of musicians’ own understanding of what it is to be a musician and will be discussed further below.

In order to be able to explore how the musicians’ professional lives developed and changed over time, a biographic narrative approach was used (Bertaux, 2003; Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Roberts, 2002), and interview participants were sought who had been working as musicians for at least five years. With this method, respondents give an uninterrupted account of their life or some specified aspect of it, followed by the interviewer asking questions arising from their narrative and any other questions they have previously decided to introduce. This method proved rewarding, allowing participants to relate in their own time and on their own terms what was important to them about the way their musical lives had developed. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed, with names and other identifying details changed. Analysis was carried out manually using a data-driven or grounded approach described by Charmaz (2006), with themes and categories identified by progressively focused coding.

### *The musicians*

This research does not claim to be able to make universal statements about all musicians. Indeed, although recent studies focus on the ‘industry’ aspect of music, i.e. the business of recording (mainly popular) music (see for example Negus, 1998; Thompson et al., 2007) the musicians in this research had largely avoided recording contracts or dealings with management in the recording business.

Since the participating organization, the Sage Gateshead, comes into contact with a wide range of musicians it made sense to try to find participants with a spread of characteristics that represented that variety as far as possible. Some of these are detailed in Table 1, along with the broad types of work from which the musicians derived an income. Eight women and nine men took part in the interviews, ranging in age from late 20s to early 70s. There was a slight bias towards the upper age ranges, which was considered useful for revealing turning points, adaptations and developments in livelihood strategies over a working lifetime. All had been professional musicians since their late teens to late twenties, except for one who had started exceptionally young, performing in radio advertising at the age of four. The musicians played across all the major groupings of classical, folk, jazz and popular music, some concentrating on one of these, others working in all.

**Table 1.** Some characteristics of the interview participants

Pseudonym, female/male	Age	Instrument	Genre(s) played in	Employed Income source(s)	Self-employed income source(s)
Fiona (F)	50s	Brass, voice, keyboard	All	Community music	Performing, teaching
Michael (M)	50s	Traditional	Folk	Teaching	Performing, teaching, recording, composing
Rosie (F)	30s	String	All		Performing, teaching
Pat (M)	50s	Wind	Jazz		Performing, management, events, teaching
Rosa (F)	50s	Keyboard, voice	All	Teaching	Performing, composing
James (M)	70s	Keyboard, voice	Classical, popular	Performing	Composing, conducting, adjudicating
Avril (F)	50s	String	Classical		Performing, teaching
Colin (M)	50s	Percussion	Popular, classical		Performing, composing, teaching, running agency
Tom (M)	30s	Percussion	All	Community music	Performing, composing
Pierre-André (M)	60s	Wind	Classical, jazz, popular		Performing, teaching
Pudding (M)	70s	Wind	Jazz, classical		Performing, teaching
Clarice (F)	60s	Keyboard, voice	Classical		Performing, teaching
Douglas (M)	60s	Brass	Popular, classical		Performing, conducting, arranging
Lynsey (F)	20s	Percussion, wind	Folk, popular	Community music	Performing, composing,
Julie (F)	40s	Keyboard, string, voice, wind	Jazz, popular	Teaching	Performing
Erin (F)	40s	Voice, string	Folk, popular, jazz		Performing, recording
Dan (M)	30s	Voice, string, keyboard	Popular	Teaching	Performing, composing

Notes: The North East music world is small and instruments are confined to 'families' to avoid identification. 'Performing' includes playing solo, accompanying and/or playing in large or small ensembles, either regularly or on a one-off basis, live or in a recording studio.

They played a wide variety of instruments, including voice, tuned and untuned percussion, string, wind and brass instruments, keyboards, pipes, concertina and piano accordion. Most had been musicians for their entire working lives, although a few had initially had other jobs, one for eight years, while building up the expertise and confidence to 'turn professional'. Three had experienced interruptions to their music lives of up to five years, brought about by health problems and household circumstances.

It was mentioned above that none of the participants had made an entire living from music-related work such as teaching. It emerged from the in-depth interviews that if this had been the case, they would not have been able to think of themselves as musicians, since they generally recognized the status of 'musician' as strongly linked to the paid making of music. Musicians' work can be thought of as located on a continuum, with little paid music work at one end and an entire income from music-making at the other. The nearer the latter, the more readily can one be identified as a musician, that is, a professional musician. This idea is supported by several participants' use of the term 'work'. By this they meant paid music work as distinct from any other paid work, such as teaching (see also Cottrell, 2004). Avril, for instance, described her precarious job as an 'extra': 'Everything could change overnight and I could find myself with no work.' She did also have teaching work at the time, but clearly differentiated that from her 'work' – that is, her paid music-making. This use of the term 'work' is, Cottrell (2004) suggests, a symbol through which musicians reinforce to themselves and others their identity as professional musicians. The importance of music as an embodied practice (MacNeill, 2009) – the physical 'doing' of music – is also central to musicians' conception of themselves as musicians. A participant describes experiencing an identity crisis because of a disruption to her working life: 'There's no satisfaction in going about saying "I'm a musician." You know, you have to be practising it, you have to be *doing* it, you have to be living in a certain way' (Clarice).

## **Understanding musicians' working lives: entrepreneurship, co-operation and community**

In this section, some features of musicians' working lives will be considered as an aid to understanding their complex nature and the contradictions that thus arise between notions of entrepreneurship and the reality of being a professional musician. They are the 'accidental' nature of their enterprising work lives; the musicians' understanding of the entrepreneurial nature of their work; and, finally, networking in the music community.

### *Musicians' work patterns as 'accidental entrepreneurs'*

The nature of the music labour market, with little employment on offer, means musicians do not generally engage in non-standard work from choice (Menger, 1999). This shows immediately why notions of entrepreneurship may not have much relevance to musicians' working lives: they are what might be called 'accidental entrepreneurs', since most of them did not set out to start a business. Their work mode is contingent on their choice of career. Whether orchestral musicians are employed or self-employed, for example, is usually decided by the type of orchestra they play with. Some orchestras

employ their members, others are run by their members who are self-employed shareholders. In areas such as writing, recording and performing, self-employment is generally the only option. In most cases, musicians will simply accept whatever arrangement comes with the specific piece of work they are doing at the time, as in this comment by a musician whose employment status had varied throughout his working life: 'The [particular instrument] jobs would be paid, I was employed by them, but apart from that, it was all freelance stuff' (James).

At the time of the interviews, nine of the musicians were entirely self-employed, while eight combined self-employment with some element of employment in teaching or lecturing, community music, management, conducting or administration. This was not a static situation. The proportions of the musicians' time spent on, or the share of their incomes gained from, particular paid work, whether on a self-employed or employed basis, part-time or full-time, had varied over their careers. Their working lives generally also included a combination of what some described as 'regular' and 'freelance' work. Regular work is undertaken fairly routinely and perhaps with the same group of musicians, for example working as a cathedral organist or playing regularly with a band; and freelance work is done on a more sporadic, perhaps one-off, basis, such as getting an individual engagement or working as a session musician.

The changeable nature of musicians' work suggests a more complicated picture of their working lives than is provided by the polarized depictions mentioned in the introduction. Musicians do enjoy freedom and variety and also experience low pay, insecurity and fragmented working lives: 'Most musicians are freelance, and it is precarious, and it's hard, so you have to really burn for the music. But if you do, then it's really lovely' (Rosa). The way in which both the positive and the negative qualities of being a professional musician are experienced is affected by the collaborative nature of music-making. We now turn to this aspect of a music career in order to explore the meaning of entrepreneurship in the research musicians' working lives.

### *Musicians' understandings of entrepreneurship*

Literature devoted to creative work frequently emphasizes entrepreneurial self-interest, with individuals taking personal responsibility for making themselves employable in an insecure, competitive labour market (Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009; DCMS, 2008; Hartshorn and Sear, 2005). Musicians must compete for scarce resources, whether it is their share of the audience, funding in the public sector or whatever it may be; and yet the nature of the music profession is essentially co-operative. Relationships with other musicians featured repeatedly in the participants' narratives and many spoke of valuing collaborative opportunities: 'Working with people. Sharing the skills, bringing the skills together with different people to create something that you wouldn't have without that collaboration' (Tom). 'I guess my choice of gigs now is because of who I work with ... There's a sort of empathy between you when you work, you know?' (Colin).

Did the participants consider themselves to be entrepreneurs? Advice for those interested in starting up in business indicates that being self-employed undoubtedly means being a business, however small. As was discussed earlier, however, the musicians did not initiate their careers as the result of any entrepreneurial drive, but from the desire to

be musicians. In thinking about their own working lives, the majority of the musicians in the research did not make a connection between self-employment and entrepreneurship. Even though, as we have seen, self-employment was a dominant feature, most did not think of themselves as a business. Others were uncertain:

I organize all the work for that [a group] and set everything up. So I tend to think of that as a business, yes. But otherwise – no, I don't think so. I'm not really sure, but generally I just think of myself as a musician. (Rosie)

Two points arise here. The first is about being *businesslike*, a term frequently used and recognized by all the research musicians as central, whether or not they regarded themselves as a business. Their descriptions of businesslike behaviour, however, tended to be associated with a sense of responsibility: being reliable and organized, fulfilling obligations to others, maintaining networks and making the most of their skills and the opportunities available to them. This is bound up in and connected to the second point, which is about Rosie saying she generally just thought of herself as a musician. That is, the way she thought about how she worked was embedded in her identity as a musician, rather than any impulse towards being entrepreneurial. The same was true for most of the participants. Being a musician is about acquiring and maintaining a set of skills, cultural conventions and ways of being that might be called a vocational *habitus*, of which work practices simply form a part.

The few musicians who did say they regarded themselves as a business did not differ in attitudes or actions from those who did not. Pat, for example, felt that musicians should regard themselves as a business, but this was essentially to do with not expecting the world to owe them a living. His stance did not translate into practices that departed radically from those of the other participants. He spoke about being adaptable and reliable, paying people on time, 'basic human decency' and developing one's reputation as a musician. But the focus of all these things, as for all the participants, was music:

So my ability to earn a living as a musician – all that ragbag of things that I've done in my career – all stem from some very basic principles. The first one is ... that I really care about the music. Whatever the music is that's closest to you, the music you play, listen to or aspire to play – if that's not there then forget it, because you've got to have that to get you through the difficult times.

What most of the musicians appeared to understand from being a business, then, was simply dealing with the day-to-day requirements of whatever combination of activities made up their working lives. This had little to do with matters commonly associated with a business enterprise, such as business plans, competitiveness, growth or profits, and much to do with the satisfactions of music-making and maintaining co-operative relationships while getting by financially.

As Fenwick (2002) suggests, the way in which individuals regard their self-employed work can arise from their motivation for doing it. In the case of musicians, the main motivator and driving force is making music, and any entrepreneurial associations are

incidental. This is not to say that they do not each develop their own talents, skills and creativity, but they do this in a co-operative way, as part of a continuous process of learning, music-making and teaching that supports the existence of the music community. The desire for this to continue – through support for other musicians, an event or a genre – can override individual self-interest. One musician, for example, described organizing a festival to bring his own and others' music to new audiences. When the project ran over budget, he simply reduced his own fee, 'which is fairly common among musicians'. The sense of fulfilment the interview participants experienced from belonging to the music world tended to outweigh economic considerations:

I mean, you asked me earlier on, did I ever see myself as a business. Absolutely not – I probably reacted sort of like this [makes a mock gesture of horror], because I've never seen that I've had anything to do with business at all. For me, that's another world, to think in terms of profit or money ... It's just fabulous to be able to do something that's so rewarding and so enriching of your life, so creative. (Rosa)

Undoubtedly, the economic pressures are real. Since the research set out to explore how musicians put together a livelihood, it did not include anyone who had found the drawbacks insurmountable and turned to another way of making a living. Nevertheless, for the research participants at least, getting money was clearly secondary to being involved in music. As we have seen, the way in which musicians put together a living from a variety of jobs means that getting money is not straightforward. We now look at how musicians set about doing this through the lens of one entrepreneurial activity – networking.

### *Networking and the musician community*

Blair (2009), investigating work in the film industry, describes active networking as being structured, dynamic and conscious, influenced by:

- 1) the job seeker's position in wider social structures,
- 2) the job-providing quality of the contacts in the network, and
- 3) the job seeker's own strategic actions; that is, how they set about deciding which contacts are useful to them.

This model depicts networking in the film industry, then, as essentially an entrepreneurial activity, with networks regarded as an economic resource. Assessing these elements through the musicians' narratives reveals networking in their case in a more complex, less instrumental light.

The way in which some musicians got started in music was clearly influenced by wider social structures, particularly family background and education. None of the musicians had parents who were professional musicians; but one participant was a member of an extended family of popular musicians, enabling him to leave school at 15 and immediately start making a living playing in rock bands. He knew who to approach for work, played in pubs and clubs, made a lot of contacts and was generally able to establish himself as a professional musician.

Studying at a conservatoire or university also provides openings to get started in music, through the teaching and performance opportunities students are offered. The four participants who pursued formal music education at a higher level were able to start building up contacts as well as being seen and developing a reputation, so that they gradually established themselves in the professional music world. Several others were deflected from studying music at a higher level, and on leaving school went to work or to university to study an unrelated subject. They still managed to keep up their music by hanging around music departments or other musicians, 'going about in London, meeting various people, taking note of how it was all done' (James). So while they were doing their 'day jobs' they were building up networks they could call on when they decided to turn professional.

Once they had got started as musicians, although few used the term 'networking', the participants developed an awareness of the value of getting to know a wide assortment of people who knew them and their reputation and might be able to offer work. 'As a musician you have to introduce yourself to different people, you always have to push yourself a little bit' (Pierre-André). Some, however, had less initial appreciation of the benefits of networking. Three participants, for example, began their music careers trying to get established in original bands. When the bands broke up, the participants found that they had limited experience and few contacts to call on, having focused everything on that single venture: 'Play in different bands, play with as many people as you can. That's a mistake I made ... I just didn't know' (Tom). One of these went to university to study music nine years after starting out and found its greatest benefit was the contacts she made: 'I got into different styles of playing and picked up different bits of work from different areas. The more people I played with the more contacts you make, and it just sort of spread' (Rosie).

While social structure may play a part in some musicians' entry to the music world, there is less evidence for its continuing influence. In Blair's analysis of active networking, potential contacts are assessed for their position within the organizational hierarchy and, thus, their ability to provide work or job information. It is this instrumental, entrepreneurial aspect of networking that was not found among the research participants. The reason for this may be to do with the nature of different cultural industries. The music world is more diverse, less hierarchical and less structured than the film industry (Blair, 2009; Blair et al., 2001; Jones, 1996). It relies less on discreet and time-limited projects and more on livelihoods created from an overlapping mix of jobs. Music also involves many different styles and genres, many instruments and many types of work from solo to big orchestras, community music to grand opera. There is also a considerable amount of peripheral work, for example organizing gigs, teaching, managing or recording, from which the participants also derived an income. Networks are undeniably the principal form of recruiting in both industries, but the more kaleidoscopic nature of many musicians' working lives means that networks are created in a more ad hoc, less strategic way than that described in the film world.

Perhaps even more in a regional setting than in a major music centre like London, many musicians patch together a living by undertaking many different types of work at the same time. One participant played in a fluctuating assortment of seven or eight rock, jazz and folk ensembles as well as undertaking teaching and studio sessions. This work

pattern necessitated being in touch with a shifting array of new and old contacts, maintaining websites and generally 'dealing with whatever comes at you first' (Rosie). The targeted nature of active networking, identified by Blair (2009) and also by Haunschild and Eikhof (2009) among theatre actors, is thus not evident in the same way. The majority of participants simply did their best to keep in touch with everyone they knew, on the basis of never knowing what might come up.

Haunschild and Eikhof said of theatre actors that 'since every personal relationship had a potential economic value it was often hard to distinguish true friends from those who just try to advance their career' (Haunschild and Eikhof, 2009: 165). In contrast, the musicians discussed their contacts in terms of collaborative working relationships or friendships. While some participants mentioned making an effort to meet people who were important to them musically, no one spoke of valuing their contacts simply for their use in getting work. It was important that people were good to work with, socially and musically, and in addition, most of the participants said that almost all their friends were musicians: 'You always stayed with people who were running things and all that sort of stuff. These relationships and friendships that one has built, they are supportive in a true personal as well as business sense' (Michael). While their skills and reputation as a musician were of primary importance, it was also essential to learn to be congenial: 'I suppose I'm quite easy to get along with. I'm willing to listen to someone else's point of view musically, you know what I mean?' (Colin). 'You develop a sense of give and take to a very high degree' (Pierre-André). This is clearly associated with the complex and collaborative nature of music-making, where musicians interact on many different levels, including friendship, communication, musical skill and co-operation, discussed above.

The notion of community, touched on earlier, is an important element in understanding musicians' network construction as more than the strategic, work-seeking activity described by Blair (2009) and others (Hartshorn and Sear, 2005; Haunschild and Eikhof, 2009; Wittel, 2001). The participants had a strong sense of being part of a community: 'You know, you're in this tribe, and you think the same way ... and you probably play music for the same reasons, that is, that it's just this thing that you're obsessed with' (Erin). They identified with each others' experiences of 'getting by' in a way that seemed embedded within a musician culture. Participants derived from this a sense of common identity, of being members of a community with its own norms and practices. Cohen (1985) describes a community as a group having something in common with each other that distinguishes them from the members of other groups: 'I like the identity of being a musician. I always think that a musician is somebody who's a little bit on the outside of the mainstream of society' (Rosie). Membership of the community is reinforced through symbols and actions that signify those distinctions, for example the use of the term 'work' described earlier, busy diaries, musicians' humour (Cottrell, 2004) or simply the recognition of shared circumstances: 'I could be sitting here with an orchestral viola player, a folk fiddler and a brass band player and there would be a certain commonality about what we were saying, even though our worlds as players intersect very rarely' (Pat). Musicians' networks can then be thought of as overlapping circles of contacts contained within, and coloured by, the wider music community whose members they identify with and whose existence they work to support.

Participants spoke of other musicians giving them opportunities and advice and helping them to become established. There were cases of lessons given for free, offers of accommodation, shared skills, money and information. Of crucial importance is that these musicians would work to encourage new musicians or enable existing ones to find new audiences: 'Being able to present musicians you think are important to other people ... mainly because I knew that people would not otherwise hear that stuff. That's something I enjoy very much' (Michael). Some indicated that it was the love of music that gave rise to these other behaviours: 'So I suppose what I'm saying is that the music comes first, and the people are kind of a bonus if you're really that happy working with them, if it's a real true partnership, a bit like marriage I suppose' (Clarice). The participants inclined towards collaborative, meaningful work and relationships, offering resistance to current notions of enterprise that characterize flexible self-employed work as individualistic and competitive. The impetus for the alternative vision of work they offer is, as Clarice says, the centrality of music in their lives. The music world has its own community, practices and values that do not sit easily with those of the enterprise culture.

We have seen that the musicians' working lives were complex. Insecurity was the norm and many of the participants could be regarded as just getting by financially, but the value of having music at the centre of their working lives mitigated some of the more negative aspects and strengthened their sense of community and identity as working musicians. It is the communal, co-operative nature of music work that helps illuminate musicians' understandings of being entrepreneurial.

## Conclusions

The musicians involved in this research showed themselves to be enterprising in the way they set about creating a livelihood in an inhospitable labour market. They assembled a complex assortment of jobs, maintained networks and developed their own skills and talents. They bore little resemblance, however, to the popular depiction of creative entrepreneurs as young, innovative, highly individualistic and predisposed to 'pursue self-employment and entrepreneurship in a spirit of self-exploration and self-fulfilment' (Leadbeater and Oakley, 1999: 15; see also Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009). The participants in fact showed considerable opposition to regarding their working lives in such terms. The maintenance of a sense of self requires the mobilization of narrative resources (Down, 2006), and while the musicians were aware of, and embraced, certain sorts of enterprising behaviour as necessary for establishing and maintaining a place in the music world, the narratives of their working lives were not generally expressed in terms of an entrepreneurial identity. They dismissed notions of individualistic competition in favour of co-operative networks and a commitment to music as a community, an art form, a source of identity and a way of life. This is a consequence of the unique intertwining of the musical and the social that forms the context for (at least some) musicians' work.

An exploration of the musicians' approach to networking – an activity often described as an essential entrepreneurial skill – revealed that they did not entirely fit the model outlined by Blair (2009). Their networks existed for more than the strategic reasons outlined in Blair's concept of active networking, and were constructed in a less instrumental way, explained by the collaborative nature of music-making and musicians' sense of

being members of a community. While musicians' networks can indeed be a source of work possibilities, this is not their only, or even their primary, focus. Networks in the music world also involve friendship, co-operation, support, musical collaboration and learning opportunities.

There are two implications that can be drawn from this study. The first is that the establishment of the 'creative industries' and their subsequent link to the 'creative economy' has done a disservice to musicians and perhaps others with their own distinctive work practices in what used to be termed 'the arts'. They have been subsumed into a discourse that gives value to an innovation and business-focused agenda. Individual (especially artistic) occupations within the creative industries are robbed of their distinctive practices and their worth as contributors to cultural life, esteemed only if they have economic impact. The contemporary reading of 'creativity' as a quality that everyone can have, given the right sort of education and skills, has moved so far from its original association with 'culture' that it has little to offer in the way of understanding the practices of those working in the arts. As Banks and Hesmondhalgh (2009) also point out, the drive for everyone to acquire entrepreneurial skills, and the notion that they will succeed if they do, takes little account of the particular and risky nature of the labour market for cultural workers such as musicians.

Second, the meaning and purpose of the kind of work musicians do may be lost if attention becomes too closely focused on marketability and employability as counters to some of the negative elements of the cultural labour market. Pressure from training or funding organizations to be entrepreneurial can lead to individuals accepting responsibility for some of the deficiencies of this market, but also the meaning of work becomes narrowed to an activity undertaken to make a living and serve the economy. The research musicians are a small group from which to generalize and, as mentioned earlier, there are many who do not succeed in establishing a musical career. The point is, however, not that everyone succeeds or that circumstances are ideal, but that the musicians involved in this research offered an alternative vision, showing there is intensely satisfying work that we can choose or aspire to. Their recognition of the need for enterprising activity in order to sustain a livelihood, while at the same time rejecting the traditional material signifiers of 'success', suggests that enterprise and creativity may need to be discussed in more complex terms.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am extremely grateful to all the musicians who gave up their valuable time to take part in this research; also to Robert Hollands for reading a first draft and the anonymous referees for their helpful and constructive comments and advice. The research was made possible through an ESRC-funded CASE studentship.

### **Notes**

- 1 The creative industries are categorized as: advertising; architecture; video, film and photography; music and visual and performing arts; publishing; software, computer games and electronic publishing; radio and TV; arts and antiques; designer fashion; crafts; and design (DCMS, 1998).
- 2 Collaborative Awards in Science and Engineering support doctoral research carried out jointly between an academic and a non-academic organization.

- 3 The Sage Gateshead is an innovative music centre, opened in 2004, which combines both education and entertainment.
- 4 The cultural occupations contained within the Standard Occupational Classification system, for example, do not match those defined as the creative industries by the DCMS.
- 5 Organizations such as the Musicians' Union were understandably unwilling to supply their mailing lists. Several organizations offered to mail details of the research to their lists but could not guarantee what proportion were musicians. The MU, for example, maintains an open membership policy.
- 6 Initial lists of contacts were provided by a jazz musician associated with The Sage Gateshead, a popular musician/FE college lecturer and an orchestral player/peripatetic music teacher.

## References

- Atkinson R and Flint J (2001) *Accessing Hidden and Hard-to-Reach Populations: Snowball Research Strategies*. *Social Research Update* 33. Available (consulted 23 March 2007) at: <http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU33.html>
- Bailey C, Miles S and Stark P (2004) Culture-led urban regeneration and the revitalization of identities in Newcastle, Gateshead and the North East of England. *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 10(1): 47–65.
- Banks M and Hesmondhalgh D (2009) Looking for work in creative industries policy. *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 15(4): 415–30.
- Bertaux D (2003) The usefulness of life stories. In: Humphrey R et al. (eds) *Biographical Research in Eastern Europe: Altered Lives and Broken Biographies*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Blair H (2001) 'You're only as good as your last job': the labour process and labour market in the British film industry. *Work, Employment and Society* 15(1): 149–69.
- Blair H (2009) Active networking: action, social structure and the process of networking. In: McKinlay A and Smith C (eds) *Creative Labour: Working in the Creative Industries*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 116–34.
- Blair H, Grey S and Randle K (2001) Working in film: employment in a project based industry. *Personnel Review* 30(2): 170–85.
- Böhm S and Land C (2009) No measure for culture? Value in the new economy. *Capital and Class* 97: 75–98.
- Cameron S and Coaffee J (2005) Art, gentrification and regeneration: from artist as pioneer to public arts. *European Journal of Housing Policy* 5(1): 39–58.
- Caves R (2000) *Creative Industries: Contracts between Art and Commerce*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Chamberlayne P, Bornat J and Wengraf T (2000) *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science: Comparative Issues and Examples*. London: Routledge.
- Charmaz K (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage
- Cohen A (1985) *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. London: Routledge.
- Cottrell S (2004) *Professional Music-Making in London: Ethnography and Experience*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- DCMS (1998) *Creative Industries Mapping Document, 1998*. London: DCMS.
- DCMS (2006) *Developing Entrepreneurship for the Creative Industries: Making the Case for Public Investment*. London: DCMS.
- DCMS (2008) *Creative Britain: New Talents for a New Economy*. London: DCMS.
- Down S (2006) *Narratives of Enterprise: Crafting Entrepreneurial Self-Identity in a Small Firm*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

- Elstad J (1997) Collective reproduction through individual efforts: the location of Norwegian artists in the income hierarchy. *Cultural Policy* 3(2): 267–88.
- Fenwick S (2002) Transgressive desires: new enterprising selves in the new capitalism. *Work, Employment and Society* 16(4): 703–23.
- Florida R (2002) *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Garnham N (2005) From cultural to creative industries: an analysis of the implications of the 'creative industries' approach to arts and media policy making in the United Kingdom, *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 11(1): 15–29.
- Gill R and Pratt A (2008) In the social factory? Immaterial labour, precariousness and cultural work. *Theory, Culture and Society* 25(7/8): 1–30.
- Granovetter M (1995) *Getting a Job: A Study of Contacts and Careers*, 2nd Edition. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hartshorn C and Sear L (2005) Employability and enterprise: evidence from the North East. *Urban Studies* 42(2): 271–83.
- Hauschild S and Eikhof D (2009) Bringing creativity to market: actors as self-employed employees. In: McKinlay A and Smith C (eds) *Creative Labour: Working in the Creative Industries*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 156–73.
- Heckathorn D and Jeffri J (2001) Finding the beat: using respondent-driven sampling to study jazz musicians. *Poetics* 28(4): 307–29.
- Hendry J (2004) *Between Enterprise and Ethics: Business and Management in a Bimoral Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hesmondhalgh D (2002) *The Cultural Industries*. London: Sage.
- IFACCA (2002) *Defining Artists for Tax and Benefit Purposes. D'Art Report No. 1*. International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies. Available (consulted 20 January 2010) at: [www.labforculture.org](http://www.labforculture.org)
- Jones C (1996) Careers in project networks: the case of the film industry. In: Arthur M and Rousseau D (eds) *The Boundaryless Career: A New Employment Principle for a New Organizational Era*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Karttunen S (1998) How to identify artists? Defining the population for 'status-of-the-artist' studies. *Poetics* 26(1): 1–19.
- Leadbeater C and Oakley K (1999) *The Independents: Britain's New Cultural Entrepreneurs*. London: Demos.
- Lin N (1999) Social networks and status attainment. *Annual Review of Sociology* 25: 467–87.
- MacNeill K (2009) Pina Bausch, creative industries and the materiality of artistic labour. *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 15(3): 301–13.
- Menger P-M (1999) Artistic labor markets and careers. *Annual Review of Sociology* 25: 541–74.
- Miles S (2005) 'Our Tyne': iconic regeneration and the revitalisation of identity in Newcastle-Gateshead. *Urban Studies* 42(5/6): 913–26.
- Miles S and Paddison R (2005) Introduction: the rise and rise of culture-led urban regeneration. *Urban Studies* 42(5/6): 833–9.
- Mills J (2004) Working in music: becoming a performer-teacher. *Music Education Research* 6(3): 245–61.
- Negus K (1998) Cultural production and the corporation: musical genres and the strategic management of creativity in the US recording industry. *Media, Culture and Society* 20(3): 359–79.
- Oakley K (2006) Include us out: economic development and social policy in the creative industries. *Cultural Trends* 15(4): 225–73.
- Oakley K (2009) The disappearing arts: creativity and innovation after the creative industries. *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 15(4): 403–13.

- Platman K (2004) 'Portfolio careers' and the search for flexibility in later life. *Work, Employment and Society* 18(3): 573–99.
- Roberts B (2002) *Biographical Research*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Rogers R (2002) *Creating a Land with Music*. London: Youth Music.
- Storey J, Salaman G and Platman K (2005) Living with enterprise in an enterprise economy: freelance and contract workers in the media. *Human Relations* 58(8): 1033–54.
- Taylor S and Littleton K (2008) Art work or money: conflicts in the construction of a creative identity. *The Sociological Review* 56(2): 275–92.
- Thompson P, Jones M and Warhurst C (2007) From conception to consumption: creativity and the missing managerial link. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour* 28(5): 625–40.
- Weatherston D (2009) Nascent entrepreneurship and music students. In: Clews D (ed.) *Dialogues in Art and Design: Promoting and Sharing Excellence*. ADM-HEA/GLAD, 50–57.
- Wittel A (2001) Toward a network sociality. *Theory, Culture and Society* 18(6): 51–76.
- Work Foundation (2007) *Staying Ahead: The Economic Performance of the UK's Creative Industries*. London: Work Foundation.

Susan Coulson recently completed an ESRC-funded postdoctoral fellowship and now teaches the sociology of work at Newcastle University. Her interests include the cultural sector, non-standard work, co-operative organizations and the future of work.

**Date submitted** September 2009

**Date accepted** October 2010