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Chasing Dreams, Finding Nightmares: Exploring the Creative Limits of the Music Career

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Abstract

In the 2019 documentary *Chasing Happiness*, recording artist/musician Joe Jonas tells audiences that the band was “living the dream”. Similarly, in the 2012 documentary *Artifact*, lead singer Jared Leto remarks that at the height of Thirty Seconds to Mars’s success, they “were living the dream”. However, for both the Jonas Brothers and Thirty Seconds to Mars, their experiences of the music industry (much like other commercially successful recording artists) soon transformed into nightmares. Similar to other commercially successful recording artists, the Jonas Brothers and Thirty Seconds to Mars, came up against the constraints of the industry which inevitably led to a forfeiting of authenticity, a loss of creative control, increased exploitation, and unequal remuneration. This work will consider how working in the music industry is not always a dream come true and can instead be viewed as a proverbial nightmare.

Living the Dream

In his book *Dreams*, Carl Gustav Jung discusses how that which is experienced in sleep, speaks of a person’s wishes: that which might be desired in reality but may not actually happen. In his earlier work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud argued that the dream is representative of fulfilling a repressed wish. However, the creative industries suggest that a dream need not be a repressed wish; it can become a reality. Jon Bon Jovi believes that his success in the music industry has surpassed his wildest dreams (Atkinson). Jennifer Lopez considers the fact that she held big dreams, had a focussed passion, and strong aspirations the reason why she pursued a creative career that took her out of the Bronx (Thomas). In a *Twitter* post from 23 April 2018, Bruno Mars declared that he “use [sic] to dream of this shit,” in referring to a picture of him performing for a sold out arena, while in 2019 Shawn Mendes informed his 24.4 million *Twitter* followers that his “life is a dream”. These are but a few examples of successful music industry artists who are seeing their ‘wishes’ come true and living the American Dream.

Endemic to the American culture (and a characteristic of the identity of the country) is the “American Dream”. It centres on “a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability and achievement” (Adams, 404). Although initially used to describe having a nice house, money, stability and a reasonable standard of living, the American Dream has since evolved to what the scholar Florida believes is the new ‘aspiration of people’: doing work that is enjoyable and relies on human creativity. At its core, the original American Dream required striving to meet individual goals, and was promoted as possible for anyone regardless of their cultural, socio-economic and political background (Samuel), because it encourages the celebrating of the self and personal uniqueness (Gamson). Florida’s conceptualisation of the New American dream, however, tends to emphasise obtaining success, fame and fortune in what Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin (310) consider “hot”, “creative” industries where “the jobs are cool”.

Whether old or new, the American Dream has perpetuated and reinforced celebrity culture, with many of the young generation reporting that fame and fortune were their priorities, as they sought to emulate the success of their famous role models (Florida). The rag to riches stories of iconic recording artists can inevitably glorify and make appealing the struggle that permits achieving one’s dream, with celebrities offering young, aspiring creative people a means of identification for helping them to aspire to meet their dreams (Florida; Samuel). For example, a young Demi Lovato spoke of how she idolised and looked up to singer Beyoncé Knowles, describing Knowles as a role model because of the way she carries herself (Tishgart). Similarly, *American Idol* winner Kelly Clarkson cited Aretha Franklin as her musical inspiration and the reason that she sings from a place deep within (Nilles). It is unsurprising then, that popular media has tended to portray artists working in the creative industries and being paid to follow their passions as “a much-vaunted career dream” (Duffy and Wissinger, 4656). Movies such as *A Star Is Born* (2018), *The Coal Miner’s Daughter* (1980), *Dreamgirls* (2006), *Begin Again* (2013) and *La La Land* (2016) exalt the perception that creativity, talent, sacrifice and determination will mean dreams come true (Nicolaou).

In concert with the American dream is the drive among creative people pursuing creative success to achieve their dreams because of the perceived autonomy they will gain, the chance of self-actualisation and social rewards, and the opportunity to fulfil intrinsic motivations (Amabile; Auger and Woodman; Cohen). For these workers, the love of creation and the happiness that accompanies new discoveries (Csikszentmihalyi) can offset the tight budgets and timelines, precarious labour (Blair, Grey, and Randle; Hesmondhalgh and Baker), uncertain demand (Caves; Shultz), sacrifice of personal relationships (Eikhof and Haunschild), the demand for high quality products (Gil & Spiller), and the tense relationships with administrators (Bilton) which are known to plague these industries. In some cases, young, up and coming creative people overlook these pitfalls, instead romanticising creative careers as ideal and worthwhile. They willingly take on roles and cede control to big corporations to “realize their passions [and] uncover their personal talent” (Bill, 50). Of course, as Ursell argues in discussing television employees, such idealisation can mean creatives, especially those who are young and unfamiliar with the constraints of the industry, end up immersed in and victims of the “vampiric” industry that exploits workers (816). They are socialised towards believing, in this case, that the record label is a necessary component to obtain fame and fortune and whether willing or unwilling, creative workers become complicit in their own exploitation (Cohen).

Loss of Control and No Compensation

The music industry itself has been considered by some to typify the cultural industries (Chambers). Popular music has potency in that it is perceived as speaking a universal language (Burnett), engaging the emotions and thoughts of listeners, and assisting in their identity construction (Burnett; Gardikiotis and Baltzis). Given the place of music within society, it is not surprising that in 2018, the global music industry was worth US\$19.1 billion (IFPI). The music industry is necessarily underpinned by a commercial agenda. At present, six major recording companies exist and between them, they own between 70-80 per cent of the recordings produced globally (Konsor). They also act as gatekeepers, setting trends by defining what and who is worth following and listening to (Csikszentmihalyi; Jones, Anand, and Alvarez).

In essence, to be successful in the music industry is to be affiliated with a record label. This is because the highly competitive nature and cluttered environment makes it harder to gain traction in the market without worthwhile representation (Moiso and Rockman). In the 2012 documentary about Thirty Seconds to Mars, *Artifact*, front man Jared Leto even questions whether it is possible to have “success without a label”. The recording company, he determines, “deal with the crappy jobs”. In a financially uncertain industry that makes money from subjective or experience-based goods (Caves), having a label affords an artist access to “economic capital for production and promotion” that enables “wider recognition” of creative work (Scott, 239). With the support of a record label, creative entrepreneurs are given the chance to be promoted and distributed in the creative marketplace (Scott; Shultz). To have a record label, then, is to be perceived as legitimate and credible (Shultz).

However, the commercial music industry is just that, commercial. Accordingly, the desire to make money can see the intrinsic desires of musicians forfeited in favour of standardised products and a lack of remuneration for artists (Negus). To see this standardisation in practice, one need not look further than those contestants appearing on shows such as *American Idol* or *The Voice*. Nowhere is the standardisation of the music industry more evident than in Holmes’s 2004 article on *Pop Idol*. *Pop Idol* first aired in Britain from 2001-2003 and paved the way for a slew of similar shows around the world such as Australia’s *Popstars Live* in 2004 and the global *Idol* phenomena. According to Holmes, audiences are divested of the illusion of talent and stardom when they witness the obvious manufacturing of musical talent. The contestants receive training, are dressed according to a prescribed image, and the show emphasises those melodramatic moments that are commercially enticing to audiences. Her sentiments suggest these shows emphasise the artifice of the music industry by undermining artistic authenticity in favour of generating celebrities.

The standardisation is typified in the post *Idol* careers of Kelly Clarkson and Adam Lambert. Kelly Clarkson parted with the recording company RCA when her manager and producer Clive Davis told her that her album *My December* (2007) was “not commercial enough” and that Clarkson, who had written most of the songs, was a “shitty writer... who should just shut up and sing” (Nied). Adam Lambert left RCA because they wanted him to make a full length 80s album comprised of covers. Lambert commented that, “while there are lots of great songs from that decade, my heart is simply not in doing a covers album” (Lee). In these instances, winning the show and signing contracts led to both Clarkson and Lambert forfeiting a degree of creative control over their work in favour of formulaic songs that ultimately left both artists unsatisfied.

The standardisation and lack of remuneration is notable when signing recording artists to 360° contracts. These 360° contracts have become commonplace in the music industry (Gulchardaz, Bach, and Penin) and see both the material and immaterial labour (such as personal identities) of recording artists become controlled by record labels (Stahl and Meier). These labels determine the aesthetics of the musicians as well as where and how frequently they tour. Furthermore, the labels become owners of any intellectual property generated by an artist during the tenure of the contract (Sanders; Stahl and Meier). For example, in their documentary *Show Em What You’re Made Of* (2015), the Backstreet Boys lament their affiliation with manager Lou Pearlman. Not only did Pearlman manufacture the group in a way that prevented creative exploration by the members (Sanders), but he withheld profits to the point that the Backstreet Boys had to sue Pearlman in order to gain access to money they deserved.

In 2002 the members of the Backstreet Boys had stated that “it wasn’t our destinies that we had to worry about in the past, it was our souls” (Sanders, 541). They were not writing their own music, which came across in the documentary *Show Em What You’re Made Of* when singer Howie Dorough demanded that if they were to collaborate as a group again in 2013, that everything was to be produced, managed and created by the five group members. Such a demand speaks to creative individuals being tied to their work both personally and emotionally (Bain). The angst encountered by music artists also signals the identity dissonance and conflict felt when they are betraying their true or authentic creative selves (Ashforth and Mael; Ashforth and Humphrey). Performing and abiding by the rules and regulations of others led to frustration because the members felt they were “being passed off as something we aren’t” (Sanders 539).

The Backstreet Boys were not the only musicians who were intensely controlled and not adequately compensated by Pearlman. In the documentary *The Boy Band Con: The Lou Pearlman Story* 2019, Lance Bass of N*Sync and recording artist Aaron Carter admitted that the experience of working with Pearlman became a nightmare when they too, were receiving cheques that were so small that Bass describes them as making his heart sink. For these groups, the dream of making music was undone by contracts that stifled creativity and paid a pittance.

In a similar vein, Thirty Seconds to Mars sought to cut ties with their record label when they felt that they were not being adequately compensated for their work. In retaliation EMI issued Mars with a US\$30 million lawsuit for breach of contract. The tense renegotiations that followed took a toll on the creative drive of the group. At one point in the documentary *Artifact* (2012), Leto claims "I can't sing it right now... You couldn't pay me all the money in the world to sing this song the way it needs to be sung right now. I'm not ready". The contract subordination (Phillips; Stahl and Meier) that had led to the need to renegotiate financial terms came at not only a financial cost to the band, but also a physical and emotional one. The negativity impacted the development of the songs for the new album. To make music requires evoking necessary and appropriate emotions in the recording studio (Wood, Duffy, and Smith), so Leto being unable to deliver the song proved problematic. Essentially, the stress of the lawsuit and negotiations damaged the motivation of the band (Amabile; Elsbach and Hargadon; Hollowell) and interfered with their creative approach, which could have produced standardised and poor quality work (Farr and Ford). The dream of making music was almost lost because of the EMI lawsuit.

Young creatives often lack bargaining power when entering into contracts with corporations, which can prove disadvantaging when it comes to retaining control over their lives (Phillips; Stahl and Meier). Singer Demi Lovato's big break came in the 2008 Disney film *Camp Rock*. As her then manager Phil McIntyre states in the documentary *Simply Complicated* (2017), *Camp Rock* was "perceived as the vehicle to becoming a superstar ... overnight she became a household name". However, as "authentic and believable" as Lovato's edginess appeared, the speed with which her success came took a toll on Lovato. The pressure she experienced having to tour, write songs that were approved by others, star in Disney channel shows and movies, and look a certain way, became too much and to compensate, Lovato engaged in regular drug use to feel free. Accordingly, she developed a hybrid identity to ensure that the squeaky clean image required by the moral clauses of her contract, was not tarnished by her out-of-control lifestyle. The nightmare came from becoming famous at a young age and not being able to handle the expectations that accompanied it, coupled with a stringent contract that exploited her creative talent. Lovato's is not a unique story. Research has found that musicians are more inclined than those in other workforces to use psychotherapy and psychotropic drugs (Vaag, Bjørngaard, and Bjerkeset) and that fame and money can provide musicians more opportunities to take risks, including drug-use that leads to mortality (Bellis, Hughes, Sharples, Hennell, and Hardcastle). For Lovato, living the dream at a young age ultimately became overwhelming with drugs her only means of escape.

Authenticity

The challenges then for music artists is that the dream of pursuing music can come at the cost of a musician's authentic self. According to Hughes, "to be authentic is to be in some sense real and true to something ... It is not simply an imitation, but it is sincere, real, true, and original expression of its creator, and is believable or credible representations or example of what it appears to be" (190). For Nick Jonas of the Jonas Brothers, being in the spotlight and abiding by the demands of Disney was "non-stop" and prevented his personal and musical growth (*Chasing Happiness*). As Kevin Jonas put it, Nick "wanted the Jonas Brothers to be no more". The extensive promotion that accompanies success and fame, which is designed to drive celebrity culture and financial motivations (Currid-Halkett and Scott; King), can lead to cynical performances and dissatisfaction (Hughes) if the identity work of the creative creates a disjoin between their perceived self and aspirational self (Beech, Gilmore, Cochrane, and Greig). Promoting the band (and having to film a television show and movies he was not invested in all because of contractual obligations) impacted on Nick's authentic self to the point that the Jonas Brothers made him feel deeply upset and anxious. For Nick, being stifled creatively led to feeling inauthentic, thereby resulting in the demise of the band as his only recourse.

In her documentary *Gaga: Five Foot Two* (2017), Lady Gaga discusses the extent she had to go to maintain a sense of authenticity in response to producer control. As she puts it, "when producers wanted me to be sexy, I always put some absurd spin on it, that made me feel like I was still in control". Her words reaffirm the perception amongst scholars (Currid-Halkett and Scott; King; Meyers) that in playing the information game, industry leaders will construct an artist's persona in ways that are most beneficial for, in this case, the record label. That will mean, for example, establishing a coherent life story for musicians that endears them to audiences and engaging recording artists in co-branding opportunities to raise their profile and to legitimise them in the marketplace. Such behaviour can potentially influence the preferences and purchases of audiences and fans, can create favourability, originality and clarity around artists (Loroz and Braig), and can establish competitive advantage that leads to producers being able to charge higher prices for the artists' work (Hernando and Campo). But what impact does that have on the musician? Lady Gaga could not continue living someone else's dream. She found herself needing to make changes in order to avoid quitting music altogether. As Gaga told a class of university students at the *Emotion Revolution Summit* hosted by Yale University:

I don't like being used to make people money. It feels sad when I am overworked and that I have just become a money-making machine and that my passion and creativity take a backseat. That makes me unhappy.

According to Eikof and Haunschild, economic necessity can threaten creative motivation. Gaga's reaction to the commercial demands of the music industry signal an identity conflict because her desire to create, clashed with the need to be commercial, with the outcome imposing "inconsistent demands upon" her (Ashforth and Mael, 29). Therefore, to reduce what could be considered feelings of dissonance and inconsistency (Ashforth and Mael; Ashforth and Humphrey) Gaga started saying "no" to prevent further loss of her identity and sense of authentic self. Taking back control could be seen as a means of reorienting her dream and overcoming what had become dissatisfaction with the commercial processes of the music industry.

Conclusions

For many creatives working in the creative industries – and specifically the music industry – is constructed as a dream come true; the working conditions and expectations experienced by recording artists are far from liberating and instead can become nightmares to which they want to escape. The case studies above, although likely 'constructed' retellings of the unfortunate circumstances encountered working in the music industry, nevertheless offer an inside account that contradicts the prevailing ideology that pursuing creative passions leads to a dream career (Florida; Samuel). If anything, the case studies explored above involving 30 Seconds to Mars, the Jonas Brothers, Lady Gaga, Kelly Clarkson, Adam Lambert and the Backstreet Boys, acknowledge what many scholars writing in the creative industries have already identified; that exploitation, subordination, identity conflict and loss of control are the unspoken or lesser known consequences of pursuing the creative dream. That said, the conundrum for creatives is that for success in the industry big "creative" businesses, such as recording labels, are still considered necessary in order to break into the market and to have prolonged success. This is simply because their resources far exceed those at the disposal of independent and up-and-coming creative entrepreneurs. Therefore, it can be argued that this friction of need between creative industry business versus artists will be on-going leading to more of these 'dream to nightmare' stories. The struggle will continue manifesting in the relationship between business and artist for long as the recording artists fight for greater equality, independence of creativity and respect for their work, image and identities.

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