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#WeAreViable, aren't we? Music careers, state support, and the political feasibility of a Basic Income for the Arts

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ABSTRACT

During Covid-19 in the United Kingdom, many musicians failed to qualify for income support, leading the Government to announce it would only "support viable jobs". This implication that creative work was *not* viable angered many, leading to the hashtag #WeAreViable on X (formerly Twitter) to defend the musical economy. However, given evidence concerning musicians' incomes, are musical careers, in fact, viable? Have they ever been? This paper critically interrogates notions of artistic career sustainability by adopting a historical case-study approach to explore how being a musician in the UK has always required forms of subsidy given unpredictable and poor financial returns. Following the systematic destruction of many of these systems of support, this paper then asks whether or not a Basic Income for the Arts represents a suitable mechanism to fill this gap, systematically evaluating the concept through the typology of "political feasibility", ultimately suggesting that it is not.

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Introduction: #WeAreViable, or #AreWeViable?

In 2020, at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, the United Kingdom (UK) government announced financial interventions to help workers throughout the economy. For the self-employed – which includes most musicians (UK Music, 2020, p. 7) – the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme was launched. However, it emerged that up to 45% of musicians were not eligible for this assistance (Musicians' Union, 2020). Shortly after, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in the UK Parliament: "We need to create new opportunities and allow the economy to move forward and that means supporting people to be in *viable* jobs which provide genuine security", noting that government interventions were there to "support *viable* jobs" (HM Treasury and Sunak, 2020, emphasis added). As Musgrave (2022, p. 18) notes: "Many people working in the music industries were understandably upset at the implication that their work was *not* viable". In response, a hashtag began on social media site X (formerly Twitter) of musicians and other creative workers stating #WeAreViable; a powerful message which eventually became an organisation

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with the stated aim of working with, and representing, "ALL sides of the live entertainment industry" (We Are Viable UK, 2021).

However, to what extent was the apparent inference of the government correct, particularly with reference to musical careers: is being a career musician, in fact, financially "viable" for the majority? The lack of state support for musicians during the pandemic acts as a salient historical aperture through which to explore broader questions vis-à-vis what the financial relationship between the state and music-makers has been, can be, or even *should* be. Indeed, if career musicianship is not viable, can we evaluate the appropriate policy response by looking at how musicians have been economically supported in the past, and can this help us evaluate a specific potential policy proposal for the future: the Basic Income for the Arts?

This paper explores these questions by looking at the relationship between the economics of popular music and popular music's place in cultural policy in the UK. Three historical periods will be mapped to explore how artistic viability was ensured, at least partly, by forms of accidental state support; unemployment benefit and art school (1960–1970s), the Enterprise Allowance Scheme (1980s), and social housing and youth clubs (2000s). The paper concludes by evaluating whether today, as these accidental subsidies are increasingly squeezed, a new form – Basic Income for the Arts – represents a model for the future. Drawing on the four-part schematic of *political feasibility* applied to Basic Income by De Wispelaere and Noguera (2012), this paper outlines significant weaknesses of a BIA predicated on four constituencies of feasibility (institutional, behavioural, psychological and strategic), to enrich a debate within the field of creative industries research which has, to date, been broadly enthusiastic towards BIA.

Is being a musician a "viable" career?

Is a music career i.e. seeking to earn a living as a writer, composer, performer, or other category of music creator, a financially "viable" career path? Data on the economics of popular music suggests musicians' earnings are generally poor (Jeffri, 2003) and enormously unequal (Zhen, 2022). Given the focus in this paper on the United Kingdom, below refers to the most up-to-date figures on the topic from this region.

In the largest systematic study on the subject from this territory, Hesmondhalgh et al. (2021) surveyed 708 musicians and found that 37% earned £5,000 or less from music in 2019, 47% earned less than £10,000, and 62% earned £20,000 or less. The median reported income for survey respondents who were signed to independent record companies was £20,250, and for artists who were self-releasing/DIY, the median income was £12,944. To contextualise these figures, the authors note in 2019 the National Living Wage in the UK was £8.21 per hour for those aged 25 and over; assuming a 40-hour working week, this is £17,076.80 (gross). The majority of respondents therefore earned less than the National Living Wage from music-making. Data such as these were mirrored in the 2023 Musicians Census which found while the average income earned by the 5,687 survey respondents was £20,700, almost half earned under £14,000 (Help Musicians, 2023).

Certainly, some musicians do earn a reasonable living from music, and an even smaller number earn a very good living e.g. 3% of respondents to the Hesmondhalgh et al. (2021) survey earned over £100,000 from musical income. The authors also note that the median income for musicians signed to major record labels (i.e. Sony Music, Warner Music Group,

or Universal Music Group) was £51,816, although this represents an elite sphere estimated by the authors to be approximately 3.3% of all musicians in the UK. They also note that 19% of their survey respondents earned 100% of their overall income from music, and that in this sub-section of the population fewer earned less than £20,000 per year (43% compared to 62% across the survey), and 36% of this group earned over £30,000 i.e. broadly above the median annual salary for a full-time worker in the UK (which in April 2020 was £31,461). However, even in this category of musicians, the authors note that many earned around or below the Living Wage, and the majority earned less than the UK median salary.

Bringing together primary data and other sources on musicians' earnings in the UK e.g. MIDiA (2019a, 2019b), Hesmondhalgh et al. (2021, p. 28) unequivocally state: "making a living from music alone is exceptionally challenging for all but the small minority of music creators". Indeed, it is in this context that musicians are well-understood as pursuing their making-music often as part of a "portfolio career" whereby other forms of remuneration might, effectively, subsidise their creative work (Bartleet et al., 2019). While some have advanced the thesis that changes relating to the digitalisation of music have made it *even harder* for musicians to earn a living (Deresiewicz, 2020) – with Spotify, for example, arguing the opposite in their annual "Loud and Clear" report (2024) – others have noted that both pre- and post-digitalisation musicians have struggled to earn anything close to sustainable incomes (Bataille & Perrenoud, 2021; Hesmondhalgh, 2021). In this respect: "there was never a 'golden age', even in the era where revenues from recorded music were at an all-time high, when substantial numbers of music creators could earn a sustainable living from recording – or by extension, song-writing" (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2021, p. 39). Thus, data shows that being a musician in the UK is not financially viable for the majority, and never has been.

Thus, how are contemporary popular musicians able to financially support themselves, such that those with career ambitions for music to, hopefully, one day be their sole source of sustainable income can dedicate the requisite time to not only practising, writing, and recording, but also the other areas of musical career development e.g. promotion, online content creation, and networking? The data above show music-making is often a secondary source of income with musicians working various musical and non-musical jobs to subside their music-making. Additionally, for many musicians, their musical income might represent a relatively small overall part of their total earnings despite them taking their career extremely seriously; a survey of 1,865 Danish musicians, for instance, revealed 65.2% of respondents earned less than 50% of their annual income from music, but of this group 27.2% saw music as their "main career" (Musgrave et al., 2023). Furthermore, combining what might be thought of as a full-time commitment to music in the pursuit of one's musical dream with traditional, full-time, non-musical employment has been seen by musicians to be highly undesirable given that the latter would interfere with the former, and compromise the time needed to dedicate to their artistic career aspirations (Ramirez, 2013).

Given this, below will examine three historical periods in the UK where musicians have been able to dedicate time to their musical careers and avoid, at least to some extent, the necessity for other full-time work. In each case, the government was crucial, even if in an inadvertent or accidental way, in providing musicians the money, time and/or space to hone their craft and contributed to the emergence of not only the careers of individual musicians, but also wider musical "scenes", industries and movements.

(Accidental) State support for music careers

The relationship between the Nation-state and popular musicians has been conceptualised by Cloonan (1999) as either: authoritarian, where artistic production is heavily controlled e.g. Soviet Art in the USSR; promotional, where for reasons such as patriotism, soft power, or protectionism to resist Anglo-American musical dominance, the government encourages domestic art via mechanisms such as radio quotas e.g. the *intermittents du spectacle* scheme in France; or benign/laissez-faire, where the state does not meaningfully intervene in musicians' lives e.g. the UK. These categories are not mutually exclusive and can vary according to the government of the day. However, in general, the UK has rarely taken steps to actively financially support the careers (or career ambitions) of musicians. Yet, the case studies below highlight how the UK has, often by accident, financed musical careers which might be, initially at least, unviable.

1960s–1970s: unemployment benefit, art school, punk, and British rock

Unemployment support (once colloquially in the UK known as "the dole") has long been understood as providing a financial safety net for musicians on low or no incomes (Graeber, 2016) and been characterised as being historically responsible for making "Britain swing" (O'Rorke, 1998). The ska/reggae/pop band UB40, formed in 1979, were named after Unemployment Benefit, Form 40 – the form needed to claim the support. The dole, and the need to "play the system" to keep receiving the support, has been centralised in histories of bands including The Clash which, combined with "the art school connection" and squatting, were core to how the band could sustain their musicianship (Emery, 1986, pp. 150–151). Parsons (2022) delineates this historic relationship between welfare and culture during these decades during which artistic production was significantly supported (accidentally) by the state; an era referred to as "the days when the patron was the dole" (Howell & Wandor, 2010). Unemployment support continued to be economically significant in musician's lives for many decades until its effective dismantling via strict regimes of conditionality imposed over recent decades which have made living an artistic life in this way increasingly challenging (see Klein, 2023). Societies unlike the UK who have more generous welfare systems – such as Denmark – continue to feature artists claiming unemployment support to subsidise artistic aspirations (Pultz & Mørch, 2015), and data on Irish musicians incomes as late as 1995 found: "The most important source of supplemental income is social welfare i.e. claiming unemployment benefit, unemployment assistance or smallholding" – with this being particularly important in the creative lives of those working in "chart music categories" i.e. non classical, popular music (Burke, 1995, p. 104).

In this era too, art schools in the UK have been well-documented as being places which were government-funded educational institutions which cultivated and nurtured the creative impulses of young, working-class, creatives who would go on to be hugely significant musicians. Frith and Horne (1987) and Roberts (2019) chart the centrality of art school both in the lives of musicians such as John Lennon, David Bowie and Christine McVie – and, according to Laing (2015) "nearly a third of punk rock musicians" – as well the development of the economics of British popular music more broadly. These were spaces of radical artistic education which encouraged experimentation away from

contemporary student concerns related to employability, and which, crucially, students were able to attend often in receipt of full funding from the state in the form of grants. Thus, as Banks and Oakley (2015, p. 47, emphasis added) note: "The role of art school in providing the (*unplanned*) context for the production of what is now thought of as an inordinately rich and productive twenty years of British pop music industry seems evident". Art schools may not have intended to produce pop and rock musicians in the way they did, nor did they offer longer-term career support, but they were in many respects "an engine of unforeseen cultural outcomes" (Beck & Cornford, 2012, p. 61).

1980s: the enterprise allowance scheme

The industrial and economic strategy of the subsequent Margaret Thatcher Conservative government (1979–1990) resulted in, among other things, a large increase in unemployment, rising from 5.3% in May 1979 to 11.9% (over 3 million workers) during February–June 1984. Partly in response, and a wider ideological commitment to individualism, a Victorian-era Protestant "bootstrapping" ethic, a desire to limit welfare, and free market Friedmanite economics, the government were keen to instigate an "enterprise culture". This resulted in the Enterprise Allowance Scheme (EAS) between 1983 and 1991, providing £40.00 per week to anyone of working age who had been unemployed for eight weeks or more, could access £1000.00 via savings or a loan (or an overdraft), and had a business idea which was approved (and most were).

A great number of musicians and other creative artists used the EAS to finance their creative output. The practices of entrepreneurial popular musicians map neatly onto an initiative such as the EAS (Frith & Street, 1986), and yet it was never intended to act in this way; as EAS beneficiary and artist Rachel Whiteread of the group which came to be known as the Young British Artists (which included Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin) noted: "I don't think [the government] had a clue what would happen" (Dickenson, 2023). The unpredicted relationship between this scheme and popular music has been examined in great depth by Bailie (2022, pp. 129–138), highlighting how acts including Rick Astley, Portishead, Jazzie B of Soul 2 Soul, Jarvis Cocker of Pulp, Shaun Ryder of the Happy Mondays, Ken McCluskey of the Bluebells, and more, all used the scheme to finance their musicianship. The scheme also financed record labels including Warp, Creation and Earache. Horace Trubridge (2015), former musician and general secretary of the Musicians Union, described the scheme as: "a notable financial safety net for emerging talent who would not otherwise have been able to fund their work as musicians and songwriters". As per the dole, or art school, the EAS was not *solely* responsible for the emergence of these musicians and their eventual careers, but it was a significant contributory factor.

2000s: council houses, youth clubs, and grime

Artistic careers need not only (some) money, time – and by extension time away from non-musical employment – but also *space*; to gather, to collaborate, to record, to perform, to broadcast from, and spaces in cities as centres of artistic nourishment are expensive. As per the previous two examples – albeit with a greater level of genre-specificity, as well as political ambiguity and even contradiction – the UK inadvertently provided spaces which, at least in part, contributed to the flourishing of one of the most culturally

significant British musical artforms of the twenty-first Century – grime: an MC-led style of music which built upon previous generations of UK Black music genres including garage and sound-system culture and well as US hip-hop (see Ekpoudom, 2024) which emerged in East London in the 2000s. The Nation-state sought to hamper the flourishing of grime music in some respects, notably via infamous racist legislation which prevented its' live performance: Form 696 (Fatsis, 2019a). However, simultaneously, inadvertent forms of government subsidy were important in its development, notably council houses and youth clubs.

Youth clubs have a central place in the history of grime music. The photographer Simon Whatley's book *Lost Dreams* visually captures these spaces of collective artistic production in the early days of grime (around 2005) encapsulating this in a quote in British publication *GQ* saying: "the youth clubs *were* the underground" (Thapar, 2022). Likewise, White (2022) in her piece introducing the exhibition "Grime Stories" at the Museum of London writes: "Youth centres and street corners where young people could congregate allowed for the development of creative clusters from which innovative musical practices, like Grime, could emerge". Today, work by Kaur (2024, p. 45) continues to map "the way in which youth clubs support and shape rap culture" in East London. Certainly the state was not always the *sole* funder of these youth clubs, who might pull funding from private partnerships or philanthropy, say, but as spaces for young people to gather as well as access recording studios and other technology, alongside interact with mentors and youth workers who could help the young people centralise a focus on music and hopefully away from the violence some might have been experiencing in their surroundings (see Thapar, 2021), their role in grime's development is undisputed as government-funded cultural incubators.

Council housing too was not only where many of the MCs, producers and DJs lived and grew up, thus acting as forms of publicly-owned housing which partially facilitated the artistic, working-class residents to live within inner-London, but even the buildings themselves became architecturally significant. Illegal pirate radio stations – "one of the pillars of grime music" (de Lacey, 2019, p. 194) – were often housed within these tower blocks. For example, the Crossways Estate in Bow was the original home of influential station Rinse FM. Again, the contradictory role of the state is revealed in that this radio station was simultaneously housed in council spaces but also suppressed via the apparatus of the state given its illegality; the co-founder of the station was issued with an Anti-Social Behavioural Order in 2005 (de Lacey, 2020). Stations such as this acted as what Mann (2023, p. 1634) describes as "an 'exilic space' that fostered collective intimacy and relative autonomy", and this complex relationship between council housing, pirate radio, and grime is also well-acknowledged (Ekpoudom, 2024; Elijah, 2024a). Thus, government-funded housing played its part in grime.

These are not unique examples of a Nation state accidentally financing cultural production (see Athanassiou & Musgrave, 2021). However, each example, understood in the context of the data on musicians' earnings, illustrate a simple point: musicians need money, time and space to produce music. However, the forms of indirect subsidy explored have become increasingly scarce: the dole morphed into Universal Credit with strict conditionality and sanctions; the introduction of fees for Higher Education (HE) (and the subsuming of arts schools within HE) combined with the reduction of grants meant students became ever more concerned about employability leaving less time for experimentation (Banks & Oakley, 2015); austerity resulted in the closure of youth clubs

(Berry, 2021); and the Right to Buy programme alongside processes of gentrification in the inner city further limited access to affordable housing (Fisher, 2014). Today, as the state has withdrawn as an inadvertent financial supporter of musicians, some have suggested that the biggest patrons of musicians' careers are now families – and thus, families with money – encapsulated in the idea that pop music might be, today, "too posh" (Lynskey & Fitzpatrick, 2013). Who else can afford to undertake this incredibly financially risky career path (Musgrave et al., 2024) and simultaneously live in an expensive city such as London, which is central in the career ambitions of many musicians? It is in this cultural context that some have begun to advance a more "promotional" orientation towards musicians, in the form of a[1] Basic Income for the Arts.

Basic Income for the Arts and "Political feasibility"

Thus far, this paper has argued that (i) data suggests music careers are not financially viable for the majority, (ii) music careers have always required some form of indirect/accidental support from the state, and (iii) many of the forms of support which have historically existed have been stripped away. This argumentation appears to lend support to the idea of what is referred to as a Basic Income for the Arts (BIA). It is worth briefly defining this concept. BIA is a sectoral-specific incarnation of a broader policy with a longer history – the Universal Basic Income (UBI) – which calls for a regular payment to be paid universally to *all* members of society (see Afscharian et al. (2022) or White (2019) for more). The need for UBI is predicated on various strands, many, on the left at least, oscillating around the weakening power of labour to capital under advanced neoliberal capitalism epitomised by widespread, endemic financial precarity and wider threats to sustainable employment posed by automation (e.g. Srnicek & Williams, 2016; Standing, 2017). A BIA adopts these principles which theorises a broken link between work and income, and applies them specifically to creative and artistic workers. To date, pilots of a form of BIA which provides a guaranteed level of decided-upon weekly or monthly income to certain artists and art workers have been trialled in countries including Ireland (see Johnston, 2022), the Netherlands, and the United States.

There are many arguments in favour of a BIA. For example, as per Brook et al. (2020b), working class artists are significantly disadvantaged compared to peers with financial support, and this would be ameliorated by a (theoretical) BIA in which *all* artists and wider arts workers were provided a guaranteed income, facilitating greater representation and diversity of output. Others have suggested that Covid-19 led to the arts sector being particularly hard hit, and thus a BIA is a form of what Banks (2017) calls "creative justice" (Cannizzo et al., 2024). Additionally, evidence suggests musicians suffer from mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression at a potentially elevated rate compared to the general population (Gross & Musgrave, 2020; Vaag et al., 2015) and initial evidence from the BIA pilot in Ireland suggested those in receipt of the benefit experienced a self-reported reduction in these symptoms and improvements in life satisfaction over a six month period (Feldkircher et al., 2024). Similar quality of life improvements were seen in a BIA pilot in the Netherlands (Wijngaarden et al., 2024). In this respect, and many others e.g. artistic empowerment and self-esteem (Daughtry & Whiting, 2025) and an important centralisation of the place of "the artist" both in society and the wider creative industries, there is much to applaud about a BIA.

However, De Wispelaere and Noguera (2012) foreground the need to assess the *political feasibility* of any basic income project, articulating a four-part conceptual typology of feasibility: institutional, behavioural, psychological, and strategic. This systematic approach facilitates the evaluation of a policy from multiple perspectives and acknowledges complexity, both to encourage a consideration of policy responses and highlight areas warranting further empirical enquiry. Below I will apply this architecture to the concept of a BIA, highlighting areas which those of us who work in, and love, the arts, must confront if we are to articulate a robust defence of the need to support the unquestionably vital work artists do, and to achieve this based on tenets of practical realisability, artistic legitimacy, and popular support, and rooted in political alliances.

Institutional feasibility

A first-order issue of feasibility is administrative (or institutional) (De Wispelaere & Stirton, 2012, 2013). One of the most problematic issues relating to a BIA concerns the setting of operational eligibility standards i.e. *who* gets to be categorised as an artist and what criteria is used to evaluate applicants? Defining an artist (Bain, 2005) or a musician as a "professional" (say) is well understood to be an imprecise task (Loveday et al., 2023). Being a "professional" musician might include objective and subjective socio-cultural-aesthetic determinants (Merriam, 1964) e.g. being paid for performing (e.g. Visser et al., 2021) or determined by the quality of their work and commitment to their craft engendering "professional recognition" (Throsby & Petetskaya, 2024). There is no standardised metric. More widely, who can or cannot be called or defined as a "creative" worker (or part of the "creative class'") is a long debate (Peck, 2005). However, to use data from the Irish BIA pilot, one might assume eligibility in the Irish context would be somewhat straightforward given tax breaks for artists which, to an extent, demarcate them in the Irish labour force and provide a metric for identifying a creative professional i.e. that one must produce "original and creative" art that has either cultural or artistic "merit". However, eligibility reports produced by the Irish government to assess the BIA reveal the complexity of the process and the extensive documentary evidence artists could produce to demonstrate that they met these highly subjective criterion (Feldkircher et al., 2024).

Literature on the cybernetics of administration highlights the concept of *cadasterability* (Hood, 1985); the maintenance of a list ("cadaster") of (non)eligible welfare recipients. This is challenging enough in the case of a broader UBI (De Wispelaere & Stirton, 2012), and significantly more complex in the case of a BIA, whereby assuming one is deemed eligible (itself political, subjective, and prone to error), if this eligibility is not permanent and can be lost thus requiring re-appraisal, this monitoring of compliance (see Goodin, 1992) is likely to incur significant administrative costs (for more see Benghalem et al., 2023). In the case of such subjectivity in establishing and monitoring a BIA cadaster, it is worth considering that those who might be best placed to access a BIA scheme may be those who can engage with the inevitable bureaucracy meaning others who are eligible, deserving, and potentially vulnerable will miss out (see Van Oorschot, 1991). Relatedly a centrally administrated BIA scheme will (for budgetary reasons) have a fixed number of beneficiaries and would therefore be deciding on the number of artists "needed" in any territory. Who is best placed to centrally make a decision such as this; is anyone? In the case of such inevitable economics of public choice, which *kind* of musician gets a BIA is a question

requiring careful attention, particularly if a scheme of this kind were to operate like other forms of arts funding. For example, Arts Council funding in the UK favours classical music and opera significantly more than other forms of artistic production such as, say, rap music (Brook et al., 2020a), and a BIA scheme risks replicating this politicised inequality. This highlights a simple point; BIA schemes might be inspired by Universal Basic Income but they are *not* universal.

Behavioural feasibility

Behavioural feasibility considers "potentially negative effects of a BI [basic income] on individuals' behaviour after implementation" (De Wispelaere & Noguera, 2012, p. 29), which in this instance necessitates reflections on motivations and artistic freedom. In the context of the BIA pilot in Ireland, the Minister for Tourism, Cultures, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media – Catherine Martin – stated: "My ambition is that the scheme makes it possible for artists to have self-sustaining careers in the arts" (Gov.IE, 2024). However, it is not clear how artists being supported by the state via a BIA represents careers which are "self-sustaining": quite the opposite. This concern causes some to not unreasonably question what being explicitly dependent on, or at least in a formalised relationship with, the state in this way might mean for issues of censorship and artistic freedom. As suggested by Elijah (2024a), pirate radio in the early days of grime was illegal and thus resistance (even if partially taking place within the apparatus of the state), and yet the aforementioned instances of the state subjugation of grime causes him to question whether or not a formalisation of the relationship between the state and musicians might engender the policing of art. One need only look at Criminal Behaviour Orders issued by the Metropolitan Police against drill musicians in London (Fatsis, 2019b), or the Belfast rap group Kneecap who had £15,000 of funding withdrawn after the Conservative government objected to their anti-Union lyrics (Carroll, 2024). The line between a promotional public policy orientation, and an authoritarian one (Cloonan, 1999), is potentially blurry.

Public policy is often entangled with ideological leanings. A BIA pilot in Minnesota, for example, stated that support would be targeted, at least in part, only towards certain kinds of art with a specific political agenda, namely: "public projects highlighting the root causes that lead to the need for guaranteed income" (Springboard for the Arts, 2023). The idea that a BIA benevolently supports artists to make "arts for arts' sake" necessitates scepticism among those of us who care about artistic freedom. It is worth examining whether or not a BIA might lead to artists changing their behaviour and producing art which aligns with the criteria of the scheme to receive payment i.e. "creative compliance" (De Wispelaere & Noguera, 2012, p. 28). Likewise, it is worth empirically interrogating, for instance, whether or not transgressive artists *want* to be supported by the state in this way. As per the work of Lankford (1990), would, say, anti-establishment punk bands desire being explicitly being paid by the state for their art or might sources of funding compromise questions of artistic authenticity. The mechanisms of artistic support highlighted in this paper (the dole, art school, EAS, council housing, youth clubs) were arguably successful because they were accidental and *not* explicitly trying to cultivate, and therefore to some extent dictate, cultural production. On the other hand, perhaps artists do not care where they get their money from, and arguably

musicians using EAS is proof of that. Likewise, perhaps a more "arms-length" form of BIA would mitigate against this (see Gilfillan & Morrow, 2016)? Thus, this represents a facet of feasibility where further research is needed to understand potential, and unintended, behavioural ramifications.

Psychological feasibility

This domain of feasibility concerns "the legitimation of a policy through securing a broad level of social acceptance among the general public" (De Wispelaere & Noguera, 2012, p. 27), which entails a consideration of justice given the centrality of solidarity to the success of welfare regimes (Schuyt, 1998). A BIA implicitly suggests that musicians' contributions to society (economically or culturally) are so great and their economic viability so low, that taken together this warrants isolating them as *particularly* deserving of financial support from the state, and, perhaps, *more so* than other occupations i.e. a form of "musical exceptionalism" (Musgrave, 2022, p. 13). Given the centrality of "the deservingness principle" of reciprocity in welfare research (Van Oorschot, 2000) proponents of a BIA need to empirically interrogate, in robust and representative ways, the extent to which the wider public accept this characterisation of artists or not. Empirical work is needed to understand if the public perceive a BIA as fair, or if it is seen as isolating musicians as being *more* deserving of state support than other forms of work which are likewise socially valuable, generators of wealth (given their investment in human capital), and poorly paid e.g. carers, nursery staff, youth workers, or others working with vulnerable populations. Few would suggest that musicians are *less* important than these workers – O'Connor (2024) convincingly argues artists have a crucial and equal place to others in the democratic realm – but we must be alive to the fact that the wider population might perceive a BIA a privileging artists as being *more* important than others who are equally deserving of support, which potentially risks undermining welfare solidarity (Schuyt, 1998).

Problematically – and connecting *psychological* and *institutional* feasibility – analysis of the 2000 randomised recipients from the 8,200 eligible applicants of a BIA pilot in Ireland reveals, for example, that ten architects ended up receiving the €325 a week payment. Given that the Economic Research Institute estimates Irish architects earn an average annual salary of €77,889 (ERI, 2024) this risks damaging popular support if the rationale for a BIA is, at least partly, rooted in moral economics "to mitigate the cultural and creative labour market's precarious conditions" (Wijngaarden et al., 2024). In other words, support for minimum incomes have been seen to be empirically connected to "need" (Liebig & Mau, 2005), and the inherently subjective eligibility of the BIA has shown it to have benefitted some demonstrably *not* in need in the Irish context, potentially (and not unreasonably) engendering a normative objection which undermines psychological feasibility.

Strategic feasibility

Finally, would a BIA be strategically feasible i.e. is it likely to be voted for with a broad coalition of political support? On the one hand, empirical work reveals support for the public funding of the arts in England (Katz-Gerro, 2011), but evidence from Europe suggests political support for the broader concept of a UBI is mixed (Noguera et al., 2011; Weisstanner, 2022), and systematic work by Chrisp (2020, p. 9) suggests "basic

income in its idealised form is largely politically unfeasible in the short-term". There is no polling data on the political acceptability of the narrower BIA, however examples of forms of BIA point to them being enormously expensive, a factor which significantly hampers "political acceptability" (Martinelli, 2020, p. 463), and thus by extension it seems reasonable to conclude that even seeking to run a large BIA trial at a time when public services are under immense strain from significant under-investment is likely to be politically unpalatable. Perhaps the most famous example of a governmental scheme providing incomes (albeit strictly conditional) for artists is the French *intermittents du spectacle,* which, whilst not a BIA, highlights the duality of a system of a large-scale state-led "promotional" culture towards creative labour which both champions French culture and affords French artists of all kinds the opportunity to produce creative work, but which simultaneously – as per data cited by Buchsbaum (2015) – is astronomically expensive; creative workers under the scheme cost more per head than unemployment benefit not least given the bureaucratic burden of administering the complex eligibility. Artists in the UK have not exhibited the tendencies toward mobilisation and solidarity seen in France (Sinigaglia, 2009), and political parties even with broader basic income commitments have not achieved polling success, and this fiscal dimension is crucial to confront. Proponents of BIA thus need to better articulate their defence of the concept, countering some of these objections to build broad support *outside* of the domain of the arts, if any form of strategic feasibility is to be ensured.

Given all of the arguments advanced, it appears that a BIA in its current form broadly fails tests of political feasibility on institutional, behavioural, psychological, and strategic grounds, although there are areas for further empirical research to better test and interrogate these domains. I suspect that within "the arts", an argument such as this is not particularly popular.

Conclusion: "rent is the creative director"

If music careers are not *economically viable* (for the majority), and a Basic Income for the Arts is not *politically feasible* (on balance), what does the future of musical production in the UK look like? As Hayes (2022) acknowledges in his own rebuke of the Irish BIA, the inevitable response to a rejection such as this is to ask what, then, is one in favour *of* to support cultural production. Do musicians need financial support? Yes, without question. Should the state be the mechanism for this support? Yes, in some form. Are time, space and housing central to questions around artistic sustainability? Yes. Is a Basic Income for the Arts the best way to solve these three inter-connected problems alongside the challenges presented by a kind of work which typically earns those undertaking it very poor incomes? The argument I have outlined above suggests otherwise. While not in a position to flesh out a national music strategy (or indeed a creative industries strategy of which music might form a part), some areas for consideration are sketched out below (aside from the implementation of a UBI, which is a separate debate: see White, 2024).

Various reforms might improve the incomes of musicians e.g. changes to streaming remuneration, or reimagining the tax system to better support the self-employed. These are entirely sensible first steps. However, these are unlikely to change the long-term, systematic reality of poor and unequal incomes among a labour market typified by huge oversupply and high competition. Alternative measures to more distinctly address the three key

challenges of career musicianship outlined herein – time, space and housing – are needed in ways which *are* politically feasible. Firstly, punishing welfare regimes in the United Kingdom which engender psychological distress (Thornton & Iacoella, 2024) need systematic reform *for all*, and indeed musicians who are poorly paid and/or out of formalised paid employment (as many are) are likely to be beneficiaries of this. This might not only be financial reforms, but also opportunities for training and investment which again all (including musicians) can benefit from. Reform of this kind requires an acknowledgement that those undertaking musical work are doing just that – work – and for their work (albeit work which is often poorly paid if paid at all) to be recognised as such. Secondly, ensuring that musicians working in all genres and at all levels (and those working with musicians of all genres) can access forms of support is key. Globally significant music scenes all begin at a grass roots level with live music venues, recording studios, community spaces, rehearsal rooms and more. Ensuring those working in these fields can access forms of support fairly whether they are working in hip hop or opera is crucial, with popular music afforded the proper respect and value for the cultural powerhouse it is and source of economic and cultural value to the UK.

Finally, aligned with McRobbie et al. (2022), Elijah (2024b) and Graeber (2016), affordable housing is the conceptual elephant in the room in facilitating artistic careers. The relationship between artists and the city has long been understood to be mediated by housing: New York City's rent control laws have allowed artists to live in one of the most expensive cities on earth (O'Sullivan, 2013, p. 463), cultures of squatting by artists in European capital cities have cultivated anti-establishment movements and genres (Pruijt, 2013), battles over housing subsidies in Berlin in the lives of young fashion designers have been foregrounded by McRobbie et al. (2022), and organisations such as ACME (founded in London in 1972) have long fought to help artists access affordable housing. Black music pioneer Elijah has a series of "Yellow Squares" on Instagram sharing short, insightful commentaries on music and culture, one of which reads: "Rent is the creative director" (2024b) i.e. the cost of housing determines, in large part, the creative work that gets produced in a society. Housing, in art, matters. Long-overdue and widespread investment in affordable housing which can act as a social safety net to encourage diversity, risk-taking and experimentation of all kinds (musical or otherwise), and which can allow low-income, precarious workers (in all fields of work) to live in dynamic, thriving cities, is the clearest route to supporting musicians.

As suggested throughout, musicians need support and they always have – data shows that being a musician is not, for the majority, economically viable – but this paper suggests that a BIA is not, yet, politically feasible, and thus not a suitable mechanism for this support.

Note

1. I use here *a* BIA as opposed to *the* BIA given that there are various incarnations and variations of the scheme with no uniform and agreed upon mechanism for its implementation or delivery.

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