

Tour Crew Mental Health: There's a Big Problem So Let's Address It!

By Catherine Harrison

Music is magical. Live music can be awe-inspiring and spine-tingling, bringing us together as a community. It can bring us to tears, exhilarate us, and make us laugh, cry, howl, and move. It's no wonder that millions of people want to work in the music industry, and hundreds of thousands do. They want to be part of it and make it their life's work.

Working in the music industry can be fulfilling, and unforgettable. It can also be debilitating, heartbreaking, stressful, and lonely. Neuroscience has proven the link between music and its positive impact on mental health. And numerous research studies have demonstrated the connection between a stressful job and adverse mental health.

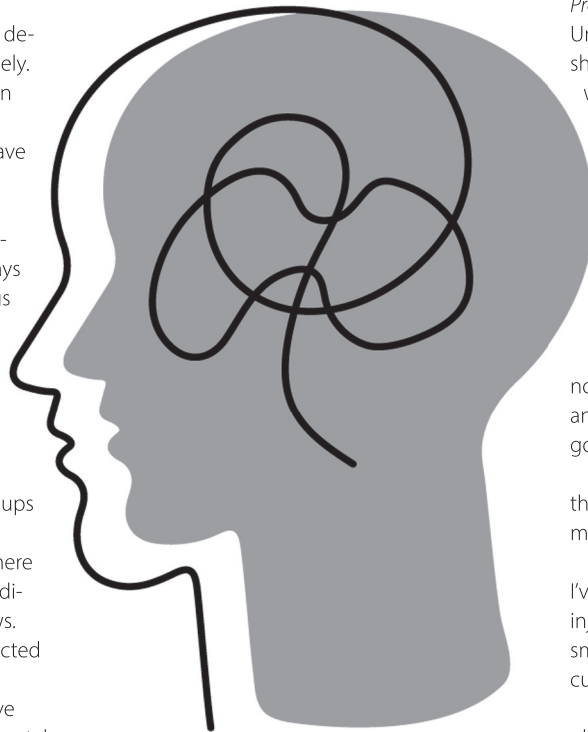
For the massive population of behind-the-scenes crews ensuring the show always goes on, one of the most important things we can do is reconcile both sides and see that the good and the bad can be true simultaneously. The backstage crew are the voices often not heard, and the stories often untold.

For as long as humans have been discussing humans, hierarchies between groups and within groups have been observed. Within the music industry (a collective), there are artists, management, corporations, audiences, and technical, trade, and road crews. What is the experience of that interconnected working community? How has COVID-19 shifted the already precarious nature of live music crew work? How has it impacted mental and overall health? What are the barriers and opportunities to optimal work/life balance and well-being for those in these functional teams? What can we do?

In her book *Atlas of the Heart*, Brené Brown says, "When we're in pain, it is easy to turn inward and collapse into our fear, anxiety, sadness, and stress." To heal our universal human distress conditioning, we must turn outward, engage with our community, give and receive support and understanding, and learn how to

live a more healthful, balanced life at work and home.

A stagehand/technician/backstage crew/roadie is a person who works backstage or behind the scenes in theatres, live music, film, television, or location performance. The metaphor of a duck on the water is apt for a live music event: The audience sees only the smooth performers on the stage; meanwhile, below the surface is controlled chaos. At what personal cost do these incredible shows go



on? The working environment is generally not conducive to optimal health and well-being. Poor nutrition, chronic substance use, poor sleep habits, erratic exercise habits, and living in the dark most of the time all contribute to the daily reality of the crew. The livelihood of a backstage worker can be precarious, challenging, chaotic, underappreciated, and invisible. This is in combination with the rapidly changing music industry itself. For the majority

of artists, relatively little money is being made from recording music anymore; thus, the entire focus is on live performances. And we know that the show only goes on because of the technical proficiency of the backstage crew.

Live shows can employ hundreds of touring and local workers. Yet, these people are invisible by design (black shirt, anyone?) and often under-appreciated and under-supported regarding health and well-being.

In a 2014 paper called *Living the Dream: Precarious Labour in the Live Music Industry*, University of Toronto Professor Adam Zende shared these observations from interviewees working in the industry:

"People do not think about these roles at all. When you go to a show, it never even occurs to [the audience] that there is a crew of people, and it is not visible; it is not supposed to be a visible thing. As a society, people assume that nobody is doing it. That it gets done on its own like black magic."

"Everybody thinks it is just the artist. It's not. Without us, your artist will sound like crap, and you're going to see a horrible show, which goes for all lighting, audio, and video."

"...the last day we worked 24 hours. So that's crazy! And a day rate does not end at midnight. It ends when the load out is done."

"I've never been too sick to do the show. I've never had a sick day. And as far as the injury, I've been injured. I've had my hands smashed in a freight elevator... I'd have my legs cut up...it's dark."

The long working hours, irregular schedules, seasonal variation, extended periods of unemployment, and extended periods of work (travelling for weeks or months) continue to have profound personal, familial, and social costs. Workers hold multiple jobs simultaneously and change positions throughout their careers. The lack of job stability, combined with changing demands from employers, and the short life span of projects, means that workers have little opportunity for career growth and instead have to reinvent themselves throughout their careers.

All humans require physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual balance and a sense of belonging and community. We need those things wherever we are. Because work is an integral part of what we do and who we are, enabling health and well-being in the workplace is even more critical. Industry technicians often describe their job as one of their most self-identifying attributes. Being part of the community is a deep part of who they are as individuals. We must remember all the good that comes from working in the music industry. People join it because they love music and want to be part of the experience.

We can see the path to better mental health and well-being as preventive and proactive, not just reactive. Even more important than materialistic terms, equality and equity come when an individual feels valued as a person. Full stop. When people have a sense of belonging, or “perceived social support,” they feel valued in a community; they have courage and belief in their strengths and potentiality. This flourishes in an environment based on mutual respect, agency, and trust. The individual and the collective are interdependent and interconnected, always. The health of one is based on the health of the other.

A 2019 U.K. study by Dr. Paul Hanna gathered feedback from 1,302 people working in lighting, audio, backstage, and other show crew teams. It reported that mental health concerns are more prevalent in the technical backstage entertainment industry (58.7%) than in the general population (25%) and that working conditions are considered to contribute to sub-optimal well-being. The study also reinforced the stigma associated with mental health in the industry. Most respondents shared that they had experienced stigma about their mental health or that negative attitudes about it prevented people from asking for and receiving support. Social stigma remains one of the most significant barriers to well-being, including self-stigma and concern of being ostracized by family and friends or not feeling safe to seek help. Of the respondents who sought and received mental health support, they did so through governmental or private healthcare resources, not industry-specific services, primarily due to a lack of awareness that such programs exist. The study suggested that the best way to support mental health in the industry was through increased awareness, openness to dialogue, education, and access to help. Enabling self-efficacy and preventative health practices were key areas to invest in. And this was all pre-COVID! These issues are global, and we’re all in it together.

Kayleigh Truman published a significant research paper in 2021 about the everyday experiences of stress and distress within the



PHOTO: EVIE WAYNES



PHOTO: MICHAEL RAINE

technical support community. Truman is a working stagehand in New York City, Local One, IATSE (The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees) and holds a master’s degree in labour. As they cited, approximately 95% of the entertainment industry was shut down when COVID-19 hit, bringing an abrupt halt to work, income, and a sense of self and community. Although the live music industry is known for its turbulent working conditions, especially for behind-the-scenes technicians and roadies, the pandemic brought it to a new level. Truman surveyed 271 stagehands based in New York City for their study. Results of the study showed that although there were standard reports of stress and financial concerns during the pandemic, 23% of respondents actually reported a greater sense of overall health and mental health during the shutdown. That is because, these respondents said, during the shutdown, they could invest time and energy into better sleep hygiene, healthy eating, activity habits, spending time with loved ones, and engaging in other community activities. For multiple respondents, it was the first time in

decades, if not their adult lives, that they could make medical appointments without fear of cancelling work. However, most respondents reported higher levels of stress, anxiety, and concern, especially concerning losing a sense of self and feeling lonely. They didn’t know what to do with their time, worried about diminished physical strength and capability to do the job once the pandemic was over, and generally experienced lower psychological and physical wellness levels.

Overall, 65.8% of respondents reported feeling neutral or struggling during the pandemic, and 47% reported feeling worse or somewhat worse than before the pandemic shutdown. These data expose the variety of experiences people can have depending on other support factors. Chronic stress can become psychological distress, which includes “generalized anxiety, burnout, and depressive symptoms.”

According to Jeordie Shenton, Tonic Rider Coordinator and Ph.D. researcher in the U.K., one of the most significant opportunities for change is “to recognize that everyone has



different needs and preferences for how they support their mental health. There's no right way or wrong way." Tonic Rider is an organization that provides non-clinical mental health support to people in the music industry. Shenton says they help equip people with the skills to manage mental health concerns in various circumstances. They focus on preventative workshops, peer support, training, and the provision of clinical support when required.

Through my own current M.A. (psychology) studies, I have researched and written about diversity, equity, inclusion, organizational hierarchies, and workplace communities and how these dynamics can support or detract from a person's health and well-being. Over the past five years, I have also investigated mental health in the music industry. These two perspectives have joined to create a better understanding of how various marginalized groups operate within the larger industry community, including the crews. Management is at the top, then the artist (if it's a superstar, possibly the other way around), the audience, and then the dozens or hundreds of people who ensure the show goes on. They often have very little autonomy and agency. Feeling disempowered and working in a toxic culture contribute to low psychological and emotional well-being. This can lead to further tension and harmful interactions, even within crew teams, representing a compelling social science concept known as "crabs in the barrel." According to the research, this phenomenon is when individuals within a given status group create competition and hierarchy, often leading to negative interpersonal relationships and toxic work environments as they fight for dominance. Many roadies report that the worst behaviour and interpersonal treatment comes from supervisors within their ranks.

One of the organizations working to improve touring life and home life is The Roadie Clinic, based in Niles, MI. In 2019, Paul and Courtney Klimson started the non-profit

organization to support roadie peers and their families. Paul is one of the most sought-after veteran audio engineers in America, with a 20+ year background in touring, television, and recording. He has worked with The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, Justin Timberlake, and Drake and provides one-on-one peer chat sessions with roadies in need. In a recent interview, he shared that since touring opened post-COVID-19, gig planning has been erratic and inconsistent, with sudden bookings and cancellations becoming the norm.

Constant uncertainty leads to chronic stress. Recently, a roadie shared with Paul that "life on the road is like being a cop, where you get a huge dopamine rush (a brain chemical that makes you feel great), and then nothing, the plunge. The ups and downs can be very destabilizing." Many roadies report constant feelings of insecurity, imposter syndrome, paranoia, identity crises, isolation, and struggling to find balance in their lives. Another roadie shared, "There are times when I feel like crying because I'm in these places of awesomeness or beauty, and it's just me alone and no one I care about to share it with. And this is the crux of entertainment touring." Roadies can both love and hate their jobs at the same time!

The employee shortage facing all industries is the same in live music right now. There is simply a need for more skilled and experienced technicians to put on the shows as expected. Experienced veterans are either retiring, exposing significant talent gaps in the system, or staying, but realizing they want a better work-life balance. Younger workers must be trained, mentored, and supported as they learn the trades. Until these two realities are reconciled, this puts the health and safety of everyone involved at risk: the technicians, the artists, and the audience members. We can all remember news stories of stages and rigging collapsing: Indiana State Fair (2011), the Radiohead tour (Toronto, 2012), Rolling Loud Festival in Miami (2001), and Spain's Medusa Festival stage (2022), to name a few.

Without psychological safety, technicians can't speak up when something is not right, ready, or safe; a piece of equipment needs to be replaced, or someone is being bullied or harassed. These kinds of situations will continue to occur at an ever-increasing rate.

During a recent Zoom call, Peter Darwin gave me similar feedback. He is a seasoned tour and production manager based in Adelaide, Australia, who works with artists like Keith Urban and site manages stadium concerts at Adelaide Oval, among other venues. Darwin believes the lack of skilled workers is a genuine concern, also contributing to chronic adverse mental health. Fewer workers with less experience equal greater risk. This can lead to constant stress and distress.

COVID-19 exposed the downsides of the casual "gig" work that crew and technicians have experienced for decades. Workers often come together for a few weeks, then disconnect again for periods. There is less opportunity for meaningful relationships to develop, with persistent uncertainty and low stability. This can lead to sub-optimal mental health on tour and at home.

After the abrupt halt of work in 2020, some skilled workers have come back, but many decided to shift professions altogether and maintain a more balanced life with time for health, family, and friends, even if it meant a reduction in pay. Nonmonetary benefits are becoming more and more critical to workers. The break of COVID-19 illuminated the often-hostile work environment and cultural practices. In his view, many producers and promoters are in denial, and vendors and crew struggle. How can we take ownership of small, daily routines to support ourselves and each other within the broken industry infrastructure?

Darwin cites the crew's mental health as a critical concern. He believes that the primary barrier is institutional practices, and the most meaningful opportunity is at the crew level: to learn small, daily routines to support ourselves and each other. Darwin is the chair of Crew Care, a volunteer-based advocacy group that provides

Mental Health First Aid and additional training in conjunction with SupportAct. Their programs address practical solutions to negative workplace habits and support individuals and groups looking to improve their daily lives at work.

In my work as a human-centred leadership expert, I help organizations cultivate awareness and reflective mindsets to develop practices that support the well-being of the individuals and teams at work. This can and should be applied in the live music industry too. People need to be taught how to communicate effectively, manage stress, and handle conflict in healthy ways in high-pressure, fast-paced environments. Human-centred leadership means focusing on exceptional results, successful outcomes, or business profits while also recognizing the inherent value of all human beings in the business model.

Brad Schiller believes that the most significant barrier to mental health remains the expected back-to-back 12 to 16-hour workdays. As an Austin-based technical lighting expert, author, and veteran in the industry, he makes the point: "There are regulations for truck and bus drivers regarding maximum hours before needing to sub out. Why not the same for crew?"

Schiller is encouraged by the different conversations happening now. "People are talking, sharing, asking for help, and offering help. The big corporations need to be aware of the issues and how they relate to their bottom lines and risk mitigation and start investing in the well-being of the road crew. Crew management companies must provide time to leverage industry resources and cultivate more openness and compassion. It's not perfect, but we're moving in the right direction."

Influential artists need to add advocacy and practical support for road crew in their riders. Many artists are very vocal about being 'green' and politically progressive. Let's add supporting the health and well-being of the crew to that focus.

Shenton asserts that we must find the middle ground between mental illness and mental wellness. We don't want to wait until things get unavoidably bad to provide support and resources. Like musicians, roadies experience the non-nine-to-five-ness of the touring life, are often time-lagged, and work in darkness much of the time. The repetitiveness of touring – sharing the same day repeatedly for days, weeks, or months – is not often recognized. This routine can lead to apathy, substance use, chronic fatigue, and disconnection from oneself. When you can't take time off to recover, be sick, and regain balance, conditions can quickly spiral downhill.

So, if you're reading this, what can you do?

If you're a technician, know that you're not alone. Reach out to the existing industry

resources and access affordable expertise and support. Find your community and begin identifying what you need to have optimal health and well-being within your work and home life. Wherever you are on the continuum of mental health, you can invest in preventative and supportive measures to improve your well-being.

If you're an artist, continue to advocate for your crew. It might be as significant as rider inclusion or as simple as ensuring they're recognized and supported throughout the working experience. Be a voice, publicly thank them, and challenge tour companies to create better working conditions.

If you're in management (tech companies, tour companies, event companies), focus on learning—tackle critical issues like stigma and negative attitudes toward mental health concerns. Invest in preventative training and development. Provide infrastructure and functional changes to ways of working to support optimal wellness on and off the job. Bring together teams to co-create new ways of working where you can realize business outcomes and maintain positive work environments for the crew through meaningful practices. Ensure your powerful voice can speak for the less powerful. It's a good business model for ethical sustainability.

If you're an audience member, become more aware of how important these people are to your experience; recognize them as professionals; learn, appreciate, and share their stories.

For everyone, participate in free Mental Health First Aid and Anti-Bullying Bystander Training. Learn how to maintain balance and well-being for yourself and how to support others. Remember the common humanity we all share. Ask questions, listen, learn, and challenge your stigma and bias about mental health and grind culture.

Remember to acknowledge and appreciate the people behind the scenes working to ensure your fantastic experience the next time you're at a live show. To quote Truman, "Stagehands are the firefighters and magicians of the entertainment world, and deserve to live life, not just survive it."



Catherine Harrison is a Canadian musician, certified professional coach, author, human-centred leadership expert, and advocate for inclusive and equitable well-being. Catherine provides non-clinical mental health support to music industry professionals. She is changing the conversation about holistic mental health through education, reducing stigma, and facilitating open, courageous communication.
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RESOURCES TO HELP

BEHIND THE SCENES

wp.behindthescenescharity.org

The Behind the Scenes charity issues grants to entertainment technology professionals, or their immediate dependent family, in need due to serious illness or injury that may be used for basic living, medical or funeral expenses. The charity also issues counseling grants to assist with the costs of seeing a therapist or in-patient or out-patient rehabilitation. It is U.S.-based but expanding is currently expanding its range of services to Canadian industry members.

THE ROADIE CLINIC

www.theroadieclinic.com

The mission of The Roadie Clinic is to empower and heal roadies and their families by providing services and resources tailored to the struggles of touring. They offer: mental health resources, family support, peer chats, 12-step meetings, suicide prevention, overdose prevention, healthcare, financial literacy, and legal consultants

THE UNISON FUND

www.unisonfund.ca

Unison is a non-profit, registered charity that provides counselling and emergency relief services to the Canadian music industry, including engineers, technicians, and any working others live music or recording fields. They are there to help artists and music professionals in times of hardship, illness, or economic difficulties.

TONIC MUSIC FOR MENTAL HEALTH

www.tonicmusic.co.uk/tonic-rider

Tonic Music for Mental Health is a British charity that offers bespoke training and support for music industry professionals, which includes music industry-specific mental health support.

SUPPORT ACT

Supportact.org.au

Support Act is an Australian music industry charity, delivering crisis relief services to musicians, managers, crew and music workers across all genres who are unable to work due to ill health, injury, a mental health problem or some other crisis, such as COVID-19.

CREWCARE

Crewcare.org.au

CrewCare is a membership-based, democratic, not-for-profit charity, whose mission is to effect change for the better in crew welfare — personally, financially and professionally. The CrewCare board is a collective of caring, like minded volunteers, dedicated to improving the welfare of Australian technical and creative live production professionals and their families.