



Musical career transition: a question of identity

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Jane Oakland tells us about the experiences of professional musicians who have been forced to renegotiate their career path



As companies respond to the economic crisis, there are increasing concerns for workers in every profession about down-sizing and job loss. Despite the government declaring that there is a golden opportunity for private investors to give more sponsorship to the Arts, most private benefactors are themselves struggling to keep afloat amidst recession. It is

difficult to predict how the music industry will adapt to these changing circumstances but inevitably jobs will be lost and job descriptions may alter. So what does all this mean for today's musicians who find themselves the victims of economic recession?

My recent PhD research studied the experiences of several professional musicians who had been made redundant from full-time employment and were forced to renegotiate their career path or deal with what is now commonly referred to as 'musical career transition'. This necessitated adapting to life as a free-lance worker or looking for non-musical employment. However, it was not the loss of income that was of primary concern for the musicians but a loss of identity. In other words an identity as a musician, which had previously provided them with status and recognition, had been undermined by circumstances beyond their control. The experience of trauma and low self-worth which accompanies job loss in the music profession is no different to that felt by any other worker losing their job. What is unique to the music profession is the level of commitment made by musicians in order to serve the music, as can be seen in the following comment from one of my participants:

'You give your body and soul to make the music wonderful and you believe that and suddenly it doesn't care for you as a person'.

However, I also found that this intensely personal relationship with music relied upon full-time employment in order to justify the high level of investment in music making. After many years of working for one particular company, a professional identity had been built on a corporate identity and stating that they worked for a prestigious company seemed more important than their own individual musical identity. Group music making gave the performers a sense of power and specialness which, for some, counteracted the insecurities that are common in the profession. Redundancy initiated conflicts between the power the musicians expected to have as performers of music and the control that managements and political organisations had over this perceived power.

'You knew the only way to save yourself was to prove to the public that it's a wonderful thing (music) and the only power that you have in this is performing and at the end of the day it didn't make any difference'.

The musicians felt let down not only by their employers but also by the music itself and it became necessary to re-evaluate the role of music and music-making in their lives. I found that successful career transition and the regaining of self-esteem were often determined by the ability to redirect the focus of identity away from group affiliation and toward the self as an individual.

‘.it was just music, music, music, music all week and I didn’t know who I was apart from this opera singer. Singing means energy and expression now, not identity. It was just one chapter of my life. I’ve proved myself. Now I know I can do it’

For this singer, redundancy eventually became an opportunity to rediscover the essential elements of singing which had become lost during a long professional career.

This change of emphasis from group affiliation to self-preservation is already being seen in the profession as full-time jobs are replaced increasingly by free-lance contracts. This change means that while it may not always be easy to find work it is also not possible to be made redundant. Therefore, an identity as a musician, however much or little work is undertaken, will always remain in place unless a musician chooses to leave the profession. However, there must be concerns about the effect that this approach to work will have on the quality of the music produced!

The journey through career transition is dependent on many individual factors. For some it can be an opportunity to develop previously unused talents, or to rediscover the joy of making music without the stresses of professional life. It may even be a relief from the pain-ridden hours spent playing an instrument, but what is certain is that it will be a life-changing experience. Is it not time therefore to implement specialist programmes designed specifically to understand the needs of musicians in crisis?

Three cheers for the ISM for daring to air the ‘R’ word (Redundancy) in their new package of counselling help. This is a much needed boost for all musicians faced with career transition, either voluntary or involuntary, and I would urge any musician in need of advice to conquer the stigma of asking for help and make use of this new service. However, in an ideal world the music profession would follow the examples of sport, dance and even the

army where professional help is offered by trained personnel who have direct experience of the business. After all, who better to understand a musician's needs than another musician? Certainly, in my own practice, I have found that musicians prefer to work with someone who they feel has a direct understanding of the profession. This is also confirmed in sport psychology research. In a project by Anderson, Miles Robinson and Mahoney (Psychology of Sport and Exercise 2004) several high profile athletes were asked about their experiences of sport psychology. In general it was thought to be highly beneficial if the psychologist had been a professional sportsperson and could 'talk the language'.

Of course, career transition for athletes and dancers is inevitable which explains the wealth of research in this area. Being a musician used to be thought of as an identity for life. More importantly, it is a WAY of life, but in the contemporary profession, work can no longer be relied upon to support this identity. Music cannot be taken out of the musician but help is needed to re-define what it means to be a musician when a particular career path is subject to change.

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This article can only scratch the surface of what is an extremely complicated process of coming to terms with musical career transition. If any reader would like further information about my work contact can be made via my website www.janeoakland.co.uk