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Performing Artists and Precarity

Work in the Contemporary Entertainment Industries

Philip Hancock
Melissa Tyler

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Philip Hancock
Essex Business School
University of Essex
Colchester, UK

Melissa Tyler
Essex Business School
University of Essex
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About the Authors

Philip Hancock is a professor of Work and Organisation Studies and a member of the Centre for Work, Organisation and Society at Essex Business School, University of Essex, UK. With Melissa Tyler, he is a co-ordinator of the Centre's 'Future of Creative Work' cluster. His research interests include the atmospheric dimensions of work and its organisation, the critical theory of Axel Honneth, and the work of free-lance and self-employed performers. His research has been published in leading international journals, including the *Academy of Management Review*, *Human Relations*, *Organization Studies*, and *Work, Employment and Society*. His most recent book is *Organizing Christmas* published by Routledge in 2023.

Melissa Tyler is a professor of Work and Organisation Studies and a member of the Centre for Work, Organisation and Society at Essex Business School, University of Essex, UK. With Philip Hancock, she coordinates the Centre's 'Future of Creative Work' cluster. Melissa's research focuses on gender, feminist theory, and embodied work experiences. Her research has been published in leading international journals, including *Human Relations*, and *Organization Studies*. Her recent books include *Soho at Work*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2020, and *Judith Butler and Organization Theory,* published by Routledge in 2019.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract In this introductory chapter, the scene is set by briefly outlining the background of our research concerning the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact of those state interventions taken to contain its spread, on the work and experiences of live performers in the UK. The chapter explains both the content of the book, chapter by chapter, and the empirical, conceptual, and policy-directed contributions the research makes to ongoing debates about precarious work in the UK's cultural and creative sector.

Keywords COVID-19 · Live entertainment · Pandemic · Performers · Precarious work

Much has already been written about the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had and is indeed still having on people's lives and our political, social, and economic institutions (Allas et al., 2020; Bloom et al., 2023; Parker, 2020). This book is itself something of a snapshot of that time when not only did the disease itself have dreadful consequences for the lives of so many people, but so did many of the measures, however necessary, that were introduced to combat its spread and impact. Here, in the UK, it was not until March 2020 that the decision to not only restrict but, wherever possible, eliminate social assembly and close contact was taken as

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the country entered its first national lockdown. Inevitably, this had devastating implications for the ability of millions of people to make a living through their normal working activities. As all non-essential factories, shops, entertainment and leisure centres, schools, colleges, and universities closed their doors, vast swathes of the population found themselves without work and confined to their homes.

For those able to work from home or for those who were eligible for the government-financed job retention or 'furlough' scheme, the worst extremes of the financial impact of the pandemic were largely mitigated. However, things were often far more difficult for those working on a self-employed or mainly freelance basis who found themselves largely ineligible for such help. One such group of people who experienced an almost total loss of work and income during this time were freelance and self-employed performers, especially those who worked predominately in the live entertainment industries.

With the closure of venues and, even in those periods when lockdowns were relaxed but when social distancing rules were in force, this workforce saw its livelihood disappear. Moreover, the introduction of the UK government's *Self-Employed Income Support Scheme*, a state intervention engineered to assist workers such as these, did little to help. The scheme proved largely incapable of supporting the majority of freelancers who were, and still are, often reliant on portfolio working and a combination of freelance and PAYE employment. Hence, this was a workforce that often had limited access to financial assistance beyond the most basic forms of state support (Hancock & Tyler, 2021).

Not that this was a workforce unfamiliar with such challenges. Often a byword for precarious work, the vast majority of creative labour in the live entertainment industries has long been characterised by the insecurities and uncertainties that are associated with freelance and self-employed work more widely. Moreover, these industries largely depend on precarious types of work and workers, with self-employment and freelancing being the dominant forms of employment (Carey et al., 2023). This being the case, while the COVID-19 pandemic was indeed catastrophic for these industries and their workers, in many ways, it merely made visible what was already a problem of chronic precarity amongst the bulk of its artistic workforce.

Even in the face of such adversity, however, many performers found new ways of not only generating income but also keeping their

performing ambitions alive. Taking advantage of the myriad of live-streaming platforms increasingly available, such as *Mixcloud*, *Twitch*, *Facebook*, and *YouTube*, following the start of lockdown in March 2020, individual and small ensembles of performers started to follow in the footsteps of larger entertainment organisations by streaming their shows live to online audiences. And while, as we shall see, this was seldom a panacea for all the challenges posed not only by COVID-19 but also by the precarious nature of live performance work more widely, it became a significant part of the pandemic-induced cultural landscape.

In this book, we report on the findings of a research project that took place over two years between March 2020 and February 2022 and that was funded by a small grant from the British Academy/Leverhulme Trust. Its primary focus was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the freelance and self-employed performers who work at the heart of the live entertainment industries in the UK. Taking a mixed methods approach, combining an online national survey with follow-up one-to-one interviews, it documented the experiences of those live performers who, due to the pandemic and subsequent government disinterest, found themselves in an even more precarious situation than even they had previously known. In doing so, we explored not only the ways the pandemic brought to the fore their day-to-day precarity but also how, in responding to it, the new ways of working and performing that emerged, bringing with them a combination of evolving opportunities and challenges.

As well as presenting a first-hand account of the experiences, challenges, and opportunities faced by these performers throughout the pandemic, in this book we also make two further contributions. Firstly, by drawing on both existing literature and the data acquired through the course of the research, we re-work the conceptual framing of precarity as it has been developed to date in the sociology of work in our analysis of how precarity pertains to this workforce. In doing so, we extend what is termed socioeconomic precarity to include not only financial insecurity but also the fragility of social and professional networks and the relations this generates. We then present two additional forms of precarity to more fully understand the precarious nature of freelance and self-employed work in the creative and cultural sector and how it is experienced.

The first of these we term *affective* precarity. This describes those challenges and uncertainties around maintaining a particular presentation of self, one that will both meet and, in turn, perpetuate established aesthetic or sensory expectations, shaping what it means to be a performer and

to give an entertaining performance. The second, *recognitive* precarity, encapsulates the sense of vulnerability that is experienced by many performers and is generated by the heightened struggle for recognition that characterises their work, and which was dramatically accentuated during the pandemic when such performers struggled to maintain a sense of themselves as credible artists in a context in which having access to a live, venue-based audience was largely precluded. Such performers' recognitive precarity is based, therefore, on their heightened need for recognition of themselves, from audiences and their peers, as viable, credible performers who have the capacity to entertain, a scenario that was made especially difficult by the pandemic and lockdown. Moreover, we further argue that all three forms of precarity identified here, while conceptually distinct, intersect. This can be in ways that worsen or sometimes generate the conditions within which one form of precarity can emerge from another. For example, a performer's experience of socioeconomic precarity often renders them increasingly vulnerable to more recognitive forms, as discussed in later chapters.

Secondly, concrete suggestions about not only how such performers might be spared some of the shocks associated with any possible future fixed-term closure of their industries are offered. In making these suggestions, we draw directly on the opinions and insights of those we spoke to in order to consider how these industries can be made more sustainable, accessible and equitable for those who work in them, now and in the future. As such, we aim not only to contribute to current research in the field but also to make a practical and hopefully positive impact on the working lives of those freelance and self-employed live performers who are our primary focus and concern.

The book is organised into eight chapters. Our opening chapter begins by considering existing research and literature on precarious work as it started to emerge in the Global North from the late 1970s onwards. It then extends its scope by considering precarious work today, focusing specifically on its consequences for the freelance and self-employed labour force. The chapter finally considers literature indicating an increasing need to understand more about the subjective impact and experience of precarious work, including its effects on an individual's sense of identity and their need, or desire, for recognition.

Chapter 2 builds on insights from the first by focusing on the meaning, nature, and experience of precarious work for freelance and self-employed workers in the UK's cultural and creative sector in general and those

performing in the live entertainment industries in particular. It discusses relevant literature on the prevalence and impact of precarious working practices in and on the UK's cultural and creative workforce, focusing on the socioeconomic consequences of such precarity for the lives of freelance and self-employed live performers. In doing so, it moves towards a review of existing literature that considers the more subjective dynamics associated with precarious work in the live performance industries, and the challenges it presents to performers and the circumstances that shape how their desire to be recognised as legitimate, viable performers is understood.

Chapter 3 explains the design underpinning the research, considering issues such as sampling, research ethics, and data analysis. The following chapter, the first to consider our research data, explores the general impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on those freelancers and self-employed live performers who responded to our survey and who took part in our interviews. Set against the wider shutdown of much of the UK's economy in general, and the cultural and creative sector in particular, it considers the socioeconomic and psychological challenges experienced by live performers during this time, alongside their sense that the pandemic not only exposed but exacerbated the precarious conditions that are endemic to the live entertainment industries. The chapter then explores performers' experiences of online performance, usually via live-streaming platforms, considering the circumstances both of those performers who could take advantage of such opportunities and of those who found themselves, for various reasons, excluded from them.

The next chapter, Chapter 5, again draws on our survey and interview data to consider the socioeconomic and financial impact of the pandemic on live performers during COVID-19 in more depth. It also extends our consideration of online performance so as to offer a more nuanced account of the operational and personal precarity that performing online presented to those who were able to undertake it. In Chapter 6, we then turn our attention to the more subjective issues that such precarity surfaced, specifically with respect to identity, vulnerability, and a desire for recognition amongst performers, considering how these issues manifested themselves throughout the pandemic. In doing so, this chapter reflects on the range of emotional, psychological, and indeed existential challenges performers faced. We also show how these were shaped and responded to, in part, through entrepreneurial activities geared towards

establishing and maintaining professional and audience networks during and beyond the pandemic.

In our penultimate chapter, we consider performers' various experiences of precarious work with reference to our data, developing a novel conceptual typology that distinguishes between what we identify as three forms of precarity characteristic of live performance work during COVID-19 and beyond. These are socioeconomic, affective, and recognitive precarity. Furthermore, while we argue that these three forms are conceptually distinct, as we show, they are also empirically and experientially interrelated in that each can be understood as both reproducing the conditions necessary for each to emerge, as well as being complementary in how they function. Finally, in Chapter 8, we consider the type of support and practical changes that the live performers who took part in our project considered necessary not only to recover from the ongoing effects of the pandemic as well as other systemic shocks to their industries, such as Brexit, but also those that they identified as being necessary in the longer-term to securing a fairer, more equitable, and accessible future for this workforce, and sector. Ultimately, therefore, this chapter aims to speak directly to funding and legislative bodies, amongst others, about how the UK's live entertainment industries might move 'beyond precarity'.

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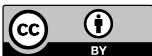

CHAPTER 2

Precarity in Freelance Work and Self-Employment

Abstract This chapter discusses the literature on precarious work as a phenomenon that has intensified across the industrial Global North over the past five decades or so. It goes on to consider the contours of precarious work today, focusing on its consequences for the UK's freelance and self-employed workforce. Finally, the chapter considers relevant sociological literature that points towards the need to understand more about the subjective impact and experience of precarious work, including its effects on an individual's sense of identity and what might be termed their desire for recognition as situated within contemporary social relations.

Keywords Freelance and self-employment · Identity · Precarious work · Recognition

Introduction

Precarious employment and the instability, insecurity, and vulnerability characterising it are nothing intrinsically new. As Quinlan (2012: 19) observes, precarity 'has been a pervasive feature of labour markets since the first industrial revolution'. This appeared to change, in many parts of the Global North at least, in the aftermath of the Second World War, with increased state intervention into economic activity, and the growing strength of trade union movements. For a time, precarity seemed a thing

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of the past, as this period of relative stability and prosperity witnessed increased security for many producing, across many Western economies, what are often referred to as standard employment relations (Kalleberg, 2011). The latter encompassed several features, most notably an expectation that employment would if desired, be full-time, permanent, and underpinned by obligations on the part of the employer to provide benefits such as paid holidays and sick leave.

From the late 1970s onwards, however, as several developed economies downgraded industrial manufacturing in favour of greater investment in the service sector, successive governments championed reduced state regulation. Employers embraced flexible forms of organisation underpinned by advances in information technology, and precarity began to experience a widespread resurgence. The reappearance of precarious work was brought to the attention of academics largely through Bourdieu's (1998) writing on the growth of workplace casualisation, which, as Millar (2017) observes, itself harked back to his earlier studies during the 1960s of the experiences of unemployed and under-employed workers in Algeria.

Described as a state of 'job insecurity, temp or part-time employment, a lack of social benefits, and low wages' (Millar, 2017: 3), precarious work individualises risk and destabilises lives and workers' ability not only to plan for the future but to flourish in the present. In his study of the re-emergence of precarious work across the US, Kalleberg identified several key features indicative of its growth, including, amongst other things, a greater perception of job insecurity and the increasingly widespread use of non-standard work contracts, alongside a tendency to shift risk from employers to employees against an ideological backdrop through which labour is considered a resource 'cost' to be minimised, especially in respect of an employer's contributions and liabilities.

As well as an analytical category, such work-related precarity has also emerged as a critical concept that has been used to wrestle with the purported neo-liberalisation of the final remnants of Fordist employment relations and the possibilities for collective action and progress they once appeared to offer. This has led to precarity also being formulated in more dialectical terms not only as a diagnosis of a degraded pathology of contemporary working life but also as a potential—if not entirely unproblematic (Smith & Pun, 2018)—basis for a new and progressive class formation (Standing, 2011). The latter, the 'precariat', has come

to be understood as a class that might be united through an awareness of its common experience of uncertainty and marginalisation and, in doing so, oppose it. While internally divided, Standing (2011) views the precariat as a class in the making, one ideally situated to challenging the inequitable distribution of economic and political resources under contemporary capitalism.

Recognising the difficulties as well as the virtues of Standing's proposal, however, not least that precarious employment conditions have become so widespread that they can affect almost anyone (Bremen, 2013; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008), we are more concerned in this chapter with a focus on precarious work as an analytical resource. In other words, we aim to understand how precarity manifests itself within and impacts upon people's working lives, specifically across the cultural and creative sector. In doing so, we draw most directly from the sociological and philosophical literature that has made inroads into extending how precarity might be understood as more than a purely socioeconomic issue but also as a phenomenon that impacts upon subjective experiences of identity and social relations. In doing so, we set the scene for our later consideration of a more multifaceted approach to precarity as it directly relates to the performers whose working lives are our focus here.

The chapter itself begins with a discussion of the literature on precarious work as a phenomenon that, while far from new, has intensified across the industrial Global North over the last five decades or so. The following section then considers the contours of precarious work today, focusing on its consequences for freelancers and the self-employed. Finally, the chapter considers literature that points towards the need to understand more about the subjective impact and experience of precarious work, including its impact on an individual's sense of identity and desire for recognition, as the latter is situated within contemporary social relations.

Precarious Work as a Contemporary Phenomenon

As observed in the Introduction, precarious work is not a 'new' feature of work and the labour market as such. Quinlan (2012) identified precarity as an issue that was readily identified in the UK and Australia in the 1800s when it was used to describe categories of workers, such as short-term farm labourers, or less frequently, labour market conditions in general. There is a significant degree of agreement, however, that in the post-war period between around 1945 and 1970, the prevalence of

precarious work, at least in the Global North, lessened as Fordism—as both an organisational and a socio-political logic—came to dominate the socioeconomic landscape (Aglietta, 1979; Jessop, 1992). Characterised by Keynesian demand-side economics, with an acceptance of the need for state intervention in, and regulation of, the economy, and the influence of strong trade unions, this was the era of what has come to be known as 'standard employment', and with which the concept of precarious work has subsequently been compared (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008).

Today, standard employment is defined as continuous and full-time work, involving a direct relationship between an employer and employee (ILO, 2017). Moreover, it is underpinned by contractual and legal rights alongside forms of social insurance usually underwritten by the state (Breman & van der Linden, 2014). While itself not an unproblematic idea, especially by virtue of a tendency to universalise employment practices across differing times, places, and populations (Betti, 2018), standard employment became a useful yardstick against which to consider the renewed presence and increasing proliferation of non-standard and, therefore, in this context, precarious employment. Historicising work in this way helps us to recognise that precarious employment is not so much an aberration but rather a reassertion of previously established practices and logics whereby, as Breman and van der Linden (2014: 920) observe, 'the real norm or standard in global capitalism is insecurity, informality or precariousness, and the Standard Employment Relationship is a historical phenomenon which had a deep impact in a limited part of the world for a relatively short period of time'.

As such, what might be considered to be the re-emergence of precarious employment conditions as, if not the 'norm' certainly as widespread, can be understood, in large part at least, as part and parcel of the breakdown of the Fordist settlement during the 1970s and the subsequent emergence of what was subsequently dubbed a flexible or post-Fordist regime of accumulation. As Hall (1988: 24) has explained it, the latter is one that favoured:

> More flexible decentralised forms of labour process in work organisation; decline of the old manufacturing base and the growth of the 'sunrise', computer-based industries; the hiving off or contracting out of functions and services; a greater emphasis on choice and product differentiation, on marketing, packaging and design, on the 'targeting' of consumers by lifestyle, taste and culture rather than by categories of social class; a decline

in the proportion of the skilled, male, manual working class, the rise of the service and white collar classes and the 'feminization' of the workforce.

The emphasis on flexibility in production, distribution and, ultimately, consumption that Hall describes, alongside the intensified regimes of competitiveness that post-Fordism engendered, led, in turn, to forms of organisational restructuring that increasingly favoured a blurring of traditional boundaries, the outsourcing of business functions, the devolution and ultimately individualising of risk to employees and, in their wake, new forms of employment relationships. The latter favoured flexibility, agility and, ultimately, the disposability of a peripheral workforce that could be grown or shrunk depending on prevalent market conditions and institutional strategies.

Furthermore, the emergence of ever-more sophisticated ICT systems and the proliferation of online service providers such as, perhaps most notoriously, Uber in 2009 took the nature of precarious work to a whole new level (ILO, 2021). Commonly referred to as platform or gig work (Vallas & Schor, 2020; Wood et al., 2019), this ICT-mediated approach to instantaneously matching demand for certain services with supply has produced an increasingly numerically significant component of the contemporary labour force (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017). It has proliferated a precariously employed workforce that lacks, in most cases, the security of employment benefits and the relative protections of standard employment (Watson et al., 2021). Protected from bearing the 'full costs and risks of employment which they have devolved onto workers' (Vallas & Schor, 2020: 280), today, such platform organisations can shed a workforce or individual members of it with relative impunity, while the workers themselves are ever more vulnerable to anything from economic downturn to poor and, potentially discriminatory, customer feedback.

Self-Employment, Freelancing, and Precarious Work

While precarious employment conditions are increasingly prevalent across the labour market, central to this book is the relationship between what it means to be self-employed or to work on a freelance basis—in this case, working within the performing arts—and precarious work. According to the 'Self-Employed Landscape Report' for 2022, compiled by the Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed, the UK

currently has approximately 1.9 million freelance workers. At the time of writing, these freelancers contribute around £139 billion to the UK economy. In this report, freelancers are primarily understood to constitute a subset of the self-employed labour force, working in the top three highest-skilled occupational categories (SOC1 to SOC3) with the largest proportion, accounting for about 17% of the total, engaged in artistic, literary, and media occupations.

While several distinctions between those who are freelancers and do indeed exist, for example, freelancers usually work alone while the self-employed may well employ others—neither of these is always the case, and freelance and self-employed workers do share many things in common. These similarities mean that both groups of workers are commonly attracted to the opportunities and flexibility offered by their work status, yet at the same time, and often because of the same conditions (e.g., working outside of formal, organisational infrastructures and management systems), they are often also vulnerable to the travails of precarious employment, something that came to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hence, while many people might be attracted to freelance work due to its perceived ability to offer greater flexibility and autonomy (Gandini, 2019; Sutherland et al., 2020), as research has indicated, it is not without multiple challenges. In the UK, such work is not only concentrated in low-wage sectors of the economy but is also associated with limited workplace rights and protections, with individual workers having no guaranteed minimum hours or reliable source of income.

In 2020, the Director of Labour Market Enforcement commissioned a report that concluded that, at the time, approximately 8.5–9.5% of the UK workforce could be considered precariously employed. While some voices have pointed to the idea that the extent of such employment is either exaggerated or considered more desirable or at least legitimate by employees than is often given credit (Fevre, 2007), academic research has mainly suggested that such work is predominantly detrimental to the economic security, and well-being, of those who undertake it (Irvine & Rose, 2022; Moore & Newsome, 2018; Però, 2020).

At a more organisational level, sociological interest in self-employment and the precarity often associated with it has foregrounded how self-employed workers are the labour market's 'missing middle' (Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2011), effectively depriving organisations of traditional sources of skills and experience because of choosing or being forced to

go freelance or to become self-employed. Nonetheless, while this is clearly unhelpful for organisations, such scholarship largely highlights the greater impact that precarious self-employment can have on individuals beyond simple uncertainties around, say, income.

As well as having a profoundly negative impact on the material underpinnings of everyday life, including the ability to plan for the future, precarious work has been widely shown to significantly harm the physical and mental health of those who undertake it (Macmillan & Shanahan, 2021). Furthermore, it is shown to have a detrimental impact on families and social stability more generally (Ba', 2020). As Irvine and Rose (2022: 14) observe, precarious employment and the various forms of insecurity it generates can detrimentally impact on people's mental health and sense of well-being. In particular, it can significantly affect what they term, drawing on Greenhaus and Beutell (1985: 77), 'role pressure incompatibilities'. These involve 'time demands, work strain, and work-related behaviours such as overwork, preoccupation with job searching, and being "always on call"', factors that can swamp a person's sense of self and mitigate against positive and healthy connections with others. Accentuating this is that, as a 2021 Trades Union Congress (TUC) report highlighted, the 'prospect of having work offered or cancelled at short notice makes it hard to budget household bills or plan a private life', a situation that, perhaps not unsurprisingly, disproportionally impacts upon already vulnerable and marginalised groups, such as migrant workers and, due to often inequitable caring responsibilities, women (McKay et al., 2012).

Farina et al. (2020) identify a positive correlation between poor mental health and those employed on highly precarious zero-hours contracts, often born of a continuous sense of uncertainty and insecurity, while in their study of Australian workers, Bentley et al. (2019) observed how precarity is exacerbated in many cases by the additional strains and worries over affordable housing and residential security. We might surmise that this latter issue affects freelance and self-employed workers in the cultural and creative sector in particular, many of whom need to live and work close to arts venues and audiences and, if not, incur travel expenses as part of their work-related costs. In a sector in which pay is notoriously low, this can leave many in a situation in which they work for nothing, or effectively 'pay to work'.

A further and largely understudied consequence of precarious employment and its relationship to health and well-being is its negative impact

on individual sleep patterns and all that can stem from this. While the relationship between sleep and work has itself been previously studied from several perspectives (Barnes, 2012; Baxter & Kroll-Smith, 2005; Hancock, 2008), Mai et al. (2019) have observed how precarious work and its negative impact on sleep patterns is often notably gendered, with men suffering more significant sleep disturbance than women. Possibly because men continue to 'consider work to be at the core of their societal role' (Mai et al., 2019: 8), what is particularly notable about this research is that it recognises the significance of the subjective impact of the insecurity such precarity generates alongside its more objective socioeconomic effects, bringing the idea of the precarious subject to the fore.

Identity, Precarity, and the Subject

The notion that precarious work is experienced subjectively, as well as being an objective socioeconomic condition, is not entirely restricted to considerations of health and well-being, however. Several studies have drawn from the ideas of Michel Foucault (Mackenzie & McKinlay, 2021; Moisander et al., 2018; Vallas & Christin, 2018), particularly his work on biopower and governmentality (Foucault 1990, 1991) to consider how workers can be both constituted as precarious subjects aligned with the demands of workplace precarity, as well as seeking ways and activities to resist or subvert it. Moisander et al. (2018: 392), for example, consider how the mobilisation of entrepreneurial discourses amongst a contracted self-employed sales force, alongside an individualisation of the risk and costs associated with the work, constitutes workers that not only submit to the insecurities of precarious employment but just as often 'reconstitute themselves and their lives as "enterprises" so as to pursue self-efficacy, autonomy and self-worth'.

In a similar vein, Vallas and Christin (2018) have identified how identification of and with oneself as an 'enterprising subject' is particularly favoured by workers in many sectors through the popularisation and pursuit of personal branding strategies whereby a precarious employment landscape becomes a marketplace in which potential employees feel required to 'adopt forms of subjectivity that construe their career horizons and work identities as objects to which corporate marketing techniques must be applied' (Vallas & Christin, 2018: 28), particularly given the pervasive role social media profiles increasingly play in recruitment.

However, while Foucauldian scholarship and a concern with processes of subjectivisation offer one possible and no doubt fruitful way to approach how precarious employment can impact on forms of subjectivity, subjective experiences of precarious work can also be understood through the focus on recognition that is espoused in the work of contemporary critical theorist, Axel Honneth (1996, 2007, 2012) and feminist philosopher, Judith Butler (2006, 2015). Both writers are concerned with, amongst other things, the role that intersubjective recognition plays in the constitution of the subject and one's sense of self-identity. For Honneth (1996), affirmative recognition by others provides the bedrock for healthy human development both emotionally and psychologically, be it as intimate partners, bearers of legally enforceable rights, and/or as valuable contributors to the healthy reproduction of society. And while the former of these is deemed to be achievable predominantly in the private sphere, the latter two forms of recognition, in the form of respect and esteem, are most commonly associated with public activities, particularly in the case of esteem as an 'opportunity to pursue an economically rewarding, and thus socially regulated occupation' (Honneth, 2007: 75).

As such, for Honneth, fulfilling, financially secure work is not only socioeconomically important; it is also integral to the intersubjective development of a secure and healthy sense of self-identity that is valued both by oneself and others. It is in this context that Motakef (2019) has drawn on Honneth's (1996) work to directly link the condition of precarity to how employees may or may not experience work as a source of recognition. Combining Honneth's model with the concept of the precarity of life arrangements, or the everyday precariousness of domestic arrangements around, say, labour in the home, as developed by Klenner et al. (2012) and Amacker (2014), Motakef argues that socioeconomic precarity amongst the freelance and self-employed workforce can negatively impact on their experience of recognition.

For Motakef (2019: 169), this is because being 'trapped in temporary or part-time work, being a contract-worker or having a low income, can encroach on one's possibilities to realise … skills, abilities and talents', thus precluding opportunities for respect, esteem and, therefore, recognition. Moreover, even though such a lack of recognition can be partly compensated for by other aspects of one's life—such as through friendship groups—it can still result in a sense of misrecognition that, returning to Honneth (1996), can have significant pathological consequences leading to a crisis or fragmentation of identity.

Judith Butler, while not immediately concerned with the organisational relations and structuring of work and employment per se, offers insights that provide an equally valuable way in to understanding how precarity relates to lived experiences of work. Butler views recognition as itself a precarious achievement, subject not only to denial by others but also as vulnerable to constraining acts of power that serve to reinforce inequitable or repressive social and economic relations. However, while Butler (2015) views precarious life as a multifaceted, universal, and arguably existential condition, given their acceptance of the importance of recognition for human flourishing, Butler is equally aware that such precariousness is heightened by, if not also often a consequence of, the organisation of economic and social relations. For Butler, therefore, while all human beings are precarious by virtue of the social relations in which they are enmeshed, different social circumstances, including those relating to lived experiences of work, contour this existential precarity, resulting in unequal exposure to its socioeconomic forms and effects.

As Millar (2017) has observed, a philosophically informed approach to precarity can bring to the fore the precarious nature of all social relations, providing a critical basis for understanding how this then comes to be socially situated in ways that shape or organise that precarity socioeconomically. It can also provide a basis for questioning the social positioning and organisation of recognition that takes place in and through work. In doing so, such an approach foregrounds that while precariousness is a defining feature of the social condition, exposure to precarious, or potentially precarious, work serves to shape and structure that condition, as also suggested by Irvine and Rose (2022: 15), who note how precarious work not only has significant socioeconomic consequences; it can leave those affected by it experiencing 'marginalisation, discrimination and exploitation' leading to, amongst other things, 'a sense of isolation and lack of belonging'.

Conclusion

In this opening chapter, we have examined the history and primary characteristics of precarious work as they pertain to the re-emergence of non-standard forms of employment during the latter third of the twentieth century, focusing on the precarity increasingly faced by the UK's freelance and self-employed workforce. We have also considered the negative impact that precarity or vulnerability to precarity can

have on both socioeconomic status as well as health and mental well-being. In doing so, we have highlighted how exposure to precarious work was not only exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic but that such exposure also continues to disproportionally affect groups that are already economically marginalised and vulnerable, including, e.g., migrant workers and those with caring responsibilities.

Moreover, the chapter has also responded to recent calls within the sociology of work to open up the concept of precarity to facilitate a greater understanding of subjective, lived experiences of precarious lives and work by considering social theories of identity and recognition and how these might pertain to developing a deeper understanding of the subjective consequences of precarious work and its organisation (Motakef, 2019; Vallas & Christin, 2018). Specifically, with respect to the workforce under consideration in this book—namely freelance and self-employed performers—existing research alerts us to the need to consider the possible vulnerabilities amongst this workforce and the adverse effects of competing demands on their creative self-identities and well-being that, most likely, are heightened by the insecurities and uncertainties generated by precarious work and the organisational settings within and through which this takes place.

In the next chapter, we continue to consider these themes and issues as we turn our attention to relevant literature that has focused explicitly on the impact of precarity on those working in the cultural and creative sector in general and the live entertainment industries in particular before and during COVID-19. As such, we consider the chronic forms of precarity that pre-existed the pandemic in this sector but which were dramatically accentuated by it. In doing so, we refine the parameters of our research, ultimately evaluating the impact of the pandemic on the multiple and intertwined forms of precarity experienced by creative workers, primarily freelance and self-employed performers in the UK's live entertainment industries. We consider the increased pressure the pandemic placed on them, for example, to develop, or perhaps more accurately, 'juggle' portfolio careers (Stokes, 2021). We also consider how the pandemic required them to develop or accelerate new ways of working to retain their audiences and professional profiles (Langevang et al., 2022; Mehta, 2017; Steedman & Brydges, 2023), and to maitain their sense of self as professional performers and live entertainers during a period when the latter was particularly under threat.

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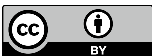

CHAPTER 3

Precarity and Work in the UK Cultural and Creative Sector

Abstract This chapter examines the meaning, nature, and experience of precarious work for freelance and self-employed workers in the UK's cultural and creative sector in general and for those who work as live performers in particular. In doing so, the parameters of the research are refined, providing an introduction and backdrop to the empirical research that underpins and informs this book. The chapter opens with a consideration of relevant literature on the prevalence and impact of precarious working practices in the UK's cultural and creative sector. The focus is then narrowed to consider the predominantly socioeconomic consequences of such precarity on the work of freelance and self-employed performers. Finally, the chapter explores the more subjective dynamics associated with precarious work in the live performance industries and the challenges they present for performers' identities and the circumstances shaping how their desire for recognition is experienced and understood.

Keywords COVID-19 · Cultural and creative sector · Freelance and self-employment · Live performers · Recognition

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Introduction

As observed in the previous chapter, significant numbers of the UK's working population experience precarious employment, particularly those who work freelance or are self-employed, often working within the ever-expanding gig or platform economy (Wood et al., 2019). However, in the UK, as elsewhere, nowhere is the relationship between precarity and freelancing more evident than in the cultural and creative sector, where 'part-time, project-based, freelance work is *the dominant* form of employment' (Carey et al., 2023: 8 *original emphasis*). Here, such work has become almost a byword for occupational precarity. While the reasons for this are complex, two factors are significant. First, the traditionally short-term nature of employment across this sector favours its regulation through fixed-term contracts dependent upon the length and success of a production, event, or project. Second, and compounding this, has been the sector's increased exposure to market forces, with freelance workers bearing the brunt of this. This has resulted in a situation in which organisations across the sector have cut costs, reduced long-term investment and increasingly utilised a larger number of short-term and insecure contracts, or even unpaid internships and voluntary labour, to remain viable. Again, freelancers have been at the forefront of the impact of this.

Moreover, it was against this wider backdrop that the COVID-19 pandemic had a particularly detrimental impact on the UK's freelance cultural and creative workforce, particularly those who work, or worked, as performers in the live entertainment industries. Experiencing COVID-19 as a crisis within a crisis, or as a 'crisis of precarity' as the actors' union Equity described it (see Chapter 1), theatre makers, musicians, comics, dancers, and entertainers of all kinds, the vast majority of whom were employed on a freelance basis, found themselves denied the ability to earn a living in their chosen disciplines. This resulted in the financial devastation of more than 300,000 people in the UK (ONS, 2020). And while a fortunate number eventually found themselves to be eligible for pandemic-specific government financial assistance, such as the *Self-Employment Income Support Scheme* (SEISS) that ran from May 2020 to September 2021, many discovered they were excluded from such schemes and, therefore, found themselves reliant on minimum state benefits and the support of friends and families and, where they existed, savings.

As discussed in the previous chapter, research over the last two decades has demonstrated that despite the sense of freedom and relative autonomy

often experienced by those working in the entertainment and related industries, freelance and self-employed workers especially also experience low pay, long hours, and the additional demands of having to develop and sustain professional networks in order to secure work (Birchall, 2017; Blair, 2001; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010). This, in turn, can lead to increased symptoms of stress and mental ill-health, as also discussed in the previous chapter, and often a crisis, particularly amongst performers, of identity and self-worth that can further exacerbate such symptoms (Hancock et al., 2021; Leidner, 2016). As with other issues, this is something that was once again heightened by the impact of COVID-19 with, for example, a national survey of performing arts professionals demonstrating that during the initial period of lockdown, around 69% demonstrated three or more symptoms of serious depression (Spiro et al., 2021).

In this second chapter, we build on and develop these insights, examining the meaning, nature, and experience of precarious work for freelance workers in the UK's cultural and creative sector in general and for those who work as live performers in particular. In doing so, we refine the parameters of our work as both an introduction, and backdrop, to the empirical research that underpins and informs this book. Regarding structure, the chapter opens with a consideration of relevant literature on the prevalence and impact of precarious working practices in the UK's cultural and creative sector. We then narrow the focus, considering the predominantly socioeconomic consequences of such precarity with a particular concern for the work of freelance and self-employed live performers. Finally, the chapter explores the more subjective dynamics associated with precarious work in the live performance industries, particularly the challenges it presents to performers' identities and the circumstances shaping how their desire for recognition is experienced and understood.

Work in the UK's Cultural and Creative Sector and/as Precarious Work

In the UK, the idea of a distinct economic sector underpinned by cultural and creative activity emerged on the back of a broader global debate surrounding the growth of what was considered to be a specifically 'creative class' (Florida, 2002). This combined with a decline in established industrial sources of wealth and a greater emphasis on the innovative capacity of human capital as representing the new 'wellspring of economic

growth' (Clifton, 2008: 64). While the activities of such a class were initially viewed in relatively broad terms, today the term 'creative class' is primarily used to describe those working in the arts and in cultural and creative practice, in sub-sectors ranging from advertising and computer game design to literature and the performing arts. What unites such industries is not only a common creative core, however, but rather, and almost by definition, an emphasis on the management and valorisation of their products as commodities within a cultural marketplace.

A largely instrumental recognition of the economic, social, and cultural value of creative capital means that while precarity or precarious work is widely acknowledged as endemic across the cultural and creative industries (Arditi, 2021; Butler & Russell, 2018; Genders, 2022; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hancock et al., 2021; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Klob & Haitzinger, 2023), it is, as Comunian and England point out (2020: 113, *emphasis added*), something that 'seems to become visible *only in moments of crisis*', such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As discussed in Chapter 2, such precarity was not, of course, caused by COVID-19, but it was dramatically worsened by it. For despite a preceding host of government-led policy interventions that purportedly acknowledged and promoted the economic value of work in the cultural and creative sector, by the time the pandemic hit, workforce precarity had already been affected by reductions in long-term investment, an increase in the use of ever-more insecure contractual terms, and the favouring of a freelance workforce lacking the stability and infrastructure of employed workers (Aroles et al., 2022; Chafe & Kaida, 2020; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Ross, 2006/2007) for several decades.

Increasingly, the sector has tended to regulate employment at best through fixed-term contracts dependent upon the length and success of a production, event, or project and, at worst, unpaid internships and voluntary labour (Brook et al., 2020). Consequently, most of those who do obtain paid work usually do so on a freelance or self-employed basis and face precarious working conditions and a lack of fair pay, job security, and other benefits associated with permanent long-term employment. These issues have been highlighted across several academic studies, media stories, and reports covering various industries and activities (Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013; Owolade, 2022; Shade & Jacobson, 2015).

For example, in art and museum curation, while purportedly to ensure a high turnover of new and innovative ideas, the increasing use of short-term contracts and the growth of an independent curatorial workforce

have expanded in recent decades in order to control costs and reduce risk. However, even while some consider the flexibility and opportunities that freelance work in this industry brings about to outweigh its accompanying financial insecurity (Shepley, 2018), this has not prevented concerns being widely raised about the negative impact such insecurity has, on the workforce and on the industry as a whole (Birchall, 2017).

Both views can be found in 'What's the Story?', the UK *Museum Freelance* survey (Lister & Ainsley, 2020). Here, between 60 and 80% of respondents agree, for example, that freelancing in the museum industry does indeed increase flexibility and a sense of control regarding work, while around 43% identify it as improving work-life balance. Nevertheless, at the same time, 40% of respondents also noted that inappropriately low pay rates are a perennial problem, while issues such as the unpaid time that goes into preparing tenders for jobs, lack of professional development support, and the effects that an 'always on' work culture has on life outside of work, are all considered to be genuine challenges. As one survey respondent reflected, referring to the flexibility and autonomy that are often lauded as the benefits of freelance work:

> I have not found that freelancing brings many of these supposed benefits. I haven't seen much flexibility, control, freedom, or increased earnings. You work when you can get it, you work on the client's terms, and with all of the dead time there is no increased income. (Lister & Ainsley, 2020: 47)

At the same time, while appreciating the chronic nature of precarity across the cultural and creative sector, it is essential not to underestimate the socioeconomic and emotional shock that COVID-19 inflicted on the sector as a whole and on those who work in it. This was especially the case for freelance and self-employed workers for whom the precarity of their livelihoods and even existence was revealed starkly to them. As Banks (2020: 650) reported it at the time:

> Many workers have spoken already about the visceral, corporeal traumas inflicted by their sudden and enforced redundancy. Across all cultural industries, workers have reported being highly "stressed, sick and skint", struggling to keep "heads above water" or feeling "totally broken" – so expressing the different and complex pains of economic injury.

And while, in retrospect, the pandemic did not, by any means, destroy the sector, it left enduring scars, shaping both hopes and fears for the future that would follow it.

Socioeconomic Precarity and UK Live Performers

Turning to the specific case of those working in the UK's live entertainment industries, particularly its freelance and self-employed performers, a similar story is evident regarding the socioeconomic impact of precarious work both prior to and during the pandemic. For example, a 2019 report produced by the *University of Bedfordshire* for *One Dance UK* entitled 'The Role and Impact of Freelancers in the UK Dance Sector' (Aujla et al., 2019), while acknowledging the value and often desirability of some freelance performance work, also highlighted its instability and unpredictability as well as the low levels of pay associated with it. The latter, in particular, the report highlighted, means that members of the workforce often find themselves needing to be supported by partners or family members in order to survive.

Similarly, the 'Big Freelancer Survey' reports produced in 2021, 2022, and 2023 by *Freelancers Make Theatre Work* (FMTW), and again in 2024, identify a range of workplace and broader socioeconomic challenges that freelancers face across the entertainment industries and the cultural and creative sector more widely. Amongst other things, these reports all highlight the vulnerability of freelance workers in an environment in which already often low fees are failing to keep pace with inflation. At the same time, work intensification and extension, with excessive hours being demanded due to a skills shortage as people leave the industry and as a consequence of Brexit, are extensively noted. In the 2023 survey, respondents widely reported being worse-off financially over the twelve months prior to the survey than during the height of the pandemic in 2020 (FMTW, 2023). One freelancer summed up the effects of this as: 'being unable to afford to move in with a partner, plan a family, take a holiday, or even take time off when too ill to work' (FMTW, 2023: 41).

Again, while not an underlying cause of the precarity experienced by such performers, as for their counterparts across the industries, the impact of COVID-19 and those measures introduced to contain its spread, tore through their working lives, heightening their sense of vulnerability and precarity. Almost overnight, thousands of such performers found their

livelihoods stripped away as the closure of entertainment venues during several periods of lockdown beginning in March 2020 deprived them of both an income and an identity. With the live entertainment industries being described as 'by far the worst hit part of the economy' (*The Guardian*, 2021), the challenges this raised are documented by Hancock et al. (2021: 1160) in their study of the lived experiences of a freelance musician, Mark Godiva, who during the pandemic attempted to stay afloat by giving online performances via the social media platform, *Facebook*. While Mark was a relative success story in that he managed not only to keep his act going during lockdown but also to build it through such online performances, the socioeconomic challenges at first appeared difficult, to say the least. As Mark himself put it,

> I had effectively become unemployed overnight, and while I am fortunate to have a wife who works in a relatively secure job and who has always been our main earner, we have a young son to support, a mortgage to pay, and the job and professional identity that I have worked hard to build up over the years seemed to be disappearing into the ether.

Nevertheless, while Mark was relatively fortunate, the persistence and widespread nature of precarious terms and conditions for performers working in live entertainment reportedly left many without a safety net, often having to fall back on family and friends to support them in the absence of work and eligibility for substantive government support. Precarious work within the industries not only generates financial obstacles, however. As Mark indicates above, such precarity, both during the pandemic and beyond, brings other socioeconomic and occupational challenges for those who are either part of or aspire to work in the live entertainment industries.

One notable example of this is the pressure on live performers and associated freelancers in the wider sector to operate in what is an increasingly entrepreneurial manner, often in excess of, or in conflict with, their artistic skills, training, or orientations, to sustain their chosen career paths. In the relevant literature, early studies of this primarily focused on the activities of various arts practitioners in the US, including, for example, Preece's (2011) article on the emergence and contours of entrepreneurial activities amongst performance artists. Subsequently, and mainly due to the growth in social media, live performers are now effectively required, more than ever, to create, perform, and promote their work, as well

as to network via social media platforms such as *Twitter/X*, *Instagram*, and *Facebook*, all of which is driven by the need to establish and maintain a personal 'brand' that will appeal to potential organisations and clients (Duffy & Pooley, 2019), not to mention audiences. Again, this is illustrated in Mark's (Hancock et al., 2021: 1161/1163) discussion of self-promotion and networking during the pandemic. As he explained it, speaking during the height of the pandemic in a period of national lockdown,

> Being a self-employed performer, I am lucky to have developed a few skills over the years. While the days of organising contracts might be temporarily on hold, I'm adept, for example, at using social media as a promotional tool and developing what you might call a reasonably strong 'brand image' around my act… and this has now come into its own via everything from tea-towels and mugs, to tote bags and even Christmas tree baubles ...

Furthermore, this need for self-promotion also places freelance and self-employed live performers under considerable additional pressure (Morris, 2014), not simply to develop the required skills and dispositions Mark refers to, but also to be constantly 'on', fuelling the overwork culture that is endemic to the sector as a whole and as discussed in Chapter 2. As also previously alluded to, in the UK, the cultural and creative sector has witnessed a concerted drive by the government and other agencies to adopt a more market-orientated approach to how it functions. In part, this has been motivated by a desire by successive governments to realise the sector's potential as a driver of economic growth and employability while rolling back state support for those who 'make' culture (McRobbie, 2016). Adding to the pressures this has brought about for freelance and self-employed live performers, the market has become more competitive, forcing freelancers especially to focus more and more on their own resources and on honing their entrepreneurial skills and attributes in order to survive in what is an increasingly competitive, commercially orientated labour market.

As Neff et al. (2005: 309) note in their study of such practices in the US, however, a more entrepreneurial mindset 'is not completely new in the culture industries'; nonetheless, in the UK, it is something that has become more evident as a response to the structural changes referred to above. The need and ability to continually 'hustle' (Langevang et al., 2022; Mehta, 2017; Pasquinelli & Sjöholm, 2015; Steedman & Brydges,

2023) through active networking, proactive self-promotion, digitisation, and often diversification of the kind Mark refers to above, has become an increasingly defining, and in certain respects, distracting feature of work in the live entertainment industries.

Butler and Russell's (2018) study of the work of stand-up comedians, for example, foregrounds the need to expend both time and energy on cultivating strong personal networks with potential employers against the usual backdrop of low pay, if not free labour and a lack of secure working conditions. As they point out, such entrepreneurialism requires not only skills in the practicalities of, for example, contract negotiation, financial management, and self-marketing; it also demands high levels of emotional labour as freelance and self-employed creative workers seek to suppress any expression of the negativity many often feel given the widely documented professional and financial precariousness described above and in Chapter 2.

For some live performers, the pandemic and the periods of lockdown that accompanied it were not, however, simply an opportunity to extend professional networks and sustain or expand their audience or fanbase. This unprecedented period and set of experiences also became an opportunity to develop new skills, and to experiment with new performance or delivery styles, and, for some, to extend their technical abilities, especially in live-streamed delivery, set design and marketing (Hancock & Tyler, 2021). On a larger scale, many of the organisers and artists associated with various concerts, music events, and other arts festivals turned their hands to adapting to online delivery during the pandemic, contributing to evolving perceptions of what live art and performance might be (Mclaughlin, 2020), e.g., in ways that might make it more accessible and/or sustainable in the future.

Subjective Precarity and Recognition Amongst Live Performers

As was discussed in Chapter 2, research has also acknowledged that despite such occasionally positive outcomes as those noted above, the often-constant demands made by such activities, combined with the equally constant sense of financial and occupational precarity, can take their toll on those working in the cultural and creative sector. This is the case not only socioeconomically but also emotionally and psychologically, and the pandemic no doubt accentuated this. A national survey

of performing arts professionals conducted in the wake of COVID-19 (Spiro et al., 2021), for example, reported that over two-thirds of those who took part had experienced heightened feelings of isolation, insecurity, and stress. Even before the pandemic, a study of the experiences of freelance musicians by *Help Musicians UK*, conducted in 2016, reported that 71% of respondents had experienced high levels of anxiety and/or panic attacks, while 69% reported experiencing depression, meaning that musicians are 'three times as likely to experience depression than the national average' (cited Embleton & Jones, 2020: 3).

More recently, in the UK, the cost-of-living crisis combined with chronic issues associated with precarity is reported as having a seriously detrimental impact on mental health amongst freelance and self-employed workers across the cultural and creative sector. Of particular concern is the view that funding and professional bodies, as well as major arts organisations and employers, make little provision to help or assist with such issues, with performers feeling chronically vulnerable and isolated as a result, as this extract from the FMTW (2022: 16) report highlights:

> As a performer, we need to freelance for flexibility around auditions and work, but the instability of it can be so stressful. My mental health has suffered immeasurably, and it feels like there's no other option or support.

Moreover, previously discussed concerns surrounding identity and recognition are even more pertinent when considered in the context of cultural and creative work, especially for live performers. Research has suggested that for some, particularly those who self-identify as artists of one form or another, the uncertainty and unpredictability of creative work can affirm their artistic sense of self (Bain, 2005; Langevang et al., 2022; Lloyd, 2010). Yet this is far from always the case, and for many, their substantial personal investment in the identity of being a 'creative' or 'artist' can result in a heightened vulnerability to the precarity of their situation, especially in times when work is scarce. This is something identified by Leidner (2016) in her study of stage actors, who observes how, without acting work, many of the people she studied struggled to sustain a viable professional self-identity and were plagued by personal uncertainty and self-doubt.

Adding to this problem is the need, discussed above, for many live performers and other cultural and creative workers to maintain a portfolio of jobs and deploy entrepreneurial techniques (Ross, 2006/2007; Stokes,

2021) in order to sustain a viable income when their chosen way of making a living is not available to them (Langevang et al., 2022; Mehta, 2017; Steedman & Brydges, 2023), as was the case during COVID-19. Not only is this often physically and mentally exhausting; it can also result in a fragmentation of occupational and, indeed, personal identity, resulting in social anxieties and insecurity amongst freelancers juggling a panoply of different jobs, producing a debilitating ongoing questioning, or fracturing, of their professional identities (Beech et al., 2016; Hoedemaekers, 2018). In combination, these issues represent significant challenges to a live performer's sense of self as they struggle to sustain their working identities and ways of making a living.

Conclusion

In this second chapter, we have considered the literature on the relationship between precarious work and the cultural and creative sector in general and live performance in particular, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Once again, we have also foregrounded, where appropriate, the impact and consequences of the pandemic and have highlighted how, while not directly causing the precarity faced by the UK's cultural and creative workforce, COVID-19 significantly and visibly exacerbated it. In doing so, we have begun to focus more directly on the subject matter of this book, ultimately evaluating the impact of the pandemic on the precarity experienced by performers in the UK's live entertainment industries.

The chapter began with a review of the socioeconomic implications of precarious work for the cultural and creative freelance and self-employed workforce, particularly concerning financial and social stability. In doing so, it acknowledged research that indicated that while such a workforce continued to value the flexibility and relative autonomy such freelance work can provide, the precarity associated with it also presents a significant challenge, often leading to over-investment in an 'always on' culture of continual hustling for work and self-promotion.

The more specific circumstances of freelance and self-employed live performers was featured next, delving deeper into their specific experiences. While the academic literature remains relatively limited concerning this particular workforce, what is clear is that while, as across the wider cultural and creative sector, the precarity of their situation clearly pre-dated the pandemic, live performers were hit significantly hard by

COVID-19 as performance venues closed, often overnight, with the introduction of government restrictions for an (at the time) indefinite period.

We considered the increased pressure this placed on freelance and self-employed live performers, for example, to develop, or perhaps more accurately, 'juggle' portfolio careers (Ross, 2006/2007; Stokes, 2021), mobilising skills that were not necessarily something that they were professionally prepared for or equipped with. Some also had to develop or accelerate new, digitally mediated ways of working in order to retain their audiences and professional profiles as well as to sustain their sense of self and recognition as professional performers (Langevang et al., 2022; Mehta, 2017; Steedman & Brydges, 2023). These are issues we will explore in more depth in the chapters to come.

In the next chapter, we leave behind, for now, the literature concerned with existing research on the precarious world of freelance and self-employed live performers and consider the research design we used to guide the selection, collection, and analysis of the personal accounts of precarious work amongst the performers who are the primary focus of this book and the study on which it is based.

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CHAPTER 4

Researching Precarious Work Experiences

Abstract This chapter presents and evaluates the methodological approach to the research discussed in subsequent chapters, explaining how data was identified, collected, and analysed. It describes how the project began with a consideration of existing research and secondary data, including relevant policy and briefing documents and reports published before and during the duration of the project, allowing us to establish a broad understanding of the ethnographic landscape shaping the lived experiences we set out to understand. The chapter then describes and evaluates the approach we took to the collection and analysis of primary data, based on an online survey and series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with freelance and self-employed live performers in the UK.

Keywords COVID-19 · Ethnographic landscape · Literature review · Methodology · Mixed-Methods

Introduction

In this chapter, we outline and evaluate the methodological approach we took to the research discussed in subsequent chapters, explaining how we collected and analysed our data, drawing on the experiences and insights of freelance and self-employed live performers, industry collaborators, and professional bodies. The sociological literature discussed in Chapters 2

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and 3 informed our approach to precarity and freelance and self-employed work in the field of live entertainment. In particular, we were concerned to understand how different forms of precarity as a condition endemic to the contemporary cultural and creative sector were experienced, including during and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We also set out to understand how the impact of the pandemic was experienced differently, depending on performers' own circumstances, and their capacity to adapt to new or evolving approaches to working (e.g., performing and/or working collaboratively online) in ways that, for some, opened up scope to generate income when the opportunity to perform live was precluded (i.e., during successive periods of lock-down and social distancing). The research was, therefore, designed to provide insight into how precarity is experienced by performers both as a chronic feature of their working lives and as a set of circumstances that the pandemic dramatically intensified.

The research was undertaken during the height of the pandemic and adopted a mixed-methods approach, focusing specifically on the experiences of freelance and self-employed live performers. It began with a consideration of relevant research and secondary data. The latter allowed us to collate insights from large-scale social surveys and other data sources (e.g., surveys conducted by industry bodies such as Equity, The Musicians' Union, and Freelancers Make Theatre Work) and 'grey literature' including relevant policy and briefing documents and reports published before and during the duration of the project. As well as informing our research questions, this material enabled us to understand more about the broader ethnographic landscape shaping the experiences and perceptions of the performers who participated in our research, including relevant news and other media coverage of their circumstances.

Following this primary stage in our research, we combined an online survey circulated between October and December 2020, generating quantitative and qualitative data, with a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The findings of the survey, including insights from the free text qualitative data that it generated from several open-ended questions, informed the interview schedule that we used to conduct these in-depth interviews between January 2021 and February 2022. All interview participants were either freelance or self-employed live performers working across different sectors and settings, demographic groups, regions and with differing longevity and experience in the industry, and of freelance and self-employed work.

Research Design

We adopted an inclusive and reflexive approach to our research design, aiming to surface and challenge embedded assumptions throughout each stage of the research process. This approach was intended to support a co-production of knowledge throughout the whole project, ensuring that the findings were the outcome of a dialogue between ourselves, our research participants and the industry bodies and representatives with whom we began to share and discuss our emergent findings and analysis. This approach enabled us to gain insights into performers' experiences, informed by a theoretical commitment to understanding the impact of precarity on their working lives and identities. It allowed us to home in on insights into the four 'markers' discussed by Portacolone (2020) in her methodological framing of research on precarity: uncertainty, limited access to resources, limited autonomy, and cumulative pressures. In our research, these themes manifest as financial, personal, professional, artistic, and technological difficulties and opportunities. However, the latter was largely brought about by the challenges and constraints imposed by the pandemic and the chronic precarity associated with freelancing and self-employment across the sector, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Our analysis of all of our data drew on the conceptual and theoretical ideas introduced in Chapters 1–3 to consider how performers' experiences of precarity and precarious work manifest in their accounts of their working lives and their descriptions of the challenges and opportunities that the COVID-19 pandemic had brought about. These informed a research approach grounded in understanding social relations as shaped by mutual vulnerability and interrelationality. Such an approach emphasises that while social beings are all mutually interdependent and reliant on others in ways that shape how we relate to and depend upon one another throughout our life course, our social circumstances and situations are such that we are by no means equally exposed. As an approach to research philosophy and methodology, this understanding of precarity and social relationality led to a research design and practice that prioritised research participants' contributions, knowledge, and understanding while, at the same time, highlighting the mutual ethical obligations entered into through research, as researchers and as participants.

In often difficult circumstances, our participants shared their time, thoughts, and experiences with us and, on occasion, their performances. During the latter, we were particularly conscious of the vulnerability

engendered by ‘putting yourself out there’ as many of our interview participants phrased it, especially when they were performing online in circumstances that were not necessarily conducive to doing so (e.g., without access to reliable, high-speed broadband, to dedicated/private performance space, and suitable equipment and necessary technical support), all while trying to maintain a professional demeanour, and to entertain an appreciative (and ideally paying) audience. Our interviews revealed how panic-stricken, overwhelmed, despondent and anxious many such performers felt, both about their inability to make a sustainable income from performance work as well as the insecurities engendered by their desire for recognition of themselves as credible, professional performers in circumstances that often precluded such recognition, e.g., when audiences were sparse, inattentive, or unappreciative of their efforts.

Acutely aware of the focus and context of the research, we ensured that all interview participants were paid as much as possible in lieu of their time and contribution, and we were grateful to access research funding from the British Academy/Leverhulme Trust to support this. However, we were also very aware that ethically responsible research involves a commitment far exceeding financial recompense (even where this is possible—see Warnock et al., 2022).

Research ethics, as outlined above, involves a relationality that underpins every stage of the research process, from the earliest conception of the research questions and design to how participants are accessed and represented, from the collection, analysis, and presentation of data to the dissemination of findings and identification of opportunities and avenues for further research, engagement, and impact. Sharing our findings and recommendations as widely as possible, including with freelance and self-employed live performers and the professional bodies that exist to advocate and lobby on their behalf, was therefore paramount to us. We used the research that we report on in later chapters to share findings and recommendations with policymakers, legislators, practitioners, and professional and public sector bodies, working to develop a collaborative co-production of knowledge and understanding as the project progressed and evolved, including via this book, which is written not simply about, but for freelance and self-employed performers in order to tell their story of what the COVID-19 pandemic was like for them.

Literature Review and Secondary Data

Before collecting and analysing survey and interview data and working with freelancers directly throughout the research process, we needed to understand the broader context of freelance work during and since the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, we thoroughly reviewed previously published research and collated material on the 'ethnographic landscape' of freelance work in the cultural and creative sector before, during, and after the pandemic outbreak. This included collating news and other media texts such as that associated with a government campaign called 'Rethink, Reskill, Reboot'. This was an ill-judged and hastily withdrawn social media effort by the UK government's *National Cyber Security Centre* to encourage cultural and creative workers to retrain in, for example, cybersecurity, which was in circulation in October 2020. Texts such as these and their reception amongst cultural and creative workers shaped lived experiences of the pandemic and what it means to be a freelance or self-employed cultural and creative practitioner both at the time and more generally, and hence were an essential part of our research process, and of understanding the ethnographic landscaping of freelance, live performance work.

By the 'ethnographic landscape', we refer to the social, political, cultural, discursive, and symbolic context shaping perceptions and experiences of what it means to be a freelance creative practitioner or arts professional and, specifically, in this case, a freelance or self-employed live performer. We understand this broader context as ethnographic because it does not simply represent a pre-existing reality but provides the sense-making context within which that reality emerges and evolves. What it means to be a freelance or self-employed live performer, including the evolving meaning of 'live' itself, and how freelance and self-employed live performance work is experienced is, therefore, shaped by the circumstances within which those lived experiences take place and become meaningful. As such, the landscaping or 'framing' of freelance work shapes lived experiences of what it means to be a live performer (including, for instance, in relation to proximity to a live audience), compelling or constraining expectations of the work, identities and lifestyles involved.

Furthermore, the ethnographic landscape involves, in this instance, processes shaping the attribution of value to freelancing, self-employment, and performance; it also refers to the conditions underpinning recognition of who, or what is, a 'live performer' and what constitutes 'live

performance'. As discussed in later chapters, these issues have important implications for performers' capacity to earn a viable living from their work and to secure recognition of its artistic value and, hence, of their sense of legitimacy as entertainers.

When COVID-19 hit, and the UK and many other countries went into a series of national lockdowns, as we discuss in more detail with reference to our research findings, many performers adapted to online delivery, raising important questions about remuneration for online work and also its ontological status (i.e., whether performing online 'counts' as live performance). These are themes we return to later in the book as they provide vital insights into how precarity is experienced in respect of what we refer to as its socioeconomic, affective, and recognitive forms. For now, it is important to note that understanding the ethnographic landscape shaping performers' identities and experiences formed a significant part of the research design, underpinning our approach to data collection and analysis.

Data Collection

Our data collection methods were designed to provide first-hand insight into live performers' experiences during the pandemic and the challenges it generated both then and (as they anticipated at the time) for their future. Our data set combined circa 68,000 words of data from the free text comments taken from the survey ($n = 221$) and one-to-one interviews ($n = 29$). The original survey comprised a mix of quantifiable attitudinal questions and qualitative open questions inviting free-text responses. The survey link was distributed via social media, and interview participants were recruited through a combination of inviting survey participants to sign up to take part in a follow-up interview, snowball sampling, and recruitment via social media networks and groups, including a dedicated social media account to counter the geographical concentration that might result from the snowball sample. The interview questions were piloted with freelance and self-employed performers across our social networks and focused on the challenges and opportunities performers had experienced during the pandemic, as well as their future expectations, both for themselves and the sector.

A large proportion of survey participants indicated that they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview ($n = 184$, or 83%),

and interviewees were selected from these based on geographical, demographic, and artistic breadth, as well as (self-defined) career stage. Our aim in selecting interviewees was to achieve the largest number of interviews and the greatest breadth of experience that we could within the available time frame and budget. We did not work with a 'sample' as such but tried to ensure that a wide range of perspectives, based on different work and personal circumstances, were reflected in the interview data we collected. All of the people we interviewed described themselves as 'live performers', the majority of whom referred to themselves as multi-skilled and as able to perform across several genres, including, for example, as singers, actors, magicians, and storytellers. Others identified themselves solely as, say, musicians or dancers, even though they often also performed other roles when required.

While the data set reported on in the following pages draws on insights and commentary extracted from the free text comments taken from the survey, the vast majority of the data that we draw on was generated through the one-to-one interviews. The performers we interviewed, and whose experiences we discuss in later chapters, were (in alphabetical order, by pseudonymous first name) (Table 4.1):

Our interviews with the participants listed above focused on the challenges and opportunities they had experienced during lockdown, as well as their future expectations, both for themselves and the sector. Interviews began with two open, ethnographically orientated questions, 'Tell me about what it means to you to be a live performer' and 'How has COVID-19 impacted on your work as a live performer?', with subsequent questions working from responses to these opening questions. As the interviews evolved, and as data analysis and collection began to conflate into each other, our interviews began to focus on the personal, financial, artistic, and technological challenges and opportunities that performers discussed in their accounts of their working lives during and before the pandemic.

Interviews were all conducted remotely via password-protected *Zoom* links and were recorded and professionally transcribed. In addition, participants were invited to comment on (anonymous) emergent findings so that data collection and analysis were as integrated and interactive as possible. NVivo was used to aid data management and support the analytical process, but all interviews were manually coded, enabling us to immerse ourselves in the analytical process and in performers' accounts of their lived experiences.

Table 4.1 Interviewees

Pseudonym	*Main work identity*	*GI*[a]	*Age*	*Region*	*EI*[b]
Alan Rupert	Magician	M	40–49	North East	W
Basil Jackson	Puppeteer	M	30–39	South East	W
Belle King	Actor	F	30–39	London	W
Bev Vale	Singer/songwriter	F	18–29	South East	Mixed
Brandon Knights	Actor/magician	M	60–69	South West	W
Brian Jones	Musician	M	50–59	South East	W
Bunty Havers	Actor	F	40–49	East	W
Charles Rogers	Actor	M	40–49	Scotland	W
Charlie Clipper	Actor/storyteller	M	50–59	South West	W
Chris Gifford	Actor/musician	M	30–39	London	W
Dave Amstrad	Actor	M	60–69	London	Mixed
Debbie Richards	Burlesque performer	F	30–39	London	W
Diana Kitchener	Actor/producer	F	30–39	South West	W
Edith Kaufman	Storyteller	F	60–69	North East	Other
Glenda Kelp	Dancer	F	30–39	London	W
Gregg Mason	Comedian	M	40–49	London	W
Harry James	Singer and musician	M	20–39	South West	W
Jane Seymour	Singer	F	40–49	Central	Black
Katherine Edwards	Actor	F	18–29	London	W
Mark Godiva	Musician	M	30–39	London	W
Mary Locket	Singer/comedian	F	70–79	London	W
Mary Rustic	Magician	F	50–59	North West	W
Peter Easton	Musician	M	30–39	East	W
Petra Simmonds	Singer	F	40–49	North East	W
Richard Mears	Musician	M	40–49	London	W
Terry Swift	Actor/performance artist	NB	30–39	South East	W
Tracy Ainsworth	Singer	F	50–59	South East	Other
Will Taylor	Musician	M	40–49	East	W
Yvonne Smith	Cabaret artist	F	40–49	London	W

[a]Survey participants and interviewees were asked to self-identify their gender, using their preferred terminology

[b]Survey and interview participants were invited to self-identify their ethnic background/group using their preferred terminology

Data Analysis

The analytical process we followed involved a basic quantitative analysis of the numerical survey data and a more thematic analysis of the qualitative data in the survey. As noted above, the findings of the survey data analysis largely informed our design of the interview questions and our

approach to the interview process. We undertook incremental analysis of the interview data as we collected it in small batches of 2–4 interviews. This incremental approach enabled us to collaborate on our thoughts and ideas, both with each other and with our interview participants (in fully anonymised forms), and to feed interim findings into subsequent interviews. This allowed us to challenge some of our underlying assumptions, including those shaped by the ethnographic landscape and the survey findings. It also ensured that data collection and analysis was as integrated as we could make it, so that research participants, where possible, also contributed to the interpretation and explanation of emergent findings and confirmed or questioned the degree to which they recognised themselves and their own experiences in the accounts that we were beginning to build. In this way, we ensured that the research process was as reflexive, recognition-based, and dialogical as possible.

In practice, this involved us first undertaking immersive readings of each individual interview, noting themes relating to participants' experiences of challenges and opportunities associated with the impact of the pandemic on their working lives. As noted above, we began to code these as personal, financial, artistic, and technological, drawing on themes in the data and the wider literature, including the broader ethnographic landscape shaping performers' identities, perceptions, and experiences discussed above. We then analysed the transcribed interview data to identify, within these four first-order codes, themes relating to precarity, highlighting reflections on past circumstances, accounts of performers' current situations, and their expectations for the future under the heading of each of the four descriptive codes.

By following this process, we were able to discern accounts of performers' personal, financial, technological, and artistic challenges and opportunities in their narratives and to tease out similarities and differences between participants based, for example, on their circumstances and whether they had performed online or not. This enabled us to work across the interview data to examine emergent findings in more depth, identifying second-order, more theoretical or explanatory codes, leading us to identify the different but related financial, affective, and recognitive forms of precarity that we discuss in later chapters.

The analysis we present in the following chapters reflects participants' experiences of how they had responded to what they perceived to be the main threats or challenges to their financial viability. We consider these

alongside insights provided by the research into their social and professional networks, the operational difficulties associated with performing, or not, online, and the aesthetic and ultimately affective challenges these generated. We connect these, in our discussion, to performers' perceptions and experiences of more subjective forms of precarity that threatened their sense of self and viability as credible performers. We arrived at this analytical framing by analysing participants' accounts of the challenges and opportunities they had faced in the past and were facing at the time we engaged with them in the research, i.e., during periods of lockdown at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and anticipated having to face in the future.

While this analytical approach was designed to aid progress, a 'phasic', linear approach was deliberately avoided; rather, we attempted to be as incremental, immersive, and interactive as possible. We achieved this by working through the data independently, discussing our coding, challenging each other's interpretations and assumptions, and then working through each other's codes to bring a different layer of analytical connection and reflection to the process. Finally, we collated our coded data and formed a narrative commentary that enabled us to move iteratively between emerging themes, theoretical concepts, and the relevant literature on precarious work discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Throughout this process, we regularly discussed emergent (anonymised) findings with freelance and self-employed performers and other relevant stakeholders (e.g., people working for or with professional bodies who advocate for better rights and working conditions for freelance and self-employed workers in the cultural and creative industries). This helped us to ensure that the accounts presented in the following chapters are as ethnographic as possible in so far as they provide a narrative in which the performers we studied, and hopefully other freelance and self-employed cultural and creative professionals, can recognise themselves and their working lives both during the pandemic, but also more widely.

Conclusion

Broadly speaking, therefore, our methodology enabled us to connect insights across the themes that emerged from our analysis of the survey and interview data we collected, understood within the broader context

of the ethnographic landscape of freelance and self-employed live performance work during and since the COVID-19 pandemic. Connecting these insights has meant that we have been able to draw conclusions about participants' experiences informed by a theoretical commitment to understanding the impact of the pandemic on performers' perceptions and experiences of precarity. This latter process enabled us to assemble the analytical narrative presented in the forthcoming chapters.

Adopting the methodology outlined above, underpinned by the approach to research philosophy and ethics also described earlier, enabled us to move iteratively and reflexively between themes and concepts in the data and the relevant literature, as well as participant and other stakeholder responses to emergent findings that highlighted the importance of the pandemic as a threat to performers' identities and livelihoods, and their different responses to this threat, as an accentuation of pre-pandemic inequalities and forms of precarity.

As noted above, the findings coalesced around participants' sense that the pandemic had worsened pre-existing challenges and that the severance from opportunities to perform live that it had brought about had required those who could do so to develop various adaptations designed to bring them back into proximity to a live audience, and (ideally) in doing so, to generate an income from live performance work. We discuss the opportunities and challenges this brought about in the following three chapters. In sum, the findings and analysis of the research discussed in this chapter coalesced around themes relating to participants' sense that the pandemic had worsened pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities, that a struggle for recognition was endemic to their work and industries, and that the two phenomena were related in important and evolving ways that we discuss next.

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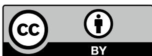

CHAPTER 5

COVID-19 and Its Impact

Abstract Drawing on original research data, this chapter examines the measures taken to contain the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK and their impact on freelance and self-employed live performers and their particular industries. It then focuses on the lived experiences of freelance and self-employed performers during this period, providing insight into their hopes and fears in the face of the devastation of their working lives at the time of the pandemic, while contextualising these in relation to the pre-existing precarity discussed previously. Finally, the chapter considers the ability of performers to transition to performing online during periods of lockdown, evaluating both the opportunities and challenges that such a transition brought about, and reflecting on how these were experienced.

Keywords COVID-19 · Freelance and self-employment · Live performance · Lockdown · Online streaming · Precarious work

Introduction

As we have observed, the COVID-19 pandemic and government measures designed to contain it devastated the UK's cultural and creative sector, particularly for those working on a freelance or self-employed basis in the live entertainment industries (Banks, 2020). In this chapter, we

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examine these measures and their impact on individual performers and their particular industries.

We begin with an overview of the virus's progression and the measures taken by the UK government to contain it, particularly regarding the impact of these measures on the cultural and creative sector in general and the live entertainment industries in particular. Then, drawing on the findings of the research process we described in Chapter 4, we focus on the lived experiences of freelance and self-employed live performers during this period, providing insight into their hopes and fears in the face of the devastation of their working lives at the time of the pandemic while contextualising these insights with reference to the chronic precarity discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Following this, we consider what became a central preoccupation of the research, namely the varying ability of the performers we studied to transition to forms of online performance in order to secure work during those periods in which they could not perform in live entertainment venues, for example, during periods of lockdown. In doing so, we consider the more positive aspects of this experience, particularly regarding the importance of providing opportunities for interaction and connection that were otherwise precluded and which were badly needed at a time of heightened isolation, anxiety, and anguish, as well as considering the experiences of performers who could take advantage of the opportunities that being able to perform online brought about. Finally, the chapter looks forward to developing some of the themes that will be expanded on in the next chapter.

COVID-19 and Its Immediate Impact on Creativity and Culture

COVID-19 was first identified in the UK in January 2020, with the first person-to-person transmission reportedly occurring a month later (Flynn et al., 2020). By 16th March, the government began to advise people to cease non-essential travel and contact, with a legally enforceable lockdown coming into place on the 26th of that month (Brown & Kirk-Wade, 2021). Over the following fourteen months, the UK moved in and out of various levels of national and regional lockdowns and social distancing measures. Throughout this period, while regulations altered over time, rules prohibiting social gatherings of various numbers effectively prevented most, if not all, live public entertainment events from taking place. The relevant regulations varied, depending on which stage of

the restrictions were in place and where (as devolved nations worked with slightly different rules at different stages), but for a period of just under two years, large social gatherings in indoor venues, the kind that are the lifeblood of the live entertainment industries, were effectively precluded.

On 20th March 2020, venues closed for what, at the time, appeared to be an indefinite period. This seemed to signal the end of not only live entertainment but many careers within the live entertainment industries, closing off, as it did, performers' capacity to generate any income from live venue-based entertainment. Given the previously documented precarious nature of freelancing and self-employment in the these industries, it is not surprising, then, that reports such as 'Cultural and Creative Industries: In the Face of COVID-19 An Economic Impact Outlook', published by *UNESCO* (Naylor et al., 2021), noted how since large parts of the sector 'depend on human congregation', combined with the 'often precarious (or non-contractual) nature of their work', live performers, alongside other cultural/creative professionals were 'particularly vulnerable to the economic shocks triggered by the pandemic' (Naylor et al., 2021: 4).

For the majority of the performers that we spoke to as part of our research, the seemingly sudden imposition of these restrictions, despite the sense of foreboding that was beginning to build early in 2020, still came as something of a shock. As musician Peter Easton reflected, referring to the almost tsunami-like impact of the pandemic on his ability to work:

> I literally saw my whole calendar for a year and a half, effectively, right up until somewhere around now in 2021, disappear within two weeks. And at first, to me that was a bit of a shock ... So at first I was a bit numb to it. I was just kind of like 'I don't really know what to do. I've never experienced this'.

A similar story was also recounted by magician Alan Rupert, who recalled how he tried to deal with the experience of watching his livelihood vanish before his eyes, including seeking out, to no avail, alternative sources of income:

> I was staying up until sort of half one every night, having a couple of drinks just on my own … It was just a three-week period where people were ringing up and cancelling. I would just spend all my day cancelling jobs and trying to rearrange them for what would have been this year [2021], but then most of them have put it back another year. I tried to

> get a supermarket job but I left it about 12 hours too late and they'd all gone, because everyone was rushing out to do them.

Occasionally, however, performers reported an initial sense of opportunity, at least at the start of the first period of the UK lockdown, in the spring of 2020. For some, if nothing else, it offered a period of respite from the demands and rigours of gigging, and of constant work-related travel. This was something musician Brian Jones mused on when asked about how he felt at this point:

> I was at a point where I was thinking it would be lovely to do less gigs. Because much as I love gigging, it's quite exhausting… And because I book my own gigs as well, I don't have a manager or someone that plans things out properly, so I'll suddenly wake up on a Friday and go, 'right, what am I doing this weekend?' and go 'oh, Norwich, Morecambe and Torquay', or something like that. It's just ridiculous, just saying 'yes' to things, and then eventually not really planning things, and then suddenly realising 'oh, I've got about a thousand miles to drive this weekend'.

Others indicated that lockdown offered new ways for people to connect and share a common sense of adversity that might ultimately be unifying. As comedian Gregg Mason observed in this respect:

> I think back to those days sort of almost kind of fondly, as like we were all in it together. Nobody knew what was happening. No one in the industry knew what was going on. There were no gigs running, no one was working, and so you couldn't feel jealous of anybody. You couldn't feel resentful of 'why are they getting that work?', which is sadly what the industry often is. There's quite a lot of that going on.

Experiencing the Pandemic

Despite such optimism, the data we collected over a twenty-four-month period, from when the UK entered its first period of lockdown in March 2020 to February 2022, when venues began to re-open (albeit it with social distancing and other protective measures in place that, in efforts to keep people safe, threatened the financial viability of many venues), suggests that the pandemic intensified the sense of precarity, insecurity, and vulnerability that was the 'norm' for many of the performers we studied. As cabaret artist Yvonne Smith reflected, speaking in 2020 during the first UK lockdown put it:

> I've wiped tables and arses. I've done every job under the sun … And I suppose I'm used to life being very up and down… We're used to that. *But this is like nothing else in intensity*. (*emphasis added*)

Certainly, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, working across the live entertainment industries is a precarious undertaking at the best of times. This is something summed up by classical musician Paul Carey Jones (2020: 48) when he notes that 'to be a freelance artist is to live your life like a startled rabbit' and, as actor Terry Swift put it, contextualising COVID-19 against the backdrop of everyday financial uncertainty and a continual juggling of contracts and income streams, 'it's always been very much a case of grabbing what you can while you can'.

Singer and musician Harry James referred explicitly to the pandemic as a situation in which his already precarious circumstances 'just got more precarious' as the pandemic took hold. As he put it, speaking in 2021, almost a year after the first national lockdown:

> Currently, I am taking any work I can get … trying to narrow down my amount of unpaid work … And to search for something that's going to get me some actual money … I mean, I've always been quite low down on the list, if you know what I mean, in terms of being a self-employed performer. I'm the guy they call in an emergency; I'm not the guy they call as a regular, … and it's been precarious, to say the least. And then it got more precarious, of course, as the pandemic set in.

It was not simply the impact of an absence of paid work and its financial implications—something that we explore in more depth in the following chapter—that was strongly felt by performers during their enforced unemployment, however. Perhaps not surprisingly, given issues raised in previous chapters, emotional and psychological challenges also became major issues, especially when it came to envisioning what life after the pandemic might look like for them and whether or not the live entertainment industries might ever fully recover. Here, musician Will Taylor (speaking in 2022, as venues began to re-open) recalls how, in this respect:

> We were all going through an emotional rollercoaster – 'coronacoaster' – at that point, of it being horrible. There were tears at various points at the start of all of this, and just getting that sense that nothing was going to go back to how it was before. And I think there has been a lot of fear and

> worry about how you fit into all of that. You know, how do you fit into the new world order?

A further consequence of the pandemic and the restrictions accompanying it feared by many performers was its potential to sediment existing inequalities that pervade the entertainment industries and the sector more widely. Regarding social class inequalities, for example, actor Diana Kitchener was clear that success in the theatre industry is often predicated on the possession of both financial and cultural capital and that the pandemic had re-affirmed this arrangement:

> It comes down to privilege and money. And I'm not going to say everyone on the list, but for instance *The Stage* Top 100 list, most of the people on that list, despite it all, they're making work, you know, in a pandemic. These are the great people. It's because they have money, because they are from privileged backgrounds and they've got money, or they already had funders.

Reflecting on similar issues, actor Charlie Rogers pointed out that while the theatre industry's structural inequalities were something he had generally accepted and lived with prior to the pandemic, lockdown and the kinds of differential access to the financial support we discuss in the next chapter had brought inequalities, especially those based on social class, into sharp relief:

> There's a real class system within the acting fraternity … up until the pandemic, I'd never ever let anything like that bother me … But then this pandemic brought in this income support scheme, and it actually only favoured the guys who didn't have to work in between acting jobs. It favoured those guys that live on a trust fund and that sort of stuff.

As well as the financial restrictions and eligibility problems freelancers encountered when attempting to access government financial support especially in relation to the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) introduced in March 2020, experiencing the latter to be grounded in existing income differentials, performers also reported difficulties relating to the income support system's reliance on profit. Many found that the scheme effectively replicated pre-pandemic income inequalities based not just on social class but also on gender pay inequity. As actor Belle King explained it:

> *One* of the difficulties with the way the income support scheme was rolled out was that it's reliant on profit, and women have less profit. So you're inevitably docked because your support is in relation to your – not even your income, but your profit. And so it continues to astonish me that nobody thought about these things in the process of rolling it out, or has done anything to try to mitigate the fact that *the people who were best supported going into the pandemic were best supported through the pandemic*. (*emphasis added*)

Going Online to Survive

Despite the largely negative experiences of enduring not only a potentially life-threatening virus but also the consequences of an albeit necessary government response that deprived performers of their ability to work in their chosen profession, there was, however, some hope for those who were able to take advantage of the burgeoning online entertainment environment that opened up during the pandemic. Indeed, 49% of the performers who participated in our survey reported performing online at least once between March and December 2020, i.e., during the first periods of national lockdown in the UK. At the same time, social media became increasingly important as a way of not only advertising such performances but also as a means of keeping in touch with existing and potential audiences as well as other performers; for example, for potential collaborations.

First and foremost, it became evident to us that there was a high degree of heterogeneity when it came to how such performances were both organised and funded, not only by virtue of the different online platforms in use but equally the importance of mediating organisations and agencies. On the one hand, there were those performers who quickly found themselves being snapped up by third-party organisations that were able to ensure that the broadest possible audiences saw their work. For example, speaking in 2021, magician Alan Rupert explained how he was picked up by an established online events company:

> They must have just Googled me because I did one for them in about, I think it was December [2020] – I can't remember what the company was called they were doing it for. But yes, so now I'm on their books, and it was an online conference for scientists who were mapping the human brain. So it was taken part in world-wide but it was based in LA, so it was 10 o'clock at night in LA, three o'clock in the morning here.

Alternatively, other individual performers had to rely on hustling through established social media networks and (virtual) word of mouth to reach prospective audiences, booking agents, event organisers, and so on, bearing the costs of both putting on the shows and any publicity they needed themselves.

Nevertheless, despite differences in the organisational arrangements underpinning such performances, most performers appeared to share a series of intentions when putting them on. The most prominent of these was, perhaps not unsurprisingly, to generate income. Utilising everything from online booking systems and artist support platforms such as *Patreon*, to virtual tip jars and the like, provided several performers we spoke to with the means to generate direct audience payment for their shows. Indeed, for several (notably male) performers who were relatively well-established in their careers and did not, generally, have caring responsibilities or who had other sources of financial support to fall back on, lockdown was a period in which, financially at least, they survived if not thrived.

For example, as the aforementioned musician Brian Jones observed, despite other challenges, combining an extensive online presence via apps such as *Mixcloud* and *Twitch*, as well as *Facebook* and *Twitter/X*, with access to state support, meant that he was financially relatively comfortable during the pandemic. In part (as he notes), this was due to not having to factor in travel costs to gigs and events, thereby saving him money on these work-related costs. As he put it:

> I seem to have more money than I've ever had. I don't quite know how that's happened. I can only assume that going on tour is actually really expensive …

It was also the case, however, that while the ability to generate a certain level of income was necessary for nearly everyone, for some performers, it was also the case that online work offered a vital means of keeping themselves in the public eye in the hope that when the pandemic was over, they would not have lost the audiences they had previously worked hard to build. Many who performed online also hoped that doing so would help them to potentially gain access to new audiences in the process, and hence to build their professional profiles and audience reach not only online, but in anticipation of face-to-face performances restarting once venues could re-open. As musician Will Taylor explained, speaking during the first lockdown in early 2020:

> Live-streaming has enabled me to perform for audiences across the world who perhaps would not have had a chance to see me live. This has potentially opened/increased opportunities for international bookings when live performances are able to resume.

As the above examples indicate, therefore, a number of performers quickly realised that online work and more proactive use of social media offered a means of extending their professional reach internationally and amongst groups who might typically not have been able to attend gigs and events in person due to, say, access issues or an inability to travel. This is a point made by actor Bunty Havers, who observed how 'for people with access needs, this online working is brilliant', and comedian Gregg Mason, who extolled the virtues of performing online at more length:

> It's safe. It's accessible for lots of people who wouldn't otherwise be able to get there. It's cheaper for those people. All that sort of stuff, I think that's been a definite bonus, that people who are housebound for other reasons than just the pandemic, or just can't afford it, or have … young children and can't afford a babysitter or whatever, they've been able to come to shows. And I think that has been a big bonus for people.

A third and final theme that featured in almost all the interviews on this subject, alongside income generation and online performance as a means of expanding audience reach and accessibility, was the role it could play as a social good, raising spirits and keeping people connected during the pandemic; simply helping people to 'get through' lockdown when social life had to be put on hold for, at the time, an unknown duration. Take, for instance, these two extracts from interviews with puppeteer Basil Jackson and actor and performance artist Terry Swift, respectively:

> I've got this art form that I can share with people. All right, I might not be able to make any money out of it, but at least *something for the common good* that I could do to get people through this unprecedented period. Could I do something to share that and bring that same joy and happiness that I do in a live setting in a virtual setting? (*emphasis added*)

> You kind of build a connection, *helping other people to feel something* … And there's a certain sense of escapism. You know, you're … helping people to go to another place … (*emphasis added*)

This theme of online performance as a focus for connection, benefitting the 'common good', and enabling people to 'feel something' during what was, for many, a deeply unsettling and dislocating experience came through very strongly in the accounts provided to us by many of the performers we spoke to. Several had been able to create what became self-regulating communities of viewers and listeners who supported each other through the pandemic, something which the performers themselves felt served a positive role during the darkest days of lockdown. Here is an extract from musician Peter Easton reflecting on his experience of this and his view of the importance that music, in particular, was able to play in helping people to cope with the 'collective shock' brought about by the pandemic:

> The only other thing that I'd emphasise throughout this whole period is I think the role that music's played for people's wellbeing and their mental health. I've certainly come across a lot of people that have watched my shows who've said, 'Oh, it really helped us get through the early weeks of this pandemic.' Because people were, you know, struggling, and there was a sense of collective shock, I think.... And I feel like loads of other people that did exactly the same kind of thing all over the world, really helped people through.

Virtual Exclusion: 'Floundering in a Sea of Unknown'

Yet despite such apparent positivity about the impact of online work, both for audiences and the performers themselves, online performance also presented many obstacles and challenges for those involved. While we will explore some of the more operational examples of these in the next chapter, it is worth taking a moment here to foreground and reflect on the experiences of those performers who felt excluded from such opportunities either by virtue of their art form, or other more technical, circumstantial, or just dispositional impediments.

For some, the online environment was simply not considered to be conducive to live performance, mainly due to the lack of embodied interaction necessary for those working in many disciplines. In a survey response, cabaret artist and singer Bob Robbins explained, for example, why he had quickly decided that online performing was not for him:

> The biggest thing is not being able to see, hear and engage with an online audience. Even though people can leave comments etc. you can't judge their true reaction the way you would with a live audience where you can 'read the room'. People are very easily distracted at the best of times in a 'live' venue but at home they can be distracted by, children, pets, telephones, social media, I've even known someone with the telly on in the background… So it can feel like you are *floundering in a sea of unknown*, which can feel quite lonely. (*emphasis added*)

A similar point was made by fellow cabaret artist Yvonne Smith, who found the lack of interaction to be potentially detrimental not only to her confidence but also to her well-being, describing performing online in the following terms:

> Feeling like one of my senses or performer instincts has gone. I haven't been able to play the room/feel the audience, which has made me doubt my ability, which in turn impacts mental health.

Indeed, such a sense of disconnection with audience members was a common sentiment expressed in the survey we undertook. This was something that often veered into territory that suggested that such work was actively avoided as it exacerbated a sense of loneliness and isolation amongst many performers, even those for whom it otherwise went relatively well (for instance, in terms of generating often badly needed income).

It was not only the sense of distance or disconnection from audience members that left particular respondents to the survey feeling that online performing was not a viable option for them. Other more mundane but nonetheless important factors, such as simply not having access to sufficiently robust internet connections, combined with an inability to perform effectively with fellow performers and partners, were also considered significant. For survey respondent actor Rachel Lowe, for example, what deterred her from online work was its inability to allow her to 'look fellow actors in the eye and react accordingly'. At the same time, for another respondent to our survey, singer and musician Mary Mungo, performing online offered little more than what she described as a 'dead working situation', devoid of life and creativity.

For some performers, the nature of their work meant that they considered it pretty much impossible to translate their activities to an online format. Singer Petra Simmonds, for example, found that she could not

adapt her work to an online performance environment and was uncomfortable attempting to do so in her own home given her previous experiences, 'because if you've always toured, how can you? It's not something that you do from home'. On the other hand, some managed to transition, for example, from live performances to holding online classes and workshops in disciplines ranging from dancing to storytelling. Nonetheless, for a significant number of the performers we studied, performing online, and therefore being able to access the financial and often emotional and psychological support it could potentially provide, was simply not an option. This is something we examine in more detail in the following chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have provided insight into lived experiences of the pandemic as these were shared with us by freelance and self-employed live performers, many of whose working lives were already chronically precarious prior to the pandemic. We have explored how many of them attempted to cope with the socioeconomic and professional challenges that COVID-19 presented, mainly through adapting to online platforms and social media in order to keep working in their chosen disciplines as best they could during periods of national lockdown and social distancing. Many thrived, as we have suggested, while others found attempting to adapt to an online performance environment very difficult, and some ruled out performing online as an option entirely. In considering these experiences, we have attempted to provide a broad overview of what it was like to be a live performer at a time when the industries on which they depended closed down and bookings disappeared practically overnight.

Moreover, we have endeavoured to demonstrate what it felt like to be dependent on work in what, as we noted in Chapter 2, proved to be 'by far the worst hit part of the economy' (*The Guardian*, 2021) during the pandemic, showing how performers became increasingly reliant on other entrepreneurial skills. These included self-promotion through social media and, eventually, the marketing, production, and delivery of their own online shows and events by those fortunate enough to possess such skills or the other technical resources or circumstances that would enable them to do so, or whose work lent itself to an online performance environment. Some found themselves in this situation, while many did not.

The concerns raised in this chapter have highlighted several themes that resonate with the established literature on the precarious nature of freelance and self-employed performance work and the stresses it places on performers, particularly during a crisis such as a global pandemic (Arditi, 2021; Comunian & England, 2020). Perhaps the most significant of these is that most performers we spoke to or who completed the survey were struck by the rapidity of the decline in their fortunes and their ability to secure work, which was emblematic of their chronic precarity and exclusion from standard forms of workplace protection and support networks. Moreover, this was clearly a significant blow to them, both financially and, not surprisingly, emotionally and psychologically as well.

Furthermore, we have brought to light what were often strong feelings about some of the perceived inequalities that continued to endure across the live entertainment industries and which were, once again, felt to be compounded by the pandemic (Eikhof, 2020). Disadvantages shaped by class and gender, while recognised as pre-existing the pandemic, were not only exacerbated by it but also accounted for many of the perceived inequities that performers experienced when it came to accessing the limited amount of financial and professional support available during these hyper-precarious times.

In respect of alternatives, we were able to develop some initial insights into how performing online, predominately by live-streaming and/or live screening, provided something of an escape route for many performers, providing a means not only of generating supplementary income during the pandemic but also of retaining their presence in the public eye while often giving them a sense of being able to contribute to the common good. At the same time, however, we identified how existing inequalities also excluded many performers from this financial and often also existential lifeline, including feeling part of and making a contribution to their art form as well as the wider community and social environment.

In the following chapter, we explore these issues in more depth, focusing in particular on how freelance and self-employed live performers experienced the operational challenges associated with securing financial support during the pandemic and, for those able to do so, transitioning their performances to an online environment.

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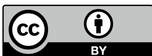

CHAPTER 6

The Challenges of Financial and Operational Precarity

Abstract In this chapter, survey and interview data are again used to report in more depth on the financial and operational impact of the pandemic on freelance and self-employed performers working in the live entertainment industries during and in the aftermath of COVID-19. The chapter focuses on performers' experiences of the financial consequences of the pandemic, in particular. It considers the challenges faced by performers who tried to access various forms of governmental and organisational support as well as the experiences of those who performed online, providing a detailed account of the operational and personal challenges that doing so presented.

Keywords COVID-19 · Financial and operational challenges · Financial support · Online streaming · Precarious work

Introduction

The previous chapter began by exploring the experiences of freelance and self-employed live performers as the pandemic began to bite following the closure of venues and the preclusion of public gatherings. We observed how, for many, the pandemic initially manifested itself as a complete shock, entirely foreclosing performers' ability to earn any income from

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P. Hancock and M. Tyler, *Performing Artists and Precarity*,
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their chosen profession. While in a limited number of cases, this situation was initially met with some relief as it offered a means of slowing down from an endless treadmill of touring and performing, for almost all others, however, the onset of the pandemic and of ensuring lockdowns was met with worry, often driving them to find alternative sources of income in a situation in which most other work-related options they would normally fall back on—for example, front of house jobs in entertainment or hospitality—had also closed down. Moreover, many freelance and self-employed performers found themselves being unable to access state support, often on the basis of their work and earnings status before the pandemic. This meant that, in a somewhat cruel irony, those who were most precarious prior to COVID-19 found themselves even more so during and after the pandemic, with class, gender, and other forms of social inequality contouring this scenario.

Chapter 5 then considered the opportunities opened up for several performers via platforms such as *Facebook*, *Mixcloud*, and *Twitch* to perform online. We noted how not only did such an environment allow many performers to generate some badly needed income; performing online also enabled those who did so to maintain, and in some cases, build, their professional profiles. Once again, however, this situation also excluded many other performers, as opportunities to perform online were shaped by social status and circumstance, as well as by the nature of performers' artistic disciplines and performance styles.

In this fifth chapter, we again draw on our survey and interview data to report in more depth on the financial and operational impact of the pandemic on performers working in the live entertainment industries during and in the aftermath of COVID-19. Moreover, we extend our observations on online performance to provide a more detailed account of the challenges that performing online presented to those who were able to do so.

The chapter begins by presenting performers' views on the financial consequences of the pandemic, going on to focus in more depth on the challenges faced by those who tried to access various forms of governmental and organisational support. Then, once again, in more depth, we consider the accounts of those who, while they were able to take advantage of opportunities to perform online, faced a range of not only financial but also operational challenges when doing so.

A Death Blow

As we observed in the previous chapter, and as the wider literature discussed in earlier chapters has indicated, socioeconomic precarity is endemic to freelancing and self-employment in the cultural and creative sector (Arditi, 2021; Butler & Russell, 2018; Genders, 2022; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hancock et al., 2021; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Klob & Haitzinger, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, not only came as a stark reminder of this fact; it took financial and often social uncertainty to new extremes, exacerbating existing social and economic inequalities and exposing the marginalised and often poorly understood position of freelance and self-employed live performers in particular. This was despite what was often their centrality to the industries they sustained before and during the pandemic and in its aftermath. The pandemic's first and most obvious impact was the almost immediate loss of income brought about by introducing various stages of lockdown and restrictions on social gatherings across the UK, from March 2020.

Results from our original survey suggested that around 99% of our respondents stated that COVID-19 had entirely or vastly reduced opportunities to perform in front of a live audience, while 76% of these said that their earnings from performance work were their primary source of income. As puppeteer Basil Jackson explained when asked about the impact of lockdown on his work as a live performer:

> That was pretty much a death blow to the work that I do. It is by nature a live art form, and if you can't perform in front of people, you really can't perform it. So that affected me across all areas of business: be that schools, … the idea of having external parties is just not something that they would be able to accommodate; weddings are obviously cancelled, … ; children's parties are cancelled; you can't have gatherings, fetes, festivals, carnivals – all gone.

The overall financial impact on Basil was significant, with his income from live performance dropping in the 2020–2121 tax year to around 1.5% of what it usually was. It was not simply the loss of performance-related income that caused freelancers such as Basil to descend into financial crisis, however, as so-called bill paying or backup work that is, for many, a necessary supplement to the relatively low and irregular pay in the sector also dried up. As actor and musician Chris Gifford summed it up:

> Pretty much every source of revenue that I have kind of dropped away … when I'm not working in any of those artistic realms, I normally temp in offices … But, of course, all the offices closed down as well. So even the second source of income, or even like the sixth or whatever, if you count them all individually, even like the non-creative source of income that I would normally go 'OK, it's a bit slow for the last months, I just need to pick up a bit of extra work', that's gone as well.

For many, the challenges this presented in the early days of the pandemic were almost existential in so far as performers often saw no way of surviving this immediate and total loss of their means of sustaining a living. Singer/songwriter Bev Vale summed up the feelings of many when she described being more afraid of the financial implications of lockdown than of the virus itself, so extreme was her concern about its implications for her ability to maintain a viable living as a live performer:

> It was horrible. Because you work so hard and, you know, you always have things in the diary, … [but at] the beginning of the virus, I was more scared about finances and my job than actually the virus.

Indeed, the simple truth was that almost every performer who took part in our survey or that we interviewed told the same story—of an immediate and often catastrophic collapse not only of their primary income but also, because so many supplemented their earnings by working in the service sector and elsewhere, their secondary (or more) income streams as well.

Grants, Schemes, and Lifelines

The announcement of the introduction of the UK's *Self-Employment Income Support Scheme* (SEISS) a few days after the start of the first lockdown did, however, offer some hope to those affected in this way. Geared towards providing income to the self-employed, such as sole traders or partners in a partnership, five grant payments were made available provided specific eligibility criteria were met. However, while some performers we spoke to were able to meet these criteria and benefitted from the scheme, significant numbers did not, with our survey finding that while 67% of our respondents reported finding themselves entirely or largely needing to access such support, over 30% reported being 'not at all' successful in being able to do so.

Often, this was a consequence, amongst other things, of the scheme's eligibility criteria being primarily based on profit and sequential tax returns over several years, both of which excluded many freelancers who were 'ineligible due to issues such as zero hours contracts, minimum earning requirements, work history, multiple income sources, and being agency workers' (Bradbury et al., 2021: 5). Certainly, the requirement that freelancing or self-employment must constitute at least 50% of a performer's income was something that failed to recognise the realities of the work environment for many such workers, who more often than not have to mix PAYE and freelance work to survive financially. Ironically, therefore, it was freelancers' pre-COVID financial precarity that led many to be ineligible for financial support during the pandemic, when their already insecure income streams wholly dried up (as noted earlier), a problem summed up by actor, Charlie Rogers:

> Where it started really affecting me was when they announced the self-employed income support scheme. And what they did for that, as I'm sure you know, is they took an average of your last three years' tax returns, and they paid you out based on that. But I didn't get that, because the government, when they took my three years' tax returns into consideration, they said that 51% of my income over those three years was from non-acting work. Now what that meant was things like in between gigs I'd maybe go and work in a bar or go and work at an event for somebody. So basically, I felt that I was penalised for working in between jobs.

A similar story was recounted by many more of our interviewees and survey respondents. For example, as musician Mark Jones wrote at some length in our survey:

> My earnings are roughly split 50/50 between employed peri teaching and freelance performing work, and this ratio has been changing to more performing work as my career has started over the past few years. I have never earned over £20,000 per year, but since I was just over the 50% threshold in 2018-19 I did not get anything from SEISS despite losing work totalling £7,000 in the first four months of lockdown, a comparatively huge amount of my income.

As we previously noted in Chapter 4, another major criticism of the scheme was that for some unsuccessful applicants, the scheme appeared

to exclude those freelance or self-employed performers for whom performance work was less profitable, often women, while favouring those who were financially secure enough not to have to find alternative employment between freelance performance work. As such, the scheme was widely considered to reinforce and legitimise existing intersectional inequalities within the live entertainment industries rather than helping to mitigate their impact during the pandemic. Further, as performers such as actor Belle King noted, the likelihood was that freelancers would feel even more compelled to take on low or unpaid work in the pandemic's aftermath, resulting in the vulnerabilities and inequalities perpetuated by financial precarity being worsened still, especially for those unable to access SEISS and other financial support. As Belle explained it:

> … You get a lot of people working for free because they think it'll book the next job, and instead it books the next free job, which books the next free job, which puts you in increasingly less secure workplaces. So the further you go down that route, the less your health and safety is being looked after. You know, the more likely you are to run into unregulated spaces, places where things like sexual harassment and assault easily slip across the radar. And since you already don't have safe boundaries in place in the terms of your agreement, like people become just *so* increasingly vulnerable in the effort to just get something.

Moreover, the highly criticised—and ultimately withdrawn—government-run 'Cyber First' campaign, which briefly appeared at the height of the pandemic (as noted in Chapter 4) and encouraged those working in the arts to consider retraining in areas such as cybersecurity, did little to assuage fears that while professing support, the UK government, in reality, had little but contempt for those working in the live entertainment industries. Actor and performance artist Terry Swift, for example, saw 'Cyber First' as sending out a message that:

> [Those working in] the performance sector don't count, *that they don't matter*. I mean, people on furlough, for instance, or in the hospitality trade, they weren't told to go and retrain when all the pubs shut. Only the performers were. Or it felt like only the performers were … [and] that made me think, 'Well, if they don't *care* about performance, or performers, or if they don't appear to care, are they going to financially assist the things that they need to?' So, are they going to financially assist theatres? Are they

> going to come up with a strategy so that our sort of work can go back to normal? Or *are we just going to be left?*

The government's SEISS was not the only source of financial support available during the pandemic, however. Leaving the minimum state financial Universal Credit scheme to one side, other organisations, such as *Equity*, the main performing arts and entertainment trade union in the UK, and the Arts Councils, also offered grants and other forms of income support during the period. However, while *Equity* was generally praised for its support, state organisations, notably the Arts Councils, were viewed more ambivalently, particularly *Arts Council England*. While a handful of our survey respondents reported that they were successful in acquiring *Arts Council England* financial support, equally, many felt let down both by the decision-making processes that underpinned the release of available funds as well as the complexity of the application process, something lamented by actor and producer Diana Kitchen:

> You know, artists could apply for funds from the Arts Council [England]. I know so many talented artists who were rejected when they'd poured hours and hours and hours and days, weeks or whatever into their applications. It's a lot of time spending writing these mostly inaccessible applications, and that's such a huge loss of time and money for artists.

Despite such financial and socioeconomic challenges, as we observed in the previous chapter, some performers were able to avoid financial collapse by taking advantage of a developing online environment for live performance whereby shows and events could be live-streamed or live-screened via various platforms and apps. However, while we painted something of a positive picture of this development in the previous chapter, performing online also presented its own challenges, which we now consider in more depth.

The Pains of Making Money Online

For many of the performers we studied, being able to perform online provided something of a financial lifeline. While, as observed in Chapter 5, some were, by virtue of a range of factors, precluded from being able to perform online either by choice or circumstance, others were able to secure both their incomes and their identities as performers by doing so.

And many felt that performing online meant they were able to contribute to the well-being of others struggling to cope with the pandemic and the rigours of lockdown. This latter group included those who were able to generate some income from online performance, as well as those who were not but who still saw value in doing so, viewing their performances as a way of helping others to stay connected, as a 'social good'. Nonetheless, performing online still generated many challenges, even for those in the relatively fortunate position of being able to do so.

For most of the performers we interviewed, performing online often mitigated the worst of the initial financial impact of the pandemic. As musician Richard Mears observed, it could be disconcertingly uncertain, however, causing worries about whether it would generate enough income to make it worthwhile, with his main worry being:

> Not having a sense in advance of whether anyone will definitely log in to watch or if we will make enough money to justify the time put into the preparation and performance.

Further, it often involved a steep learning curve towards understanding what could and could not be performed online. As musician Brian Jones observed, this was not simply an artistic or even technological concern but also a legal one, i.e., in terms of navigating the various copyright limitations, as he reflected when discussing his work as an online DJ:

> [I thought I would just do] a Facebook Live thing. And I did that for a couple of weeks, until I got kicked off. They actually closed my account for a couple of weeks, which was a bit scary. I just got banned from Facebook, for innumerable copyright violations. And so I started them up again on Mixcloud.

Nonetheless, for some, online performance provided a means of covering work-related expenses, say, 'paying for my Adobe membership and internet fees, stuff that I need to do the work', as comedian Gregg Mason put it.

For some performers, online work *did* provide a more than significant income, especially when combined with financial support schemes such as the SEISS and/or more entrepreneurial activities such as the production and retailing of merchandise. For musician Will Taylor, the latter was a

substantial source of income generation that opened up as a result of the success of his online performances, enabling him to make 'a nice bit of money' as he put it, and to diversify his income streams. As Will explained it:

> I've also got my Dizzyjam shop. I've only got a certain amount of space for T-shirts and CDs. So what I've done is I've put that across to Dizzyjam, who basically print the T-shirts, mugs, tote bags – they've only got a small number of items that they do, but you don't pay any upfront for that. I've just done my songbook as well, which has sold quite well. I'm promoting that. And that's just a digital download. So the merch has made a nice bit of money every month through the website. It's just diversifying and having incomes coming in from lots and lots of different streams.

The majority of performers reported to us, however, that online performance was unlikely to provide a sustainable living in the long or even medium term. Many performers quickly found that people were not prepared to pay much, or indeed anything, despite having watched a show, something that became more problematic as the pandemic persisted. Many found, as magician Alan Rupert reflected, that audiences stopped paying or 'donating' for online performances beyond the first period of lockdown:

> I left it so that people could pay whatever they wanted through PayPal, or I could send them bank details, and it was working quite well. I was getting about £50 a show. But then, at the end of that first lockdown, it just died a death.

Certainly, as the pandemic progressed, several performers found that they had to modify their approach to generating income from online work, often moving from donation or 'tip-jar' models to selling tickets for events, as actor and storyteller Charlie Clipper explained:

> I'm much better selling ticketed events. I got myself an account with Ticket Tailor, and of course they were very good because they were offering zero commission on ticket sales through lockdowns, which made it much better, and opened up a couple of different alternative PayPal and Stripe payment options through that. And I found that was the best way to go for me.

The uncertainties and challenges of generating income from online performances were not the only difficulties that performers experienced, however. For some, simply getting a show online could be a precarious undertaking in itself, requiring, at the very least, a reasonably up-to-date computer or smartphone, and access to high-speed broadband. As such, many survey respondents, in particular, pointed to the fact that even when they had undertaken online performance work, it was often hampered by an inability to invest in, for example, adequate lighting or sound equipment, especially for those who were already struggling with low pay and financial uncertainty (exacerbated for many, as noted above, by being unable to access state or *Arts Council England* financial support schemes to offset lost income).

As actor Alison Lennon explained in her survey response, she had 'no money to invest in professional equipment'; something particularly true for women whose relatively lower pre-pandemic earnings meant that investing in the equipment needed for credible or sustained live-streaming was simply not viable, especially with no guarantees that doing so would even cover the costs involved in the initial outlay.

Space, Place, and the Aesthetics of Online

In addition to the challenges of generating a sustainable income from performing online and the associated costs, a related problem was that of having access to a suitable online performance environment, which was also far from equitably distributed. As noted in the previous chapter, the ability to invest time and resources into establishing an online presence often depended on having other sources of income, such as grants, familial support, or additional employment. However, a further factor yet to be discussed was the importance of a conducive home environment and the affordances associated with particular spatial, and we might add familial/relational resources.

As for many people during the pandemic, home became not only a place to reside but a workspace as well. Singer/songwriter Bev Vale highlighted the investment she had felt compelled to make, both financially and in terms of the time involved, in 'set dressing' her kitchen at home so that it was suitable for online delivery:

> So my Christmas tree was up way earlier than most, because I was pre-making all these Christmas videos. Yes, loads of pumpkins everywhere for

> Halloween. There is a lot of effort that goes into it, just to make sure that you look the part, and your background looks the part too … I hope I get it back. I honestly don't know if I will, but it felt like something I had to do.

Bev explained that she considered herself to be (relatively) lucky in this respect, as she lived at home with her parents and partner in the detached house in a semi-rural area in which she grew up. Bev's family home was spacious, quiet, and well-lit, and her family were able to provide not only financial but also moral support, encouraging her efforts to maintain her professional profile by performing online. Bev's family were proud of the contribution they felt she was making to supporting other people during lockdown, helping audiences to maintain a sense of connection and to keep people entertained.

In these circumstances, Bev was able to generate some income via various payment options that she set up. Her partner, parents, and siblings often helped out with setting up her live-streams; they provided technical support if something went wrong (e.g., when a camera fell off a worktop in the kitchen while she was live-streaming), and they all often made 'cameo' appearances in her shows. Bev felt that they were so much a part of her growing online presence that the whole family were very touched when a regular audience member made a 'thank you' donation of £100 for the family to get a takeaway meal delivered during lockdown.

In contrast, other performers reported that their circumstances at home meant that online performance was simply not a viable option for them, saying, for instance, as performance artist Tracie Kingsman did, that 'living in a small apartment with little open space and bad lighting does not lend itself to online performance'. And as dancer Glenda Kelp put it, 'I have no space in my home where I could make it look like … vaguely nice and performance-like'.

Even for those who could perform from home convincingly, the spatial and technical obstacles could be challenging, often taking up both time and resources, something observed by musician Richard Mears when discussing his online double-act cabaret shows:

> It takes a long time to create a well-lit space, … with an appropriate background. There's always a couple of hours of shifting furniture. Tweaking the camera angles etc. Unfortunately, there isn't really the spare budget to hire a technician to do all that for us. So we have to.

Socioeconomic issues were also evident in references to the spatial restrictions of performing from home, especially for those who lived in smaller properties, had families, or had to share their space at home with other people during the pandemic. For example, as actor and magician Brandon Knights observed in our interview with him:

> Where we are … the bedroom … [is] not particularly massive, and actually there's not many areas where I can film anything other than [against] a back wall here, but it's kind of right on the bed. There's basically no other space in the flat, because it's just a one-bedroom flat … I've got enough space that I can just about do everything that I need to do, whereas I know a few people who just don't have that at all … But even then, my partner [has] … been working from home over the course of the pandemic, which means that my workspace is the bedroom. So absolutely *any* work that needs to be done is kind of sat on the bed, playing the guitar, composing, writing, filming, recording voice-overs – like it's all in one space … Being confined to one room, essentially, to try and do all this creative stuff is quite a tough sell.

Similarly, in her survey response, performance artist Tracie Kingsman explained that circumstances such as these meant not just finding but 'creating' the time and space to prepare and put on a credible performance, which was a genuine obstacle. She described this specifically in respect of both the size of the available space where she lived, and its unsuitable aesthetic:

> Artistically backdrops/visual issues are the biggest challenge for performing at home. Living in a small apartment means I physically don't have space for some of my acts, and there isn't a suitable place that looks good to film against - it always looks like a show at home.

Even when space was considered adequate, technical obstacles often existed to creating and monitoring the aesthetics of the performance, such as living in housing with poor soundproofing, for instance. Moreover, those with parenting or caring responsibilities had to share not just their living space but also their time, with many being involved in additional child, social or health care provision, or home-schooling during lockdown. Aside from the time and commitment involved, many performers (not surprisingly) felt inhibited or found it difficult to focus, knowing that other people, including children, were in the vicinity and could hear or

see them performing or might need them while they were 'live'. As singer Tracy Ainsworth explained:

> I am a mother, and my children are at the front of my mind all the time. Not being able to detach from home makes me inhibited!

Frequently, spatial, domestic, and embodied challenges would intersect, requiring innovative responses in order to make online performances from home possible. Puppeteer Basil Jackson, for instance, explained the difficulties of trying to set up and work with his Punch and Judy show in a small spare bedroom, highlighting his embodied experiences of trying to navigate the challenges involved:

> [The covered stage is] built in two halves – by building the first half, balancing it on the end of the bed, and then the rear half, the two prongs will be sat on chairs, and then I would have to scoot under it, a bit like a den you'd build when you were a child, and I'd be on my knees. Now I can stand up and I can do a show – you know, 30 or 45 minutes, 50 minutes – and I've learnt to adapt to that. But adapting to a new physical way of performing the shows when you're on your knees with your feet underneath you, and your legs go dead after about 15 minutes – that was the biggest challenge, adapting to the physical posture of doing it.

What Basil describes meant, effectively, retraining his body in order to adapt to the spatial conditions of his home as a makeshift performance space. As he explained it:

> … OK, so you are trying to do your mouse [puppet] with your left hand. It's like doing that. It's like you have to retrain to do something different. And you've got no choice: you can't go back to the right-handed approach because the conditions don't allow for that. So it's a challenge, a real challenge.

While not always as tricky as this to manoeuvre, other performers also identified ways in which online performance, especially that which took place in smaller or restricted spaces, required them to modify the embodied aspects of their work in order to be aesthetically as well as technically convincing. Musician Will Taylor, for example, reflected on such modifications and how he had attempted to address the challenges

he experienced when performing within the confines of a small back bedroom:

> I've had to get used to performing to a set spot and looking at a set camera. Because I've watched people performing online where they are performing as if they're performing live –they've just set up a camera in the corner – and that takes away the intimacy and it feels a little bit weird. So I've found myself, as well as having to kind of look straight into the camera constantly, also I don't want to look up at the camera to check how I look, because people can see your eyes.

Conclusion

While the precarious socioeconomic position of most freelance and self-employed performers working in the live entertainment industries predated COVID-19, there is little doubt that chronic precarity accentuated the pandemic's impact. In turn, the pandemic worsened the financial precarity that many performers experienced as a chronic feature of their working lives. For many, as a consequence of numerous lockdowns and restrictions on social gatherings both inside and outside the home, the pandemic resulted in an almost immediate and total loss of income from performing live.

While ubiquitous across the sector, the impact of this immediate and total loss of income from live performance was not uniformly felt. For some, access to, say financial support, particularly in the form of the SEISS, was an outcome of a fortuitous contractual status and/or of pre-pandemic relative financial stability, even privilege (i.e., of being in the relatively fortunate position of <u>not</u> having to juggle several different jobs and/or income streams in order to sustain a viable living). For others, being unable to perform live meant being deprived entirely of what was already a low-paid and relatively insecure way of earning their living. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, this scenario was compounded by pre-existing social, cultural, and economic inequalities that were dramatically accentuated by the pandemic.

In these circumstances, some performers were able to turn to online performance as a way to generate income and, therefore, to help alleviate the worst extremes of the pandemic's financial impact. Yet the incomes that performing online generated were also characteristically precarious, with patrons and audiences being notably fickle in how much, if anything,

they could or would pay for any such performance, that is if anyone turned up. Such uncertainty further exacerbated performers' sense of exposure as they experienced such a lack of interest or support as a direct affront to their 'value' as entertainers. And, once again, socioeconomic disadvantages and financial difficulties presented many performers who tried to perform online with a number of challenges, not least regarding their access to the technology, space, and environment needed.

In the next chapter we explore this latter theme in more depth as we consider issues of identity, vulnerability, and performers' desire for recognition as these issues emerged through interviews and conversations with our research participants. In doing so, we review several emotional, psychological, and often existential challenges faced by performers resulting from the chronic precarity they experienced and the intensification of this during the pandemic.

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CHAPTER 7

Precarity, Identity, and the Meaning of Cultural and Creative Work

Abstract This chapter focuses on the subjective experiences of precarity as these were relayed to us and discussed during the research. In doing so, the chapter explores the significance of a number of existential themes relating to identity, vulnerability, and the desire for recognition that impacted on freelance and self-employed live performers' lived experiences of the pandemic in such a way that they often led to some questioning the viability of their working lives and identities. Further, the chapter reports on the perceived importance of individual entrepreneurial activities geared towards establishing professional and audience networking during and beyond the pandemic, considering how the sense of recognition this could generate might help to contribute not only to a performers' greater financial security but also to a positive sense of self-esteem and self-respect. It also considers some of the more problematic and challenging issues such activities raised, not least in relation to the question of what it means to be a live performance artist.

Keywords COVID-19 · Entrepreneurialism · Identity · Mental health · Precarity · Recognition

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Introduction

As we observed in Chapters 2 and 3, precarious work is not only an objective condition; it is also subjectively perceived and experienced in ways that can affect individuals' entire lives. Uncertainties surrounding someone's ability to acquire sufficient paid work to sustain a viable livelihood can lead to an internalised sense of frustration, failure, or inadequacy. And in turn, this can potentially undermine the ontological basis of a person's psycho-emotional security and sense of self-esteem.

For those who work as performers, the combination of precarity as an objective condition and as a subjective experience can lead to a destructive self-questioning of professional viability and of one's capacities, talents, and abilities to entertain an appreciative audience, especially as the latter is an important source of self-affirmation (Beech et al., 2016; Hoedemaekers, 2018).

Freelancers and the self-employed are arguably especially vulnerable to both precarity's objective and subjective dimensions because, as we have already shown, they are more likely to work in highly precarious financial and occupational circumstances. Often, by the very nature of the demands their work makes of them, and the expectations that enter into it, they are more likely to struggle to sustain a viable professional identity, frequently plagued by critical self-doubt and uncertainty (Leidner, 2016).

In this chapter, we explore what these kinds of existential issues relating to identity, vulnerability, and the desire for recognition mean for performers, and meant for them during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which such issues were intensified, leading many to question the viability of their working lives and identities. In doing so, we reflect on a range of emotional, psychological, and indeed existential challenges performers faced, as these surfaced in our research. In particular, this chapter focuses on the following emergent themes:

Firstly, it considers the reported challenges that the pandemic posed to the mental health and sense of identity of freelance and self-employed performers in the live entertainment industries and the impact of precarity and inequality on their sense of self-esteem. Secondly, in the face of such challenges, the chapter reports on the perceived importance of activities geared towards establishing professional and audience networking during and beyond the pandemic, considering how the sense of recognition this could generate helped to contribute, in some cases, not only to

greater financial security but also to a positive sense of self-esteem and self-respect. Finally, the chapter draws these two themes together, exploring the relationship between experiences of performing online and the additional challenges these posed for an individual's sense of what it means to be a 'live' performer.

If I'm Not Performing, Then Who Am I?

While as we have observed, precarious work is acknowledged to have an often harmful impact on the mental health of those subject to it, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly exacerbated this, resulting in what is a well-documented crisis in mental health across the UK in general (Irvine & Rose, 2022) and in the cultural and creative sector especially (Spiro et al., 2021). The performers we studied discussed the pandemic's emotional and psychological impact on them and their discipline very much in terms of how it made them feel on a day-to-day basis, i.e., without having recourse to a readily available collegial or organisational infrastructure to offer support or advice because they were freelance or self-employed. Indeed, the mental health impact of the pandemic, and of working in the sector more generally, and on a freelance basis especially, was one topic that elicited extensive responses to the survey question we asked about the main personal challenges that performers had faced during the period. Take, for example, the following response to this question from musician Will Taylor, who said:

> The main personal challenge has been keeping motivation up and trying not to sink into a pit of despair when it feels like there will never be real gigs again and that the work is not leading to anything. For me, gigs and festivals in front of real audiences are the most enjoyable part of what I do.

More immediately, terms such as 'depression', 'panic', and 'anxiety' all featured throughout the responses to this survey section, with one respondent, singer Petra Simmonds, openly acknowledging that they had experienced, for the first time in their life, extreme thoughts of self-harm. Writing during the first period of lockdown in the UK, Petra said:

> I feel deflated and, for the first time in my life, have suicidal thoughts, but fortunately, I have a very supportive partner who is also excluded after 47 years working in theatre.

While this was a tragically extreme response to the personal crisis many performers faced due to the impact of COVID-19, it is more than likely that it reflects the experiences of many of those we could not reach through the research. For many of our participants, however, it encapsulates the basis of a broader pandemic-induced crisis in their sense of self-identity as performers. As musician Mark Godiva put it, also referring to the effects of the pandemic:

> … It has certainly affected my mental health; especially as my "act" is such a part of who I am and vice versa.

A Loss of Identity

While there exists a substantial amount of research that establishes a clear link between one's occupation or work and one's sense of self or identity (see, e.g., Gini, 1998), our study identified an existential relationship in the minds of our interviewees between their capacity to perform in front of a live audience and the precarious nature of their sense of self-identity and esteem. Actor and magician Brandon Knights, for example, made this point when he reflected on the impact of the pandemic on his very 'being'. Referring to performing live, he said:

> I think it goes to the heart of your identity. Because the whole thing about … I mean, being a performer isn't something that you do like a job in Tesco's. It is part of your being; it's what you are. And if you can't express that, it really does chip away at your whole sort of idea of who you are.

Indeed, such an account resonates with what was said by many live performers about their reasons for performing. While financial remuneration and making a living were clearly significant, interviewees also pointed to the profound and often quite visceral importance of performing in front of a live audience despite the precarious nature of the work involved. As comedian Gregg Mason explained it:

> There is something about the immediacy of being in the room, the sort of sacred space of the stage and all that. You know, you can get slightly over the top, but there is something about the fourth wall and all of those theoretical ideas, philosophical ideas really, which are very powerful. And when an audience does come together, it is a special thing. It's a powerful feeling. An audience feels like one beast, somehow. It's physical …

Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, for many performers, the pandemic did not simply amount to a sense of loss but rather a direct assault on, or violation of, their very reason for being and sense of self; it was a threat to something they experienced, as Gregg put it, as quite 'sacred'. This experience was also expressed by actor and storyteller Charlie Clipper, who explained in perhaps the starkest of terms that being unable to perform live was akin to being 'negated', a view supported by singer/songwriter Bev Vale when she reflected on her experiences of the first few days and weeks of lockdown:

> I genuinely lost who I was as a person. And I think people don't realise, you know, when you have a job that's so special to you, it's who you are. It's not just what you want to do; it's what you love to do – you kind of lose a sense of purpose … I just had no kind of sense of what am I doing.

Such existential anxiety, this feeling of losing oneself, was felt particularly starkly by our interviewees who believed that at the core of being a performer is the necessity of struggle: the struggle to be recognised, approved of, and, ultimately, rewarded for the work one does. Glenda Kelp, who worked as a dancer, stressed this point when she reflected on her passionate commitment to an industry that she described as continually trying to 'expel' her:

> You have to be so driven and so passionate about what you're doing to be able to pursue a job that is kicking you out all the time … The entertainment industry doesn't want you; it's doing everything in its power to expel people from it. So you have to really want it to keep pursuing it. So, being a performer becomes an *enormous* part of your identity. For lots of us – for most of us, really – it's something that we found at very, very young ages, so it's always been a part of our lives.

These more detailed, reflective accounts echo phrasing used in survey responses to the question noted above about the personal challenges that

COVID-19 had presented, which included, for instance, references to existentially precarious terms such as 'dread' or phrases such as 'floundering in a sea of unknown' (noted earlier). Such terms were used to describe the sense of isolation and disconnection, both from oneself and others, brought about by the almost total collapse in meaningful social contact and connection with others through the act of performing that, as Glenda Kelp notes above, is such an 'enormous' part of what it means to be a performer.

Despite this, however, as we have alluded to in previous chapters, it was via the medium of online performance that many of the performers we spoke to sought at least to attenuate the impact of the pandemic on their identities. For many of those who could do so, using social media to sustain, if not in some cases extend their public profiles and the audiences they could reach, also provided a medium for self-affirmation, and (at the time) a vital source of recognition.

Online and in the Eye

As discussed earlier, using social media platforms to entertain paying audiences from home extended a financial, if still precarious, lifeline to many performers during the pandemic. And while such shows have seen only relatively limited attention paid to them elsewhere (Rendell, 2021), their economic importance to those performers we studied cannot be understated. However, online shows and other forms of mediated delivery not only provided a means through which performers could engage paying audiences. They also helped them to retain a place in the public eye and a sense of recognition that enabled them to stabilise (relatively speaking), their already relatively precarious sense of identity both prior to and during the pandemic and beyond. Cabaret artist Yvonne Smith summed this up when referring to the idea that performing online could be a social good, as noted earlier, when she observed how performing online had not only been financially rewarding:

> … *but also really nourishing*, because it was a direct relationship ... And I think we felt, as artists, just that need to feel viable, need to feel useful and that you had a role to play. Because I think a lot of performers have really questioned what's the point of us, you know? Netflix is here. Are we necessary? Do you need us? (*emphasis added*)

In a similar vein, musician Mark Godiva pointed to the fact that through performing online, he felt that he had contributed to the 'creation of a community of fans around the world who are interested in my work and who regularly tune in'. This enabled him to sign off from his weekly live performances by thanking his audience for 'validating my life choices'. In this sense Mark indicated what he considered to be not only the audience's financial importance to him, but also the role they played in (re)legitimising his continuing identity as a performer during difficult times.

Singer Brian Jones also recounted a similar experience concerning the importance of a community that (at the time we interviewed him during the first national lockdown) was forming around his weekly live-streamed DJ sets. Brian highlighted both the significance of this community for his own sense of identity as a performer, as well its importance as a source of mutual support for his audience members. As he explained it, referring to his weekly online show:

> A community has formed around it. And they've even named themselves… and they've started their own Facebook page, so they're all kind of getting together. And there was even one, a couple of weeks ago, or a couple of months ago, when I couldn't do … on the Tuesday, and so they ended up having this mass Zoom with each other instead, on the Tuesday. And it's been a real sort of support group. There's a lot of people have said that it's helped them a lot. I mean, socially it's been the centre of my week, because it's been a way of interacting with people and having fun, and just playing a load of music that I love.

Moreover, other performers also shared Mark Godiva's experience that performing online could not only help them to retain but potentially extend their international profile and audience base. For instance, magician Rupert Allen noted how he had been hired to perform online shows in 'every continent except Antarctica' by the mid-point of the pandemic. Some performers even structured their shows' itineraries and formats to adjust to this new-found geographical exposure. As musician Will Taylor explained it:

> … The first gigs that I did live essentially from lockdown was my virtual world tour. And so, what we just decided to do was to play at times that were appropriate for different places around the world. So, I did one for the UK – I played at about eight o'clock in the evening here. But then I

> did one for East Coast US, so it was – I don't know what time it was in East Coast US – if it was seven o'clock in the evening, it would be like midnight or something… And then the West Coast, obviously I had to get up and did that at about two in the morning. And then I did one for Australia and New Zealand, which I did – that was about 10 o'clock in the morning.

For many performers, including those with parenting/caring responsibilities, the flexibility of being able to perform online opened up genuinely new opportunities to extend their reach and range of experiences. Yvonne Smith, for instance, described how she had undertaken a 30-minute live 'stand up' cabaret show for an audience in Sydney and had then led a creative workshop for participants based in New York, designed to share the skills needed to produce and perform online, all within the approximate time frame of a UK school day.

Further, this accessibility and flexibility did not only extend to performers' experiences of their work. The extended exposure offered by performing online was considered advantageous by many because it also increased accessibility for those audience members and other participants who might otherwise be unable to attend traditional performance venues, providing a further source of self-esteem and validation. Edith Kaufman—a professional storyteller—explained, for example, how performing online enabled her to perform for, and work with, people who had dementia or who had suffered traumatic experiences, enabling them to experience an ostensibly public performance in a physical space in which they felt safe (e.g., in their own homes).

For some, the opportunity to perform via online and social media platforms and the emergence of an audience for such shows was also greeted as an empowering and personally creative development. For example, for singer Jayne Seymour, it provided the motivation and opportunity to 'learn how to video edit and green screen edit. I've had to learn how to home-record and do production', resulting in a sense that she was a more 'rounded performer'. At the same time, performers who took part in our survey were equally as ready to acknowledge how the need to convey their work and ideas through a new medium promoted an opportunity to 'experiment', to develop 'new styles', and even as one performer put it, to 'be more artistic'.

Nevertheless, despite the existential, and indeed, financial lifeline that online performing offered for some of those we studied, even for those

performers who were able to take advantage of it, as we have observed in previous chapters, performing online did not always offer the degree of succour or reassurance they might have hoped for, and for many, it brought with it its own challenges.

Far From a Panacea: 'It's Just Me and a Computer in a Room'

During the pandemic, working mainly from home generated challenges for many people. These were, especially, as we noted in the previous chapter, those living in smaller properties (Hubbard et al., 2021) who found it particularly difficult to transform their home environments into performance spaces. These challenges were not always of a spatial or technical nature, however. Performing online, almost exclusively from home, while certainly something of an answer to performers' individual struggles for income, recognition, and self-identity, also often triggered new experiences of precarity (in addition to the financial uncertainty noted earlier). For some, this was simply a result of the sense of alienation they felt performing in such a distanced and detached, highly mediated way, a view expressed by singer and performance artist Harry James, who said:

> I would rather just perform to one other person in a room than do livestreaming. Because potentially it brings back all of that loneliness, and I do feel as though it's just me and a computer in a room, and I can't kind of summon up … I feel as though a lot of my motivation in life is around other people, and there's like a deadening that happens when I record into a computer.

Similarly, while ultimately highly supportive of online live performances, musician Peter Easton also reflected on the lack of embodied interaction with an audience, noting this as one of the most challenging aspects of such work:

> I think the other major problem I found was how do you deal with the fact that you are literally playing to a screen and you've got no feedback coming back from the audience? So you'd play a song, and you know, it'd just be completely quiet and you'd just be sitting there trying to fill time. [Plus] You've not gone anywhere; you've not got that kind of adrenalin build-up and that buzz that you'd go to a gig, you get your equipment, you go and

meet people beforehand, maybe meet people afterwards. There's none of that.

In this sense, some performers considered working online to replicate, if not reinforce, the sense of loss, both of self and meaning, that the restrictions associated with the pandemic had engendered with, for example, singer and comedian Mary Locket describing it as producing 'a very desolate feeling'.

For some live performers, the online medium robbed them of the very visceral embodied feedback they relied on to achieve a sense of a job well done and the recognition they craved from their audiences. As singer Jayne Seymour expressed it, '[I miss] being able to feel, hear—it's all the senses. Sometimes, unfortunately, it's even smell [laughs] …', while singer Elliot Porter, in his survey response, described one of the significant problems he had with performing online as 'not being able to see people's faces', explaining 'I thrive on audience reaction and feeling the energy in a room'.

This, in turn, rather than easing problems around emotional and mental health, actually exacerbated feelings engendered by the pandemic as a threat to performers' sense of self-identity and esteem, with one survey respondent, dancer Honey Justman, describing the impact of working and performing online as a feeling of being 'digitally burned out'.

The lack of physical feedback from audiences (e.g., via affirmative eye contact, facial expressions, applause, and so on) often exacerbated performers' sense of vulnerability to the precarities of the often limited esteem and audience appreciation measures that were available to them online. Most notably, these included financial donations during a show via online payment systems and visual feedback mechanisms integral to specific platforms, such as the ability to post 'likes' and 'hearts' on Facebook. Singer/songwriter Bev Vale, for example, discussed in her interview with us the feeling of exposure that such mediated forms of recognition could bring about:

When you first start going live, and like 'oh my god, there's ten people, wow'. Then it got to a point where I had about 100 people watching me. And then whenever you don't get that amount, you kind of feel like, 'Oh no, why? Why have I not got many people today? Am I worse today?' You start to question yourself, and you can feel very exposed.

Fears over credibility and how this may or may not be reflected in audience attendance or contributions to shows were made even more complicated when performers knew their ability to perform online and to offer a credible experience for their audiences was limited by their material situations in respect of, for example, their setting and circumstances at home, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Such challenges, combined with the ever-present risk that a technical failure might ruin the aesthetics, or 'moment', of the performance—including not only equipment failure but more likely interruptions to a broadband internet connection—introduced another element of precarity into these performers' lives. This was one that could impact not on their material ability to 'put on a show'; it could equally undermine their self-confidence and belief in their ability to 'act' as professional performers capable of attracting and entertaining an audience. While performing online brought some respite, both financially and existentially, for some performers, therefore, as a way to mitigate some of the most difficult implications of the pandemic, it was certainly not without its own complications.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the final one of those focusing specifically on our empirical findings, our primary interest has been in showing how the live performers we studied experienced and coped with the personal and existential pressures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We highlighted the kind of mental health pressures documented more widely (see, e.g., Macmillan & Shanahan, 2021) and observed how the pandemic and its related restrictions had a very particular impact on the health of the freelance and self-employed live performers who took part in our research because their ability to work is so closely tied to their sense of self-identity and esteem.

In addition to, or even beyond, experiences of financial precarity, freelance and self-employed performers experienced a heightened sense of vulnerability during the pandemic. This was tied to what in itself was a precarious desire for recognition as viable and indeed credible performers in an environment in which opportunities to achieve such acclaim suddenly vanished. This led to what Irvine and Rose (2022: 15) describe as an increased feeling of 'isolation and a lack of belonging' amongst many of the performers we studied.

Even for those who, once again, turned to online performance and live-streaming or live-screening as a way to mitigate the difficulties brought about by the pandemic, this did not always provide the panacea that was hoped for or needed. A significant number of our participants reported a degree of success in using online performance as a medium through which to establish and maintain meaningful contact with an often-extended audience, one that nourished their sense of self-worth and viability. Yet others also experienced (often alongside this) the demoralising and precarious reality of being reliant on a disembodied medium that denied them the 'buzz', proximity, and the tangible feedback they associated with and needed from performing live. This left them feeling (precariously) dependent on abstract forms of recognition, such as 'likes' on a screen or the amount of money that might be donated or paid in response to a performance, and the latter could be highly variable for reasons that did not necessarily reflect the actual quality of the performance.

In the following chapters, we consider what we have learnt from these and our other empirical findings, combining insights into performers' lived experiences with relevant scholarship on precarious work in order to extend our sociological understanding of workplace precarity. Drawing on our data and its analysis, we outline a conceptual typology that contributes to this scholarship by distinguishing between three analytically distinct but empirically interrelated forms of precarity that characterise work in not only the live entertainment industries and the cultural and creative sector, but the precarious labour force more generally.

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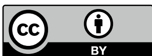

CHAPTER 8

Live Entertainers and Extended Forms of Precarity

Abstract In this chapter, a novel tripartite typology that distinguishes between different forms of precarity that afflict the kinds of work in the live entertainment industries discussed here is developed and explained. The first, socioeconomic precarity, is characterised by irregularity and uncertainty surrounding income and the availability of work, as well as unstable occupational and often personal circumstances. The second is affective precarity. This highlights how attempting to adhere to the aesthetic and atmospheric ideals that permeate performance work in the live entertainment industries produces its own sense or experience of insecurity. The final form, recognitive precarity, is a product of personal and interpersonal doubts and insecurities surrounding identity and esteem that many of the performers we studied spoke of. Finally, the chapter examines how these three forms of precarity are interrelated, considering how they can help to make sense of lived experiences of freelance and self-employed work in the cultural and creative sector and in precarious work and labour markets more widely.

Keywords COVID-19 · Precarious work · Socioeconomic · Affective and recognitive precarity

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Introduction

In previous chapters, we have observed that precarious employment and its challenges are perennial characteristics of freelance and self-employed work in the live entertainment industries. This means that, as demonstrated most notably in Chapters 5 and 6, this particular workforce was largely ill-equipped to absorb many of the financial and operational shocks inflicted on the cultural and creative sector due to COVID-19 and associated restrictions placed on social contact. Moreover, as we discussed in Chapter 7, the pandemic accentuated not only the objective character of precarity; it also intensified precarity as a subjective condition for many of those live performers exposed to it, resulting in difficulties ranging from mental and emotional health problems to issues concerning performers' sense of self-esteem and very identities as performing artists.

To aggravate, or certainly complicate this, was that when attempting to supplement or replace their lost income by undertaking live performances via online streaming during the pandemic, many of the performers we studied found that their experience of doing so only exacerbated their experiences of precarity. For while performing online could provide a financial lifeline, it also exposed performers' felt sense of vulnerability to the vagaries of audiences and a host of social and technical obstacles. While the former may be unwilling or unconcerned to pay for the work that performers did online, the latter might directly impact on a performer's ability to maintain a sense of professional credibility and esteem. And of course, these two elements were closely connected—if online performance did not generate enough income, performers were unable to invest in necessary technology, set dressing, and so on. And likewise, if online performances were hampered by constant disconnections, or poor sound or lighting, they were less likely to generate income, all of which constituted significant threats to performers' sense of professional credibility, and viability.

In turn, then, and (crucially) in combination, these difficulties could significantly impact on a performer's sense of subjective precarity, if their efforts did not attract a paying, appreciative audience, or if they were not well reviewed, often resulting in performers feeling a heightened sense of anxiety about the credibility or viability of their performance. These difficulties not only further exposed performers' socioeconomic precarity; they also exacerbated other vulnerabilities, including inequalities in access to a host of resources necessary to convincingly 'put on a show'.

They also impacted on performers' insecurities surrounding their professional identities in an environment in which their close identification with their work meant that these anxieties were already, often intensely felt and in a situation in which wider governmental discourses, for example, aforementioned campaigns to encourage retraining, and lack of access to financial support further exacerbated performers' sense of professional vulnerability.

In this penultimate chapter, we work through these challenges and the differing experiences of precarious work observed in the previous chapters, presenting them through a novel conceptual typology that distinguishes between what we identify as three distinct but interrelated forms of precarity. We show how these are both empirically and experientially interdependent in so far as each can be understood both to reproduce the conditions necessary for additional experiences of precarity to manifest themselves, as well as being complementarity and mutually reinforcing in how they operate and shape lived experience.

We begin with *socioeconomic* precarity. While relatively speaking, well-documented to date, including in relation to work in the cultural and creative sector, this form of precarity is characterised by a situation whereby income and the availability of work are characterised by irregularity and uncertainty, potentially leading to unstable occupational and often inter-personal relationships. While such precarity was, as we have seen, widely experienced by most of those working across the live entertainment industries prior to the pandemic, it was almost universally exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19. This was both in respect of the effective closure of venue-based live entertainment as well as the challenges many live performers experienced when attempting to shift to online performance as a means of sustaining both a viable income and continued presence in their chosen field or discipline.

Next, we introduce *affective* precarity, highlighting how adhering to the operational, aesthetic, and atmospheric ideals that permeate performance work in the live entertainment industries produces its own sense or experience of precarity. In particular, we acknowledge how these ideals are not simply shaped by the presentational norms associated with the cultural and creative sector; they are also contoured by the ways in which this work is situated, organised, and experienced within the context of social relations and networks, including one's immediate living (and for many, during lockdown, home-working) arrangements. With reference to affective precarity, we emphasise how, during the pandemic, having or

lacking a supportive home environment, social network and living conditions could either alleviate or accentuate some of the worst excesses of a performer's experiences of related forms precarity.

In the next section of this chapter, we turn our attention to the personal and interpersonal doubts and insecurities surrounding their identities that many of the performers we encountered spoke of. We conceptualise this as an expression of what we term a form of *recognitive* precarity. By 'recognitive precarity', we refer to the ongoing vulnerability engendered by a person's constant struggle for recognition and by the ways in which that struggle is socially situated, including in relation to work and its organisation. In doing so, we highlight how and why live performers can experience heightened insecurity and a lack of self-identity as professionally viable. We show how they are, therefore, particularly exposed to the vagaries of recognitive precarity as a result of their ongoing need to be recognised for their artistic credibility and capacity to entertain an audience in an environment dominated by recognitive factors such as professional reputation, audience appreciation, and critical acclaim, especially in the context of an evolving social media-based review culture.

Finally, having mapped out our conceptualisation of these three forms of precarity, in the last section of the chapter, we examine how they are interrelated in an area of work that, in its current form, thrives on workers' socioeconomic insecurity, their affective vulnerability, and the anxieties engendered by their desire for recognition. In doing so, we aim to show not only how these three interrelated forms of precarity help us to make sense of performers' lived experiences but also of freelance work in the cultural and creative sector more generally and in precarious work and labour markets more widely.

Socioeconomic Precarity

The first form of precarity that our research has highlighted as endemic amongst the UK's freelance and self-employed cultural and creative workforce is what we term *socioeconomic precarity*. While drawing heavily on established discussions of precarious work and precarity that identify its economic and occupational consequences for those impacted by it (Han & Hart, 2021; Moore & Newsome, 2018; Però, 2020), here we conceptualise socioeconomic precocity as a situation characterised by both irregularity and uncertainty. This is not only in respect of work

and income and those benefits often associated with standard employment, such as entitlement to paid holiday and sick leave, but also unstable occupational, professional, and often inter-personal relations.

As we observed in earlier chapters, some commentators have argued for the benefits of freelance and self-employed work in terms of an often desirable increase in flexibility and autonomy (Fevre, 2007; Ravenelle, 2019). Others have posited the idea that a shared experience of precarious work could itself offer the basis for a new and progressive class formation (Standing, 2011). The majority of existing research has identified the predominantly pernicious impact of socioeconomic precarity on working conditions, economic security, and a capacity to organise collectively for better conditions across a host of industries and labour market locations (Hassard & Morris, 2018; Moore & Newsome, 2018; Però, 2020). Moreover, as well as being considered to have a profoundly negative impact on the material underpinnings of social and economic life, including the ability to plan for the future, such precarity has also been widely identified as having significantly harmful implications for families, kinship and caring networks, and social stability more generally (Ba', 2020; Batista et al., 2024).

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, while precarious work and employment conditions can be found across labour markets and occupations, especially in what is often characterised as the 'gig' or 'platform' economy (Sapkal & Chhatri, 2019; Wood et al., 2019), the live entertainment industries have long been associated with particularly insecure employment practices and relations (Arditi, 2021; Butler & Russell, 2018; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Shade & Jacobson, 2015). And while for the majority of all those employed in such industries, access to work tends to be governed by the availability of fixed-term contracts dependent upon the length and success of specific productions and events, there is a significantly large contingent of freelance and self-employed performers that make up the backbone of these industries and who are particularly vulnerable to the socioeconomic instabilities of this labour market.

In the research reported on here, we have witnessed first-hand accounts of the impact of socioeconomic precarity on live performers, something intensified firstly by increased and sustained cost-cutting across these industries over recent decades (Aroles et al., 2022) resulting in an increase in even less secure terms of employment than previously (Gill & Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2004; Ross, 2006/2007) and, more recently, by the

impact of COVID-19, described by puppeteer Basil Jackon as a 'death blow'.

In practice, constant exposure to socioeconomic precarity means that what many performers have in common is a working life characterised by a continual need to 'hustle' and to engage in chains of relationships (e.g., with agents) that accentuate competition and work intensification, and a compulsion to continually navigate competing artistic and market-orientated imperatives (Umney, 2017). Moreover, for many performers, the need to undertake entrepreneurial activities such as self-marketing, produces an additional sense of precarity concerning their artistic integrity, rendering performers vulnerable to accusations of conceding to a dominant and often undesirable commercial logic shaping their working lives and identities (Hoedemaekers, 2018). The latter issue can lead to reputational harm, or fear of it, in a sector in which professional standing often relies on finely tuned specialist skills, with commercially successful performers risking being perceived as unskilled dilettantes who lack integrity, leading to a state of perpetual self-doubt and ongoing questioning of professional identity (Beech et al., 2016). The latter is a problem that in turn, can accentuate experiences of socioeconomic precarity as occupational, professional, and often inter-personal relations become more challenging to navigate and sustain sustain.

All of this highlights that live performance work is not only personally demanding; it is also work that takes place in a highly precarious labour market marked by instability and insecurity, as well as an often constant sense of the need to extend one's working practices and time into areas of organisational and commercial activity that while perhaps essential, can feel detrimental to one's credibility and sense of meaning as a performer, involving long hours of unpaid and often unrecognised labour, much of which might be outside of one's creative or artistic skill set, interest and orientation. Nevertheless, however complex the relationship between socioeconomic precarity and the desire to be recognised as a credible live performer was prior to COVID-19, the pandemic dramatically accentuated both this complexity and the demands it placed on performers, creating the 'coronacoster' as musician Will Taylor described it.

Furthermore, intersectional inequalities accentuated by the pandemic also highlighted the persistence of structural, intersectional injustices across the entertainment sector, including those related to social class, as well as gender, age, and race and ethnicity, disability and so on. These

inequalities limit access to work and, at the time of the pandemic, financial support schemes. They continue to contribute to disparities in pay and other forms of economic and social inclusion, with marginalised performers continuing to feel that they have to choose between occupational solidarity and speaking up about unfair or unsafe terms and conditions (Dean & Greene, 2017; FMTW, 2022, 2023).

Hence, while such precarity was widely experienced by most of those working across the live entertainment industries as a chronic problem prior to the pandemic, the acute financial impact of lockdown and other related measures dramatically accentuated socioeconomic precarity amongst its freelance and self-employed workforce in particular, many of whom found themselves lacking access not only to (already chronically low) pay but also to organisational infrastructures, government funding schemes, professional networks and (for many), the means to generate any sustainable income from performing online.

As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, such socioeconomic precarity was also often accompanied by an experience of being operationally precarious, including for those able to perform online, as well as for those who were precluded from doing so. Many of the performers we studied found themselves limited by technical impediments to putting on artistically or, indeed, aesthetically convincing performances online, and many experienced problems resulting from spatial, embodied, or circumstance-based limitations, amounting to what we term 'affective precarity'.

Affective Precarity

We use the term 'affective precarity' here to describe the atmospheric, material, embodied, and relational uncertainties involved in seeking to maintain a particular presentation of self that will meet aesthetic or sensory expectations. These are difficulties that intersect with socioeconomic precarity and which can be experienced within the context of social relations and networks, including one's immediate relationships. We use the term affective precarity to make sense of the extreme difficulties performers experienced when attempting to perform 'live' via online platforms during periods of lockdown.

For the live performers we studied, their experiences of affective precarity, as discussed in earlier chapters, frequently meant that they found themselves trying to navigate the operational challenges associated with attempting to replicate or at least substitute the moods or atmospherics

(Böhme, 1993; Grant, 2013) of an entertaining, live performance via an online medium or platform. For many, this was often (in the case of lockdown) while working from their home settings, some of which were much less conducive than others to being transformed into performance environments. For such performers, and especially for those who reported being entirely unable to attempt to perform online, their experiences of affective precarity were shaped by the technical, physical, and spatial challenges, as well as the inter-personal and relational circumstances they worked and lived in.

During lockdown, these conditioned or contoured their capacity, or otherwise, to 'put on a show'. And while performers found the absence of more embodied inter-personal interactions with audience members or other participants to be a significant challenge when attempting to evoke the atmosphere and aesthetics of a 'live', face-to-face performance, they also experienced difficulties relating to the degree of space, opportunity, and support they had available to them. Many had to make efforts, as best they could, in spaces and circumstances that were often poorly suited to giving a 'live' performance to an audience.

To understand these experiences and the wider circumstances of workers in similar situations across the cultural and creative sector more generally, and potentially more widely, we use the term affective precarity to make sense of the anxieties and uncertainties associated with efforts to perform in situations that are often not at all conducive to the aesthetic and relational demands involved. For the performers we studied, their experiences reflected, in particular, the precarious challenges of attempting to replicate the atmospherics of a live performance via online media. For Böhme (2003), such atmospheric conditions are often the outcome of not only sociocultural, economic, and ecological factors but also equally productive acts of work, which he terms 'aesthetic labour'. Unlike, say in the work of Witz et al. (2003), where aesthetic labour tends to describe the embodied activities of interactive service workers, Böhme uses the term in a much broader sense to encapsulate 'the totality of those activities which aim to give an appearance to things and people, cities and landscapes, *to endow them with an aura, to lend them an atmosphere*, or to generate an atmosphere in ensembles' (Böhme, 2003: 72, *emphasis added*).

For the performers we studied, the aesthetic labour involved in creating atmospheres was an often complex and precarious undertaking dependent upon many factors, or 'ensembles' to borrow from Böhme, including

those relating to the quality or nature of the performance itself, as well as to the structure and aesthetic characteristics of the setting, alongside the mood and responsiveness of the audience. These are all factors that themselves often depend on performers' socioeconomic and relational circumstances, and which require a considerable investment of time, effort and resources. As musician Mark Godiva noted in this respect, 'working to get the mood and atmosphere in the room right is more than half the battle'.

Hence, on the one hand, such affective precarity was clearly heightened during the pandemic as performers struggled with additional financial challenges and structural inequalities due to, say, their home settings lacking the requisite aesthetics, space, privacy, and resources needed, not to mention the necessary technology and equipment or even the inter-personal support for their efforts from family, partners, and other cohabitees. On the other hand, however, such precarity was also considered to be a chronic component of live performance whereby so much, as noted above, is, despite the aesthetic labour that might go into 'putting on a show', often outside of the individual performer's control. This can include, for example, having to perform at an inappropriate venue or for a disinterested or even aggressive audience. Moreover, this is especially true for those live performers whose already minimal ability to choose when and where they work is even further restricted by the impact of socioeconomic precarity, and by other intersectional inequalities, and simply by the need to work and generate income.

For many of the performers we studied, even in circumstances in which their home settings could be transformed into makeshift performance spaces during lockdown, he technical obstacles to creating and monitoring the atmospherics of a performance raised concerns that were interrelated with the accentuated socioeconomic precarity discussed above. Getting the lighting, sound, and camera angles consistently right, for example, was reported to be a perennial problem, alongside the unpredictability of external noise and interruptions and the simple fact that performers could never be entirely sure of the audio-visual or lighting quality reaching the audience.

Additionally, for performers whose partners, families, or cohabitees were less than supportive of their work and/or their efforts to continue to work online during successive periods of lockdown, these difficulties were accentuated, or were felt particularly acutely. Performers who sensed that their efforts were an imposition, or were not recognised as

having value or credibility, felt even more vulnerable and exposed. This was especially difficult for those with parenting or caring responsibilities who had to share not just their living space but also their time, with many being involved in additional child, social or health care provision, or home-schooling during lockdown. Aside from the time and commitment involved, many such performers (not surprisingly) felt inhibited or found it difficult to focus, knowing that other people, including children, were in the vicinity, or they felt guilty or conflicted about the time and energy that needed to go into preparing for, and delivering, an online performance.

While brought into sharp relief by freelance and self-employed live performers' experiences during the pandemic, affective precarity is by no means unique to what happened during COVID-19, nor is it distinctive, we would suggest, to this particular workforce. Rather, we would surmise that affective precarity occurs throughout the cultural and creative sector as well as across any contemporary labour market in which workers have to continually navigate the many challenges associated with maintaining a presentation of self or performance that will meet the aesthetic or sensory expectations of, in this case, an audience, but also customers, clients, co-workers, and so on. As such, when workers have to undertake work in aesthetic, atmospheric, and relational circumstances that make creating an enticing, entertaining, or otherwise affirming experience for others (e.g., an audience, customer, client, etc.) particularly difficult, often in conditions that are socioeconomically and recognitively precarious, they can be understood to be affectively precarious. Further research is needed, we would suggest, to understand how workers in other sectors and circumstances experience this.

Notwithstanding this critical point, however, what also came to the fore during our study of freelance and self-employed live performers during the pandemic was not simply the impact that affective precarity had on their ability to perform, nor the fact that this was itself often underpinned by the previously discussed socioeconomic insecurities and challenges they faced. Rather, of note was how the intensification of socioeconomic and affective precarity that the pandemic brought about accentuated performers' sense of insecurity about their perceived recognition as credible and, indeed, viable performers. It is to this issue of recognition and its relationship to performers' identity and, indeed, psychological and emotional health, as discussed in Chapter 7, that we now turn.

Recognitive Precarity

In this, the penultimate section of this chapter, we present our third form of precarity in order to bring to the fore what also emerged in our research, namely an ongoing struggle for recognition that is itself situated within the context of the experience of socioeconomic and affective forms of precarity discussed above. Drawing on ideas developed by social philosophers Axel Honneth (1996, 2012) and Judith Butler (2004), we use the term recognitive precarity to describe how a person's desire for recognition of themselves as a credible, viable subject renders them perpetually vulnerable. Recognitive precarity is distinct from, but also helps to explain, the subjective impact of the kinds of socioeconomically and affectively precarious working conditions that came to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic discussed above.

To recap on ideas introduced in earlier chapters, for Axel Honneth, an individual's struggle to secure a sense of self-identity and emotional and psychical well-being is often based on the esteem and respect that is (ideally) achieved through participation in the activity of waged labour (Honneth, 2012, 2014), something that, as Motakef (2019) acknowledges, can often be sorely undermined by the lack of recognition attached to precarious forms of employment. Similarly, in the work of Judith Butler (2004), while recognition is always vulnerable to shifting sociocultural norms, and legal and political frameworks, precarity as a profoundly existential condition is understood to render us vulnerable to the demands of organisational priorities and practices which themselves create a heightened landscape of recognitive precarity.

Moreover, as Butler (2004) observes, as social beings, we are all precarious in an existential respect, but our social positioning and circumstances, such as (we might surmise) those discussed above with reference to socioeconomic and affective precarity, mean that we are not equally so in a sociological sense. In practice, this means that 'competing regimes of value' (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008: 64) render some workers more vulnerable than others to a perceived or felt lack of esteem and respect. Performers are a notable case in point, particularly those who struggle to maintain a viable living from their work, something for which many of those who took part in our study had striven for many years, making personal and financial sacrifices to do so, and which the pandemic had very rapidly eradicated.

It seems fair to say that, as Leidner (2016) observed in her aforementioned study of stage actors, many who work in acting and the performing arts more widely struggle to sustain a secure sense of self-identity while being afflicted by personal uncertainty and self-doubt, itself suggesting a heightened desire for recognition (Honneth, 1996). As many performers stressed throughout our study, being a performer was central to their identity, a sentiment encapsulated well by actor Charlie Clipper when, as observed in Chapter 7, he described the impact of COVID-19 and his inability to perform as like 'being negated'. Reflecting on this and situating it within the context of the pandemic, the common theme that arose throughout our research was the extent to which live performance (pre-pandemic) could validate not only the life choices made by many of the performers we studied but also their very sense of self-worth as viable and fulfilled subjects. Their sense of the importance of being able to perform was summed up many performers, including seventy-year-old singer and comedian Mary Locket, who explained how when she was on stage she felt an affirmed sense of meaning and purpose:

> You're not seeing the day-to-day slogging [me] that forgets things, that gets things mixed up. You're not seeing that. You're seeing this vibrant woman who was absolutely thrilled with the moment … that's the glittering part of me. I've got meaning and I've got purpose…

As such, many performers found the challenges of lockdown and social distancing to be profoundly existentially debilitating, as they were forced to face, head-on, the precariousness of their own identities as performers. Integral to this experience was the disappearance of those intersubjective moments that occur during a live performance when the audience and performer can enter into what might be described as a 'conspiracy' of recognition, with each reliant on the other to validate their co-presence in a particular moment in time and space, and which the performers we studied referred to as the ephemeral 'moment of exchange'. It was the loss of such encounters and of the scope for mutual recognition and self-affirmation that accompany them that, for many of the performers we studied, represented one of the most significant traumas of the pandemic, something illustrated by the words of actor and magician Brandon Knights, who observed that 'being a performer

isn't something that you do like a job in Tesco's. It is part of your being; it's what you are'.

As discussed in earlier chapters, shifting to online delivery for those who could do so often produced a mixed resolution to this challenge. For some, it elicited ambivalent feelings whereby the ability to engage with a seemingly appreciative and responsive audience was welcomed but somewhat tinged by a realisation of the precariousness of dependency that underpinned it. For example, as we have observed, musician Mark Godiva often signed off at the end of his weekly online shows by thanking his 'community of fans' for validating him and his life choices, as if what had up until then been implicit had suddenly been laid bare for all to see. At the same time, as suggested above, one positive aspect of working online identified by a number of performers in our study was the emergence of audience 'communities' that ensured continuity, interactivity and, by virtue of this, a stable if spatially dispersed source of recognition. Even where an element of continuity was not particularly present, the opportunity for interactivity and the recognition of one's work often remained a feature, and sometimes an improved one, of some online performances.

Notwithstanding these potentially affirmative experiences, however, others explained that performing online had often accentuated their sense of precariousness surrounding their identities as viable live performers. In some instances, this came down to issues previously discussed regarding socioeconomic and/or affective precarity. For example, the inability to afford reliable or sufficiently sophisticated streaming technology and the risk of poor quality or failed broadcasts challenged some performers' beliefs in their professional credibility and/or artistic legitimacy. Similarly, their capacity to generate what they considered to be a conducive atmosphere for their performance or to achieve what they felt to be the proper aesthetic standards due to spatial or associated restrictions also often led to a similar sense of uncertainty and insecurity about how well-regarded their work might be.

Moreover, those performers who were unable to interact with other performers and/or their audiences in an albeit technologically mediated manner—say through chat functions or by making eye contact—found themselves reliant on other forms of mediated recognition, including viewing or watching figures or financial contributions as a means of adjudging the reception of their performance and degree of recognition of

themselves as entertaining or legitimate performers. Indeed, as a medium of feedback and potential recognition, such media could prove to have a highly unpredictable quality, with patrons and audiences being notably fickle in how much they could or would pay for any given performance, that is, if anybody turned up at all, a situation that often exacerbated performers' sense of recognitive precarity as they experienced such a lack of interest or support as a direct affront to their integrity, even viability as entertainers. The latter of course could have serious consequences for performers not only in terms of exacerbating financial difficulties, but also their sense of self-worth and esteem, with concerns being widely raised about the impact of such circumstances on performers' mental health during the pandemic and subsequently.

Conclusion

As this book and a vast swathe of research produced during and since the pandemic has shown, COVID-19 had a disastrous impact on much of the UK workforce, while lockdowns, social distancing, and an ongoing unease with social gatherings had particularly damaging consequences for those employed in the live entertainment industries. Freelance and self-employed live performers, while far from alone in their struggles, often found themselves at the sharp end of those interventions designed to lessen the impact of the virus, with many watching their livelihoods and professional identities disappear seemingly overnight. Already struggling with a crisis of precarity and their reliance on a gig economy, this scenario presented 'a crisis within a crisis'.

Socioeconomic precarity, perhaps above all else, defined the working lives of these performers prior to the pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 and the restrictions that accompanied it not only brought this into stark relief but exacerbated it. For those reliant on performance as their primary source of income, and especially those unable to access pandemic-specific state support, their circumstances often meant leaving the industry altogether and trying to find alternative forms of long-term employment, or struggling with whatever resources they could access.

Some, however, were able to take advantage of an emerging online entertainment environment, especially during periods of lockdown in 2020 and 2021, and many have maintained this since. Nonetheless, online performances, based as they so often were and continue to be, on voluntary donations and 'virtual tip jars', may have provided

short-term financial remedies but were unreliable and unpredictable, for example, when expenditure on equipment, set dressing, etc. exceeded the income that it generated, exacerbating socioeconomic precarity. These challenges were further intensified by recognitive precarity as the quality of a performance was often self-judged against the criteria of funds raised or by what relatively limited feedback was possible.

Moreover, the affective precarity associated with performance work for instance, resulting from the time and effort involved in establishing a conducive atmosphere within which a show might take place, was made even more difficult as digital meditation muted the spontaneity and interactivity between performers and audiences. At the same time, spatial restrictions and inadequate equipment and sets made each performance more than just a challenge but often also an exercise in hope, further contributing to a widespread and sometimes overwhelming sense of existential vulnerability.

This situation often left performers feeling not simply un- or under-appreciated but deprived of the recognition they derived from the immediacy and viscerality of performing in front of a live, physically proximate audience, one that helped to sustain their identities as performers. However, while we have separated out these three forms of precarity as an analytical exercise, as suggested above, in practice, they are closely interrelated. Affective and recognitive precarity, while not reducible to the socioeconomic, clearly exist in a constellation-like relationship with chronic financial and social uncertainty.

As such, the combined impact and experience of all three types of precarity—socioeconomic, affective, and recognitive—represents a substantial concern for all those who engage in precarious work, not just in the cultural and creative sector but across the labour market more widely. In this sense, freelance and self-employed live performers' experiences during the pandemic provided a glimpse into what work is like when all three forms of precarity are brought to the fore and when their chronic effects are dramatically intensified. But while the pandemic may have produced a distinctive set of circumstances, socioeconomic, affective, and recognitive precarity are endemic features of contemporary work, especially but not exclusively in the cultural and creative sector, and particularly—but by no means uniquely so—in freelance work and self-employment.

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CHAPTER 9

Beyond Precarity? Towards a Fairer Future for Live Performers

Abstract In this final chapter, we focus specifically on the type of support and practical changes that the performers we studied identified as necessary not only to maintaining a sustainable recovery from the ongoing effects of the pandemic, as well as Brexit and the recent cost of living crisis, but also to securing a more fair, equitable, and accessible future. The chapter draws on established research and secondary data, as well as the analysis of the research findings from our own study presented in earlier chapters throughout the book, to speak directly to funding and legislative bodies, professional and membership organisations, policymakers, employers, activists, trade unions, practitioners, and creative workers about how the UK's live entertainment industries might move 'beyond precarity' and to examine what conditions might be necessary to enable this to happen.

Keywords COVID-19 · Funding · Inequality · Precarity · Representation · Universal Basic Income

Introduction

While the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the multifaceted value of freelance work across the cultural and creative sector, it also exposed its widespread and multidimensional precarity. The burgeoning body

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of research and social commentary discussed in previous chapters indicates that live performance, in particular, is only made possible by the efforts of a freelance and self-employed workforce, one often trapped in situations that involve undertaking significant amounts of under- or unpaid and often unrecognised labour. As such, many freelancers can find themselves trapped in a chronic situation characterised by overwork and underpayment whilst experiencing a perpetual sense of marginalisation and under-appreciation. Moreover, intersectional inequalities contour this scenario in ways that the pandemic dramatically accentuated.

Perhaps not surprisingly, there are concerns, particularly amongst campaigning bodies, that not only have the lessons of the pandemic not been learned concerning improving the pay and working conditions of freelance and self-employed performers but rather that the impact of COVID-19 has been 'used strategically to drive pay and conditions down'. This has also left many freelance workers feeling increasingly precarious in industries described as a 'toxic and aggressive place to work' (FMTW, 2022: 8–9) and in which under-funded venues pass on the need to make cost savings to their most vulnerable workers.

By providing a 'snapshot' of freelance and self-employed live performers' experiences during COVID-19, particularly during periods of national lockdown and social distancing, this book has attempted to understand the impact of the pandemic on their working lives. Considering both their chronic and acute financial concerns, it has contextualised these in relation to a broader range of issues, including structural inequalities and injustices. In doing so, it has also pointed to the need to extend our understanding of what precarity means and how it is experienced, reflecting on what we can learn from these experiences about the nature of freelance work in the cultural and creative sector more widely, including how such forms of precarity can shape the working lives of freelancers and the self-employed.

Having discussed how we might conceptualise such precarity, in this chapter we consider the type of support and practical changes that the performers we studied identified as necessary not only to recover from the ongoing effects of the pandemic, as well as Brexit and the recent cost of living crisis, but which they also identified as necessary in the longer-term to secure a more fair, equitable, and accessible future. In doing so, we draw on established research and secondary data, as well as the analysis of our own research findings presented in previous chapters, speaking directly to funding and legislative bodies, professional and membership

organisations, policymakers, employers, activists, trade unions, practitioners, and creative workers about how the UK's live entertainment industries might seek to move 'beyond precarity'.

Performers' Hopes for the Future

Amidst a climate shaped by the ongoing effects of the pandemic, government policies that have led to substantial funding cuts for the arts (and freelance workers in particular), the impact of Brexit, the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, and the undercurrent of chronic precarity, as actor and musician Chris Gifford put it, 'we're expecting performers to deliver constantly and to deliver more, and generally *we're expecting them to deliver more for free*' (*emphasis added*). As so many who contributed to our research emphasised, this situation is unsustainable. It is ethically indefensible and counter-productive in a global economy in which the cultural and creative sector in general, and the live entertainment industries in particular, make a vital political, social, cultural, and economic contribution.

Speaking in 2021, a year after the UK's first national lockdown, singer and musician Harry James summed up the views of many when he explained his reasons for leaving freelance work as a live performer in the wake of the pandemic. He highlighted, on the one hand, the centrality of being a performer to his sense of self and, on the other, his ongoing struggle and sense of exploitation. Referring particularly to income-related turnover in the sector, he said:

> I feel very sad about the situation … because that was a big part of my life for quite a long time. And everyone I know has been struggling anyway. Even though I was doing big corporate gigs, it's not a very secure or reliable industry, full stop … I've spoken to a few of my friends who I thought *were* the successful friends, and they're quitting too … I guess it was just such hard work to even get to the point where you were just about making a living and covering your overheads... And I suppose there will be a whole new generation of young performers who will still be full of hope and willingness to work for very little. But I don't think industries should be completely based around, you know, new crops of young people that can be exploited. I think there ought to be some bare minimum wages … to lessen the inequality.

Tackling Unpaid and Unrecognised Labour

Reflecting on similar concerns about low pay and referring specifically to a lack of recognition of the amount of unpaid labour involved in performance work, storyteller Edith Kaufman told us that her preference, like many other freelancers, would be for the introduction of a universal basic income (UBI) for freelance workers in the sector:

> You know, [preparing for live performance work] takes an enormous amount of time. And … that is never recognised. You're only paid for your performance on the day, so that has always been a problem. [UBI] would free you up to pursue and to spend time perfecting things and researching them. You could enjoy doing them, instead of thinking 'all this time I'm doing it, I'm not getting paid for it', and you're worrying about the bills coming in ...

While the idea of a UBI explicitly tailored to the needs of creative workers is one that has already been argued for in the UK (Caldow et al., 2024), trialled in the Republic of Ireland (Marshall, 2023), and even decried as a 'neo-liberal con' that is 'designed to disenfranchise vast parts of society and undermine the earning power of all but the capital-owning elites' (d'Alancaisez, 2022) it has, as yet, to be given serious consideration amongst UK policymakers.

Nonetheless, many freelancers emphasised how UBI or similar could better support open access to art and culture and tackle some of the exploitative effects of content sharing on profitable dissemination platforms, with the latter being an ongoing and evolving worry for freelance creative artists. As actor and musician Chris Gifford put it,

> I like the idea that I can put stuff out for free and people can access it for free, but if we like that model – and people do seem to like that model – then we need to find a way to pay the performers or pay the people who are doing that creating; because otherwise, as we've already seen, … [what] happens is YouTube, Google, etc. make a lot of money, … and the performer makes very little.

At minimum, a widely shared view amongst the performers we studied is that some provision for freelancers who are injured or unwell, especially in work-related circumstances, is badly needed. As Edith Kaufman explained:

> I think one of the big dangers is if you're ever unwell. That's quite frightening for a creative artist, because normally you don't have any back-up or anything like that. So … in the worst-case scenario you're on your own, … something to fall back on, that would be very important.

The chronic and multiple forms of precarity discussed in earlier chapters, combined with successive cuts to government funding for the arts and culture, is something that, in the wake of the pandemic, performers felt had left many in a situation in which they had little choice but to accept work at below the agreed industry (e.g., union) rates, or leave their industry altogether; something that a form of UBI would, performers believe, help to address.

Moreover, a widespread problem that a UBI could move towards addressing, or at least might mitigate the worst consequences of, is the prevalence and impact of unpaid or 'donated' labour both within the live entertainment industries and across the cultural and creative sector. The frequent expectation that freelancers will be willing and able to work unpaid to gain 'experience' or 'exposure' not only exploits those who undertake such work but perpetuates a model in which hourly rates of pay are often well below the national minimum wage once unpaid hours are accounted for, perpetuating the forms of precarity discussed in Chapter 8.

Dancer Glenda Kelp, who we interviewed shortly after live venues began to re-open in July 2021, with social distancing measures in place (meaning that many productions operated well below capacity), summed up these problems when she noted how:

> [Pay] is not regulated, so it's not like any venues follow Equity minimum. That's just not a thing. So you kind of just have to argue your own case and ask for what you want, and sometimes you'll get it, sometimes you won't. And it's your choice whether or not you take things that are subpar … And it needs addressing … I've earned almost nothing for a year and a half, so I'm not going to rock the boat. But I'm really, really not happy about it.

Moreover, as singer Jayne Seymour reflected, referring to the exploitative nature of 'exposure bookings' (in which freelancers are not paid or are underpaid for the work they do on the assumption that the opportunity will benefit their professional profile and lead to further paid work):

> You know, this was always kind of a bit of a joke within the industry anyway, where somebody will say, “Oh, there’s a gig advertised, there’s a gig out there. It’s for no pay, but it’s great exposure. It’ll be great exposure for you.” Well great exposure means nothing. It just means they don’t want to pay. It’s like asking somebody to come and fix your electrics and say, “Well there’s no money in it for you, but it’s great exposure because I’ll tell all the neighbours that you came and fixed it for free” …

Funding and Subsidy

In addition to better financial protection and regulation and consideration of the feasibility of a UBI, performers also indicated that a review of current funding models is necessary to tackling the worst excesses of inequality, precarity, and exploitation they described. Live performer Harry James, for instance, highlighted the importance of better, nationwide investment in grassroots venues:

> I would suggest taking some of the grants from [large venues/organisations] and making some of that available to independent venues. I suppose if you specifically earmarked it… Or setting a minimum wage – that would be good. Because it’s work. It *is* work, but … It would have to be a big, country-wide policy shift, and I don’t see that happening at all with this government … That would be to dream so big.

Throughout the research we undertook, performers constantly noted how financial support from bodies such as the various Arts Councils, both before and during the pandemic, was predominantly targeted at the large and more established venues, leaving smaller operations and, in particular, those individuals who worked both in and for them, high and dry. This was something that actor Bunty Havers, for example, felt had to change in a post-pandemic world, arguing that what is needed is a more equitable distribution of available funding:

> Rather than just like the big national institutions getting shed loads of money, [they should be] spreading it. And not asking them to spread it, or not asking centralised groups to spread it, but actually getting the money to the different groups directly so that they have the autonomy to do it and serve their communities in the way that they know is best.

As such, many performers called for a thorough review of the processes and the decision-making that underpins grant funding in the UK in the hope that it might undergo a correction that, if not favouring freelancers, might at least establish more of a level playing field for those working across the sector.

'The Show Can't Go On' … But It Did

Despite such aspirations, many of the performers we studied viewed the COVID-19 pandemic as a missed opportunity to mobilise in support of a UBI and other substantial changes across the sector, in order to tackle the worst extremes of the multiple and chronic forms of precarity discussed in previous chapters. This situation arguably reflects relatively low levels of unionisation amongst the UK's freelance and self-employed cultural and creative workforce, resulting in a significant and ongoing lack of voice, representation, and recourse across the sector such that its endemic precarity has become almost self-perpetuating.

This latter point was emphasised in 2021 in the first of several Big Freelancer Survey reports conducted during the UK's first national lockdown by Freelancers Make Theatre Work (FMTW), and subsequently. In it, they highlighted that the reputational dependency of the freelance model of work has a coercive effect that discourages freelancers from 'challenging or even questioning poor pay and conditions, abuses of power, and unsafe working practices' (FMTW, 2021: 2), especially in the wake of the pandemic, while arguing that 'the sector cannot—and must not—return to "business as usual", which to freelancers represents economic exploitation, poor working conditions, a lack of inclusivity, and an inability to shape or determine sector strategy' (FMTW, 2021: 3).

FMTW's second survey, published in 2022, raised similar issues and recommendations, reporting on a widespread feeling that 'the show can't go on as it was prior to the pandemic and shouldn't' (FMTW, 2022: 11) with many freelancers who took part referring to the toxic effects of this imperative as an exploitative and unsustainable work ethic. One of the survey's participants summed up the hopes of many by wishing for 'better working hours, proper breaks, proper staffing, more accessibility for all, no bullying or discrimination, and equal opportunities. Less of "the show must go on no matter what" attitude'. Another said, '"the show must go on" only … if it is safe to do so, with properly paid workers … who aren't working outside of their skill set or comfort zone'. Concerns about the

pressure to work 'above and beyond without financial recognition' were reported as being 'ubiquitous across the sector', compromising safety and accentuating precarity (FMTW, 2022: 11).

One way forward, FMTW suggests, might be a government-legislated introduction and enforcement of fair rates of pay that tackle the disparity between freelance wages and salaried (PAYE) staff in arts organisations, with the 2023 Big Freelancer Survey report recommending projects that employ freelancers paying at least the union-agreed rate, treating this 'as a minimum rather than an industry standard' (FMTW, 2023: 5). Moreover, such an approach might at last start to address not only the socioeconomic precarity experienced by such performers and other freelance cultural and creative workers on a day-to-day basis but also to start to unravel the recognitive and affective precarity that it fosters, as discussed in Chapter 8, by addressing those root causes of insecurity and inequity.

Intersectional Inequalities and Precarity

Recognising the value of performance, freelance and self-employed labour, and of other forms of cultural and creative work is an essential step towards fair remuneration and the enforceable regulation of the time, skill, effort, and experience it involves. However, it is equally important to understand how (and why) intersecting and persistent social inequalities shape the socioeconomic, affective, and recognitive forms of precarity endemic to the cultural and creative sector discussed in this book. As Kolbe et al. (2020: 15) note in a recent working paper on intersectional inequalities in the creative sector, 'strategies around diversity and inclusion … risk being largely delinked from their intersections with material marginalisation, thus running the risk of disconnecting issues of representation from wider struggles around production and social and distributive justice'.

Our research participants, alongside existing data and other recent studies, certainly suggested how intersecting inequalities, including but not limited to those relating to protected characteristics and personal circumstances, contour and accentuate precarious work across the sector, and our analysis points to how these inequalities need to be understood as intertwined with multiple, interconnected forms of precarity. As singer Petra Simmonds observed, being excluded during the pandemic from work and forms of grant support or state financial support left her feeling

highly precarious as both a performer and a person, 'like you're not good enough, you're not important enough'.

Moreover, and as noted previously, the current funding model perpetuates a widespread 'lack of transparency around pay' (Industria, 2023: 37). This obscures the extent to which freelance workers' donated labour continues to prop up a chronically underfunded industry that depends upon the exploitation of not only creative workers' hopes of making and sustaining a viable income but also their desire for recognition of themselves as legitimate and viable performers and subjects. As such, for many of the performers who took part in our study, the vulnerability engendered by their inability to earn a sustainable living from performance work perpetuated their sense of recognitive precarity, which in turn fed into chronic socioeconomic precarity and the difficulties they experienced in being unable to access secure, fairly paid work.

Doing 'Meantime Work': Understanding and Organising Art as Labour

First and foremost, it needs to be acknowledged that understanding and addressing the multiple forms of precarity discussed here, and their links to persistent, intersectional inequalities, would require a radical rethink of how aspects of the cultural and creative sector are funded and organised. Notwithstanding this, however, there are important and feasible initiatives—or 'meantime work' (Industria, 2023)—that employers and professional bodies, funding councils and other stakeholders in the sector could feasibly commit to in the short to medium term, potentially breaking the 'over-work, underpayment bind' (FMTW, 2023) that underpins the multiple and intersecting forms of precarity shaping freelancers' working lives described in earlier chapters. Such 'meantime work' could begin to open up fairer conditions of possibility for freelance and self-employed live entertainers and, indeed, those employed across the sector more widely to earn a sustainable living.

Minimum Rates of Pay

Considering the relatively low pay levels to which many freelance and self-employed entertainers are subject, it is also often the case that where minimum remuneration levels have been established, they are often not enforced. As the 2023 *Artist Leaks* (Industria, 2023) project noted,

amongst the responses it gleaned from its research in respect of smaller, independent projects such as those funded by Arts Council England, 93% of artists were paid below minimum wage, suggesting that the Council's standard policy (at the time of writing) of giving 'guidance' on minimum rates of pay for artists is largely ineffective. At the same time, none of their respondents recorded data from projects or institutions in Wales, hinting that the Arts Council of Wales's policy of refusing to fund applications paying below union and industry association-approved rates may be more equitable and effective and is a crucial practice to extend and maintain for the longer term.

The situation appears even worse when funding organisations, such as the UK Arts Councils, are not involved. The widespread expectation, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, that performers and other artists are willing and able to philanthropically 'donate' their labour to the sector relies on embedded assumptions about performers' circumstances and their capacity to share their skills, time, and labour freely, which in turn, drives down rates of pay across the sector. Furthermore, when negotiating remuneration, whether via fees from art institutions or through payment for live performances that are venue-based or online, the onus is primarily on individuals to negotiate their pay, often for them to be told that the budget cannot accommodate their requests or to be provided with smiley emoticons and 'likes' in lieu of pay. Many of the performers we interviewed reported their labour being unrecognised and, therefore, undervalued or unremunerated in such a way and subsequently feeling embarrassed about asking for fair payment, even in the form of donations.

As such, for now, the 'meantime work' we would recommend based on the research discussed in this book, alongside the findings of organisations such as FMTW (2021, 2022, 2023) and Industria (2023) would include *working with arts institutions, employers, and other commissioning bodies* to *lobby for fairer, more sustainable funding* and pay, including for performance work that is venue-based, but also for work that is performed online, e.g., via live-streaming or live-screening. Also required, however, is *a radical shift towards transparency and accountability*, including publishing pay structures and budgets for all creative work that is publicly funded. Furthermore, fixed-rate freelancer fees should be correlated with hours worked to ensure that actual wages are legal, fair, and equitable, including across demographic groups, sub-sectors, and between freelancers and PAYE employees.

Recognition and Self-Worth

Unfair and unequal pay and the insecurity that surrounds it not only has a socioeconomic impact on those working in these industries, however. As we have seen, it also directly affects workers' self-confidence and self-worth. This, in turn, can further negatively impact on relationships with children, partners, and others in their immediate and wider networks, not to mention their working lives and identities in the longer term. Over the course of many months and years, and a working lifetime, the cumulative effect of being underpaid and undervalued, producing '*a pervasive sense of exhaustion and injustice*' (Industria, 2023: 71, *emphasis added*), can make the viability of sustaining a working life in performance and other art forms inaccessible to all but the most privileged, producing a negating, combined experience of socioeconomic, recognitive and affective precarity which then undermines performers' capacity to make and sustain a living in their chosen industry or discipline.

In this respect, we concur with the conclusions of the *Artist Leaks* project that a fair, equitable, and sustainable future for freelance and self-employed live performers and other creative workers requires moving towards a way of living and working together that supports and values creative lives, tackling the causes rather than simply the effects of all forms of precarity, including the so-called elective precarity that they highlight (Industria, 2023), as well as the chronic socioeconomic, recognitive, and affective forms of precarity that our own study has shown to be profoundly and destructively interconnected.

Regarding so-called elective precarity, there is a need to acknowledge and challenge the assumption that many freelancers choose to work freelance, knowing that doing so involves 'trading' job security for creative autonomy as this assumption often conceals the structural constraints within which such choices are made, including the fact that in many sectors and roles PAYE work is simply not available. Moreover, it occludes the multiple forms of precarity perpetuated by such constraints though equating the 'choice' to work freelance with an implied acceptance of under- (on non-) payment, unfair and often unsafe working conditions, insecurity and a lack of flexibility, and the expectation of having no voice, representation, or advocacy to address these chronic problems.

Tackling the impact of all forms of precarity, including that which is supposedly 'elective', where freelancers are presumed to be willing to trade financial viability for the creative freedom that their freelance status

purportedly brings, requires mobilising collectively to oppose this logic, while seeking to '*understand art as … labour*' (Industria, 2023: 12, *emphasis added*). The latter requires making a collaborative demand for transparency, accountability, and recourse that ascribes not only financial value to creative work but equally the recognition that freelance work, and indeed creativity itself, is of intrinsic social and cultural value, prompting both self-esteem and collective self-confidence amongst its practitioners.

Collective Representation

While it is vital then that the above issues are addressed if we are to see a meaningful improvement in the working lives of freelance and self-employed live performers and other members of the cultural and creative workforce in the UK, a vital piece in the jigsaw is the need to nurture collaborative campaigning across the sector. It is generally recognised that freelancers and the self-employed represent a 'special challenge' when it comes to collective labour organisation (Wynn, 2015: 111), especially so for more traditional trade unions that struggle to address the individualisation of the employment relationship common to freelance work.

Nonetheless, while trade union membership is something that needs to be better understood and encouraged, an alternative way forward can be found in the growth of new collective actors (Mezihorak et al., 2023) in the sector, such as FMTW, Creative UK, One Dance UK, and Museums Freelance, amongst others. While often focusing on collecting and collating data and insight into the working conditions and experiences of freelancers and the self-employed, such organisations have also identified and, in some cases, offered workable routes to securing additional voice and representation.

Embedding the cultural and creative sector in a more transparent and accountable funding model, coupled with a more equitable and sustainable organisation of freelance work and workers, would, therefore, represent an integral aspect of the kind of 'meantime work' that could help to improve current working conditions and fortunes across the sector.

Freelancing Beyond Precarity: Towards a Fairer Future for Cultural and Creative Workers

In conclusion, and with the points discussed above in mind, in response to questions about the type of support that freelance and self-employed performers and the live performance industries are likely to need in order to recover from the long-term effects of the pandemic, of Brexit, and of the cost-of-living crisis that emerged in its wake, and to secure fairer futures for workers and the sector as a whole, four priorities were identified by the performers we studied:

- A need to regulate and supplement low (or no) pay to mitigate against the chronic forms of precarity that the pandemic, Brexit, and the current cost of living crisis dramatically accentuated, but which pre-existed all of these events. A fair and accessible funding model that could work in a UK context is considered necessary to tackle endemic, multidimensional precarity and the inequalities it perpetuates.
- Access to supportive infrastructures comparable to those available to PAYE employees, including (but not limited to) sick pay, maternity/paternity leave, representation, and recourse when needed (e.g., following experiences of harassment, discrimination, unlawful and/or unsafe practices, and other negative behaviours) is also deemed essential.
- Also needed is a systemic review of employment protection for freelancers and the self-employed. Part of this review should involve evaluating possible subsidies to support access, equipment, and skills development as the nature, meaning, and experience of 'live' performance continues to evolve in order to maintain, as far as possible, some of the benefits opened up by online performance, for example increased accessibility, and to mitigate against some of its challenges (e.g., inequitable access to high-speed broadband, and necessary equipment).
- A concerted effort to promote and encourage collective forms of organisation, solidarity, voice, and representation across the sector, especially amongst freelancers and the self-employed is also deemed to be essential to moving towards a fairer, more equitable, and sustainable future for freelancers and the self-employed, and for the cultural and creative sector more widely.

Conclusion

From the perspective of their financial security and professional identities, the COVID-19 pandemic was a particularly traumatic experience for those working as performers in the live entertainment industries. Nonetheless, while far from welcoming such developments, many reported experiencing COVID-19 and successive periods of national lockdown as at least an opportunity to develop creative, artistic, and technical skills, build a global audience base, combine work and home more seamlessly, and experiment with ways of working that are potentially more accessible, inclusive, and sustainable. Many saw online performances during successive periods of lockdown as contributing towards the maintenance of social interaction, and culture as a point of community and connection, as a 'social good'.

Even so, other freelance and self-employed performers we studied raised serious concerns about the immediate and long-term impact of the pandemic on their working lives and on the cultural and creative sector more generally. Perhaps not surprisingly, the loss of proximity to an audience and opportunities to connect in an immersive and interactive way with fellow performers resulted in significant artistic challenges, while practical and skills-based limitations constrained the possibilities attached to performing online. Overall, for almost all of the performers we studied, even those who were able to generate some income to offset their overall losses by performing online, the pandemic was nothing short of catastrophic; it foregrounded the multiple and intersecting forms of chronic precarity shaping performers' working lives that the pandemic dramatically worsened, but which it did not create.

The interrelated priorities and potential actions noted above have been identified as necessary to working towards a fairer, sustainable future for freelance and self-employed performers, their industries, and the sector as a whole to offset these chronic forms of precarity and their ongoing impact. These could offer performers and cultural and creative workers a much-needed degree of financial stability; they could help to mitigate against some of the multiple precarities and inequalities described in this book, and they could help to ensure that performers and other creative workers from under-represented backgrounds are not forced out of their industries, and the sector, and that new entrants are not deterred. To this end, more must be done to understand the evolving relationship

between the changing meaning, nature, and experience of 'live' performance and the conditions required for a fairer, accessible, and sustainable future for the UK's live performance industry. It is imperative that some of the lessons learned from the pandemic are not forgotten and that the extremes of socioeconomic, affective, and recognitive precarity that cultural and creative workers experienced during COVID-19 and in its wake are not part of the sector's future.

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