

Introduction

The Intimate Work of Connection

The relationship between musicians and their audiences has changed. No more disappearing into skies or mansions, today's musicians are earthbound, under pressure to build connections with listeners. Audiences, especially those who came of age in a time of ubiquitous media, expect the musicians they follow to be "constantly accessible, especially on social media, offering unique and intimate moments to their fans."¹ Where once the audiences for mass music had no "real" relationship with powerful and distant performers,² today musicians relentlessly seek relationships with audiences, following listeners from platform to platform, trying to establish a presence for themselves and build connections. Day in and day out, the work of relating is never done. "People are so busy," says the savvy young songwriter Greta Morgan, "If you can't find a way to sneak into their daily routine, they'll miss your show."

The music industries of the second half of the twentieth century were never really stable, but for many working within and around major and independent record labels, they came to feel natural. The path for a certain kind of musician to make playing into a steady gig was unfair and unlikely, but it was clear. You got a band together, you made demos, you performed. If you were lucky, you got "discovered" by the A&R (artist and repertoire) guy from a record label. The label would pay you up front and then finance, distribute, and publicize your work. Fame and fortune would follow.

Brian Travers, saxophone player with the British band UB40, was one of the lucky few who made an enduring career in this system. In 1983, several years after they first started playing together, their cover of Neil Diamond's "Red, Red Wine," recast as a smooth reggae number, became a breakout hit. The band, two siblings and a bunch of friends from the working-class town of Birmingham, went on to sell more than 70 mil-

lion records. To their shock and continuing confusion, they got rich. They don't have all their original members, but they're still going, and they still draw huge crowds.

Now, Travers wonders whether anyone can ever be as prosperous doing what he did again. "I'm probably part of that last generation that sold vinyl, and then everybody re-bought your vinyl on CD, and then the record company sold them your CD in a different packet 55 times and really milked an album," he reflects. "But that's not a bad thing," he adds quickly. "I mean, that's got nothing to do with music. That's got more to do with being an industrialist."

Few recording artists liked the old model—even Travers derides it as industrialism rather than music—but at least they felt like they knew the game. Music businesses were among the first to be upended by the internet, as audiences' abilities to create and distribute media and interact among themselves undid the centralized control that recording and related industries had long enjoyed. Recorded music sales have dropped precipitously from their 1999 heights and the industry has contracted. Where once there were only labels, radio stations, magazines, and face-to-face conversations with friends, now there are more ways to release, hear, read about, and discuss music than anyone could have imagined when people like UB40 were starting their careers.

As a result, everyone is winging it. People who've been making music professionally for decades are as confused about how to build a career as those just starting. "My friends and I have been having the same conversation for the last ten years," says Roger O'Donnell, who has had a forty-year career in music, sometimes as a solo jazz artist and most notably as keyboardist with the Cure. "We're now no closer to knowing what the answers are." O'Donnell worries that today young people who would like to turn music from hobby to career will split between a very few who become industrial stars and those left behind to "slug around." "You have a job. You work like a slave, and you tour and don't make any money. And you sell a few albums at gigs."

Canadian band Cowboy Junkies had a huge hit in 1989, coincidentally also with a cover, this one of the Velvet Underground's "Sweet Jane." Unlike UB40 and the Cure, they need the income that comes from continuous work. It's hard now to figure out where that money will come from. At this point in his life, their songwriter and guitarist Michael

Timmins reflects, it's "not like I'm going to go become a lawyer." It's a recurring topic of conversation with his music friends too. They lament "the fact that money's drying up and you can't get any money to do this or money to do that, and nobody wants to pay to do this, and everybody's calling on you to do stuff on spec and 'Come do my free concert' and blah-blah-blah." Ultimately, though, "it's just like 'Well, this is what we do, so we do it.' At least we have the benefit of really loving what we do, you know?" He laughs. "I mean, you kind of just sort of hope. How are you going to find food is a whole other question. You just do it because you love it, and that's what we do. That's basically what it comes down to at this point."

The cellist Zoë Keating was a child when Travers and O'Donnell found fame and fortune on major label contracts. Today, like Timmins, she is one of the many musicians trying to find a way to earn a middle-class living somewhere between the "slugging around" O'Donnell fears and the hit-centric industry machine Travers scorns. To say she is unusual is an understatement. Classically trained, she performed with the cello rock band Rasputin and collaborated with indie/alternative acts like Amanda Palmer and Imogen Heap before launching a solo cello career composing and performing uncategorizable instrumental music somewhere between new classical and alternative. She oversees the creation, production, distribution, and sales of her recordings, using the direct-to-fan platform Bandcamp, which allows her to sell her work at a minimum price she sets and allows buyers to overpay if they choose. She makes her money through album sales, live performances, performing with other artists, and licenses and commissions for film, television, and dance.

Though she is one of a kind, Keating exemplifies the entrepreneurial musician best suited to these new times. Having worked in information visualization at a San Francisco tech company during the 1990s, she's at ease with computers and with online interaction. She knows how to code and creates open source tools for other musicians. She is a frequent speaker at music conferences, one of the few who (pays attention to, let alone) shares the financial data from her career. She is a policy advocate who works on behalf of other musicians. She was an early internet adopter, webcasting concerts from the Bay Area artists' warehouse where she lived in 1996, long before most people had broadband. In the



Figure 1.1. Zoë Keating, performing at the Intel booth, Consumer Electronics Show, 2011. © Jon Fingas, and made available under a CC BY-ND 2.0 license. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/jfingas/5337722042>.

early days of Twitter, an employee put her on a list that new users could use to populate their feeds with a single click. It got her more than a million followers, most of whom continue to follow. This is complemented by a loyal adoring audience on Facebook and hundreds of subscribers to her mailing list. She has posted to all regularly for years, sharing details of her daily life. When she tweets something like “There is a light at the end of the tunnel. My son just got up and **POURED A BOWL OF CEREAL AND MILK WITHOUT ME,**”³ dozens, sometimes hundreds, of people “like” it within hours.

Keating is the opposite of the 1980s rock star, rich not in money but in the business, technical, and social skills it takes to run her own career. She likens herself to “a small family grocery store” where shoppers realize that choosing not to pay “might actually hurt them.” She conveys this message to her followers in part by saying so explicitly, and in part by building a more intimate relationship with them than any 1980s rock

star ever could. She reaches out to her audience day continuously on social media, talking about topics like baking, child-rearing, and, when tragedy came, her husband's illness, death, and her ongoing mourning. "I need to let people know that I do live entirely on album sales," she told me: "I just need to be vocal about that. Once they know that, then they might actually buy a record. Because I know that these people might be listening already. I get these emails a lot, like people have been listeners for a while and then it wasn't until they got to know me on Twitter that they bought my album." Keating sells beautiful music in part by offering her audience her *self*. They listen to her music already. They *buy* it because they get to know her.

The Uncertainty of Connection

In 2009, I was asked to speak about connecting with online audiences for recording industry and artist representatives at MIDEM (Marché International du Disque et de L'Édition Musicale), Europe's biggest music tradeshow. Held in the French resort city of Cannes as the global economy crashed, the event featured champagne brunches and yacht parties. The theme that year was "connecting with" and "serving" audiences. "Monetizing" lay just below the surface, the implied and sometimes explicit point of connection and servitude. If musicians connect, the logic went, audiences will pay, artists will make a living, and so too will we. The musicians on stage at MIDEM, and events like it that I have attended since then, told compelling tales of how they had used the internet to run successful promotional campaigns or raise money directly from fans.

But when I heard the musicians in the audience ask questions, or talked with them after my own talks, I didn't hear confidence or enthusiasm.

"Do I really have to use *all* the sites?" they'd ask.

"I don't know what to post," they worried.

"I have nothing to say."

A musician's path to a sustainable career was being redefined as maintaining a never-ending, always-engaging, continuously innovative conversation with their audience, one self-promotional enough to remind people that they have something to sell, yet interpersonal enough to

make listeners feel connected and eager to spend money on them. All they had to do, it seemed, was get on social media, post, respond, and let the likes roll in. It struck me as a bit like telling someone who's moved to a new town and has no friends to "connect and engage!" as though that were actual advice for how to go about doing it. No one was discussing the daily practices of engagement, let alone what it takes to build and live in relationship with audiences day in and day out, month after month, year after year.

I wasn't surprised to hear onstage pundits' uncritical enthusiasm about social media as a recipe for entrepreneurial success. Anyone familiar with the history of technology knows how common it is to succumb to utopian visions of new media, as though they offer simple mechanistic solutions to complex social problems. Similarly, their silence on the relational opportunities and challenges of these quasi-magical connections that could transform follower counts into cash was expected. Having taught courses in interpersonal communication for more than twenty years, I know how common it is to see relationship building and maintenance as common sense rather than strategic accomplishments. After all, we all do it every day. Give us a few good examples and we'll catch on, right?

No.

Teaching that class showed me that those most convinced relational communication is intuitive rather than scientific and artistic tend not to do it as well as those who take time to learn about it, understand its challenges, and make conscious choices about their practices. Every conversation, I'd tell my students, everything we say to someone or do in their presence sends messages that further support, redefine, or undermine our relationships.

When we ask musicians to be direct, unique, and personal with their audiences, we ask them to redefine a relationship that has been structured in particular ways for decades. We ask them to do more work, work that requires relational, communicative, self-presentational, entrepreneurial, and technological skills that music work had not previously demanded. Where once organizations and media created many boundaries for their relations with audiences, it's now musicians' job to "draw the boundaries of what works and what doesn't." No one was addressing the personal ramifications of this relational labor. No one was

asking what those relationships and interactions look like or mean to the musicians who are expected to live them. What, I wondered, would musicians have to say if asked?

To find out, I began interviewing as many as I could get to talk to me. This book draws on those interviews, a variety of other materials, and my observations and experience over decades to paint a holistic portrait of the historical, cultural, and technological contexts that give rise to the expectations that musicians connect with their audiences in more intimate ways, the dialectic tensions this ongoing relational maintenance entails, and the ways that musicians make sense of and strategically manage their connections with audiences. Musicians are the focus, but this book is not only about them. Musicians are cultural forerunners. The tensions they face as they try to negotiate the boundaries of their relationships with audiences, and the strategies they devise to manage these tensions, have implications for workers in countless fields as they strive to build and maintain markets for their work. If anyone has insight into playing to the crowd, it's them.

Relating in the Gig Economy

Industry and government figures often consider musicians to be exemplary entrepreneurs. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, for example, started a 2016 blog post titled “Working in a Gig Economy” with this romantic description: “Ryan Heenan works whenever, wherever. He’s a songwriter who sells customized jingles and videos online to clients worldwide. ‘It’s really a dream come true,’ says Heenan. ‘It gives me the freedom to set my own hours. And I can do what I do anywhere there’s an Internet connection.’”⁴ One need look no further to see evidence of musicians’ leadership in the gig economy than the origins of the word “gig,” a gift from American jazz musicians who adapted it from African American slang to describe work.⁵ “Gig” made its way from music into wider parlance in the 1950s, “when the hipsters and the Beats adapted it to mean any job you took to keep body and soul together while your real life was elsewhere.”⁶

The gig economy prizes many of the qualities that enduring musicians have. They’re flexible, mobile, can take on a wide range of tasks, and they’re used to working in teams assembled for short-term projects.

There are reasons to wax romantic about this. The autonomy and continuous change of gigging can be exhilarating and exciting. When so many feel alienated in their places of employment, the freedom from institutions and bosses can help “keep body and soul together” even at work. While many workers must stifle their feelings to get through the workday, creative workers like musicians draw on emotions, have more opportunities to experience emotion-provoking events, and have more latitude in how they express emotion in their work.⁷ Yet musicians also exemplify the individualized risks, responsibilities, and precariousness of contemporary work.⁸ Gig work is inherently unstable, and questions about where money will come from now and in the future cause anxiety. The threat of poverty is ever-present. This is the context in which forming and maintaining friendlike relationships in which artists share their “authentic” selves with audiences, online and off, comes to be seen as a potential means of maintaining their careers.

As steady jobs give way to the gig economy, people pursuing all kinds of careers now find themselves blurring lines between friendship and professional networking as they work to remain visible, stay marketable, and court audiences for their work. While a few generations ago, many workers in Europe or North America could expect to keep the same job for life, more workers are now like musicians, always on the lookout for the next gig, unsure where the money will come from, and bearing the risk of unemployment alone. Nearly 40 percent of American workers, a third more than a decade ago, are part-time, freelance, and contingent “gig economy” workers.⁹ Mary Gray and Sid Suri estimate from a Pew survey of contingent workers that “by the year 2027, nearly 1 in 3 American adults will transition to online platforms to support themselves with on-demand gig-work.”¹⁰ Self-employment is “fundamentally different from wage labour”; it requires distinctive communicative and relational practices, and demands that workers invest their “entire human capital” to compensate for “the lack of any organizational structure.”¹¹

Getting a gig isn’t just about finding colleagues and employers; it’s about building relationships. To stay marketable, many people find themselves like musicians, commodifying their selves as well as their professional talent.¹² Developing a “personal brand” is supposed to provide us with stability, financial success, and career advancement.¹³ Whether they are the creatives of New York’s Silicon Alley, socializing

late into the night at networking parties where dancing girls shimmy as they drink¹⁴ or would-be Web 2.0 personalities seeking opportunity in the Silicon Valley nightlife,¹⁵ workers use their time off work socializing, hoping to make a name for themselves, and create the interpersonal conditions through which they can find work. Building friendly relationships with crowds of strangers is essential to the “venture labor”¹⁶ in which workers invest their time, selves, and relationships to grow their future careers.

Social media, from mainstream platforms like Facebook to bespoke apps, are central to building and maintaining these relationships and to acquiring and displaying the status markers that make people marketable.¹⁷ One manager explained to me that musicians should treat reaching out to their audience and peers online “like a full-time job.” But no matter how much they do, there is more to be done. And no matter how optimistic the dream of staying professionally afloat through personal connection, or how enriching the connections people form may be, as we’ll see, the daily practices of relating can also be boring, confusing, unsettling, and a source of stress, anxiety, and fear. Relational labor often demands skills and practices different from the job you want to be paid to do, and it can take time away from that work and from leisure.

Intimacy has been mobilized to serve capitalism for generations, but the internet, particularly the loose collection of platforms known as “social media,” brings a new twist. The “commodification of intimate life” that sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild calls the “the great unnoticed trend of our time”¹⁸ increasingly includes an expectation that people use always-on media to turn their selves into products and personal relationships into career opportunities. The internet’s networking, data-sharing, and platforms have been used simultaneously in ways that undermine the labor structures that once shaped careers and push people toward making and maintaining professional connections that resemble intimate relationships in their frequency, ordinariness, and how personal they are.

The relationships people form through relational labor can be rewarding and pleasurable in ways that transcend the utilitarian frames that surround them. Aside from the practical benefits of being able to broadcast information, being in touch with the people who appreciate your work brings validation, interesting conversation, and genuine

friendship. As Andrea Muehlebach wrote of Italians doing volunteer work for the Italian state, “the economy of good feeling is more than an ideological smoke screen or a psychological palliative. Rather, it is a profoundly indeterminate space of both love and loss, pleasure and pain, compassion and exclusion.” She warns us not to underestimate the potency of the emotional ties this work generates: “The fact that the public produced through these acts is partial does not make the acts themselves so.”¹⁹

In many ways, the relationship between musicians and audiences has always been intimate. Musicians often compose and perform from a very personal place. When that music affects audiences, it can feel like a direct line of heart-to-heart communication has opened. Nacho Vegas is a Spanish alternative folk singer-songwriter, known in Spain as a literary figure akin to Bob Dylan. Sometimes, he told me, music can “create in some people who like your songs the sense that you have important things in common, like feelings or experiences in life. Which is not always true. But it can be beautiful as well. Relationships with the audience can be beautiful and strange at the same time. And that’s great, I think.”

Once commodified, music was marketed in part by strategically crafting and selling artists’ images so that audiences might feel a sense of identification, admiration, or awe (e.g., Richard A. Peterson on the fabrication of authenticity in country music).²⁰ Technologies such as microphones that can capture a voice no louder than a whisper and relay it directly into our bodies put us into close sensory contact with musicians even if they were worlds away. But until recently, these experiences of intimacy were ephemeral and largely imagined by listeners as they engaged with musicians’ recordings. On the rare occasions musicians and fans were in the same place, their encounters were usually highly ritualized. Unless they were in the same social circles in the same towns, musicians and audiences couldn’t have the kind of ordinary, friendlike interaction so common today.

That changed in 2002 with the launch of MySpace. It may be a punchline now, but MySpace was the first social network site to explode globally. Created and based in Los Angeles, MySpace seeded its network with people in the LA music scene, betting that musicians’ need to build and reach audiences could serve the company’s need to convert people, be they musician, fan, or anyone else, into users. For musicians, the po-

tential seemed clear: make a profile, upload your songs so people can hear them, start collecting friends. Other musicians can also be used as friends. Get enough friends to up your friend count to where it demonstrates marketability and you can parlay that into gigs, recording contracts, and—if you are as lucky as Arctic Monkeys, early on described as “the first MySpace band” (a description they rightly rejected)—worldwide success. Getting and keeping friends on social network sites could be fun and really did create new opportunities, but rather than replacing what musicians had long done, these new media platforms “set up new (often completely unforeseen) musical relationships and activities.”²¹

What musicians sought with MySpace after 2002, gig workers around the world seek today on sites like Facebook and LinkedIn where, with the right contacts and a well-maintained, engaging presence, you might find your next career opportunity. People who never thought of themselves as having “audiences” now find themselves trying to “connect” and “self-brand” in the hopes of following their dreams, living their passions, or, more likely, getting a paying gig that covers rent. Online and off, freelancers and entrepreneurs court social bonds in what used to be free time, blurring the boundaries between social life and work life, colleagues and audiences, friends and fans. Relational labor is now normal, yet we have barely begun to understand it.

Music

Musicians are exemplary workers, yet music work has distinct qualities. It is widely agreed that music fulfills “different needs and ways of being human” than language does.²² Cultures vary in how they express and limit music, but there are no cultures now or known to history without it. Music allows us to communicate, process, and structure feeling, relationship, and social order in ways that language cannot. It is a highly structured, abstract, and complex information system, organizing parts into hierarchical containers and drawing extended contours that we recognize as melody.²³ It raises and subverts expectations in ways that arouse feelings. Yet even when it incorporates lyrics, it does not—indeed, cannot—impose meaning. It has unique power to mean precisely *because* it evokes without explicit reference.²⁴

The musicologist Christopher Small argues that the interplay of notes and passages in music—raising, dashing, and fulfilling expectations—allows us to experience and reconcile the contradictions of relationships between people and metaphysical deities, one another, and the social institutions that bind and separate.²⁵ Musicking, he writes, using the Old English word to remind us that music is an activity, not an object, is “a tool by means of which our real concepts of ideal relationships can be articulated, those contradictions can be reconciled, and the integrity of the person affirmed, explored and celebrated.”²⁶ Simultaneously personal, intimate, and collective, music has unusual power “in forging, fostering, solidifying and challenging values and attachments.”²⁷ Music produces and inflects social relations “from the most concrete and intimate to the most abstract of collectivities.”²⁸ It embodies nations, social hierarchy, and “structures of class, race, gender and sexuality” while supporting institutional forces like “elite or religious patronage, market exchange, the arena of public and subsidized cultural institutions, or late capitalism’s multi-polar cultural economy.”²⁹

Musical instruments were among the first technologies our species created. In what is now Europe, and perhaps other places not yet discovered, approximately forty thousand years ago, early people carefully carved mammoth tusks and bones of swans and griffin vultures into sophisticated flutes. Designed to serve metaphysical functions, these ancient people carved holes and beveled them to best fit their fingers. They strategically placed the holes to separate continuous sonic ranges into a discrete, fixed pitch. Parts were carved separately and fitted together with adhesives. Although we can’t know just how these flutes were used, in the surviving anthropological record of humanity, music always appears to be tied to religion, ritual, and their institutions. In his groundbreaking history, Gary Tomlinson argues that music was essential for the very creation of social institutions among early humans.³⁰

Against the epic backdrop of history, the period in which “musicians” have performed for and been paid by “audiences” is a tiny blip in the recent past. Until recently, and still today in large swaths of the globe and pockets of gatherings in Westernized societies, music making has been a ritual communal event in which all those present take part. The ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino calls this “participatory music.”³¹ In participatory musical events, “there are no artist-audience distinctions.

Participatory events are founded on an ethos that holds that everyone present can, and in fact should, participate in the sound and motion of the performance.”³² Over the course of history, particularly in the last thousand years, participatory music, while never disappearing, has had to make room for (and sometimes has found itself replaced by) what Turino calls “performative music,” something made by a special expert category of paid “musicians” for paying “audiences” whose role is to listen.

Since the European Middle Ages, music has been increasingly objectified, commodified, and industrialized, to the point where, even as it retains all of its personal, cultural, and human value, it has become entrenched in commerce.³³ As global cultural investment has shifted ever more toward market logics, especially since the 1970s, the community-enhancing values of music have been increasingly obscured by a focus on financial values. Governments and industrial actors have acted on the presumption that “the life enhancing properties of art and culture were less important than the goal of economic prosperity.”³⁴ In mass music industries, for at least the last hundred years, value has been “gauged according to financial, not cultural or aesthetic, criteria.”³⁵ Music workers thus find themselves between worlds that can have competing ideas about what constitutes appropriate relationships between those who make music and those who appreciate it.

Musicians

Music is an activity in which anyone can participate, making “musician” a fuzzy category. There is “no definition for ‘musician’” or any “one organization that represents the majority of musicians,” as the nonprofit musician advocacy organization the Future of Music Coalition notes.³⁶ In this book, I focus on career (or would-be career) music workers who, even when they find success within the industry, work in what Jennifer Lena describes as “scene-based genres.” They perform in a variety of specific genres, including indie, singer-songwriter, jazz, Desi, afropunk, heavy metal, Electronic Dance Music (EDM), and others. Leno identifies four categories of music genre, distinguished in part by their economic positioning. “Industry based” genres seek to sell “musical products to as many consumers as possible.”³⁷ Industrial musicians are supported and paid for by industry organizations. “Avant-garde” and “traditionalist”

genres operate outside commercial markets. Musicians in these genres neither expect nor make money. Scene-based genres sit in between. Musicians may earn livings from music, but they usually draw financial and practical support from diverse sources, including “family members, friends, and nonmusical employment to support their creative labor.”³⁸ In scene-based genres, musicians and audiences tend to prize “authenticity” over artifice, and audiences’ sense of connection to the performers’ personalities is essential to the music’s appeal and marketing.

The forty-some professional and semi-professional musicians I interviewed lived in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, Norway, and Spain (a list of those who agreed to be identified is found in appendix 1). I met many through events like MIDEM and other European conferences. Others I got to know on Twitter. Some were recruited through my own social networks. Because I wanted to know what, if anything, was actually new about social media, I spoke mostly with people who had built audiences before MySpace and had been through the shift from the age of aloof rock stars to the everyday connections of the socially mediated musician. As a result, I do not address how to build new audiences from scratch. I also spoke with younger artists, to see what transcended age and experience and what did not. While some people were eager to speak with me, I met countless dead ends trying to broaden the pool of interviewees, even when asking people I already knew. The time-honored method of snowball sampling rarely worked. Musicians, I quickly learned, protect one another, and friends who think their connection means they can offer others access are usually wrong.

The musicians I spoke with earned livings with varying degrees of success and varying reliance on selling music. Some were rich. Some were earning nothing from music and were only intermittently releasing or performing music. Most had been able to earn a living primarily as musicians, at least for a while. The money they did earn from music came mostly from live performances, although others lost money touring. Some made money from selling recordings. Several doubted there were still careers to be made selling recordings for anyone but a small set of stars. Many found other ways to make money in music. They compose and license music for film, television, and advertising; write musicals; teach music or songwriting; run recording studios; work as

engineers or producers; and work with other musicians. A few had corporate sponsorships. Several found work outside of music. One produces a nationally syndicated sports radio show. Another sells his paintings. A Grammy-award-winning musician has since trained as a barber and opened a small barbershop he calls the Handsomizer. One has turned his Prince and Michael Jackson super-fandom into a professional sideline, working with their estates and running a popular tribute YouTube channel.

Only a minority of working musicians ever earned livings from recordings. The Future of Music Coalition spent 2012–14 collecting and analyzing surveys from 5,371 American musicians about how they earn money and how much.³⁹ They estimate that only 6 percent of musicians' aggregated income comes from music sales. Even in rock and hip-hop, where people were most likely to earn money from recording, less than 15 percent of revenue came from sales. Live performances accounted for 28 percent of aggregate revenue. Those who think t-shirt sales are the miracle cure for musicians' recession will be disappointed to hear that only 2 percent of revenue came from merchandising. Altogether, individual musicians cobbled together income from forty-two different sources, including advances, commissioned jingles and soundtracks, licensing, ringtones, salaried employment with an orchestra or ensemble, live and studio session fees, teaching, fan funding (5 percent had received that), speaking honoraria, awards, grants, and more. Those who spent at least thirty-five hours a week on music and who earned at least 90 percent of their revenue from music made on average \$62,757 annually.

The interviews, eight hundred pages of transcripts in all, form the core of this book, but I draw on a variety of other materials to situate them in broader contexts. I spent seven years reading and following what musicians and other public figures did on social media. I paid close attention to news and social media coverage that touched on musicians' relationships with their audiences, collecting hundreds of examples. I followed social media accounts of digital music strategists and people in the music tech industries. I read biographies of musicians who differed from those I had interviewed.

I also draw on my own immersion in the field which, in addition to these daily rituals of media consumption, included attending music industry conferences, where I spoke, kept up on the changing state of

the field, and listened to musicians and the questions they asked. Furthermore, I write as a lifelong music fan whose personal and professional histories dovetail conveniently with the internet's. I am the kind of music fan who defined much of my life in terms of which artists' work I was obsessed with at the time. I obsessed on music from a couple of people I interviewed as I wrote this book. I spent much of adolescence hanging out at the independent record store in the college town where I lived. I worked there as a graduate student. I saw hundreds of shows a year, dutifully logging them in a hardcover blank book throughout the 1980s. For a long time, nearly all my friendships were focused on music. Some still are. Many of my friends were in bands. I have an odd knack for befriending bands I love, perhaps due to my awareness of issues I cover in this book.⁴⁰ My experiences as a fan, as a friend of musicians, and as a person with access to musicians ground and shape this analysis. Music genres and social identities shape one another, so what you read here is inevitably informed and colored by my own social position. I came of age in an indie music scene in the American Midwest that was overwhelmingly white, educated, and cosmopolitan. I seek to move beyond this by including material from other scenes and sources, but rather than disappearing into a veil of feigned objectivity, I remain present in the book, as situated interpreter, fan, and participant in decades of technological and relational continuity and change. Please interpret my omissions as invitations to further inquiry.

Relational Labor

People often romanticize creative labor, forgetting that the people who do it are workers,⁴¹ but sometimes the ugly truth shines through. In 2014 *Buzzfeed* posted a comparison of meet and greet photos with the pop stars Avril Lavigne and Rihanna.⁴² If you were among the millions of people who read this article, you learned that Lavigne has a “no-touching” policy that leads to awkward photos in which “everyone looks like they’re dying inside.” The photos show Lavigne with weak smiles standing awkwardly beside fans in Brazil who, having paid four hundred dollars for the opportunity, try to look like they’re having fun. Rihanna, in contrast, “has the best meet and greet pictures.” She is all over her fans—groping their breasts, grabbing their butts, making kissy

faces, vamping, and playing it up. Everyone, including her, looks like they're having a great time.

The article's message about how to treat audiences is clear. Rihanna, slipping easily into intimacy with strangers, is relating rightly. Lavigne, enforcing distance, is not. Humiliating coverage seemed to *Buzzfeed* an appropriate response. But what if Lavigne just really doesn't like to be touched by strangers? Why is that so bad? What would faking it cost her? Too much, it seems, for Justin Bieber, who in 2016 canceled fan meet and greets entirely, claiming they left him too drained and unhappy. Perhaps Rihanna is an excellent actress, but it's also possible that for her this kind of fan encounter is validating and pleasurable, while for Lavigne and Bieber it's an alienating part of their job.

In her groundbreaking book, *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild described the demand that we manage our emotional displays as part of our job requirements as "emotional labor." In work that demands emotional labor, the "emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself."⁴³ Though the phrase's meaning has expanded considerably, Hochschild's original definition was quite specific.⁴⁴ Emotional labor occurs in jobs that (1) require contact with the public, (2) are meant to produce a state of mind or feeling in others, and (3) are supervised by organizational superiors. Later scholarship has shown that these measures to control emotion can come not just from supervisors but, perhaps more repressively, "from peers, customers, and the self."⁴⁵ Hochschild briefly mentions contexts in which contact with members of the public may recur frequently enough to form relationships, such as that between doctors and patients, but her analysis focused on one-shot encounters, such as the flight attendant seeking to calm a surly or frightened passenger or the bill collector trying to intimidate someone shirking payment.

Perhaps ironically, perhaps inevitably, the more technologically mediated society has become, and the more emotions have been commodified as part of labor, the more value is placed on public embodied performances of authentic, natural feeling.⁴⁶ "Impersonal relations are to be seen *as if* they were personal," writes Hochschild; "relations based on getting and giving money are to be seen *as if* they were relations free of money."⁴⁷ In parallel, "the increased global commodification of popular culture creates an even stronger desire among many consumers for that which seems

uncommercial and therefore less affected by the strong hand of the marketplace.”⁴⁸ Whether you’re a country singer trying to pick the right shirt⁴⁹ or a waitress taking an order, acting authentic takes work.

The growing emphasis on emotion, personal connection, and authenticity are part of what labor sociologist Lisa Adkins describes as a “cultural feminization of work” that can be traced to the 1970s.⁵⁰ In many ways, commercialized music, with its emphasis on aesthetics, style, image, emotion, and creating a soundtrack for social gatherings, was way ahead of this curve. As consumer culture has shifted toward feminine aesthetics and practices of “style, surface, image, simulation, and masquerade,”⁵¹ even noncreative labor is valued in terms of how it makes others feel. More work is like hostessing, demanding that people manage friends’ and strangers’ social situations and needs.⁵²

Emotional labor can be both rewarding and alienating, depending in part on how workers interpret their practices.⁵³ Using our feelings as commodities can be enjoyable, healthy, and fun if we feel them sincerely and appreciate their effects on others.⁵⁴ If Rihanna really enjoys meet and greets as much as it looks like she does, it’s probably good for her, at least for now. Many of the musicians I interviewed took genuine pleasure in hugging their fans. But emotional labor also comes with inherent risks to our well-being. Hochschild worries about the human cost of managing our hearts for commerce, asking, “what happens when a gift becomes a commodity and that commodity is a feeling?”⁵⁵ When we can’t separate job demands from feeling work, it’s difficult to maintain clear lines between which of our practices are paid and formal, and which are unpaid and informal.⁵⁶ Work and personal identities blur. Are we performing our delightful social media personalities because we enjoy it or because we are in search of income?⁵⁷ Even those who enjoy emotional labor risk burnout, stress, and cynicism.⁵⁸ Lavigne and Bieber aren’t the only ones who run into trouble staying whole while giving so much of themselves away.

Useful as it is, the concept of “emotional labor” does not get us all the way to the relational work that musicians now do with their audiences. I use “relational labor” to emphasize the relationship building and maintenance at stake in this work, while calling attention to the “labor” context of work and the concerns about the self and alienation raised by Hochschild and others. Joyce Bellous describes “relational la-

bour” as “effort expended to initiate and maintain connections to other people” in contrast to “productive labour (effort expended using abilities to get resources to live on).”⁵⁹ Muehlebach takes the phrase from Italian volunteers she studied, who referred to their work as “lavoro relazionale.”⁶⁰ She describes it as an effort to re-create social bonds, diffusing and enabling the fact that it may be done in ways that both resemble and replace paid work. Though these works, and those cited above, use the word “relational,” none defines what they mean by “relationship” or unpack the processes that make relationships work. Instead, not unlike the music industry pundits I described earlier, they use terms like “connection” and “bond.”

Viviana Zelizer doesn’t use “relational labor” in her book *The Purchase of Intimacy*, but she elucidates the “relational work” people do to differentiate categories of social bonds and to manage those relationships.⁶¹ She describes people as having implicit matrices of relationship types, separated by dynamic boundaries that are made explicit in the legal cases on which she is focused. I understand relationships as ongoing communicative constructions.⁶² People have formed a “relationship” when they have interacted often enough to form recognizable patterns and have expectations of each other. They agree there is a relationship (though they may disagree on its nature) that continues even when they are apart. They can draw on a shared past in current encounters, and those form the basis for their future encounters. A change in one person’s behavior affects the relationship as a whole. Relationships change and require continuous, if often unnoticed, renegotiation. Each person in a relationship sees it differently, but the relationship involves feelings, knowledge, and understandings for all involved.

I define “relational labor” as the ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work. This includes (1) the communication itself, but also (2) the time and effort it takes to develop the skills, knowledge, and other human capital such communication requires (from years of experience in the field to familiarizing yourself with new social media platforms or metrics); (3) the ongoing sense making needed to understand yourself, others, and the relationships you are building; (4) the development of communicative and relational strategies; (5) the boundary making and marking it takes to set limits on relationships; and (6) the

never-ending revisiting of all of these things as each encounter can raise new dynamics. All relationships take work. I distinguish relational “labor” from relational “work” to emphasize that even if relationships become voluntary or pleasurable, this kind of relational work is done as part of a job (paid or otherwise) or in hopes of securing one.

The kind of relational labor musicians do differs from emotional labor in three significant ways. First, while emotion is certainly an important part of it, relational labor is about much more than the performance and creation of feeling. Musicians build and maintain enduring relationships, getting to know their audiences and letting their audiences get to know them. This kind of relational labor is common in many fields. The phrase “relational labor” has been invoked (sometimes too broadly for my tastes) in papers about mentoring and teaching, care work, and sex work, as well as to describe the work women do in romantic and domestic relationships.⁶³

Musicians’ relational labor differs from emotional labor, and from many of the other work domains in which relational labor is practiced, in that as gig workers their emotional and relational work are untethered from organizational rules and norms. Professions have codes of ethics to provide relational boundaries and differentiate personal relationships from professional ones.⁶⁴ Companies offer policies and training. Though some musicians may have recording contracts that shape their behaviors toward audiences to some extent, nearly all of them are left alone to figure out how to deal with their own and others’ emotions and to create whatever kinds of relationships they will have.

Third, “emotional labor” is almost always applied to encounters between pairs of people. The kind of relational labor musicians do is with individuals, but also with crowds made up of people with whom they have any range of actual and potential relationships. They must simultaneously manage the relational demands of each person who reaches them and play to the crowd as a whole, with all of the diverse audiences of allies, antagonists, strangers, and others it contains.

Musicians, as we have seen, are pushed toward relational labor that takes friendship as its aspiration. Hochschild’s work with debt collectors reminds us that friendship, with its routinized exchange of intimate information and affection, needn’t be the only model for relational labor. However, in popular culture, it has become a dominant one. Intimacy is

a fuzzy concept,⁶⁵ but common to languages sharing the Latin root *intimus* is “that intimacy means an awareness of the innermost reality of one person by another; it is a privileged knowledge of what is disclosed in the privacy of an interpersonal relation, while ordinarily concealed from the public view.”⁶⁶ Zelizer defines intimate relationships as those that “depend on particularized knowledge received, and attention provided by, at least one person—knowledge and attention that are not widely available to third parties.”⁶⁷ The kind of interpersonal intimacy I talk about in this book includes more than access to private information and personalized attention, although certainly these are important. Intimacy is also about how and with whom we co-construct our selves. Steven Beebe, Susan Beebe, and Mark Redmond, in the textbook from which I liked to teach, define “interpersonal intimacy” as “the degree to which relational partners mutually confirm and accept each other’s sense of self. The closer the relationship, the more you depend on a partner to accept and confirm your sense of self; your partner does the same.”⁶⁸

The call to be more personal in professional interactions can be traced to a mid-twentieth-century transformation of “intimacy” as a feature of close relationships into a public and moral good, a shift with origins in the rise of capitalism, secularism, and urbanization.⁶⁹ In a fascinating historical analysis of intimacy in the United States, Howard Gadlin argues that since the early 1940s, “technological intimacy” has become common.⁷⁰ Intimacy becomes a tool when it is used to meet needs other than its own realization. Once “a respite from alienation at one’s place of work, from isolation in the community, from the incomprehensibility of technology, and from social anonymity,”⁷¹ intimacy was appropriated by the very forces from which it offered sanctuary. Yet even as (perhaps because) it was reduced from sanctuary to tool, the emerging twentieth-century “ideology of intimacy” repositioned closeness as morally superior to distance and formality.⁷²

Marveling at the new ambiguities around “intimacy” that they saw in the early 1970s (around the same time Hochschild was in the field doing ethnographic research for *The Managed Heart*), Levinger and Raush write: “On the one hand we witness a quest for closeness; on the other hand, there is a breakup and distancing. Certainly traditional concepts of relationship are under question. We are no longer sure of the meaning of such words as friendship, marriage, love, intimacy, family, closeness

or distance; the boundaries that once seemed to define such concepts have become diffuse.”⁷³ Like the quest for closeness these authors describe, the desire for intimate connection that we see in fans’ new expectations of musicians may be “best viewed as part of a larger historical quest for community and for a world in which all needs for intimacy and affiliation are satisfied.”⁷⁴

Relational Dialectics

Intimacy, as these thinkers describe it, is a pull toward interpersonal closeness that counters pulls toward distance, publicness, formality, and techno-capitalist alienation. To make sense of the intimate work of connection that musicians and so many others do, we need to account for both the pulls toward closeness and the pulls away from it. The relational dialectics perspective is particularly helpful for understanding relationships in terms of the inherent, irreconcilable, inseparable contradictions they pose.⁷⁵ Think of the yin-yang symbol, in which each side is defined by its contrast to the other and each holds the seed of the other within it. Dialectics may be in opposition, but they form a whole. Each end defines the other. Closeness means nothing in a world with no distance. Distance means nothing without closeness.

Philosopher Martin Buber’s influential work *I and Thou*, first published in 1923, describes humans as necessarily moving between two dialectical stances toward the world and one another. When we approach others or the world in the I-You mode, we turn ourselves over to the intimate, ephemeral, emergent, participatory experience of whatever happens between us. “Whoever says You does not have something for his object,” Buber wrote; “he has nothing. But he stands in relation.”⁷⁶ The I-You approach is an ideal, rarely and fleetingly fully realized. It is essential to our humanity, to our personal evolutions, and to moral relations with others. But it can also “pull us dangerously to extremes, loosening the well-tried structures, leaving behind more doubt than satisfaction, shaking up our security—altogether uncanny, altogether indispensable.”⁷⁷ In the I-It mode, we see people and the world as objects to be understood and used. I-It seeks control and so requires distance. I-It offers the potential to perceive structure, order, and a sense of who we are relative to others as we move through a complicated and messy world. It helps us

identify and mobilize resources to navigate what would otherwise be an overwhelming sensory flow. These dialectic struggles are experienced individually, yet are culturally and historically shaped.

The challenge, as with all dialectics, is not which side to choose; it is to find an acceptable balance between them as dynamics of situations shift. Anticipating Gadlin's concerns about transforming intimacy into a tool, Buber warned that the human need for structure and order had been overtaxed for centuries. I-It relations threaten to overwhelm modern people's capacity to continuing relating to one another as Yous. It is "the sublime melancholy of our lot," he wrote, "that every You must become an It in our world," "assigned its measure and boundary" and losing "actuality."⁷⁸ "Without It," he warns, "a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with that is not human."⁷⁹

To build and maintain personal relationships, including those we'll see in this book, we must constantly negotiate dialectic tensions. Interpersonal relationships scholar William Rawlins has written extensively about the dialectics that characterize close relationships.⁸⁰ We need to love and be loved, but we also need to use one another. We want to express ourselves, but we also want to protect ourselves and one another. We want to accept and be accepted, but we judge and are judged. We want to be individuals, different from, and perhaps better than, others, but also to participate in a larger whole, relating to others through shared activities founded on commonality and equality. We have ideals of relationships and one another, yet we continuously confront the realities of their limitations. The dialectics we manage are "multiple, varied, and everchanging in the immediate context of the moment."⁸¹ They clash and collide. Our relationships are always becoming, never done. "From the perspective of relational dialectics," write Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery, "social life exists in and through people's communicative practices by which people give voice to multiple (perhaps even infinite) opposing tendencies. Social life is an unfinished, ongoing dialogue in which a polyphony of dialectical voices struggle against one another to be heard, and in that struggle they set the stage for future struggles."⁸²

Dialectic tensions take form in daily interaction practices as people draw on psychological and communicative strategies to manage these and other contradictions. Every time people speak, as Mikhail Bakhtin described a hundred years ago, their words balance and anticipate count-

less opposing forces. He wrote poetically that “The word, directed toward its object enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse.”⁸³

What today is so often blithely called “engagement” is how we manage these challenging dialectics, make meaning, and make relationships. As contexts change, as they did throughout the twentieth century and still do, different dialectic forces gain and lose strength. The boundaries and norms on which appropriate and comfortable interaction depend become unsettled. We are in a time that calls us to use intimacy as a tool with strangers on an unprecedented, technologically mediated, everyday scale. We are still trying to work out how much information is “too much information.” Over time, across interactions, across people, across contexts, the ways we come to balance these dialectics through our communication will create new cultural boundaries and norms.

We don’t get to change historical contexts or eliminate relational dialectics. We do get to choose how we manage them, and that can make the difference between satisfaction and discontent, between flourishing and withering, between good work and bad. The techniques workers used to resolve dialectics can have different personal and organizational effects.⁸⁴ In our least sophisticated moments, we may simply choose one side or the other. We may move back and forth between them, never finding balance for long. At our most mindful, we are able to attain the most rewarding approach, celebrating “the richness afforded by each polarity and tolerat[ing] the tensions posed by their unity.”⁸⁵

Music is itself dialectical and much of its value lies in its ability to trouble and transcend dialectics. As Georgina Born wisely puts it, music is “a medium that destabilizes some of our most cherished dualisms.”⁸⁶ Music grounds our intelligence in our bodies and affects us as little else does. It is both end and means. It is universal, yet also cultural and still deeply individual. It is both product and process, pleasurable and profound. Musical endeavors, Reimer and colleagues argue, “represent a pinnacle of what the human condition exemplifies.” Music’s unifying transcendent experiences “inevitably have many positive effects on the quality of the interrelated mental, physical, and emotional dimensions of human life.”⁸⁷

Musicking, and all the social activity that happens around and through it, is a form of communication with ancient powers to build meaningful identities, help us find our place in the world, and help us flourish. “At every age,” wrote Reimer and his colleagues, “a life being ‘well lived’ is a life being lived with the fullest possible richness of feeling. Whatever the quality of feeling music affords, from the amusing to the soulful, from the fleeting to the indelible, from the frivolous to the passionate, all are precious contributions to a central value humans seem to share—the value of life being fully lived because it is being abundantly experienced.”⁸⁸

Music’s commodification—and the ensuing commodification of musicians’ selves—strikes at the heart of the dialectical tensions between the life-giving potential of so much work and its utilitarian commercialization. Music’s contribution to life can be impeded by “social, institutional, and psychic factors.”⁸⁹ As much as it brings people together, music can contribute to inequality and suffering. It can help lead people to hate and to war. It may serve as a sedative that numbs us to conditions we should be fighting, or may become a vehicle for individualistic competition.⁹⁰

When music is industrialized, and when it is swept up in new digital industries, it often becomes a source of inequity, driving a system in which a few—be they elite musicians or, more likely, well-paid executives and computing professionals—profit immensely while most cannot afford to devote their work life to music. In this regard, too, music shares much with other fields, in which the potential for work to contribute to human flourishing stands in constant tension with its potential to drive inequity, disparity, and alienation.

“The twenty-first century may well bring terrifying changes in social life,” writes Zelizer, “but they will not occur because commodification in itself generally destroys intimacy.”⁹¹ Rather than seeking to extricate the intimate from the commercial, or to extricate money from close relationships, “the challenge is to create fair mixtures. We should stop agonizing over whether or not money corrupts, but instead analyze what combinations of economic activity and intimate relations produce happier, more just, and more productive lives. It is not the mingling that should concern us, but how the mingling works.”⁹² In an ideal world, all work would be meaningful and help people flourish, what David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker call simply “good work.” In place of alienation, workers might find their best selves.

Since music dwells in the social realms of feeling, relationship, and creativity, music work would seem to have tremendous potential to be the kind of ideal “good work” that leads to human flourishing.⁹³ Yet, as we will see, it is difficult. Music is a context in which all the tensions around feeling, relationship, intimacy, and work collide. What is at stake as musicians forge their way through the work of relating to audiences is more than how they can make a living; it is how they, their audiences, and ultimately all of us relating through commercial platforms in market systems can hold on to our basic humanity and help one another flourish.

Understanding Musicians’ Relational Labor

This introduction has laid out the main issues the book addresses. Before ending, I want to give you a brief guide to the chapters ahead. The book can be read as a whole, in order, and you will get more from it if you read it this way, but some readers may find that some chapters are less interesting to them than others, or that some parts provide too much background information for their needs. Should you be such a reader, feel free to skip such sections. The rest will still make sense.

The musicians in this book are communicators, seeking to give and gain social meaning, and laborers, seeking to make money in contexts dominated by capitalist market logics. The book’s first part, “Music,” discusses these two sides of music. With an eye toward the ideal of flourishing, the first chapter asks what it is about the relationships with audiences that musicians find most rewarding. The answers, not surprisingly, have little to do with getting paid. It is about knowing what their work means and finding validation of its significance. It is about communicating feeling and fostering relationship.

Music is communication, but it is also commodity. The second chapter traces the history of music as a form of labor, showing how musicians became a professional class of sorts, one separate from amateurs and audiences, and how technological innovations, particularly in the twentieth century, continually upset and reset the relations between them and those audiences. Once close, musicians and audiences became separated by mass mediation. When the recording industry floundered as the internet rose, musicians were pushed to be entrepreneurs, reaching back to the audiences once again.

The book's second part, "Participation," turns to audiences, how the internet has changed their practices, and the dialectic tensions this raises for musicians concerning participation and control. The third chapter traces the history of music audiences following the commodification of music. Rather than giving up on participatory practices when mass media separated audiences from musicians, audiences created new kinds of participation through fandom. I show how fans developed cultures among themselves, replete with practices, norms of acceptable behavior, and hierarchies. From the earliest days of networked computing, music fans were there, shaping the technologies and cultures that emerged online, setting the stage on which musicians would later perform their efforts at connection. By the time musicians and industry figures realized they could use the internet to reach audiences directly, those audiences had already established their presences and social norms online, putting them in unprecedented positions of power.

The growth of audience power means that artists must negotiate a dialectic between maintaining control of their work and professional identity and acting as participants in the subcultures built around their music. The fourth chapter turns to their strategies for doing this. It outlines three common strategies of control—territorializing, invoking intellectual property rights, and datafying—and two strategies of participation—recognizing autonomy and collaborating with audiences. Within market systems, I argue, even the most participatory strategies necessarily incorporate elements of control.

Part 3, "Relationships," turns to the expectation of intimacy I've been discussing in this introduction. In chapter 5, I look directly at the impact of social media, showing how platform affordances reshape relationships between artists and audiences. I compare social media platforms to the stage and the merchandise table. Many of the dialectics raised in social media are seen also in these older modes of encounter, but the relational affordances offered by social media, in conjunction with the emerging norms around their use, push musicians to be more accessible and more engaged in mundane, daily personal interaction with their audiences. Relationships change from imagined connections with perhaps a brief moment of actual meeting, to ongoing connections, with the obligations and pressures those entail.

The final chapter asks how musicians manage to maintain distance when culture, economics, and technology push them toward “authenticity” and closeness. I consider how “authenticity” in music has shifted from meeting genre criteria to being your true self. I address the potential negative consequences of closeness, including its threat to mystique and the fact that it only takes a few people who think they are far closer to you than they really are to create both stress and danger. Relationships are built through both disclosure and restraint. I explore musicians’ strategies for creating boundaries in their relationships with audiences by managing their availability and the topics they discuss.

The examples we’ll see throughout the book speak to how, beginning centuries ago and culminating in the twentieth century, participatory experiences have been transformed into commercial objects, driving wedges between those who create and those who consume. We’ll see the twentieth-century movement away from appreciating formality and distance toward viewing intimacy as a virtue to be deployed widely in all domains of life, including for commercial profit. We’ll see workers move from systems that offered local and institutional support toward decentralized systems in which they are on their own to follow their passions, crash and burn, or muddle through, hoping nothing goes too terribly wrong. And with the rise of social media, we’ll see creators and consumers brought back together in new ways, challenging boundaries that have long been taken for granted and reformulating relationships under new terms that have yet to be determined.

A dialectic perspective will never tell you that something is either good or bad. What it offers is a way to understand the dynamics that underlie relationships and the strategies people use to manage those dynamics in ways that work for them, and perhaps for others. The conclusion asks what we can take from musicians’ experiences to help us understand relational labor, regardless of the field in which it is deployed. Relational labor has the potential to bring both revenue and meaningful connection. It can help people understand the value of their work and feel inspired to create more. It can create friendships and communities. But it can also alienate, overwork, and undermine the good work people are trying to do. It’s up to all of us to help shape the world that lets people do their best work while holding on their selves. I hope this book gets us closer.