Article

"That's the Experience": Passion, Work Precarity, and Life Transitions Among London Jazz Musicians

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Abstract

This article looks at early-career jazz musicians working in London. It links sociological literature on precarity and the life course with a more specific focus on the process of establishing a career in music. It shows how participants sought to embrace and sometimes even manufacture greater precarity in their working lives, and how they contextualized it as part of the life course. Their ability to manage precarity in this way, however, was greatly affected by structural factors, specifically socioeconomic background. Particular elements that are especially pronounced in creative work, such as the prominence of project-based employment and the importance of passion for the job, are important factors leading to the management and indefinite extension of these transitional periods.

Keywords

creative work, jazz musicians, precarity, career paths

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The transition from labor market entry to career stability has long been a concern both in wider sociological literature, and increasingly in the more specific study of employment. The two fields are linked because those in the early stages of their careers are likely to be particularly vulnerable to precarious working conditions (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006; Kretsos, 2010). Given that the attainment of stable work has frequently been considered an important personal landmark (Cuconato, 2011; MacDonald, Shildrick, Webster, & Simpson, 2005), research has shown how increasing work precarity has also impacted life course patterns (e.g., Brzinsky-Fay, 2007; Golsch, 2003). However, studies also emphasize the extent to which socioeconomic background affects the nature and duration of these transitions, suggesting that relative material security can lead workers to manage precarity for much longer before seeking stability (Côté & Bynner, 2008). In "creative" jobs such as music, the relative youth of the workforce and the widespread informality of work make the connections between the life course and work precarity particularly worthy of investigation.

This article offers a qualitative study of jazz musicians in London, examining their perceptions of work precarity as they seek to transition from new scene entrant to established professional. Our creative sector case enables us to draw together strands of distinct but mutually relevant research. We consider themes that are particularly pronounced in creative work—specifically the importance of passion for the job, and the project-based nature of the labor market. By focusing predominantly on musicians who are in the process of becoming established, we show how these themes can explain the intentional prolongation of precarious working arrangements, thus indefinitely postponing or even reversing life course landmarks such as home ownership and parenthood. In support of this, we make three empirical points. First, we show how our participants accepted and often embraced labor market precarity. Second, we argue that they sought to manage this precarity rather than seeing it as a transitional phase to overcome. Third, we suggest that their ability to do this depended on familial support, which begins at a very young age but may continue long after entering the labor market.

The article continues as follows: First, there is a literature review considering the resonances between literatures on life course transitions and creative work. There follows a discussion of methods, before an empirical section that examines participants' attitudes to precarity, its role in their life course, and the support networks upon which they rely.

Finally, discussion and conclusion sections summarize the argument and describe its implications.

Precarity and the Life Course

While the experiences uncovered in our data are by no means only relevant to young people, sociological literature on "transitions to adulthood" yield important insights for the study of work precarity. The expansion of precarious employment as a consequence of structural economic shifts and the breakdown of the post-War economic order (Kalleberg, 2012) has profoundly affected young people, who may face a more informalized and risk-laden labor market than their parents (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006; Standing, 2011). Heightened job instability increasingly faces even relatively highly skilled young workers (Barley & Kunda, 2004). They may have to endure long periods of insecurity upon first entering the labor market, in the hope of eventually penetrating a more stable core workforce (Bulut, 2014). As our data will show, the idea of ostensibly transitional phases of career precarity, which individual workers must seek to manage, is by no means limited to the very young, particularly in creative work.

The idea of work precarity as part of the transition from labor market entry to labor market integration parallels sociological depictions of the flux and uncertainty of youth. Concepts like "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2000) have appeared as attempts to understand this transitional period. While our sample is older than the typical "emerging adulthood" age range (25–35 rather than 18–25), various points from these discussions are relevant to our analysis of jazz musicians' working lives. Particularly important in these debates is the idea of postponement (Bynner, 2005). It is widely accepted that transitions to adulthood in developed societies are now taking longer (Clark, 2007; Côté & Bynner, 2008), reflected in phenomena such as an extension of parental semidependency (Heath, Rothon, & Kilpi, 2008) and increasingly frequent "boomerangs" back to the family home (Stone et al., 2014). Emerging adulthood initially appeared as a psychological concept indicating a period of exploration before life choices solidify. However, writers have also centralized social structures such as class background, showing how those young people with more familial resources extend their transitions to adulthood for longer (Bynner, 2005). Hence, despite ostensibly denoting a specific period between

adolescence and maturity, the duration of the transition to adulthood is extremely variable (Côté & Bynner, 2008).

Research also highlights the importance of heightened labor market insecurity for the life course. Work precarity may well delay transitions to adulthood (Golsch, 2003), and atypical working patterns could jeopardize the embedding of young workers in secure social networks (Woodman, 2013). Common to debates both on transitions to adulthood and on precarious employment is a shared concern for the interaction between economic and social realms. If the prolongation of life transitions is highly dependent on social support networks, precarious work also demands social contextualization. Put simply, the extent to which work precarity is problematic depends on whether other social support networks exist or not (Gentile, 2011). Castel's (2000) work conceptualizes work and social networks as two distinct sources of stability and posits the existence of a "disaffiliated" class that lacks access to both. Hence, when we refer to "work precarity" here, we mean the objective state of an informalized and unreliable jobs market, as distinct from the individual's own experience of it. We will show that the management of work precarity and the postponement of stability, in creative careers, is relevant well beyond the typical "youth" age range studied by the authors above.

We suggest that studies of work and employment increasingly need to untangle the connections between the workplace and prolonged life transitions. There is a growing emphasis on the need for individualized ways of coping with increasingly turbulent labor markets (Kalleberg, 2009; Ranci, 2010; Wyn & White, 2000), but it is also clear that the way workers experience both life transitions and precarious work are closely connected to structural factors. Moreover, while precarity and prolonged life transitions may be products of structural economic change, they are not simply enforced on people: Standing (2011) has argued, for example, that many "precarious" workers increasingly "reject the laborism of stable full-time jobs," craving instead to "work on their own" outside of traditional collective structures. Hence, in what follows, we examine workers' own attitudes to work precarity in the labor market, focusing on the ways in which they use their agency to manage it, and the resources they draw upon in doing so. Moreover, we contextualize their responses within the life course, showing the managed embrace of work precarity as integral to the postponement of hallmarks of stability such as home ownership or parenthood. Before this, we introduce relevant characteristics of the creative work context.

Passion and Agency in Creative Work

There are two prominent themes in research on creative work which are particularly relevant to the issues discussed in the preceding section. One is the notion of "passion" for work, which can legitimate precarity and the disruption of the life course. Second is the often project-based nature of creative employment that enables workers to exercise agency over the work settings they encounter, and hence to some extent regulate their rate of integration into labor markets. These factors are clearly not exclusive to creative jobs such as music performance but are especially prevalent within it. Moreover, the predominance of young workers in music work (Gibson, 2003; McRobbie, 2002) makes it a useful lens through which to consider worker attitudes to precarity and its effects on the life course.

Project-based or "portfolio" employment is relatively common in creative work (Gill, 2002; Kong, 2011), with creative careers often characterized by multiple short-term projects with heterogeneous employers or clients. This heterogeneity and unpredictability means that institutions like unions tend to have limited ability to regulate the conditions of work (Heery, Conley, Delbridge, & Stewart, 2004). Moreover, the "economy of favors" inherent in project-based employment (Ursell, 2000) may legitimate low pay and working for free; the latter being particularly common in music (Musicians' Union, 2012). As Pilmis (2007) shows, as workers become more established, the heterogeneity of projects may narrow into a smaller set of more stable work sources. Hence, workers negotiating precarity in creative jobs may hope to later transition to more regularized careers (Bulut, 2014). This may be a complex process driven by tensions between artistic objectives and the need for stability (Lingo & Tepper, 2013). This transitional "establishment" phase is where we find the vast majority of our research participants.

One important implication of project-based work is that, despite its inherent insecurity, it also gives workers an opportunity to exercise agency over their working lives (Antcliff, 2005). Lindgren et al. (2014) juxtapose the instability of portfolio labor markets with the opportunities it affords to seek out exciting work projects. This is particularly salient in research on music work. Because musicians may be able to attain comparatively stable jobs such as instrumental tuition, they may cultivate highly complex portfolios in which extreme informality exists alongside more reliable income streams (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Umney & Kretsos, 2014). This raises the prospect—strongly evidenced

in our research—that we may see workers seeking to manage precarity, rather than treating it as a phase which must be traversed on the way to stability.

What factors influence how this agency is used? While it is possible that creative workers are seduced into embracing work precarity by ideological factors, such as the "cool" nature of the jobs involved (McRobbie, 2002; Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin, 2005), arguably of greater relevance to our discussion is the idea of work as a passion. Various writers have looked at this idea critically. For example, Michie and Nelson (2006) show how the relatively greater intensity of passion for computing work among men has led to the marginalization of female workers in the sector. Expectations that workers care deeply about their jobs can legitimize the neglect of work–life balance (Antcliff, 2005). Vázquez-Cupeiro and Elston (2006) highlight the ambivalence of "passion": It can signify enjoyment, but also the idea of suffering in the service of a calling. Consequently, they show how it disrupts the attainment of work stability among, predominantly female, academics.

Jazz music is a paradigmatic example of creative work, typified by improvisatory performances in which the separation of conception and execution is greatly reduced (Smith & McKinlay, 2009). Jazz jobs tend to be organized around disparate, small-group performances in a wide variety of settings and with an ever-shifting array of collaborators (Dowd & Pinheiro, 2013). Existing research into jazz work shows that workers may often trade-off better remunerated work for jobs affording greater creative satisfaction (Stebbins, 1968; Umney & Kretsos, 2014). Consequently, jazz constitutes an interesting environment in which to consider themes of work precarity, worker agency, and passion. We focus primarily on early-career musicians who are trying to establish themselves as professionals, considering how they regard work precarity and asking them to reflect on how their work priorities connect with their life transitions. We show how their pursuit of passion through work leads them to try to manage precarity, accommodating it in the long term rather than aiming for a future transition to greater stability. We also show how their ability to do so is dependent on socioeconomic factors, particularly family background.

Methods

Our research draws on interviews with 30 musicians working in London collected between December 2011 and December 2012, plus follow-ups with 14 participants. We sampled jazz musicians, but this does not mean

all participants earned a living exclusively through playing jazz. Rather, interviewees were almost all professional musicians who had had formal education in jazz. All had developed "portfolio" working lives including jazz alongside various other engagements like teaching, or else other kinds of playing such as "function" gigs (i.e., private parties) and musical theater. Specifically, we were interested less in established professionals but rather those in the process of trying to become established, to whom issues of precarity and life course transitions would be more salient.

Of 30 participants, all but four fell into the 25–35 age range. One was younger (23), and three were in their late 30s or early 40s. This reflects the basing of our data gathering around snowball sampling from an initial point of two contacts. Rather than working to an a priori age range, we sought out musicians who were in the process of establishing themselves on the London scene, or in some cases those that had recently moved away after attempts to do so. The important thing was to interview those who could talk about their efforts to transition from labor market entry to professional establishment, even if this encompassed some older participants. Frequently, this included musicians who had studied elsewhere and, after spending some years in preparation, relocated to begin afresh in London—undoubtedly the hub of the UK's jazz scene. To work to a predefined age range would therefore have been unduly restrictive. There were important demographic limitations in the sample. Jazz is a particularly male-dominated environment (Heckathorn & Jeffri, 2001), and only four participants were female. Moreover, Black and ethnic minority musicians are also marginalized in British jazz (Banks, Ebrey, & Toynbee, 2014); something also reflected in the fact that only one participant was from an ethnic minority. These are weaknesses which we hope to address in future research.

Interviews lasted 1 to 2 hours. Initial questions probed the empirical nature and organization of participants' employment, with a particular focus on their experiences of and attitudes toward work precarity. Moreover, we asked them to reflect on the life course. How did they regard ostensible hallmarks of adulthood such as home ownership and family life, and how did they see these transitions connecting with their work? The final area of focus was their family background, and specifically the extent to which they had been able to draw on family support both before and during the "establishment" phase of their careers. The extent to which they did so varied, and we asked them to reflect on how the availability (or absence) of such support affected their approach to

the labor market. As noted, we conducted follow-up discussions with around half of the participants. These were generally those encountered early in data gathering, with whom we wanted to revisit themes that emerged over the course of research. This was particularly the case with the more reflective questions concerning the connections between family support and attitudes toward precarity, which became more of a priority as research progressed.

The remainder of the article presents this data. We first discuss the ambivalence of our participants to work precarity, before examining how they sought to contextualize it within the life course. Finally, we highlight the importance of family support in mitigating the effects of precarity and facilitating participants' management of it.

"If I Enjoy Something, I Don't Worry About the Money So Much": Passion and Precarity

Overwhelmingly, our participants described entering the music profession because of their passion for music. The depth and implications of this passion should be examined, however. Most straightforwardly, it was almost universal among participants that it downgraded the relative importance of well-remunerated and stable work; put most bluntly in the quote from Rob (27, saxophone) that heads this section. Participants who had relocated to London after studying elsewhere typically explained this transition not in terms of economic opportunity, but because of the quality of London's music scene. Stephen's (28, bass) assessment that "generally if musicians are free, they want to go and play. They don't mind [low fees and informal arrangements]" was widespread. More strongly, for the great majority (though not all, as shown below), the desire to play the kind of music that they wanted to play was something to which material concerns were worth sacrificing. Many invoked a trade-off; material expectations should be lowered in order to enable the pursuit of "original" projects (i.e., a participant's own creative output rather than functions or theater). The following quote from Harry (26, trumpet) sums up this widespread view of work stability as an extravagance one has no right to expect:

> Everyone knows when starting an original project that you have to be into the project because there ain't going to be any monetary rewards.... That's why we're into music. We were doing that stuff for fun when we were learning music.

A further implication of music as a passion was the blurring of the line between work and enjoyment for many participants. Rob's (27, saxophone) response to questions about future objectives was an extreme example of this haziness: "that's funny, because when you ask about career objectives it makes it sound like work!" More representative is the following response from Bryan (28, bass):

> There's a big blur between what I do for work and what I do for fun. . . . If you don't practice, it's over really. There's no point being a musician if you don't practice. . . . When I have time off in the evenings, I practice. So literally all day Tuesday I'll be practicing. If I wasn't here now I'd be practicing. So I really see that as the single most important part of being a musician even though it's not actually earning me any money.

Like many other participants, Bryan's income came mainly from teaching or performing functions by rote. The only music he pushed himself to practice for were his original projects, which constituted a negligible fraction of his income. Hence, the largest chunk of his working time was spent developing his own capabilities, with little impact on his earning power.

This work/enjoyment blurring often (with some significant exceptions) led to a strong aversion to the idea of music as a "trade." Participants who had undertaken more regularized work such as musical theater often recalled feeling out-of-step with older colleagues exhibiting this mind-set. Rob, for example, described being berated by bandmates for practicing jazz during scheduled breaks while doing pantomime. Edward (27, saxophone) recalls his experiences on cruise ships:

> The majority of people on there had been there 20 years—nobody seemed to be passionate about music. And I can't imagine any of those characters at any point being passionate about music! There was no passion left in them about what they were doing. It almost felt like a trade rather than a passion.

This view was not universal. Some participants dismissed this critique of music as a trade, viewing the perceived "backs to the audience" attitude of others as a self-indulgent barrier to self-sufficiency. We return to this point below. Closely linked to this resistance to music as a trade was an aversion to the regularization of employment and an embrace of variety: "In the last two months I've done a lot of House gigs, played

with orchestras, done quartet gigs, done an Indian music concert. . . . And I just feel as long as I have variety I'll be happy" (Anna, 26, saxophone). "I couldn't do a 9–5 sitting in front of a computer screen" (Ryan, 27, saxophone). Simon (28, guitar) described his attraction to a precarious existence, suggesting that if he found himself in stable work, "I would feel like I was missing something."

Passion for music could also in some cases inspire highly individualistic perspectives on working life, which came through in different ways. Extremely common was the desire for self-improvement; to push oneself, in contrast with the stagnation participants often associated with more regularized work. Frequently, the move to London was explained as reflecting a desire to expose oneself to a higher caliber scene, escaping from local comfort zones. Terry (32, guitar) had cornered the jazz teaching market in his home town but, seeing his development as a player stalling, hoped to rekindle it with "The Fear" that comes from starting from scratch on the periphery of the London scene. Similarly, Oliver (29, bass) said:

> You think you can easily stay . . . do a bit of teaching, some gigs at [the local jazz venues] . . . . And I thought "God, I could end up being 40 and never have tried anything else." Because it's so comfortable. . . . That idea of getting to forty—married, house, a bit of teaching. . . . That was such a difference from when I was younger and watching Queen: Live at Wembley. . . . And I wanted to go for that.

Noel (33, bass) was arguably the most extreme case in this regard, having given up a stable conservatoire teaching job and selling his house in order to rent in London while trying to accumulate work.

Occasionally, the idea of pushing oneself hardened into more explicit individualism. Richard (28, drums) is the most extreme case, speaking enthusiastically about the "meritocratic" nature of music, where (unlike in "normal" jobs) it was impossible to get away with mediocrity. A more universal theme was the desire for self-direction, and ownership of a particular artistic project.

> When you do a function gig, you think "has this pushed me forward as an artist? Has it increased my profile as a performing musician?" . . . . If you do a function you get nothing from that. Whereas if you do a quartet gig down at the local to only five people . . . you'll think "that's me, that's my name." You're doing creative gigs under your name. Even if you're not

> playing to other people, you have an output as an artist. (Harry, 26, trumpet)

The observation that participants were motivated by a passion for music therefore has various implications for their attitudes to work. First, it legitimates the sacrifice of material stability. Second, it stigmatizes the idea of "music as a trade," associating it with cruise or theatrical work typically dominated by older players. Third, it inculcates a desire for challenge and self-improvement which leads to the (part) rejection of potentially more stable work sources like teaching or theatrical work. From this, we may infer that the idea of a potential transition to future stability is of limited appeal for our participants; an idea we examine in more nuanced detail in the next section.

"Money Perpetuates My Existence, and That's OK As Long As I'm Playing Good Music": Managing Precarity and the Life Course

Participants often needed to make a decision about the balance between "creative" and more stable kinds of employment. Many consciously prioritized the former, but a minority was unwilling to do so. Ben (29, guitar), who since entering the labor market had determinedly sought out theatrical work over jazz, states:

> I made a decision at college to make sure I could earn a living [from music]. . . . I've cut off most of my creative side mostly because of time and because of being exhausted. It's something I'd like to get back into, but I'm more than happy making a living wage out of what I'm doing.

Another (Eric, 28, saxophone) found the precarity of project-based work (which he had sold a house to support) unbearable and was seeking to leave music altogether.

> I worry endlessly. I've got health problems as a result. . . . Because you're constantly just stressed about every aspect of your financial security. And it's not just your job, it's also your passion. And the whole thing gets into one massive whirlwind, and it can be very, very soul-destroying. . . . Today I've sold my Apple laptop for £600 because I need it to get through March. So I'm not in a position where at 28 I own nothing. . . . But when I was 21 I owned a house. . . . I've even sold saxes! . . . . And it's gone to keeping me alive.

Most other participants, however, sought to manage rather than escape precarity. To do so, they may take on varying quantities of teaching or other jobs such as theatrical work or functions that were typically seen as less fulfilling. Rather than a transition away from precarious work, participants sought to mitigate its negative elements, often to better sustain them long into the future. Noel (33) had "trimmed" his secure teaching job, to the point where it provided a basic safety net to pursue gigging. For some, this "precarious" phase was seen as an opportunity explicitly associated with youth: "I didn't come to London to save, I came to play music. So if I have a roof over my head and live a bit precariously, that's fine for now. You have to do it while you're still young" (Simon, 28, guitar). But, for the majority, longer term objectives were to achieve just enough economic stability to allow the pursuit of creative projects.

> The only economic objective I can see myself having is that I could have enough for a deposit on a flat in Zone 2–3 of London, but that seems almost unachievable. I don't want to earn shedloads of cash. I'm not money-oriented. If I was I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing. I want to keep doing what I'm doing. And to be doing creative projects where I have creative control. (Edward, 27, saxophone)

The above quote is relatively typical of the sample, but in some cases there was a more emphatically stated distaste for the idea of seeking out stable work as they got older. Dan (26, saxophone) was asked about the prospects of a mortgage and children:

> I'd rather not think about it! I'd have to change. Now I don't have responsibilities and only myself to provide for. I'd have to rely on money more. So doing the originals stuff and not taking money from gigs—I couldn't do that. Yesterday I spent all day working on getting gigs—I couldn't do that. . . . I do want all of that stuff at some point. I'll cross that bridge when it comes to it. If I have to hustle for more function gigs, so be it.

In some cases, the notion of stability itself was seen pejoratively because of its implications for working life. Alex (27, trumpet) had been offered, but quickly given up, regular work in a West End show:

> It was so boring. It ruins you as a musician. I really think [you have to] take other opportunities to play real music . . . that isn't just playing the

> same exact notes every night for five years. . . . It isn't my idea of why I became a musician. And the guys that do it tend to be married with kids and jobs, needing financial security. If you don't have those obligations you're not required to do it. As soon as you get a mortgage or kids, suddenly you're thinking—I should probably find something more stable and higher income.

Terry (33, guitar) provides a vivid example of this view of stability as synonymous with subordinating one's own passion:

> I was doing loads of teaching . . . so I'd saved a fair amount, but had got quite pissed off. . . . I know some people that really hate teaching . . . it doesn't grate with me, but you can see your life slip away doing that because you know that the only progress that's going to be made is your students.

There are important nuances here because some participants saw strong incentives in regularized work. Arran (27, drums), for example, was seeking out the kind of West End gigs that Alex rejected, finding satisfaction in the execution of complex theatrical charts. The widespread view, however, was that regularized jobs like these were not musicians' *raison d'être* and should support, not replace, self-directed original projects. As noted, some reacted very negatively to the idea of future stability, and some had even given up supposed tenets of adulthood (e.g., home ownership) to enter a new, risk-laden phase. Most importantly, participants tended not to envision clear transitions to stability in the future, instead seeking to cultivate limited quantities of more regularized work—this is an opportunity afforded by the project-based structuring of the labor market. Hence, while participants could potential seek to access more formalized types of work, the salient issue for most was the extent to which these opportunities should figure in their own balancing of regularity and creativity.

"There Are Lots of Double-Barreled Names in the London Jazz Scene" (Connor, 33, Bass): Social Support Networks

The preceding section showed how participants were often conflicted about future transitions to stability, instead seeking to develop portfolios balancing different work sources in the longer term. This balance must be negotiated individually, depending on various factors including

preferences about how one's passion can best be pursued. But individual responses to precarity and life transitions also reflect structural factors, and particularly important here is the availability of material support from one's family. Almost all participants described having depended at some point on family support, including from a very young age. Most began learning their instruments in primary school and were therefore dependent on parental encouragement and resources. Family can provide a conducive environment for picking up an instrument, as Mark (26, drums) describes:

> [I have always played music, because there were a lot of musicians in my family, so it was pretty much present straight away. . . . So I started playing Tupperware boxes, and I always had pretend kits for ages, and then my dad bought me a real drum set when I was six. . . . At six my sister would have already been playing trumpet so I would have been performing with her, and my brother was a trombonist.

The investment of resources (both financial and time) is also critical:

> My mum made an absolutely gigantic investment in my musical learning. All at the same time I was having lessons in piano and guitar and viola and tuba, and singing, and theory. . . . And going on all these different summer camps, playing in bands, this kind of stuff. Ferrying your kids about the place, buying all these instruments. (Terry, 33, guitar)

Participants had typically spent well over a decade practicing their instruments, and so the great majority considered this kind of early support critical. One interview, whose father had also been a musician, referred to his parents' "understanding the way of life. . . . They've never wanted me not to give music a go through pressures and financial strains" (Chris, 28, drums). Generally, this support continued through higher education, which provides not just training but also networks critical to future success. It is probable that this need for extensive parental investment constitutes an important entry barrier to music for those from less affluent backgrounds.

The remarks made so far in this section largely applied across the sample. There is more divergence after they enter the labor market. Where the potential for continuing support beyond education exists, it affords an underlying security that reduces the pressing need for stable work: "If I went a month without making any money, I know I won't be living on the streets. At the very [worst] I could move back

home" (Dan, 26, saxophone). While most did not need it regularly, many had depended on parental support during the early stages of labor market entry, as they devoted their time to the unpaid labor involved in networking. Parental support also helps with unexpected contingencies. One participant was forced into financial problems after becoming the victim of car crime, while another had had a regular residency cancelled abruptly.

The stronger the familial safety net, the more participants were enabled to immerse themselves in pursuit of their passion, to some extent staving off the imperative to do more regularized jobs. Certainly, most participants did teach—typically one or two days per week. But, reflecting Bynner's (2005) emphasis on the role of structural supports in prolonging life transitions, those from more affluent family backgrounds could tolerate higher degrees of work irregularity. Though this point would arguably require a wider quantitative study to verify, it is therefore unsurprising that so many participants remarked on the perceived dominance of the jazz scene by people from comparatively privileged backgrounds. "I really only know one or two working class musicians. Especially in London it's a very white, middle class thing" (Harry, 26, trumpet). See also the following exchange with Stan (33, bass):

> Stan: I can think of numerous examples of jazz musicians from wealthy families. There are a lot of affluent "artist" types, and to be honest I probably count among that number. I'm lucky enough that I actually inherited a fair bit of money that I spent on a flat. My dad helped me buy the rest of the flat. So I hardly have any outgoings in terms of rent.
>
> Interviewer: That enables you to pursue what you want to do a bit more?
>
> Stan: Yeah. There are a lot of musicians in that situation.

One of the older interviewees (David, 40s, guitar) had taught for many years and described being struck by the influx of students entering music from elite private institutions, reflecting the expanding provision of jazz education and the codification of a jazz syllabus (Whyton, 2006). As may be expected from sociological literature linking class to confidence (e.g., Filippin & Paccagnella, 2012; Zhang & Postiglione, 2001), David observed a more self-assured attitude among these students and, notably for our purposes, a greater propensity to view themselves as artists rather than workers in a trade. In keeping with literature

emphasizing a class dimension to life transitions, we argue that the availability of family support facilitates the pursuit of music as a passion through the extension and management of work precarity. For others with relatively weaker familial support lines, such as Eric (see preceding section), work precarity meant great personal hardship.

A minority of participants reflected critically on these dynamics; in the words of Mark (26, drums), the "insanely middle class" demography of the jazz scene. One manifestation of this criticism that resurfaced in a significant minority of interviews was the stereotype of the self-indulgent jazz musician, afforded the luxury of pursuing individual projects to the detriment of the attributes required by more rounded professionals: self-promotion, organization, and technical skills such as accurate sight-reading. Mark referred to "that jazz attitude of playing with backs to the audience, playing what they want, you can guarantee their parents are worth a bit of money." In this sense, participants such as Mark did have a sharply critical analysis of the role of "passion" in the lives of musicians, associating the pursuit of it with parental dependency.

Our interviews show the ambivalence of passion and work precarity among jazz musicians. Frequently, the two were seen as inextricably linked, and for some, the possibility of greater work stability was seen as stifling. Participants often had complex attitudes toward their futures. Some, such as Eric or Ben, whose cases are discussed above, had experiences largely consistent with the idea of precarity as part of a transition in the life course. It had caused them stress and worry, and they were keen to embrace more stable careers. Since the time of the interview, Ben has married and had a child; realizing objectives he had spoken about at the time and which were tied to his negative attitudes toward precarity at work. These participants, however, are a minority. More were resistant to the idea of a transition to stability, instead seeking to find their own balances whereby they could support themselves at a tolerable level while maintaining and managing the inherent ties between "passion" and precarity. The availability of parental support made it much easier to do this, and those who had more support available were generally more disposed to concentrate more heavily on "original" and nonregularized work.

Discussion

This article has made three main empirical points about participants' attitudes to work precarity and its connections with their life course. First, they accept and in some cases actively seek out precarity.

Second, the boundaries between stability and precarity are blurred, as participants balance quantities of stable work to support otherwise precarious careers, rather than simply progressing from one to the other as they establish themselves. Third, their ability to do this is linked to economic background. These three points are interlinked. The passion almost all participants had for music is key to explaining the first two points. The belief, either that an informalized and unpredictable working life is an inevitable corollary of the pursuit of passion (which was common among the great majority of participants), or that (for many but not all participants) it should be actively sought out in the pursuit of passion, explains why many were reluctant about the prospect of a future transition to stability. As noted, some had even attained landmarks such as home ownership and given them up to move to London. The third empirical point shows that the ease or difficulty participants have in achieving this balance is not simply to do with individual attributes but is closely connected to economic structures. The importance of parental support, not just through education but in the early stages of labor market entry, is critical in enabling the pursuit of passion.

The creative sector focus also illustrates the connections between agency and structural factors in participants' transitions. Clearly, economic resources are critical in determining the range of labor market choices available to participants. However, the project-based nature of work meant all participants were conscious of the potential to shape their own labor market trajectory. This is an important particularity that is not limited to creative jobs but is particularly pronounced within them, raising the possibility of intentionally extended life course transitions and the indefinite management of some degree of work precarity. Hence, many participants by no means fit into the "precariat": They undoubtedly experience work precarity, but they have some potential to limit this by turning to other work sources. Moreover, they are rarely "disaffiliated" in Castell's (2000) sense because they often had support networks outside of work. Our research re-emphasizes the importance of connections between economic and social dimensions: Stability in one realm can throw a very different light on precarity in another. It also shows how socioeconomic background can greatly enhance one's agency to negotiate project-based labor markets in pursuit of an amenable balance of work.

Before concluding, we should note the wider economic context. Interviews occurred against a backdrop of protracted recession and welfare state retrenchment in the United Kingdom. Unsurprisingly, the significance of the economic downturn was highly variable

among participants. For those that could draw on family support well into the stages of career establishment, the effects were not strongly felt. These participants had often continued as they had been, seeking to prioritize "creative" jobs. Similarly, the presence of welfare state institutions was a conspicuous absence in interviews, and we suggest that this reflects the preeminent importance of private (i.e., familial) support networks among participants. Moreover, the fact that function work appears to have been the kind of job most severely affected by the downturn had a double-effect on those with less support because this was a common work source generally providing better paid if less creatively rewarding work. Hence, Eric, who had earned most of his money from functions, had been pushed into great distress by the recession. At the time of the interview, he was seriously considering leaving music.

Conclusion

Before making some concluding remarks, a note on the limitations we hope to address in future research. First, our research is a snapshot of our participants' lives rather than a longitudinal study. We argue that participants tended to prolong the arrival of life course landmarks such as work stability and feel that our interviews evidence this claim. However, we clearly have not been able to trace the way these views evolve in the same respondents over the years. Nonetheless, as noted, our participants' age range was somewhat higher than is typically associated with the sociological study of youth, and the fact that so many clearly remained in transitional flux well into their thirties indicates that they can be seen as strong illustrations of the postponement of life course transitions. A more important weakness is the relative narrowness of our sample's demographics, comprising only small numbers of female and ethnic minority participants. Further research could productively seek to highlight the experiences of female jazz musicians in particular, in order to consider how gender shapes the interconnections between work precarity and the life course. This is particularly important given the fact that authors have frequently highlighted the highly gendered effects of passion for work (Michie & Nelson, 2006; Vázquez-Cupeiro & Elston, 2006).

Despite these limitations, our findings have useful implications for literatures on the life course, and on creative employment. In the latter case, our work focuses specifically on the "transitional" phase in creative careers, connecting this with wider sociological discussion of transitions in the life course. While literature on creative work emphasizes

fatalism and poor working conditions, we show the importance of contextualizing these attitudes within personal life trajectories. Attitudes to work precarity are critically shaped by the way participants envision their futures and, perhaps even more importantly, the preexisting support they can draw upon. Because of the importance of passion in this context, and the capacity for workers to exercise some degree of agency in project-based labor markets, we argue that future research needs to embed an understanding of the employment relations and labor market dynamics of the creative industries within a wider reading of the life course and support networks of workers within it.

Our findings also strongly evidence those arguments emphasizing the importance of economic structures in the life course. As Bynner (2005) has suggested, family economic background may facilitate the management of precarity, and our interviews illustrate the truth in this. Strong networks make it easier for participants to postpone the stability necessitated by life landmarks such as raising a family. Our main contribution is to emphasize the links between these points and more specific questions about work and employment. Specifically, we show how the qualitative attitudes workers have about the workplace itself are often important in explaining the desire to postpone these transitions. In some cases, as demonstrated by our study, they engender a highly critical perception of the notion of stability, as a brake on the pursuit of music as a passion.

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