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The slow burn: questioning the discourse surrounding popular music success, and exploring opportunities for entrepreneurship in 'the long tail'

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1. Abstract

If Chris Anderson is right that the 21st century entertainment industry is based on niches rather than hits [1], then the discourse surrounding popular music success seems decidedly outmoded, stuck in the era of the 'overnight success' and the 'next big thing'. In this paper, I will explore the extent to which an alternative, slower, might be open path open to musicians: a path I will call 'the slow burn'.

I will ask whether there is money to be made even in what Chris Anderson calls 'the long tail', the infinite number of niche markets that, Anderson argues, the internet has made economically viable. And I will ask whether an entrepreneurial approach, even on a relatively limited scale, can provide the sustainability and autonomy that eludes some apparently more successful acts. In reaching my conclusions, I draw on my own practice as a musician, on brief case studies of artists I consider representative of the 'slow burn', and on a pilot survey of popular music students at Middlesex University, where I am a lecturer.

2. Introduction including aims

The best part of a decade ago, I was a session musician with the band Passenger. Jo Whiley played one of our singles on Radio 1; we performed live on Radio 4's Loose Ends and on Radio 2; and we appeared on bills alongside everyone from James Blunt to The Levellers via Gabrielle. Yet despite the sort of budget more usually offered by a major label, the record itself went largely unnoticed. Although the experience was not entirely representative, we did once play to a room that contained no-one at all other than the support band and the venue staff.

For most major label acts, that would have been the end of the story. And it was for me: I left after a highly enjoyable couple of years. But it was not the end for the band's singer, Mike Rosenberg. After another false start, Passenger was finally re-launched as a solo act. This year, Mike – still a close friend – achieved his first international number one with *Let Her Go*, which has sold more than a million copies in the UK alone [2].

The story of the overnight success that is in fact years in the making may not be new, but it is, I believe, worthy of re-examination. Even in the UK, we are sold pop culture as the ultimate incarnation of the American Dream: rags to riches, zero to hero, almost within the three minutes and thirty seconds of a hit song [3]. In this paper, I aim to explore an alternative narrative – not simply that of the 'hard graft' that lies even behind apparent 'overnight successes' such as Robin Thicke [4] but also the notion that, even for those who *never* 'make it' in the commonly understood sense, there are still opportunities to earn at least a partial income.

Questioning the assumptions that underlie our understanding of success in popular music is important, I believe, as falsely inflated hopes could lead to prematurely abandoned careers. There are also implications, I suggest, for the teaching of popular music. Employment prospects for graduates are important for any university – and for musicians, as for many in

the creative industries, this is likely to mean self-employment. According to Charlotte Carey and Annette Naudin, however, there is a lack of empirically rigorous research that relates specifically to the creative sector in general and to enterprise curriculum in particular [5].

This is a particular area of personal interest, since I lead the Music Entrepreneurism module at Middlesex University. I have aimed to embed an entrepreneurial spirit within the curriculum, as Naudin and Carey advise, and to establish closer links with industry and practitioners; my colleagues and I have also made the module available to Popular Music, as well as Music Business and Arts Management, students. My role as a practicing musician, as a member of the duo Grasscut, is also entrepreneurial. Although we both perform live and on record, my colleague Andrew Phillips writes and produces all the music. As well as playing piano, synthesizer and double bass, meanwhile, I manage the act 'from within'.

3. Background and related work

If success was a decade in the making for Mike Rosenberg, a relatively accessible singer-songwriter who benefitted from the loyal support of a sizeable management company, it is likely to take even longer if your music lies to a greater or less extent outside the mainstream.

Following my departure from Passenger, I co-founded a group called Bellows, who combined contemporary European jazz with elements of electronica and post-rock. I also co-founded Grasscut, blending electronica, folk and leftfield pop with spoken word samples from the likes of TS Eliot and Hilaire Belloc. Remarkably, neither has followed Passenger in achieving an international number one. But while Bellows folded after just one EP, Grasscut has proved more enduring. We have released two albums on the Ninja Tune label; had tracks featured on Kmart and Mazda adverts; recorded with John Surman and Robert Wyatt; played live across Europe, alongside acts such as the Kronos Quartet; and received five-star reviews from newspapers such as The Telegraph. Tom Robinson of BBC 6 Music recently named our debut album one of his favourite 13 records of all time [6]. Yet we still have only 1,000 followers on Twitter.

All of which leads to the question: in a post-Top Of The Pops world, what is the definition of success? Take the American jam-band Phish, formed in Vermont in 1983. Only one of their original albums made the Billboard Top 10, and they have never had a radio hit. Yet Phish have generated over \$120 million in ticket sales alone over the last four years [7] – an income that, spread over their 30-year career, far surpasses that of many flash-in-the-pan pop stars.

Brad Barish from Topspin Media has studied the career of Phish from a business perspective and identified three key qualities. First, there is *iteration*: 'systematically working one's way through product variations to find a product/market fit'. Second, there is the ability to *pivot*: to 'make a structural course correction to test a new fundamental hypothesis about the product, strategy and engine of growth'. Finally, there is the development of a *tribe*: 'a group of people connected to one another, connected to a leader, and connected to an idea.' [8] As Phish biographer Parke Puterbaugh noted, the band 'weren't swamped by success but experienced a slow, steady climb, during which they nurtured their craft in an environment where they gained a following one fan at a time.' [9]

Historically, it is far from uncommon for bands to progress at a similarly measured pace. *The Dark Side Of The Moon* may be one of the most commercially successful albums of all time, but it was Pink Floyd's eighth LP. Pulp hit the big time with their *Different Class* album in 1995, but they had formed as early as 1978. The Cuban musicians of Buena Vista Social Club represent a particularly extreme case, waiting half a century for their taste of worldwide fame.

Such stories serve to show the importance of an incubation phase: as Malcolm Gladwell suggested in *Outliers*, it typically takes 10,000 hours of practice to achieve success in a given field [10]. And yet, this incubation phase is under threat in an increasingly risk-averse music industry. Many labels now operate a hair-trigger A&R policy, in which a band can find

themselves in danger of being dropped because an album stalled number 11 in the charts rather than making the top 10 [11]. Even successful bands are liable to 'fall off cliffs', finding themselves suddenly abandoned by both fans and industry despite sales figures in the millions [12]. An X Factor winner like Steve Brookstein, who reached number one with his first (and only) single, can end up performing on a P&O ferry [13].

What, then, of those not lucky enough to sign a deal in the first place? The threshold of engagement, as far as industry gatekeepers are concerned, has risen dramatically in recent years. Whereas potential alone might once have been enough to secure a deal, today's artist might need to be regularly selling out a 500-capacity venue in his or her hometown before a manager or label will take interest [14]. It is hardly surprising that, as Charles Umney and Lefteris Kretsos have pointed out in their study of London jazz musicians, 'fatalism and powerlessness over working conditions' is widespread [15].

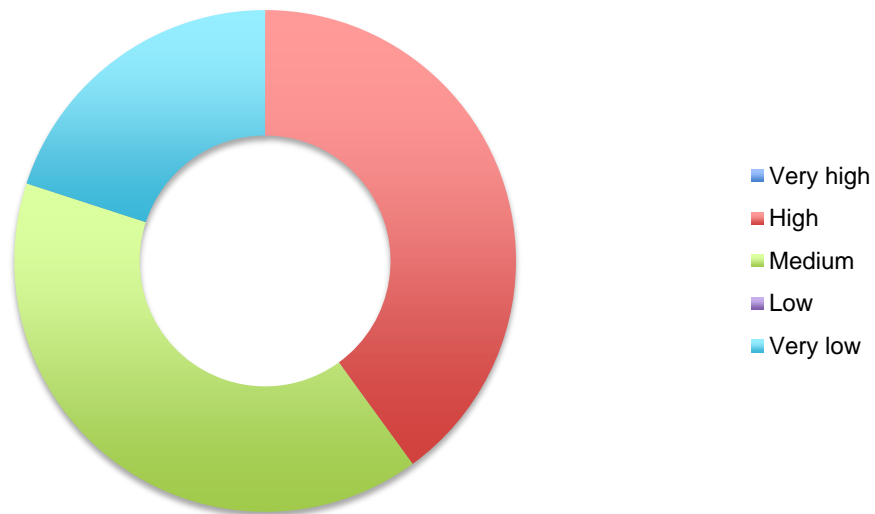
4. Results

In my pilot survey, of ten first-, second- and third-year undergraduate students, all studying Popular Music at Middlesex University, I mainly asked respondents to indicate strength of agreement or disagreement with a given statement, using a Likert scale.

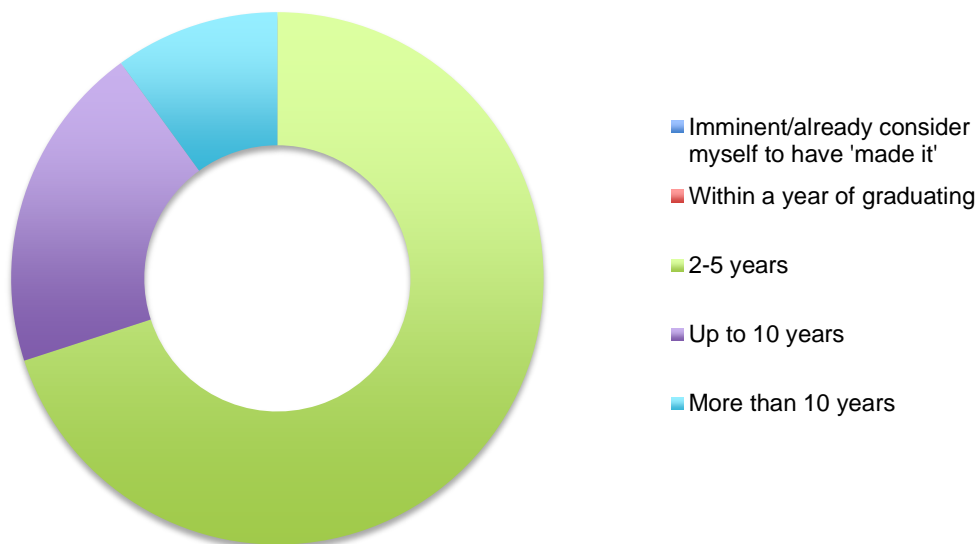
Yet my survey began with two open questions. First, I asked each participant to define the concept of 'making it' as a popular musician. Most replied that it meant earning a living from releasing and performing original music; one stated that he would consider himself to have 'made it' if he had made a living from music, 'even... for a limited amount of time'. Others, however, were more ambitious. 'My definition of "making it" as a popular musician,' answered one participant, 'is knowing that your name is recognised worldwide, going on tour worldwide and being accepted as an artist'. For another student, 'making it' meant 'playing my own music every day on different stages in different parts of the world' (see appendix: question 1).

I also asked students to name artist who epitomised the concept of 'making it' (see appendix: question 2). The answers were extremely disparate, with no artist mentioned by more than one participant, suggesting that the notion is highly subjective. The neo-prog band IQ, cited by one survey participant, are perhaps most similar to Phish. Other artists cited varied from The Beatles – not much argument there – to James Arthur, who won X Factor as recently as 2012 (see appendix: question 2). Conor Maynard, also cited by one student as having 'made it', also released his first single in 2012. Most participants were reasonably confident of 'making it' themselves, and often within a similarly ambitious timescale: typically within five years of graduating (see graphs 1 and 2 below).

1: How do you rate your chances of 'making it' as a popular musician?



2: If you do 'make it', how long do you expect it to take?



Such aspirations are heartening, certainly, but they may be unrealistic. Even with prodigious talent, it can take time to stand out in world saturated with music, in which almost every piece ever recorded is a mere mouse-click away. A survey of 2,000 musicians in 2012, commissioned by the Musicians' Union, found that over half earned less than £20,000 a year, with one in five earning less than half that sum. Significantly, nearly two-thirds of those respondents had been working as musicians for ten years or more, with 21% having worked as musicians for over 30 years [16]. And that is for those already sufficiently committed to a music career to have joined the MU. Michael Scott, applying Bourdieu to the milieu of DIY music producers in New Zealand, points out that cultural entrepreneurs typically operate *sans* capital. Instead, they are obliged to construct 'buzz' through social capital (contacts and networks), cultural capital (dispositions or deportments, i.e. image, as well as musical skill) and symbolic capital (accumulated prestige and reputation). Conversion to the 'instantaneous cash exchange of the economic capital economy' may happen, but the process is likely to be incremental [17].

5. Discussion

How, then, to proceed? It is the contention of this paper that one partial solution is for the artist to adopt the mindset of the entrepreneur. Musicians may balk at this, preferring the Romantic notion of dedicating oneself to 'pure art', even – or, perhaps, especially – if it means starving in a garret. Yet it is questionable whether there can really be such unmediated art. Certainly, individuals known variously as 'cultural entrepreneurs' [18], 'creative entrepreneurs' [19] and even 'bohemian entrepreneurs' [20] have existed since Beethoven and Liszt [21] – and it doesn't get much more Romantic than that.

Dale Chapman has traced the concept of entrepreneurial selfhood all the way back to the itinerant pipe and tabor traditions of early modern Europe, as well as more recent solo musicians such as Robert Fripp and Andrew Bird. Yet while these musicians relied on a self-sufficient, multitasking virtuosity to survive volatile socioeconomic conditions, Chapman makes clear that Fripp's 'ethically engaged, artistically committed' conception of the music entrepreneur diverges from the 'brutal instrumentalism of the Thatcherite ideal' [22].

This, then, is a strand of entrepreneurship that is not necessarily driven primarily by profit; in which the bottom line is not necessarily the bottom line. Unlike the rapper 50 Cent, who named his 2003 debut album *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'*, such an entrepreneur, like one of my survey participants (see appendix: question 1), might be content to earn 30% above the national Living Wage. Yet with advances small or non-existent for most artists, at least early on in their careers, simply to break even is likely to require entrepreneurship: costs might typically include equipment, studio fees and touring expenses, as well as manufacture, distribution and marketing for those who self-release.

Seen in this light, it becomes clear that to become a music entrepreneur is not necessarily to 'sell out'. On the contrary: in hip-hop, business savvy is something to boast about, precisely because it engenders independence [23]. In this context, entrepreneurship can flourish alongside non-corporate, even overtly anti-corporate, ideals: the anarchist punk group Crass, for instance, successfully ran their own label and ExitStencil Press, which helped give birth to the extant Southern Records network, and sold a reported 250,000 copies of their self-released *Stations of the Crass* album [24].

The Grateful Dead, who in many ways anticipated jam bands such as Phish, are a particularly illuminative example of this phenomenon. John Guiney and Congcong Zheng have positioned the Dead as 'institutional entrepreneurs', able to successfully operate within the music business 'by fostering the emergence of a unique community that supported the band's alternative business model' [25]. The Dead were, the authors suggest, one of the first bands not merely to build a community of fans but to include those fans when making key business decisions. Although not one of the band's early studio records was a commercial success, they eventually became one of the highest grossing bands of all time – even though, from formation in the mid-1960s, it apparently took until 1987 for members to earn more than a cost-of-living salary.

The market has changed significantly since the heyday of Crass or the Grateful Dead but, according to Scott Cohen, co-founder of the digital distribution and management company The Orchard, taking ownership of one's business decisions may still be a route to autonomy and sustainability. In era of the digital, rather than the industrial revolution, Cohen argues that the money is in the consumer, as opposed to the product; the artist should aim to monetise fans not content [26]. This process of entrepreneurship, then, begins with finding an audience.

I know from personal experience that good press cannot now be relied upon to sell records. With the rise of social media, however, artists have more chance than ever to build a loyal following or 'tribe' – a term used by Brad Barish in relation to Phish and by Seth Godin in relation to the Grateful Dead [27]. In the digital era, there is an audience for almost everything, and artists have the means to win fans one by one, bottom-up rather than top-down. And, contrary to the stories of doom and gloom, there *are* ways of earning money as audiences grow.

Even on the record front, in an industry still reeling from Napster and currently tying itself in knots over streaming services such as Spotify [28], there are numerous options available, including self-releasing and crowd funding (for which Amanda Palmer is unofficial poster girl, although other Kickstarter successes such as Five Iron Frenzy and Murder By Death are also worthy of study). And whatever is said about declining record and publishing advances, a large sync – the placement of a track on a film, advert or video game – can bring in significant sums [29] (even if a dispiriting portion, at least until you have recouped, disappears into the pockets of label and publisher).

Although fees in excess of £1 million are available only to the largest acts, and certainly should not hide the fact that many emerging artists are forced to play for free (or even to ‘pay to play’), in live music too there are interesting options. These include busking, an option pursued by Passenger, and house concerts, organised via websites such as concertsinyourhome.com and houseconcerts.com [30].

Another potentially lucrative area is merchandise, which today means more than T-shirts and cigarette lighters. Most of your Facebook fans may not pay for a single iTunes download, yet the notion of ‘bundling’ content allows artists to present options for those that *are* willing to part with sometimes significant quantities of cash. According to Scott Cohen, an artist might earn 72% of income from the top 20% of his audience, a figure that comes close to the 80/20 rule [31]. Since fans are typically most excited by experiential content, expenses may be minimal. Some of Cohen’s acts, still nowhere near household name status, are making significant sums from the top 1 or 2% of their fanbase willing to pay, for instance, \$100 for an exclusive ‘bundle’ of merchandise, including signed set-lists and a chance to meet the band.

So successful can this model be that, according to Kevin Kelly, an artist needs only 1,000 true fans to achieve a sustainable career. I know from personal experience, however, that there is a crucial difference between 1,000 true fans and 1,000 Twitter followers. The true fan, by Kelly’s own definition [32], is prepared not only to buy every single product you release but also to travel, say, 200 miles to see you perform.

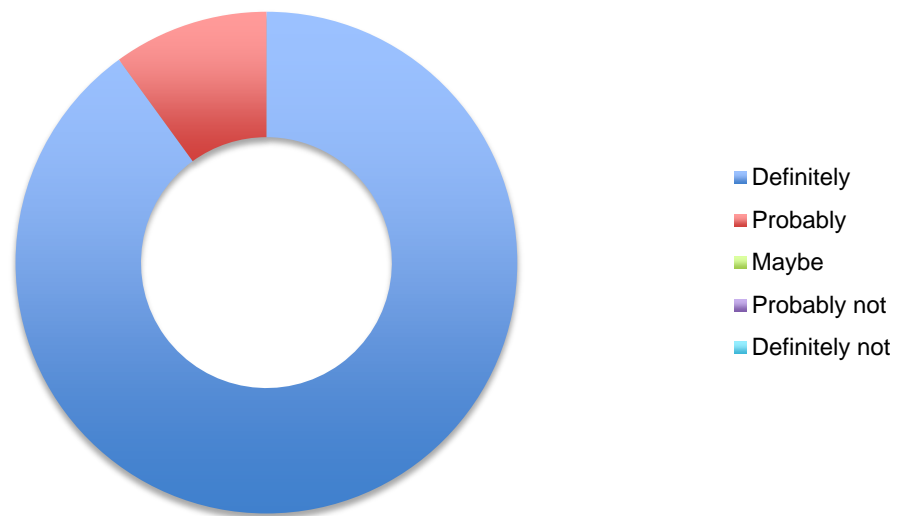
Finding 1,000 such fans takes time – and, even with an entrepreneurial approach, the slow burn will not pay the bills, at least in the short term. Each of us will need to find our own solution to this challenge. For me, burning slowly as one half of Grasscut, the answer lies in a portfolio career. Alongside Grasscut, I also work as a writer and lecturer; Andrew Phillips, the other half of Grasscut, composes soundtracks for BBC and HBO programmes. For other artists, the solution might include teaching or session work, even areas not directly connected to music. Find something you like, because you may be doing it for a while. As Bill Drummond and Jimmy Cauty of the KLF put it: ‘Nobody wins the pools. There is no such thing as a fast buck. Nobody gets rich quick. El Dorado will never be found. Wealth is a slow build, an attitude to life.’ [33]

6. Conclusions

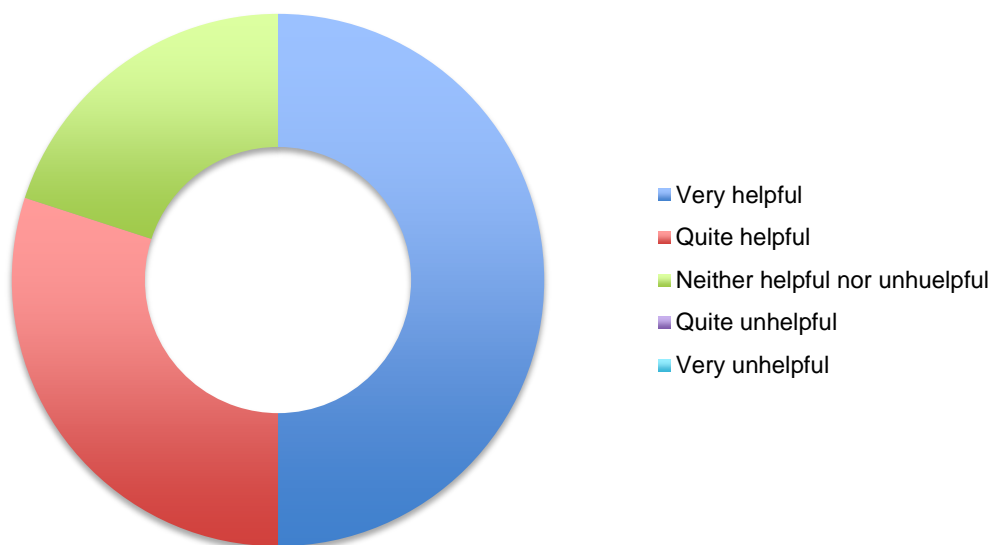
Certainly, more research is required before we can be sure that Cauty and Drummond correct. There is a need to identify ‘slow burn’ acts for more detailed case studies, perhaps comparing and contrasting earnings with those of artists such as James Arthur, who really did achieve almost literal overnight success through reality TV. The attitudes towards ‘making it’ expressed by the small sample of students who participated in my survey may not be representative of the broader population, and a larger-scale survey will be a priority in my own future research.

It is too early to say for sure that musicians are giving up prematurely on their musical dreams because of expectations that a pop career will ignite faster than a firelighter. This subject too, I believe, is worthy of future research. From my own initial results, it is noteworthy that most of the students in my sample survey still found the notion of ‘making it’ helpful, and all believed they would continue to make music even if they failed to ‘make it’ by their own definition (see graphs 3 and 4 below).

3: If you don't 'make it' by the above deadline, do you expect to continue to make music?



4: To what extent do you see the notion of 'making it' as helpful?



Since Grasscut have not – at least, not yet – adopted practices such as crowd funding or 'bundling' merchandise, the entrepreneurial methods I have discussed also require further research. Since it is a relatively new module, it is also too early to assess the impact of teaching music entrepreneurship at Middlesex University. I aim to research this in the future by means of interviews with both current and former students, combined with qualitative information regarding graduate employment and self-employment.

My tentative conclusion, however, is that the KLF may have been at least partially right. Selling one's soul at the crossroads – or what might be considered its modern incarnation, appearing on X Factor – may still work for those making highly accessible music, at least in the short term. But there can be commercial, as well as artistic, success away from the limelight too. The careers of such musically diverse acts as Passenger and Phish suggest that even those artists far down in the long tail, should, in the words of Winston Churchill, keep bugging on [34]. While reality TV might create the one-hit-wonders, it may be the KBO Factor, rather than the X Factor, which offers the greater chance of longevity.

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7.2 Discography

50 Cent, *Get Rich Or Die Tryin'* (Shady / Aftermath / Interscope, 2003)

Bellows, *Troop* (Candid, 2009)

Grasscut, *1 Inch: ½ Mile* (Ninja Tune, 2008)

Grasscut, *Unearth* (Ninja Tune, 2010)

Passenger *Wicked Man's Rest* (Chalkmark, 2007)

Passenger *Let Her Go* (Embassy Of Music, 2012)

Appendix

1: What is your definition of 'making it' as a popular musician?

'Making it to me would be being able to earn 30% more than national Living Wage and be able to maintain things such as housing and food costs as well as normal living costs, which will differ depending where you live.'

'"Making it" is a weird one. I think people have varying ideas of what that is. For me, "making it" means two things. One, I want to be able to make some form of living from performing original music and/or writing for other artists. And two, I have to be happy doing it, otherwise there's no point.'

'The definition of "making it" is very complex and personal. Nevertheless, with the years, I have been getting closer to a more concise meaning of it. I'll say that I'm making it when: I realise myself playing my own music everyday on different stages in different parts of the world; when I see my music recorded and published; when I compose different types of music; if my discography shows how I've grown as an artist and human being; if I played with different musicians; if I'm making sufficient income to live a comfortable life (which could come from performing, songwriting or a substantial pension provided by an ex-husband... I'm only joking). All of this alongside keeping control of the creativity and moral integrity of my music/act.'

'To go far with my singing and songwriting, making my music heard, probably even releasing an album.'

'Being able to sustain a comfortable living from music as if it were like any other job. i.e. regular, stable income. To have a good regular attendance at all gigs/have a loyal, good-sized fanbase. To be stylistically recognised with a genre, or define a new off-shoot of an already existing genre.'

'"Making it", for me = economic independence; in the spirit of J S Mill, the ability to freely undertake any creative work (or not) in association with others, without the constraints of a system.'

'I think "making it" as a professional musician is when you can make a living out of doing what you love (your music) and also when you feel totally accomplished for what you have created, so I see it as something that is straightly linked to songwriting. I think this applies even if it is for a limited amount of time.'

'Being successful enough to make a comfortable living out of your music.'

'My definition of "making it" as a popular musician is knowing that your name is recognised worldwide, going on tour worldwide and being accepted as an artist.'

2: Can you point to a musician – known to you or simply in the public eye – who epitomises the notion of 'making it' to you?

Artists mentioned: The Beatles, Damon Albarn, Tracey Thorn, Björk, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Ingrid Michaelson, Regina Spektor, Daughter, Fink, Little Dragon, The Knife, Migos, Rihanna, James Blake, Brooke Fraser, JLS, Ryan Leslie, Justin Bieber, James Arthur, Conor Maynard, IQ, Jamal Edwards. Edwards was an interesting choice, representative as he is of the notion of entrepreneurship explored in this paper, although he is primarily known not as a musician but as the founder of SB TV.

Graphs depicting answers to the other survey questions are to be found within the main text