The Original Gig Economy

James Bau Graves

A “gig” is a slang term for a musical performance, allegedly a shortened form of “engagement,” which has long been common usage among performing artists. *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians* describes it as “a term commonly applied to an engagement of one night only.” The earliest documented use of the term appears in *Melody Maker*, September 7, 1926: “One Popular Gig Band Makes Use of a Nicely Printed Booklet.”

More recently, the term has expanded to include almost any kind of employment, but particularly work that is arranged on an ad hoc, day-to-day basis, such as occasional engagement at the discretion of the marketplace as opposed to regular and predictable 40-hours-per-week employment. “The gig economy” refers to an enormous and growing portion of American labor that is short-term, contractual work in which workers must continuously hustle to pursue the next gig, or suffer the financial consequences. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Gig workers are spread among diverse occupation groups and are not easily identified in surveys of employment and earnings.”

This essay addresses some of the most common issues faced by workers in the original gig economy: music. While its focus is on the specific challenges to pursuit of a musical career, many of the issues raised here apply equally to any of the arts disciplines. Dancers, actors, painters and poets often face similar employment challenges, as do many itinerant or self-employed workers in other fields. The author is
a musician, music producer and music educator, so music is the discipline of choice, but it can serve here as a template that fits numerous other careers as well.

Making a career in music is an exceptionally challenging project, one that offers such a range of obstacles that one must be deeply and passionately devoted to the muse to persevere. In order to practice their art, musicians routinely sacrifice many of the comforts that most Americans take for granted. They must be sufficiently possessed by their emotional and spiritual need to make music that they are willing to forego a predictable income, a stable home life, health and retirement benefits, the fruits of middle class aspiration. They are subject to a particularly predacious sector of the economy, which routinely takes advantage of their talent and creativity, while offering few avenues to attain the education that might protect them and their work. This industry is replete with examples of masters whose contributions to American culture are manifest, but who were so consistently exploited by record companies, managers, booking agents, promoters and publishers that they lived and often died in poverty. The fruits of their creativity were deliberately siphoned away by an industry ostensibly devoted to their craft but deeply distorted ethically.

Before the aspiring musician has the opportunity to experience any of this, good or bad, there are years of solitary practice, rehearsal and the honing of one’s musical capacities. The great majority of professional musicians start playing as children and devote decades of effort to attain a level of competence allowing them to pursue a performance career. Often, this musical education takes place outside of any formal setting. Conservatory graduates are a relatively small segment of the musical community, greatly exceeded by musicians whose work falls outside the European art music canon: jazz, blues, country, folk, rock, hip hop, and hundreds of regional and ethnic variants and sub-genres. These musicians are largely self-taught, or learn their
art within a community setting in which their interests and aspirations can take root, often learning from grandparents, uncles, cousins or the kid next door.

But it is a long journey, requiring many more years of dedication than is required by most other career paths. And since musicians do not generally enjoy high social standing in our culture, this education – unlike science, technology, engineering and math – does not often reap the benefits of governmental subsidy, or highly paid employment upon graduation (or, in some cases, parental support). If you want to be a musician, you’re going to learn how to do it on your own dime, and on your own time.

Performing is among the most valued satisfactions of the musical career, but it is quite distinct from the act of music-making. The thrill of standing in front of an audience and demonstrating one’s special capacities and passions is a very powerful motivator. Music educators build frequent performance opportunities into the curriculum because they are such significant inducements to student success. So most musicians grow up performing regularly onstage, even as children. While they are refining their musical talents, they must simultaneously master the arts of live performance, which are very different and distinct from strictly musical considerations. This, too, is a realm in which most performers must learn from their own practice, and with little guidance, or by observing elders. Some find the stage to be an easy, comfortable environment; for others it can be a lifelong source of anxiety, often putting an abrupt end to a musical career. Performance can also be hazardous. Aside from the late night hours, often in venues with inebriated patrons, playing many instruments can itself be physically stressful. Musicians are routinely afflicted with repetitive-motion injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome. Singers must care for their throats and vocal chords with great care. Of course, none are compensated for gigs missed due to illness or injury.
Then, there is the lifestyle that goes along with a career as a performer. The vast majority of gigs are one night stands, so the artist must be prepared to travel constantly to the next stage. Even musical theater artists who might spend a month or more in one venue are probably not doing so in their hometown, and even then the show moves on to the next city on the tour. This applies to musicians up and down the continuum of fame and fortune. Like those at the start of their careers, musicians at the pinnacle of international fame must live out of a suitcase much of the time, and spend more time in airport departure lounges than they do at home with their families. Indeed, the life of a traveling troubadour makes stable family relationships extremely challenging. When a performer is gone from home a substantial portion of every year, intimacy is difficult to maintain. It is no wonder that drug addiction and alcoholism are so often associated with musicians; the life they must lead for a successful career is intrinsically distorted, not just for the musician, but for everyone close to them as well. “Home” really is anywhere they lay their hats, but that is not a home that would be recognizable as such to most people.

Incessant travel, unfortunately, does not guarantee a predictable revenue stream. Income from playing gigs is exceptionally quixotic. Most professional musicians experience alternating periods of feast and famine, a string of good paying jobs is followed by a fallow period during which nobody seems to be hiring. Touring musicians can accumulate earnings during the course of a tour, which might last a week or many months, depending on the artists’ popularity and business acumen. That income hopefully is sufficient to carry them until the next set of engagements. But if it is not, the sporadic nature of the musician’s income renders them poor credit risks. Credit card companies are not reticent about artists’ lifestyles, so, like many other low paid workers across the economy, musicians can easily find themselves indebted at
usurious interest rates. Indeed, the roller coaster of many musicians’ earnings and their troubled credit scores deny access to the stability of mortgages and home ownership, the traditional building blocks of middle class wealth accumulation.

Since virtually all gigs are contract labor, musicians enjoy none of the perquisites and protections of a “normal” workplace. Apart from those that musicians create for themselves, there are no company health insurance plans, paid sick days, vacation time, or retirement plans. As self-employed workers, they must file Form SE along with their income taxes each year, which takes a slowly growing percentage of their earnings in lieu of FICA, currently 15.3% (12.4% for Social Security and 2.9% for Medicare). Many musicians ride on their spouse’s health insurance plan, assuming their spouse holds a “day job,” or buy insurance on the Obamacare exchanges. Or, if they are young enough to feel invulnerable, they often go without.

Frequently it is not just the spouse who holds the day job. A large percentage of professional musicians work at other employment to make ends meet. For many, this is service employment, waiting on tables or driving for Uber, lines of work that also usually come without benefits. Many gigging musicians teach music on the side, either in schools (although in-school music education has steadily declined in America for several decades) or privately. This helps to keep them engaged in music as a profession, but it can also cut into the flexibility of scheduling that is required to be responsive to gig availability. And of course, many musicians put their musical careers on hold while they accept full time employment in an unrelated field. This can sometimes prove to be such a powerful magnet that it becomes challenging for musicians to return to their performance careers when the next opportunity arrives. Indeed, once in the mainstream economy, some musicians become painfully aware of
the comparative drawbacks to the musical lifestyle. The instrument comes out of its case less and less frequently.

The musical gig economy confronts aspiring performers with a host of business-related challenges that they may have never taken into consideration. Musicians tend to focus their attention on playing music, but it turns out that a successful musical career demands far more time and attention devoted to the business of music making than to the actual making of music. Successful entertainers learn this and adapt their expectations accordingly. Young musicians are often unequipped to navigate the gauntlet of agents, managers, and venue bookers with which they must contend on a daily basis. If they compose their own original material, add a layer of publishers, copyright lawyers, and licensing agencies like ASCAP and BMI, most of whom seem to communicate in a foreign language.

Some musicians learn to deal with all of this as a matter of course, but there are many others who never expected to have to master the intricacies of a complex industrialized system. They just want to play their music and let somebody else deal with all of that. Unfortunately, this leaves such artists subject to all manner of exploitation. It turns out that the ability to successfully swim in this ocean of the entertainment industry has little connection to artistic ability. Everyone who works in music can list the brilliant musicians who’ve spent their career playing crummy bar gigs because their business chops were no match for their musical ones. Equally, we all know mediocrities who have made successful careers on the basis of their business acumen rather than their aesthetic assets.

The structure of formal music education abets this trend. Take a look at the course catalog at any conservatory or music school. You’ll find a rich array of course material addressing every aspect of music making, but in most cases not a single class
about how to actually conduct a musical career. What should you look for in a management contract, and why would you want a manager in the first place? How do you copyright your work? What constitutes fair use? How do you write a fellowship proposal? What do you need to get your work in front of talent buyers? Is union membership (typically the American Federation of Musicians) going to help your career or make it even more difficult? It is a shame and a scandal that none of this has made it into the curriculum at most music schools. They produce graduates who can play their scales up one side and down the other, but who have no idea how to negotiate a publishing deal or what a record company can and cannot do for their career.

Layered on this web of business necessity is the rapidly changing nature of the entire industry. Technology has effectively transformed the revenue streams across the industry. Twenty years ago artists toured to support sales of recordings; today recordings are the bait to attract audiences to live performances. Record companies that once dominated the industry now find themselves competing with indie artists who produced their own music via a Kickstarter campaign and market it based on their Twitter feeds. The rules of the game have not disappeared, but many of them have been bent beyond recognition. As a result, musical professionals have by necessity become nimble at contending with changing circumstances.

Among the musicians who struggle against these realities of business, traditional artists – individuals who preserve and propagate the many streams that comprise our collective national heritage – are at a unique disadvantage. Most of them represent the arts of communities that are marginal to mass culture, regional and ethnic genres that enjoy little public exposure outside their own community setting. Our National Heritage Fellowships, which celebrate America’s most acclaimed tradition-bearers, are most often awarded to masters who are heroes within their own communities, but
whose work has never reached a broad public audience. Their work is far removed from the world of agents and electronic press kits. Only a handful of them can actually make a living through the practice of their art; the majority find employment in other fields and pursue music in their free time. In most of the developed economies, masters of traditional heritage are recognized and compensated by their national governments. There is no such system in the United States. The Traditional Arts division at the National Endowment for the Arts has received the smallest budgetary allocation of all the Endowment’s discipline programs since it was created – currently it awards less than $2 million in grants annually to support traditional culture in the entire country. There is no national foundation that includes support for traditional arts as a part of its mandate. We are systematically allowing the flower of America’s innate cultural genius to wither.

Of course, all of these pitfalls over which so many musical careers stumble are magnified for artists of color attempting to make their way in the music industry. In the public arts and culture field, encompassing concert halls, theaters, museums, operas, and dance companies that operate as nonprofits, the discrepancies in resource allocation to white organizations compared to African, Latino, Asian, Arab and Native American (ALAANA) organizations is stark. Fifty-five percent of all foundation support for arts and culture goes to less than two percent of the largest arts organizations, those with annual budgets of more than $5 million, virtually all of which are white-led organizations. Ninety percent of arts nonprofits have budgets of less than $1 million, including the great majority of ALAANA organizations, but collectively they receive just twenty-one percent of grant funding. The financial and organizational support available to artists of color is a mere fraction of that afforded to white musicians. This is no comment whatsoever on the quality of anyone’s music making or devotion to work.
It is just a fact of entrenched institutional racism, which the entire public culture sector has failed to address, even in a modest way, despite decades of very public hand-wringing.

In Chicago, where I live and work, racial segregation is extraordinarily severe, with very clear physical demarcations between white, black and Latino neighborhoods. It is easy to see, looking at the map, exactly where the restrictive real estate covenants and neighborhood redlining started and stopped. White folks on the north side of the street, black folks on the south. Although the city’s population is roughly one-third white, one-third black and one-third Latino, only 14 percent of arts organizations are located in black or Latino neighborhoods. Eighty-six percent of arts nonprofits are physically located in white neighborhoods, some at great distance from black or Latino audiences. The performers who work in these venues reflect the communities in which they are situated. So white musicians have almost six times as many gig opportunities as their ALAANA counterparts. Of course, these lines are no longer a part of the legal fabric of the city, musicians are free to cross them at will, and they do every day. But nevertheless, the disparity remains stark. There are many black kids who have never ventured into the white North Side, and even more white kids who would never even consider visiting the black South Side.

One might imagine that things could be different in the for-profit sector of the music industry, that enterprising impresarios would find a way to deliver music to every kind of audience, wherever they live. But that would be mistaken. A map of the Performing Arts Venue (PAV) licenses issued by the City of Chicago to bars and nightclubs that feature live entertainment looks almost exactly like the map of nonprofits: they cluster in the white neighborhoods. In this city, a minority of the population has almost unlimited access to an exceptionally rich palette of cultural
offerings. The rest of the city has very few opportunities to showcase its musical talents.

Yet, a deeper examination tells a different story. A map showing the home addresses of Chicago composers who hold musical copyrights is thick on the South Side, far more than the rest of the city. This is representative of all those blues men who created the Chicago blues canon that has spread throughout the world and changed the nature of global music. They lived, worked, played, and recorded on the South Side, and most of them died in poverty stricken circumstances. The presence of all those dots on the map is testimony to the fact that every community has its cultural vitality that is worthy of celebration. The institutions we have created, however, do not celebrate the culture of every community. They focus, almost exclusively, on the arts and culture of one segment of the city, Eurocentric art to the exclusion of everything else.

If our public institutions could shift their focus to the entire population, the disparity of opportunity between white musicians and musicians of color would surely also diminish. It is difficult for many of us who have spent our lives working in this field to express much optimism about this prospect. Entrenched white privilege has been exceedingly resilient for centuries, and action to demand a shift in priorities defies the current regressive political climate. However, a consortium of Chicago arts nonprofits has been striving to change the conversation within our own field. Enrich Chicago originally consisted of the CEOs of fifteen cultural institutions attempting to hold ourselves and each other accountable for actually taking positive steps to reduce the gross racial disparities that plague our corner of the economy. These 15 have been joined by a half dozen of the largest foundation arts donors in town, equally committed to changing their own practice toward more equitable outcomes. Together, this collaborative has pushed itself toward deep introspection about how we have
internalized institutional racism, and what specific steps might be taken to address our own culpability. It is a nascent movement, but already it is attracting attention both in the local philanthropic community and in the national arts and culture scene.”

Contemporary American capitalism is unlikely to address in any meaningful way the many challenges that are intrinsically woven into the life of a professional musician working in the gig economy. That music continues to be a major industry and source of employment speaks to its importance in the lives of individual musicians, and more broadly as a cultural touchstone. We value “our” music because it helps to tell us who we are. “The primary function of music,” writes the famous American ethnographer Alan Lomax, “is to remind the listener that he belongs to one certain part of the human race, comes from a certain region, belongs to a certain generation. The music of your place stands for everything that ever happened to you when you were a kid, reminds you of what your family was like, what it was like when you fell in love – in fact it is a quick and immediate symbol for all the deepest emotions the people of your part of the world share.” Music making offers a spiritual communion that feeds our deepest human needs, and provides the impetus to continue down the road to the next gig.

James Bau Graves has played thousands of gigs, and produced thousands more, over a long career. He is Executive Director of Chicago’s Old Town School of Folk Music, and Co-Chairman of Enrich Chicago. His book, Cultural Democracy, was published in 2005 by the University of Illinois Press.

---

1 Grove Music Online ed. L. Macy, grovemusic.com
3 Torpey, E, and Hogan, H., Working in a Gig Economy, United States Department of Labor, bls.org, 2016.
5 Mapping Arts and Culture Across Chicago, Cultural Policy Center at the University of Chicago, 2013.
6 ibid.
7 See enrichchi.org.