

# When Music Speaks: Mental Health and Next Steps in the Danish Music Industry

*Part 4 – Final Recommendations*

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## **Preface From the Partnership for Sustainable Development in Music**

We are pleased to present the final report of the research on Danish musicians' mental health and well-being. For over a year, the research has delved into the mental health and wellbeing of Danish musicians, yielding a robust and comprehensive dataset for the Danish music industry. We now have evidence-based recommendations that underscore the importance of collaboration on systemic challenges, and rallying around initiatives that scale, signpost, and secure quality in this field.

The recommendations consolidate the findings from the three preceding reports: a quantitative analysis of musicians' mental health and well-being, mapping of existing initiatives, and a qualitative analysis based on personal interviews with Danish creative and performing musicians. The recommendations are a call to action, and notably, they are a call for the industry to come together. There is a substantial task ahead in reducing fragmentation within our industry to enhance the effectiveness of our efforts for those we are doing this for: the artists who create and perform the music enriching our lives.

### **A special thanks to all partners**

Since we started this research with University of Westminster, the Partnership for Sustainable Development in Music has grown from 12 to over 80 partner organisations from across the Danish music scene. During this time, the industry has shown support and commitment to the research and the vision behind, with more than 60 stakeholders generously sharing their knowledge and experience. We would like to acknowledge the depth that perspectives from industry professionals, musicians, mental health professionals, and researchers, has brought to this body of work.

## **Disclaimer**

This is an independent report commissioned by and authored for the Danish Partnership for Sustainable Development in Music.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect the official position of the Partnership. Responsibility for the choice, analysis, and interpretation of the data and for the opinions presented in this report lies with the authors.

Report authored by Dr. George Musgrave and Dr. Sally Anne Gross.

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## Introduction

This report represents the conclusion of a one-year research project – *'When Music Speaks'* – dedicated to understanding the mental health and wellbeing of music creators in Denmark. We are using the term music creators here as a broad and inclusive term encompassing songwriters, musicians, performers, composers, lyricists, and others who work with music in this way, informed by the work of Hesmondhalgh et al. (2021: 7) who delineate this term in more detail. The central aim of *'When Music Speaks'* was to develop recommendations which seek to respond to the needs of music creators in Denmark, and which are informed by the latest empirical data from this dynamic field of enquiry. It is clear from our findings that the music creators we heard from in Denmark both via our survey and in our interviews want meaningful and impactful change so that they and the whole Danish music sector might flourish. Music acts as a source of profound meaning and joy in music creators' lives, and as such they want the sector to work better so that they can *live* better. This is what these recommendations seek to achieve.

Our recommendations are based, first and foremost, on what the music creators we heard from in Denmark told us that they wanted and needed to better support their mental health and wellbeing. More broadly, however, the recommendations below draw from four methodological strands:

1. **Survey data analysis:** Firstly, our recommendations are underpinned by survey data collected and analysed on the mental health and wellbeing of music creators living and working in Denmark and the wider Kingdom of Denmark. This survey, presented in the *'When Music Speaks – Part 1'* report, collected data on anxiety, depression, and subjective wellbeing among a range of Danish music creators encompassing performers, songwriters, producers, composers, DJs, and a range of other categories. This survey had 1,865 respondents, making it the largest study of its kind in Scandinavia.
2. **A review of models of mental health interventions:** Secondly, we reviewed various models of mental health interventions for music creators currently being offered by amazing organisations around the world – organisations which have blossomed over the previous decade in particular and which offer crucial, much needed, and in many cases highly successful forms of support. These include helplines, preventative approaches rooted in resilience, traditional forms of therapy (notably Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and mindfulness), and peer support services. The findings from this analysis were presented in the *'When Music Speaks – Part 2'* report and the analysis was undertaken to see which model (or combination of models) might work well in the Danish context given our survey data.
3. **Interviews with survey respondents:** Thirdly, as presented in the *'When Music Speaks – Part 3'* report, qualitative interviews were undertaken with seventeen music creators living and working in Denmark. These respondents were drawn from our earlier survey and represented a range of genres, career stages, mental health and subjective wellbeing scores and experiences of mental health interventions. We have spoken to a broad church of music creators who see music making as their main career; they may be from different stakeholder positions, but identifying as full-time, career-oriented music creators unites them all.
4. **Field trips to Denmark:** Fourthly, over the course of the previous twelve months, we have undertaken four field trips to Denmark, visiting Copenhagen, Roskilde and Aarhus. These

field trips allowed us to speak to the following stakeholders in more depth, and visit their places of work, in order to gain a richer, ethnographic insight into the Danish music industry. These field trips took place in:

- January 2023 (Copenhagen) – Roundtable discussions with music creators, Danish music industry professionals, members of the *Danish Partnership for Sustainable Development in Music*, and scholars studying music creators in Denmark.
- May 2023 (Aarhus) – Interviews with rappers living in the Danish city of Aarhus and their management to understand more about this scene in Denmark.
- June 2023 (Copenhagen/Roskilde) – Site visits to a number of educational institutions and music management companies.
- January 2024 (Copenhagen) – Interviews with mental health service providers, some working with music creators and others working more broadly.

The recommendations being put forward here represent the perspectives and insights of our interviewees principally. There are already many incredible initiatives in Denmark which are aimed at improving the mental health, wellbeing and working lives of music creators. In this respect, we acknowledge that a number of the recommendations below already exist in some form or to varying degrees. Where this is the case, we want to be a voice of support for these initiatives which are already doing great things, and where greater investment to facilitate scaling up might yield meaningful improvements. Finally, having completed this year-long project, our findings chime with many of the international studies on the subject of music creators' working lives and their experiences with reference to their mental health and wellbeing i.e. that the music supply chain, the music sector, and seeking to build a sustainable career as a music creator, are all experienced as complex, competitive, and at times highly stressful.

Our recommendations below, therefore, are formulated with one simple aim:  
**to try and improve the mental health and wellbeing for those who make the music which improve the lives of so many.**

The three recommendations made below are:

**1. Collaboration: Finding Common Ground**

1A: Simplifying the Complexity

1B: Structural Reform

**2. Community: Wellbeing through Togetherness**

2A: Accredited Mental Health Peer Support Groups

2B: Community and Career Support

**3. Education: Mental Health and Empowerment**

3A. CPD for Music Industry Professionals

3B. Music Education and the Expectation Gap

## **Recommendation 1 – Collaboration: Finding Common Ground**

### **1A: Simplifying the Complexity**

#### **What did survey data tell us?**

While severe anxiety was relatively limited, is it simultaneously the case that there were many survey respondents who did indicate levels of anxiety which reached the threshold of clinical significance.

#### **What did a review of models tell us?**

A variety of different types of interventions are needed for different music creators with different needs.

#### **What did interviewees tell us?**

“We have so many organisations [in Denmark], but they have difficulties in working together” - Participant 1.

“If I needed help, where would you even turn? I wouldn't even know who to contact” - Participant 17.

Interviewees told us that they experience the Danish music industry as highly fragmented and complex. This meant that, for them, finding out information about forms of mental health support, or more general career support, was challenging. This highlights the need for better signposting given the range of interventions which already exist in Denmark. Our first recommendation therefore is to synthesise the range of existing service offerings in one place, which can offer non-partisan information for music creators. This might be an existing website, or something entirely new. A portal, or website, should act as a place which collects up-to-date information on, for example:

- All of the existing mental health interventions for music creators in Denmark. This should include a full range of existing interventions (of which we are aware of a great number already doing excellent work), any new interventions which might be launched (see Recommendation 2 below) and be a place where those in more acute need can find therapists or other mental health professionals specialising in working in the music sector. Interviewees told us they were confused about where to access this information, and we should make it clearly available for them.
- Our review of models shows us that different kinds of interventions e.g. coaching, counselling, therapy etc, are likely to work for different music creators at different career stages. The portal should therefore try and clearly explain what kinds of interventions are available, and who they are best suited to.
- This portal should also simplify existing uncertainties around forms of mental health intervention e.g. clearly describing the differences between different kinds of mental

health services, professionals, areas of expertise, etc. This can also be a resource for music industry professionals as per our recommendation 3A below.

It is worth acknowledging one potential challenge engendered by this recommendation, and this concerns ensuring the quality of the service offerings. In the first instance, a portal of this kind might simply be a repository of information. However, in the longer-term, we would suggest that seeking to move towards a system of quality-assurance might be desirable. Here, for example, a system of 'kitemarking' next to specific kinds of mental health services which are understood to be of particularly high quality, and which have undergone forms of quality control, might be helpful for music creators when they are trying to choose which service is right for them. This is a more complex task likely to involve third-party professionals with the relevant expertise or longer-term processes of accreditation. However, this is worth keeping in mind were this recommendation to be adopted and seek to grow and develop.

## 1B: Structural Reform

### What did interviewees tell us?

“It's a strange system that no one thought many years ago, well, actors, musicians, artists, all of us types, that some framework should be set up for this, because they can't manage it themselves. So, they end up losing their home, or losing their minds” - Participant 2.

“Fixing individuals is not what fixes the problem... My struggles are a healthy aggression towards the system” - Participant 9.

Interviewees of all genres, career stages, and musical experiences told us *unequivocally* that they felt structural reform was required to address their mental health and wellbeing challenges, many of which they ascribed to wider systemic features of working as a music creator in Denmark. This identification of structural issues was strikingly different from earlier research which we conducted in the United Kingdom<sup>1</sup> where political change was rarely mentioned. This cultural difference has, perhaps, something to do with the ways in which social democracy is *experienced* in Denmark, and as such the role Danish music creators feel wider civil society has to play in their creative lives and their expectations around this support.

It is vital that we listen when these music creators speak, and when they tell us that they do not *only* want more easily accessible information (Recommendation 1A), or individual solutions such as peer support groups (Recommendation 2A below) or career support (Recommendation 2B below), but they also want wider reform too. Interviewees could identify forms of structural reform clearly, from changes in government policy around how music is funded (particularly rhythmic [or popular] music), changes in forms of government subsidy for creatives, to changes to the Danish tax system to better support self-employed workers. All of these were highlighted as significant sources of stress and factors which contribute towards their feelings of anxiety and low wellbeing. It is also important to note that many of these structural factors were exacerbated and amplified during the coronavirus

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<sup>1</sup> Gross and Musgrave (2020)

pandemic, and indeed the lives of many in the cultural sector continue to be impacted by Covid-19. The music sector is still grappling with the idea of *recovery*, and indeed this term – recovery – is salient, speaking to the ways in which structural reform is connected, in the minds of the music creators we interviewed, to their mental health needs and forms of recovery.

It is not for us as researchers to elucidate which forms of change *should* take place. However, what we can do is share what our interviewees told us: they want structural change, and that change will require discussion and the diverse, fragmented bodies within the Danish music sector coming *together* to develop the strategies to improve outcomes for music creators and the whole Danish music sector. In this sense, we are foregrounding that systemic and policy reform around how music creators' lives are experienced, particularly those who are the most systematically disadvantaged e.g. younger music creators, female music creators, those working in genres of rhythmic music, etc - is not only a cultural, artistic, and societal concern, but it is also health and wellbeing one too. Music improves all our lives, and it is important that we work to improve the lives of those that make the music.

## **Recommendation 2 - Community: Wellbeing Through Togetherness**

### **2A: Accredited Mental Health Peer Support Groups**

#### **What did survey data tell us?**

The central challenge facing Danish survey respondents was anxiety and low levels of subjective wellbeing. Depression was less prevalent. Likewise, the most *severe* form of anxiety was relatively less present among our sample too, with a greater prevalence of mild and moderate anxiety.

#### **What did a review of models tell us?**

Peer support groups, with clearly defined facilitators who have lived experience of working in music, offer a good evidence base to improve personal or psychosocial factors e.g. hope, meaning, empowerment, self-esteem, confidence, self-efficacy, and quality of life.

#### **What did interviewees tell us?**

“[It is important to have] groups [and] nurturing a sense of community ... to nurture a way of talking about mental health” - Participant 4.

“What really helps is having a network that are able to understand the same type of obstacles that you have...[and where you can] meet others that are in the same situation... [and] dare to be vulnerable” - Participant 7.

Our second recommendation is that peer support groups offer welcome spaces of sharing, togetherness and community for many music creators to help support their wellbeing. Peer support groups are non-competitive spaces where peers who share a common experience can come together for things including (but not limited to) emotional support and the sharing of knowledge. By definition these groups are led by facilitators who are also peers in that they share experiences with service users, and who are trained to lead sessions of this kind. Chiming with international literature on the topic, interviewees noted that their experiences with mental health treatment had fallen short when the professionals working with them had not understood the nature of the music sector or music creators' lives. Peer support group leaders should, therefore, have lived experience, described by one interviewee as “core understanding” (Participant 3).

During our visits to Denmark, we met with peer support specialists (working with populations other than music creators), and we would suggest that any new group be established in collaboration with Danish specialists in this field. Likewise, we are aware that a number of peer support groups for music creators already exist in Denmark. Where this is the case, we would recommend that these initiatives be invested in, scaled up, championed, and more effectively signposted (see Recommendation 1A above).

In discussions around mental health care in Denmark with interviewees, it was suggested that being ‘diagnosed’ was crucial in accessing help of various kinds. While practices of accessing care

following diagnosis were often praised for being fast and often hugely helpful, this was more difficult for those who were not able to 'demonstrate' their anxieties with a formal diagnosis, particularly when their emotional states might fluctuate. Interviewees expressed that the medical route might not always be necessary, and in this sense being able to access peer support is likely to be of great benefit. Interviewees also highlighted a number of challenges of career musicianship which chime well with the approach offered by peer support. Two examples (although these are not the only two to emerge from interviews) offer suggestions of specific kinds of groups which might be helpful:

- ***Drug, alcohol and other substance use.*** A number of interviewees had experienced the destructive role played by substance abuse in their working lives. Interviewees spoke of their own battles with addiction, and the devastating impact alcoholism had had on those around them, even resulting in death. Offering spaces which allow music creators for whom this is a concern in their lives might be a salient offering.
- ***Women-only groups.*** The challenges faced by women music creators were prominent in interviews and in our survey data, where they were seen to be an at-risk group, particularly for anxiety. It was suggested that many might benefit from opportunities for women to come together to support one another. As one interviewee told us: "Women need to help women in this industry" (Participant 17), and another phrased this as: "You need ways of coping to be a woman in this world" (Participant 5). Women expressed the need for support and solidarity, and peer support might be one way of offering help. In this respect, another element of a peer group offering might consider discussion groups targeted at groups with specific anxieties and/or uncertainties, of which women are demonstrably one.<sup>2</sup>

## 2B. Community and Career Support

### What did interviewees tell us?

"You need to be able to see a life in music. To see people and say: That could be me" - Participant 1.

"It would be very nice for people to get guided in like what they should actually focus on" - Participant 16.

"The only person you have to support you, is yourself" - Participant 17.

Many of the music creators we spoke to suggested that at least part of their feelings of anxiety stemmed from a combination of feeling alone - wherein this isolation was taken to mean individually shouldering a great deal of responsibility for their creative career – alongside feelings of uncertainty over their career. In this respect, interviewees told us that they wanted career support to help guide them through their working lives. Live talks, workshops, seminars, or even discussion groups were mentioned as opportunities not only for learning, but for feeling part of a community and to share with peers. This kind of approach was described by one interviewee as being "idea work" (Participant 7).

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<sup>2</sup> There are likely other groups that will fall into this category too.

Another function of community desired by interviewees concerned the sharing of experiences, having a safe space, and opportunities to be inspired by others i.e. that it was important to see the journeys music creators go on, and how they negotiate and understand concepts like 'success' over a lifetime. These spaces of inspiration were also, it was felt, key in showing the practical reality of a music career beyond myths or oversimplified narratives, but instead focused on practicalities on the ground.

Again, it is important to note that there are already a great number of initiatives focused on career support being offered in Denmark. In this sense, some readers might understandably be wondering why interviewees requested things which already exist. However, we suggest this only further re-enforces the importance of our first recommendation around simplifying the existing service offerings in Denmark, and indeed the portal outlined in Recommendation 1A above should also be a place where existing forms of career support can be clearly identified.

## **Recommendation 3 - Education: Mental Health and Empowerment**

### **3A: Continuing Professional Development for Music Industry Professionals**

#### **What did interviewees tell us?**

“Those young kids who are just thrown into it because they're good at writing a melody, or whatever it may be, it's actually more about getting them properly prepared, and give them some kind of ballast to be able to withstand whatever it is that they're going to experience” - Participant 2.

“I have two friends who killed themselves, right, and they were artists... And I know with both of them the problem was to some extent that they didn't have anyone on the record label or the booking agency or even the manager that really understood them fully and their problems. That's just terrible because they're not here anymore. And they were great artists and amazing people... They really pushed the guy through a trauma and he was not ready and there was a lot of issues around them pushing too much” - Participant 10.

A small group of interviewees expressed a desire for a greater ethic of care among music industry professionals to better understand the wellbeing challenges faced by music creators, and for practices to respond accordingly. It is important to note that this is not to lay blame at the door of any one person, organisation or sector within the broader music industries. Indeed, we have encountered on our many field trips to Denmark music industry professionals from record labels, managers, publishers, and live music professionals who are highly progressive, and recognise the need for greater understanding vis-à-vis music creators' health and wellbeing. However, whilst there is already work happening in this area, more can be done to equip music industry professionals with the latest knowledge around health and wellbeing in order that they might have information to signpost music creators towards effective support and feel better able to respond when a music creator they are working with might be struggling. Again, this kind of information would be well placed on a portal, the kind of which outlined in Recommendation 1A above. It may well be the case that Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of this kind is best overseen by a larger body which has a large number of organisations as members and who can facilitate training of this kind with professionals trained to do so. Examples of the form this CPD might take include (but are not limited to):

- Workshops on key themes relating to music creators' health and wellbeing to provide advice for professionals working in the sector e.g. gatekeeper training for suicide prevention, sessions on ethical decision-making and duty of care, or other open forums for discussion.
- Brief pieces of literature e.g. pamphlets or booklets, distributed to music organisations in Denmark which contain key pieces of information and contact details for specialist mental health organisations who can work with music creators to whom help can be referred if needed.

- The development of a mental health 'Code of Practice' which all member organisations can sign up with which seeks to foster a greater ethic of care in the music industry, which one interviewee powerfully described as "radical softness" (Participant 7).

### 3B: Music Education and the Expectation Gap

#### What did interviewees tell us?

"In music school [and] band academies, I think [we need] workshops, where it could be a coach coming out and even talking about what's important to consider when running a band e.g. how do you work together and set up an appropriate work environment, [or] how do you take care of yourself and your co-workers. I think that would be important" - Participant 3.

"Being in education is a great equalizer. But then when I talk to people who are on the other side... it's just way more difficult to make it as musician... It's dispiriting... When you get out [of education] ...it's really difficult to deal with" - Participant 4.

Greater mental health education is not only of importance for those who work with music creators, but also for music creators themselves. A recent EU commission makes an explicit recommendation that: "Every music school curriculum should include a substantial and compulsory component on physical and mental wellbeing risks and prevention" (Vermeersch et al., 2023: 11). Indeed, we agree with this, and suggest it needs to be central for music curriculum of all kinds to better equip music creators with an understanding of the emotional challenges which career musicianship might present.

However, beyond embedding mental health education for music creators across all genres, it is also the case that many interviewees expressed challenges around moving from music education into the world of working as a career musician. That is, many interviewees, particularly younger interviewees, had studied music for a great length of time within the range of music education offerings in Denmark, becoming highly skilled at their craft. However, upon leaving education, some were shocked to discover that much of being a career musician is poorly paid, precarious, and highly challenging. Several of the interviewees said they felt they that their studies could have better prepared them for the transition into the world of work. While it is a complex subject area, the high levels of competition in the music sector mean that the majority of graduates are unlikely to fulfil their ambitions, and this creates an *expectation gap* i.e. the gap between the lives they might hope for, dream of, and even *expect* after years of education, and the reality of what living and working as a music creator is actually *like*. This reality can be painful and challenging to address.

We suggest that Danish education institutions should embrace this complexity and embed forms of graduate transition planning which take account of the very real challenges many music creators face when they leave their studies. We have met highly progressive institutions in Denmark who are doing work which is internationally significant in this area. We suggest these organisations share their practice with others.

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