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Living Under the Lights:
The intensification and extensification of aesthetic labour for independent musicians in Toronto

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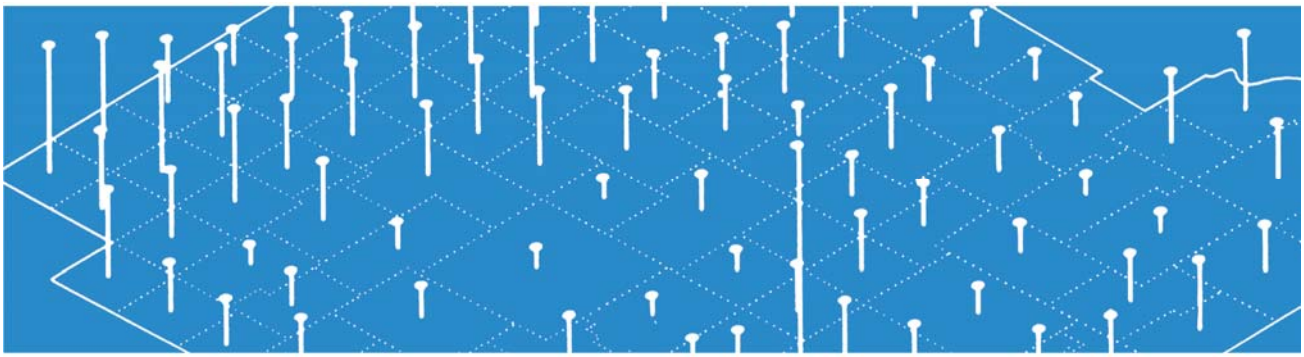

Abstract

Musicians have always performed aesthetic labour but the music industry is changing because of new technologies, organizational forms and declining record sales. This paper draws on interviews with independent musicians in Toronto to demonstrate that aesthetic labour is becoming increasingly important in the contemporary marketplace. It is argued that aesthetic labour has become more time-intensive and takes place across a growing range of spaces, including the stage, the street and online. This paper contributes to existing studies in geography that consider the spatial dynamics and precarious conditions of creative labour.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been increased attention to the embodied capacities and attributes of workers, often referred to as aesthetic labour (Warhurst et al. 2000). This research explores the stylization of workplace performances, including the way workers are required to produce an attractive and professional look or demeanor as part of the job. Many of these studies focus on interactive service work, foregrounding how aesthetic labour is used to develop a company's image or brand, as well as that of its products and services. Recently, the concept has also been extended to creative labour (Entwistle 2002; Dean 2005; Entwistle and Wissinger 2006).

Using the example of independent musicians in Toronto, Canada, we argue that although musicians have always had to perform aesthetic labour as part of their job, the nature of this labour is changing in the current period. We examine how the introduction of new digital technologies, the decline of major record labels and the rise of independent music production have altered the performances and spaces associated with musical labour. In particular, we highlight three ways that aesthetic labour has shifted in the current period. First, with the 'MP3-

Crisis' and subsequent decline in record sales, independent musicians perform more live shows to generate income. As 'standing out in the crowd' becomes more difficult, musicians place greater emphasis on the visual components of their performances, increasing the amount of aesthetic labour required (Hracs et al. 2013). Second, without the support and expertise of record labels, independent musicians assume sole responsibility for marketing their music and communicating with fans. This has extended the emotional and aesthetic content of the job and expanded the range of spaces where this labour is performed. Third, with the development of new internet platforms (such as YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter), musicians are performing aesthetic labour in new online spaces. This increases their workload and further erodes the division between their working and non-working lives. Taken together, these findings contribute to existing studies in geography that consider the spatial dynamics and precarious conditions of creative labour.

The analysis is based on 65 semi-structured interviews conducted in Toronto, Canada. Of these, 51 were with independent musicians and 14 were with key informants who work as managers, producers and executives at major and indie record labels. These individuals provided valuable information about recent changes in the music industry and the demands and risks associated with independent music production. The interviews covered musicians working in a variety of genres, including rock, hip-hop, electronic, punk, jazz and classical. They ranged from one to two hours in length and were digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded according to theme. Verbatim quotations are used throughout the paper to demonstrate how participants expressed meanings and experiences in their own words. The quotations used in this paper reflect the prevalence of particular themes in the interviews.

Divided into two sections, we begin by reviewing the literature on aesthetic labour and its relationship to creative work. The second section examines the changing nature of aesthetic labour in the music industry, highlighting three spaces where musicians increasingly perform aesthetic labour: the stage, the community and online.

Aesthetic labour and creative industries

The notion of aesthetic labour stems from the classic work on emotional labour, which Hochschild (1983, 7) defines as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display". Emphasis is placed on how service work involves managing one's deepest feelings and emotions. The term aesthetic labour, which Warhurst et al. (2000, 4) use to refer to the "embodied capacities and attributes possessed by workers", seeks to incorporate the embodied nature of service work, and the corporeal labour that goes into the production of particular dispositions (Witz et al. 2003, 36).[1] In this way, distinct modes of customer interaction depend as much on performative 'styles of the flesh' as they do on manufactured feelings (Butler in Witz et al. 2003, 37).

Aesthetic labour is a manifestation of social and cultural capital; its attributes are related to gender, age, class, race and ethnicity (Pettinger 2004). Symbolic values are attached to bodies, leading to the development of physical capital, which is a manifestation of a particular habitus - a socially constructed system of cognitive and bodily dispositions that ensure a consistency and

[1] Some authors see the concept of aesthetic labour as moving beyond or displacing that of emotional labour (see for example Witz et.al, 2003), while others see the two concepts as compatible (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006).

durability to performances (Bourdieu 1993). Embodied dispositions include ways of walking, talking, standing and feeling (Witz et al. 2003).[2]

Witz et al. (2003) point out that, although physical capital is a collective manifestation, it is also developed by organizations or firms. Employers recruit workers with particular embodied attributes (Bourdieu 1993). Once employed, employers develop these embodied dispositions further - training and transforming the worker - so that they produce a particular style of service. Through this process, the physical capital of employees is converted into economic capital by service employers. The corporate production of aesthetic labour thus mobilizes physical capital to organizational or firm ends and also inculcates new modes of embodiment within the working subject. As Entwistle and Wissinger (2006, 775) argue "workers' bodies are harnessed to sell the organization's image, literally by embodying it".

Studies on interactive service work, particularly the retail and hospitality sectors, have emphasized the ways corporate organizations develop aesthetic sensibilities among their employees Pettinger 2004; McDowell 2009; Warhurst and Nickson 2007; Witz et al. 2003). Recently, however, researchers have begun to analyze how creative workers also perform aesthetic labour (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006; Entwistle 2002; Dean 2005). As Entwistle (2002, 321) suggests, in creative economies "aesthetics are not something 'added on' as a decorative feature or after-thought once a product has been defined; they are the products, and as such, are at the centre of the economic calculations of the practice". Creative industries depend heavily on symbolic knowledge, or what Asheim and Gertler (2005) call 'know who'.[3] Symbolic knowledge - which is concerned with shaping the aesthetic qualities of a product - is context-

[2] Embodiment refers to the integration of body and self (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006: 776).
[3] In their discussion of innovation, Asheim and Gertler (2005) identify different types of knowledge, including analytical knowledge ('know why'), synthetic knowledge ('know how'), and symbolic knowledge ('know who').

dependent; its meaning often varies by location (Asheim and Gertler 2005). Creative work is also characterized by high levels of employment insecurity and perpetual networking (Neff et al 2005). These features translate into a strong need to be embedded in a local cultural scene and to spend long hours socializing and exchanging knowledge (Ross 2008; Gill and Pratt 2008). This leads to a large component of aesthetic labour.

As one example, Entwistle and Wissinger (2006; 776) seek to understand the nature of aesthetic labour in fashion modelling, where "the emphasis upon the body is arguably greater than in service work, as it is the main commodity or tool of the trade". Similarly, Dean (2005) applies the notion of aesthetic labour to television and theatre acting, arguing that a key requirement of these jobs is to attract an audience gaze. Dean (2005) notes a link between physical attractiveness and the ability to secure roles. Like fashion models, actors, particularly female actors, are required to be charming at all times and to spend long hours building relationships with directors and casting agents (Dean 2005).

Unlike service industries where performances are dictated by organizations, workers in creative industries are often freelance. Models and actors are required to become entrepreneurs of the self. They must take responsibility for managing their own bodies and image (Dean 2005; Entwistle and Wissinger 2006). As Rose (1999) suggests, this freedom does not signal the absence of governance, but rather a new form of power premised on self-management (see also McRobbie 2002). Indeed, for fashion models aesthetic labour entails an on-going and never-ending commitment to body maintenance (diet and exercise). As Entwistle and Wissinger (2006, 791) argue, the "freelance aesthetic labourer cannot walk away from the product which is their entire embodied self".

Creative work entails the need to be 'always on' (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006, 774). Work continues well beyond the four walls of the office, spilling into society at large (Lazzarato 1996, 137). In this situation, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish work from leisure: "a polymorphous self-employed work has emerged as the dominant form, a kind of intellectual worker who is him or herself an entrepreneur, situated within a market that is constantly shifting and within networks that are changeable in time and space" (Lazzarato, 1996: 135; see also Gill and Pratt 2008). In this paper, we investigate aesthetic labour in music, an occupation which shares many of these characteristics.

The changing nature of music work in Toronto

Toronto has long been recognized as the largest and most diverse music centre in Canada (Hracs et al. 2011). The city is home to several important educational and performance institutions, all of the major Canadian record labels and features the largest number of recording studios and performance venues in the country. Toronto supports a diverse array of genres, including rock, jazz and classical and has developed a strong reputation as 'the place to be' for established and aspiring musicians.

Over the past decade, however, the nature of music work has radically changed in the city, as it has in other centers around the world. During the corporate era (1978-1998), most musicians in Toronto were either affiliated with a major or independent record label or striving to sign a record contract. At this time, recording, promoting and distributing music were capital and skill intensive activities that required a specialized division of labour, and the support and resources of large firms (Leyshon 2009). While record labels constructed artist images, handled marketing,

promotion and public relations, musicians were largely free to focus on creative activities such as writing and recording songs.

In the late 1990's, new digital technologies sparked the so-called 'MP3 Crisis' in the music industry, weakening the power of record labels and ushering in a new form of digitally-driven independent music production (Leyshon 2009, Hracs 2012). In 1999, Napster popularized an illegal system of sharing music files over the Internet. Coupled with other market trends, 'downloading' resulted in billion dollar losses for the major record labels, the termination of thousands of recording contracts, and the downloading of the economic risk and responsibility of talent development directly onto individual musicians.

At the same time, digital technologies have democratized the production, promotion, distribution and consumption of music. Inexpensive computers and user-friendly software allow musicians to record in home studios, and digital formats and online retail spaces allow musicians to enter the world of marketing, fundraising and distribution for the first time (Von Hippel 2005; Leyshon 2009). With declining entry barriers, the traditionally niche 'Do It Yourself' (D.I.Y.) model has been transformed from a punk-inspired alternative into the dominant organizational form for up-and-coming musicians. In Canada, 95% of all musicians are not affiliated with either major or independent record labels (CIRAA 2010). Instead, they operate as entrepreneurs who are responsible for the growing range of creative and non-creative tasks, including music writing and recording, but also fundraising, marketing, communication and booking tours. This transition has furnished musicians with unprecedented control over their careers. Yet, the market is fraught with uncertainty and competition is intensifying. In Toronto, independent musicians find it increasingly difficult to earn a living. Between 2001 and 2006, the annual incomes of musicians in Toronto declined by 25.9% to $13,773 (Hracs et al. 2011).

Music work has always entailed some degree of aesthetic labour, such as crafting unique identities and looks and forging emotional connections with audiences. Yet, during the corporate era, many musicians received help from their labels and managers (Hracs 2013). In the wake of industrial restructuring, however, competition forces all musicians to perform a broader and more time-intensive range of aesthetic labour tasks. As we will discuss in the following sections, a growing amount of time is spent on live performances, on the visual aspects of a performer's identity and on marketing and promoting oneself. These transformations have changed the temporality and spatiality of aesthetic labour.

On stage: the growing importance of live shows

Like acting and modelling (Dean 2005; Entwistle and Wissinger 2006), music work involves live performances that require the musician to project a particular image. Attention to dress, appearance, bodily comportment and motility is key, and performances are often highly gendered and sexualized (Whiteley 2000). However, whereas live performances have traditionally promoted album sales, today the opposite is true. As the value of recorded music has declined due to oversupply, illegal downloading and the rise of entertainment alternatives (such as DVDs, video games and the internet), live performances have become the dominant revenue stream for independent musicians (Young and Collins 2010). In fact, MP3s and CDs are now often given away to attract consumers to live performances. As a result, Hyatt (2008, 23) reports that Canadian musicians in his sample earned 48.5 percent of their income from performing live and only 3.4 percent from selling recorded music (in physical or digital formats).

This shift toward live shows has increased the aesthetic labour involved in music work and transformed live performance from a relatively smaller and more pleasurable part of the job - the

culmination of writing, rehearsing and recording - to a highly competitive and intense activity that determines survival. Musicians spend more time performing in their home city and are on tour for longer periods, which, according to respondents, creates conflicts with their personal lives.

Musicians feel pressure to make the most of their opportunities by converting audience members into loyal and paying fans. As one musician put it,

> You have to make sure you are better than anything people are going to see. I have to make sure that every single person that comes to my show is going to be absolutely floored and that they walk away thinking 'I have to come back and see this band. I have to bring friends. I have to go to their website and download the music' (Interview).

Musicians work hard to engage the audience. In addition to playing songs, they tell stories about the band and promote future shows, recorded music and other merchandise. In the absence of firm-based studio managers or intermediaries (such as agents), who ensure freelancers look and behave appropriately, independent musicians are individually responsible for managing their own bodies, images and emotions.

As the market for live music has become saturated, the originality of individual songs and quality of musicianship is no longer sufficient to attract and satisfy consumers. Rather, many musicians have realized that they must produce a complete package by combining their sonic style with a unique visual and aesthetic style. As one musician explained "when I see a show I want to be stimulated and excited…I hate to admit it, but I do think that image is 50% and the music is 50%…" (Interview). As another musician put it:

> People need an image… We wear very tight wife-beater shirts. We accessorize every show with different themes and other costumes, so on stage you can look up and see six people wearing the same outfits. It looks like a show. (Interview)

Respondents talked about developing a 'whole package' for the stage, arguing that the visual and entertainment elements are often more important to success than the quality of the music (Hauge

and Hracs 2010). In addition to mastering and performing their instruments musicians must become actors in a theatrical sense and showcase particular trademarks. As one musician put it:

> We want to have a nice balance between musicianship and showmanship… On stage when people see me, that is not necessarily me. It is this stage persona…It is an acting thing…With fashion and with models too, I guess it is kind of an ideal…Backstage when a designer is telling the models to get ready, it is like 'okay you are a Park Avenue Princess and you're going on a shopping trip, and you have Brad Pitt on your arm, go.' And that is the same thing when a musician is playing a show on stage. (Interview).

Beyond the physical look, musicians must also develop and perform stage personalities that project enthusiasm. Echoing what Hochschild (1983, 127) termed the 'war of smiles', many of the respondents talked about the importance of coming on stage with energy, and smiling at the audience. Body language is also crucial to the performance. As one musician explained:

> I have to have a 'stage persona'. I actually have stage clothes now that I only wear when I am performing and it is a completely different personality that comes out of me from wearing something shiny… I have to up everything I am doing. I have to be entertaining and visually stimulating in addition to just performing (Interview).

Although the majority of our respondents understood that performing these forms of aesthetic labour was essential to competing for fans and consumption dollars, musicians argued that wearing certain outfits and acting flamboyantly required emotional and bodily management. As one musician put it:

> I feel pressure because I am dead center stage with the co-lead singer and he is crazy. He is really into it and dramatic and exciting and I am not any of those things, so I have to pull from places to try to make myself that way… (Interview).

Despite the discomfort, several respondents acknowledged the economic necessity of commodifying themselves in this way. As one female musician argued:

> I sell more CDs if I am wearing something cute. I played a show at a ski resort two days in a row with the same amount of people both times and if anything I played better the second day. The first day I was wearing a short skirt and a cute outfit and I sold [more] (Interview).

Given the pressure to win over audience members and reward loyal fans, musicians straddle a fine emotional line. They must engage the audience, but also protect their own time.

Although venues and bars are spaces of pleasure and escape for consumers, they are spaces of work and performance for musicians. Whereas some creative workers are protected from direct interaction and mingling (for example actors do not interact with the public while they are 'working' in the theatre or television (Dean 2005)), musicians are much closer to interactive service workers (McDowell 2009). As one musician put it:

> We always played at bars and clubs, going on at 11:00 pm. There is late night stuff- drinking, drugs- which embodies that whole lifestyle…When you are an entertainer, you want to go out there and you want to see people smile. You want them to have fun. You want to make that connection, and you don't want to fall short of what their expectations are… [The audience] might be ready to party on a Friday or Saturday night, but as a band touring and playing shows every night, you can't keep it up…It is hard to make that division between working and being responsible and partying with everyone else (Interview).

In the current era, the range and intensity of performances is increasing. Pressures to enhance the visual and aesthetic dimensions of shows and mingle with the audience are mounting and many of these practices are difficult to sustain.

The basin of aesthetic labour: home, street and community

It is common for creative workers to experience a fluid boundary between work and leisure (Jarvis and Pratt 2006) and independent musicians increasingly perform aesthetic labour in a range of spaces beyond the stage. Much like their freelance counterparts in advertising and new media, who spend a significant amount of time upgrading their skills through training and networking at parties to maintain and expand their social contacts (Neff et al. 2005; Ross 2008), musicians spend a greater portion of their time networking with venue owners to secure work and performance outlets. This emphasis on networking and the continual production of the

body/self for an audience contributes to the feeling of being 'always on' (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006). As one musician puts it, "What is typical for us, and I think it is unfortunate, is that you never have the sense that you are done, that you are really free" (Interview).

For musicians, this amounts to 'working all the time,' and the inability to relax in the home. Beyond rehearsing and recording, musicians spend a growing proportion of their time on more public and interactive activities, such as branding and promoting their creative content. As one musician put it: "It is a full-time job, but only about 10% actually involves music. The rest of it is the marketing and the looking for work" (Interview). As another musician explained: "Like any freelance work… I spend a lot of time making sure that I'm present in people's minds and I'm on people's phone lists…There's a ton of that and it's constant" (Interview).

Never knowing when an opportunity may arise, musicians operate in a constant state of readiness. Even when musicians are not actively promoting their work, they have to be aware of their look and be ready to perform on command in any spatial setting. As one musician explained:

> I've got to be 'on'…and know things to say in conversation…I was at a restaurant last week, but I did a show around that area and a kid recognized me from there, so I've got to be 'on' there. I can't be like 'I'm eating my dinner with my girlfriend, so leave me alone' (Interview).

The performance of aesthetic labour is intensifying and extending across space. Without record labels to handle promotion, booking shows and fan communication, independent musicians perform the role of content generator (producer) and the promoter (intermediary). The absence of firms is important because the pressure of self-management is arguably greater than for those conforming to corporate codes, which can be circumvented, subverted and challenged through collective action (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006). For independent musicians, the constructed 'self' is not donned and removed at the end of the working day, but is the product.

As a result, musicians arguably find it difficult to maintain a distance between work identity and self-identity.

Aesthetic labour in online spaces

Digital technologies have allowed contemporary independent musicians to enter the world of global promotion and distribution for the first time. MySpace Music, for example, is a free service that lets musicians directly promote and sell digital audio downloads to a vast audience at a low cost. By 2007, 80% of all musicians maintained a MySpace page (Antin and Earp 2010, 953) and today using online spaces has become a virtual necessity. Musicians may sell music on Apple's iTunes store, but they also use personal websites to sell and promote recorded and live music and merchandise. Beyond an inexpensive means of facilitating the flow of goods and information, these online spaces allow musicians to interact directly with fans. They also alter the relationship between producers and consumers (Grabher et al. 2008). Through social media applications such as MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter, musicians are gaining new ways to engage with their audience on increasingly personal levels. As Young and Collins (2010) point out, these new communication channels encourage disintermediation, allowing musicians to bypass traditional middlemen, such as record labels, distributors, radio networks and independent record promoters.

New technologies bring opportunities and uncertainties (Young and Collins 2010). Cote and Pybus (2007, 96) argue that new forms of subjectivity are being constructed within social networks like MySpace and that opening a social media account means extending oneself into cyberspace and becoming a 'digital body'. Like physical bodies, digital bodies are always in a

state of becoming, and require continuous maintenance and enhancement through upgrades and content updates. This requires extensive investments of time, energy and aesthetic labour.

For everyday users, a site like Facebook represents a space of pleasure and escape, facilitating interaction with friends. For musicians, however, social media represent a site of labour. As one musician explained:

> Everyone has got a MySpace page and a Facebook page and who knows what else, and you work a lot in that forum. An enormous piece of my schedule is coming home from gigs at 12 or 2 am in the morning and spending an hour on the computer answering emails and messages (Interview).

Work now spans different spaces, including the home, and with mobile devices, it can take place almost anywhere. Thus, the spatiality of work has expanded and the temporality of life is now governed by work (Gill and Pratt 2008).

The impetus to spend time on social media stems from low entry barriers and increased competition. As musicians create websites to promote their shows and sell their music and merchandise, they must work harder to attract and retain attention in the crowded online marketplace and monetize their content by converting digital flaneurs into loyal and paying customers. As one musician explained:

> Bands are like whores … using MySpace, using Facebook,…YouTube, whatever they can get their hands on. Which is why those bands get heard so quickly, and it is a great thing, to get your music out… You have to use every avenue that you can whether it be touring and computer media and networking (Interview).

Our interviews suggest that musicians engage directly with consumers in increasingly intimate ways. This trend is evident in the growing number of advice columns that recommend ‘creating conversations’ with fans that make ‘meaningful emotional connections’ on a personal level (Ward 2011; Ehrlich 2011; MySpaceShowDown 2008). As one music blogger explains:

> You as an artist need to connect personally online with your fans, have discussions with them, ask them how they are doing. Don’t make it all ‘me, me, me... I am the rockstar look

> at me'. Your fans will be the ones showing up at concerts and buying your merchandise. They are your biggest online evangelists... Treat them good and they will spread the word. Get your fans' input on new t-shirt designs, songs and even give them something back every once in awhile. Treat your fans like they are all VIPs (Osbourne 2010).

Establishing and maintaining these connections requires musicians to constantly update their creative content (such as video clips) and personal content (news and stories). As a result, musicians spend an increasing amount of time developing online personas and answering personal questions to keep fans interested.

All of this work clearly involves emotional management, but interacting with fans in chat rooms, emails and 'posts' is not limited to text. Evidence suggests that online interactions are increasingly visual, requiring aesthetic labour. Online advice columns argue that creating a 'uniform look' that fits with the music and using 'top-notch imagery' is crucial if you want to be noticed online (MusicRadar 2008). Musicians collaborate with local fashion designers, artists, photographers and videographers to create unique and personal videos and pictures and they also spend time video chatting with their audience (Interviews).

The ability of online spaces to blur the boundaries between producers and consumers and facilitate intimate interactions brings benefits. For musicians establishing relationships with their audience helps them to sell their music-related products and build 'brand' loyalty. Musicians can also crowd source creative ideas and funding for new projects from their fan base using sites such as 'Kickstarter'. Yet, these activities require investments of time and aesthetic labour which limits the resources musicians can allocate to developing new creative content and contributes to what McRobbie (2002, 61) calls the 'corrosion of creativity'. Beyond balancing these tensions, there are personal risks associated with these forms of aesthetic labour and some musicians, particularly women, report being harassed by fans:

> I know a lot of other girls have issues with crazy stalker fans. Sometimes, you have to be really careful. We work so much in these online communities. My Space and Facebook have become mandatory in the music business. People gain so much access to your personal life, especially with Facebook…You don't have control over what's going on after a while… At Christmas time I had a guy who had come to a lot of my shows. He seemed perfectly normal…but then he sent me this crazy e-mail one night on my website (Interview).

The attempt to forge a closer relationship with consumers, and the need to perform aesthetic labour in a growing range of spaces, thus exposes musicians to greater risk.

Conclusion

This paper examines the nature of aesthetic labour in the digital age and contributes to existing studies that examine the spatial dynamics and precarious conditions of creative work. It demonstrates that in the contemporary music industry, aesthetic labour is increasingly important to standing out in the crowd and earning a living.

The findings indicate that live shows have become the dominant revenue stream and independent musicians work to enhance the visual and theatrical aspects of their performances by paying more attention to their image, clothes, and bodily comportment. Off stage, independent musicians spend a growing portion of their time networking and maintaining their image. Operating in a constant state of readiness, public spaces, including restaurants and the street itself, are experienced by musicians as sites of work instead of pleasure or escape. Similarly, because independent musicians are responsible for marketing their image and products to consumers directly, online spaces have become sites of aesthetic labour. Musicians spend a considerable amount of time developing and updating online content that is increasingly visual, and interacting with fans in intimate ways.

Thus, while music work has always involved aesthetic labour, we argue that these performances are intensifying and that this has profound implications for workers' stress levels, emotional well-being and financial security. The boundary between work and leisure is eroding and encroaching into evenings, weekends, and holidays (Jarvis and Pratt 2006). In the absence of firms, risks and responsibilities are borne by individual musicians and this can lead to self-exploitation. Banks (2007, 58) argues,

> In the particular case of cultural industries, workers carry the burden of creative aspirations and dreams of artistic consecration into the highly competitive market arena and the popular idea that cultural workers need to suffer to make great art may further encourage individuals to self exploit to a level beyond that which would be imposed by the most fervent of capitalist employers. In short, we might say that the love of art can lead workers to neglect the care of the self.

Ultimately, as the market dynamics for music and the complexities of digitally mediated interaction continue to evolve, ongoing research is needed to track the impacts on aesthetic labour and the precarity in creative work.

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