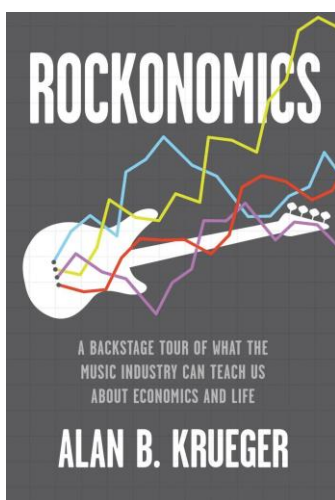


**Rockonomics: A Backstage Tour of What the Music Industry Can Teach Us about Economics and Life** by Alan B. Krueger, Currency, New York, ISBN 9781524763718 (hardback)



**Book review by Daniel Nordgård**

In June last year, Alan B. Krueger's final book was published. It was a much-anticipated work and, sadly, released postmortem, after Krueger passed away on March 16, 2019. While the music business and industry were hardly the core themes of his research, he nonetheless managed to publish research that have become central and much-sited sources for a broad range of researchers – including myself.

Although Krueger points out that he is neither a devoted fan or a big consumer of music, his writing on the subject is enthusiastic and authentic. In fact, a striking feature in much of his writing, but this book in particular, is that it illustrates his sincere passion for both music and numbers, in equal parts. Throughout the book, Krueger delivers numbers and statistics in parallel with examples, excerpts from interviews, and narratives that neatly frames the points being made and the stories being

told. The book posits several important narratives and arguments – some established by Krueger himself (like the economics of superstars (Krueger 2005)) – assembled in a coherent and well-structured book that is easily read.

Over the course of 11 chapters, Krueger lays out what must be considered the basics of music economics, as well as some of the discipline's more important issues. Some of the chapters deals with explaining the logics, structures and dynamics of the music economy, such as the basic structures of revenue streams (chapter 2), the economics of live music (chapter 6), Intellectual property (chapter 9), or the basics of music streaming (chapter 8). Together, they provide a comprehensive framework on how the music business works. However, they also lead to or tie into other complex and interesting issues, like the power-laws that dictate the economics of superstars (chapter 4), or the supply of musicians (chapter 3). Chapter 4 expands on a topic Krueger long ago established; that the music economy is one that is overtly skewed towards the top artists – more than other sectors.

By returning to and updating his previous work on the superstar economy, Krueger delivers what must be truly sobering numbers and statistics for any aspiring artist or manager; economic success in music is rare. Continuing success is even rarer. Hence, chapter 3 – the supply of musicians – must then be seen in this light, and here Krueger delivers meaningful insights on US-American (and it's mostly US-American) musicians, the precariousness of their work (reminding us where the term "gig-economy" comes from), gender issues and mental health. Given the slim chance of success, coupled with some rather discouraging features of the music industry (see chapter 7: Scams, Swindles and the Music Business), why then do so many work towards a music career? Krueger addresses this by referencing dialogues he's had with artists and musicians from his focus-groups, such as Sheila Stratton-Hamza (p. 58): *"I'm in pain before taking the stage, but euphoric once performing. I feel my essence comes out. I'm transformed as a person"*.

In chapter 5, Krueger speaks to a critical but oft-neglected part of achieving success in music: luck. Clearly your chances of being lucky in-

crease with talent, resources and networks, and these attributes themselves increase your chances of success, if you're lucky. Yet luck (or the absence of it) is rarely talked about in the context of success in music, and very rarely from an economics standpoint. Here, most often, we're served statistics, models and laws. Luck, however, is most effectively communicated through stories and examples, and Krueger cites several, like the references to Sixto Rodriguez, or the meeting between Elton John and Bernie Taupin.

And here in this chapter is where we also see some of Krueger's more political, or ideological views, as when he draw lines between luck and his own successful academic career at Princeton University: "*In other words, we are all better off if we recognize the role that luck plays in contributing to our success, and if we are more tolerant and supportive of those who are less lucky*" (p. 118). These lines are all the more poignant in light of Krueger's tragic departure from life.

Though the book deals with complex issues, these are explained and discussed in a manner that is inclusive and open in both language and illustrations, making it well-suited for students as well as scholars and researchers, or business professionals, politicians or complete outsiders. It is pedagogically written and academically well balanced.

If the book is to be criticized, it is that it can read as a little US-biased, both when it comes to data and examples (one exception being China, in chapter 10), but also academic references. However, given the complex issues already being addressed in this book, keeping it focused on one territory is perhaps necessary. Nevertheless, it works really well the way it is, and I look forward to discussing "Rockonomics" – and Krueger's wider thoughts and analyses – with my students and fellow researchers for years to come.

## References

Krueger, A. B. (2005) "The Economics of Real Superstars: The Market for Rock Concerts in the Material World", *Journal of Labor Economics*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 1-30.