

## Introduction

### Musicians as Workers: Sites of Struggle and Resistance

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This special issue of *MUSICultures* grew out of the interdisciplinary conference *Music and Labour*, which was held in Hamilton, Ontario, in May, 2013. The conference theme grew out of two interrelated and pressing contemporary issues: 1) the digitization of music production and consumption and the ensuing questions of ownership, creation/creativity, entrepreneurship, listening practices and notions of community (see McCleod 2005; Holt 2010; Kruse 2010; Allen 2012); and 2) the economic downturn of 2008 and its effects on the production, dissemination and consumption of music. Prompted by the ways in which these issues hinged upon questions of vocation and livelihood for cultural workers, we began to consider a broader question: what counts as musical labour and why do music scholars rarely frame their arguments about music production and consumption in these terms?

The occlusion of musical labour is not new, nor is it limited to scholars; rather, it is a pervasive feature of Western musical cultures, particularly in late capitalism. As the cultural historian Karl Hagstrom Miller observes, the privileging of effortlessness, amateurism and naturalness in Western musical performance and discourse, along with a scholarly focus on musical markets and consumption, has historically obscured understandings of music as a form of labour (Miller 2008). In asking an interdisciplinary group of scholars to consider questions of musical labour in a wide range of genres and contexts, and by drawing upon a spectrum of methodological, theoretical and disciplinary approaches, the conference offered an intervention into the ways popular music has traditionally been studied. Rather than questions of labour remaining implicit—which they so often have been in music scholarship—the

aim of this conference was to bring them to the surface in order to explore new ways of conceptualizing all forms of “musicking” (Small 1998).

The conference brought together over 90 Canadian and international scholars, researchers, musicians, students, educators, promoters, journalists, union members and arts organizers. Recognizing the diverse ways in which research, research-creation and experiential perspectives on the topic of music and labour can be communicated, the conference included a range of academic, artistic and practice-oriented activities: panels in which professional academics, independent scholars and students presented research papers; two documentary film screenings followed by discussions with the filmmakers; and four workshops, two involving the participatory performance of the labour movement song repertory, a third co-led workshop on a labour studies and music community education program and a fourth led by McMaster University’s Cybernetic Orchestra, which explored the potential of live coding, laptops and open source software for amateur music making.

The two workshops that featured participatory singing of union songs were particularly energizing moments. The first of these was led by Tony Leah and Kevin Wrycraft, who teach in the Unifor-McMaster (formerly CAW [Canadian Auto Workers]-McMaster) Labour Studies Certificate Program, which is designed specifically for members of Unifor, Canada’s largest union for workers in the private sector. The title of their session was “Building Working Class Culture and Solidarity Through Music.” (See the conference digital archive for a video from this workshop.) The second, led by long-time collector and performer of protest songs from the 1930s and 1940s, Leo Feinstein, focused on the importance of group singing as an organizing tool in the labour movement. Breaking away from the usual format of the academic conference presentation, these sessions offered conference attendees an opportunity to connect through performance and to experience the possibility of building community and solidarity through sharing familiar songs.

The conference also included two performances by local musicians and a roundtable that featured local music producers, community organizers and artists who discussed their rich experiences—both historically and currently—with Hamilton’s music scene. Long an important hub for independent/alternative music scenes and known for the quality of its recording facilities, the arts are currently playing a key role in the revitalization of Hamilton’s economy. A critical element of this conference involved its location in downtown Hamilton. Situating the conference in the downtown immersed conference presenters and other attendees, most of whom came from outside of Hamilton, in the centre of a city that is actively seeking to revitalize its economy, culture and “brand” through culture (as exemplified by the slogan,

“Art is the new steel”). In many ways, Hamilton—particularly the vibrant James Street North neighbourhood, which was less than 300 meters from the main conference venue—is an exemplar of the “creative city” (Landry 2008) in which, as Hamilton’s Cultural Policy asserts, “[C]ulture is the fourth pillar of sustainable development, joining economic prosperity, environmental responsibility and social equity” (*Transforming Hamilton Through Culture: The Cultural Plan*, 2013). In this formulation, the arts, culture and heritage help attract new knowledge-based workers and businesses to replace job and investment losses in the heavy industry sector. Such policy initiatives bring fresh attention and status to the arts, including music, although they may overlook the ways in which creative work itself tends to be precarious and the ways the role that the arts and artists play in urban renewal, including gentrification, may have problematic implications for local populations (McRobbie 2013).

These tensions resonate strongly with the conference theme of music and labour and were brought to the surface, especially, in what we called the “Industry Panel.” This panel was composed of six local people who work in the arts industry in various capacities: Sam Siva (Our Sis Sam), whose project is to “cultivate and ignite” (her words) the hip hop scene in Hamilton through organization and promotion of events such as Steel Gold, a monthly hip hop showcase; Graham Rockingham, long-time music critic for *The Hamilton Spectator*; Amber Aasman, an artist, musician and teacher who works as Program Coordinator at The Urban Arts Initiative in Hamilton, which offers programs for at-risk, homeless and street-involved youth; Jamie Gunner Smith, tour manager, publicist and radio show programmer/host; Mark Milne, co-founder of Hamilton’s Sonic Unyon Records and Hamilton’s Supercrawl, an annual arts festival that is identified by many as an initiative key to the city’s urban renewal project; and Casey Mecija, musician and community organizer. In assembling this panel, we were committed to representing a range of different perspectives, not only in terms of the participants’ particular activities within the arts community, but also to bring in diverse voices and experiences. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it became apparent during the discussion that strong divisions of opinion on the benefits of gentrification fell roughly along the lines of generation, gender and ethnicity, with those who were older, male and white tending towards enthusiasm while others, particularly those who were younger, women, and people of colour, questioning and naming the problematic aspects of urban renewal initiatives. The generational divide was particularly interesting. Hamilton has a long history of producing noteworthy musicians who go on to national and international acclaim, including Daniel Lanois and acts such as Teenage Head; defining Hamilton’s musical significance was, for the older participants, largely based on legacy (and a certain nostalgia

for bygone eras) rather than the current diverse and constantly shifting scenes. A video of the panel discussion is available as part of the digital archive of the conference.

Holding the conference in downtown Hamilton helped facilitate the participation of community members such as Sam Siva who, in addition to participating in the Industry Panel, organized two performances for the conference: one by local blues musician Harrison Kennedy, the other by the hip hop fusion group Canadian Winter. Holding the conference in the city centre also allowed us to have events at and otherwise involve community organizations, like the Urban Arts Initiative, the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, The Factory Media Centre and the collectively run HAVN (Hamilton Audio/Visual Node), as well as culture-oriented businesses, such as the historic bar and performance venue This Ain't Hollywood and the community-responsive performance venue/coffee shop/restaurant/bar Homegrown Hamilton. In fact, an off-night "art crawl" on James Street was organized, during which many arts businesses and organizations stayed open late so that conference attendees were able to experience one significant way in which the arts are being regularly highlighted in Hamilton (art crawls occur on James Street North every second Friday). It was only possible to involve performers and community arts organizations in this way through the generous funding we received from SSHRC's Connections Grant Program.

The Connections Grant also allowed us to create a digital archive for the conference, which includes almost all of the presentations and performances. This archive is housed by McMaster University's Sherman Centre for Digital Scholarship. The archive can be accessed at this address: <http://musicandlabour2013.com/>. Our thanks to Dale Askey and Sandra Lapointe at the Sherman Centre for their guidance in digital archive best practices. Thanks to Laura Wiebe who took these guidelines and implemented them; Dr. Wiebe also served as Assistant Editor for this special journal issue; without her conscientiousness and attention to detail it is doubtful that either the archive or this journal issue would have come to fruition. The Connections Grant also allowed us to hire experienced graduate student workers, including Heather Kirby, who oversaw sound and the audio capture, and who engineered this material in a way that helps bring the archive to life, as well as Immony Mem, for video documentary and editing. We are especially grateful that at a conference themed around labour, we were able to compensate our student workers, rather than asking them to volunteer their time. In addition to Heather and Immony, these include Craig Jennex, Jocelyn Smith, Marquita Smith, John Partington, Mitchell Petersen, Casey Mecija and Elise Milani; we'd also like to thank our colleague Rick Monture for sitting on the Local

Arrangements Committee. Thanks also to staff at McMaster: Pam McIntyre of ROADS (Research Office for Administration, Development and Support) for her assistance in preparing the SSHRC grant application; and Mariana Costa and Marissa Rosato, who had the labour-intensive job of administering the grant.

While this unique archive offers researchers a window into “work in progress” that we hope will prove useful for further scholarship, we also wanted to offer those who participated in the conference a venue through which their presentations could be polished and published in a more conventional way; hence, this special journal issue, for which we selected, by peer-review process, seven essays. Although conference papers approached the broad issue of music and labour from a number of different perspectives, including the music industry (record labels), creative actors such as sound engineers, video producers, and of course from the point of view of fans, all of these essays in this journal issue focus on questions of labour from the perspective of performing musicians. Martin Cloonan asks the fundamental question with which our idea for the conference began: what are the ramifications of treating musicians as workers rather than “artists,” “celebrities” or “stars?” His examination of the British Musician Union’s records reveals the precarity of musicians’ lives—largely self-employed (often unemployed), living from one gig to the next, each of which may take place in a different kind of venue, with different working conditions and constantly changing technological landscapes—and the difficulties of advocating for workers’ rights under such conditions. Although Karen Cyrus writes about musicians in a very different context—Jamaica in the 1950s and 1960s—she is similarly concerned with the everyday lives of working musicians, specifically how it is that they come together in a particular time and place, why they stay or leave, and the conditions of their employment. She explores how these material factors may lead, as they did in this case, to the creation of new genres of music; in the process, she demystifies artistic practice and locates creativity and innovation in the everyday.

Sheena Hyndman also focuses on questions of compensation and the working practices and creativity of musicians—in this case on the producers of remixes within EDM (electronic dance music) culture. Since the beginning of remix culture, questions of whether or not the creation of new music using elements of existing recordings constitutes a violation of copyright have been at the forefront of the discussion; the idea that “original” composers should receive compensation for the use of their material has often resulted in lawsuits. Hyndman, however, moves beyond these questions, taking it as a given that the remix artist is, himself or herself, a composer of original work and examining

whether and how such musicians are compensated for their creative work. John Williamson also deals with questions of intellectual property, but he dislodges the discussion from its usual focus on composers or “authors” to that of a range of working musicians, particularly in the context of collective bargaining. Williamson argues that debates about intellectual property in the recording industry are not new, but reach right back through its history, and that these issues are key to understanding the exploitation of musical labour in the industry. He further argues that discussions about copyright, particularly those involving the British Musicians’ Union, were frequently characterized by cooperation (*not* conflict) with music publishers and the recording industry as these groups advocated together for more favourable terms with entities like the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Many of the essays in this issue broach the subject of musicians’ rights, especially with respect to compensation, either for playing or creating music (or both at once). Matt Stahl’s contribution provides a wide-lens examination of the concept of “rights” and how it is mobilized in the context of popular music-making. Interestingly, Martin Cloonan foreshadows the very debate that Stahl takes up at length when he raises the following issue:

As many [British Musicians Union] members are self-employed freelance workers, this results in a set of requirements and expectations of their Union that is different from those in industries where regular, “permanent,” employment is the norm. Effectively a lot of MU workers are small and medium enterprises (SMEs). They are more petit-bourgeois business men and women than they are proletarians.

Indeed, like Williamson and Cyrus, Stahl identifies key moments when musicians asserted their rights by situating themselves as employers or even as peers of large industrial entities. Rights, as they become significant to discussions of musicians’ agency, are embedded in particular socio-cultural circumstances; in Anglo-American liberal society, rights discourse belongs to the bourgeoisie and emerges in the context of a liberal market economy.

Scott Henderson’s essay takes up the question of musicians’ agency through another lens. Looking at Saint-Étienne, France, this essay examines the intersections between musicians’ creative and organizational agency and local communities, continuing the work of scholars such as Sara Cohen and Andy Bennett (Cohen 1991; Bennett et al. 2004) and addressing questions of “creative cities” and arts-centred urban renewal. Henderson’s focus on a post-industrial city, moving away from an industrial coal-based economy and

embracing culture as offering new economic possibilities, through tourism in particular, is strongly reminiscent of the situation in Hamilton, with its celebration of art as the “new steel.” Henderson investigates the repurposing of former industrial spaces—including a coal mine—attending in particular to the interplay of different musical genres, immigration, and ethnic and other differences that define the city’s “new” cultural scene. Attending to difference, as well as musicians’ agency, in this cultural and geographic landscape is certainly critical when considering such transitions in a range of similar cities, including Hamilton.

If the preceding essays have investigated musicians asserting and negotiating their identities as workers, Jordan Gonzalez, in this expansion of her prize-winning conference paper, addresses the work of musicians in shaping a wider framework for social justice for working people. Her essay examines how musicians who took part in the *Nouvelle chanson chilienne* (New Chilean Song) movement articulated the roles of work and workers in various aspects of their practice (including song lyrics writing, and the distribution of roles in music ensembles). It recovers the role played by musicians in the Popular Unity movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which united Socialist, Social Democrat, Communist and other parties under the leadership of Allende to advocate for land reform, nationalizing the mining industry, and a range of other new programs aimed at economic justice—efforts that were crushed in Pinochet’s 1973 coup and the regime that followed, lasting until 1990. Given the systemic crackdown on Leftist organizations during the time of Pinochet’s regime, with its extensive catalogue of human rights violations, Jordan Gonzalez’s work on how the *Nouvelle chanson chilienne* movement represented workers in song lyrics, how their conception of music as work and the innovative forms of creation that guided their activities and how they attempted to connect with audiences as members of the people is indeed an important act of historical recovery. We close with this essay because it demonstrates the importance of understanding musicians as workers within a global framework, going beyond the liberal (and neoliberal) politics of North American and European societies—and as understanding musicians as existing in solidarity with other working people.

Working on this conference, on obtaining funding, and on editing this special issue—all dealing with Music and Labour—led us, as tenured academics researching and teaching in the field of popular music, to several moments of self-reflexivity. As “creative workers,” both academics and musicians have to negotiate a competitive, financially risky field, characterized by deep inequalities in compensation while at the same time being motivated by intangible values and carrying out a great deal of immaterial labour. While

there are distinctive differences between those who work as musicians and those who work on music as academics—job security, benefits and a good-to-excellent salary for some of the latter among these—there are also a number of congruencies. Academics in Humanities disciplines are increasingly employed in non-permanent jobs for low pay and with no job security; the corporatization of the University and its resultant embeddedness in neoliberal politics has resulted in fewer academic jobs with ever-increasing workloads for those who do have them to the point that these jobs are for all intents and purposes unmanageable; health and well-being are now routinely compromised under the crushing weight of work. Research and teaching are increasingly valued only insofar as they are able to bring external funding and attract warm student bodies to our institutions. Still, those who have full-time, permanent positions as academics who study music certainly occupy privileged positions. We acknowledge this while agreeing with Matt Stahl, who has argued here and elsewhere (2013), that musicians in many ways embody the situation faced by all workers in neoliberal capitalism, including academics: contingent, bearing downloaded economic risk, and exploited physically, emotionally and intellectually. Immaterial labour, as Tiziana Terranova contends, is not just the “knowledge work” that we do as part of our salaried employment (*if we are lucky*); it also “pervade[s] the social body,” particularly “the postmodern cultural economy: Music, fashion, and information are all produced collectively but are selectively compensated” (2000: 41). Even when we are not thinking of ourselves (or others) as workers, say, in the context of personal or subcultural expression, this labour is still being appropriated for profit—a conundrum that should give us pause but not silence us. As we work through the pleasure we take in music and in studying it, talking about it, and teaching about it, we are also reminded of the complex ways in which labour weaves into these experiences. 🍀

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