

From Portfolio to Platform Career

Navigating the Promise and Pitfalls of a Sustainable and Meaningful Life in the Performing Arts

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ABSTRACT: Written as a concise guide for students and working professionals, this article¹ examines and critiques the “portfolio career” in arts professional development to offer an alternative conceptual strategy to forge a sustainable life. Eight modes of arts work are explored (performing, teaching, creating, writing, healing, manufacturing, distributing, and administering). The “Platform Career” is proposed as an extension of and possible solution to the shortcomings of the portfolio career. In the platform model, one professional activity serves as a financial base for the artist’s panoply of creative work, providing health insurance and other employment benefits plus additional financial stability to reduce financial and emotional precarity. **KEYWORDS:** portfolio career, arts career development, platform career.
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Ask a performing artist how they earn a living, and they will likely give multiple answers. As a career path and survival strategy, artists often make money by doing not just one but several things. Even those famous for a single, high-profile achievement—such as the prize-winning playwright, composer, or performer—often did other types of work on their journey to success. Once there, they may continue to do a range of work—

¹ This essay is based largely on lectures I have given annually to first-year music students at the University of Michigan since 2004 (see also Clague 2011). My understanding of the portfolio career is indebted to related conversations over the years with colleagues, including Angela Beeching, Susan Booth, Nee Chucherdwatanasak, David Cutler, Antonio Cuyler, Aaron Dworkin, Kelly Dylla, Linda Essig, Chris Genteel, Jonathan Kuuskoski, Jeffrey Nytch, Jeremy Peters, Rachel Roberts, Peter Witte, and Nathaniel Zeisler, among others.

performing, teaching, creating, administering—in part to supplement their income or, just as importantly, to earn another kind of profit—meaning and purpose. Often in the arts, doing one thing is a job, while doing several things can forge a career.

This essay is intended as a concise, accessible guide for students and working professionals in the performing arts who aspire to a multifaceted, meaningful career. Creators working in architecture, visual or digital arts, creative writing, and design may also find this article useful. It is meant to inspire thinking by suggesting a conceptual pathway from an experimental, start-up phase of career exploration (the portfolio career) to a still dynamic but sustainable structure for artistic work that is both financially viable and personally rewarding (the platform career).

The strategy outlined in this article builds upon more than two decades of teaching and mentoring at a professional school of music, theater and dance. The main inspiration for sharing this approach is to suggest a framework that describes what many young artists are doing, especially in the years immediately following graduation from a professional art school, while also permitting current students to explore a broader range of possibilities for earning a living in the arts. Much of professional study encourages an increasingly narrow specialization. This essay nurtures a broad openness to possibility.

The strategy described here is also grounded in historical and economic research. My home discipline as a scholar is history. I have long investigated the careers of influential artists, striving to consider the whole, three-dimensional range of their professional activities and not just the one thing that made them famous. Arts economics is a secondary area of my research as financial structures are intimately intertwined with arts activity across time, and what people pay for can tell us a lot about what they value and care about.

This article further depends on research done by colleagues in arts entrepreneurship, business, public policy, and the social sciences. These scholars use surveys, economic data, and other tools to trace professional trajectories in the arts. To keep the article brief, this related research is only mentioned briefly in the text. Readers looking to deepen their understanding are directed to the accompanying notes and citations for additional context, support, and criticism. There is much to learn from this ever-expanding field of arts career research.² With this caveat and suggestion on the table, let us proceed.

The Portfolio Career

The “portfolio career” is nothing new. The term is credited to business management thinker Charles Handy (Handy 1989, 1994), but the idea has deep roots in history and practice. Composer Virgil Thomson discussed the approach in 1939 to explain “how composers eat” (Thomson 1939), and others have argued that the approach can be found as far back as the 16th century (Weber 2004, Barker 2021). More recently, arts

² Podcasts, such as *Creative PepTalk*, *Dance Careers: Unfiltered, Makin’ It Happen*; *A Career in the Performing Arts*, *Duet: The Music Teacher’s Partner*, *Great Music Teaching*, and the *DIY Musician Podcast*, just to name a few examples, can also be a good source of information for working artists.

entrepreneurship scholars and educators have explored the concept as part of a contemporary career strategy (Munnely 2022, and Kuuskoski forthcoming) and often as part of complete books focused on career advice (Cutler 2009, Beeching 2010, 2019, Radbill 2013, Herstand 2017, Rabideau 2018, Nyth 2018b).

The “portfolio” notion in the portfolio career refers to a collection of different work activities meant to increase opportunity, income, resilience, and fulfillment. Multiple activity streams and their associated earnings (both monetary and personal) are merged into one larger solution. Perhaps most importantly, a portfolio approach requires the artist to stretch their professional comfort zone. They must experiment with a range of work possibilities and thus discover a personal mixture of activities and their related skills, interests, motivations, and passions to forge their career path.

The types of work included in the portfolio career concept are often quite traditional and conventional, even as they respond to new technologies and social needs. An arts portfolio can combine entrepreneurial ventures, gig-based freelancing, and traditional salaried work. History is filled with artists, both famous and not-so-famous, who have combined different activities into a successful and influential career. Iconic examples include dancer-choreographer George Balanchine (Homans 2022), musician and composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (Dworkin 2019), and actor-playwright William Shakespeare (Dworkin 2019). More recent examples include tap dancer Savion Glover (Glover 2000, Hasday 2006), musician Caroline Shaw (Wilhoite 2015), and theater artist Robin Frohardt (robinfrohardt.com). You need not be a famous star to make this strategy work for you (Essig 2022).

The portfolio career strategy may be common, but it is not easy (Latukefu 2022, Westgarth 2023). It is also not for everyone. A portfolio career requires relentless hustle and renewal, courage, patience, and resilience. It is a practical strategy for making a life in the arts. Yet, the portfolio career’s characteristics of flexibility, adaptation, and opportunity creation are not only its strength but the root of its main disadvantage—financial precarity (Menger 1999, Alper 2006, Lingo & Tepper 2013, Moore 2016).

This guide begins by reviewing eight modes or types of professional arts activity in which music, dance, and theater professionals typically work. Next, it explores how a portfolio of several of these activities can help artists discover a recipe for economic and personal success that adapts to changing circumstances and needs. Nevertheless, it is vital to understand that the portfolio career strategy has both positive and negative aspects. Its promise and pitfalls are also explored, and I propose a potential solution—the Platform Career.³

While its name may suggest making money as a social media influencer or by using a website to find gig work or recruit donors, the word “platform” here does not refer to a technology application, even as some artists have used social media or crowdfunding

³ To our knowledge, this understanding of the “Platform Career” was first articulated publicly by myself and Jonathan Kuuskoski in Miami as part of a joint presentation to New World Symphony fellows in April 2017.

platforms to professional advantage (Tosatto 2019, Blaising 2021, Handke 2022). The word platform is here used literally as a base to stand upon. This platform supports you and your artistic work. In essence, the platform career is a variation on the portfolio model. One professional activity develops over time into a stable “platform” of more dependable income that includes benefits such as health insurance (Clague & Kuuskoski 2017). Standing more securely on this platform, the artist may continue to explore additional professional possibilities and passions. As the artist’s goals and opportunities shift, new activities can be nurtured and a new platform created. Experimentation, growth, and change are core components of the portfolio-to-platform strategy.

The Eight Economic Modes of the Performing Arts, Plus One

Performing artists typically work within eight modes or types of economic activity (Crawford 2001, 149; Clague 2011; Witte 2023).⁴ Knowing these modes and using them strategically can help the artist develop a personalized professional vision, revealing how their talents, passions, interests, and training might help forge a viable career. These eight modes are as follows.

1. Performing

Not surprisingly, performing is the most typical and visible economic mode in the performing arts. Over 80% of portfolio artists include performance work in their activity mix (Davidson 2022, Munnelly 2022). The artist traditionally earns a wage for singing, acting, dancing, etc., in a venue for a live audience. Performers are usually paid a fee for each “service,” say a staged event or concert, plus a similar per-service wage for preliminary rehearsals. This work can be paid under an ongoing contract with an ensemble or company, or it can be done as freelance “gig” work in which performances are contracted one at a time. Income in this area is typically immediate and direct. The problem with gig work is that it can be sporadic.

2. Teaching

Here, the artist is paid to provide instruction to others in their craft. Such teaching can be one-to-one or for small groups or classes. Pupils include youth, other aspiring

⁴ The eight modes of economic activity in the performing arts are expanded and adapted from musicologist Richard Crawford’s book *America’s Musical Life: A History* (W.W. Norton, 2001), where six “lines of work” are proposed: “composing, performing, teaching, distributing (or publishing), writing about music, and manufacturing musical instruments and other goods” (149). I first wrote about them in Clague 2011, 172. In addition, arts administrator Peter Witte suggested the category of healing to me. Note that the categories are flexible. Specific activities such as repairing, marketing, or legal work can overlap categories and could even be considered separate modes. The list here is meant to be comprehensive but generalized and can be adapted to better fit specific industries. A 2013 Future of Music Coalition report, for example, analyzed forty different income streams specifically for musicians (DiCola 2013, 12).

professionals, or adults looking to explore an art form. Teachers may receive a salary from an institution, such as a music store, non-profit cultural center, dance studio, public school, or university. They might also teach as a solo “independent contractor,” compensated directly by each student per lesson (Boyle 2020). Public school teachers and university professors are professionally credentialed; private lesson teachers often are not but rest on their reputation of success. Some artists may work under supervision in schools as “teaching artists” on behalf of a cultural organization. Historically speaking, teaching is the performing artist’s second most common economic pathway next to performing itself. Even Mozart taught lessons. Some 68% of respondents to a 2022 survey reported that teaching was part of their portfolio career (Munnely 2022). Income in this area is often immediate and relatively regular.

3. Creating—Composing, Choreographing, and Playwriting

Performing arts creators invent art in the form of repeatable templates for performance—such as scripts, choreographies, or musical scores. Playwrights imagine narrative dialogue for plays, movies, and television shows. Choreographers create patterns of movement. Composers create symphonies, pop songs, and jazz standards, movie scores, or commercial jingles (Collinson Scott 2017). When a creator has a salaried position or commission, income can be immediate and direct. If not, creative work is often speculative—done in hopes that it can be sold, published, and licensed later. In this way, creative work can provide an ongoing revenue stream through royalties and performance fees. Owning and managing one’s intellectual property, such as copyrights, is thus vital to this pathway (Frith 2004, DiCola 2013). Such royalty or licensing income may take time to develop. Historically, artists who retain their copyrights have better potential for long-term economic success (Frith 2004, DiCola 2013).

4. Writing and Researching

Artists know their fields of practice as insiders and thus can bring significant insight to work as scholars and critics. They can uncover their art forms’ history, aesthetics, and social dynamics and share this knowledge with other specialists, students, or a broad public. Writing and researching generate money through publishing, research grants, or teaching or librarianship. Income can be slow to develop and sporadic, but grants and institutional wages as an archivist, program annotator, journalist, or professor can make this work financially viable and sustainable. A terminal degree (such as a Ph.D. or MFA) is generally required to become a university professor in this area.

5. Healing

Arts therapies are a growing area of professional arts activity and often require specialized training in an accredited program, such as in music therapy (Hogan 2001, Junge 2019,

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arttherapy.org). Artists without health credentials can sometimes perform healing work under supervision, say within a retirement community or clinic environment. An example would be “comfort care” musicians who play an instrument to help patients fall asleep or manage stress in a hospital setting (Hoover 2021). Such work is generally “gig” work but may be done under an ongoing contract and with an hourly wage. A second type of healing work serves performing artists directly. For example, wellness and medical providers, such as physicians, physical therapists, and emotional counselors, might focus their work on supporting the physical and mental health needs of other performers. Often, these artist-serving medical professionals have a performing arts background themselves. This work requires additional professional training, such as a physical therapy or medical degree, that can result in salaried positions.

6. Manufacturing/Making Things

Those trained in the arts are often well-positioned to design and manufacture arts-related products. Such goods include audio or video recordings, sheet music or published scripts, signal effects pedals, clothing, instrumental reeds and accessories, pianos or saxophones, costumes, and stage sets. A subset of manufacturing is maintenance and repair, and such work ranges from managing an arts-related information technology infrastructure to fixing trumpets or tuning pianos. Income can be per job or salaried. Salaried work typically involves joining a pre-existing firm as an employee. If you invent or make your own products and can afford to grow this income stream more slowly, you may wish to create your own manufacturing company.

7. Distributing/Selling Things

Distributing is selling art products to consumers, such as running a brick-and-mortar record store, guitar shop, etc., or operating an online store to sell sheet music, scripts, costumes, or dance shoes. As an artist, you can use your knowledge to help others find the right tools and gear. Selling can be paired with manufacturing the goods to be sold. Gaining experience as an employee can be a useful place to start if you want to run your own business eventually. If you work for others, income can be relatively immediate; if you create your own sales channels from scratch, income may take time to develop. A subset of distributing is legal representation in the arts, such as protecting and leveraging copyrights and trademarks, which may require a law degree.

8. Administering

Arts administration is the management and strategic support of arts activity (Cuyler 2020, Stein 2022). Typically, the arts administrator works within an organizational environment, such as a non-profit orchestra, theater or dance company, a school, or a for-profit business, as a salaried or hourly employee. Some administrators create their own

organizations. Roles range from executive director or president to jobs in marketing, fundraising, production, artistic affairs, diversity and inclusion, admissions, licensing, product development, and other roles. Representation for individual artists is another related area. In this case, the services of the performing artist—say a conductor, dancer, actor, or ensemble—is the product to be sold. Work as an agent is often paid as a commission on work secured for the artist.

9. The Non-Arts Job

Non-arts employment is a ninth bonus category that often complements performing arts work (Herstand 2017). Non-arts work can supplement arts-related income and can be very creative and personally satisfying as well. Artists have specific skills that can be transferred to other fields and professions where they are highly valued (Bertrand 2020, Peters 2024). These transferrable skills include flexibility and creativity, problem-solving, the ability to work independently, staying focused to perfect a task, teamwork and other interpersonal skills, an openness to constructive feedback, planning and project management, public speaking, writing and communication, event management, and more. Non-arts jobs that work well for artists have traditionally included hourly office and restaurant work. Many artists have used non-arts jobs to advantage. The composer Charles Ives, for example, made a living in business that allowed him to ignore the commercial marketplace and thus write experimental music that did not “sell.” His compositions later earned him a Pulitzer Prize (Burkholder et al.). It is a strategy and not a sign of failure to combine artistic work with non-arts work (Throsby 2011). In fact, a 2022 survey concluded that 38% of portfolio artists earned some income from non-arts work (Haapakorpi 2022, Munnelly 2022).

The appendix to this article provides a worksheet to help artists explore these modes of artistic and non-arts work. This Personal Arts Activity Inventory invites the artist to catalog their work history and interests to nurture a broader conception of professional activity that might provide both monetary income and personal satisfaction. Worksheet results will identify possibilities for the portfolio career or exploratory start-up phase of an artist’s career. Mentors can use the sheet in a workshop setting, while individual artists can use it as a self-management tool.

The Portfolio Career: Promise and Perils

The portfolio career combines two or more modes of work into a full-time living (see Figure 1), and research with working artists affirms the practice of doing more than one thing and creating one’s own opportunities. A 2011 survey of some 5000 musicians by the Future of Music Coalition, for example, notes that 89% of musical artists earned income from at least two activities and that 39% earned from four or more. The activities combined most commonly were performing and teaching (DiCola 2013, 12, 23; Munnelly 2022). Previous research has suggested that 70% of musicians juggled multiple roles (Thomson

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2013). Maybe most compellingly, a long-term survey of alumni from collegiate professional arts programs indicates that 77% of graduates report having been self-employed at some point in their career (SNAAP 2017). This is supported by freelance worker data for artists in the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey from 2003 to 2015 (Woronkiewicz 2019). The NEA similarly concludes that artists frequently work as independent contractors, indicating that self-employed work is 3.6 times more likely in artistic careers than for those in non-arts professions (NEA 2019). Such studies show that artistic careers are quite often portfolio careers.



Figure 1. The Portfolio Career, an exploratory, professional strategy for the performing artist

Trombonist Ingram Lee, for example, launched his musical career by working in three modes: performing, teaching, and distributing. He performed regularly with several orchestras and chamber groups; taught both as an independent contractor in several middle and high schools and also as the trombone studio instructor at a regional college; and, finally, he distributed trombones and mouthpieces as the sales representative for a custom instrument maker. He worked long hours and purchased health insurance through the local musicians union. During this period, he also put as much as 30,000 miles on his car annually, driving from gig to gig, but his creative life was rich and varied. He loved teaching and had the satisfaction of performing as well as helping others improve as musicians. The skills he developed as a sales representative further enhanced his teaching and performing work. He helped students and colleagues find an instrument that propelled their growth, and he also learned to customize his own trombone to optimize his playing (Lee 2021).

Portfolio careers have both advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, they are flexible, adaptive, self-directed, and individual. They are characterized by variety and

permit the artist to pursue their own unique interests. They eschew routine. Such careers are also resilient. If one mode of activity falters, other modes can be added or increased. For example, if a symphony goes on strike and performance income dries up, the instrumentalist who also teaches can recruit more students to make up for lost income. A 2022 study concluded that there were three primary motivations for pursuing a portfolio career: artistic fulfillment (92%), time commitment and schedule/flexibility (85%), and payment/ability to earn a living (82%) (Munnely 2022).

Both a plus and a minus of the portfolio lifestyle is the hustle (Pippen 2019, 424–44). Portfolio artists must continually seek new opportunities—more performances, more students, more sales, more gigs. This hustle is both a blessing and a curse. For some, the hustle is fun and rewarding, generating a higher income or new possibilities. The portfolio artist need not wait for a job opening but can generate their own opportunities. However, opportunity creation requires almost continuous effort and energy. Not everyone finds joy in the hustle. Such a life also includes regular disappointment. For every new opportunity realized, there are likely dozens of inquiries that go unanswered or promising leads that consume time but prove fruitless. Relentless optimism, skilled personal and professional networking, and emotional resilience are characteristics vital to the hustle. The skills needed can be developed in work and internship experiences. Research has likewise shown that internships can nurture long-term success (Frenette 2020).

One's personal identity is typically an artistic strength and a source of expressive inspiration. Your story can help audiences understand your art. It is nevertheless important to note that the portfolio career exists within the too often antagonistic context of society at large, both its explicit prejudices and hidden biases. People who are regularly confronted by racism and other forms of discrimination—for example, women, people of color, trans people, immigrants, and the undocumented—may well face these same pernicious hurdles as a portfolio artist (Peterson 1985, Topaz 2022). On one hand, the ability to generate opportunity gives the portfolio artist unusual agency to circumnavigate bias. The entrepreneur who confronts a closed door is taught to create a new door. Yet others may nevertheless try to prevent any door you create from opening. Instead, embrace those allies who will celebrate your work and help you to open those doors. Seek out those audiences and opportunities for which what makes you special is a strength.

Several scholars have criticized the portfolio career model as anti-worker and a neoliberal trap that devalues the artist (Moore 2016, Nyth 2018a, Ritchey 2019, Deresiewicz 2015 & 2020, Chucherdwatanasak 2022, Enriquez 2022). Employers can readily take advantage of arts workers. Pay for gig work, for example, is sometimes poor, below a living wage, and often does not include compensation for practice and preparation. Union protections rarely apply to freelance or gig workers, so the portfolio artist assumes employment risks personally (Manchester 2009). There is no paid sick leave or vacation time. A teacher loses income, for example, if they fall ill and cannot teach. Performances can be postponed or canceled without compensation. Health insurance, retirement savings plans, and family leave are the responsibility of the self-employed (Kristal 2007; Woronkovic

et al. 2020). Even worse, artists can internalize this insecure life as normative, as if the starving artist trope is not only to be expected but something to which a real artist aspires (Bartlett 2019, Opara 2019). Love of the work should never be a rationalization for low pay and insecurity (Scolere 2019).

Professional arts educational programs and their faculties can also be criticized for training too many artists relative to opportunity demand in the overall economy. A winner-take-all culture is typical. Schools celebrate their superstar alumni but often fail to keep track of the many others who do not find a living in the arts. The portfolio career itself can be a tool for this manipulation. Less ethical institutions may use a too-optimistic rhetoric of freedom, innovation, and self-sufficiency to convince prospective students and their parents of the promise of the entrepreneurial arts career while minimizing its inherent challenges and risks (Chucherdwatanasak 2022). Any claims that the portfolio career strategy is a failsafe plan are simply false.

Further, arts entrepreneurship is often overly glorified. Failure is celebrated as a purely learning opportunity, and its emotional toll on the individual is shunted aside (Morgan 2012). If an artist is unable to secure a professional living, their shortfall is too often blamed entirely on the individual—as a failure of talent, artistry, or effort rather than as a deficiency of the arts economy itself. The arts profession in the United States is far from perfect. It can be unfair and also can be criticized for providing poor wages, limited job security, and unequal access to opportunity (Opara 2019, Morningstar 2022). Success is due to many factors outside of sheer ability and effort, such as family money, supportive mentors, timely grant programs, scholarship opportunities, and more than a bit of luck. Merit is only one factor.

The performing arts could do better. Artists are motivated by passion, but passion cannot pay the rent or provide for retirement. Compensation for artists must facilitate not only an event but the community arts ecosystem. Artist collectives, cooperative publishing, and artist-led ensembles or companies could be built from the start as more just and equitable business models (Bain 2012). Yet, portfolio artists necessarily confront their personal economic needs urgently as individuals. They need to pay rent each month. Developing multiple income streams is thus a valuable tactic to address immediate financial needs within the context of an extant capitalist system.

The central and most critical problem with the portfolio career is financial precarity (Jeffri 2003, Bain 2012, Van Assche 2020).

Too often, the hustle can be an act of survival. It is expensive to make rent, cover student loan payments and insurance premiums for instruments and gear, pay for professional clothing or coaching, access rehearsal spaces, and afford transportation to the next audition, not to mention providing for other basic needs such as food and healthcare.

Even as it provides opportunities to adapt, the portfolio career is inherently unstable. This is in part because U.S. labor law does not require employers to pay benefits to part-time employees. State laws differ, but federal regulations in the Affordable Care Act require that employers offer health insurance only to those working 30 hours or more per

week (healthcare.gov). As a result, combining multiple part-time jobs into a full-time living often fails to provide benefits such as health insurance or a retirement plan (Brustein 2005). The self-employed portfolio artist must instead purchase health insurance on their own. They also need an emergency savings account for when work dries up and must likewise provide for their own retirement, say by opening a personal Roth IRA savings account. Such a self-constructed financial safety net requires disciplined financial management. In practice, however, saving for the future may be all but impossible when today's expenses consume limited earnings.

The Platform Career: One Solution to Reduce Precarity

Transitioning to a platform career can reduce the precarity of the portfolio model. In a platform career, the artist extends one mode of activity into a primary income source (typically at least half-time or three-quarter time, depending on state law or employer policy) that serves as a reliable economic base and provides basic benefits such as health care and retirement savings (see figure 2). Such platforms are often found through a cultural organization, business entity, or educational institution.



Figure 2. The Platform Career, a more stable configuration of the portfolio model.

As a gigging bassoonist in Chicago, for example, this author made money performing with orchestras and in commercial studios, as well as from teaching private lessons, operating a mail-order music supply company, and managing a youth chamber music program. During this same time, however, I completed a Ph.D. in musicology, which later allowed me to become a full-time university professor. The university job now serves as my professional platform. It provides the benefits and base income that allow me to pursue additional entrepreneurial projects. In my career, I have worked in all nine modes described above. Even now as a university professor (which involves teaching, research, and administrative service), I have worked outside the university: performing on my instrument, writing books and liner notes, giving pre-concert talks, and serving on non-profit boards. Some of these activities provide additional income; others do not. All these activities, however, also allow me to explore new interests, develop new skills, make new contacts, and find purpose by giving back to my community.

By providing financial stability, platforms further provide a base from which to

explore new portfolio opportunities. A stage designer, for example, might have a 75% position with benefits at a local college but also design sets for a regional playhouse or work with an entertainment venue to create decorations for weddings or commercial photo shoots. These additional opportunities might offer more income, more creative satisfaction, or both. Note that the designer continues to work at the college, earning regular income and benefits, even as they explore outside opportunities. The platform thus does not replace the portfolio. Instead, the platform structure supports the artist, allowing them to pursue a portfolio of activities. It is a more stable configuration of the portfolio career model. One mode of work provides a financial and emotional base for a range of creative expression. Having a reliable platform shifts the portfolio approach away from a survival strategy and towards a sustainable career model.

Dancer Demi Shields created a professional portfolio as a dancer in New York City, combining a recurring seasonal position with the Radio City Rockettes with choreography and commercial dancing for parties, cruises, and social events as a crowd enhancer. To this performance work, he added everything from teaching to part-time work in arts administration, fundraising, tech startup offices, bartending, and restaurants, as well as writing for a dance magazine and short-term gigs as a film extra, all while chasing auditions for Broadway. He subsequently moved to Detroit and developed a platform career, working in arts education and outreach for a university while continuing to dance as a freelance choreographer, performer, and teacher. Combined atop an arts administration platform, his career provides more financial security but still “fulfills a personal mission” (Shields 2023).

Professional platforms can also be created from scratch. Clarinetist Kari Landry, for example, is a full-time employee of the Akropolis Reed Quintet, an ensemble she cofounded as a music student. After ten years of playing concerts and winning competitions with the ensemble, Kari was able to leave a half-time arts marketing position to work for her ensemble full-time. She now serves the ensemble as both a performer and an administrator, bringing the marketing savvy she learned in her previous job to her multifaceted role in the quintet as a musician, publicist, and fundraiser. The quintet is now a 501(c3) non-profit entity that provides her with health and retirement benefits as well as income. Her administrative work began with an internship, and now she also teaches a class in non-profit creation and management at a university. She owns a home and has started a family (Landry 2023).

Vocalist Sam Williams created the one-woman show “American Patriots” exploring political division as a capstone project while completing her graduate degree. During school and immediately after, she pursued a series of arts administration jobs to learn skills in marketing and fundraising, enlisting her supervisors as mentors. All the while, she grew her show into a full-length evening with collaborating artists. She soon founded her own socially-driven production company—Art Impacts, LLC—and after securing grant and donor funds, alongside invitations to workshop and perform her show, she gradually cut back on her work for others from full-time to part time and finally to work

solely for herself. Combining her work as an arts leader, singer, and producer, she plans to launch a series of socially engaged multimedia works (Williams 2024).

Platforms, even if they are relatively stable, are not necessarily permanent. A current platform cannot be taken for granted. Its maintenance requires excellence, dedication, and flexibility. In this sense, the platform career is not exceptional but is like all employment. For this reason, maintaining a portfolio of activity atop a platform keeps other possibilities alive. If needed or desired, one of these supplemental activities can become a new platform. The portfolio also serves to counteract the sometimes routine nature of platform work by providing new outlets for creativity and additional rewards, whether financial or personal.

The portfolio-to-platform strategy allows the individual to explore not only making money but making a difference, finding meaning in the work. As of 2024, trombonist Ingram Lee, for example, moved to a new town and initially found work in a full-time position working in sales for a musical instrument company. Finding little joy in customer service work, he resigned and returned to portfolio work including teaching. Having experience in self-managed portfolio work allowed him the flexibility to consider not just financial but personal satisfaction among his career requirements (Lee 2024).

As arts professionals, it is all too easy to forget the joy and pleasure that originally motivated us to dedicate our lives to the arts. It is thus important to remember that the profits gained through arts work have the potential to include both economic and personal rewards—both the money needed to sustain one’s life and the personal satisfaction needed to make one happy, however you define that for yourself (e.g., financial security, time for family or personal wellness, meaning and mission). Your goal should not be just one or the other. This may be the reason that most portfolio artists (despite the risk and effort involved) report that they prefer their varied career lifestyle. They embrace the portfolio career as both a necessity and a choice (Munnely 2022).

Art and money need not be in opposition. In recent writings by arts entrepreneurship theorist Linda Essig, she uses the ancient figure of the *ouroboros* (a snake eating its own tail) to suggest that art (the head) can thrive on money (the tail) if innovation and entrepreneurship (the body) are fueled by the artist’s personal mission (Essig 2015 & 2022). Identifying your personal mission can transform your career and transform the world. Similarly, arts sociologist Megan Jordan suggests that such mission-driven artistry may be found in a growing social activism that itself may be a new form of arts entrepreneurship (Jordan 2023).

My own research into the arts business strategies of composer George Gershwin offers a historical example. For Gershwin, there was no conflict between art and money, between writing music that was both popular and excellent. Excellence meant sophisticated, modern, and emotionally compelling music. To accomplish this, Gershwin explored the latest compositional models from composers such as Claude Debussy and Alban Berg. For Gershwin, excellent music would also necessarily be popular and thus profitable. Gershwin used these profits—from his first hit song, “Swanee,” and his iconic piano concerto

Rhapsody in Blue, for example—to finance more speculative endeavors from the tone poem *An American in Paris* to his folk opera *Porgy and Bess* (Clague 2020).

Money is the fuel of the portfolio-to-platform strategy. Think of yourself as a business and use your money wisely as capital to be invested in yourself and your career.

Be aware that portfolio careers demand careful financial record-keeping. Success as an entrepreneurial artist requires using tax law correctly and to advantage (Riley 2016, Milam 2019). It is vital to deduct all legitimate expenses from your taxable personal income and thus reduce your tax payment to maximize your resources. As a portfolio-to-platform artist, you are a business entity. You are your own agent, manager, producer, publicist, photographer, videographer, and social media guru. To that list, also add accountant and tax professional.

One hurdle to establishing a multifaceted arts career is emotional. It can be intimidating or even frightening to experiment with new career possibilities. By definition, exploring the new puts one outside of their comfort zone. As artists, we hold ourselves to extremely high standards of skill honed over many years of intensive study. We tend to perfectionism. Insecurity, if not imposter syndrome, is rarely far away, even for established professionals. Exploring a new mode of work, however, necessarily makes one a beginner. Give yourself permission to try. Expect that you will be on a learning curve and know that it is okay to be uncomfortable. Discomfort is a normal part of the learning process. Being aware of your emotional journey will not only assist your personal development but will make you more empathetic to students and collaborators. One study showed not only the importance of mental health and well-being for arts careers but demonstrated that physical exercise was positively associated with artists' well-being (Shaughnessy 2023).

As a portfolio-to-platform artist, your biggest assets are your energy, commitment, and passion. For many artists, the drive to make art is a calling not to be denied. The question is not whether to be an artist but rather how to make being an artist possible. If this describes you, the portfolio-to-platform strategy can help you to develop and organize your potential into a viable living. It can allow you to support yourself while gaining experience and skills. It can sustain your work financially as you discover your purpose and maximize joy. At its best, the portfolio-to-platform career strategy is an ongoing journey that encompasses personal growth, economic reward, and the opportunity to pursue a meaningful artistic life. This type of career is a choice. It is not easy. It is never guaranteed. But for those in the arts who fully understand its opportunities and challenges, the portfolio-to-platform career strategy can make a life's work possible.

Appendix: Personal Arts Activity Inventory

Name: _____

Date: _____

1. Have you ever earned money for an arts-related activity? Yes No Uncertain
2. Have you found joy and meaning in an arts-related activity? Yes No Uncertain
3. In which of the following modes of arts economic activity have you already been engaged and how? Check the box for any work you are doing, have done, or hope to do. Describe your work briefly and indicate if you earned money or joy from each. Add activities that you would like to try. Put a star next to three things you'd like to prioritize.

PERFORMING (earned \$\$ joy)—describe:

TEACHING (\$\$ joy)—describe:

CREATING (\$\$ joy)—describe:

WRITING (\$\$ joy)—describe:

HEALING (\$\$ joy)—describe:

MANUFACTURING (\$\$ joy)—describe:

DISTRIBUTING (\$\$ joy)—describe:

ADMINISTERING (\$\$ joy)—describe:

4. Do you find that non-arts work benefits your creative activity? Yes No Unsure
Why?

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5. In which environments do you thrive? (check all that apply)

- Working Alone
- Working with Others
- Being Paid
- Volunteering
- Having Direction
- Creating my own Agenda
- Having a supervisor
- Other: _____
- Other: _____

6. In which activities do you feel at your best? | Which activities might be a future platform?

7. What next step might you take to explore a professional activity more deeply? Could your network or an internship help?

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