

All of me: Art, industry and identity struggles

Casper Hoedemaekers & Sierk Ybema

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Introduction

Work is an area in which we spend a large part of our lives, and in which we invest a lot of our ideas about who we are in life. This might involve ideas about building a career, professional aspirations, the social relations we build in the workplace, status, and so on. Who we are, what we are capable of, and how we fit in are central questions posed to us already when we enter an organisation, via a recruitment and selection process based on an applicant profile and a job description. As such, it should come as no surprise that identity is a major part of our working life, and that those who study work and organisation consider it important to examine (see also Coupland, chapter X, this volume).

But how does identity come into the work of creative and independent workers? How do identity issues affect those in the music sector, who often work autonomously? For them, there is no clearly delineated identity carved out within a formal organizational setting. At the same time, however, identity can play an especially significant role for them, since their output is often seen as an extension of the inner world of its creator(s) and a symbol of their identities, both by creators themselves and by audiences or consumers. Like any product of our professional, artistic, or commercial endeavours, for a singer-songwriter making and performing music is a project of self-realization. Probably, this is why a conversation about a person's artfully designed creations tends to turn into attempts to make sense of his or her self – what they find essential about themselves, how they view themselves in relation to others, how they present themselves to the outside world, how they are being seen by their 'audience', and what produces pride or doubts about their 'selves'.

In this chapter we draw close to workers' lived experience and sensemaking efforts by adopting a perspective that places identity questions centre stage. We illustrate our identity perspective on work and management by delving into the music industry and, specifically, by using examples from interviews with Ben Talbot Dunn, a singer-song writer who performs his work mainly as part of a band, Open Swimmer. Analysing this singer-songwriter's identity work offers a window onto some of the recurrent dilemmas in the music industry and in people's identity work more generally. In his account, we can explore different aspects of his identity talk, different roles to which he aspires, and different narratives along which they are structured. In our analysis, we will look at a number of tensions that emerge from his identity accounts, which we place within the context of a romantic ideal dominating discourse in the (independent) music industry that emphasises 'art for art's sake' and denounces commercialism. First, however, we briefly introduce our approach to identity and identity talk.

'Self' and sociality

Rather than studying identity as an objective fact or an individual's or collective's deeper essence, we explore how identities are embraced or resisted, articulated or

rearticulated. Such a perspective frames identity as being constituted through the ways in which people present their 'selves' and what they say when explaining who they are to themselves and to others. It focuses on the ways in which social actors categorize themselves, individually or collectively, in the process of claiming an identity. This way, we can offer insight into, for instance, how identities are constituted and, over time, reconstituted in how people project themselves and how they are perceived.

The formation of an 'identity' can be viewed as a constant interplay between social and self-definition. Social (re-)definitions involve, for example, professional and organizational scripts for appropriate or desirable role behavior or disciplinary persuasions to act 'normal' or express 'appropriate' opinions. At the same time, people present their selves to an outside world, conforming to or deviating from particular prescriptions through, for instance, role embracement, rule breaking or emotional distancing. Thus, one might say, identity formation is a 'dynamic interplay between internal strivings and external prescriptions, between self-presentation and labeling by others, between achievement and ascription and between regulation and resistance' (Ybema 2009: 301). Identities are thus constructed somewhere 'in between' the communicator(s) and their audience(s): 'It is in the meeting of internal and external definition that identity, whether social or personal, is created' (Jenkins 1994: 199; see also Jenkins, 2004). Seen from this viewpoint, for the individual, identity formation involves processes of negotiation between self and others, between 'inner' desires and strivings and an 'outside' world. Even in 'inner conversations', individuals adopt an image of inside-outside interplay when they speak, for example, in terms of a 'dialogue' between internal ideas, wishes, and affections ('who I want to be') and 'external' expectations and evaluations ('who they want me to be').

Identity struggles

'One for the money, two for the show': artist or professional?

The formation of identities is a complex, multifaceted process that produces a psychologically and socially negotiated temporary outcome. For musicians and managers in the music industry, one such negotiation is between artistic and commercial identity templates. In Ben Talbot Dunn's case a major facet of his identity work is how he tries to unite his work as a creative musician with the managerial and economic side of running a band and releasing material. Here is an excerpt that deals with some of these aspects:

Understanding this dynamic faced by many musicians in the industry – pursuing a passion whilst currently trying to make a living – is a veritable reality for Ben & Open Swimmer. Ben's ultimate focus and drive is making music, but he concurrently acknowledges that some opportunities to play with his band must be considered as they can end up costing the band members money. In addition, there are some gigs that may involve investing money but represent serious opportunities for exposure amongst industry figures and Ben insists that those gigs are always important. Therefore it is a genuine tightrope that must be walked between pursuing a passion regardless of economic return while at the same time making money to ensure that this same passion & dream can live on in a commercially oriented world; 'the only reason it is about the money is so that I can do it'.

We can see from this short excerpt that this is a sensitive topic, and indeed it is a tension that is often cited by artists. Is it possible to create works of art that are truly uncompromising in the context of economic market relations, under pressure to make a living? For musicians, this may lead to a meditation on whether what they are involved

in is something that reflects their desire to create a personally meaningful piece of music without pre-emptively considering the audience reaction, or whether one is closer to the figure of the entertainer who exercises their musical craft for maximal audience satisfaction.

Here we see Ben's identity work play out as a struggle between an 'intrinsic' longing for an authentic self as true artist and 'extrinsic' demands to make a living as an artist. The money here, for Ben, is merely a pragmatic means towards realising an end that is fully artistic in nature. Placing such an identity narrative in a wider perspective, we could read this tension in light of a very specific idea of what musicians are supposed to do, namely to submit themselves to art is a way in which they remain untainted by outside influences unless where strictly necessary. We suggest that this can be seen as indicative of ideas about art and creativity that first emerged within the Romantic period, in which we find the idea of art and commerce as being irreconcilable. This is rooted in the romantic notion of 'art for art's sake', and the idea that true art is authentic and highly personal, in that it reflects the intentions and emotions of its creator.

Viewing Ben's identity narrative as a romantic construction shows how what he presents as 'internal' or 'external' to his identity is, in a cultural sense, more complicated and intermingled. We can thus see that the narratives that structure our individually experienced 'authentic self' are themselves socially prevalent, historically specific and evolved from earlier notions and, at the same time, the seemingly external economic demands of the musician's working life are part of the fabric of the self. It allows Ben to build an epic narrative of himself as a true artist defending artistic authenticity against commercialism in the music industry. In the conclusion section, we will further discuss this idea of Romantic ideology as a central tenet of modern times and the contemporary music industry.

'Alone together': on individual and collective identities

Another way in which we can see an interplay of identities that are seemingly either external or internal is in the struggle between articulating 'me' and/or embracing 'we'. In the music scene one can frequently observe tensions between, for instance, pursuing a 'solo career' and being in a band, between an instrumental 'solo' and collective orchestration, between being the 'front (wo)man' and 'backing vocals', between being 'Bob Marley' and/or being 'the Wailers'. This tension is comically illustrated by the liner notes of the Judas Priest album "Killing Machine" on which the two guitarists are both credited with 'lead guitars'. In Ben's case we can also observe a tension between individual and collective identities. Let's look at an excerpt from his case study:

Ben recalls how at the beginning when he formed his new band 'Open Swimmer', he saw it as a completely separate musical identity, entirely disconnected from his sense of a musical self as 'Ben TD'. This separateness was reinforced through the fact that, at first, Ben avoided playing his solo material with the band. However as he once more evolved into a band member he felt more at ease using material from his solo gigs. Ben's experience in 'Open Swimmer' vividly illustrates an oscillation between individual & collective musical identities. He clearly identifies himself as the leader of the band 'because I wrote all the music and made the album without any of the band members', but concurrently he acknowledges that it is now a band sound, a 'group of musicians as opposed to one guy'.

[...]

Ben is now comfortable with the centrality of his role in the band's identity and his established leadership of its activities. This was not always the case. Ben admits struggling at first within Open Swimmer with the issue of highlighting that it was his music that the rest of the group were just playing. Even to the extent of feeling uncomfortable being the one at the front of the band singing. However this is now something that is openly acknowledged and accepted by all band members – Ben's ownership of the group's musical outputs and the recognition of that. The band gives Ben enough separation from being a solo artist to enjoy the collectivity of making music in a group and creating that sound, but at its heart, Open Swimmer is Ben and he is not 100% aligned with the ideologies of a band and a collective essence. However, although comfortable with the one man and his band analogy, Ben does feel that there must be an element of commitment to a band identity as psychologically musicians don't invest in a situation where they feel it is just them supporting an individual musical pursuit. So perhaps calling them a band was more for the reassurance of those around him, than any definitive alignment with a group identity.

Following our discussion of romantic notions of the artist, we can begin to understand why it is important for Ben to portray the band as a collective agency here, even though he has composed all the material. Within popular music nowadays, the idea that those who are performing the music have engaged in a joint act of creation is a pervasive idea, since all musicians are assumed to be performing something that expresses their beliefs and convictions in some way. This can be seen as an extension of ideas from the Romantic period, in which artists are seen to convey their inner world through their art. Under these ideas, musicians are then seen not as professionals, hired guns who are making a living at their craft, but as artists who have a profound connection to the art they are representing. Ben is acutely aware that the other band members are mainly performing his songs, but he still insists on giving the band its own specific identity and thereby hiding his own role as bandleader, composer and arranger considerably.

This reveals a fundamental understanding for Ben – people are the vehicle for him to perform the music that he is writing. The band identity is a pseudo-collective that acts not like a group but as a mechanism for Ben to continue producing, performing and enjoying the music that he alone creates. Despite Ben's insistence that the group dynamic is still appealing to him – being on the road with the band, rehearsing as a group and sharing music – it is still his music and his musical identity that is shared and at the forefront of the group's persona.

Ben here embraces his membership of Open Swimmer, and emphasises its collective representation of the music, but at the same time is ambivalent about it. He resists it insofar that he feels that the group still fundamentally represents his music. This uneasiness can be related to the implicit social prescription that independent music is mostly a collective endeavour, and that passive membership of the group, or simply utilitarian performance of the music, is discouraged. His vacillation between collective and individual identities here can be read in this light.

“Dear boy, have a cigar...”: The romantic order and the music industry

We can see above that identity work of those in the music industry has recognisable reference points, expressed in identity shifts in relation to ideas of collectiveness and individuality. We can see a similar tension in the way that the more idealised aspects of creativity are reconciled with the prosaic realm of commerce. As in our little nod to Pink Floyd's cigar-offering record executive above, musicians are often disdainful of business on the surface. If we look at this short case study on Ben and his band Open Swimmer, we can see how he is also careful to preserve (and to present himself as primarily driven by) artistic ideals. His music is a collective endeavour of musicians who remain independent from business. Ben struggles with his role as a (businesslike) bandleader, and some of the tasks that this implies. Ben expresses hesitation at his leadership, which

involves making creative decisions in a fairly autocratic manner. He is also somewhat uncomfortable with taking an instrumental approach in publicising and promoting his music, and appears to have the sense that this is at odds with his intentions as a creative musician. Here it is useful to look at why this might be the case, which involves remembering some of the changes in the music sector and culture more generally.

The assumptions that we find in Ben's account of how a band might function are historically specific, and might conceivably be quite alien to a musician from the 1950s, for example. In previous eras, and still in genres like jazz and Latin-American music, there was often a clear bandleader who would employ musicians, arrange gigs, divide fees, and supply the repertoire to perform and record. This person functioned as a creative director, conductor as well as the business manager and figurehead of the group in question. Some of these bandleaders are recognisable names, and stars in their own right: Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Cab Calloway, Glenn Miller, Nelson Riddle, just to name a few. To this we can add any number of bandleaders who ran much smaller groups, in a variety of genres that comprised popular music throughout the early to mid-20th century.

In economic terms, this was an employment model, in which musicians are hired for specific commitments on specific financial and creative terms. In musical terms, this had the benefit of clearly separating what each member contributed, such as performance, arrangement, composition, and so on. The relatively unambiguous nature of this model changed with the emergence of music as an element of counter-culture from the 1950s onwards. Popular music connected to an expanding teenage market, and addressed itself more openly to the sentiments and sensibilities of this younger contingent, and did not eschew pushing back against societal conventions of civil obedience and propriety. With this, a different model of musical production also started to emerge. Increasingly, the idea of a band became something that reacted partly against this 'authoritarian' notion of employment and leadership, and embraced the idea of collective production and organization. This was also a move away from a discourse of music in the service of entertainment to one of art production, driven by ideals of art for art's sake.

Within this new paradigm, creation and authorship were given an elevated status, especially when they were collective. A side effect of this was that other forms of musical labour such as arranging, production, scoring and so on were relegated to the back-office while composition took centre stage. Making music was here increasingly seen as an act of inspiration, and an expression of deeply held sentiments, which de-emphasised the professional infrastructure of previous eras (even though it still pervaded the music industry). We can understand this as a resurgence of ideas that come from a much earlier period, and that were suppressed over the course of the 20th century in which the values of the Enlightenment became dominant. Doorman (2004) argues that in contemporary ideas on art, life, politics and work, we can trace a strong influence of ideas that originate in the 19th century and can be associated with Romanticism, a movement in art and literature that emphasised natural beauty, purity and authenticity. For Doorman, Romanticism has reshaped our self-understandings, cultural production and the way in which civilisation is understood in relation to the natural world. It injected specific forms of Utopian thinking into consciousness at the time, which sought to trace origins and universal truths at the expense of the 'manufactured' civilisation of science, industry and realist art.

Doorman argues that such ideas resurged in the 1960s, when the post-war generation reacted against the societal order and political status quo prevalent at the

time, and sought to assert alternative ways of living through music, art, and social movements, among other things. In a similar vein, Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) have analysed the way in which capitalism evolved over the course of the 20th century and they argue that the post-war generation pioneered something called artistic critique, which as a cultural movement sought to regain authenticity and autonomy within the lives that people lead. The counter-cultural movement in music can be seen as part of this.

Many musicians nowadays view their work as an activity that embodies a high degree of authenticity, and that reflects aspects of their personality, emotions or individuality. In this way, they shape their identities within a wider narrative of what art and creative work should be, based in ideals of art for art's sake, authentic self-expression and autonomous creation. However, such ideas can sometimes sit uncomfortably alongside the very necessary entrepreneurial and organisational side of musical work. Musicians' identity work is here shaped by cultural notions of creativity and art, but also by the daily demands that are placed upon them and the diverse sets of tasks that their craft requires.

Issues such as these are something that Ben Talbot Dunn seems to grapple with. Viewed in light of historical developments in popular music and its production, this is relatively new. Ben takes on most of the hard work of running a band as well as composing and arranging its repertoire, but finds it difficult to articulate his own role against dominant notions of what a 'band' is: individuality versus collectivity, work versus art. We can see here how identities are in a constant play between social definition and self-definition, with dominant narratives, contradictions and overlaps complicating the process. Identities are shaped not only in relation to the immediate demands of work, social relations and personal relationships, but also in relation to more abstract ideals that present themselves to us through our everyday practice.

In one singer-songwriter's account we find that what at first sight appears as a struggle between the 'authentic self' and the pragmatic reality of economics might partly result from unknowingly attributing to his deepest, intimate self a nostalgic set of romantic beliefs. By understanding how such wider narratives become part of how we see ourselves, we can better navigate paradoxes and tensions within how we relate to our practice and to others, and recognise how the boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' pressures is often more complex than it seems. Identity struggles shape the way in which we work, and it mediates our relationship to ourselves, others and our collective endeavours.

References

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