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Challenging the Stigma: A Global Case for Artist Autonomy, Self-Governance and the Manager-as-Employee Model in the Music Industry

Research Article

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Abstract: A prevailing standard in the global music industry posits that every musician necessitates a manager to oversee strategic planning, negotiations, and commercial intricacies. This paper contests the prevailing norm by advocating for a manager-as-employee paradigm, based on the principal–agent theory and entrepreneurship studies, in which the artist is redefined as the business principal who engages a manager for specialised functions. Utilising historical trends and the contemporary digital landscape, this article illustrates that musicians actively participate in many entrepreneurial endeavours—such as budgeting, branding and distribution—and thus need not relinquish overall authority to a manager. The article contends that, notwithstanding the valuable connections and experience offered by reputable managers, contractual agreements should prioritise the artist's creative vision and financial independence. It delineates how artists might work, examining practical frameworks such as project-based management agreements, and promoting wider acknowledgement of music as a viable vocation. The conclusion urges industry stakeholders—labels, promoters, media and educational institutions—to endorse a paradigm where artist liberty is the norm rather than the anomaly.

Keywords: *Artist Autonomy • Manager-as-Employee • Principal–Agent Theory • Entrepreneurship • Managerial Gatekeeping Self-Governance*

1. Introduction

The artist–manager relationship in global music businesses consistently presents intricate issues of authority, accountability and equity. While some countries uphold enduring norms characterised by contractual clarity and professional regulation for managers, other regions—especially in areas of Africa and the Global South—frequently exhibit informal partnerships with ambiguous boundaries of duty and control. In my professional experiences as a musician, particularly within Ghana's dynamic yet informally organised music industry, I have witnessed countless situations where unclear managerial connections undermine musicians' autonomy and financial independence. This has resulted in a concerning situation where artists often rely on managerial oversight not only for logistical assistance but also for affirmation and credibility within their professional circles.

The global proliferation of digital distribution channels and direct-to-fan technologies has radically transformed the manner in which artists interact with their audiences and oversee their careers (Poplavskyi & Trach 2022; Fairchild 2015). Platforms such as Spotify, Bandcamp, Patreon and forthcoming blockchain technology have significantly empowered artists, offering unparalleled prospects for direct control over their creative and economic endeavours (Agrawal et al. 2023; Ashtagi et al. 2024; Barbadekar et al. 2024). Ironically, this augmented autonomy has concurrently intensified the intricacy of the business landscape, increasing artists' dependence on administrative acumen to adeptly manoeuvre through these novel market circumstances.

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This study situates itself at the convergence of global advancements and localised challenges, contending that the conventional artist–manager connection necessitates serious reevaluation and structural reconfiguration. This work seeks to challenge prevalent assumptions that portray musicians as intrinsically deficient in business acumen by openly characterising artists as entrepreneurial proprietors who use managers as distinct agents or specialist employees. It aims to offer a pragmatic, theory-based framework to enhance transparency, responsibility and autonomy for artists, thus addressing substantial deficiencies in current scholarship on the principal–agent theory as it pertains to creative sectors. This study ultimately enhances both scholarly dialogue and practical management strategies, promoting transparent, fair and sustainable interactions within the global music industry.

2. Literature Review

Handling strategic planning and industry complexity, artist managers help artists to focus on creation and guarantee career sustainability (Gaudesi 2016). They are therefore essential for the success of an artist. This prompts significant enquiries from a business perspective. Claveria-Mayol's (2024) paper examines moral hazard in principal–agent relationships, illustrating how the allocation of decision-making authority can result in inefficiencies when agents (managers) receive high-powered incentives, potentially taking advantage of the principal's (artist's) reliance on them, thereby exacerbating the risk of misaligned incentives and inefficiencies in contractual arrangements (Lalević 2023; Athamena et al. 2020).

While managers have become more important due to the complexity of the digital age, Morrow (2024) does an extensive empirical study on music artist managers and reveals a startling paradox in the business: their financial compensation stays flat, which causes great attrition rates and a "brain drain". Based on his results, using equity-based remuneration should help to reduce discontent and match managers' interests with long-term performance of artists. While Morrow argues that managers should be seen as co-creators or partners, this study keeps a principal–agent perspective, therefore placing managers in clearly defined roles. It underlines the requirement of contracts including clear project-based deliverables to improve artist autonomy and stop managerial exploitation. All things considered, Morrow's observations highlight the need of redefining contractual clarity and remuneration systems to handle managerial discontent and turnover in the music business.

Furthermore, as digital platforms (Spotify for Artists, Bandcamp, Patreon) and direct-to-fan engagement technologies increasingly challenge traditional gatekeeping models, artists now possess unparalleled authority over their distribution, promotion and revenue channels (Ng & Gamble 2024). Independent artists are likely to need more management, not less, because there is no record label involved and providing labour: Frenneaux (2023) analyses the empowerment of independent artists through digital platforms and Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethics, which offer access to distribution, production and marketing tools. This development challenges traditional gatekeeping models and introduces new platform-based intermediaries that influence visibility and success. There is arguably less need for a label but perhaps more need for a manager (i.e. it is unlikely that the artist can do all of the work themselves): necessity for a comprehensive manager may be exaggerated or, at the very least, requires thorough reassessment in light of current market conditions.

With his work in 2018, Morrow provides a thorough theoretical contribution to modern artist management. Inspired by interviews in five worldwide creative cities, Morrow offers a responsive management model based on agile project management (APM), contending that the complexity of the creative sector calls for flexible and iterative solutions. Given that artistic careers are sometimes erratic and cooperative efforts are fleeting, he ties his framework to the agile movement and stresses the importance of non-linear, fluid techniques that allow for tight cooperation between artists and management. Morrow notes the emergence of self-managed artists and redefines artist management as a kind of group creation, therefore shattering the conventional wisdom separating "business-minded" managers from "creative" artists. However, this paper deviates from Morrow's approach by suggesting a principal–agent model, therefore placing the manager as an agent and the artist as the principal. By means of project-based contracts and well-defined roles, this redefining strengthens artist autonomy and offers stability.

My viewpoint on this matter is shaped by extensive experience as a performer, during which I have noted—both locally and through discussions with international peers—a widespread cultural bias that undermines musicians' business acumen. In Ghana, where my professional adventure commenced, I observed that artists frequently depend on managers not only for logistical assistance but also to authenticate their status as “serious” workers. In discussions with colleagues from many regions, including Europe and North America, I have found that the same preconceptions persist: the musician is perceived as a “creative dreamer”, allegedly requiring stringent oversight from a financially astute management. It became clear to me that these concerns transcend any single location, indicating a globally ingrained mentality that necessitates a more extensive theoretical analysis.

This article posits that artists ought to be seen as the genuine “business principals”—the actual entrepreneurs of their creative ventures—rather than being intrinsically reliant on managers for strategic guidance or professional validation. It specifically contests the entrenched belief in management dominance by suggesting that artists can (and ought to) engage managers under explicitly delineated conditions, regarding them as contracted experts or advisors acting in the artist’s best interests. This approach confronts a profound cultural stigma: that musicians, due to their creative inclinations, are inherently incapable of strong commercial acumen. This article restructures the artist–manager relationship by integrating fundamental concepts from entrepreneurship theory (see Kuratko 2011; Baker & Welter 2020), principal–agent frameworks (see Bergman & Lane 1990; Maggetti & Papadopoulos 2018) and the music business literature (see Saragih 2019; Pizzolitto 2024), aligning it more closely with conventional managing techniques in other sectors.

This viewpoint is innovative for two reasons: first, it methodically employs established business theories, particularly in entrepreneurship and agency, within a domain typically dominated by tradition and anecdotal evidence; second, it highlights the entrenched stereotypes that depict all musicians as lacking self-governance, thus sustaining managerial reliance. Designating the artist as the “principal” and the management as an “employee” or “agent” re-establishes the business aspect of music in accordance with traditional corporate frameworks, wherein owners or Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) engage professionals while retaining ultimate authority.

This article employs a position paper technique, synthesising theoretical ideas with industry observations to construct a cohesive, scalable argument, in contrast to an empirical case study reliant on quantitative data or extensive interviews with industry professionals. Multiple elements substantiate this methodology:

1. **Overarching Theory:** Utilising management and entrepreneurship theories (such as agency theory, resource-dependence theory and entrepreneurial autonomy) necessitates a deeper conceptual framework than is usually present in more focused case studies (see Bellavitis et al. 2023; Sheldon & Jun 2007; Ferreira et al. 2018; Harkins & Forster-Holt 2014; Babelytė-Labanauskė 2022).
2. **Global Relevance:** The argument encompasses various music markets—where the motivation to engage a management may vary in specifics but remains remarkably constant in its fundamental reasoning (i.e. musicians perceived as ‘unmanageable’). A position paper facilitates extensive cross-industry comparisons, rather than limiting the analysis to a single locale or classification system (Chevrier 2009; Bauer & Schedl 2019).
3. **Pragmatic Approaches versus Data-Heavy Analysis:** Although statistics on artist wages, streaming income or management fees can be informative, the primary aim is to alter the viewpoint—to question a conventional belief and suggest a systematic alternative. Consequently, the paper emphasises theoretical ideas, real-world examples and practical recommendations for artists, rather than detailing extensive statistical data (see Sarwat et al. 2024; Ramanadhan et al. 2021; Sutton 2021; Osborne 2023).

According to Morrow (2024), the balance of power in the relationship between the artist and the manager is special, since the artist manager works for the artist while the artist is usually following his direction. As success builds across an artist’s professional path, this balance of power often changes. A change in the degree of success will cause the power balance to move in the artist’s benefit. Dealmaking between the two sides will suffer, nevertheless, if the power balance favours the artist management in the period preceding success and following a downturn in popularity. The two parties also have more subtle daily power exchanges.

This paper aims to provide a clear theoretical foundation and practical implications, serving as both a conceptual roadmap for artists seeking to reclaim their autonomy and a stimulating contribution for business scholars interested in unconventional principal–agent contexts. This emphasises that music is not a simplistic field free from significant managerial issues; instead, it is a dynamic, growing industry where conventional business frameworks can—and should—be utilised to benefit creative people.

3. The Business Lens: Principal–Agent Theory and Entrepreneurship

Rennie et al. (2024) applies the principal–agent theory especially to the dynamics of media economics and management. They emphasise that the principal–agent relationship usually consists of a primary—the party who assigns power—and an agent—the party who performs tasks on behalf of the principal. The theory emphasises common issues such as information asymmetry and different motivations, in which agents typically have access to better or more extensive knowledge, therefore enabling either prospective benefits or chances to act in their own interests rather than the principal's. Also emphasised in their work is the need for well-defined contracts and monitoring systems to reduce moral hazard and adverse selection.

Using the principal–agent theory, Morrow (2024) examines the connection between artists (principals) and middlemen including managers, labels and streaming platforms (agents). He defines the principal–agent dynamic in which the agent, expected to operate in the best interests of the principal, receives tasks from the principal. Information asymmetry does, however, sometimes exist when agents have access to vital information about contracts, royalty payments and digital data lacking in principals that might be exploited.

Morrow relates this knowledge asymmetry to problems including adverse selection and moral hazard. While adverse selection results from artists selecting agents without fully comprehending their talents or ethics, resulting in sometimes exploitative interactions, moral hazard results from agents prioritising their own short-term benefits without facing the repercussions. He underlines that agents leave artists susceptible as they keep their advantage via control over metadata concerning payments and copyright management. By offering better financial information, Morrow suggests that technical developments, including blockchain and distributed ledger technologies, could improve openness and empower artists, hence resolving main-agent problems. All things considered, his observations highlight the importance of organised relationships, openness and fair answers in artist–manager dynamics.

The principal–agent theory serves as a fundamental framework in classical economic and management scholarship for analysing the distribution of decision-making authority and incentives within organisations. As this claim explains in a more general theoretical sense, Wang et al. (2024) apply principal–agent theory to a particular situation in water management, illustrating its function in allocating decision-making authority and distributing incentives. As a result, the assertion is explicitly supported and given a useful application in their paper. The argument is strongly connected with Lalević's (2023) comprehensive social and psychological perspective on the principal–agent issue. It looks at hierarchy, incentives, decision-making power and conflict resolution—all of which are essential components of the principal–agent theory in management and economics research.

Key contributions by Jensen and Meckling (2019), Ross (1973) and others illustrate that a principal, such as a firm owner, engages an agent, such as a manager or consultant, to execute tasks on the principal's behalf (Ben-Porat et al. 2024; Andreasari & Wicaksono 2024). The essence of this relationship lies in the expectation that agents will act in the principal's best interest. However, information asymmetries, differing incentives and restricted oversight can result in issues such as moral hazard, where agents engage in excessive risk-taking without bearing the full consequences, and adverse selection, where principals employ agents without a complete understanding of their abilities or true motives. Riess (2021) discusses the issue of information asymmetry in executive hiring, drawing attention to the ways in which unfair selection happens when principals (employers) do not have complete knowledge of an agent's (CEO's) actual abilities and the emergence of moral hazard when Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) take risks that benefit themselves but may not be in the best interest of shareholders.

In order to handle difficult commercial decisions, musicians (as principals) sometimes look to managers (as agents) in the music industry. Because managers usually have more understanding of contracts, revenue sources and business connections than artists do, this dependency leads to information asymmetry. The artist cannot be sure their management is acting solely in their best interest without supervision, according to economists, which can result in a classic principal–agent problem. A manager's compensation, typically around 15–20 percent of the artist's gross income, is linked to revenue and profit growth. This connection can lead to misaligned incentives if not thoughtfully designed (Hubbert 2018). The outcome is adverse selection—where an artist may unintentionally choose a manager who misrepresents their competency or intentions—and moral hazard—where a manager uses insider knowledge or authority for personal benefit at the expense of the artist.

Although industry professionals underline that managers have a fiduciary obligation to behave in the best interests of the artist, enforcement mostly depends on trust and legal action instead of proactive control. Unlike talent agents, personal managers in many countries are not obliged to be licenced or controlled, so artists have to carefully check managers. Unchecked power of attorney allows an inept or dishonest management to take advantage of an artist who is not informed. Veteran entertainment lawyers do suggest completing due diligence on a prospective manager's track record and contacts, a reflection of how secret knowledge can otherwise sour the artist–manager relationship (Kinney 2015).

Here, I look at well-known examples of how artist managers took advantage of their inside information or access to hurt their clients. These examples cover a wide range of topics, such as negotiating contracts, structuring deals, handling royalties, travelling and publishing. Each one shows how insider information in the hands of a self-interested manager can cause major problems between the principal and the agent.

Colonel Tom Parker, Elvis Presley's manager, embodies an agent taking advantage of an information disparity. Parker was a sharp dealmaker who framed agreements mostly to his own advantage. He got a contract in 1955 calling him Elvis's "exclusive and exclusive agent". Parker began at 25 percent and then expanded his cut to an unheard-of 50 percent of Elvis's income, whereas average manager commissions were from 10 percent to 15 percent (Harrington 1997). Musical genius but business-naïve, Elvis left the "taking care of business" to Parker, a trust he used to further himself. According to a 1997 study, Parker frequently asked extra fees (as "technical advisor", etc.), occasionally making more money from Elvis's movie ventures than from Elvis himself. Parker controlled crucial career decisions as an insider. Notably, he turned down all Elvis's overseas tours. Although the reason was logistical, Parker was an unauthorised immigrant who worried about losing his status if he left the United States. Parker's secrecy prevented Elvis from seeing that this self-serving decision cost him lucrative global tours. Parker negotiated record label royalty rates with

Victor, but without pushing for greater payments even when Elvis became the label's top seller. The worst was Parker selling Elvis's full master catalogue to the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), for US$5.4 million in 1973, considerably below market value. Elvis earned only US$1.35 million after Parker's 50 percent commission and taxes, with most of it going to his ex-wife in a divorce. Parker earned more than Elvis, and the Presley estate calculated this fire-sale cost Elvis's heirs US$300+ million in future royalties. Parker established Boxcar Enterprises, which gave Elvis only 15 percent of merchandising sales and retained control over the rest.

Years later, the court examined these acts closely. Declaring Parker "guilty of self-dealing and overreaching", a court ending an audit of Elvis's estate in 1980 said he had often handled Presley's affairs in Parker's best interests rather than Elvis's. While Parker was "aggressive, shrewd and tough", the court said Elvis was "naive, meek and unassertive", unduly dependent on his manager's direction. Parker had locked in amazing fees and unbalanced transactions by using his informational edge and Elvis's faith. This case is a classic illustration of how substantial moral risk was generated by a manager's insider influence over contracts, royalties and career paths. Because of an imbalance of information and power in their relationship, Elvis paid a great price for Parker's insider moves: virtually half of his income and the rights to his own music.

Using his industry acumen, accountant-turned-manager Allen Klein cut himself into the earnings of rock's largest events. Klein was hired in the mid-1960s to renegotiate The Rolling Stones' deal with Decca Records. Using hard-nosed strategies and information asymmetry, Klein obtained US$1.25 million in advance royalties for the Stones; most importantly, he made sure one of his own businesses would get the payback (Sweeting 2009). Without the band first knowing, Klein signed away ownership of several of the early Rolling Stones' master recordings, therefore acquiring the rights to many of them. Years later, it was clear that ABKCO, Klein's business, held their rich 1960s catalogue. After Brian Epstein passed away, he moved similarly with The Beatles, raising their U.S. royalties rate and securing a 20 percent fee and major influence over their financial operations.

This caused rifts (McCartney distrusted Klein profoundly), and finally legal conflicts and The Beatles' partnership broke apart. A few years later, involving Beatle George Harrison, perhaps the most shocking betrayal of confidence occurred. Over his song "My Sweet Lord", which he claimed to have copied "He's So Fine", Harrison was enmeshed in a copyright infringement dispute. Klein, who had been Harrison's business manager, surreptitiously utilised information from that position to gain personally from settlement negotiations. Unknown to Harrison, Klein sought to buy the music publisher (Bright Tunes), which was suing him, using private knowledge about royalty prices and settlement proposals he had discovered as his manager (ABKCO Music, Inc. v. Harrisongs Music, Ltd. 1983). He essentially sought to assume the plaintiff's side of the action so that he could influence the result and profit from Harrison's situation. Harrison sued when this became known. Klein "breached [his] fiduciary duties", the court said in the historic case of ABKCO Music, Inc. v. Harrisongs Music, Ltd. (1983), by "using sensitive information" gathered during his management of Harrison to negotiate the purchase of the song rights for himself. Klein's improper gain was corrected with a constructive trust (ABKCO Music Inc. v Harrisongs Music Limited 1983).

Not all modern artist–management disputes are historical relics; a recent well-known instance features Chance The Rapper (Chancelor Bennett) and his long-time manager Pat Corcoran. Their relationship started nicely, but by 2020 it had collapsed into conflicting litigation. Chance said Corcoran used insider information and access in a number of ways that prioritised Corcoran's interests over those of the artist. Chance accused his former manager in a 2021 suit of "repeatedly breaking his fiduciary responsibilities… by trading on [Chance's] good name for his own advantage". Specifically, Corcoran reportedly steered business prospects to firms he personally owned and sought hidden bribes as the "price" of doing business with Chance (Music Business Worldwide 2021). If a third party sought to collaborate with Chance for a tour, endorsement or similar opportunity, Corcoran would only assist in the arrangement if his affiliated companies received a share or if he obtained undisclosed payments. The actions were executed without Chance's awareness, taking advantage of Corcoran's role as the manager and gatekeeper to the artist.

Stoute revealed Chance of Corcoran's meddling, which caused the agreement to fall through. Later on, Corcoran made a different offer based on his own businesses, thereby trying to underline ownership over Chance. This scenario exposes Corcoran's abuse of his managerial role, therefore generating a moral hazard whereby he gave personal benefit first priority above Chance's professional prospects. The episode highlights the need of openness in artist–manager ties since Chance would have lost a big contract without knowing of Corcoran's self-serving behaviour. This reminds us of the need for checks and balances to stop managers from abusing their insider access in the music business.

In the context of the music industry, the artist is inherently positioned as the primary figure, managing both the creative and financial aspects of their career. In an optimal situation, the appointed manager (the agent) ought to align with the artist's vision, facilitate advantageous agreements and safeguard the principal's financial and reputational interests. Information asymmetry may arise when a manager oversees industry contacts, contract negotiations and daily business decisions without providing transparent reporting to the artist. Moral hazard arises when a manager prioritises short-term revenue maximisation and, consequently commissions, over the long-term development of the brand or the preservation of creative authenticity.

However, there are numerous strategies to counteract this inclination and forward a common vision of ongoing success. Should particular lifespan milestones or developmental goals be reached, the commission rate can rise rather than offering a flat percentage. For instance, after 2 straight years of increase in album sales or streaming data, the manager's share can start at 10 percent but climb to 15 percent. This system honours managers for persistent brand promotion and deters hasty actions that can compromise the long-term course of the artist. Managers and artists can engage in multi-phase agreements whereby each phase contains both short-term deliverables (such as an album release or tour) and long-term development goals (such as worldwide audience growing or investigating new creative avenues). Renewal terms become more favourable at the end of each phase if the manager meets or surpasses designated long-term benchmarks, therefore guiding managerial effort beyond one-off income fluctuations.

Some creative contracts provide management of the artist's brand or business entity a stake akin to startup stock instead of a simple commission. The manager has a vested interest in maintaining artistic authenticity and developing long-lasting brand equity rather than pursuing temporary arrangements since their final pay-off depends on the general valuation of the artist's career or brand identification. Under a deferred-compensation arrangement, some of the manager's income is withheld and delivered only if the artist's career performance maintains or rises over time (e.g. steady income, fan-base expansion or market entry into new areas). Many manager contracts also include sunset clauses, which can be improved so that residual payments to the management depend on reaching designated benchmarks over a longer horizon, therefore matching the manager's incentive with the consistent success of the artist.

The contract can mandate frequent performance assessments, including financial and creative audits to help all parties to be responsible. Both sides keep a complete, long-term measure for success by explicitly evaluating not just immediate income but also brand positioning, fan involvement and creative successes. This openness deters behaviour that can boost temporary gains but compromise the future possibilities of the brand.

The short-term character of many ordinary management arrangements can essentially worsen moral hazard; nonetheless, other contract forms exist that encourage long-term growth. Both manager and artist are more likely to follow strategic, long-term pathways by moving performance criteria and pay away from quick money alone towards brand longevity. This artist requires a manager for business affairs to help guarantee that brand integrity and creative authenticity stay front and centre instead of being surrendered for a short commission.

The role of internal and external control mechanisms, such as auditing, financial reporting transparency and corporate oversight, in reducing opportunism and inefficiencies is examined by Brukhanskyi & Tsaruk (2023), supporting the claim that structured management practices reduce agency problems in business sectors like construction. In the music sector, standardised safeguards are infrequently observed. In a contract-theoretic setting, Dutta et al. (2020) discuss how entrepreneurs (agents) exaggerate performance metrics to mislead investors (principals). They also note that audits as a control mechanism paradoxically amplify exaggeration rather than deter fraud, supporting the idea that structured oversight, such as auditing and contractual obligations, is necessary to reduce agency costs in business sectors. This gap highlights the necessity for an agency-theoretic re-evaluation of artist–manager relationships, positioning the artist as the firm owner responsible for implementing, monitoring and enforcing clearly defined managerial duties.

Research on entrepreneurship identifies innovation, autonomy and financial risk-taking as essential characteristics of a successful entrepreneur (Akkuş 2024; Al-Mamary & Alshallaqi 2022). Pioneers such as Schumpeter (1934) defined the entrepreneur as a creative disruptor who innovatively combines resources to create new value. Contemporary scholars, such as Ribeiro & Becker (2024) and Irwin et al. (2022), highlight the importance of identifying and leveraging opportunities, particularly in dynamic and uncertain markets.

In the music sector, the artist can be regarded as a quintessential entrepreneur. Every new composition, album release or performance represents a product innovation that has the potential to alter market preferences or initiate subgenres (e.g. the emergence of Afrobeat(s), the global rise of K-pop). Also, independent artists frequently finance and distribute their work independently, assuming the associated risks. They foster direct audience engagement through social media, incorporate consumer feedback in real-time and adjust their artistic direction without the usual corporate approval processes. Artists who self-produce tours, merchandise or recordings invest capital initially without assurance of return, paralleling the entrepreneurial risk undertaken by startup founders.

Positioning musicians as entrepreneurs clarifies that the creative domain of music and the business domain encompassing revenue, budgeting and marketing are interwoven responsibilities of the same individual—the artist–entrepreneur. Contrary to the prevalent stereotype of artists as mere dreamers, numerous successful musicians exhibit focused entrepreneurial skills, leveraging global fanbases and establishing brand partnerships that compete with those of traditional businesses. Delegating these responsibilities to a manager lacking adequate oversight or authority can distort the intended entrepreneurial framework, thereby compromising the artist's autonomy.

The assertion that an artist requires a manager for business affairs neglects the entrepreneurial skills that have advanced numerous music careers. Reputable managers can facilitate growth through strategic expertise and industry connections; however, their role is secondary to the artist's position as the entrepreneurial principal, a concept that aligns with the principles found in entrepreneurial literature. In reality, this means that managers don't always have to work in the traditional way, which is based on commissions. They could instead work as contracted service providers or consultants with a set price and scope, which would protect the artist's rights. By setting up the manager's job as a project-based or contractor setup, the artist can protect the authenticity and independence of their work over the long term, lower moral hazard by making deliverables clear and still get expert advice. This arrangement makes it clear that the artist, as the main force behind the project, still has overall control, while the manager's specific skills build on the artist's natural ability to be a business.

Although there are evident similarities between artists and business owners, the conventional manager-centric model frequently reverses typical principal–agent dynamics. Music history contains numerous instances in which a manager exerts significant control, either financially through excessive commissions and concealed costs or creatively by influencing artistic direction and collaboration decisions. In these instances, the manager assumes the principal role, relegating the artist to a subordinate or passive status.

Multiple interrelated factors contribute to this misalignment. In contrast to corporate executives who are constrained by shareholder agreements or bylaws, numerous music managers function under vaguely articulated contracts or informal agreements. The lack of standardised performance metrics and transparent reporting contributes to agency costs and moral hazard, allowing for manipulative or self-serving behaviour among managers. The persistent belief that musicians need 'adult supervision' fosters an environment in which management is viewed not only as a service provider but also as a protective guardian. This contributes to the systemic undervaluation of musicians' autonomy and business acumen. Prior to the digital era, managers and labels functioned as essential gatekeepers for distribution, radio play and touring opportunities. Despite the advancements of the digital age, the persistence of traditional systems continues to provide managers with significant control over promotional opportunities and brand negotiations, frequently perpetuating artist reliance.

Aligning the music industry's managerial frameworks with principal–agent theory and recognising the entrepreneurial essence of an artist's work clarifies the shortcomings of the conventional manager-first mindset. If artists are the economic owners and innovators, then standard agency safeguards and entrepreneurial norms ought to regulate the manager's role. This reconceptualisation counters exploitative relationships and affirms the artist's rightful position in a creative enterprise, transforming a historically skewed dynamic into one aligned with fundamental business principles.

4. Dynamics of Authority in Artist–Manager Relationships

The artist–manager relationship is set up across much of the music business such that managers serve as advisers or facilitators, but artists retain ultimate control over their careers. Arts management theory notes that *the arts manager is a facilitator of the arts, but without the artist and his or her vision, there are no arts managers* (Colbert et al. 1994). Stated differently, the manager's primary responsibility is not so much to impose but rather to assist and carry out the creative vision of the artist. This point of view fits the concept of the artist as the principal in a principal–agent relationship: the artist (principal) pays the management (agent) to act on their behalf and in their best interest. Legal and ethical norms indeed dictate that 'the manager has the obligation to operate in the best benefit of the artist, even above his or her own self-interest' ('fiduciary duty', see Kinney 2015).

Modern industry practice sometimes shows this harmony. These days, artists are more and more recognised as owners of their creative "company" and entrepreneurs. 'Artists nowadays are pretty much by definition music entrepreneurs and owner-operated organizations, creating their businesses and their brands', Paul Pacifico (CEO of the Association of Independent Music) notes (Coleman 2018). Many accomplished musicians use digital tools and personal branding to run facets of their careers—from production to marketing—on their own terms, with managers offering direction and contacts. Therefore, the manager's main responsibility is to generate possibilities and control business logistics so that the artist may concentrate on creative output. One South African industry overview, for instance, says: *A musician or artist's job is to create music, while a manager's job is to handle the business elements of the music industry* (MacKinnon 2022). Managers handle bookings, negotiations, promotions and other business chores to act as a 'buffer' between the artist and the business, thus freeing the artist to focus on creative output (SmartistU n.d.).

It's important to remember that contemporary management agreements frequently guarantee the artist's ultimate say on important choices. To emphasise that the manager works for the artist, clauses may state that the artist must approve certain creative or career decisions (Sanderson Law 2025). Rather than being the standard, the infamous pictures of manipulating managers from musical history—like Colonel Tom Parker, the manager of Elvis Presley—are now seen as warning tales. Actually, a lot of the 'popular image of the music manager… as a predatory exploiter of the naïve artist' is a holdover from earlier times (O'Riordan & Gillon 2021).

Renowned mid-20th-century managers like Allen Klein (of The Beatles and Rolling Stones) 'enjoyed shares of artist income that would be inconceivable today', scholars say, and those extremes 'do not reflect the reality of music management in the 21st century' (O'Riordan & Gillon 2021). Usually institutionalised in contracts that safeguard both sides, the power balance today is more of a balancing act between the artist and the manager. Artists also establish their teams—lawyers, agents, etc.—increasingly to guarantee that their vision is maintained. Many artists keep general control over important career paths, and managers serve as advisers, connectors and implementers—facilitators—instead of dictators.

Although artist autonomy is ideal, there are many cases—especially in less regulated music marketplaces or among young musicians—where managers control artists' careers excessively. I concur with Morrow (2013) in highlighting the issue that artist managers within the international popular music industry lack consistent regulatory frameworks, especially in light of the growing centralisation of responsibility associated with this position.

Sometimes some artist managers take advantage of these artists and also act as though their managerial role is permanent (like in a marriage). Jenner (2002) stresses that nothing is everlasting; it's only a commercial connection and not a marriage. You should thus regard losing an act as part of your growth as a manager. On the other hand, but rather than concentrating only on the requirements of the artist, Morrow (2013) argues that one should take artist managers' interests into account while analysing legislative possibilities.

In areas like the Global South where the infrastructure supporting the music industry is less established, the issue of artist manager exploitation may worsen. Numerous artist-manager agreements function outside of official contracts or legal frameworks, according to studies of the African music industry. For example, working with managers (or self-styled managers) without formal agreements is 'common in [the] predominantly informal' creative sector in Ghana (Nyadu-Addo 2024). Friends or family sometimes take on the managing responsibility. Veteran performer Esther Smith says in Ghana's gospel music scene, 'Most female gospel musicians are controlled by their husbands or pastors… in an "informal style"'. She argues that although family based management has benefits, it also readily results in 'complications' when personal emotions interfere with business and suggests hiring an honest professional to prevent career 'ruin[ing]' by misbehaviour. In many circumstances, the lack of explicit legal limits means managers, sometimes with little responsibility, have considerable influence over branding, bookings and budgets. A Ghanaian case study revealed that some managers even operate 24/7 with unrestricted access to the artist and no supervision, and 'some artistes are managed without legal contracts' entirely.

Also, alleging fraud, breach of fiduciary responsibility and even racketeering, Superstar Billy Joel sued his former manager, Frank Weber, for US$90 million. He was also an ex-brother-in-law (Hochman 1989). Joel's lawsuit alleged that Weber had covertly lost over US$10 million in speculative investments, double-billed costs and even mortgaged Joel's song copyrights without his knowledge. This well-reported case revealed clear financial misbehaviour by a reputable manager. Alanis Morissette, a Grammy-winning musician, accused in public Jonathan Schwartz, her business manager, of embezzling her money. Eventually, Schwartz acknowledged that he had stolen around US$7 million from Morissette over the course of 4 years, hiding his tracks by fraudulently claiming that cash withdrawals were 'personal costs (Press Association)'. Morissette claimed he stole both her trust and her money and would have bankrupted her should the crime have persisted (Dalton 2017). Schwartz, a clear case of artist's betrayal and exploitation by a fiduciary guardian, entered a guilty plea to fraud in 2017 and was sentenced to 6 years in prison for syphoning a total of US$7 million from Morissette and other celebrity clients.

Boy bands Backstreet Boys and NSYNC, an American boy band popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s, found out that their boss, Lou Pearlman, had become a secret 'sixth member' of their groups and was taking most of the money they made (Nelson 2023). The Backstreet Boys sued Pearlman in 1998, alleging that although Pearlman had taken US$10 million for personal use, the five band members had only seen roughly US$300,000 overall despite producing an estimated US$200 million in income. In 1999, NSYNC sued similarly in order to get out from under their exploitative agreement. Later shown in documentaries, these court battles exposed Pearlman's use of young performers under blatantly unfair contracts, a practice that also applied to other events he oversaw. One of the most unfortunate management scandals in music history claimed British rock band Badfinger. The band was bankrupt from Manager Stan Polley's dishonest and avaricious behaviour; royalties were never paid, and millions of dollars vanished. The narrative of Badfinger is seen as a warning one: they were 'mismanaged and exploited beyond the confines of human decency', a circumstance that caused two band members to die in hopelessness (Ling 2022). Pete Ham of Badfinger blamed Polley for ruining their lives in his 1975 suicide letter. Although from the past, this episode is well-documented and often referenced as an extreme example of managerial misuse of authority.

Nigerian gospel singer Mercy Chinwo recently went public in the African music scene, accusing her former manager, Ezekiel 'EeZee Tee', Onyedikachukwu. Chinwo claims that her manager-turned-label-boss kept around US$345,000 of her digital income and show earnings without reporting or distributing the money (Channels Television 2025). Recounting that he told her, *I made you who you are, and I will destroy you*, she also accused him of bullying and threats; she lived in fear as he delayed her royalties for 2 years. This continuous conflict—with legal action apparently in store—showcases how manager exploitation is not only a Western occurrence but also a reality in developing nations, frequently involving young musicians signing onerous long-term contracts.

Several investigations and research point to these incidents as manifestations of deeper systemic problems in the artist–manager dynamic, because of the inherent power dynamics and 'moral hazard' in most music contracts and management agreements:

- **Contractual Exploitation of Artists:** A 2022 law-review research by Morris notes that young musicians are typically tied into long-term contracts that 'take advantage of them and do not give enough pay', hence referring to widespread 'artist abuse' in entertainment contracts. Many artists find themselves unable to break free from demanding contracts and occasionally 'directly duped' by the very people they rely on, including managers, agents and even family members (Morris 2022). Stated differently, the industry's usual private contracts sometimes provide chances for exploitation, and musicians have openly protested about these injustices for years.

- **Principal–Agent Problem and Misaligned Incentives:** Industry watchers often note that the relationship between an artist–manager suffers a classic principal–agent issue. Usually unable to completely oversee or control the manager (agent), who might follow their own interests over those of the artist (as principal). As one study notes, an artist often cannot guarantee that their representatives are acting in their best interest 'without a certain degree of oversight' (Giglue 2018). Managers usually get a cut of the artist's gross income, so a dishonest manager might want to maximise earnings (to get a bigger cut) while ignoring the artist's health or long-term job health. This imbalance of interests can lead to actions that are good for the manager financially but bad for the artist. This is a type of moral hazard that comes with many music management contracts.
- **Lack of Oversight or Regulation:** Unlike fields like law or accounting, artist management is mostly unbridled, which can aggravate abuses. Given the growing authority and responsibility managers have in artists' careers, scholars have pointed out it is 'problematic that artist managers in the international popular music industry are not now subject to consistent regulatory frameworks' (Morrow 2013). In a UK Parliament examination into misogyny in music, regulators realised that managers play a very essential role in helping artists' careers, but incidences of exploitation suggest that measures are required (Women and Equalities Committee 2023). The group proposed a music manager accreditation or licencing mechanism to avoid abuse, similar to sports agents. This initiative for oversight recognises that managers may exploit their authority if there are no standards or accountability in place.
- **Global and Cross-Cultural Dimensions:** Although they may show varied forms, research and journalism point to global power imbalance problems in general. For example, some idols in South Korea's K-pop scene have famously sued their agencies to escape 'slave contracts', notably long, tightly enforced management agreements judged to be unduly one-sided (DK Herald 2024). After revealing how their contracts bound them for 10+ years with little share of income, several members of popular K-pop groups (such as TVXQ, originally a five-member group formed by SM Entertainment, and EXO, a South Korean–Chinese boy band formed by SM Entertainment) have gained legal relief, highlighting management company mistreatment. Fast-growing but loosely controlled musicians in African music markets can encounter either similar or worse power inequalities.

All the data from judicial cases, media investigations and academic studies point to a similar conclusion: artist–manager relationships are frequently rife with imbalances of power. From megastars in the United States to rising stars in Nigeria, Ghana or Korea, many artists have discovered that allowing a manager unbridled power over their careers and income can result in major exploitation—through contractual slavery, financial mismanagement or deception. This repeating trend has driven legislators and industry watchdogs to demand changes that would limit unethical behaviour and empower artists, thereby assuring managers really behave in the best interests of the talent they handle.

5. Bridging the Gap: Fair Practices for Under-Resourced Artists

Undoubtedly, most musicians do not start their careers with significant financial resources or advanced business acumen; for a considerable number, obtaining a manager's assistance can serve as an essential pathway to funding, visibility and fundamental professional support. In these scenarios, where the manager supplies the majority of resources instead of the artist, it can be posited that the manager inherently assumes the role of the controlling principal. From a long-term equity standpoint and in the context of fostering healthy artist development, it is both feasible and crucial to safeguard the musician's autonomy. Even when the manager provides financial support and operational expertise, the artist is not required to remain in a state of permanent or exploitative subservience. The attainment of this equilibrium is contingent upon several fundamental principles.

Initially, it is crucial to define clear financial terms. In any situation where a manager allocates resources towards studio time, promotional activities or travel costs, it is essential to establish a written agreement that delineates explicit repayment terms. A manager who provides capital essentially acts as an investor; therefore, the contract should clearly outline the amount being invested, the criteria for recovering that investment, and a maximum limit (or 'sunset clause') beyond which the manager forfeits any further claims to returns. The safeguards in place effectively mitigate the risk of indefinite debt cycles, ensuring that a musician who eventually achieves market traction is not left in a position of perpetual obligation to the manager's initial funding.

Second, it is essential to ensure that the artist retains creative control within the contract, even in scenarios where the manager supplies the majority of resources. Clauses that ensure the musician retains control over creative decisions, content approvals and public appearances serve to prevent a situation where a financially powerful manager dictates the artist's work contrary to their wishes. In a similar vein, the contract ought to incorporate stipulations regarding an exit timeline or the possibility of renegotiation after a predetermined duration, thereby preventing managers from securing artists in long-term exclusivity once initial debts have been resolved. In situations where formal legal options may incur high costs or be difficult to access, implementing a clear dispute-resolution mechanism—like industry arbitration—serves as a pragmatic protective measure.

A significant consideration involves the equilibrium of commissions or fee structures. Standard industry agreements, which typically provide the manager with some percentage of gross revenue, can become excessively burdensome when the artist is generating minimal income. Furthermore, when a manager's compensation is exclusively tied to substantial short-term profits, there is a tendency to favour projects that yield immediate results over those that contribute to the long-term development of the artist's brand. One option is to implement a tiered commission structure, in which the manager earns a higher percentage solely on the deals they directly negotiate, while receiving a reduced or no commission on revenue generated from the artist's independent activities. This approach effectively maintains aligned incentives and prevents managers from excessively intruding into all aspects of the artist's revenue.

Protecting the fundamental welfare of the musician is also a prudent course of action. In the context of covering touring costs or financing studio sessions, it is common practice; however, a concerning trend emerges where numerous young musicians neglect to secure medical coverage or ensure healthy working conditions. Provisions that designate a small share of the manager's investment towards supporting the artist's well-being highlight the fundamental idea that this relationship is fundamentally a partnership, rather than simply an act of patronage. Moreover, a manager aiming to enhance the professionalism of an artist who has previously lacked resources should prioritise the transfer of business knowledge, enabling the artist to manage finances and negotiations autonomously in the future. The transfer of knowledge enhances trust and mitigates the risk of fostering a culture of dependency.

Ultimately, a manager's financial support can significantly impact an artist who lacks resources. However, it is essential to establish well-considered contracts and clearly defined boundaries to protect creative ownership and future earning potential. By blending the logic of startup investment—where entrepreneurs retain ultimate control despite relying on external funding—with the unique demands of the music industry, both parties can reap fair rewards. The manager successfully recuperates and benefits from their investment, while the artist maintains control, respect and the ability to guide their own creative direction.

6. The Stigma and its Consequences: Why Artists 'Hide' Behind Managers

In numerous regions globally, creative endeavours—especially music—are consistently devalued, frequently regarded as a recreational pursuit rather than a bona fide vocation. This claim is supported by Schieb-Bienfait & Emin's (2023) emphasis on the challenges young musicians face in professionalising, the absence of sufficient support networks, and the excessive celebration of entrepreneurship in cultural and creative industries (CCIs). The claim is also supported by Stevenson's (2023) exploration of the precarious nature of cultural work, the blurring of work and leisure boundaries, and the perception of artistic practice as a vocation rather than a stable profession. Chibici-Revneanu (2018) examines the cultural construction of artistic vocation, frequently associating creativity with metaphysical or spiritual callings. This association can both foster creativity and marginalise artists, especially within non-mainstream or indigenous traditions, thereby perpetuating the notion that music and other creative disciplines are frequently deemed illegitimate careers.

This cultural devaluation yields several concrete repercussions for practicing artists. Clients may significantly lower compensation for performances or anticipate musicians to perform without remuneration under the pretext of 'exposure'. Event organisers, charities and private individuals may contact musicians with the presumption that the artist should be appreciative solely for the opportunity to perform. Such beliefs highlight a widespread belief that music, although pleasurable, does not warrant compensation equivalent to other conventional professions.

Confronted with these circumstances, numerous artists find it extremely challenging to negotiate remuneration and working conditions directly, especially if the individual soliciting a complimentary or low-cost performance is an acquaintance or someone who could facilitate future opportunities. Negotiating remuneration amidst cultural trivialisation might resemble a challenge to established standards, particularly when others around have consistently propagated the notion that 'it's merely music; anyone can perform it'. In this context, employing a manager is not inherently an acknowledgement of the artist's incapacity, but rather a strategic tactic to protect themselves from uncomfortable confrontations. Managers, due to their formalised position, can negotiate equitable fees, set contractual conditions and uphold the artist's dignity in a manner that the artist may find challenging to achieve without seeming 'difficult'.

Consequently, a manager serves as a psychological and professional intermediary—somebody capable of contextualising negotiations solely in commercial terms while safeguarding the artist's reputation. This method may further bolster the image of legitimacy: if an artist is managed by a representative, the customer is more inclined to regard the relationship as a formal transaction rather than a mere favour. Consequently, even artists proficient in self-management frequently 'conceal' themselves behind managers to evade degrading interactions and safeguard against exploitation or coercion into unpaid labour.

In addition to financial exploitation, there exists a more nuanced, yet equally significant, array of psychological and cultural forces. Artists sometimes traverse social contexts where the prevalent stereotype of a 'tortured' or 'irresponsible' musician endures. This stereotype depicts artists as impetuous, impractical dreamers who are unreliable in managing logistical or financial affairs. Historically idealised personas such as the impoverished bohemian artist or the tormented rock musician reinforce this narrative, suggesting that a musician's authentic purpose is to endure hardship for their craft, rather than to partake in pragmatic negotiations or career strategising.

In this context, an artist who endeavours to handle their own business risks being perceived as 'unprofessional' by promoters, sponsors or fans, as society anticipates that a creative individual needs external supervision to operate effectively. When a musician assumes control over their financial or logistical arrangements, they risk undermining the allure that culture frequently associates with creative endeavours. Conversely, assigning those obligations to a management conforms to society's expectations: it reinforces the notion that the artist is the fervent creative, while another individual represents the pragmatic business intellect.

This cultural framework places an emotional weight on artists. Numerous individuals experience a conflict between advocating for equitable remuneration and maintaining a persona that is approachable, trendy and unrestrained. Negotiating elevated prices or establishing stringent contracts may conflict with the anticipations of fans or promoters who may assume that the artist should be content with publicity or the intrinsic pleasure of performing. The outcome is psychological tension: if an artist engages directly in business discussions, they risk reinforcing the stereotype of being 'difficult' or avaricious; conversely, if they completely eschew these dialogues, they may face exploitation, inadequate compensation and jeopardise their long-term career sustainability.

These pressures combined underscore the idea that a manager is not only beneficial for industry navigation but essential for an artist's social and emotional welfare. The manager serves as both gatekeeper and scapegoat—an individual who can be held accountable for expenses, while the artist retains the image of an amiable and accessible performance. While this relationship can occasionally be beneficial, it frequently confines artists to a *status quo* that diminishes their potential for autonomy. By excessively relying on the manager's authority, the musician unintentionally reinforces the misconception of their own irresponsibility, maintaining the wider cultural prejudice against perceiving music as a legitimate, self-directed career.

7. Breaking Down the Myths: Artists as Capable Business Owners

A prevalent misperception regarding artists is that they are solely creative persons, unable to manage the complex logistical and strategic decisions required to run a comprehensive organisation. This cartoon overlooks the intricate responsibilities that numerous artists already undertake. Successful musicians, even with limited visibility, must participate in several economic activities to maintain their presence in today's market.

Branding has emerged as an essential element of an artist's public character, comprising aspects such as the visual design of album covers and the personal stories communicated via social media (Gross 2022; Cheţan & Iancu 2023; Colzani 2017; Monteiro 2022; Tomiuc 2015). Developing and sustaining a unified brand across channels like

Twitter, Instagram and TikTok necessitates a methodical strategy: artists organise content calendars, customise postings for targeted audiences and utilise analytics to identify successful tactics. Simultaneously, marketing transcends simple promotional posts; artists create targeted campaigns, allocate resources for playlist placements on platforms such as Spotify, and foster relationships with bloggers, influencers and online communities. These responsibilities require marketing expertise that is mostly comparable to that anticipated in a small business within any consumer-focused sector.

Budgeting and financial planning are also significant components. Musicians doing tours must consider travel expenses, venue charges, lodging and possible session musicians, while also projecting ticket sales to prevent financial deficits. Merchandise options, encompassing T-shirts and vinyl albums, add complexity to inventory management and price strategy. The artist must evaluate production expenses and anticipated demand, considering the overhead associated with e-commerce platforms and shipping logistics. Collectively, these efforts demonstrate a degree of financial literacy comparable to that observed in typical small business settings, where each action can substantially impact net profit.

In the digital era, platform-based distribution is an additional realm in which artists consistently exhibit financial acumen. Platforms such as DistroKid, TuneCore and CD Baby enable indie artists to self-publish on Spotify, Apple Music and various other streaming services, thereby circumventing conventional label gatekeepers. Platforms like Spotify for Artists and Bandcamp enable artists to track streaming numbers in real time, assess the popularity of their music and interact directly with fan communities. Simultaneously, platforms such as Patreon offer a mechanism for generating recurring money through fan memberships, necessitating that the artist develop tiered offerings, manage patron communications and create exclusive content according to a schedule that meets subscriber expectations. These activities require a comprehensive project management skill set, as the artist navigates concurrent creative endeavours with audience engagement and content distribution.

Ultimately, musicians—whether intentionally or not—assume a multifaceted entrepreneurial role that integrates talent with the duties of marketing, budgeting, inventory management and data analysis. They are not inept business entities; rather, they exhibit, in practice, numerous fundamental competencies that underpin small and medium enterprises (SMEs) across various industries.

An expanding array of contemporary artists highlights the viability of a self-managed or partially self-managed paradigm, with success narratives across many genres. For example, Chance the Rapper notably rejected record label offers early in his career, choosing to release his music independently and depend significantly on digital distribution and fan interaction (see Best et al. 2017). By utilising free mixtapes, social media marketing and direct brand collaborations with prominent technology firms, he illustrated that an artist could attain mainstream acclaim without relinquishing ownership or creative authority to conventional management or record label structures.

Outside the realms of rap and hip-hop, several independent musicians across genres like folk, pop, rock and electronic utilise platforms like Bandcamp to oversee sales, distribution and fan interactions without the involvement of intermediaries. Some effectively utilise 'pay-what-you-want' pricing strategies, fan-subscribed membership levels and limited-edition item initiatives. Despite not consistently achieving mainstream chart success, many of these artists cultivate sustainable incomes by directly engaging with fans and removing intermediaries. Such stories underscore that even if an artist chooses to hire a manager at some stage, they need not relinquish complete control or credibility; they can incorporate managerial assistance for specific tasks while retaining the bulk of strategic oversight themselves.

Collectively, these examples refute the oversimplified belief that artists must depend on managers due to an absence of requisite abilities for professional advancement. Although personal requirements and career aspirations differ, the achievements of Chance the Rapper, and various independent artists demonstrate that entrepreneurial, proactive musicians may prosper without wholly relying on external gatekeepers. These cases represent modern confirmations of what entrepreneurship theory has long posited: capable individuals—regardless of their industry—can assume entrepreneurial functions if provided the opportunity and resources. In the realm of music, it is evident that numerous artists function as Chief Executive Officers (CEOs,) managing marketing, financial planning and content strategy on a daily basis. The gatekeeping role, traditionally ascribed to managers, loses its primacy in this light, suggesting that a manager's function is best conceived as supportive rather than all-encompassing.

8. The Manager-as-Employee Model: Concept and Practical Execution

Conventional industry standards frequently portray managers as influential gatekeepers who typically exert greater control over bookings, promotions and financial negotiations than the artists they represent. From a business management perspective, it is more rational and sustainable to regard the manager as hired personnel—an individual who follows the artist's directives rather than establishing the overarching plan. In this arrangement, the artist maintains creative and financial control, establishes objectives and compensates the manager with a reasonable salary or a limit commission for certain, predetermined duties. This approach corresponds with fundamental principal–agent theory, wherein the artist (principal) retains authority over critical decisions while the manager (agent) provides specialised skills or manages daily operations. Yarin (2013) looks at the role of hired managers in industrial businesses and stresses that they mainly look out for the interests of business owners rather than employees. This supports the idea that managers should be seen as hired staff whose job is to maximise profits and capital generation rather than independent stakeholders.

A common fallacy is that a manager must be an industry magnate or possess significant personal money and strong connections in the entertainment sector. The position can be occupied by a friend, a mentee or any dedicated individual who acknowledges the artist's promise and is prepared to champion the artist's interests. Although experience and connections are beneficial, the paramount consideration is that the selected manager or support individual honours the artist's autonomy and vision. By transitioning the perspective from 'I require a manager to oversee all operations' to 'I will employ a manager capable of executing designated tasks under my supervision', artists can circumvent numerous detrimental dynamics and financial hazards that emerge when the manager is inherently regarded as the authority in the relationship.

Furthermore, structuring the connection in this way might promote professional growth for both parties. The manager, albeit potentially equipped with negotiation or organisational abilities, may get further insight into the artist's creative requirements and brand identity within a certain scope of work. The musician can enhance communication techniques and business practices by adopting the role of employer or project leader, so supporting the concept that music-making is a significant entrepreneurial pursuit.

In a manager-as-employee model, contracts serve as the pivotal element that unifies mutual expectations. Instead of entering into an open-ended, comprehensive agreement in which the management asserts a typical 15–20 percent of total revenue, the artist could develop short-term or project-specific contracts customised to particular requirements. A manager may be employed for the duration of an album release cycle to oversee marketing, coordinate press appearances and liaise with booking agents. Upon the conclusion of that cycle, both parties may assess the outcomes—reconsidering the terms if they find value in prolonging the relationship or amicably dissolving the arrangement if it no longer aligns with the artist's goals.

This contractual clarity also encompasses clearly delineated roles, responsibilities and remuneration. A manager may get a fixed salary, a flat fee for specific milestones, or a capped percentage—for example, 10 percent of revenue up to a designated level, beyond which either an alternative split or no further commission is applicable. By establishing these boundaries, the artist prevents situations in which a manager arbitrarily increases performance fees to enhance their own profit, thereby jeopardising the artist's reputation or straining relationships with venues and promoters.

According to principal–agent theory, categorising the manager as an employee or project-based consultant mitigates conflicts of interest. The manager is motivated to advance the artist's career for the purpose of securing repeat business or bonuses, although they remain committed to the artist's larger vision instead of exploiting agreements for immediate financial gain. The primary aim is not to undermine the value a manager provides—specialised managers can undoubtedly offer crucial connections, negotiation expertise and logistical assistance—but to guarantee that their function stays secondary to the artist's objectives.

The advantages of this methodology encompass the following:

1. **Accountability:** Clearly defined scopes of work and contractual obligations diminish uncertainty, facilitating performance measurement and enabling termination of the agreement if the manager does not fulfill established standards.
2. **Transparent Finances:** A fixed fee or capped commission structure enables the artist to anticipate their budget and inhibits management from exceeding an established limit on fees.

3. **Reduced Disputes Regarding Earnings**: A defined term or project-based framework minimises the potential for indefinite commission claims that frequently result in legal or interpersonal conflicts between artists and management.

However, certain possible drawbacks must also be recognised:

1. **Supervisory Obligations:** The artist must allocate time and cognitive resources to oversee the manager's actions, evaluate finances and guarantee responsibility. This may be onerous for individuals who wish to concentrate solely on creative production.
2. **Skill Development:** Not all artists are prepared or inclined to assume the responsibilities of an employer. They may need to enhance their leadership, communication and negotiation skills to properly manage another individual.
3. **Restricted Managerial Network:** A friend or mentee assuming a managerial role may lack the industry connections that a more seasoned professional could provide. Although this may alleviate exploitative power dynamics, it could also impede short-term professional advancement if networks are essential in specific sectors.

In assessing the use of the manager-as-employee framework, artists should consider the advantages and disadvantages in relation to their capacity, disposition and individual career goals. The fundamental conclusion, however, remains unchanged: surrendering complete control to a management is neither unavoidable nor inherently advantageous. By establishing an employment or consultant–client relationship, musicians can preserve their identity as the creative and business principal—determining exactly how and when to use external assistance.

9. Addressing Counterpoints: Time, Connections and Creative Trade-Offs

A prevalent criticism of the manager-as-employee model is that it may become time-consuming for the artist. In conventional frameworks, a manager often supervises daily operations, including organising media engagements, arranging live performances, overseeing goods inventory and composing brand partnership proposals. When an artist opts for self-management or closely oversees a professional manager, they eventually assume a greater administrative responsibility. Hours previously dedicated only to composition, rehearsal or live performance must now be allocated to activities such as budgeting, monitoring marketing indicators or assessing possible agreements.

This transition might be particularly challenging for artists who flourish in uncontrolled, creative processes. Continuously alternating between 'creative brain' and 'business brain' necessitates a significant degree of discipline and organisational proficiency. Some performers specifically attribute their preference for a comprehensive manager to this mental burden. Nonetheless, recognising the issue does not diminish the advantages of autonomy. It emphasises the significance of establishing predictable workflows—occasionally with the assistance of virtual assistants, project management software or part-time administrative support—that allow the artist to oversee business operations without becoming completely engulfed in documentation. In every entrepreneurial endeavour, time management is a crucial ability, and the artist must establish a rhythm that sustains creative vitality while ensuring strategic monitoring.

A common counterargument is to industry connections. Prominent managers frequently possess wide networks that include brand sponsors, record label executives, festival organisers and powerful media outlets. Such links can facilitate an artist's rise, providing access to tours, significant endorsement agreements or distribution prospects that may otherwise be difficult to attain. From a purely pragmatic perspective, an artist devoid of these ties may find significant merit in engaging a manager recognised for gaining sync placements in high-budget television productions or facilitating introductions to premier agencies.

However, engaging such a manager—rather than uncritically yielding to them—does not inhibit the artist from accessing these networks. The artist can, nevertheless, leverage the manager's experience and connections in a focused, project-specific manner. The manager may oversee festival submissions or negotiate substantial brand collaborations on a retainer basis, while other routine duties stay under the artist's direct oversight. Many artists establish a compromise by employing a senior manager for essential negotiations or periods of transitional growth, while maintaining ultimate authority over creative and financial decisions. The manager operates as a specialised consultant, rather as an overarching authority, maintaining the artist's ultimate autonomy.

Achieving a strategic equilibrium is essential for harmonising the undeniable advantages of a manager's network and administrative assistance with the artist's legitimate position as the primary entity. A pragmatic strategy is the project-based or limited-scope agreement. An artist may engage a manager specifically for an album release cycle, a significant tour or a branding effort, rather than entering into an open-ended, multi-year contract. This structure guarantees that the manager concentrates intently on certain deliverables—such as media outreach or sponsorship proposals—while the artist retains comprehensive control over their career path.

By restricting the manager's authority to a specific domain or timeframe, artists mitigate any conflicts of interest and preserve a distinct sense of ownership over long-term branding choices. Furthermore, these restricted engagements typically feature clear compensation frameworks, mitigating the danger of inflated commissions or ambiguous income distributions. Artists can utilise the manager's knowledge and network flexibly, adjusting their engagement as needed, while maintaining creative control and financial transparency.

In summary, the manager-as-employee model necessitates a proactive approach from artists in managing business responsibilities and strategically utilising management relationships, while simultaneously providing a flexible framework that can be tailored to unique requirements. Artists who take on leadership roles maintain their ability to create, expand and ultimately shape their own professional futures, regardless of scheduling challenges, the pursuit of valuable industry alliances, or the need to balance creative freedom with strategic growth.

10. Practical Strategies for Artists: Negotiation, Financial Literacy and Branding

A common obstacle for artists moving into a more independent business position is financial literacy. Musicians who have consistently delegated financial matters to third parties may feel inundated when required to reconcile income streams, prepare for taxes and uphold balanced accounts. Comprehensive guidelines and brief courses on bookkeeping, budgeting and tax issues are readily accessible. Digital platforms such as Coursera, edX and Berklee Online provide customised programmes exclusively for creative professions. By committing a few weeks to organised study—emphasising essential concepts such as cash flow management, financial statements and tax deductions—an artist can significantly decrease the chance of expensive errors in the future.

Equally important is the ability of negotiation—the capability to express one's financial value in situations when creative work is frequently devalued. Negotiation is equally a matter of mindset and tactics. Musicians who frequently encounter the phrase 'but it's just music' from prospective clients or sponsors must learn to articulate their craft as a legitimate service with measurable expenses (equipment maintenance, rehearsal duration, compositional investment) and intangible benefits (brand reputation, cultural capital). Methods derived from Harvard's Program on Negotiation or renowned texts such as Getting to Yes by Fisher, Ury and Patton (see Schoen 2021; McKeown 2013) can be synthesised into actionable scripts. By compiling a concise list of discussion points—emphasising prior accomplishments, media visibility and audience engagement—artists approach fee negotiations with assurance. In numerous instances, the straightforward act of calmly restating professional standards (instead of passively acquiescing to inadequate offers) can alter client perceptions and facilitate equitable remuneration.

While the manager-as-employee paradigm underscores an artist's liberty, it does not obviate the necessity for external knowledge. Complicated legal matters, elaborate tax submissions or extensive marketing initiatives may surpass an artist's comfort level. Consequently, forming a streamlined support team is both practical and economical. At a minimum, most artists gain advantages from contacting a lawyer with expertise in entertainment law—an individual who can evaluate performance contracts, licencing agreements or publishing deals to assure the preservation of intellectual property rights. An accountant or bookkeeper can manage revenue tracking, royalty statements and tax preparation, thereby liberating the artist's time and minimising the risk of costly errors.

The essential point, however, is that these professionals—similar to managers—serve the artist, not vice versa. Short-term or project-based retainers may be employed to circumvent permanent overhead costs. For example, a musician may engage an accountant on a quarterly basis to systematise revenues and reconcile revenue from streaming, sales and live performances. Conversely, an entertainment attorney may be engaged specifically when the artist is poised to execute a significant licencing or distribution agreement. By delineating each consultant's area of work, the artist ensures cost management and clarity in delegation. This structure exemplifies the entrepreneurial norm: business owners frequently depend on fractional Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) or legal advisors while retaining essential authority. Collectively, these temporary or restricted-service agreements correspond seamlessly with the manager-as-employee model, guaranteeing that the artist retains primary decision-making authority at all stages.

A notable transformation in recent years is the rise of Internet platforms that allow musicians to engage with fans, secure performances and independently release music, circumventing conventional gatekeepers. Crowdfunding platforms such as Patreon and Kickstarter enable musicians to establish consistent revenue streams by providing unique content, backstage access or customised merchandising packages to dedicated supporters. Simultaneously, direct-to-fan sale platforms on Bandcamp enable artists to market physical and digital products without the onerous overheads associated with major labels or distributors. These platforms often provide detailed analytics, enabling artists to monitor sales trends, track geographic audience data and respond swiftly to consumer behaviour.

In live performances, technology has diminished the necessity of a manager's network of contacts. Websites and apps such as GigSalad, Sonicbids and Eventbrite allow artists to pitch for shows, festivals or private events—directly communicating with promoters or venue owners. Although personal connections in the music industry are crucial, digital platforms democratise opportunities, facilitating the discovery of emerging talents based on merit rather than only on managerial affiliations. Even traditional booking inquiries can be managed in-house by adopting a streamlined system—sometimes as simple as a separate professional email address dedicated to bookings and a well-organised online calendar.

Additionally, social media remains a potent tool for forging deep fan connections, mobilising audiences around album launches or tours and testing out new artistic directions. A savvy artist who masters content strategy and audience engagement effectively takes on the role of a brand manager, guiding the narrative around their art. Far from needing a third-party manager to handle every post or decide each marketing angle, the artist retains a direct line to their fanbase, instilling authenticity and agility in their interactions. Over time, many musicians discover that cultivating this direct dialogue shapes not only their promotional success but their creative process as well—fans' feedback, preferences and emotional responses can inspire fresh ideas or highlight new directions.

Taken together, these technological advancements contribute to a landscape where the value of full-time managerial gatekeeping is dramatically reduced. By learning core business principles, assembling the right auxiliary experts and harnessing digital tools for distribution and engagement, today's artist-entrepreneur can navigate most industry hurdles independently. The manager, in such a setting, becomes a flexible player—brought on board to execute discrete tasks under well-defined terms, rather than a default puppet master holding all the strings.

11. Reframing the Industry: A Call to Action

This article argues for redefining the manager as a hired professional instead of an inherent authority in the artist's career. The manager-as-employee model highlights a significant transformation in agency: the artist maintains the position of principle, determining creative directions, financial objectives and overall brand identity, while the manager supports specific duties under defined conditions. Implementing this strategy can be revolutionary. When artists cease to regard managers as gatekeepers and instead perceive them as employees with specific duties, they acquire influence in negotiating deals, establishing brand collaborations and managing their intellectual property. This reassessment of duties not only alleviates conflicts of interest but also promotes a more equitable allocation of rewards. Artists are less susceptible to exploitation and experience an enhanced sense of ownership over their creative works and business results.

Although managers are often, in strict legal or contractual terms, employees of the artists they represent, this status can be confused in practice—particularly in areas like Africa, where managers regularly assume a controlling posture, sometimes even publicly attributing almost entirely an artist's success to their own expertise. Artists who had earlier been cautious of formal management structures may feel empowered to look for support personnel who clearly report to them by expressly reframing the manager as an 'employee' in both attitude and contractual arrangements. Musicians who could normally function under exploitative or unclear power dynamics can thus create more sustainable, open partnerships, so overcoming the ingrained preconceptions that show managers as the only 'realists' and artists as 'naïve dreamers'. Reiterating the management's employee-like function does not lessen the manager's actual contributions; rather, it helps to clarify that both artist and manager stand on more fair ground where mutual responsibility and respect may flourish.

Redefining the manager's function has significant implications for the entire music industry. Labels frequently depend on managers to act as brokers in negotiations and release schedules. If more musicians were to embrace a manager-as-employee approach, record labels could face a new type of musician—one equipped with explicit financial strategies, comprehensive marketing plans and a solid understanding of rights ownership. This increased autonomy may result in more equitable label contracts, as artists have the assurance and knowledge to bargain from a position of power.

Promoters and venue operators are likely to gain advantages as well. By immediately engaging with an artist who possesses transparent business procedures, a promoter may circumvent the extended negotiations that can arise when managerial demands eclipse the artist's intentions. Contracts could be handled more efficiently and transparently, alleviating the logistical impediments frequently attributed to 'managerial interference'. Media outlets, ranging from blogs to mainstream broadcasts, similarly establish clearer communication channels—potentially enhancing coverage quality and aligning with the artist's genuine goal.

Furthermore, creative liberty possesses significant ramifications for industry sustainability. Musicians who maintain oversight of their financial and creative endeavours can more consistently establish a sustainable trajectory—cultivating fan relationships, diversifying income sources and perhaps reinvesting in their local music communities. This consistency can foster a more conducive environment for emerging talent, reducing the cycle of transient artist–manager disputes and professional fatigue.

The reclassification of managers as workers presents numerous prospective research and practical opportunities for stakeholders in the music industry and beyond. Researchers may investigate the impact of different compensation models (e.g. fixed salary, limited commissions, equity-based arrangements) on artist satisfaction, productivity and career duration. Music unions or guilds could provide standardised contract templates that formalise the employee model, alleviating artists from the intricacies of draughting contracts independently and reducing the susceptibility of younger or less experienced talents. Simultaneously, entrepreneurial programmes in academic institutions and incubators might broaden to incorporate artist-specific tracks that instruct on the essentials of managing a creative enterprise while maintaining artistic integrity.

A crucial supplementary component is bridging cultural perceptions. In numerous areas, music continues to have challenges in being recognised as a legitimate vocation, often dismissed as merely a 'hobby' or 'frivolous pastime'. The outcome is a climate where unpaid or severely undercompensated performances are prevalent, compelling artists to rely on management for any prospect of equitable treatment. By advocating for music as a respectable professional path—equivalent to established industries—educational institutions, government entities and music organisations can assist in mitigating exploitation and altering public perception. This may manifest as public campaigns that honour the economic contributions of local musicians, or it may entail direct governmental initiatives that provide artists with the same labour protections as other self-employed professions.

Ultimately, acknowledging music as 'a legitimate profession' is crucial for establishing the social and economic framework that underpins the manager-as-employee model. Should the wider culture esteem artistry and recognise the intricacies of creative labour, artists will be more inclined to assert control over their economic matters, negotiate equitable terms and uphold professional standards. Consequently, the music industry as a whole reaps benefits: more sustainable careers, healthier collaborations and a stream of new output unimpeded by antiquated notions of artist vulnerability.

12. Conclusion: Strengthening Artist Autonomy for a More Equitable Global Music Business

The default practice of managers controlling artists' careers is obsolete and harmful to long-term artistic and financial health, according to this article. I have proven that the artist, not the manager, is the logical principal in the music business, with the manager acting as an employed specialist. The manager-as-employee model corrects power imbalances, removes conflicts of interest and dispels the idea that musicians are 'unmanageable'. Artists often perform complicated entrepreneurial responsibilities including budgeting, branding, booking and distribution, indicating that they have many of the talents needed for self-governance. Properly draughted contracts and position definitions can protect artists' autonomy while exploiting managers' experience and industry connections, even without funds or networks.

To create a more equitable global music industry, artists must be recognised as professionals and not be seen as financially or organisationally naïve. Managers will be appointed for specific projects or retained at will under transparent contracts with fair, capped compensation. Labels, promoters and media outlets connect with artists who understand their rights, money and artistic goals. This transition offers better financial outcomes for musicians, less exploitation and more career routes for superstars and indie or niche artists who want a sustainable living.

An industry with clear commercial logic, respect for creative labour and equal contractual ties benefits artists, managers, industry leaders and audiences. Whether they self-manage or seek support, artists must remain in command as the business principal. Young artists, especially those without external management, should feel empowered to continue forward on their own terms, or in other words, manage themselves. This article shows that the 'foolish, unmanageable artist' is a relic in a shifting musical scene by using the methods, mindsets and contractual safeguards to establish careers that reflect both their artistic inclinations and financial expertise.

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