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Middle Eight

Are workers musicians?

SIMON FRITH

Introduction

Working in Music: The Musicians' Union, Musical Labour and Employment was a conference organised by Martin Cloonan and John Williamson at the Mitchell Library in Glasgow in January 2016. The conference marked the end of a four-year research project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council on the history of the UK's Musicians' Union (www.muhistory.com). It was a particularly interesting event for two reasons. First, among the conferees were a number of MU officials, including its General Secretary. It is unusual for research subjects to take part in academic discussions of their activities. Second, among the various papers there were, to me, a surprising number on the history of musician organisations elsewhere, in France, Belgium and Switzerland, in Portugal and Galicia, in Ireland, Chile and the USA, in Australia and New Zealand.

What these papers had in common, despite the fascinating differences in detail and approach, was an underlying question: are musicians workers? And it is this question on which I want to reflect here. My remarks draw not only from the papers at the conference, but also on research in the history of live music in Britain, from discussions with Annette Davison about her research on early cinema musicians and, above all, on Martin Cloonan and John Williamson's history of the Musicians' Union (MU).[1]

I will begin my comments, though, with a throwaway remark made by the General Secretary of the Musicians' Union, John Smith. During a discussion of copyright he referred to 'working musicians – not stars or anyone like that'. In the context of a discussion of record rights, which apply differently to 'named performers', who negotiate royalties, and unnamed performers, who play in recording sessions for a fee, Smith's reference to working musicians made perfect sense but I was still struck by the implication that session musicians somehow 'work' in a way that named artists, stars and people like that, do not. This is not, I think, an account of what anyone actually does in the studio; it refers, rather, to their varying *status* as music-makers: some musicians are considered to be workers, others are not.

[1] See S. Frith *et al.*, 2013, *The History of Live Music in Britain, Volume 1: 1950–1967* (Farnham: Ashgate), chapter 3; Annette Davison, 2013, 'Workers' rights and performing rights: cinema music and musicians prior to synchronized sound', in *The Sounds of the Silents in Britain*, ed. J. Brown and A. Davison (Oxford, Oxford University Press), pp. 243–62; and Martin Cloonan and John Williamson, 2016, *Players' Work Time* (Manchester, Manchester University Press).

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It is this status difference that interests me. To what extent has the MU been shaped by the problems of determining which music makers are 'working musicians' and which are not? To what extent has the MU shaped our understanding of musical labour?

The supply of musical labour: music as a craft

The MU's origins lie in the activities of late 19th century working musicians who thought of themselves as craftsmen, skilled labourers providing musical services. Joseph Williams and his colleagues in the Amalgamated Musicians' Union (AMU), founded in 1893, got together in response to the increasingly oligopolistic organisation of the music hall and variety circuit. Musicians needed to be collectively organised too, rather than as freelance and self-employed workers competing with each other for work. The AMU thus followed the model of other late 19th century craft unions. Williams's task was to get individualistic musicians to act together – to protect us 'from ourselves', in Williams's own words, to get better control of the supply of musical labour through collective bargaining. The most significant MU activity ever since has been to stop 'working musicians' being substituted by people (including, increasingly, people with machines) who are not really musicians at all. The distinction between working musicians and other kinds of music-makers has driven union policy throughout its history.

There have, of course, been employment situations in which labour market forces, the supply of and demand for musical services, have been favourable to unionised musicians and from which working musicians have certainly benefitted, but these conditions have been the result not simply of MU action (strikes or boycotts, for example) but also of employers' ideology and the kind of employment involved, for example when substitute labour is inappropriate and/or unavailable or when the potential losses to the employer caused by any disruption of the music-making process are greater than the costs of closed shop agreements. I'll return to this point later.

Even in the 19th century, though, there was another way of thinking about musicians: not as workers or potential members of a craft union but as professionals. The Society of British Musicians was founded in 1834 and in the same year that Joseph Williams launched the AMU the classical flautist, Fred Orcherton, founded the London Orchestral Association, which by the time it merged with the AMU to form the MU (in 1921) was called the London Orchestral Union of Professional Musicians. There were clear ideological differences between musicians who regarded themselves as workers and musicians who regarded themselves as professionals. As an editorial in the *Musicians' Journal* put it in 1924,

> Musicians occupy a place in society which falls partly on one and partly on the other side of the line dividing the proletarian from the liberal professions; and they offer an example of the difficulty of drawing a sharp distinction between intellectual and manual workers.[2]

[2] 'Internationalism', *Musicians' Journal*, 24 April, p. 5. Cyril Ehrlich characterised the difference between the London Orchestral Association (and other musicians' societies and organisations) and the AMU with the cricketing analogy of Gentlemen vs. Players, but this is not quite right. Gentleman cricketers were assertively amateurs; members of the London Orchestral Association were equally assertively

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My point here, though, is that, whatever the status or identity implications of describing oneself as a worker or a professional, musicians share the problem of controlling entry to their trade. It is not necessarily determined by exams and qualifications (like a profession) or by a formal apprenticeship (like a craft or guild).[3] That said, working musicians tend to be as clear as professional musicians that some performers are not 'real' musicians because they lack the necessary musical skills (this is one reason for singers' sometimes uneasy status in musicians' organisations).

I can give the example of my late father-in-law, a successful working musician who ended his musical career leading the band at the Savoy Hotel while also, in the 1960s, doing a lot of session work in London recording studios. He was contemptuous of British Beat music, sure that beat bands (including the Beatles) lacked musical skills, convinced that their records were all performed by session players. The irony of his position was that he had no formal music education or apprenticeship either, did not really read music and would not have become a working musician in the first place if formal qualifications had been necessary for the job (he started out as a singer).

Given the difficulties of determining who can rightfully claim to be a musician, it is not surprising that much MU energy has been devoted to determining who can't rightfully make such a claim and to persuading music employers not to use such people to provide musical services. MU history reveals the changing targets of such campaigns: military and police bands, women (particularly after the First World War), 'aliens' (foreign musicians and migrants), machines (and those who play them) – sound cinema, recording, Hammond Organs, synthesisers, deejays, etc. All these were seen to be providing unfair competition for musical jobs (and MU members' arguments were often overlaid with sexism, racism, xenophobia, technophobia and, indeed, musical snobbery).

In the long sweep of history most such 'excluded' musicians were eventually brought into the Union fold. Despite its central concern for unfair competition, from the start the MU also had a policy that anyone who did make money from selling their musical services should be part of the collective organisation, which is not to say that the moments of transition – from excluded to welcomed performers – were always uncontroversial, as is evident in members' letters to *The Musician*, the MU's journal.

The problem that doesn't go away is the amateur musician, the person who isn't paid for musical services but may provide them for free. The relationship between amateur and professional musicians is an important aspect of musical life in Britain and not all negative for the MU, whose members have long benefited from paid work from amateur performance groups such as choirs. It is also the case that in many popular music worlds (folk, jazz and rock most obviously) the distinction between the amateur and the professional performer is not clear-cut anyway. For example, there are a significant number of British rock musicians now in their 60s and 70s who are still playing paid gigs in much the same pub and club venues (and with much the same repertoire) as when they started performing in their teens. Some

professionals. See Cyril Ehrlich, 1985, *The Music Profession in Britain Since the Eighteenth Century: A Social History* (Oxford, Clarendon Press), pp. 121–63.

[3] Most orchestral musicians do go through formal assessments and exams for entry into conservatoires, the usual route into the classical music 'profession', but there are exceptions even here.

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of these musicians will have had more or less lengthy periods of full-time employment as musicians, some will have had quite other full-time occupations; they would not now distinguish between themselves in terms of being amateur or professional.

Nevertheless, the integration of musicians playing for their living with musicians playing for free does make problems for the former in terms of the public understanding of musical labour, an issue to which I will return.

The demand for musical labour – musical employers

In terms of the everyday music market, the employment of musical labour is relatively under-researched: we don't have a clear map of who pays how much for which musical services where, although having two working musicians in my immediate family (who do make a full time living from music – one as an avant-garde composer and rock guitarist and the other as a classical timpanist and percussion player), I am well aware of the amazing range of people who use their services and of how many different kinds of musical activity are involved.[4] I'm also well aware that many of the people who employ their services are musicians and, indeed, MU members. This is to complicate the usual distinction between music worker and music user, between musical supply and demand.

Here, though, I will focus on the significance for MU policy of institutional employers: broadcasters, state subsidised orchestras, record companies (and their recording studios), cinema/film companies (and their sound studios), major promoters and venue companies (dance halls, clubs, cruise ships, etc.)

These employers are significant because they are the ones with whom closed shop agreements are (or have been) possible – the threat to disrupt their money-making activities has force. In Britain the MU's negotiating position has also been strengthened by key employers' music ideologies, whether it is the BBC's public service commitment to education as well as entertainment and, importantly, to live music broadcasting, or the Arts Council's belief in the cultural value of high music making and high music makers.[5] In the post-war period the MU thus established a strength in the classical music market that had spillover benefits for popular musicians too, in terms of working conditions, basic fees and so forth.

This was obviously good for the MU: union membership became necessary for all musicians likely to be involved with these institutional employers. However, on the other hand, this also meant that the MU came to be – was seen to be – part of the musical establishment, and thus an irritant for if not an enemy of the DIY and 'alternative' music-making that drove the post-rock 'n' roll history of British pop music. No rock musician memoir is now complete, for example, without a chapter describing the idiocy of the MU/BBC miming and performing rules for *Top of the Pops*.

This brings me to my final points. In the MU's early days there was a clear distinction between working musicians and the people (composers and songwriters)

[4] One question this raises is how widely the MU can and should define 'musical labour'. Is a music teacher a working musician? Most working musicians certainly teach.

[5] This is usefully documented in Benjamin Wolf's PhD thesis, 'Promoting new music in London, 1930–1980', Music, Royal Holloway, 2010.

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whose music they performed – hence Joseph Williams's hostility to the Performing Right Society. There seemed to be no sense of shared interest between the AMU's working musicians and the Performing Right Society's music authors and publishers. However, 20th century developments of popular music saw composers and performers increasingly becoming the same people, whether in jazz, country music, folk or, eventually, pop and rock. At the same time, for a significant period of the MU's history, the music market has been dominated by the record industry. In a discussion of literary culture, Stefan Collini recently reflected that:

> Capitalism has continued to shape the profession of letters in its own image: the mechanisms governing the sale of commodities mean a few individuals become very rich indeed and most do not; the whole system being kept going by the illusion that they might.[6]

The same could be said of the domination of musical life by record companies and, in the context of this paper, this means that the idea of 'musician as worker' has continually been opposed by the idea of 'musician as creative artist', an auteur who may be happy to benefit from union membership but does not want to be thought of as 'a worker'. This brings us back to the distinction between named artist and unnamed session musician, and to the romantic irrationality of young musicians who opt for the named artist rather than the session musician trajectory, even though they would have a more stable, better rewarded and much longer career following the latter route.

There is a final and different question involved here too: whether musicians work or play. Martin Cloonan and John Williamson have titled their MU history, *Player's Work Time*. This is an excellent and apposite punning phrase but raises a serious point for the Union. The belief that music – making music – is in itself, fun, a pleasurable activity that shouldn't be thought of as work is embedded in our culture. Music is something humans do; we are *all* musicians – hence the vast number of amateur musicians, people who play for love. Such love of music is, of course, why people are willing to pay for musical labour in the first place, but it also means, perhaps, that they don't really regard or music *as* work. Its value is precisely as non-work. Musicians may, then, be workers, but they shouldn't be!

[6] Stefan Collini, Review of D.J. Taylor's *The Prose Factory*, *The Guardian*, 9 January 2016, p. 9.

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