Agile management strategies within the music industries:

Artist management and the problem of creative labour

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1. **Key words:**

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2. **Managing artistic contributions within the music industries**

Artists contribute to society in a complex variety of ways. While artistic creativity can serve useful, benevolent purposes that enrich our world, there is also a dark side to artistic creativity; the divisive tendencies of the arts can lead to tension, violence and fanaticism, and creative thinkers can be more dishonest. A full understanding of artistic contributions is therefore needed when examining the topic of artist management: what exactly are artists, and their managers, managing?

Artistic contributions are often understood in one of two ways: first, that artistic creativity is beneficial *in and of itself*; and, second, that artistic creativity generates *instrumental* benefits.

Within music advocacy and funding discourse that emanates from the music industries, there has been a shift from considering music to be a 'loss leader' for the public good, one that should be subsidised using taxpayers' money, to arguments that there are a wide range of instrumental benefits that can be derived from the facilitation of artistic creativities. Within the music industries, 'economic' benefits are arguably predominant in such instrumental arguments, although such arguments also feature the impact students' participation in artistic creativities can have on school performance in other subjects, and the ways in which the arts can strengthen democracy (Madden and Bloom, 2001: 411). The complexity of artistic contributions, and how these contributions are managed, therefore derives from binaries such as these, and also from the complexity of creativity itself.

Following Madden and Bloom (2001), two broad conceptual forms of creativity can be used to unpack this complexity here: 'hard' creativity and 'weak' creativity. The differences between these two forms pivot on the concept of 'newness':

> 'Hard' creativity represents the creation of something that is 'brand new' in the sense that it is unprecedented (creation as invention). 'Weak' creativity represents something merely being 'brought into being' (creation simply as production) (412).

A particular challenge for artists, and their managers, is that while weak and soft creativity are perhaps the predominant forms of artistic creativity (Ibid: 414), the focus of arts advocates, policy makers, and often the media, on innovation and 'hard' artistic creativities means that what most artists are creating the majority of the time falls outside the scope of many of the support structures within the music industries.

The research problem this paper explores then is, simply put, how do artists and their managers make headway in such complex conditions of uncertainty? This problem is explored by drawing upon original research that was conducted within the music industries. The research questions informing this study emphasise the subjective experiences of artist managers and self-managed artist entrepreneurs. What is it like to manage an artist? Or, if you are a self-managed artist entrepreneur, what is it like to manage your own career? Can agile methodologies be used for managing artists within the music industries?

3. The agile movement

Agile project management (APM) originated for the purposes of developing software that better meets users' needs. It contrasts with traditional project management, which often involves rigidly sticking to a plan, in the way that it involves a zigzagging pattern of adaptations in response to inevitable changes. These adaptations are informed by insights gleaned from frequent experiments and 'sprints'. While originating in the software industries, the agile movement has now gone mainstream with the ideas stemming from this approach to innovation being deployed in many industries, and even by governments. APM is characterised by the close monitoring of customer feedback and each iteration of the developing product is designed to obtain and test such feedback. In this way, product development is not informed by assumptions about what customers want, but what they actually need. This approach therefore reduces the risk involved in product development.

By enabling participants to respond to change, rather than follow a rigid plan, APM often involves small teams that work autonomously, with managers managing for goals rather than micromanaging processes, or as Highsmith (2010) puts it: "agile leaders lead teams, non-agile ones *manage* tasks" (47). This is because APM involves understanding that: "ultimate customer value is delivered at the point-of-sale, not the point-of-plan" (Ibid: 8). APM has largely been enabled by: "the plunging cost of experimentation" (Ibid: 5) in many industries that has been enabled by the digitsation of aspects of these industries.

APM necessitates a close working relationship between the artist and the artist manager. This is because strategies and solutions evolve over time and they can change quickly. This means that understanding that artist management is a form of group creativity is fundamental here because from the manager's perspective, their client needs to be part of the team, rather than outside of it because they have delegated the management roles and related decisions to the manager. This is also true in reverse, particularly with regard to hard artistic creativity, because the artwork itself may demand what happens next, rather than the audience for it, and therefore managers and artists need to work together to navigate the nuanced interrelationship between innovation in terms of the actual artistic product, and the building of an audience for it.

4. Research design: Selection of cases and participants

The research was carried out in the US, Canada, England and Australia between 2009 and 2017. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 artist managers and self-managed artists across the music industries. This method was supplemented by analysis of the trade press associated with each industry and textual analysis of key products.

In terms of the selection of participants, this research project involved a qualitative approach. The aim was to capture an aspect of the music industries - artist management - as it is experienced, and interpreted, by the participants in this project. To this end, this project employed an 'intensive' rather than an 'extensive' (Harré, 1979) research design; it investigated how artist management practices work in a small number of cases in order to generate explanations of the development of artists' careers and of the experiences involved in artist and manager relationships. Measures were also taken to ensure a degree of representativeness, in terms of the interviewees involved, so that as wide as possible a range of experiences were examined within the scope of this project and its limitations.

5. Lean startup and effectuation methods for the arts

This paper argues that Agile Project Management, the Lean Startup (Ries, 2011) and Effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2008) methods are useful within the context of the music industries. They are particularly useful for addressing the complexity and uncertainty that stems from attempts to answer the career development and music investment-related question: How can we sell music? Both methods eschew more traditional business planning and provide a way to control a future that is inherently unpredictable and extremely uncertain. Artists and artist managers face uncertainty on two fronts. First, music within the context of the arts: what any one particular artist is trying to achieve through their artistic creativities can be uncertain, and second, artists and artist managers face uncertainty in relation to the question of whether they will be able to shape a future for themselves within the music industries. This paper focuses on the startup phase of career development in the music industries. It acknowledges that the lean startup method and effectual logic are like first and second gear: they are useful for starting artistic enterprises and careers, though eventually managers and artists shift away from these logics. APM, the LSM and the EM are a better fit for the work autonomy and aesthetic autonomy that are required for some forms of artistic creativity. So if these approaches are useful for working in the arts, what, exactly, is the Lean Startup methodology? What is Effectual logic?

Most startups fail (Blank, 2013) and in the music industries, market failure is the norm (Madden and Bloom, 2001). Both approaches focus on experimentation and are responsive to consumer/audience feedback. The LSM tests assumptions about how a product will perform through the generation of hypotheses that are then proven or disproven through a build-measure-learn feedback loop that is facilitated by the early release of minimum viable products (MVP) (Robinson, 2001; Ries, 2011: 93). It is therefore a method that serves startups in their search for scalable and repeatable business models in contexts in which there are no pre-existing business models to emulate.

The LSM serves the founders of startups in addressing the extreme uncertainty that comes with starting a brand new venture in a new industry, or a new sector of an existing industry, that is without precedent. The question of whether an artist's career can be considered to be a startup has been partly addressed by Hughes, Evans, Morrow and Keith (2016). These authors argue that, for example, while a band operating in the music industries is not an entirely new structure or concept, in the case of Madden and Bloom's (2001) definition of 'hard artistic creativity' (artistic creativity that is groundbreakingly innovative and inventive), some bands/artists are operating in conditions of extreme uncertainty and therefore the LSM is useful in this context.

The LSM is being used in this paper in conjunction with EM simply because the latter adds additional, and useful, logics that can be applied by artists and artist managers during the startup phase. Sarasvathy (2008) studied the work of expert entrepreneurs and notes that many of the most interesting ventures are by definition operating in a context in which the future is unknown, and is unknowable. In analysing how entrepreneurs shape unpredictable, or unknowable, futures, Sarasvathy identified the 'future shaping' techniques entrepreneurs use, and these constitute 'effectual logic'.

The principles of Effectuation are as follows. For Sarasvathy, expert entrepreneurs start with their means, rather than pre-set goals or opportunities; entrepreneurs pursue the possibilities that arise from the means they identify by asking the questions 'who am I?', 'what do I know?' and 'who do I know?' Next is one of the most useful principles of effectual logic for the purposes of this paper. It concerns the notion of 'affordable loss' and it can be used to expand understandings of how the founders of startups approach the risk associated with the experimentation required for Ries's (2011) LSM. Sarasvathy notes that by understanding what they can afford to lose at each step, expert entrepreneurs limit risk by choosing goals and actions that will progress the project in a positive way, even if at this incremental step they incur some form of loss (see p. 81). This principle is related to another effectual concept that features the Lemonade metaphor in the following bromide: “when life gives you lemons, make lemonade” (90); by inviting the surprise factor, expert entrepreneurs use ‘bad news’ as a cue for creating a new market or product.

In relation to building partnerships, expert entrepreneurs pursue relationships with ‘self-selecting’ stakeholders: “Effectual entrepreneurs focus their efforts on the image of the future coalescing out of a dynamic series of stakeholder interactions rather than crafting a vision up front and then attempting to force it or ‘sell’ it to targeted stakeholders” (89). Finally, the Pilot-in-the-Plane principle concerns the non-predictive control that is facilitated by the belief that the future is ‘made’, rather than ‘found’ or ‘predicted’, and therefore by focusing on activities that are within their control, expert entrepreneurs are piloting the plane. Effectual logic is therefore useful for expanding the use of the LSM in this paper, and for managing careers and startup enterprises that necessarily have to address the uncertainty and unpredictability stemming from ‘art’.

6. Portfolio careers during the startup phase

The tendency for artists and other creative labourers (such as artist managers) to develop portfolio careers has been well researched (see Throsby and Zednik, 2010; Bridgstock, 2011). A portfolio career simply involves the ‘portfolio’ of commercial activities and resultant (multiple) income streams artists and artist managers develop in order to support their creative work. During the startup phase, artists and artist managers therefore often live a double life, and it is in this context that the ‘startup phase’ for artists needs to be considered pluralistically, i.e. artists, and their managers if they have one, have to ‘startup’ multiple careers of sorts in order to establish the multiple income generating activities that constitute their portfolio career.

The notion of a portfolio career is relevant to artists during the startup phase, and also to artist managers during this phase of their client’s career, and also their own career as a manager. As one highly successful New York-based artist manager in popular music, Daniel, noted in relation to the impact that one particular attempt to license artist managers would have on this startup phase:

> 99 out of 100 new artists can't incentivise someone like me and people with smaller businesses, to spend a year of their life managing a brand new artist and making almost no money. That's something you need young, inexperienced, but hopefully very smart people to do and that's how a lot of managers get started, and that's how a lot of artists get started ... and therefore managers who are, you know, working out of their apartment on their cell phone, and don't have any staff ... if you start having economic costs to do that then you're just going to eliminate services that no one else is going to provide.
>
> (Interview 1)

Artist managers speculatively invest time into artist startups. Because they are investing, as Daniel noted, "a year of their life managing a brand new artist and making almost no money" they often need to develop a portfolio of other income generating activities in order to sustain themselves during this phase, and then juggle these activities as best as they can.

The risk relating to the artist manager's investment therefore most often concerns the loss of time and this is where effectual logic and Sarasvathy's (2008) notion of 'affordable loss' is useful. Entry-level artist managers need to limit risk by choosing goals and actions that will progress the artist's career they are managing in a positive way, while keeping an eye on the progress of their own career. This is because, as highly successful British artist manager in music, Peter Jenner, (2002) noted: "Nothing is forever, it's just a business relationship and not a marriage, and you should see losing an act as part of your development as a manager" (1). This sense of the ever present and inevitably impending end to their relationship with a client pervaded the interviews conducted with artist-managers in music for this project. This poignant aspect of artist management in popular music was discussed by senior Toronto-based artist manager, Ben:

> I mean every artist and manager relationship ends, it's just whether it is in 10 days time or in 10 years time. I often joke with the artists' I've worked with over the years saying that 'well one day you'll fire me, it's just a matter of when.' This is because eventually something comes between you. It's rare for a situation to be like Peter Jenner and Billy Bragg where two parties can get along for something like 20 years. That's a rare situation to be in. Normally something comes between you.
>
> (Interview 2)

In this context, the notion of affordable loss is different for the artist manager than it is for the artist. This is because the artist typically only has one attempt, or to use the industry vernacular, 'shot', at breaking out of the startup phase and establishing a career, whereas any one artist manager has multiple shots at doing this because they can move on to manage a new artist, using the social capital they acquired through their previous investment of time in developing a different client's career. Metaphorically speaking, any single artist's career becomes a stepping stone for the manager in their attempts to develop of their own career.

In terms of an artist manager's career then, each client they manage can be considered to be part of an incremental step for building their own career, and at each step they may incur some form of loss. As the power balance between the artist and the artist manager shifts with commercial success, the irony of artist management is that the better an artist manager is at helping their client build a career, the worse negotiating position they themselves end up being in with their own client. They also become more vulnerable to having a more established artist manager or artist management firm swoop in to take over the management of the client post the startup phase. Discussing this dynamic, and the issues that arise when external regulators do not understand it properly, senior London-based artist manager in popular music, Harry, noted:

> With external regulators you just need to be careful because people get preconceptions. And this is driven by television and movies where the manager is always the bad guy. But it's not necessarily always the case. Artists can be very shrewd and there are countless examples of where the artist has effectively ripped off the manager, and this may be that the manager has done all of the work and the artist just walks away. Particularly at the starting out level, where a young manager will get the artist as far as a record deal and then the record company encourages the artist to take on a more experienced manager and the young manager has done all the hard graft and is then left with nothing.
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> (Interview 3)

In terms of effectual logic, it can be argued here that, though painful, this scenario does not necessarily leave the entry-level artist manager with nothing. If the entry-level artist manager can get over the heartbreak of this happening, through this process of managing an artist startup "as far as a record deal" they will often have accrued social, cultural, subcultural, and (hopefully some) economic capital that they can use to pursue new possibilities that arise from the new means they identify by asking the questions 'who am I?', 'what do I know?' and 'who do I know?' The portfolio career also becomes relevant here for entry-level artist managers. By also working for an entity that is involved in the creative and cultural industries on the side, entry-level artist managers may also use their arts-related work to build social capital that they can then use to better answer the aforementioned questions.

In relation to the LSM, from the artist manager's long term perspective, each artist's career can be viewed as minimal viable product (MVP), and they can build their own career through the build-measure-learn feedback loop that the process of signing new clients enables. They can also use 'bad news' of, for example, being dumped by their client in order to be replaced by a more experienced manager or management firm, as a cue for creating new opportunities. However, to do this effectively they need to invest a sufficient amount of time and effort into each client's career, otherwise they risk reputational damage. As senior New York-based artist manager in music, Daniel, noted:

> The biggest problem is a lack of effort. People take on too many artists and can't do a good job for everyone, and the old cliché is to throw things against a wall and see what sticks. And if you're one of the artists that didn't stick to the wall you feel 'gee they said that they loved me, and now I never hear from them', you know, 'if I'd known they weren't going to work hard I would've found somebody different to represent me'. That's the kind of thing that doesn't lend itself to legal remedy; it's just a function of judgement and reputation.
>
> (Interview 4)

Therefore artists and artist managers often attempt to shape futures for themselves in different ways and this affects the relationship between the artist and the manager, and also the relationships they collaborate with each other to form with self-selecting partners. For instance, because artist managers can have multiple attempts or 'shots' at breaking out of the startup phase, they may go easier in a negotiation than an artist who only has one shot would; they want to maintain the relationship with the entity with which they are negotiating so that they can approach this entity again, on favourable terms, with one of their new potential signings in the future. As the artist typically only has one attempt or shot, they are often more anxious and emotional about such negotiations than their manager is. Discussing the multiple attempts an artist manager has, the intrinsic motivation they need to keep going, and the risk they take in their attempts to break themselves and/or their client out of the startup phase, senior Toronto-based artist manager in popular music, Ben, noted:

> If you are passionate about it and you believe in an artist then you are willing to take that chance and honestly 9 times out of 10 it usually ends poorly. In the sense that usually you don't get what you are expecting or what you put into it. But there's always that hope that one time you will.
>
> (Interview 5)

In relation to building partnerships, some of the senior managers interviewed for this project pursue relationships with 'self-selecting' stakeholders; their attempts are reflective of the following element of effectual logic, they: "focus their efforts on the image of the future coalescing out of a dynamic series of stakeholder interactions rather than crafting a vision up front and then attempting to force it or 'sell' it to targeted stakeholders" (Sarasvathy, 2008: 89). Within the music industries for example, the traditional management model involves crafting a vision in collaboration with the artist up front, and then attempting to sell this vision to targeted stakeholders such as record labels. In the digital age however, many of the potential stakeholders have become 'self-selecting' because they can become more 'reactive' by only signing artists who can already demonstrate a direct connection with an audience, and exponential growth in terms of audience interest, which can be measured digitally in various ways using statistics and data (see Hughes et. al., 2016). As a consequence, a number of different artist management business models are increasingly coalescing out of new patterns of stakeholder interactions in the music industries, rather than just the aforementioned 'traditional' one, as senior London-based artist manager, Harry, noted:

> All managers are looking at different business models … There are still some people who are using the traditional management model and there are others who are effectively going out to business angels to get the money in to effectively act as the record label. There are other people who are assuming the role of the record company on behalf of the artist without going out to a third party investor, they are instead just growing the business that way and so they are performing the record company functions but without the private investor, or without the private equity stakeholder. Because as soon as there is an outside investor the returns you are going to make are going to be different. It means that the amount of money the manager is going to take or share with the artist is going to be different.
>
> (Interview 6)

Decisions as to which business model to pursue are often informed by effectual logic in this sector of the creative and cultural industries. A seminal example of a band in recent times that identified the means they had available to them by asking the questions ‘who am I?’, ‘what do I know?’ and ‘who do I know?’ was the band Radiohead with the release of their album *In Rainbows* on the 10 October 2007 as a digital download for which consumers chose their own price: beginning at nothing. Morrow (2009) explored the issue of whether this strategy of Radiohead’s presented a model for other artists to bypass established record labels, however what became evident was that this was simply an example of effectual logic being used. Thom Yorke, Radiohead’s lead singer, made the following comment concerning their unorthodox approach:

> It’s not supposed to be a model for anything else. It was simply a response to a situation. We’re out of contract. We have our own studio. We have this new server. What the hell

> else would we do? This was the obvious thing. But it only works for us because of where we are. (Thomson cited in Morrow, 2009: 163)

This strategy arguably only worked for Radiohead because of who they were, what they knew, and who they knew. It was also largely dependent on who knew them, i.e. a massive audience that had been built in part by EMI's investments in the band over a 16 year period to that point.

In contrast to this example of an established band using effectual logic to better control their intellectual property/copyright and overall career, the potential downside of effectual logic during the startup phase of an artist's career is that it can lead to a dilemma relating to who controls their intellectual property/copyright. This dilemma concerns how much an artist is willing to give away in order to attract partners and investors during the startup phase and it is twofold. First, the artist during the startup phase often does not have money to pay a fee to the people who they need to help them grow their business into an ongoing concern, and these people, who are usually service providers such as managers, do not want to work for nothing. Second, in order to motivate these people they need to help them grow, the artist is willing to license or to assign their intellectual property/copyright to these people (who would otherwise simply be service providers). This can lead to a conflict of interest for the artist manager because they are then acting as the manager *and* the song publisher, record label, or any other entity that has a relationship to the artist's intellectual property/copyright.

The conflict of interest arises in relation to the question of whose interests the artist manager is going to represent. For example, do they represent the artist's interests in a negotiation with the song publisher (them) in their role as an artist manager (also them)? Or do they represent the song publisher's interests, which are also their interests? This type of conflict of interest can also provide the artist manager with the opportunity to 'double-dip'. Double-dipping in this scenario would involve the artist manager receiving income as the song publisher, while also commissioning the artist's share of the song publishing income as the artist manager. Discussing this type of conflict, senior New York-based artist manager in music, Daniel, noted:

> The only time there are potential conflicts of interest in my experience, other than people who are just idiots, is relatively new artists who need/want somebody to handle them and that person says 'how am I going to make any money out of this?' If I can't make any money now at least let me be your partner in the following areas. You know, as a co-publisher. Occasionally that happens … And in that kind of a situation the obligation should be to fully disclose it and to make sure that the artist has an independent attorney, who doesn't have a conflict of interest, to explain to them what it is they're committing to.
>
> (Interview 7)

This is a dilemma that arises during the startup phase of an artist's career because the artist is trying to motivate someone to invest time into the development of their career on the promise of future compensation. The principle of deferred compensation, when combined with the irony of artist management being such that the better an artist manager is at fulfilling their role, the more vulnerable they are to being ousted by the artist, means that the artist will sometimes agree to license or assign their intellectual property/copyright to the artist manager with whom they are working during the startup phase. From the artist manager's perspective this helps to appease the anxiety relating to the longevity, or lack thereof, of their relationship to the client. As Daniel continued:

> If you're going to try to get people to work for you, you've got to find a way of compensating them. If you can't pay them cash, you've got to give them some promise of future income, which sometimes involves contracts. So I think if you can't incentivise people you are not

> going to be able to motivate them. So that's a dilemma for new and developing artists, they get services that they can't really pay cash for. If they get paid cash, no one's going to ask you to sign anything. That's the dilemma.
>
> (Interview 8)

From the perspective of the artist manager, this desire to partner with the artist during the startup phase is understandable because they want to be a co-owner or licensor of the intellectual property that will exist in the future that they help to create. This is because the future for an artist manager or artist is not 'found' or 'predicted', but is instead 'made', 'shaped' and 'created'. The dilemma therefore exists primarily from the artist's perspective (not the artist manager's); during the startup phase they may need a particular manager to help shape their future, though if they can get to this future, they may feel that a better option than their current manager may/will exist there.

7. Conclusions

When it comes to the startup phase of an artist's career, artist management and artist self-management involve attempts to address uncertainty on two fronts: first, the arts: what any one particular artist is trying to achieve through their artistic creativities can be uncertain, and second, artists and artist managers face uncertainty in relation to the question of whether they will be able to shape a future for themselves within the music industries. The argument in this paper; that the uncertainty stemming from artistic creativity is derived from the fact that it is subjectively defined, evokes the art versus science debate. Regarding this debate, Robinson (2011) noted:

> It is as legitimate to talk about the objective processes of making and understanding art as it is about anything. To assume that artistic judgments are simply personal opinion is as mistaken as assuming all scientific opinion is disputed fact. Meaning and interpretation are at the heart of all creative processes. (194)

The best way to elaborate on this seemingly contradictory quote (within the context of this paper), is to consider that there is a spectrum of uncertainty stemming from artistic creativity. As discussed in the introduction to this book, the complexity of artistic contributions, and how these contributions are managed, derives from the complexity of creativity itself. A useful frame for this spectrum of uncertainty involves Madden and Bloom's (2001) 'hard' creativity and 'weak' creativity. On one end of the spectrum, weak or soft creativity concerns creativity simply as production: something merely brought into being and this can involve replication of tradition and it is therefore less uncertain than hard creativity. This is because hard creativity involves innovation in the sense that the work is a brand new and unprecedented invention. On this latter end of the spectrum, managing 'hard' artistic creativities is extremely uncertain.

While weak and soft creativity are arguably the predominant forms of artistic creativity (Ibid: 414), attempts to use brain science to measure the affective impact of specific artworks, the experience of engaging with, viewing and listening to the arts, or to prove that two people have an identical experience of an artwork, have fallen short (see Carey, 2006). Therefore instead of turning to science to address the uncertainty, and sometimes extreme uncertainty, stemming from artistic creativity, this paper has argued that the Lean Startup Methodology (LSM) and the Effectuation Method (EM), when combined, are useful for framing the ways in which artists and artist managers experiment with artistic ideas, minimum viable artistic products, ongoing innovation, and iterative sprints in their attempts to create art that will have an impact. Lean startup and effectuation methods for the arts therefore involve generating experiments that can test artist's, and artist manager's, assumptions about what a work of art *is* and/or can be, what the work(s) of art they are creating is *for*, what *good* their and their artwork's impact on the world is, and how can they articulate this 'impact' to audiences and potential investors. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly from the perspective of the artist manager, these methods are useful for testing assumptions regarding how they can *sell* art in order to build a scalable and repeatable business around it in their attempts to break out of the difficult startup phase of an artistic career or arts-related enterprise.

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