

Introduction:

This portfolio will explore the profession of a session musician as an area of the creative industries. A session musician is defined by the Musician's Union (2025) as a person who plays a musical instrument or is a vocalist that plays live at a gig or in a recording studio. Session musicians tend not to be featured artists and are not contracted to a record label. A session musician works mainly in the recording and broadcast industry recording commercial audio, film soundtracks, music for adverts, jingles, television signature tunes, incidental music and music for radio (UK Music, 2025). In addition, a session musician can be engaged directly by a production company or record label, but is often engaged via a fixer (also known as a contractor) who has signed an agreement with the Musicians' Union (Musician's Union, 2025).

The academic, professional qualifications and experience required to be a session musician:

Becoming a session music requires professional training and education, and often a degree in music is required (Indeed, 2025), although this is not essential (Careers in Music, 2026). The advantage of a bachelors degree is the broad education in music it provides, for example studying and writing music, performance skill development and applying correct music theory and techniques. In addition, in relation to qualifications, it is common for musicians to learn their instrument via a private tutor leading to academically recognised music qualifications (Indeed, 2025). For example, the Trinity College music exams which can be used for entry into degrees programmes (Trinity College London, 2026). Some musicians are self-taught which may take longer depending on the individual (Indeed, 2025). Experience needed for a session musician is performing regularly in a band or ensemble, having an extensive prior experience as a performer which requires a substantial amount of time practising the instrument (UK Music, 2025). Experience performing can also support networking and it provides opportunities that may lead to future work, also many session musicians are also in their own band (Careers in Music, 2026).

Knowledge, skills and personal qualities/attributes needed for success within the profession:

Knowledge

In terms of knowledge, industry connections are important, being smart at networking can help you build a long lasting connection with an employer/artist (Musicians Union, 2025).

Skills

A high level of skill is required to be a session musician (UK Music, 2025). Session musicians must be able to perfectly perform the first time they see the music which they are about to record. In most instances this will be without prior rehearsal or sight of the music (UK Music, 2025). Reading music is essential as is being able to adapt. Improvisation is also important so that they are able to follow what the artist/employer wants (Careers in Music, 2026). Another important skill is being able to adapt one's playing style to suit the genre of music required or preferred by the employer (Alla's Music Studio, 2025).

Personal Qualities and Attributes

A session musician should be able to work well with a range of colleagues and be self-motivated, adaptable, reliable, flexible and efficient (UK Music, 2025). Both UK Music (2025) and Careers in Music (2026) recommend that session musicians are reliable because recording may be dependent on the session musician being available and on time. If the musician is late, it might disrupt recording and be costly in terms of studio time. Additionally, session musicians need to be able to collaborate well with others as this could lead to more opportunities and a chance to get hired again by the same person for future projects (Careers in Music, 2026).

Duties and responsibilities of the profession – what does a typical day's work involve?

Duties and Responsibilities

There are many duties and responsibilities for a session musician. They play a key role in the music industry by contributing to live performances, recordings, and other projects such as music for advertising and film (Career Explorer, 2026). According to the Musicians Union (2025) there are different types of recording sessions including "studios, location recording, commercial audio, music for advertising, film and soundtrack, like TV, concert recording."

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Regardless of whether the session musician is playing a live performance or in a studio the duties and responsibilities will be very similar. However, when recording live, for example, live television, musicians need to be well prepared as there are no second takes (Musicians Union, 2025). Session musicians need to be able to quickly interpret musical ideas and sometimes need to contribute creatively when promoted (Career Explorer, 2026). They must be responsible for managing their time well, as it is often limited in the studio and they need to have an understanding of recording equipment and other technology to be able to be as efficient as they can be. Another responsibility is to be professional as they work on a contract basis or freelance, which requires them to have some knowledge of contract and be able to understand intellectual property rights. They also need to be responsible for their own practice and skill development and must be able to keep up with new musical techniques (Career Explorer, 2026).

According to Rozario, Eyzaguirre and Migliari, (no date) a typical day starts at 8:00am when they then check messages from potential clients and prepare their instruments/equipment for the day. Rozario, Eyzaguirre and Migliari (no date) give an example of someone called Bruno who in the morning spends time practising or doing his administration tasks, then later in the afternoon he will be ready to record and may do up to 8 sessions with clients.

The main financial and legal issues that impact on this profession

Financial Issues

Session musicians usually get paid a flat fee for the work they do (Musicians Union, 2025). The Musicians Union publish minimum rates for session recordings. For example, a 3 hour recording for a BBC radio session is £87.00 versus television which would be £257.00 (Musicians Union, 2025). According to Hunter (2025) session musicians will not often receive royalties, unless this has been previously stated in a recording agreement, the royalties will go to the independent artist or the label instead. Therefore, session musicians may have unstable incomes. Because of this session musicians need to be good at budgeting, especially in between clients when they do not have immediate pay cheques and they still have to maintain equipment. Sometimes, session musicians may support their income with other jobs, for example teaching privately.

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The Musicians Union look after session musicians' recorded performances. The Musicians Union negotiates agreements with broadcasters, film producers and record companies, plus collect and send musicians the fees, where applicable, for other uses of those recorded performances (Musician's Union, 2025).

Legal Issues

Session musicians are independent, which allows them to move between projects that have short durations and their potential clients can often be very different (iMusician, 2025).

Fixers or music contractors act as a kind of agent between the session musician and their clients, this is normally for large projects and productions (iMusician, 2025). Having a fixer is helpful as the fixer can manage the legal and contractual side of large jobs for the session musician (Musicians Union, 2025).

In the UK, legal expectations related to session musicians are moving more towards written agreements and formal contracts which include session musicians (Music Legal, 2025). From 2025, for example, more formal evidence will be required by the courts to solve copyright disputes. Therefore, this means that session musicians should have a clear written agreement that establishes ownership of the different parts of the recording/credits/revenue distribution (Music Legal, 2025).

The potential marketing and promotional aspects of this profession

As a session musician, self-promotion is a key aspect of marketing. A way of doing this would be to talk with many other musicians and establish a good reputation with clients and others in the industry (MacDonald, 2019). This may lead on to future work.

Session musicians can also self-promote by building a portfolio of your work to show to possible clients. Allowing them to see the skills you have and how that would fit their needs (Fusion, 2026).

Additionally, social media marketing is very important for a session musician as the musician can market their services and demonstrate their skills as a practitioner, for example uploading a video of a performance which may gain you traction and possible clients (Indeed, 2025). A further technique a session musician can use is cold calling by calling up recording studios and or theatres to attempt to build a relationship in the industry to acquire work. Another great way would be for the session musician to create their own website,

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which creates a platform for them to be contacted and hired easily. In addition, this is a further space through which to advertise their skills and previous work (Indeed, 2025).

Intellectual and personal challenges presented by the profession and how these might be dealt with

Intellectual challenges

Intellectual challenges relate to the session musician's ability to deal with mental processes required to play at an advanced level. These will include advanced sight reading, complex multi-tasking, the ability to quickly switch between different playing styles and remain accurate (Atlanta Institute of Music and Media, 2024).

Personal challenges

Personal challenges faced by session musicians can include being away from home for a long period of time if touring. Also, session musicians might have unusual working hours and an unusual work life structure, where you may not be working for a week and then suddenly working for many hours in one stretch.

Burnout can be an issue for session musicians and is usually caused by the build-up of difficult circumstances and their effect on the mental and physical health of an individual. In the music industry this can be caused by a number of things including, the stresses of being freelance and its financial worries, being away from home for a long time or working unusual hours such. Also, there might be an emotional and social impact related to networking and self-promotion (Musicians Union, 2025).

For session musicians to avoid burnout it is important to have a healthy routine, for example getting enough sleep and having proper mealtimes. It is also important to make sure that session musicians seek out further help if needed (Musicians Union, 2025).

Career-progression and development opportunities that are available within the profession

Many sources suggest that for career development session musicians need to be able to network and make connections (Careers in Music, 2025; Musicians Union, 2025). Careers in Music (2026) confirm that as a session musician's career advancement is either through building reputation or increasing rates of pay. Rate of pay may differ for the project and the

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musicians union rate can be sometimes be less than the rate offered but can equally be more (Careers in Music, 2026).

Networking or making connections is key to growing a career. The best way to progress as a session musician is to play with as many people as you can (Haberfield, 2022). For example, sessions musicians may form creative relationships with recording artists which might lead them to become part of their backing band or to even go on tour with them.

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