

“I do it for the love”: Pop music and aspirational labour

Ellis Jones, University of Leeds

It's not about the money, money, money
We don't need your money, money, money
We just wanna make the world dance,
Forget about the price tag

"Price Tag", Jessie J ft. B.o.B. (UK No. 1, w/c 12 February 2011)

And we'll never be royals (*royals*),
It don't run in our blood
That kind of life just ain't for us
We crave a different kind of buzz

"Royals", Lorde (UK No.1, w/c 27 October 2013)

I don't have money on my mind, money on my mind
I do it for, I do it for the love

"Money On My Mind", Sam Smith (UK No.1, w/c 23 February 2014)

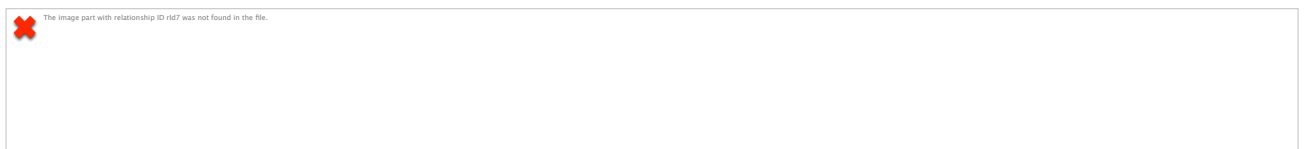
For three musicians who don't like to think about money, Jessie J, Sam Smith, and Lorde certainly are thinking about it a lot. In these songs, all of which topped the UK singles chart between 2011-14, they each outline their own commitment to authenticity over commercialism by identifying, elucidating on, and then distancing themselves from, a discourse of materialistic accumulation and conspicuous consumption. In doing so they comment on a tension between art and commerce which has run through popular music since its inception, and specifically on what it means to be a musician navigating that terrain. However, in this essay I want to propose that these three songs are also doing something more. Drawing on the neo-Foucauldian elements of Mark Banks' analysis of the politics of cultural work (2007), I propose that pop music serves as part of the apparatus that helps us understand our self and our society, providing us with the tools to "self-govern" in both beneficial and harmful ways. I argue that these three songs construct and represent a discourse of autonomy which, having emerged within creative labour, now serves to legitimate new areas of precarious and underpaid work. In doing so I hope to make a link between the substantial literature on the present conditions of creative work (see Gill 2014, pp.13-17 for an overview) and a socio-musicological analysis of the cultural texts emanating from this environment, suggesting that this combined approach helps us to understand how

conditions of musical creation might speak, through music, to audiences' comprehension of their own lives.

Cultural work, including the work of making music, has historically been seen as offering a relatively high degree of creativity and autonomy. Banks posits the Romantic era, entwined as it was with the dawn of industrialisation and the Enlightenment, as the period in which the artist "became recognised as the antithesis to the rational and calculative subject of the modern age" (2010, p.253), with distance from commercialism often considered to be linked to, or even *necessary for*, their capacity to evince truthfulness. Popular music, in contrast, is *immersed* in mass culture, but it also draws on an understanding of creativity that, influenced by rock ideology, often sees self-expression and authenticity as oppositional to standardization and profit-seeking, creating an "anti-mass" culture on a mass scale (Keightley 2001). As a result, pop music, at least at the level of creative process, remains an art form generally made in artisanal modes, by individuals and small groups with highly specialist craft skills (Toynbee 2000), insulated from the deleterious effects of rationalisation by a middle layer of management whose role is "to try and control and temper the capricious creative to corporate accumulation imperatives" (Banks 2007, p.9). The result is that musicians occupy a position of "negotiated autonomy" (Banks 2007, p.7) within an industry that reluctantly acknowledges the creative process as necessarily unwieldy.

Two of these three songs — "Money on My Mind" and "Price Tag" — are explicitly about experiences of working and creating within the music industry. In the former, Sam Smith's opening lines offer a succinct summation of the art-commerce tension he found there:

[Fig 1. Opening lines of "Money on My Mind"]

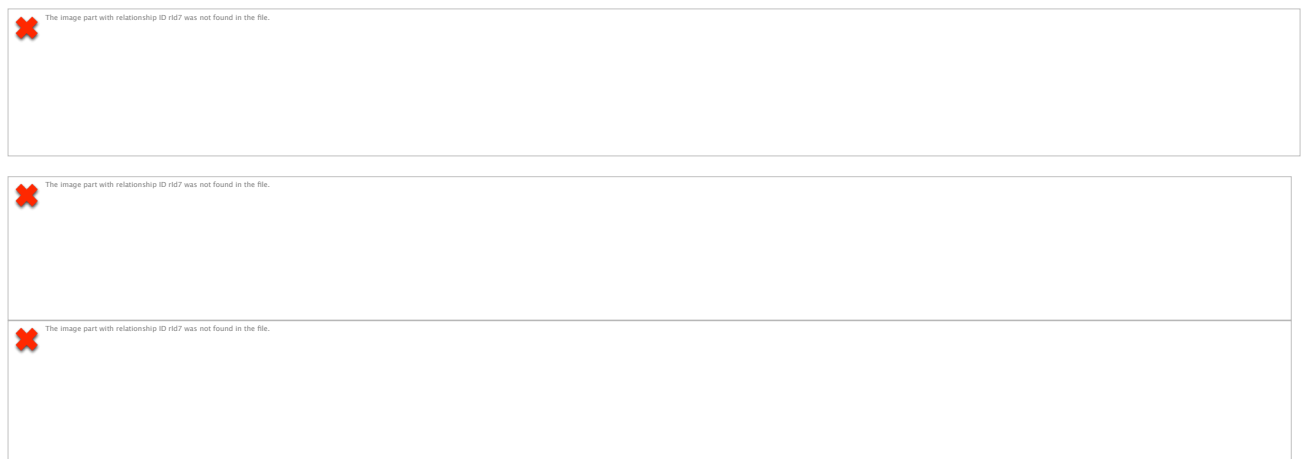


In the song's first real melodic movement, Smith jumps cleanly from the root-note up to the third on "heaven", isolating his artistic process, and its associated spirituality, from the mundane stresses of industry politics. Jessie J similarly bemoans the difficulty of music-making within a setting in which "the sale comes first and the truth comes second", and her contemporaries are "so serious" that they "can't even have a good time". Both artists set themselves up in opposition to the rational, calculating tendencies of their industry, instead placing value on experience and enjoyment.

Lorde's "Royals" is not lyrically situated within a context of music-making, but instead looks upon pop music culture as an outsider in order to critique its obsession with material goods as irrelevant to her own experience. In the same vein as The Smiths' "Panic" ("the music they constantly play, it says nothing to me about my life"), "Royals" questions pop music's mandate to represent the populace, and claims authenticity based upon a comparative proximity to social reality. Lorde recognises the power of pop culture to shape its audience's appetite for material goods ("I cut my teeth on wedding rings in the movies"), before demonstrating how her critical engagement with this culture resulted in a change of perspective ("my friends and I we've cracked the code"), establishing ideological clear water between herself and the consumer society that she now stands outside of ("we're not caught up in your love affair"). In doing so she is affirmed as authentically and autonomously *herself*, a product of her own self-reflexivity rather than in thrall to consumerist norms.

It would be easy to point out the hypocrisy evident in these songs, all of which decry the commercialisation of pop music whilst embedded within (and enjoying the benefits of) an industry that measures success by profitability. An alternative approach would be to read them as complex, ambiguous reflections on doing creative work within an environment where creativity and commerce and in near-constant negotiation. In each of these songs the opening chorus line, taken by itself, is a strident disavowal of commercialism. However, in each song the element of the hook that is repeated (either by the lead vocal line or in the backing vocal) is solely the symbol of wealth, rather than its negation:

Fig 2. Opening chorus lines of "Price Tag", "Royals", and "Money on My Mind" [repetition in bold]



The repetition of the commercial element without its critique suggests an absent-minded fascination with their subject matter, an almost subconscious intrigue which temporarily halts their anti-commercial impetus in order to linger, starry-eyed in the presence of wealth. This

lyrical reiteration is matched in all three songs by repetition of its rhythmic delivery, and in “Price Tag” and “Money on my Mind” also by melodic repetition (in “Royals” the repetition in the backing vocal arrives higher, in a two-note fanfaric pronouncement). This creates a second, more musical reading, that cuts across the first — whilst they insist that they *won’t*, they *don’t*, and it *isn’t*, the repetition infers that they *will*, they *do*, and it *is*. Banks identifies creative workers as the “embodiment” of the tension between art and commerce (2007, p.8), and in these songs this struggle is audibly performed, as three artists attempt to explicate their exteriority from a system whilst speaking from within it. Additionally, as the representation of their position is channeled through the formal specifics that designate it as a marketable pop song (song length, song structure, arrangement, dynamics, etc), each song doubly reflects its own position in relation to the art-commerce tension.

Having established how these songs represent their own position with regards to art, authenticity, and commerce I will now consider how these songs might also work to reflect and structure the experience of their audience, and of society more generally. Foucault uses the term “government” to describe “the conduct of conduct”, that is, the ways and means by which authorities and agencies attempt to guide subjects to certain ends, and which manifests itself in “tactics” (including discourse) that attempt to govern subjectivity itself, controlling our conception of and relationship to ourselves (Rose 1999). Banks, following Foucault, argues that power operates “not through overt domination” but through discourses in which power regimes are enunciated, and secondly by “ensuring that subjects are embedded in institutional contexts that enable the *self-exercise* of power” (2007, p.42). Pop music as a discourse (itself negotiated as a result of complex power struggles within the music industry and beyond) can contribute to its audience’s strategies of “self-government” by communicating “prescribed standards of behaviour that revolve around compliance with a set of apparently ‘natural’ norms, values and bodily practices” (Banks 2007, p.45).

In analysing the discourse of the songs that are the focus of my study, I wish to argue that they are in close affinity with the contemporary economic and social context of “aspirational labour.” I focus firstly on the theme of entrepreneurialism, building on Mark Banks’ identification of an “enterprise discourse” within creative labour, and then move to consider autonomy, a notion closely linked to ideas of enterprise and self-sufficiency, but which crucially leaves room to resist capitalistic notions of expansion and accumulation. In my conclusion I will return to the subject of aspirational labour and communicative capitalism in order to identify why the two elements of this discourse — entrepreneurship and autonomy — might be particularly prescient.

Duffy posits aspirational labour as an approach to the contemporary creative labour market whereby conditions of precarity and instability are combatted by “individualist appeals to passion and entrepreneurialism” that “temporally reroute employment concerns” (2015, pp.452-3). This has been similarly theorised as “hope labor” (Kuehn & Corrigan 2013), and is also addressed in the related concepts of “venture labor” (Neff 2012), “speculative work” (Kennedy 2013) and “free labour” (Terranova 2000). I use the term aspirational labour more broadly to cover work in which lack of adequate economic reward and/or unsatisfying work is excused or justified by the promise of future earnings, and which is broadly divisible into two categories.

Firstly, online creative work, which increasingly involves the integration of one’s self into an interconnected web of monopolistic media platforms in order to build and maintain an audience. Within this we might also include the administrative and social dimensions associated with this work, which also takes place on these platforms. We need to understand much of this activity as taking place within the domain of what Jodi Dean calls “communicative capitalism” (2010, p.4), in which capital finds fertile ground for production through the “expropriation and exploitation of communicative processes”. Dean argues that communicative capitalism “directly exploits the social relation at the heart of value,” and no longer needs to transform labour into surplus value through the commodity-form, having “found a more straightforward way to appropriate value” (2012). This tends to make the relationship between user and platform less antagonistic than that between worker and boss, as their aims — exposure, engagement, *communication* — are often complementary, and the user taking responsibility for growing their own “attention economy” generally serves platforms well. It also tends to mean, however, that structures of reward are muddled and notions about what work should earn (or even which work *has earned*) financial recompense is unclear.

Secondly, I also want to include within the remit of aspirational labour, albeit more tentatively, the sphere of work referred to within the media as the “gig economy”. Here, an individual worker’s income is accrued piecemeal through a variety of separate income channels, often involving substantially different types of work, and which “does not come with pensions, sick pay, holiday entitlement and parental leave” (Hutton 2016). This is primarily organised through online platforms such as Uber, Airbnb, Deliveroo, and Craigslist, and unlike much “immaterial labour” online, payment systems to users are regular and well-established, rather than being vaguely “promised” or hoped for at some later date (i.e. aspired to).

However, my justification for labelling this work as “aspirational” is based on the way in which gig work is almost always presented as secondary to some unspecified primary activity, paid or not, where workers locate their sense of personal and social meaning. Uber promises its drivers “work that puts you first — drive when you want, earn what you need” (Uber n.d.), offering the flexibility to work only to the minimum-level required to ensure subsistence, positioning subjectivity and meaning-making as more important, and also as none of their business. This work is aspirational because it always points to itself as temporary, a stopping-point on the way to self-realisation. It is important to note the distinction here between aspirational creative work and the kind of gig work which offers fewer (or no) opportunities for creative expression, and the often substantial differences between these types of work in terms of motivation, organisation, and reward (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011). However, creative work has often acted as a bellwether for changes in working conditions more broadly, and as more work calls for “on-demand” flexibility and autonomy, creative workers have been celebrated as its forerunners, acting as “the poster boys and girls of the new ‘precariat’” (Gill & Pratt 2008, p.3). In this way, discourses initially associated with creative work, such as those carried by these songs, are increasingly relevant to non-creative work.

In his 2007 study of the politics of cultural work, Banks identifies an “enterprise discourse” built upon a “modern pathology” of “self-reliance” (2007, p.47). He demonstrates how the close association of creativity and autonomy, filtered through a neoliberal economic system, results in a mode of “self-government” that “encourage[s] individuals to self-exploit to a level beyond that which would be imposed by the most fervent of capitalist employers” (p.43). Banks argues that “when individuals are forced to become their own enterprise, not only ‘success’ but ‘failure’ also become their own enterprise, demanding biographical solutions” (p.49). The second verse of “Money on My Mind” provides an example of entrepreneurial self-governance within the “negotiated autonomy” of Smith’s position within his industry:

Please don’t get me wrong, I want to keep it moving
I know what that requires, I’m not foolish
Please can you make this work for me?
I’m not a puppet, I will work against your strings

In order to “keep it moving” — a resonant evocation of capital’s ceaseless desire for productive activity — Smith is willing to make some alterations (only slight ones, mind) to his work and/or working conditions. Rather than acting as the “foolish” creative in need of management’s steady hand, Smith shows himself as closer to the self-governing

entrepreneur who has successfully internalised the logics of his industry. In this context the display of rebellion (“I will work against your strings”) reads more like an advance warning, an *asking of permission* which also acts a promise to his employers to display the necessary signs of authenticity, the pose of economic “disinterestedness” that Bourdieu regards as necessary for artists to consolidate cultural capital, even whilst its conspicuous display ensures their capitalisation upon it (Banks 2010).

Andrew Ross has argued powerfully that underpayment (for musical work, amongst other things) is “the natural outcome of a training in the habit of embracing non-monetary rewards — mental or creative gratification — as compensation for work” (2000). In employment both within and beyond of the creative industries, “emotional labour” often includes a “second paycheque,” an added bonus of “moral currency” often resulting in the actual paycheque being substantially lower (Johnson 2015). In his guest verse on Jessie J’s “Price Tag”, rapper B.o.B. proclaims “we do this for the love, so we fight and sacrifice every night”, making a direct link between this kind of “second paycheque” and the resulting trade-off in terms of financial reward, and the limited expectations that one ought to have if one aspires for self-realization over wealth. A key element of “enterprise discourse” is the entrepreneurial “war story”, the emphasis placed upon the “rites of passage and ‘hard knocks’ to be endured while building a business” (Banks 2010, p.60). This serves to validate and contextualise the lack of success experienced by aspiring creative workers by identifying it as a necessary part of a narrative that concludes with well-earned reward. The aspiring entrepreneurial worker is enticed into falling for the gambler’s fallacy: the assumption that periods of hard luck serve to increase the probability of good luck in the future, and that some external balancing force is keeping track of the score, poised to issue adequate recompense when the time comes. When B.o.B. argues that he and Jessie J are “leaping across these undefeatable odds,” he acknowledges this fallacy, and negates it through reference to the pair’s anomalous status as financially successful musicians.

Alongside this, there are also occasions where a sense of autonomy is more oppositional to the more capitalistic aspects of enterprise. When Lorde says, of her and her friends’ relative poverty, “everyone who knows us knows that we’re fine with this”, she constructs an argument for self-worth and contentment operating on a different metric to financial gain. This kind of self-realisation, especially when financial reward is discounted as a yardstick for measuring success, requires a kind of self-reflexivity that has a depoliticising and desocialising effect — success and failure become are attributed to the individual, resulting in “self-blaming” rather than an understanding or acknowledgement in the ways that

structures might limit or shape opportunities to do good or meaningful work (McRobbie 2002).

When Lorde argues that “life is great without a care”, the implication is that with wealth comes “cares”, i.e. the burden of responsibility and routine. Jessie J similarly notes that “money can’t buy you happiness”; Sam Smith winningly reassures us that “you know I have no money on my mind.” In “Royals”, the “rulers” that serve as Lorde’s antithesis are not literal monarchs, but the pop star representatives of hegemonic culture in which, as the bridge section elucidates, “every song” and “everybody” is engaged in a vainglorious celebration of conspicuous consumption:

But every song is like:
Gold teeth, Grey Goose, tripping in the bathroom
Bloodstains, ball gowns, trashing the hotel room
We don’t care — we’re driving Cadillacs in our dreams
But everybody’s like:
Cristal, Maybach, diamonds on your timepiece
Jet planes, islands, tigers on a gold leash
We don’t care — we’re not caught up in your love affair

The specific consumer brands name-checked here clearly signpost rap music (and its influence on mainstream pop) as the dominant cultural force which is the subject of her critique. Recognising this, some commentators have accused Lorde of racism, arguing that the denunciation of consumption is a privilege afforded to those who can afford to put ideological concerns ahead of material needs (Flores 2013). Contrast this approach with, for example, Jay-Z’s brazen admission in “Moment of Clarity” that “I dumbed down for my audience to double my dollars,” which suggests that to worry about artistic integrity over economic security is in fact a specific form of *inauthenticity* to lived experience. Whilst acknowledging this appropriately intersectional critique of “Royals” (and noting that Jessie J’s derogatory references to “bling” and “video hoes” carry similarly problematic racial overtones), my focus here is on the song’s presentation of autonomy as a countercultural or resistant practice, rather than its relationship to identity politics.

Much of the activity that takes place within communicative capitalism is operating at the intersection of work and leisure, where a discourse of autonomy is fundamental to the way in which relations between platforms and users are framed. Platforms, whether they are hosting creative content (YouTube, Soundcloud), everyday communication (Facebook,

Twitter), providing a marketplace (eBay, Etsy), or facilitating services (Uber, Airbnb, Deliveroo), place their users under no obligation to fulfill any minimum amount of activity. Indeed, the idea that a platform like YouTube might compel us to upload at least three videos a month or face the sack feels patently absurd — after all, we don't *work* for YouTube, so there is nothing to be sacked from. But we should also understand this as a post-Taylorist, even *post-management* approach to organising labour, in which the cost of (virtually) housing each additional “worker” is virtually nil, and therefore there is no significant disadvantage in having a “workforce” in which vast swathes are working at very low efficiency — an Airbnb host who only lets their spare room one night per year is still a viable, profitable user from the platform's perspective.

In an economy where space is no longer a primary concern, efficiency is no longer of critical importance. Platforms instead seek scope (a monopoly-hold over their sector), and they seek activity (the production of new content, the sharing of data, the audience for adverts). Time is still a concern, of course, placing a limitation on productivity, but arguably here autonomy acts as a trade-off, in which giving users freedom to come and go as they please is far more effective than paying them for a working day. The “reservoir” of non- and semi-professional cultural creators (Miège 1989), who have historically made up what Toynbee calls the “unassimilable” portion of musical production (2000, p.27), are now assimilable within an economy in which autonomy is far less “negotiated”, but also carries far less political weight. Platforms give users the choice to work hard, or to perform what we might call “soft” work — to utilise services only sporadically, in a way that is sometimes work and sometimes leisure, gaining access to platforms in exchange for things (content, data, attention) that might not feel like work at all. In such an economy, a discourse of efficiency is neither appropriate nor desirable, not only for platforms but for the users who seek better ways of understanding and claiming ownership over their experiences. What might be more appropriate is the discourse I have outlined within these songs, that extols the virtues of living autonomously “without a care”; that legitimates those rebels who “work against your strings” whilst encouraging them to “keep it moving”; that uses entrepreneurial war stories of “sacrifice” to sanction periods of underemployment; that values the “heaven” of self-realization over the “pressure” of profit; indeed, that considers money to be an *inappropriate* measure by which to gauge success... and yet remains obsessed by it. Jessie J's rallying cry of “we don't need your money” is valuable both from the perspective of the platforms in justifying underpayment, and from the users in terms of understanding their own work as worthwhile and successful.

Kuehn and Corrigan’s analysis of “hope labor” note that there are two ways in which the “risk” of perennial underpayment is denied or negated by their aspiring creatives. The first is by asserting that the “pleasures of social production” and the recognition of good work by peers are reward enough, even if opportunities for paid work should fail to materialise (2013, p.19). The second is through a refusal to contemplate the possibility of failure, as creative workers steadfastly assure themselves and others that it *will* pay off. With regards to the first, it is important to acknowledge the legitimacy of these non-monetary rewards, following Hesmondhalgh’s warning not to be too quick to over-identify all social production as (exploited) work, lest we erase the very real positive experiences and opportunities for self-realisation that stem from such activity (2010). But we ought also to acknowledge how communicative capitalism manages to capitalise from both the hardest workers and the “softest” in new and pernicious ways, creating unstable and unsatisfactory working conditions which then radiate outwards into other sectors. The discourse I have identified in these three pop songs serves to legitimate both the hard and the soft worker — the aspirational entrepreneur is promised eventual reward for their sacrifice and their genuine “love” of what they do; the hobbyist or lifestyle-creative is given a framework for measuring self-realization in which financial recompense is an inappropriate metric. The discourse of autonomy values a flexible approach to self-governance entirely in keeping with an economy in which social value is captured regardless of the profitability or sustainability of our own individual ventures.

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