

Many 'amateurs' want to become 'pros'.

By Michael Brooman

I studied Fine Art (painting and art history) at East London University (formerly NELP) before taking on the challenge of making music in the mid 80's. My philosophy was that by bringing artistic principles to music and sticking with them, one could overcome technical shortcomings. I was inspired- as were many- by the Velvet Underground and also the DIY ethos of the punk 'revolution' in the late 70's. And here we come to the first lesson: two of the most influential bands ever in rock music: the Velvets and the Sex Pistols (not to mention some of the other bands that followed) were decidedly UNprofessional in their approach to music.

Indeed neither of these bands gave a toss about the 'right way' to do things in music, let alone the music industry. Yet somehow they managed to actually change the course of music history.

Despite this, many amateurs *do* want to become 'pros'. So let's drill down a bit and explore the reasons and implications behind this.

It's not easy to define exactly what an amateur and a pro actually are. If I get paid for doing a gig, does it make me a pro? What about two gigs, or three? When exactly do I become a pro? Is it when I don't need to do another job to make a living? But what if I *want* to keep doing another job as well as music? Does that make me an amateur?

Many musicians want to become 'pros' because it means getting paid for their work, and this is understandable. But 'pro' is often used in another way, to say that someone is competent and generally knows what they are doing. Some 'professional' musicians might like to use the term 'amateur' in a pejorative way, perhaps as a kind of protection against competition. After all, not EVERYONE can become a musician, can they?

For me, the word 'pro' as it applies to musicians conjures up the image of an industry insider. Maybe someone who wears black jeans all the time, has backcombed hair, never gets up before midday and 'knows the ropes' about how things work in the industry. They may be a session player or a band member going on tours and recording in the studio.

All of this is fine but it doesn't mean their work as artists is any more relevant than someone who doesn't get paid for what they do. Indeed many fine musicians, including members of classical orchestras are out-and-out amateurs when it comes to this definition.

Also, when you look at the history of rock music, we often see that bands were at their best at the start of their careers and gradually went into a long, steady decline with perhaps the odd revival along the way.

I would go further and say that there are almost NO examples of bands that steadily got better, artistically as they aged- there are a few of course- but generally it's pretty rare. This is a subjective view I realise but many critics would agree.

So where does this leave us and what are the implications of this, if it's true?

At some point along my own journey as a 'musician' (although I do not really think of myself in this way) I realised something significant: the process of making art in the form of music was very different from the realities that appeared to exist in the music business.

It's a bit like comparing having sex with someone you love with the pornography industry!

To me, and I would guess many musicians, making music is an almost sacred occupation. Yet one would hardly say the same about the music industry, which often resembles a sort of glorified meat market. Personally when I got a peek into what the music industry actually involves I decided instinctively that I didn't really want to be associated with it, and at a particular point this caused me to back away from my musical ambitions.

Yet the urge to make music came back, and making the distinction between the two things- artistic expression and a commercial industry- helped me to continue.

John Peel said something about the industry to the effect that when artists become recognised and enter the commercial realm they are essentially pressurized by record companies to produce 'more of the same' and that this eventually becomes their undoing. That may be so, but I would suggest that ultimately every artist is responsible for their own output, pressurized or not..

Another reason many 'amateurs' want to become pros is based on anxiety about their worth or status as artists. Becoming a pro can look like validation about level of skill or artistic standing and many artists crave such recognition. Unfortunately when such recognition comes from outside it can have the opposite effect since the underlying doubts and fears of 'impostor syndrome' remain under the surface. What happens when the critics go lukewarm or turn against you completely? Then you will have to rely on inner resources.

Steven Pressfield, in his excellent book 'Turning Pro' defines the process of becoming a professional in terms of winning this inner war and eventually prevailing over our doubts by sheer persistence. For him this is the real struggle we face as artists. It's one that has mystical proportions and is defined in terms of an endless feud against a nameless force that appears to sabotage our most noble aspirations. According to Pressfield, a pro is someone who has got the upper hand in this war of attrition, or at least has found a way to continue the battle rather than simply caving in.

In our own recent project/band which we call 'Affected by Dreams' we have refused to work with 'pro' or session musicians on principle. Our philosophy is that being involved in a project is a leap of faith and that it's just not enough to turn up and expect to be paid for your time. Yet we also identified another problem with so-called professional musicians (in the rock industry), namely that they have often adopted specific ways of doing things, protocols that help them shore up their sense of professionalism and investment in their own skill and knowledge. The problem with this is that making art is not a routine activity and it's not a matter of working to a formula. Indeed, on the contrary it's about questioning formulas and reliable routines.

A 'pro', in effect is often just a person whom society has accepted as worthy to fill a particular role. But the history of art is not defined by accepting society's standards, but often refuting them.

Perhaps the whole discussion is irrelevant and it doesn't really matter whether we call ourselves 'pro' or not. Yet anyone who tries to get their work recognised will encounter some or all of these issues. Most of us will occupy a less clearly defined position on the pro-nonpro spectrum, and perhaps this is fine. Yet it is worth being wary of these definitions.