



LOVE AND HEARTACHE, WRAPPED INTO ONE

Casualties of the music industry rarely find sympathy in this highly competitive world, as **Rachel Jepson** reports

According to the charity Help Musicians UK, musicians are three times more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression than any other occupational group.¹ This doesn't surprise me. I've been a singer, songwriter and performer for over 17 years, with experience of many different aspects of the music industry, and I've experienced my own mental health problems related to the work. I'm also a qualified counsellor working primarily with clients who are musicians, and daily see the industry's impact on clients who come through my door.

It would be both unrealistic and unfair to put the blame on the music industry for each and every one of these cases of depression and anxiety. The musicians who took part in Help Musicians UK's survey may have a history of mental health issues that pre-dates their involvement in music. They could have experienced a major personal trauma that was completely unrelated to their work. However, I know from my own experience that the nature of the industry can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and present complex, new challenges to those who work in it.

There are many different categories of musician: those who play for simple enjoyment; those who gig continuously with covers bands; those in unsigned originals bands, trying to make it to the top; those who do session work for others, on tour, in the studio - whatever pays. There are musicians who work as sound engineers or producers or in other studio-based roles. And there are the very few who have 'made it', and achieved public recognition, wealth and fame.

Even they can suffer from anxiety and depression. We see it more and more in the media - major artists admitting that they have

mental health issues or that they can't continue their tour because of anxiety, or those who cancel gigs because of mental exhaustion. Instead of empathy and understanding, they get, 'Why are they so depressed? They've got all that money and fame' or 'If they can't hack it, no one's forcing them to do it.'

Not making it

Kevin is a guitarist who came to me for help after years and years of struggling to 'make it' in various bands. He had turned to substance abuse. 'I'm a failure,' he'd say, although he was anything but. 'So,' I'd respond, 'as a musician, you don't consider yourself to be a success?'

'No. I want to be recognised for being good. I want all of this hard work to mean something, to lead to something big.'

'Can you explain what you mean by "good" and "big"?'

He sits in silence for a few moments. 'I'm a good guitarist. I love it and I'm good at it. I want people to recognise that - people who are in the music industry, people at record labels, radio stations. My band are really good, and nobody notices. You think you've got somewhere and then you come crashing down. "Big" would be a major record deal or something - headlining a festival. We deserve that. I've been in bands for years and years. Why do they never get the chance? Why is it always someone else?'

Kevin feels his time, energy, talent and ambitions are not being rewarded; his passion is not being reciprocated. For a musician who is struggling with substance abuse, gigging at bars and clubs, surrounded by social drinkers, is in itself a massive struggle. Kevin has explored with me his own feelings of failure and his addiction, not only to alcohol and other drugs, but to music and striving to reach his goals.

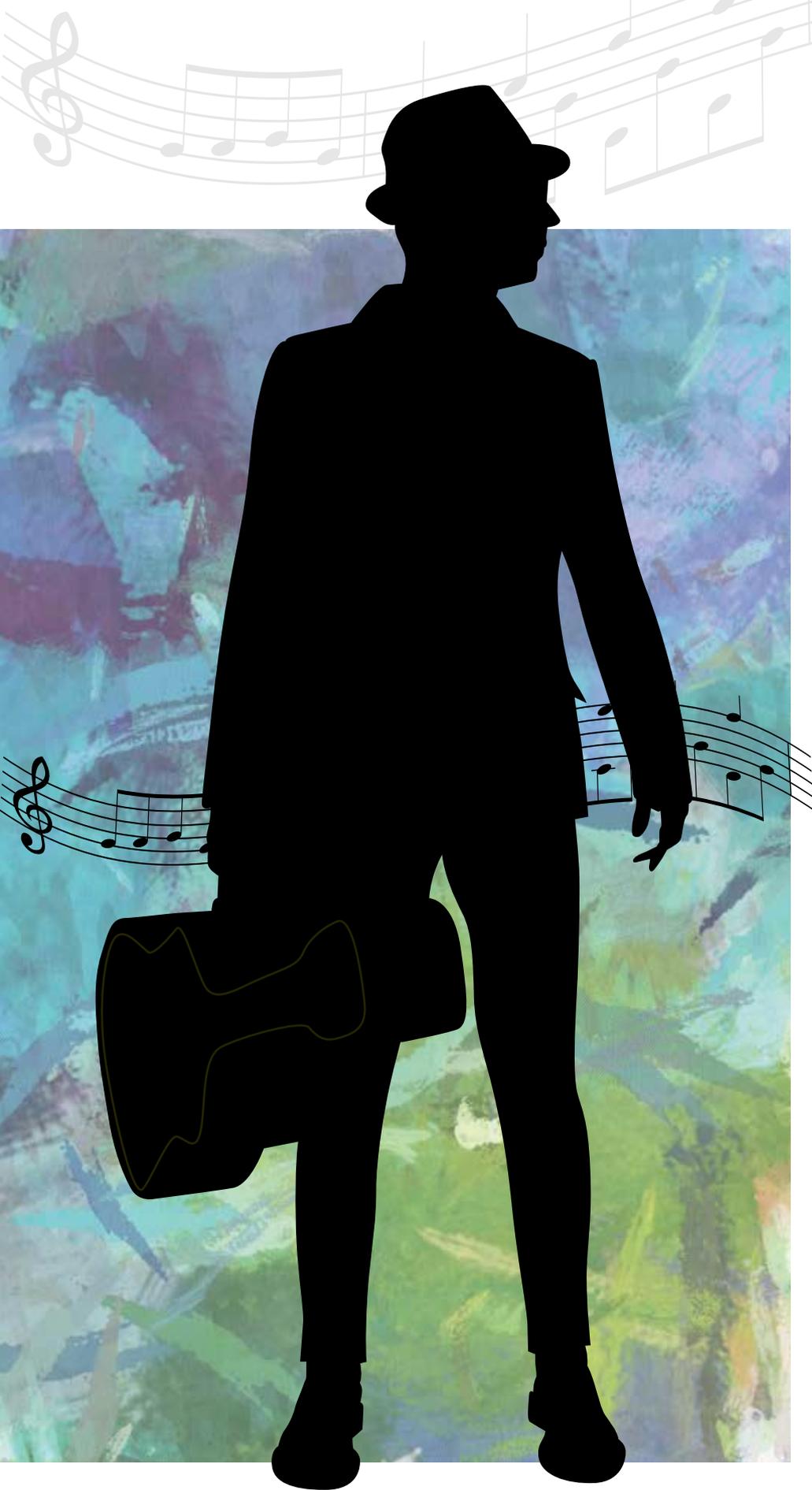
I have tried to focus him on his successes - his achievements in music and also away from music, of which there have been many. It's difficult for Kevin to praise himself as he has cultivated this self-hatred over many years. 'Sometimes, I just hate myself and can't stand thinking about this stuff any more.'

This is a bold statement, but doesn't surprise me. We discuss the fact that Kevin has been living this life for almost three decades and that all of these thoughts and feelings are deep-rooted. Over the past few sessions, he's come to some massive realisations: 'I don't regret any of it, you know. I just want different things for myself. I don't want to hate myself any more. I'm alright really.' He smiles and stares off into the distance. 'When I was 22 and just starting out, I thought I had the world at my feet. But I wish I could go back and just shake myself and say, "It's not going to be easy. Don't think the world owes you anything. Take help from anyone who offers; you're not too good for anything."'

'Let's focus on that - what you thought you were too good for.'

'There are times when I look back, where I think, if I'd just stuck with it, then things could have been different. Like when I did that course but thought I was too good for it and left. Or when I played with that band, but they weren't ambitious enough, so I left. I loved playing in that band. That's what's important.'

We've already established that Kevin feels unnoticed, unrewarded and like a failure. Perhaps those emotions aren't necessary any longer. Kevin has been angry for his younger self not getting a better deal, when I'm not sure that's the issue any more. Kevin is approaching 50. Age is such a colossal issue for musicians, and the industry has promoted this fear of



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getting older, your time passing: 'Better make it soon or you'll be too old.'

'I just want to be happy,' Kevin says in our last session. 'I don't feel that this life is making me happy; it hasn't for a really long time.' He sits with this for a moment. 'There has to be a way I can play and not keep wondering where the next opportunity is coming from or getting excited that someone influential is going to be at our next gig. I just want to play, and for that to be enough. I'm almost 50, for God's sake; I need to grow up and move on.'

And, with that, Kevin sits back. I don't know how long Kevin will feel contented with the realisation that he needs to 'grow up', but for now he's prepared to explore the prospect of not making it, and still being Kevin.

On the road

James is a gigging saxophonist who has done session work for major artists all over the world. He sometimes gets depressed by the long periods with no work, waiting for the next paid gig. He also thinks the bad working conditions and long hours explain his depression. He can be away from home for weeks, even months, at a time, which upsets him; he misses his young sons. It's the life he's chosen, but he doesn't feel he could or would want to do anything else.

James tells me a story: 'I was in the pub last week and a friend of a friend asked me what I did for a living. When I told him, he laughed in my face and said it was a slacker's job. I was so angry: angry that this is how musicians are perceived, and angry because he knew nothing about me. I work so hard for my money. People don't understand; they don't think of it as a job.'

'It seems important to you - how you and what you do for a living are perceived by others,' I say. ►

'Right now, in my life, I feel I'm putting a lot in and not getting anything back. Yeah, I'm doing something I love; I really do love it. But it's being away from home, from my kids, from my life here that's making me depressed.'

I tell James that I can see he's angry and upset, that this clearly means a lot to him - that he's seen to be working hard and providing for his family, and paying a price. His face changes and he starts to smile.

'Does it sound stupid?' he asks.

'Why would it sound stupid?'

'Because I'm a grown man living my dream, and complaining about how hard my life is.' He shakes his head and laughs.

And there we have it: how does he have the gall to complain that he is suffering when he gets to travel the world, work with famous artists and do something he loves - and gets paid for it?

James stares at the floor, puts his head in his hands and doesn't say anything for a couple of minutes. When he finally comes up for air, I can see he has tears in his eyes. 'There are so many times when I just wish I'd chosen a job in insurance or something. An office job, nine-to-five, clock in and out, and home to my family. My kids would see me all the time, my wife wouldn't be p****d off with me. A stable life, stable income.'

He wipes the tears away, looks me in the eyes and smiles. 'But here we are! It's the only thing I'm good at, the only way I can make money. I just can't go on feeling like this.'

I ask James to focus on this fantasy life where he is an insurance worker and goes home to his family every night. James admits that a job like that wouldn't make him happy, but points out that there are other jobs in music that don't mean being away for long periods and having gaps between jobs. 'I have it better than some. I just wish I could do more work closer to home.'

We focus on this - being away from home for long periods of time. I ask James what it would look like if he could work closer to home. He begins to seriously explore the possibility of turning down tour work and only doing sessions in the UK. I can see that there is some light at the end of the tunnel. He takes a really deep breath and leans forward: 'I'm going to talk to my wife when I get home and tell her what I want to do. She hates seeing me depressed. I hope she'll understand.'

James returns at the next session, and explains that his wife does understand, but her father has just been taken seriously ill and she too has had to turn down work as a freelance photographer to help look after him. Money is too tight, and he can't afford to turn down tour work. We talk about how he can be OK with this. 'It definitely helps to know she's supportive and knows I'm feeling down. When I go away next time, I'm going to take it as easy as possible and look after myself. I know it's really important to do that, because otherwise I'm risking making myself ill.'

But I can't help wondering if James is just telling me what he thinks I want to hear; does he actually believe this?

As a counsellor and musician who has experienced first-hand the negative effects of life as a struggling musician, I think it's so important for those in the music industry to be aware that they're dealing with people. Yes, most musicians know that it's competitive, that you are rejected on a regular basis and that you need a thick skin, but that doesn't mean people can't be treated respectfully.

Meeting expectations

Marina is a singer in a band that gigs two or three times a week, but often for free. Venues and promoters rarely pay unsigned bands, and, if they do, there's massive pressure on the act to bring people to the gig and provide their own audience.

'I played a gig last night where, for every five people who came to see us play, we got £3 to

take home. I think we came out with about £9,' she tells me.

'You seem almost resigned to this, but I know this kind of thing has made you angry in the past.'

'Well, what can I do? We want to play certain venues, the ones where people get noticed, but they don't pay.'

I can see that Marina is in conflict with herself: in past sessions, she's acknowledged that this lifestyle is making her depressed. She says she feels drained and numb. 'I got an email from a record label wanting a £500 admin fee for me and my band to be promoted to radio stations and stuff. It's not right and I feel sick when I think of people who actually fall for that, who just want a chance. I've had a lot of that lately and who the hell do those people think they are?'

I can see the anger is starting to resurface. I see she's realised this. She has a sip of water, and takes the session in a different direction.

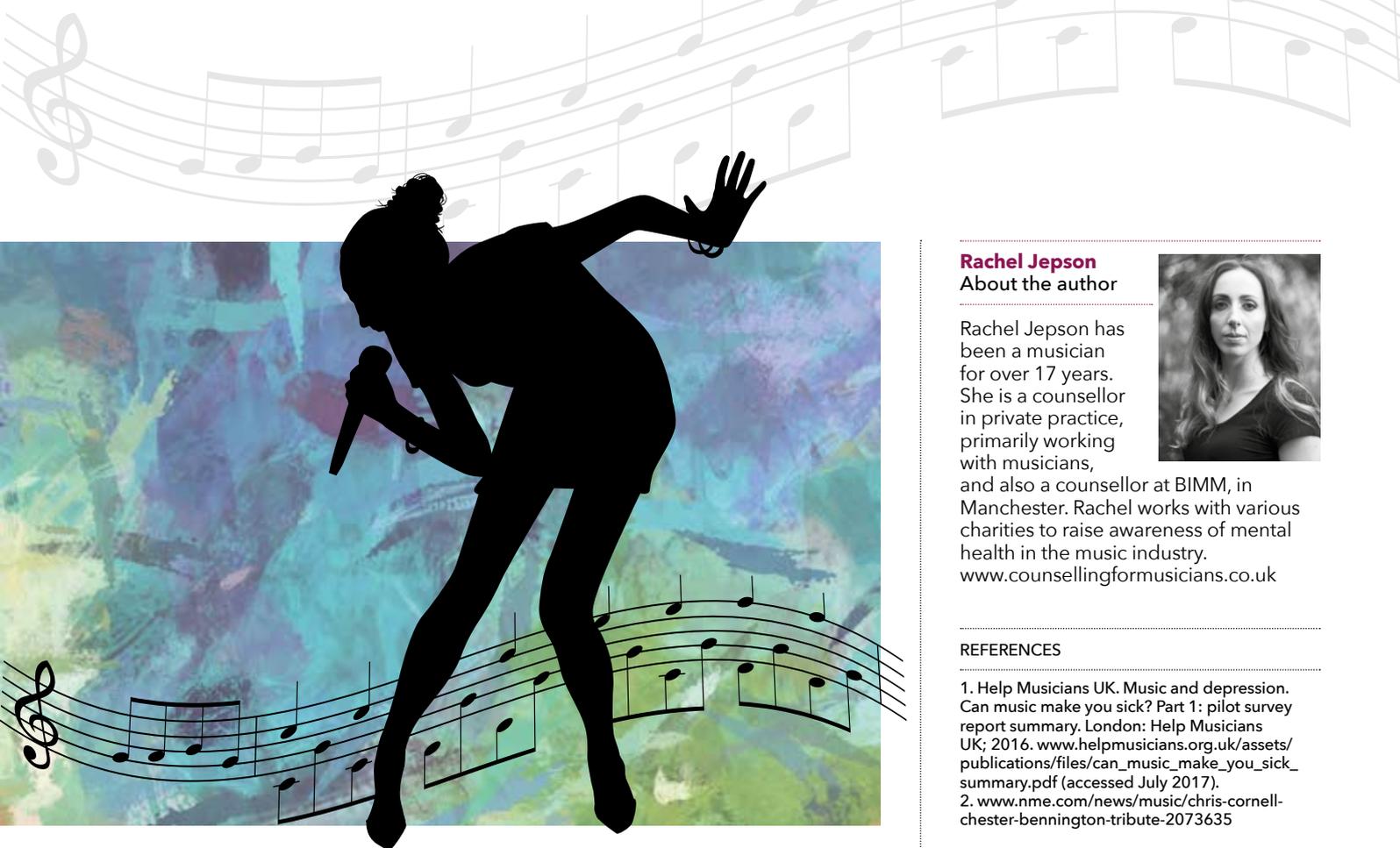
'I've got a friend in a covers band and they make £500 a gig sometimes, but it's not something that I imagined myself doing.' I ask her why. 'Because it's not my stuff, is it? It's someone else's stuff and anyone can do it. It's not me. Just talking about it makes me want to cry because it's not what people would expect of me and I'd have to explain that I wasn't signed; I was singing other people's songs. I'd just be relieved I was making some money.'

I ask her to elaborate on what she believes other people's expectations of her are when it comes to music. 'I've always been told that I'm brilliant. All my teachers, friends, family - everyone always said they knew I'd make it and be someone in music. It was in my blood; it wasn't a choice. It was never going to be anything else.'

There it is again: the expectation that you are 'someone' if you're successful in music, that you've 'made it'.

Marina regularly suffers from panic attacks, and the constant pressure from her parents and expectation that she will do well have become the main catalyst for these attacks. She feels she must have something to show for her decision to move away from home and pursue a career in music. She has a temp job at a call centre; she says it pays her rent and enables her to pursue music and pay for rehearsal rooms. 'It sounds like your career in music isn't meeting up with the expectations

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you've had from an early age. I wonder what it would be like for you to change those expectations?'

'Give up on my dream?'

'No, not at all, but I think it would be really valuable to assess what you want from music, what you want your career to look like, and what it would mean for you to be alright with certain aspects not quite meeting up to what you expected.'

Marina sighs and sits quietly for a while. 'I know I want to do this; I just don't know how I'm going to make a living.'

In the next session, Marina seems energised and says she's been re-evaluating her expectations of her musical career. She is going to stick with the call-centre job and save up for some studio time to record solo material she's been working on. I have an uneasy feeling that Marina hasn't admitted to herself that it's the hope of what will happen with this solo material that is making her so excited. Is she planning to record the album for herself, or is it simply the aspiration taking a different form?

I tell her that it's warming to see her so excited, but I express my concern.

'I can see why you'd be thinking that,' she tells me. 'I'll try and enjoy things and do them

for me too, but I can't lie and say I don't care whether anyone else likes my stuff, because I really do.'

Like Kevin, Marina's anxiety and depression are largely due to her reliance on the recognition and affirmation of others who are more 'influential' than her. I tell her she seems calmer lately and point out that she hasn't mentioned panic attacks in a few weeks. 'When I feel a panic attack coming on, I just start singing in my head. I start writing a song, imagining lyrics, and it gives me something to concentrate on. The panic passes and I can breathe. After, if I can remember, I write the song down. I'll have an album soon! I'm going to call it something like "Panic". I think that's a good tribute to this crazy business. People will love it.'

Challenge the stigma

There is no easy answer when your own expectations are as high as everyone else's. As a musician and counsellor, I see a lot of myself in my client's ambitions and drive, and understand all too well the appeal of a seductive, yet harmful, industry where you are reliant on 'people in power' to validate your self-belief. There is definitely a sense of stuckness: the same patterns, the same frustrations and

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2. www.nme.com/news/music/chris-cornell-chester-bennington-tribute-2073635

themes, are brought by most musician clients. I remember that it's empowering for them to be seeking help, going to therapy and embarking on a journey to help them explore their anxiety and depression.

What's important to remember, for me, for musicians and for the music industry, is that everyone is fighting their own battles, no matter how successful or talented they are. In May this year, Soundgarden frontman Chris Cornell took his own life. Two months later, Chester Bennington of Linkin Park, another successful musician and a good friend of Chris Cornell, also died by suicide. He had suffered from substance abuse and depression for years, and was overwhelmed by the death of his friend. Many newspapers and online blogs published his farewell letter to Chris. In it, he wrote: 'Your talent was pure and unrivalled. Your voice was joy and pain, anger and forgiveness, love and heartache all wrapped up into one. I suppose that's what we all are.'²

Such empathy and understanding are thin on the ground in this highly competitive world, but, if we all carry on talking about mental health, and if established, well-known artists keep speaking up about it, we will at least raise awareness and challenge the stigma, which has to be a step in the right direction. ■