

# Can Music Make You Sick?

Final Report and  
Recommendations

A Help Musicians UK report based on a  
commissioned University of Westminster study



“

Everyone is now talking about depression in the music industries. It is a real thing. The dangers of the performing world have always been there. The highs are very high and then there is a kind of built-in obsolescence that means the lows are very, very low.

Neil Barnes, Leftfield

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# About Help Musicians UK

Help Musicians UK (HMUK) is Britain's leading independent music charity.

Since 1921, HMUK has provided help, support and opportunities to empower musicians at all stages of their lives. HMUK's mission is to create a sustainable future for all musicians and the industry.

The charity works in partnership to transform the music industry through advocacy, campaigning, programmes and targeted investment for all those within it.

[helpmusicians.org.uk](http://helpmusicians.org.uk)



## Supporting musicians' mental health

Mental health is one of the most important issues the music industry is facing right now. It is a complex matter, often co-existing alongside other factors related to welfare, relationships, physical health, employment and financial strain. It's one of the many challenges that musicians can face in managing their careers.

Drawing on the results of the Can Music Make You Sick? study commissioned by HMUK, the charity launched #MusicMindsMatter, a campaign for industry-wide support of a dedicated 24/7 support line and service for people working in music.

Set to launch in late 2017, the service will aim to provide advice and education on mental health problems, as well as improved access to mental health services, where possible.

## Health and Welfare

During 2016, HMUK's Health and Welfare team experienced a 22% increase in requests for help from musicians across the UK, and in total last year, the charity spent £1.9 million helping these musicians through direct and indirect financial support.

Where a musician qualifies for funding, HMUK can provide financial support to help with short-term housing and living costs. The charity also links people with statutory health services, funds access to qualified assessment and treatment, and directs musicians to other services that are best placed to help.

HMUK is fortunate to have a dedicated team of staff and volunteers who help them reach more musicians than ever before by providing a home visiting service for those that might be going through hardship, or who are isolated.

Many musicians cite HMUK as fundamental to their journey back to work. However, a musician's recovery isn't always black and white. For some people, not everything they're going through has a full resolution. Some musicians make a complete recovery, but for others it's an ongoing process and HMUK is able to support them, encourage them, connect them with advice and resources, and walk alongside them on their journey.

# Foreword

## Mental health: A wake up call for the music industry

**A musician's career often involves massive highs and lows, and learning how to navigate them is an art in itself.**

The lifestyle can be stressful, especially for freelancers. The industry can contribute towards higher levels of anxiety due to the precarious and unpredictable nature of the work. Many musicians find it hard to plan their time or future, and the combination of anti-social hours, exhaustion, and low or zero pay adds to the pressure.

We're at a pivotal point in the industry, and how we support those experiencing mental health concerns is one of the biggest challenges that we face.

While we have made progress, there is still a stigma around mental health, which isn't surprising in a profession where people are expected to perform consistently at the top level.

**The results revealed that those working in music may be up to three times more likely to experience depression, compared to the general public.**

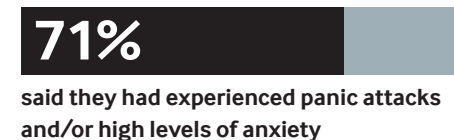
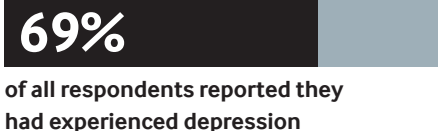
As the UK's leading independent music charity, HMUK has seen a rise in the number of calls and applications from musicians going through a crisis.

We wanted to understand why this was happening and what could be done about it.

### Can music really make you sick?

In 2016, we launched the first phase of Can Music Make You Sick? – a study by researchers Sally Anne Gross and Dr George Musgrave, University of Westminster, which received over 2,200 self-selected responses and provided vital insights into the scale of the problem.

The results revealed that those working in music may be up to three times more likely to experience depression, compared to the general public.



By creating a safe space where more musicians can speak openly about their mental health concerns, we can continue to chip away at the stigma so that those working in the industry don't have to suffer in silence.

### Our response to an urgent need

This booklet combines the 2016 research with new qualitative interviews and will enable us to pilot and launch a phased nationwide support service that will help us begin to respond to the needs of the music community.

We cannot do this alone. We believe the solution is in the hands of the music industry itself, which is why we launched #MusicMindsMatter. Not only is HMUK committed to building a Music Industry Mental Health Taskforce, we are also determined to work with key partners and influencers to give musicians and those around them a route to finding crucial clinical and therapeutic support.



**Christine Brown**  
Director of External Affairs  
Help Musicians UK

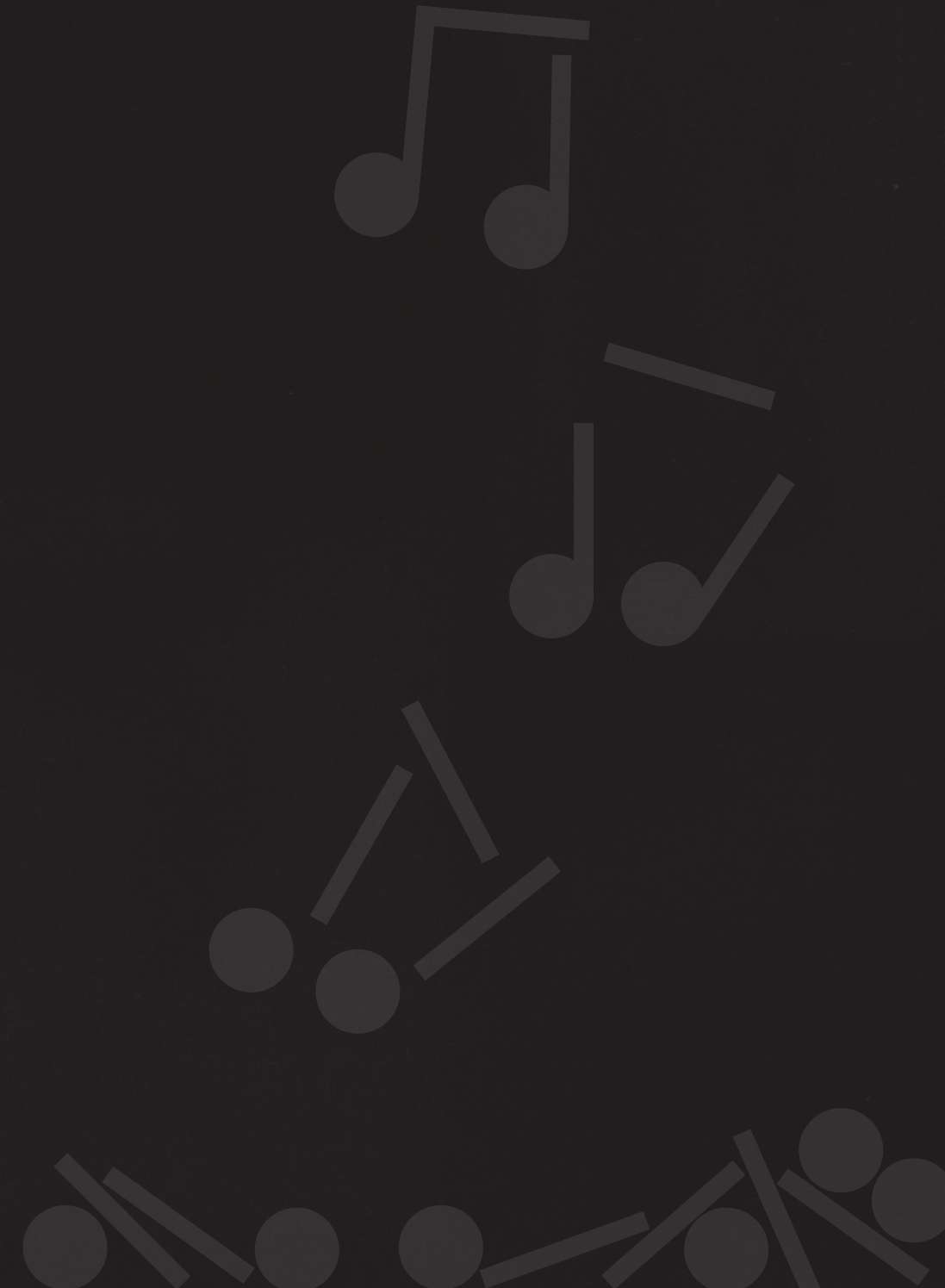


# What's making musicians sick?

Following on from 2016's quantitative research, this next phase delves deeper - consisting of in-depth qualitative interviews that were carried out with 26 musicians who took part in the initial study.

These 26 respondents were asked about their working experiences and how they understood these impacted on their mental health and general wellbeing.

The group of respondents included an even gender split and covered a broad range of ages, different career stages, and a wide variety of musical genres, including pop, soul, jazz, urban, reggae, classical, rock, dance, folk, opera, dubstep and musical theatre. Respondents came from across the UK, with 50% working in London and the South East and the rest based in Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Cardiff, Bristol and Belfast.



# Headline findings

The qualitative study identified a number of factors that can impact on a musician's mental health.

**01**

Music makers' relationship to their work is integral to their sense of self. It's how they define themselves.

**02**

People in the music industry need to believe in themselves and in their work, yet the unpredictable nature of the business can knock that belief.

**03**

Music makers can be reflective and highly self-critical, and exist in an environment of constant critical feedback.

**04**

A career in music is often precarious and unpredictable.

**05**

Many musicians have several different jobs as part of a portfolio career, and as a result can feel as though they work 24/7 and can't take a break.

**06**

It can be hard for musicians to admit to insecurities because of competition and wanting to appear on top of things.

**07**

Family, friends and partners play an important role in supporting musicians, but this can also lead to feelings of guilt.

**08**

Musicians' working environment can be anti-social and unsympathetic, with some people experiencing sexual abuse, harassment, bullying and coercion.

**09**

Musicians can find it hard to access affordable professional help for mental health issues.

**10**

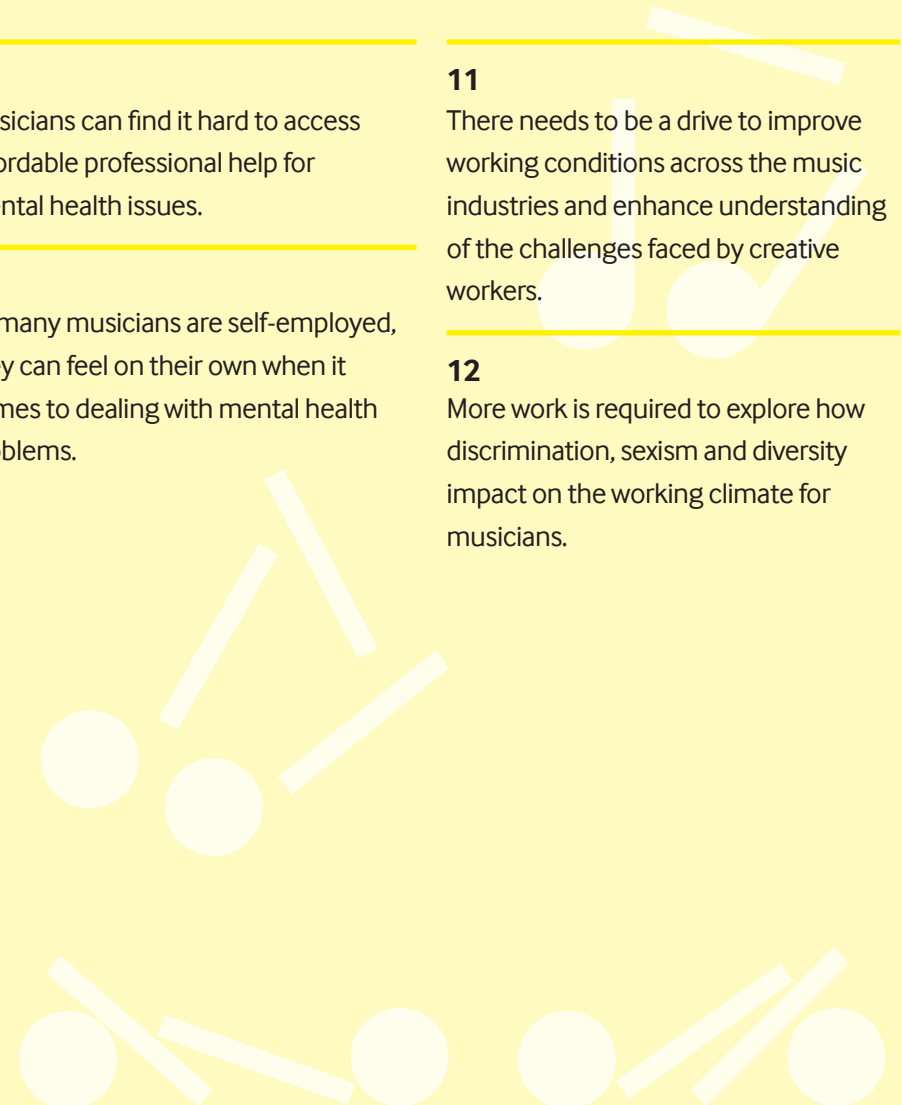
As many musicians are self-employed, they can feel on their own when it comes to dealing with mental health problems.

**11**

There needs to be a drive to improve working conditions across the music industries and enhance understanding of the challenges faced by creative workers.

**12**

More work is required to explore how discrimination, sexism and diversity impact on the working climate for musicians.







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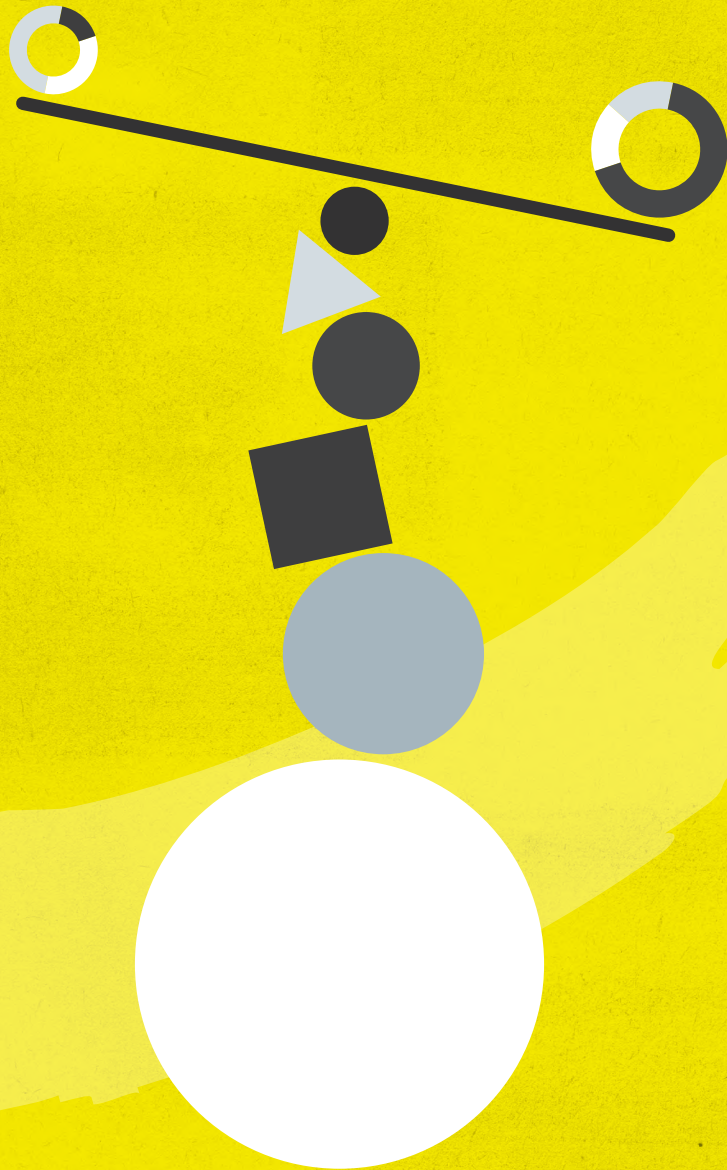
“I’m not sure I’d say it’s the music that makes me sick. It’s the lack of things I’d consider success. It’s the lack of support doing something that’s not considered ‘real work’.”

Anonymous survey  
respondent, 2016

## Musicians need to express their creativity

Music was a great source of pleasure and comfort to all the musicians and music professionals interviewed. For many, it is overwhelmingly their great love, and some even talked about it as though it was a person or a relationship.

Although this love of music is clearly a strength for a musician, the connection between performance, identity and the need for self-belief can leave musicians vulnerable. As Manchester-based producer Yvonne Ellis said: “If you’ve got a creative spark in you and you’re a musician, you need to use it. Because if you’re not being creative then it can make you ill, it can make you depressed.”



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“When there’s instability, anxiety and depression can creep in. This is the most unstable career that I can possibly imagine someone being in.”

Jamie Binns, Music manager

## The stress of a precarious industry

The precarious nature of the music business can cause people to live in a constant state of stress, unable to fully relax or switch off. An indie musician and theatre producer from Belfast said: “I haven’t had any days off that I can remember, for years, and I’ve felt really guilty about having time off.”

Even musicians who were successful and financially stable sometimes worried that their careers might disappear. A pop/urban producer based in London said: “You feel the wolves at the door at any moment.”





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“It starts to make you sick because you’re seeing everyone else prosper and you’re like, what am I doing wrong?”

R&B singer/songwriter, London

## | Money worries

Concerns about money were a constant theme in the conversations with musicians. A dubstep producer from London said: “I wake up in the morning and the first thing I think about is money...it’s constant stress.” Some emerging artists are working one or more jobs in order to not only survive, but also to subsidise their music making.

As a result, some respondents said they couldn’t plan their lives or futures as they’d like, and spoke about a creeping sense of self-doubt when they saw peers achieving life goals such as buying a house, getting married or going on holiday.





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“There are some incredibly talented musicians and writers who never get to see the light of day because they don’t get that break.”

Major record label executive

## You need luck, not just talent

Respondents spoke of their frustration at the role of luck in their careers. Not all musicians are given opportunities that reflect their hard work, belief in themselves or talent; success is often dependent on chance or “little bits of magic that come together at a certain time.”

A London pop/urban producer made this comparison: “Imagine you were a footballer and you were playing every day, but the goal was barely the size of

the football, where every match is 0-0, and where people scored once every six months or once a year. That’s what it’s like.”

It can be hard to maintain an equilibrium in a random environment where the odds seem stacked against you. The same producer added: “You get worn out by the relentless line of knockbacks, failures and disappointments, which are completely inevitable.”

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“You’re often waiting for validation and there can be a kind of worthlessness that comes when you work so hard on something and it doesn’t pay off.”

Indie/Musical Theatre, Belfast

## Everyone’s a critic

A career in music takes place in an atmosphere of constant criticism, with social media providing a never-ending flow of opinions from fans, journalists, friends, bloggers and fellow musicians.

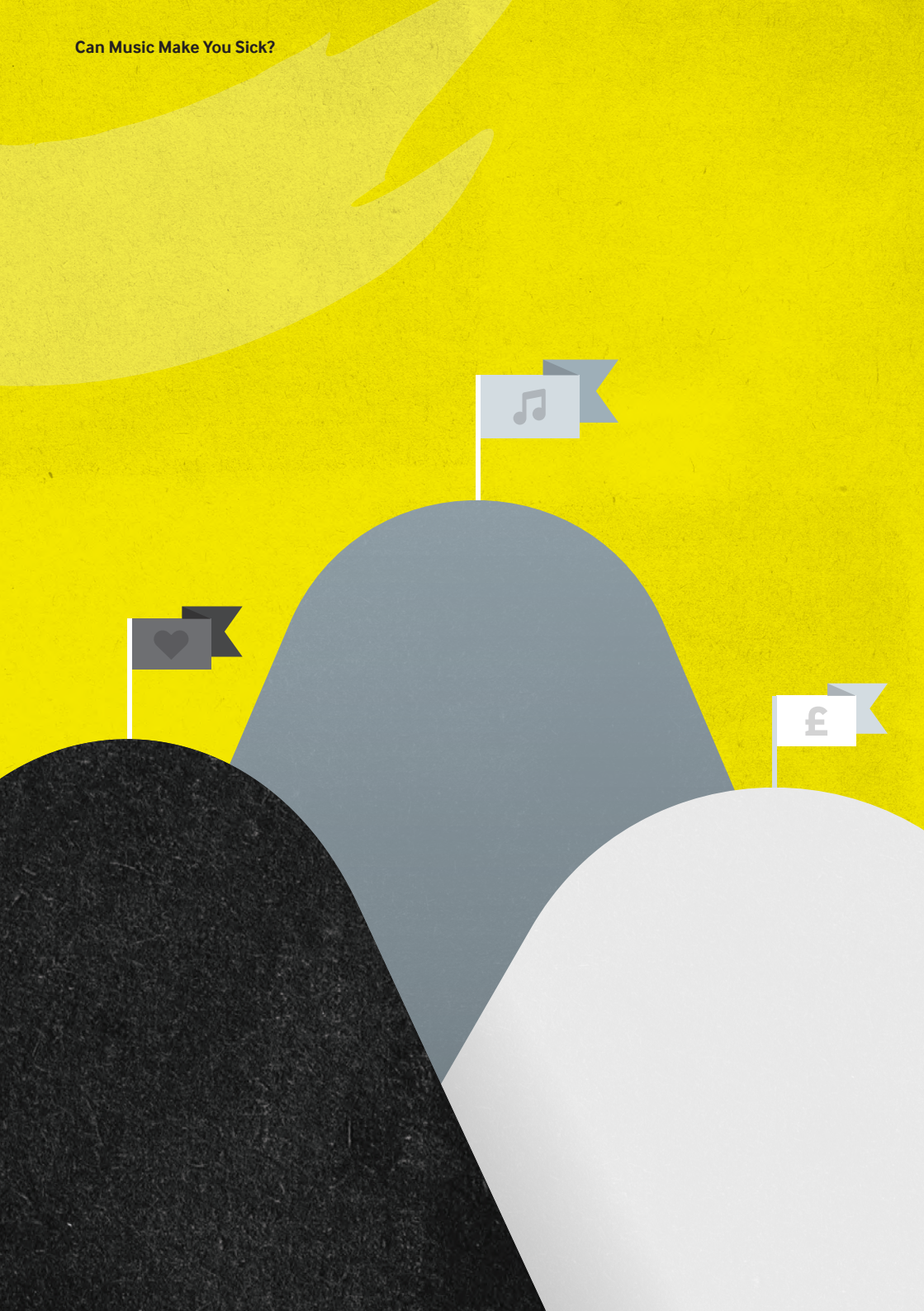
Many respondents in the survey said that they felt vulnerable to the criticism of others. As one producer in Manchester put it: “Music is you, stark naked in the street.”

A folk musician in Cardiff echoed this sentiment: “Writing and then putting [music] out in a public domain and waiting for some kind of feedback... that can make you really vulnerable.”

Anxiety can also spring from “waiting for the validation of someone to tell you you’re great” or from having a distorted view of an audience’s response. A musical director in Newcastle said: “I honestly believed that every time I went on stage, every single person in the room was an expert in music and was critiquing every note.”

When a musician develops a heightened fear of criticism, the result can vary from profound feelings of anxiety to depression.





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“People will ask ‘are you still doing your little music thing?’ Well, yes. Are you still doing your little banking thing?”

Dubstep producer, London

## How do you define success?

Those interviewed often found it hard to define their own success, as money isn't the sole solution or barometer.

Musicians of all genres talked about being troubled by feelings of self-doubt and anxiety about how they were valued – not only by their fellow musicians but by fans, audiences and the wider music sector. Some questioned the value of their creative work, given its ‘lack of financial value’.

However, despite all the difficulties of working in the industry, it was clear that the idea of giving up music was deeply disturbing. The notion of no longer being a musician was a source of greater anxiety than existing as a musician. For a significant number of people in the study, being successful often meant being able to call themselves musicians.





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“The stress of being away from home... When you’re really, really busy you hardly see the family, that’s when marital problems start.”

Jazz musician, Birmingham

## The toll on relationships

The strain of being a musician can have a profound effect on personal relationships and family life. Unsocial hours and time spent away recording, touring or promoting a release can force musicians to make a choice between their work life and their relationships.

Manchester-based DJ Paulette said: “It has made it pretty impossible... to meet someone. I had to make a choice between my job, my work life and my family, and I chose work over my family.”

Interviewees were grateful for the support they received from friends and family, but said this could also provoke feelings of guilt.

In addition, part of the pleasure of being a musician is bonding with colleagues who become an ‘alternative family’ when they’re on tour or working closely on a musical project. This is great when things are going well, but is another factor that can amplify feelings of rejection or depression if the work comes to an end.





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“Why am I going into this environment, which for women is so unsafe? And it really is. It really is.”

DJ Paulette, Manchester

## Discrimination, harassment and abuse

Some musicians in the study spoke of their first-hand experience of discrimination, ageism, sexual harassment and abuse. Working in these conditions is known to lead to mental health problems such as increased stress, depression and anxiety.

In one case, a female respondent recounted an extremely alarming history of sexual abuse in the

workplace. Another spoke of being measured every month by her record company and management to ensure she remained a size 8 in order to fit into sample size clothes. Yet another talked about eating disorders and starving herself before auditions.

Musicians were very aware of the significance of their age and appearance, so the passing of time was another cause for anxiety.



# What needs to change?

Musicians forge their creative careers in a highly fragmented, hyper-competitive, over-supplied and very complex environment. In a world of blurred boundaries, definitions and relationships, it can be hard to identify who is responsible for providing support for issues such as mental health problems.

**The University of Westminster research suggested three key areas for change.**

## 01

### **Education**

Mental health issues should be embedded in the curriculum of music education courses so that students are aware of the potential challenges. There's also a need to stimulate a wider discussion about mental health with working musicians throughout the industry.

## 02

### **A Code of Best Practice**

A Code of Best Practice would act as a voluntary demonstration of organisations' awareness of mental health problems in the industry, allied to a commitment to kindness and tolerance and an understanding of the challenges faced by creative workers.

## 03

### **A mental health support service for those working in music**

Musicians want professional mental health services that are affordable and easy to access. They also want to talk to people who understand the unique issues that they face.

# What's next?

Having listened to the views of musicians, music industry professionals, stakeholders and existing mental health providers, HMUK is keen to propose meaningful and lasting solutions for the industry.

## HMUK is committed to:

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### **Building a Music Industry Mental Health Taskforce**

with key partners, and helping musicians to find the clinical or therapeutic support they need. The Taskforce will provide a forum where members of the music industry, mental health experts and ambassadors can discuss mental illness and make recommendations for a set of pledges for managers and labels that would establish a duty of care within the industry.

### **Setting up a phased nationwide support service**

in late 2017 that will be shaped and defined by key stakeholders, including musicians and those working in music. This service will aim to provide 24/7 advice and education that is qualified, professional, safe and focused. Where possible, it will also offer improved access and signposting to existing mental health services.

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**Igniting support and underpinning a global approach** from the music industry through the #MusicMindsMatter campaign, by forming partnerships with organisations that are committed to providing crucial support in this complex area.

HMUK recently supported the Music Managers Forum on their *Music Managers Guide to Mental Health* – an invaluable reference document for managers and industry professionals.

The industry needs to come together, and HMUK will continue to collaborate with qualified clinical professionals and the wider mental health community, advocating for change across the industry.



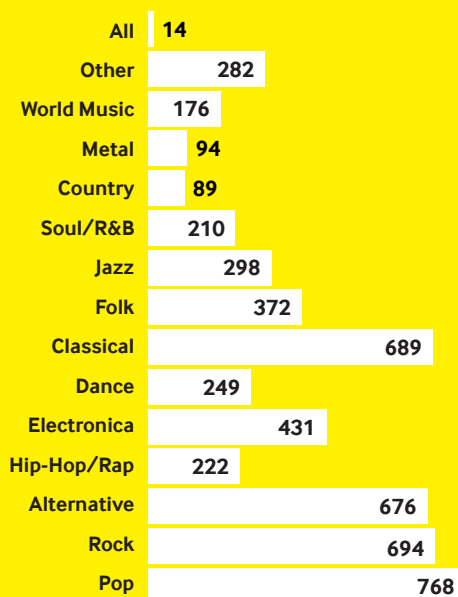


# About the Study

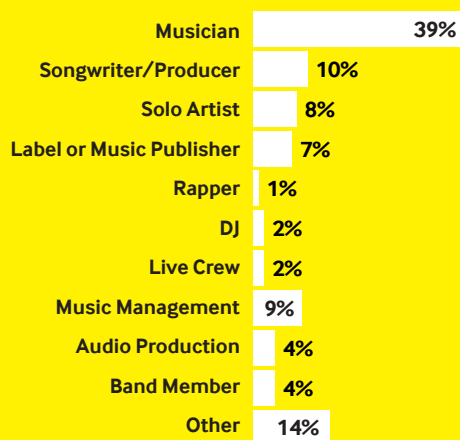
In 2016, HMUK led the industry by commissioning the largest study of its kind into the wellbeing and working conditions of those working in music. The results gave a snapshot of the working lives of 2,211 people who responded to an online questionnaire.

The Can Music Make You Sick? research and study was undertaken by Sally Anne Gross and Dr George Musgrave of the University of Westminster and published by MusicTank.

Select the top 3 genres that best describe the musical areas that you work in



Which of the following best describes your occupation?



69%

of all respondents reported they had experienced depression



of those that reported, just



30%

claimed they would be very likely to, or had already sought help



Felt there were gaps in the provision of mental health support services for musicians

40% were 'not sure' | 5% said 'no'

71%

of all respondents believed they had experienced panic attacks and/or high levels of anxiety



of those that reported, just



44%

had received treatment



If you sought help with your mental health, did you find it easy to get help?

No 53%  
Yes 47%



The following three case studies are from the Can Music Make You Sick? pilot survey and report.

## Case Study 1

# James Rhodes

## Concert Pianist

James Rhodes is a British concert pianist. He was the first classical pianist to sign a record deal with Warner Bros, has released six albums, and performs globally. He also contributes to publications including The Guardian and The Telegraph, and has presented documentaries on BBC Four and Channel 4. His international bestselling memoir 'Instrumental' was published in 2015.

"[Music is] my first and longest lasting love. It's been my best friend for as long as I can remember."

"[That being said] the worst things are the loneliness and the pressure – constant pressure I put on myself. It doesn't really come from outside. I'm not really worried about the critics or the press. I feel like I have to live up to a certain standard otherwise it's not good enough ... Also you've got to be really careful when you're doing something that's so personal, and you're exposing yourself in that way to criticism and abuse and whatever."

James wrote an article in 2013 in The Guardian entitled 'Find What You Love and Let it Kill You'. Speaking about this article, he said:

"[To succeed in music] you have to work for years, decades, tens of thousands of hours. You have to practically let it kill to have any chance!"

In that article he wrote:

"[I had] no income for five years, six hours a day of intense practice, monthly four-day long lessons with a brilliant and psychopathic teacher in Verona, a hunger for something that was so necessary it cost me my marriage, nine months in a mental hospital, most of my dignity and about 35lbs in weight. And the pot of gold

at the end of the rainbow is not perhaps the Disney ending I'd envisaged as I lay in bed aged 10."

In our interview, he said: "As far as earning a living and forming a business, you've got to get help. You need management, if you can, and a record label. But, record labels are usually filled with \*\*\*s who just want to \*\*\*k you ... There are a lot of charlatans."

"It's not that it's 'hard' to be a musician; it's hard to make a living at it. A lot of that is down to the industry, and a lot of it is down to just the fact that it's a really tough gig ... I'm in a very lucky position because I have a full calendar and I'm earning well, but I think if I was starting out now it's really challenging. You need a lot of support."

"I mean, of course it's who you know, isn't it? That's one of the biggest things. You've either got to be really lucky or you need to know someone ... but also you need to be resourceful. The only reason [my career took off] is because I decided, 'Who's my very favourite pianist in the world? Who's his agent?' I found it out. I sent him a bottle of champagne and I sent him an email. I chased them. And he agreed to meet me. But that came from me. He didn't just knock on my door and say, 'Hey, do you want to play the piano to me?' You've got to be quite cheeky, I think, and resourceful."



## Case Study 2

# Lauren Aquilina

## Songwriter

Lauren Aquilina is a 22-year old songwriter from Bristol, who has been living in London for the last two years. Following huge success with three independently released EPs, she signed a record deal with Island Records (Universal Music Group), and a publishing deal with Sony/BMG, at the age of 19. After releasing her debut album entitled 'Isn't It Strange' in 2016, she announced she would no longer be performing, and would instead be songwriting for others...

"The best things [about being an artist] for me are writing ... Writing is the thing that I feel most strongly about and most passionately about. The fact I get to do that for a job is amazing. ... [Having said that] there are so many things that come with the music industry that aren't necessarily music related ... which all contribute towards how I'm feeling now..."

"For example, there's the lack of routine. I would hate having a 9-to-5 job. But you go from being so exhaustingly busy, and then you look at your calendar and you have nothing on for the next two weeks. I get so depressed. I struggle with that. There is pressure in every job, [but] I feel like in the music industry there's this thing of either you are smashing it or you're a failure. There's no in between ... I would say that there's a [small] team of people [within the industry] who can single handedly decide where your life is going for the next year..."

"[That being said], I've found most of my criticism has come from other artists – my competitors ... I hate the fact that I call them competitors! ... The way that my label, my radio pluggers and my manager talk about them, they become competitors ... But quite often I'm also a big fan of these artists, so it's a conflict.

I would never say anything bad about them ... But the business side of me has to see them in that way because it's like every man for himself here..."

**“ Writing a song has never made me unhappy ... it's the industry, it's the game. It's the game that makes you unhappy.”**

"I have been thinking more recently about writing a CV, and what else I would do. All my friends are finishing university. I don't have a degree, I don't have very good A-levels. My only work experience is in music and a Saturday job in retail ... I don't know how to get a job that I love when I feel like I have no experience. I don't know if I've wasted the past 3 years trying to do music if it was never going to work out ... Music became my identity ... Now, I'm in a position where I'm not sure if music is going to be my life."

"Writing a song has never made me unhappy. Sometimes I've been, like, "that's not a great song, but oh well, I got something out of it." That's never made me unhappy, but it's the industry, it's the game. It's the game that makes you unhappy."



## Case Study 3

# William Doyle

## Recording Artist

William Doyle is the real name of the recording artist formally known as East India Youth. William's first two solo albums were critically acclaimed and catapulted him into the music industry spotlight. For many artists the pressure of work and the pressure they put themselves under; the eternal cycle of expectation and ambition coupled with self-criticism and anxiety is crippling.

William found himself touring and promoting his work for nearly three years without any real breaks. The distance between the myth and the reality of working in the music business is a big challenge and the need for guidelines is also something many of the survey respondents mentioned. William has very strong opinions about this:

"Education. You need to be educated about these things. No one tells you what it's going to be like, and you go your whole childhood wanting to be in the music industry, and be a touring musician – however much glory that brings you or whatever you want out of it. And no one tells you along that journey, 'You can get that, that can be yours. You can achieve fulfillment and happiness. But there's also all this other s\*\*\* that comes as a cost to that.' No one tells you that."

"In this career, work-life separation is difficult to get. It's not like you go to an office every day and then shut off your computer, it is always with you, like a living thing. It is important to have somebody to support you and who understands at a very deep level what the demands on you are."

**“ In this career, work-life separation is difficult to get. It's not like you go to an office every day and then shut off your computer, it is always with you, like a living thing. It is important to have somebody to support you and who understands at a very deep level what the demands on you are.”**

By 2016, William had made the decision to take some much needed time out, which he did with the full support of his manager. He moved away from London, voluntarily left his record company, changed his artist name and started working on himself and his music in a way that feels much better for his health and wellbeing. He recently completed another tour of the USA and Europe, a thing he thought he may never do again and he is putting the final touches on his next album.



# Get help now

**If you need help, you should contact your GP or call NHS 111 (England), NHS Direct (Wales), NHS 24 (Scotland), or your relevant HSC organisation (Northern Ireland).**

**In an emergency, go to your local A&E department.**

**The following support lines are also available:**

**Samaritans:**

116 123 or 0300 123 3011 (Welsh line)

**Mind:**

0300 123 3393

HMUK's Health and Welfare team currently help thousands of musicians across the UK who are going through a crisis, or are in need of longer-term care or support. This includes financial assistance where needed, as well as advice on welfare or performance-related health issues. As part of this service, a HMUK staff member or volunteer may visit the musician to ensure that support is based around an individual's needs.

If you have a health problem – physical or psychological – that affects your ability to perform, HMUK also has a partnership with the British Association for Performing Arts Medicine (BAPAM) that entitles you to a free assessment. BAPAM is an independent charity that gives specialist health advice. If further treatment is required, BAPAM provides information about appropriate health care practitioners, taking into account your needs as a musician.

**Find out about more sources of support for mental health issues here:**

[helpmusicians.org.uk/get-advice](https://helpmusicians.org.uk/get-advice)



## Acknowledgements

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### Disclaimer

This report has been prepared by Help Musicians UK (registered charity no. 228089) on the basis of research carried out by Sally Anne Gross and Dr George Musgrave (University of Westminster), and MusicTank. This research was funded by Help Musicians UK.

### Researchers' notes

The term 'musician' used throughout this report refers to the artists, managers, producers, production staff, live crew, publishers and others in the industry who took part in the study.

The music industry is commonly understood as a singular entity. However, this singular term can be misleading, and the very idea of a united place contradicts the reality, which is a music environment full of competing interests and industries. Therefore, the plural term 'music industries' is used in some instances.



