Are Musicians Entrepreneurs?
A Preliminary Analysis

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Abstract: In this narrative literature review, we employed the grounded theory for studying the scientific debate, the contradictions, and the tensions between entrepreneurship and music activity. In particular, this work represents a preliminary study for a more in-depth future analysis of this relationship. The analysis let emerge two superordinate structures, five themes, and eight subthemes. The two superordinate structures represent the most relevant tensions we found in the analyzed articles. The first tension highlights the complicated relationship between musicians’ identity and the entrepreneurial nature of their job. The second tension studies the needed compromises that musicians have to consider between the individualistic nature of their art and the needed conformism imposed by the capitalistic environment of the music market. Finally, in the discussion section, we consider this preliminary study’s limitations and propose several further research opportunities.

1. INTRODUCTION

The definition of music entrepreneur, ascribable to arts entrepreneurs, is not entirely achieved. Scott (2012) suggests that “cultural entrepreneurs are a social group comprising mostly young people whose primary life goal is to build an artistic career” (Scott, 2012:238). This definition shows two of the main characteristics of music and arts entrepreneurs. The first element of the sentence interprets these entrepreneurs as a social group, and the second element interprets music entrepreneurs as people who aim to build a career in the arts field. Their main objective is not to generate revenues or profits. In fact, music entrepreneurs are a category of entrepreneurs somewhat different from traditional conceptualizations because the entrepreneurial abilities for the music and creative industry cannot be entirely taught. Moreover, many successful firms and many individual artists who can be classified as music entrepreneurs who achieved the top in their musical genre have no background in economics, business, or entrepreneurship (van Zuilenburg, 2012).

The general environment of the music industry is widely changed after the advent of digital technology that has been intensely reducing the revenues of recorded music (Everts & Haynes 2021; Haynes & Marshall 2018). This change, which reached the music industry and other realities, has produced considerable modifications to the structure of creative entrepreneurship. In particular, the manners through which musicians interpret these changes and the related actions that have to be undertaken need particularly in-depth analysis.

Creative abilities remain the most critical precondition for an artist’s success (Albinsson, 2016). However, musicians have to express their entrepreneurial potential for emerging in their mar-
kets. These conditions create an intrinsic contradiction between the nature of the arts, interpreted as an expression of the creative and anti-system individuality of an artist, and the nature of entrepreneurship as interpreted from a popular viewpoint, i.e., as a profit-oriented activity that is entirely disconnected to ethical, social and human issues.

The environment in which musicians and entrepreneurs have to live currently is simultaneously varying and stimulating but complex and precarious. During the current era, which achieved a higher level of complexity due to the Covid-19 pandemic that increases the difficulties of live music entertainment, musicians have new methodologies for creating a critical mass of audience for emerging in their field (Marttila, 2012). Furthermore, over time, musicians have been forced to hardly strive for creating and conducting new typologies of secondary professions, improvised and autonomous, that let them emerge as entrepreneur models that are different compared to the traditional conceptualization of entrepreneurs. At the same time, this precarious condition stimulates the creativity for an entrepreneurship viewpoint, and it has been creating the preconditions for developing the musicians’ preference for the competition rather than cooperation (Coulson, 2012).

In this complicated system of contradiction between individualism, which originated from the needs and the precarious conditions of the music environment, and conformism, needed for achieving a critical mass of potential fans, there are also ethical and moral issues that music entrepreneurs and musicians experiment during their professional lives. In particular, literature verified that many musicians who show entrepreneurial competencies struggle to accept being considered entrepreneurs (Coulson, 2012). These conditions have been developing a new way to see entrepreneurship among musicians, that is a kind of self-referential conceptualization that sees this positions separated from the rational logic of profit and revenues generations and closer to a form of entrepreneurship that promotes social cohesion and the sense of belonging among creative workers (Wilson & Stokes, 2002).

Therefore, it seems clear that the music market shows for musicians many threats and few advantages, given the reconversion of its nature from physic to digital, the precarious of a capitalistic system that aims to competition rather than cooperation (Scott, 2012) which is currently and strongly compromised by Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. The entrepreneurial abilities of musicians and record companies succeeding in surviving to the current difficulties keeping their ideals and principles stable are promoting the entrepreneur figure as an essential social and economic member. Nevertheless, it is generally possible to identify more relevant issues and financial risks connected to the choice of undertaking a music career nowadays, comparing them to the last decades of the last Century (Everts & Haynes, 2021).

In such a complex contest, which is rich in practical and ethical contradictions, both economic and moral, it is understandable that musicians are reluctant to ascribe their professional category to entrepreneurial activity. On the one hand, the consideration of value represents the foundation of the individual development of artists, who should be considered members of the community. Through their arts, artists let emerge the contradictions of the system. On the other hand, musicians need to compromise to continue with their music career in the contemporary capitalistic arts environment. Given all these premises, we argue that there is a need to answer this research question:

RQ: Given the literature evidence, what is the relationship between music and the entrepreneurial nature of their creative and artistic activity? In other words, are musicians entrepreneurs nowadays?
This preliminary study is structured as follows. A methodological section, in which we explain how we developed this article, precedes the evidence that emerged from the application of the grounded methodology to the existing literature on the topic. In particular, the section describes and comments on the main contents that emerged from the analysis of selected articles. Finally, in the discussion section, we consider the possible and preliminary answers to the research question, the limitations of this preliminary study, and the opportunities for further research.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study represents a preliminary analysis based on a narrative literature review concerning the intersection between entrepreneurship and music. In particular, we performed the research through Google Scholar, using the string *musicians AND entrepreneurs*. Moreover, we used a grounded approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1997) to achieve data saturation and write the content analysis included in the 3rd paragraph.

We employed the grounded analysis through open, axial, and selective coding to let the main themes and subthemes debated in the literature emerge. This approach allowed us to find two superordinate structures, five themes, and eight subthemes representing the preliminary result for the subsequent development of the topic. Through the open coding, we studied the contents article per article, identifying the codes that, at least at the beginning, seemed to be relevant for the general discourse on the intersection between music and entrepreneurship. After that, axial coding allowed us to identify the connections among the previous codes. We found the most relevant categories through this coding, gathering the most meaningful codes within each category and eliminating the codes and categories that were not relevant for the debate. Finally, the selective coding allowed us to classify themes and subthemes shown in the 3rd paragraph.

Figure 1 shows the process we employed for researching and studying the selected article.

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**Figure 1.** Grounded approach employed during this preliminary study
3. CONTENT ANALYSIS

In this section, we present the content analysis of the articles selected through the grounded procedure. In particular, two superordinate structures, five themes, and eight subthemes emerged during the study. Figure 2 shows the conceptual map of the results.

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**Figure 2.** Superordinate structures, themes, and subthemes
3.1. Superordinate structure 1: Musicians are (and are reluctant to be considered) entrepreneurs

3.1.1. Theme 1: Entrepreneurship and music

Subtheme: Is this coexistence possible?

Achieving a comprehensive discussion about the intersection between entrepreneurship and music passes through the convergence of the conceptualization of the entrepreneur. The literature separates the idea of music entrepreneurs from the traditional conceptualization of entrepreneurship, which interprets entrepreneurs as individuals searching for profits. Moreover, the tendency to move away from this idea is not recent. With the emergence of sustainability-related thematic, the literature has been clarifying that the firms’ objective should be different from the research of a short-run profit. Since the era of Shumpeter (1934), entrepreneurs have been considered something closer to a creative action man rather than an avid and calculating individual.

Therefore, the general concepts of entrepreneurs and artists are connected if considered from a philosophical and scientific in-depth analysis. Nevertheless, often the entrepreneurs’ need for an economic return to ensure the sustainability of their businesses has a strong effect on the visibility of their actions. In other words, the entrepreneur is noticed more immediately than visionary artists who, instead, are often not searching for immediate and massive recognition (Haynes & Marshall, 2018). In fact, sometimes they are understood only after decades (or centuries) after their death.

During an interview with the composer of progressive rock music Frank Zappa (RockIt, 2016), the musician explained clearly how the entrepreneurial music world has been changing over time between the Seventies and the Eighties. The fundamental difference is that music entrepreneurs were not musicians at the beginning of the record industry history. They were investors who decided to record music independently from their music knowledge, which did not exist. Therefore, achieving a high level of conformism and convergence in music styles was not possible in this environment. The musical experimentation was much more intense. When this approach has changed, the musical direction of the record industries has started to be assigned to music experts. Instead of leaving the audience the decision about what music has to be listened to, they began to decide for the audience.

Moreover, music entrepreneurs, especially independent musicians, do not have a classic vision of entrepreneurial risk. In fact, literature verified that the musicians’ requests for bank loans, in general, are not a choice that musicians make (Wilson & Stokes, 2005).

Subtheme: Entrepreneurship VS music entrepreneurship

The position of musicians is not associative in a complete way with the different visions of classic entrepreneurial activities. According to Albinsson (2018), musicians should act (and admit to acting) as a form of entrepreneurship based on opportunity. In fact, the velocity by which the music market and music industry change over time, together with the background context and the related music, oblige freelance musicians to keep a proactive behavior toward the market. Moreover, the music labor market is intensely hostile for musicians. In fact, it obliges them to keep social networks developed and perform in many different professions and duties connected to the main one, i.e., music. This aspect surely enriches the vision of music entrepreneur as a
proactive and creative subject but, at the same time, makes them more individualistic and forces them to continue research for the completeness of their identity (Coulson, 2012).

From the viewpoint of personality traits, music entrepreneurs seem to show the exact characteristics of traditional entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference. In fact, it seems the music entrepreneurs cannot be entirely trained in their activity. Therefore, there is a sort of innate predisposition for this profession. For this reason, some workers belonging to the music field cannot achieve the success their desire. The reason is that their personality is much more associable to a condition in which they can express their full potential and their vocation if they rest bordered in an environment that is directed by other people (Van Zuilenburg, 2013).

Evert et al. (2021) distinguished two typologies of musicians. The first type is composed of arts-oriented musicians, who substantially interpret their role and job as a vocation dedicated mainly or exclusively to their profession. The second type concerns business-oriented musicians, who instead do other professions together with music, outsource some activities, and align more with the traditional idea of entrepreneurship. This contradiction has also been identified concerning high-level entrepreneurs, such as music-industry executives (Wilson & Stokes, 2005). In fact, while such entrepreneurs have a business education background and training, the community that surrounds them and that influences, through its economic contribution, musicians and music market management does not have an actual entrepreneurial culture.

3.1.2. Theme 2: Identity and music

Subtheme: Musicians’ identity: contradictions and entrepreneurial education

Musicians’ identity struggles to reflect in the vision of arts entrepreneurship, despite the new generation recognizing more than the generation belonging to the Seventies (Scott, 2012). Musicians keep over time their elevated cultural position. In summary, musicians’ social position is to entertain and innovate with arts to earn sufficiently to continue this profession’s entire life. Therefore, it is tough to associate music entrepreneurship with a material vision of labor. Instead, musicians can be ascribed preferably to the figure of social entrepreneurs (Albinsson, 2018).

The research of identity completion for musicians is a relevant issue. In fact, musicians are reluctant to recognize themselves in the materialistic nature of their profession. Although their behavior is often associated with entrepreneurs, musicians do not talk about themselves, referring to their entrepreneurial identity (Coulson, 2012). Nevertheless, the nature of the artists’ work is highly distinctive. The artists’ objective is to distinguish themselves from the other artists and the crowd to propose their original interpretation of reality and the future. In this sense, during the research of their identity, musicians experiment with a constant crisis between the individualistic and profit-oriented nature of their work, needed to make their career sustainable in the long run, and their self-awareness as social entrepreneurs.

Although it seems clear that entrepreneurship in the creative industry can represent a point of reference for other typologies of entrepreneurship, the problem of music entrepreneurs’ identity leaves some entrepreneurial operations incomplete. In fact, the analysis of single creative markets published in the literature, such as the UK (Wilson & Stokes, 2002) and Greece (Dawe, 1998), highlighted that such a contradiction puts in a difficult position the realization of communication abilities of creative entrepreneurs. Everts et al. (2021), who analyzed the Dutch music
market, identified a contradiction between arts-oriented and business-oriented musicians. In particular, there is not an agreement between the two groups of musicians on the correct methods for conducting their music activity, dividing the development of their identity in two different paths, the first tends toward the interpretation of self as a subject of vocation, the second toward the interpretation of self as a subject of the market.

The survival of this market is strongly dependent on the communication style, the existence of strategic partnerships, and promotion planning. For this reason, the tendency to the individualism of musicians should be limited through a better entrepreneurial culture. In summary, musicians’ identities can be completed, but they should be trained and educated sufficiently to ensure their self-awareness. This evolution is possible only by acquiring entrepreneurial competencies connected to communication that appears latent and not expressed by the music and creative entrepreneurs.

**Subtheme: Valorization of musicians’ identity and accumulation of symbolic capital**

Music has a particular value of use since it is not perishable over time and causes an accumulation of symbolic capital able to modify the identity of who uses it. For this reason, music entrepreneurs try to build their position within the business environment as “subjects of value” (Scott, 2012: 251). In this sense, music production, which is individualistic and at the same time business-oriented, is ascribed to a circuit of exploitation of symbolic capital that generates new cultural tendencies and that is associated perfectly with the conceptualization of social entrepreneurship, as described by Albinsson (2018).

Following the digitalization of the music industry, musicians’ business model, especially for independent musicians, has been changing considerably (Eiriz & Leite, 2017). In a panorama in which music is distributed for free in most cases, the valorization of single artists’ identity can be compromised by the necessity of ensuring an immediate monetary reward. Considering the complex capitalistic system in which it is assimilated, the recording industry aims for a short-term reward and immediate profits that can be improbably matched to symbolic capital accumulation. This contrast is relatively strong and threatens the correct way toward completing the single artists’ identity.

The accumulation of symbolic music capital should not be confused with a nonexistent concept of inestimable capital. The value of the arts is indeed intangible but not inestimable (Cartwright et al., 2015) and highlights a double condition of artists as members of a community that should support them through injection of capital and as an individual who has to nestle their creativity within their community. Therefore, although the success of the creative activity can be affected by the presence of collaboration among the stakeholders, it is essential to remember that the creative process is an individual activity (Wilson & Stokes, 2005). In general, the literature verified the presence of many contradictions within the sector of value creation in the music industry, especially concerning the objective of this creation. Such contradictions are very similar to the tensions discussed in the debate on the nature of music entrepreneurs between capitalistic context and creative individualism (Sternal, 2017).

**3.1.3. Theme 3: Early-career musicians**

It is highly complex to separate the role of musicians into performer and teacher. In fact, they are a moral duty for artists that consists of the diffusion of their talent and knowledge. Johansson (2012) identified some contradictions in this regard and interpreted these tensions as opportunities to im-
prove the general music environment and generate innovative solutions. Music is indeed an art toward which people approach because a passion pushes them, and this is an opportunity and a threat. The considerable volatility of this premise can allow musicians to employ their entrepreneurial abilities to define new solutions to emerging problems. Moreover, the general conditions in which musicians live, often forgotten by the institutions as demonstrated by the numerous protests that occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic, are complex and, even if they are an objective problem, they are also a motivation that can lead towards new entrepreneurial activities, for example, online education.

At the beginning of their career, musicians dedicated much time to their music activity, although they had to dedicate some time to other professions (Everts et al., 2021). Nevertheless, in the light of what emerged in the previous emerged themes, for several authors, it is critical to ask the prerequisites for the choice made by young people to participate in the music scene becoming musicians and music entrepreneurs (e.g., Everts & Haynes, 2021). In fact, the complexities of the market music panorama oblige to consider can discourage, at first sight, young musicians and new voices who, however, should keep their individualistic nature or adapt, with difficulty, to a progressive debasement of their identity, advantaging the capillary and conformist diffusion of artistic and music contents. Talent shows and illusorily fasts success fostered by social platforms should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, reasons that push young people to start a career in music should be researched in more profound explanations.

### 3.2. Superordinate structure 2: Musicians in the capitalistic digital era

#### 3.2.1. Theme 4: Social media, entrepreneurship, and music

**Subtheme: Is nowadays musicians’ success different compared to the past?**

There are numerous similarities between how musicians achieve success nowadays and in the past. If we think, for example, of Beethoven and Paganini, their success did not depend only on their compositions and performances. It has been a gradual process that stabilized their social position, exactly as today happens when musicians create their audience and foster it through social media. In other words, the difference between the current and the past entrepreneurial structure, especially for music, concerns the timing with which such a success is achieved, but there are no considerable differences in its nature and quality (De Nora, 1995).

Moreover, evidence in the literature verified how musicians do not dedicate much time to online platforms for developing their businesses (e.g., Everts et al., 2021). The orchestration of media and social media is critical for leading artists’ success at the highest possible level (Cartwright et al., 2015). Nevertheless, it is necessary that music networks work in a synergic way and that such a work is the efficient result of the collaboration among all the stakeholders. Emerging musicians cannot exploit such a condition at the beginning of their careers. In this sense, musicians’ investment to achieve success in this standardized and capitalistic music environment is relevant, especially for early-career artists.

To understand how entrepreneurial music design was evolving in the last decade, Kaya et al. (2010) proposed the distinction between four categories of music entrepreneurs: Old School Artists, Independence Seekers, Major Label Seekers, Digital Era Enthusiasts. In fact, these categories resisted over time. In particular, the last category has been growing considerably due to the increasing use of social networks as YouTube and Spotify.
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Subtheme: The effects of social media on music entrepreneurship

The development of social media produced a double effect on the art and music market. The research of salability and employability tends to homogenize the market in a specific historical period. At the same time, musicians search for differentiation of their art compared to the others’. Such a contradiction crashes with the diffidence experimented by musicians for entrepreneurship and for considering themselves as entrepreneurs. Moreover, media, managers, and record companies’ pressure amplify the contradiction between capitalistic and artistic logic (Coulson, 2012).

The impact of digital technologies on music entrepreneurship and, in general, on the music market has been rather intense. Such an impact is not limited only to the born and the diffusion of social platforms, and its origin is dated back to the digital music sharing started during the Nineties. This transformation has not only modified the general business model, but it also had an impact only on independent musicians who, from being music composers, had to transform into entrepreneurs, going beyond their creative nature and embracing a 360-degree entrepreneurial vision, which includes many more activities (Eiriz & Leite, 2017).

Given the presence of social media, the financial output needed for achieving a critical mass of audience is limited (Kaya et al., 2010). In particular, the use of social networks, during the last decade, has been passed from being instrumental to reaching the popularity needed for getting a contract with a major record company, to the beginning of an era during which the success in these platforms can be sufficient for emerging and establishing as independent musicians.

3.2.2. Theme 5: Capitalism and music entrepreneurship

Subtheme: The choice between originality and conformism

The critical difference between the (recent) past and the current musicians’ position is the capitalistic context in which arts are developing during this millennium. The choice to undertake a career in music production was more dangerous in the past rather than in the present. In fact, capitalism, together with all its contradictions and complexities, including the debasement of philosophical and artistic music contents, produced a context in which success is more probable than in the past eras, in which communication was slower and less effective. Although capitalism produces the homogenization of the audience, music entrepreneurs’ opportunities for diffusing their work are more numerous and easier to access (Haynes & Marshall, 2018).

Musicians’ need to emerge in this highly dynamic panorama seems, at least in part, dependent on the local context development and the related connection with musicians’ business (Everts & Haynes, 2021). Everts et al. (2021) have indeed verified that the choice of musicians’ work organization in the Dutch context strongly depends on the specific market conditions. The work environment is rather complex if ascribed to a capitalistic environment that privileges the large corporative agglomerates. The progressive reduction of independent labels, together with the always greater concentration of epicenters of music production diffusion, are increasing musicians’ individualism, promoting entrepreneurship that, at the same time, challenges and adapts to the market needs. In fact, on the one hand, individualism leads to a more genuine expression of musicians’ self. On the other hand, individualism reduces the power of single musicians and contextually improves the commercial power of record producers and large music corporations.
For these reasons, independent musicians are separating from large labels, at least at the beginning of their careers. In fact, literature verified that musicians, once they transformed from composers to entrepreneurs, compose and diffuse their music adapting to new entrepreneurial styles that generalized a concept of music broadcasted for free due to the advent of new platforms and new capitalistic forms of competition (Eiriz & Leite, 2017). Therefore, the valorization of music peculiarities is the most precious part of the product commercialized by musicians, especially in a market where capitalistic conformism is producing a convergence among the styles (Cartwright et al., 2015).

Subtheme: Do alternatives to be music entrepreneurs exist for musicians?

Although the capitalistic context seems to have given musicians an order and more significant opportunities, employment remains a significant issue. Although no musicians perceive themselves as entrepreneurs, there are no practical alternatives for this category of workers. Moreover, instead of “normal” jobs, the employers sometimes transform into agents, and there is evidence in the literature concerning the fact that musicians with less experience confess to having lost money and time due to negligent and unprofessional agents (Marttila, 2012).

Therefore, the alternatives to entrepreneurship for musicians are limited, at least at the beginning of their careers. Unfortunately, as happens for other typologies of activities, artists are nowadays launched from record companies just when they achieved considerable success. This general context makes the market very complex and, therefore, has powerful consequences for marketing. In fact, musicians and producers cannot be limited to distributing their music: they have to put together a vast range of accessory services (e.g., merchandising, communication, promotion, and brand) that can ensure short-term success (Eiriz & Leite, 2017).

4. DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In this preliminary study, we tried to understand the evolution of the literature concerning the relationship between musicians and the entrepreneurial nature of their creative and artistic activity. In particular, we searched for the musicians’ interpretation of their role as music entrepreneurs. With a narrative analysis of the literature performed through a grounded approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1997), we started from evidence concerning the solid tensions and the intense contradictions which characterize this relation, and we tried to let the debated themes emerge.

Analyzing themes, sub-themes, and superordinate structures, we identified two tensions concerning the relationship between musicians and music entrepreneurship. The first tensions interpret musicians as people who are still not ready to accept their entrepreneurial nature (Coulson, 2012). Many musicians are reluctant to recognize themselves as entrepreneurs because the nature of this role, at a popular level, is associated with the unethical research of profits and revenues. Nevertheless, the literature clarified that the position of modern music entrepreneurs is much more advanced than this limited vision. In particular, music entrepreneurs are creative subjects who accept a proactive facilitator for social cohesion and for the sense of belonging (Wilson & Stokes, 2002).

Although this preliminary study highlights this contradiction, we argue that further research can be conducted for clarifying how to incentive musicians to recognize in their role of creative entrepreneurs, even more ethically and socially, to foster their business and entrepreneurial
training and improve their performance without going against the principle the develop the individualistic identity of artists.

The second relevant contradiction we found in the literature is that musicians experiment with the challenge between originality, which is proper of the nature of their profession, and conformism, which is required by the capitalistic nature of the music market (Cartwright et al., 2015). The development of music streaming platforms that broadcast music for free and the tendency of record companies to consider as selectors of music instead of transferring this duty to consumers are developing the tendency toward homogenizing music content. Despite this can guarantee the stability of profits in the short run, in the long run, musicians’ identity and accumulation of symbolic capital will be objects of an intolerable deterioration.

Although this preliminary study let emerge this contradiction, we argue that future researchers can concentrate their efforts to achieve a more in-depth understanding of the reasons that represent the foundation of this strong tendency to the homologation of music contents. Moreover, since musicians are forced, for business reasons, to limit the impact of their identity and individualism on published contents, further studies could evaluate, through a longitudinal logic, the impact of this homologation on musicians’ identity.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, it seems clear that the music market can be divided into two main groups of participants. From one side, record companies and major labels have a vision of their businesses perfectly coherent with the traditional conceptualization of entrepreneurship. They aim to homologize music content because this strategy ensures short-term high profits. On the other side, there are musicians and independent labels that, instead, are reluctant to consider themselves as entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, they need to sustain their professional activity, and therefore they have to make revenues and earn profits. To summarize, they have to do something they do not recognize as part of their nature.

In conclusion, in this preliminary study, we found that musicians are entrepreneurs, consciously or not. In this sense, entrepreneurial training and philosophical and ethical education connected to the social nature of entrepreneurial music activities assume a strategic role. Music entrepreneurs can understand the importance of their entrepreneurial identity, fostering the convergence between homologation strategies performed with profits and more authentic strategies planned for their individualistic realization.

REFERENCES


