

BOOK REVIEW

Can Music Make You Sick? Measuring the Price of Musical Ambition by Sally Anne Gross and George Musgrave

Jonathan Kuuskoski
University of Michigan

ABSTRACT: Jonathan Kuuskoski reviews *Can Music Make You Sick? Measuring the Price of Musical Ambition* by Sally Anne Gross & George Musgrave.

DOI: doi.org/artivate.10.2.158

Instability for musicians transcends financial precariousness; the industry itself seems predicated on blurred lines and perennial uncertainty (p. 59).

We all know that making a career in music isn't easy. The field is hypercompetitive, full of uncertainty, and high-risk. A common principle in the work of mentoring aspiring professionals, then, is to reinforce the idea that they must dream big and stay the course. Achieving success requires diversifying capabilities, hustling through the early years, and maintaining an open mind to every potential opportunity. Disappointments are inevitable, we tell our mentees, and carving out a satisfying, sustainable, and impactful career will demand grit, creativity, and an unwavering belief in yourself. Sure, that might seem hard, but we hope each new musician we work with will look back one day and say, "Yeah, that was worth it. I'm a stronger artist and human being having gone through those early struggles. Thank goodness I went for it." We *want* to believe that they all have a fair chance at finding individual pathways to success.

But what if our understanding about the potential payoff of a music career is askew? What if an artist's commitment to the hustle has ramifications that could undermine their mental health and wellbeing? What if the price of ambition is higher than we think, regardless of how successful we become? These are the compelling questions at the heart of the very well-researched new book *Can Music Make You Sick? Measuring the Price of Musical Ambition* by Sally Anne Gross and George Musgrave (University of Westminster Press, 2020).

The book tackles three goals—an empirically-driven understanding of how artists today experience their career development, an interrogation of the conditions within the industry and how they impact aspiring artists, and a critical evaluation of how those realities may impact our professional training of future artists and music workers. The book takes a two-part, methodological approach to the analysis of these complex, interrelated questions. The authors' initial study of 2,211 professionals across the UK represents the largest survey of its kind ever conducted. Executed in partnership with Musicians Help UK, Gross and Musgrave sought to understand the degree to which music workers experience mental health conditions, specifically anxiety and depression. The results were staggering. According to their findings, music workers are three times more likely to have experienced anxiety and/or depression than the general public. Digging down into more specific detail, musical artists are roughly 10 percent more likely to experience depression and anxiety versus other music industry workers, in particular younger artists (under the age of thirty-five). Women reported 10 percent higher rates of anxiety and depression than men—approximately three-quarters of the female population in the survey experienced these conditions.

For the authors, uncovering the dire realities facing music professionals led to a second line of inquiry that in many ways drives the central thrust of this book. Gross and Musgrave augmented the survey findings with forty qualitative interviews featuring a variety of music professionals—from performers to producers and educators, as well as with industry executives, medical professionals, and even addiction treatment specialists. Rather than settling on some generalized observations about how industry forces might influence the ways consumers perceive and define artistic success, these interviews aimed to understand how musicians themselves actually *feel* about the work they do. This dive into prevalent perceptions of artists on their own circumstances, and the resultant impact on their emotional well-being as they navigate a difficult (sometimes unforgiving) profession, is the dimension that sets this book apart from other research studies.

While not aimed at the casual reader, each chapter of the book functions as a self-contained treatise on one element of the ecology that is under consideration. The density of the prose is counterbalanced by a detailed table of contents, with subsections listed for every topic, which proves immensely helpful for the reader. This text can thus function as a reference document for specific topics as much as it serves as a detailed research analysis. This reviewer especially appreciated how the authors incorporated information relevant to our COVID-19 context—presumably just before the book went to press, given the publication timeline. The book is one of the most up-to-date resources available on an essential subject and should be required reading for all music business programs.

Divided into six chapters, the core pillars of Gross and Musgrave’s investigation are their questions of assessment: How do artists evaluate the status of their labor, of their personal and professional value, and of their relationships? What do they value, and why, across those three dimensions, and what do the findings reveal about the realities of making music a career? Naturally the resulting analyses are complex, and—this reviewer believes—provoke essential questions about the future of arts entrepreneurship education and research. The most omnipresent revelation is that musicians pursuing a career in the field process their efforts through a combination of internal and external filters that are contaminated by two neoliberal, techno-positivist mythologies.

The first of these mythologies has to do with the way the economics of the twenty-first century music industries impact our consumption of music. We often hear, in general terms, how the transition into a digitized music culture has democratized the creation and distribution of music. There is undoubtedly more music being created than ever before, and more flexibility for listeners to follow their curiosity within the endless song databases proliferated by today’s streaming giants. But as consumers gain, producers and creators of content feel the pain. Gross and Musgrave spend a considerable amount of time unpacking the contrary forces that are inevitably coupled with our overabundance. As it turns out, more isn’t necessarily better. For example, abundance is symptomatic of overproduction, which reflects both an intuitive understanding that the supply for music laborers greatly outsizes demand in essentially every type of job, and results in an ongoing depreciative pressure on prices. The challenges of monetizing music in a digitized consumption landscape, then, are paradoxically revealed to be both democratic and Darwinian. Everyone has access to distribution platforms, but it’s now up to each individual artist to carve out an audience. It makes sense in most contexts to expect that oversupply, coupled with nearly free access to a product, would drive down the price of consumption, leading to increased competition, and (likely) industry consolidation. The authors deftly critique the consequences of this hypercompetition, and the precarity it fosters across the board. Our music industry infrastructure, which has bowed to the digital consumer’s expectations, poses an immense burden that “plays out on the bodies and in the minds of musicians and music producers” (p. 113). Artists bear this pressure in a variety of ways, and many feel both personally responsible for their failures and powerless to shift the industry itself.

But how is an artist even supposed to figure out whether they are doing well or poorly? How should they feel about their careers? Today, artists are asked to reconcile a commitment to “utmost self-belief” with “conscious but controlled self-doubt” (p. 64). One can’t help but sense that many artists in this study felt burned by the false promises of our industry and paid mental and physical prices along the way. This second mythology, that success is tied to exceptionalism, comes crashing down under the weight of Gross and Musgrave’s analysis, which draws richly from cultural economics, the psychology of creativity, and the media theory of communicative capitalism. Take, for example, the observation that subjects in the study regularly reported feelings of inadequacy or failure, regardless of their levels of objectively measurable achievement. Even incremental successes, the status quo of any arts career, are often perceived as missed opportunities. As it turns out, the precarity of pursuing music makes it very difficult

to relish the day-to-day process of building a musical career. In that context, artists are undermining their own sense of worth. This gap between expectation and achievement throws music workers into a cycle of disempowerment over their futures, and the sense that they need to keep hustling at all costs.

These findings turn on their heads some of our most prevalent assumptions in the field of arts entrepreneurship. In our work we often propagate the notion that if an artist is talented, hard-working, and savvy enough, they will “figure it out.” They might just need a few extramusical tools to do so. In failing to define success in more grounded ways, because we are steeped in the dominant fantasy of meritocracy, we may advance the toxic concept that individual artists are in full control of their destinies. One powerful assertion of this book is that the “successes (and failures) of musicians are not isolated incidents of genius rising to the top” (p. 90). In contrast, the interviews consistently highlight the complexity of what it means to even define success, and how one’s race, social class, access to capital, and preexisting connectivity to the industry bolsters incredible advantages. The implication is not that entrepreneurship training is worthless—rather that we must more fully account for these other factors, which often supersede even the savviest application of entrepreneurial tools and tactics. As an example, Gross and Musgrave posit that career training norms at present may be feeding the idea that creating content trumps all other priorities. Their research has found that falling into that trap not only erodes one’s sense of self-worth, it also often strains every personal relationship in a musician’s life. Artists fail to break that cycle of diminishing returns because, while the entry costs to making music have lowered (thanks to the rise of the internet), exit costs remain extremely high. Why? Because musical and personal identities are intertwined. As they say, “[music workers] can’t quit because making music ‘is’ them” (p. 96). What might happen if we questioned the assumption that the comingling of these identities is essential for finding artistic satisfaction and sustenance?

The conclusion of the book focuses on answers to these questions, presenting ideas for how we might manifest a more equitable and sustainable music infrastructure and reverse the dominant, negative pressures that are harming music workers. It seems clear that the nature of the industries as a complex adaptive system makes a one-shot solution impossible. While Gross and Musgrave readily admit that simple infrastructure solutions are difficult to realize, they do introduce points of entry for further investigation that span personal wellness tactics, public policy strategy, and even legislation. Each of these warrants further investigation. In particular, the miniature case study on Lil Peep and the debate surrounding “duty of care”—the degree to which managers, labels, and other support players should be held responsible for individual artists’ behavior and its consequences—is fascinating and deserves a more fully-fledged analysis.

The authors ultimately circle back to discuss their roles as educators and examine how tertiary training programs can make a difference. This book asks professionals in arts mentorship and education—the so-called keepers of the faith—to become seekers of the truth. In doing so, perhaps we will realize that the limitations of our music economy shouldn’t be viewed as weaknesses. In fact, reevaluating our own attitudes toward the status quo could begin to reflect more critical metrics around professional success, and might be essential to developing

the kind of pedagogy that would prepare our students more realistically for their futures. That work will also challenge us to design a more ethical professional development training pipeline, and to reject the mythologies interrogated in this book. After all, if the three most important relationships in an artist's professional life (to their own status, to their creative work, and to other individuals) are all in peril, the final question for us is fairly simple. Can we, as the stewards of tomorrow's changemakers, do better? If we care about the future of the performing arts, the answer must be yes.