Songs, Stories and Selfhood: A Critical Humanist Study of Creativity and Identity on an Acoustic Music Scene

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A Doctoral thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy of Loughborough University

June 2010

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Contents

ABSTRACT

This thesis researches singer-songwriters on an acoustic music scene. The rise of non-folk based 'acoustic' music and the recent re-emergence of the 'acoustic singer songwriter' in mainstream popular music bring up interesting aspects to consider regarding the self in contemporary culture. The key purpose here is to reflect upon the production and reproduction of creative musical identities amongst these music makers both in the *private sphere* of their daily lives and life histories, and in the *public sphere* of the acoustic music scene and conventional society. Through a consciously continuous movement between the self and the social, and the private and public spheres, I fuse ethnographic observation of the social workings of the acoustic music world with in-depth examinations of the making and management of creative identities amongst its individual participants. The thesis focuses on three definable areas: firstly, the artistic creativity of music making itself; secondly, the creativity involved in the everyday managing of the musical identity, both in the domestic realm and in the music scene itself; and thirdly, the creative carving out or mapping of musical identities through the telling of individual life stories.

The research deals with semi-professional musicians well into their adult years who are caught in a struggle between economic and domestic pressures on the one hand and their personal construction of a musical identity on the other. My focus here on a demographic category largely made up of the thirty-sixty age group – what we might refer to as 'the greying zone' – is of crucial sociological importance. The only studies of older age groups in music research tend to involve minority scenes outside of the mainstream such as folk, jazz or classical. This thesis however gives a voice to individuals engaged in a mainstream music scene, which, although closely related to folk, is in many ways closer to rock and pop. This greying zone is surprisingly absent from studies of culture and yet it is they who, more than ever, have a very powerful part to play in what is produced and consumed in popular music.

There will be aspects regarding the general nature of acoustic music in this thesis. It is important to make clear however, that this is not intended to be a musicological study. It is also crucial to state that it aims to be more than simply a popular music study. This is a sociological analysis of individual identity, creativity and everyday life using a music scene as a backdrop. Overall, I present here a dynamically human picture of a diverse and mutable music culture involving individual stories and changes within and between its members.

INTRODUCTION

> These singing writers were the final "maturity" of rock 'n' roll, which had been born
> out of a union between rhythm and blues and country and western music...The
> Beatles had shown up to prove that music for kids could still be fun for grown ups,
> and the first rock groups had shown what the musicians had learned from those high
> school records. But now here was pop music and its audience settling down at home
> with a mortgage to pay, and kids to put to bed. Goodnight America
> (Gillet, 1970:411)

According to Gillett, popular music 'grew up' in the 70s with the 'singer songwriter'.
This thesis is a study of 'grown-ups' who happen to be 'singer songwriters'. They are
a group of around twenty musicians aged between thirty and fifty who make up the
core of a local 'acoustic music' scene in Leicester, a medium sized city in the English
Midlands. Scenes like this one are partly reflective of the dual re-emergence of
acoustic music and the singer-songwriter in the early 21st century on a mass cultural
scale. As we will discuss, this phenomenon may merely be the product of calculated
music industry manoeuvrings. However, it may be suggested that this movement
back towards more 'reflective music' represents popular music's re-engagement with
authenticity and self-identity amidst the chaos of the late modern or postmodern
world. On the other hand, perhaps the resurgence of the acoustic singer songwriter
merely exemplifies a 'dumbing down' of folk music in the context of the corporate,
self-promotional culture of contemporary western society. These are key musical
themes of interest, but on a broader level I will attempt to elucidate the ways in which
studying solo musicians on a music scene can inform us sociologically about the
relationship between the self and the social. The study of acoustic singer-songwriters
certainly seems an obvious nodal point in exploring the creative self-identity in
contemporary life.

Acoustic music occupies an ambiguous and complex borderline territory between
a) the democratic ideals of folk, in which the distinctions between performer and
audience are blurred by its egalitarian, participatory nature; and b) the individualistic,
promotional world of rock in which commercial pressures and instrumental rationality

1

predominate. The dilemmas and identity struggles facing the participants in my research between their creative integrity on the one hand and the pressures to make their day-to-day lives more economically productive (both within and without the world of music) on the other, are reflected in the very character of acoustic music itself.

We see many studies of music scenes that involve groups of people: e.g. the folk scene (Mackinnon, 1993 Brocken, 2003), or the rock scene (Cohen, 1991) etc. Studying a world such as the contemporary acoustic scene, however, which is predominated by singer-songwriters, presents a unique opportunity to develop a thorough analysis of the relationship between individual selfhood and the social. The acoustic musician is in a constant dilemma between self-promotion and co-operation with others. This dilemmatic position is additionally fascinating in that it speaks volumes about the individualistic and confessional character of contemporary culture.

The thesis is driven by an approach to individual creativity as a moral, biographically meaningful and inherently social realm as opposed to the creative consumerism found in the mass consumption of music and many of the daily practices deemed as creative and directly related to the realm of the private e.g. DIY, gardening, cooking etc. Musical creativity is in fact particularly interesting as it is something that often emerges in the private sphere and develops through performance as a communicative, public phenomenon.

My approach to music-making will be underpinned here by the idea of creativity as a process always involving both the self and others, whether in terms of relationships and interactions in the present or recent past, in the life history of the individual songwriter, or simply in the understanding of the creative act as an inherently dialogical process. I will draw strongly on the cultural sociology approaches of Raymond Williams (1961) and more recently Negus and Pickering (2003) regarding the notion of creativity as the communication of experience - demonstrating the ways in which creativity, daily life and the narrative of the self are intertwined.

A strong theoretical undercurrent of this is the notion of a 'critical humanism' (see Plummer, 2000): a re-engagement with the significance of the individual actor and the

individual's life story in sociological research. There is an emphasis here on re-valuing the human subject whilst maintaining a critical awareness of its fragility and ambiguity in contemporary society. The thesis presents a re-engagement with the humanistic sociological notion of the 'individual in society' so articulately expounded by cultural sociologists such as C Wright Mills (1959) and Raymond Williams (1961) and yet so quickly deemed as irrelevant in contemporary social theory. As a starting point, let us briefly look at the changes in the notion of the self in recent history.

The emergence of the self

> Throughout the modern era, the quest of the individual is for his self, for a fixed and unambiguous point of reference. He needs such a fixed point more and more urgently in view of the unprecedented expansion of theoretical and practical perspectives and the complication of life, and the related fact that he can no longer find it anywhere outside himself
> (Simmel in Taylor and Cohen, 1992:218)

Notions of the crisis of the self such as Simmel's above eventually led to the doom-laden postmodern proclamations of the death of the subject in the latter half of the 20th century (see Baudrillard 1983, Lyotard 1986, Foucault 1980). Transformations in space and time through satellite technologies, advances in travel, and the mass media's colonisation of the everyday made the concrete building blocks of self, community and place increasingly ambiguous and, therefore, it was argued, irrelevant. Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* argued that radical subjectivity was under threat and that the subject could only resist through everyday acts. According to Baudrillard (1983), the spectacle had evolved into *hyperreality*: i.e. there was no reality to take as a reference point, therefore the subject had disappeared into a vast sea of signs. As Harvey outlines: in the cultural state of postmodern society…

> We can no longer conceive of the individual as alienated in the classical Marxist sense, because to be alienated presupposes a coherent rather than a fragmented sense of self from which to be alienated…
> (Harvey,1990:53).

3

But what exactly is this modern notion of a self that is deemed to be, at the very least, under siege in contemporary society? The notion of the individual undoubtedly blossomed with the rise of industrial capitalist society. Lionel Trilling points out that the 'possessive individual' of modern society emerged with industrialisation: 'At a certain point in history men became individuals' (in Plummer, 2000:81). According to Poststructuralist Marxist Louis Althusser, the human subject was merely a 'myth of bourgeois ideology' (Althusser, 1976:52-3).

The notion of a time before individuality is a difficult one for us self-obsessed individuals of the 21st century to grasp. In contemporary culture everyday life is pervaded by the idea of 'the individual'. Whether it be in the form of pop stars, celebrities, politicians, or our own reflexive selves (see Giddens, 1991), we are constantly monitoring ourselves and others through the mass media and other privatised means such as therapy, new age interests, self-help books etc.

Let us explore further the roots of this contemporary notion of the individual: According to Raymond Williams, this notion first began to emerge in the medieval period. Then the word 'Individual' meant 'inseparable:

> ...its main use was in the context of theological argument about the nature of the holy trinity. The effort was to explain how a being could be thought of as existing in his own nature yet existing by this nature as part of an indivisible whole.
> (Williams, 1961:90)

Williams points to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a crucial time:

> The crucial history of the modern description is a change in emphasis which enabled us to think of 'the individual' as a kind of absolute, without immediate reference, by the very structure of the term, to the group of which he is a member. And this change...seems to have taken place in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Slowly, and with many ambiguities, since that time, we have learned to think of 'the individual in his own right' (ibid:91)

4

Williams points out that the Reformation was a crucial turning point in the idea of a self:

> The basis of a new sense of 'individual' can be interestingly explored in the history of the idea of the individual soul, and we are probably right to see in the controversies of the Reformation an extension of the idea inherent in the Christian tradition, by which it was possible to pass from seeing the soul's destiny within an ordered structure, of God and Church, to seeing this destiny as in a different way personal: a man's direct and individual relationship with God.
> (ibid.)

Going back to the medieval age the idea of an individuality not connected to group membership was unthinkable:

> ...there is an evident change, between medieval and modern thinking, in this difficult conception of 'man in society'. Most accounts of medieval society stress the way in which a man was defined by his position in the social order: an 'individual' in the old sense, defined by membership of a group. As Erich Fromm put it: 'a person was identical with his role in society; he was a peasant, an artisan, a knight and not *an individual who happened* to have this or that occupation.
> (ibid:92)

However, as we stated earlier it was with the rise of industrial capitalism that the idea of truly being an individual in the modern sense emerged:

> The growth of capitalism, and the great social changes associated with it, encouraged certain men to see 'the individual' as a source of economic activity, by his 'free enterprise'. It was less a matter of performing a function within a fixed order than of initiating certain kinds of activity, choosing particular directions. The social and geographical mobility to which in some cases these changes gave rise led to a definition of the individual – 'what I am' – by extension to 'what I want to be' and 'what by my own efforts I have become'. Yet this is still a definition of an individual in his social or economic role, and we can still observe that this kind of definition has persisted into our own times...
> (ibid.)

Plummer points out that the other important aspect of the self of industrial society was its gradual privatisation. The romantic, alienated figure of the introspective bedroom songwriter is perhaps the epitome of this privatised self today:

> It is probably at that moment that people, overwhelmingly from the west, start to develop fully a sense of themselves as objects of introspection, of interest, of value; when the individual begins to brood and reflect in his of her inner nature... Significantly, this is also, '...a time when the individual starts to retreat from the public life into the realms of privacy- the inner thought, the private home, the real self.
> (Plummer, 2000:81)

By the latter half of the 20th century, the idea of a true self, separated from any structural chains, emerged. This idea blossomed in the 1960s and 70s as the post-war 'baby boomer' generation came of age: the idea of 'self actualisation' and fulfilling one's 'potentialities' began to take a hold. A politicised youth generation influenced by the marriage of Marxism and Freudianism saw self-expression as going hand in hand with the liberation of society as a whole. This generation exemplified what Christopher Lasch called the culture of narcissism and Michel Foucault termed 'The California Self': a self that was obsessed with the confessional and the cathartic. It was within this climate of cultural narcissism and the confessional 'California self' that the first wave of popular singer-songwriters of the late 60s and early 70s emerged, interestingly enough, out of California. These post folk hippies wrote sensitive melancholic music and heartfelt lyrics based very much on 'baring the soul'.

According to Foucault, the kind of self-revelatory culture that emerged at this time links back to the Christian idea discussed by Williams earlier: the search for the inner self. We seek the sinful truth about ourselves by monitoring and confessing our desire. In the 60s the fusion of Freud, Marx and eastern spiritualism resulted in a revival of this idea of 'liberation' through self-revelation (Cohen and Taylor, 1992:20). However, argued Foucault, in their quest for apparent self-liberation, individuals actually became more and more under control of social structures/ideologies through engaging in 'social control talk' (Taylor and Cohen, 1992: 21). Psychotherapists, social scientists, lifestyle experts are all part of this

structure. Interestingly, the singer songwriter revival of recent years has emerged in an even more concentrated cultural climate of mass confession through television talk shows and lifestyle programmes in which the self is on parade and constantly seeks approval from others to get it back on track. This culture of narcissism presents 'a self uncertain of its own outlines, a self without faith' (Lasch in Taylor and Cohen, 1992:22).

In the light of these societal and theoretical shifts there have been many terms that have prefixed the 'self'. Plummer lists some of them: 'fragmented' (James), 'mutable' (Zurcher), 'saturated' (Gergen), 'actualising' (Maslow), 'situated' (Benhabib), 'postmodern' (Sarup) and 'self reflexive' (Giddens)
(Plummer, 2000: 81-83)

The postmodern cynics argue that this contemporary crisis of the self merely demonstrates that the anthropological models of self and subjectivity underlying the human sciences are now no longer relevant:

> ...not only is there no point in trying to penetrate our social roles to find a common human essence which is not there, but even the idea of an underlying coherent individual essence of particular personhood (one's own true self) is a myth which Freud effectively exploded
> (Rorty in Cohen and Taylor, 1992: 23)

Discussing the poststructuralist announcement of the death of the subject (see especially Foucault,1978, 1980), Plummer raises a crucial point:

> This rejection of the human subject highlights one of sociology's core contradictions: an interminable tension between the subjectively creative individual human being acting upon the world and the objectively given social structure constraining him or her...Just how can we reconcile our own human creativity with a coercive and dehumanising social order?
> (Plummer, 2000:4)

Within the context of the study of creative individuals this last sentence is a theme that runs throughout the thesis. A truly critical humanist project is by no means completely divorced from the late modern and postmodern approaches discussed above. Even within the postmodern thinkers' framework of cynical and portentous readings of the contemporary self, there are possibilities for the individual human being to rise to the challenge through its 'aestheticisation':

> Recent social theory concerned with 'modernity' has identified the ability to be reflexive about and mobilise cultural forms as a hallmark of being in so-called 'high' modern societies (Lash and Urry 94, Giddens 90-91). Following Simmel (1917), these writers conceive of the rise of aestheticisation as a strategy for preserving identity and social boundaries under anonymous and often crowded conditions of existence'
> (DeNora, 2000:51)

Foucault, clearly influenced by Nietzche, argues that we should give up on the idea of searching for some inner self and instead focus our energies on the idea that:

> The principal work of art, the main area to which one must apply aesthetic values is oneself, one's life, one's existence
> (quoted in Taylor and Cohen, 1992:23)

Rorty too argues a similar line:

> With no true self to discover, a more promising moral project becomes 'self creation' and self enlargement rather than 'self-knowledge' and 'purification'
> (Rorty in Taylor and Cohen, 1992:23)

This is a crucial demonstration that we do not have to give up on the unique self: whether we consider it as a creation or an object, and whether we call it a myth or story: either way, the self is a creative project. In keeping with postmodern approaches, the traditional idea that there is a true inner self or unitary inner soul which can be revealed is rejected here. Of course in contemporary life, as we shall see, the individual is pulled in many differing directions and never exists outside of external social forces. However, the thesis speaks up for the individual subject as an

acting and interacting social being with a unique life and his or her own story, constructed through embodied, lived experience. Through acts of creativity and the creative construction of a unique narrative, we can create, at the very least, a coherent self in a fractured world. As we will also see here the membership of a creative cultural world or community helps this sense of coherence.

Let us look more closely at what the critical humanist approach entails: Plummer offers a typology of key characteristics of human beings within this approach. The human being is always:

1) *Embedded* - The human being is...always stuffed full of the culture and the historical moments of which it is a part, and this history and culture is always in process and changing.

2) *Symbolic, Dialogic, Inter-subjective* – Language and communication is central to human beings...Humans can and do communicate with themselves and others...Human beings are able to take the roles of others, imaginatively and sympathetically, and chart their own actions in relation to these others.

3) *Contingent* – Human beings are surrounded throughout their lives by chance, fateful moments, contingencies.

4) *Dually embodied and Symbolic* – Whilst humanism must examine the ways in which humans develop massive symbolic and meaningful worlds...it should never overlook the embodied and animalistic nature of this experience.

5) *Universal* – A postmodern suspicion of the universal self should not lead to a desertion of the idea of certain human potentials such as imagination, senses, reciprocity, play etc...The point is to recognise both universal capacities along with diversity and specificity.

6) *With a Moral (ethical-political) character* – Human cultures drip with moral and ethical problems, and are organised through and within circuits of power...they are the stuff of human cultures – the webs of meaning through which lives get organised. We are talking about the potentials for lives – individually and collectively – to

become more and more enriched, varied and fruitful.

(Plummer, 2000:12-13)

Importantly, Plummer also highlights the parallels between the critical humanist position and postmodern approaches emphasising the stress of 'the local' and the 'flux of everyday life'. (ibid).

In Plummer's definition of a critical humanism two points really stand out in relation to this research:

a) [It] must pay tribute to *human subjectivity and creativity* – showing how individuals respond to social constraints and actively assemble social worlds

b) It must deal with concrete human experiences – talk, feelings, actions – through their *social and economic organisation*
(Plummer, 2000:14).

So the postmodern rejection of the idea of an inner self or a fixed identity does not have to mean that we give up on examining the ways in which individual human beings creatively construct a self through music. The creative act of constructing a musical identity around the communication of lived experience (which is our definition of creativity here) demonstrates that a humanistic sociology does not necessarily have to be completely at odds with postmodern approaches to the self. Music as 'arguably the cultural material *par excellence* of the emotional and the personal' (DeNora, 2000:46) and, more specifically, musical creativity, is the perfect cultural medium for examining this area.

The thesis aims to demonstrate that in the context of the ambiguous, fragmented nature of the individual subject in contemporary culture on the one hand, and the adult pressures of career, family and financial responsibilities on the other, the making of music, and the building of identities around it represents a strong artistic defence, not of some 'inner self', but rather of the creative construction of a unique self-identity. In order to adequately explore this paradox it was necessary to formulate a methodology which would achieve an adequate examination of the presentation of self-identity within both the private sphere (the home, the inner myth of the self,

personal relationships) and the public spheres (the social context of the local music scene, impersonal relationships and commercialised realm) and within everyday life itself.

Methodological approach

On the whole, my research methods attempt to tread a fine line between two approaches: The first approach is that which is so intent on examining the workings of a 'scene' that they become over-sociological, thereby overlooking the importance of the individuals involved in that scene, e.g. their various histories, varying levels of integration, musical status etc. The second approach is that which we find in the mainstream media of autobiographies and music documentaries that tend to valorise the individual artist to a romantic or heroic status at the expense of the social world they inhabit. Here my methods are in a continuous movement between the individual subject and the social world in which they operate.

Many studies of music scenes take a long view of a given music world, often giving only a superficial analysis of key issues such as a) how musicians became involved in that world; b) how the musicians themselves articulate their experiences of that world; c) how they undertake the complex management of their identities (e.g. what else are they apart from members of a music culture?) The aim of this research was to build up the fullest possible picture of a local music scene. This involved looking at it from three different angles:

a) From an outsider's view (the initial snapshots anthropological, ethnographic);
b) From the insiders' view: through the lived and told experiences and histories of core members of the music world;
c) From the boundaries i.e. as a marginal participant but not a member of this particular musical world.

My aim of bridging the gap between a) the sociology of a music scene and b) the richness of the individual stories and experiences of those involved in that world meant that my own observations of the acoustic music world had to be supplemented by the ongoing accounts of some of its core members. In order to adequately examine the construction of selfhood and the forging of creative self-identities amongst the

participants it was necessary to examine three strands of their accounts as music makers: firstly, their self-identity in the present and where they situated themselves in relation to the local music scene; secondly, their life-history and their accounts of how they had carved out an 'alternative' career and a musical identity (outside of their main job or non-musical set of responsibilities); thirdly, their ongoing accounts of day-to-day and month-to-month experiences and the way their identities were reshaped by these over the two to three-year research period. In summary, this information was garnered through the following multi-methods approach:

1. Interview data from an ongoing series of in-depth interviews/Longitudinal data emerging from tracking of participants over two to two and half years
2. Ethnographic data emerging from longitudinal observations of the scene and frequent informal interactions with participants.
3. Documentary data emerging from participants' websites, CDs, song lyrics etc.

Entry into the Acoustic Music Scene and making initial contact with the research participants

Through attending a particular venue – *The Musician* pub, which was the hub of the local acoustic music activities – I was able to make initial informal contact with one or two of the key established musicians on the local scene. After these early meetings I frequently attended the city acoustic club 'open-mic' session (also at the same venue) and other local venues (in both cases as a spectator). Additionally, I attended informal gatherings, small-scale festivals, recording sessions etc. This meant that I was able to make contact with some of the core members of the scene on a regular enough basis to build up a familiarity with potential participants. Crucially, this made them comfortable enough to undertake the series of interviews I asked of them.

It is important to state that my own position as a musician and music enthusiast helped considerably in terms of engaging with local musicians. During the course of my research I observed, conversed with, but also played music informally with many of the core members of the scene. Because of this, my position as a researcher was, in one sense, marginal (as I was not 'a local performer' and therefore not perceived as fully a part of the world), but in another sense participatory, as the participants were usually aware that I was a musician. This undoubtedly helped in terms of being seen

as someone who had at least some level of understanding of the participants and their experiences.

Sample

In total there were around fifteen to twenty musicians regularly involved in the local acoustic music scene and a handful of other key figures made up of regulars/aficionados and bar staff etc (in many cases these individuals were musicians as well). During the three-year period spent in and around the margins of this scene I came into contact with all of these members. Some I interviewed once, some I had minimal contact with, and others I had no contact with but learned about their status and position on the scene through other musicians on the scene or through my own observations.

The main focus of the research was the four local musicians who I refer to throughout as the 'core participants'. I aimed to track their progress over a two to three year period through both formal contact in the shape of four or five semi-structured, in-depth interviews (for each participant) across the research period, and frequent informal contact at gigs, impromptu performances, rehearsal sessions etc. I also asked them to keep timesheets/diaries for three separate weeks over a 6-month period in order to assess how they fitted music in with their daily routine.

These four participants were all aged between thirty and forty at the beginning of the research and were from diverse backgrounds and in different circumstances, but all were linked through their involvement in the same local scene frequenting the same pubs, venues, sessions and social events. The table on the following page shows the core participants, their musical role on the scene and their domestic/occupational circumstances at the beginning of the research period.

Core participants

Person and age	Musical role	Situation/Occupation at start of research period
1. Alex – early 30s	Singer songwriter, guitarist	Full time university lecturer
2. Dave – early 30s	Singer songwriter, guitarist and club singer	Had just given up job as care worker to do music full-time. Singer songwriter career supported by income as a weekend club entertainer.
3. Kate – early 40s	Singer- songwriter/guitarist and viola player	Was unemployed but had applied to take a funded course in landscape management. Mature student.
4. Andrew – early 40s	Singer-songwriter, guitarist ran city acoustic club	Full time telephone customer adviser at an electrical company

In addition to the ongoing interviews carried out with these four core participants, I also conducted one-off in–depth interviews with nine other local acoustic musicians and songwriters. 25 interviews were conducted in total (16 with core participants plus nine one-off interviews with secondary participants). The majority of these were individuals who were centrally involved with the local acoustic scene. This also included individuals who had contact with the local scene but were not integrally involved with it. This allowed broader comparisons to be made, and countered the potential problem of the core sample being unreflective of wider contemporary acoustic music culture. Some of these one-off interviews were directed more towards certain themes, depending on the particular respondent's role in the local music scene. These interviews were conducted at various points across the research period.

Eventually it was possible to identify five types of participants in the research project:

a) The core participants: The four individuals whom I tracked over the period of two years.

b) Secondary participants: nine musicians centrally involved in the local acoustic scene that I interviewed in-depth once and, in some cases, also had fairly regular informal conversations with.

c) Informal informants: (half a dozen) Central figures on the scene whose place in the scene I had knowledge of and, in some cases, had informal contact with, but did not interview. This would include the more professional local musicians. These were people I came across in the midst of the research rather than sought out. This included those musicians at a higher professional level who were not my main focus but nevertheless, in the context of the local music world, were frequent reference points for other musicians.

d) Extra peripheral figures on the scene with whom I had informal conversations with at various points across the research period. (This included audience members and friends or partners of musicians.)

There were clearly different levels of musician on the scene. The table below outlines this.

Levels of Musicians

Levels of musicians	Description
1. Highest level professional musicians	Those for whom music was their full-time occupation and whose reputation stretched beyond the local area.
2. Established individual performers	Those who were established performers and known on the local music scene generally; often people who had been around for many years and whose names drew a crowd. While they were often perceived of as professional standard, they were usually still reliant on other sources of income. They may have associated with or have played with the 'level 1' musicians.
3. Individual performers in the process of establishing themselves	Those artists whose names were becoming more recognised in recent months or years, but who were still struggling to establish themselves, often struggling economically as well.
4. Established Local Musicians (instrumentalists, not singer-songwriters) who are often called on to help artists from 2 and 3.	Those who were often of a professional standard on an instrument but who were not solo artists or songwriters. They were often asked to play or record with artists from levels 2 and 3 and in some cases may have played with the level 1 professionals.

At the highest level were professional and nationally recognised artists. The next level down involved the veterans of the local acoustic scene for whom music was an extra source of income, but not the primary one. These individuals were nevertheless

perceived as 'professional' in the sense that they were respected locally as talents, and often supported or played with the bigger names. The next level down involved those who were still in the relatively early stages of establishing themselves as well known names on the scene. In addition to these performers there were the level 4 musicians: those who were recognised and well known for their talent but mainly by other musicians rather than audiences.

This research did not focus on the level one musicians. However, they did of course act as reference points for musicians and were involved socially with some of the research informants. Those individuals who fit into levels two and three were the groups that I was largely concerned with in the research; not the full time professional musicians, but those either struggling or who had always struggled to balance music making with day-to-day life; many of them often in a continuous dilemma about their identity as well as struggling economically through the years.

Participant observation

While my role was not that of a local performer or a core member of the scene, my marginal status on the scene can nonetheless lay claim to a level of participation within this world. As Becker (1982) points out, an art world is constituted by its audience and not just the producers of the art work. In this sense then, for the three-year research period I was certainly a participant in this world. Particularly with regard to the core participants I believe this helped in developing a reciprocal understanding in terms of talking openly about the song writing process, lyrical meanings etc. It also helped ultimately in the sense of musicians disclosing more about domestic circumstances and personal relationships etc.

Interview schedule

The first interview session conducted with the core participants was semi-structured. The intention of this first session was to build up an initial picture of the part that music played in the individual's life, how it had fit into their life history and the part it played in constituting their identity. This session was used to gain insights into the general views of participants regarding creativity, music, self-identity, music scene etc. While I had some clear key themes that I raised in all sessions, I tended to let the participant lead the talk (within reason). Consequently, some of these initial

interviews focused more on personal and biographical aspects, some on creative processes, and some around everyday issues. This relative autonomy given to the participants was in itself a key part of the research as it was important to gauge the extent to which people emphasised certain aspects of their identities and lives and not others. Where there was a clear imbalance in information given between participants, I attempted to balance this out in later sessions by homing in on areas not discussed at length previously. This model was the one followed for the nine supplementary interviews with the secondary participants.

In the second session I asked the participants to play recordings of their own songs or performances and talk about the music as the recordings played. I also gave them the opportunity to play other artist's music that had influenced them. The purpose of this session was to move away from any notion of the song as purely a text to be analysed by the music researcher, and instead to look at it in a phenomenological sense i.e. the ways it was interacted with, brought to life and given meaning by the participants. This was a reflexive process. For convenience, recordings were more desirable as they presented an opportunity for the participant to interact with their own performance and put themselves in the role of listener as well as performer. Interestingly, in some cases, this involved participants listening to recordings of their own live performances, which was a rare opportunity for them to put themselves, to some extent at least, in the position of the audience. However, in cases where the participant did not have access to recordings of their songs, they performed the songs live, talking about them before and after playing. This session also involved reflections on creativity in relation to song writing, musical arrangements and CD artwork and photography.

By using this approach I hoped to uncover the meaning that songs or performances held in individuals' biographies. These often represented epiphanies in their lives or invoked feelings of heightened consciousness that were perhaps fleeting at the time. An important aspect of this was to examine the way in which music connected to the construction of memory and subsequently to the building up of a music maker's narrative. It was often the case that the participants brought to the session a lot of tapes or CDs stretching back quite a few years and going up to the present day. The

sheer amount of time taken up by this however usually meant that not all the music could be covered in the allotted time, and in some cases an extra session was required.

The third meeting focused on the musicians' life histories. This session would reinforce some of the recollections and biographical information garnered by the music session. However, this session allowed the participant to talk about their life histories more broadly i.e. developing a narrative of self that was not just centred on the music. Prior to this session I asked participants to provide a skeletal outline of their life story as if key parts of their life were chapter headings. This was based on an idea put forward in Ken Plummer's book *Documents of Life* (2000). The intention of this session was to focus on turning points or 'defining moments' in the music makers' lives. I used this information in conjunction with previous biographical information to follow up some key issues in a semi-structured manner. I also asked for the participant to bring any significant documents or possessions to the session. This could be anything from musical instruments to photographs, newspaper cuttings, scrapbooks: in short, anything that they felt represented key moments in their lives or that held significant meaning to them:

> Researchers seek consistency in subjects' responses when subjects' lives are often inconsistent. The life history technique is peculiarly suited to discovering the confusions, ambiguities and contradictions that are played in everyday experiences (Plummer, 2000:40)

Howard Becker has argued that only life history approaches and participant observation were adequate models for capturing the meaning of 'process' (Becker in Plummer, 2000:40)

The fourth session focused on times and spaces of creativity in the musicians' daily lives. For three separate weeks during the course of the research I asked the four core participants to keep a diary/timesheet for a period of a week. I supplied them with the timesheets. This was not intended as an exercise for deep reflection, but rather as a way of getting some sense of the routine organisation of their lives. Rather than acting as hard quantitative data, the purpose of the timesheets was to provide me with

some kind of concrete starting point for a discussion of lifestyle, domestic life, work, and how music fitted in alongside their daily routine.

I asked the participants to provide a skeletal outline of how each day panned out including the details of how much time was taken up by musical activities and how the day was organised. On a practical level, this meant that it was not too arduous a task for the participants, and on a broader level it helped me to get an idea of which aspects primarily occupied the musicians' daily lives. Asking them to do this three times over the research period gave an opportunity to get some clues about the extent to which their everyday lives were changeable or relatively fixed. Some weeks might be significantly different from others. Most importantly this helped to shed light on the routine patterns of the singer songwriters' day-to-day lived existence, and the extent to which creativity was compromised by daily tasks and responsibilities. In briefing the participants of what this would entail I drew on a study by Maass and Kuypers (1974) of adjustments to the old age of upper class San Franciscans

The final session provided an opportunity for the core participants to reflect on the changes that had occurred since the first interview (approximately two to two and a half years prior). It also presented an opportunity for me to try and home in on some of those areas that I felt still required more exploration. These varied between participants.

Overall, the use of these methodological approaches for the mapping of self-identity acted as an alternative to snapshot analyses of music 'scenes'. In many sociological studies of local cultures there is little insight into who the individuals are that constitute a given music culture. Yet individual musicians' histories and the creative interactions with their music are surely invaluable in gaining a fully rounded, detailed and human picture of a local music scene.

The combination of this longitudinal approach with the core participants, the supplementary interviews with secondary participants, and participant observation of the scene as a whole, meant that a deep picture was built of some of the key individuals, but always within the context of a dynamic and interactive social world.

It is useful now to look at some of the key ethnographic studies of music scenes in Britain from the past few decades and how they feed into the theory and methods behind my own research.

My research hopes to fill several gaps in the popular music and cultural studies fields. Aside from DeNora's study of music in everyday life (2000), there is no literature concerned specifically with the construction of the self through music and the life story and certainly not in relation to musical creativity. Neither has any research been done on contemporary 'non folk' acoustic music scenes or songwriters. There are two principal texts that have a clear relation to this research however. These are the best-known ethnographic studies of UK music scenes in specific locations – Sara Cohen's *Rock Culture in Liverpool* (1991) and Ruth Finnegan's *Hidden Musicians* (1989) on music making in Milton Keynes.

Sarah Cohen's study of the rock music scene in Liverpool is closely connected to this thesis in that it is largely about the struggles amongst a specific group of musicians to build their identities through music rather than through conventional occupational routes and hence to escape from the drudgery of day to day life. Cohen acknowledges that while it may sound like a cliché, that for many of Liverpool's young people, being in a band was a 'way out' of conventional life, and rather than being perceived of as a 'drop-out phase' passed through before adulthood, constituted a legitimate career path. At the same time her study highlights the dilemmatic area faced by musicians: i.e. creativity compromised by commercial pressures.

Cohen's research, like this thesis, focuses on one specific music scene: in her case the rock/indie rock scene. Due partly to the nature of this genre, the focus is exclusively on a youth culture. Cohen looked at unsigned bands – bands without record contracts and therefore on the margins of the industry. She especially looked at the way that cultural production at a national level and mass media level 'influenced and affected' cultural production at a local level. She covers in some detail the social relationships between bands and, importantly, discusses the individual lifestyles and biographies of the musicians.

Cohen deals with the interesting issue of dilemmatic identities with many musicians living what they termed a 'Jekyll and Hide' existence (Cohen, 1991:50). She uses this phrase to describe the way that, as well as some doing manual jobs or even, in some cases, taking part in experiments, in order to raise money, some musicians also performed in cabaret or covers bands.

Cohen presents the Liverpool scene as containing co-operative and reciprocal relationships between local bands: bands attended each other's gigs, 'procured' gigs for each other etc. However, importantly Cohen has a critical eye noting the conflict and tensions that arose from this in terms of who owed who more favours etc.

Cohen's research provides clear evidence of a community of musicians, but this could be also conceived as a clique. It is based on a continuous 'othering' of bands from outside of the Liverpool rock scene. The feeling was often mutual. For example, there were equally cliquey elements with the Wirral's two bands talking about having nothing to do with the cliquey Liverpool set (ibid:33):

> The rock music 'scene' in Liverpool was…divided by cliques, factions, feuds, and rivalries, yet at the same time united by age, gender, a common ideology, mythology, and gossip grapevine, and a web of interlinking networks and band genealogies as its members moved between bands and music-related occupations.
> (ibid:225).

Crucially Cohen's focus is on unsigned bands in order to highlight 'cultural production in a local context':

> …an important part of the study dealt with the way in which those bands were influenced and affected by cultural production of a commercial nature at a national, mass media level.
> (ibid:5)

What Cohen arrives at in her conclusion is a reiteration of the traditional mass culture versus folk culture debate:

The bands...were constantly negotiating the shifting ground between fantasy and reality. The threads between the two worlds were tenuous, usually held by whimsical individuals, fickle public taste, and the twists of fortune. The bands thus seemed endlessly poised between success and failure, caught between original creativity and the demands of the record industry. Consequently some adopted what Frith called 'the ideology of "folk" in rock'. Polarities common to that ideology were highlighted, such as rock/pop; meaningful/superficial; authentic/false; truthful/deceitful; art/entertainment (non-art); creativity/commerce. The deconstruction of such oppositions revealed underlying preoccupations and motivations, thereby bringing into question other familiar distinctions such as music/non-music; order/disorder; pure/impure; dirty/clean.
(ibid:223)

The thread of Cohen's research is the rock musicians' resistance to commercial and mainstream pressures apparent in the wider music industry. The community was based on a sub-cultural sense of radical musical values:

They generally faced a common predicament: trapped between creativity and commerce and confronted by the same industry with its familiar 'gatekeepers'. They therefore formed, in a sense, a 'community'.
(ibid:225)

Finnegan's *Hidden Musicians*

Finnegan's study *Hidden Musicians* involved the examination of a medium sized town's amateur music making activities. A crucial point made by Finnegan's research, and one that this research follows through, is that although musical activities on an amateur level are accepted as part of English culture they are rarely investigated in terms of their organisation:

In fact we regularly take them so for granted that we fail to really *see* the unacclaimed work put in by hundreds and thousands of amateur musicians up and down the country. Yet it is this work, in a sense invisible, that upholds this in other ways well-known element of our cultural heritage
(Finnegan, 1989:3)

Finnegan asks some key questions including – how is local music sustained and by whom? Is there a predictable structure? Are local musicians a marginal minority or a substantial body? (ibid:4). And the most key question of all:

> ...what, finally, is the significance of local music-making for the ways people manage and make sense of modern urban life or, more widely, for our experience as active and creative human beings?
> (ibid.)

Finnegan points out what little work there has been, both in 'the micro sociology of amateur music; and, incredibly, questions on active music-making as such'. She continues, 'academics...have somehow found it easy to ignore something which is in other ways so remarkably obvious'. Finnegan also argues that there is little in the way of studies of music making activities in a particular town.

She makes a crucial point that music is an integral part of the social process of daily life rather than something 'marginalized as leisure, as somehow less real than 'work' or 'society''. Finnegan argues that she is:

> [F]ollowing one well-established tradition in social and historical research: that of using specific case studies to lead to the kind of illumination in depth not provided by more thinly spread and generalised accounts...it is relatively unusual to concentrate on the *practice* of music: on what people actually *do* on the ground...I discovered that looking closely at people's *actions* really was a route to discovering a local system that, even to me, was quite unexpected in its complexity and richness.
> (ibid:7-8.)

Crucially she is critical of the way most studies of music focus on professional musicians or 'great artists' in music. This is a major reason she cites for the absence of studies of local music. To counter this tendency she turns to the influence of sociologist Howard Becker, and his classic *Art Worlds* (1982) and presents a sociological picture of the workings of a music world. Referring directly to Becker's concept of art worlds she argues:

The 'musical worlds' of Milton Keynes were instances of such 'art worlds'. They were distinguishable not just by their differing musical styles but also by other social conventions: in the people who took part, their values, their shared understandings and practices, modes of production and distribution, and the social organisation of their collective musical activities'.
(Finnegan, 1989:31)

Gaps in the literature

Cohen was in Liverpool for one year, and she managed to get fairly close both socially and musically to the bands. What is lacking from her research however is a more longitudinal approach to the personal and domestic struggles by the musicians and the 'conflicting identity' issue. Although Cohen does discuss her participants in the context of their occupations and daily lives, on the whole we primarily see these musicians only in one role: 'the rock musician'. My research attempts to show how music makers are torn between their musician role on the one hand and occupational, family and relationship roles on the other. Again, this also demonstrates the limitations of focusing on youth culture: Cohen's participants, being in the 16-24 age-group, perhaps do not have as many roles to juggle. Equally the wealth of adult experience is inevitably less weighty.

Cohen's research gives very cursory biographies of each member of each band. Just over three pages (about a paragraph each) is dedicated to each band member's adult career and 5 pages for Crikey it's the Cromptons (Cohen, 1991:21). There is a danger in such a cursory presentation of individuals' lives, which can easily result in methodological shallowness. In my coverage of biography, I explore each participant's adult career and entry into scene in a little more depth. More importantly, I comment on the participants in terms of the continuing remaking of themselves throughout the thesis.

There is arguably an element of romanticism in Cohen's study which leads to a cliché found in many youth cultural studies: kids struggling to make it against the odds. As it is based exclusively on a youth culture, there are familiar themes of rebelliousness and idealism in the musicians' accounts. In some ways my research is a corrective to

such romantic depictions of music makers, focusing on the realities of maintaining such idealism within the context of greater adult responsibilities.

Finnegan's research must take credit for its comprehensiveness. However precisely because of this, her analysis is often too focused on structural explanations of musical organisations without much critical exploration into the social positioning of individuals or the dynamic power relationships within music scenes. Finnegan acknowledges the limitations of focusing on many different musical worlds and her long list of around two hundred rock and pop bands in Milton Keynes exemplifies the downside of sociological comprehensiveness in that she can never get too deep:

> I am...aware that by comparing the many different musics in the area I am depriving
> myself and my readers of the full understanding that a deeper search into just one
> musical group or tradition might have provided...
> (Finnegan, 1989:11)

My research, by way of contrast to Finnegan, focuses on one small world, and is thus able to gain a grasp of both the mechanics of the social world and the individuals in it, as well as giving us an idea of how social networks function and how people are positioned, not merely through their position in the scene, but also by the way they present themselves to others and themselves through their storied identities.

As in Cohen's research, Finnegan's emphasis is very much on groups. The lived experiences of solo songwriters and musicians are almost non-existent. There is something of a sociological idealism in Finnegan's study particularly, which paints pictures of collectives such as clubs, societies, orchestras and groups. My research, in acknowledging the existence of the lone performer, is able to examine the tension between belonging to a scene and promoting and presenting the self; an area historically overlooked by sociologists.

Along with Becker's *Art Worlds* (1982) of course, other relevant texts to this research include his classic participant observation work on jazz musicians in the 1940s in his book *Outsiders* (1963). Importantly this book highlighted the notion of adult careers occurring in marginal occupations and not merely conventional professions. This is a

strong strand of the thesis: individuals' struggles to forge an alternative musical career as opposed to a conventional occupational career path.

Michael Brocken's (2003) text on the British folk revival is informative in terms of recognising the inherent problems in folk music's resistance of the commercial and the popular. Studying a contemporary acoustic scene that more than acknowledges its popular music heritage is in some ways the answer to Brocken's critical question. His main thread is that folk music should be treated as an equal form of popular music rather than a rarified form outside of the mainstream. Brocken's study is also very instructive in terms of its critique of performance conventions and the acknowledgement of conflict and tensions in this area.

Niall Mackinnon's (1993) work on the British folk scene is also informative and relevant to this study. Mackinnon examines the way that creativity is threatened by market forces infiltrating music. Both he and Brocken examine the contradictions between the collective traditions of the music and the commercialisation and professionalisation of musicianship, though Brocken's approach is far more critical. In Brocken's case he crucially acknowledges such developments in terms of both music and socio-cultural changes. More specifically, Mackinnon discusses the paradoxical position of the 'folk professional':

> The folk scene…contains a large contradiction: a scene that has its central organising ethos that ordinary people can make music independent of commercialisation has spawned a generation of professionals. Most folk events involve the exchange of money.
> (Mackinnon, 1993:71)

He talks about the tendency of some folk artists to stop playing the folk clubs altogether and command higher rates at folk festivals and arts centres. In one sense we can see the acoustic singer songwriter as emerging at this critical juncture whereby the musician begins to see their music as a career path rather than a fulfilling hobby.

Structure of Chapters

The running order of the chapters in this thesis is based on the methodological approach of moving continuously between the individual/private sphere and the social/public sphere.

Chapter one crucially provides the necessary popular music background and relates it to societal trends that fed into the contemporary acoustic singer songwriter phenomenon.

Chapter two presents a long view of the scene: outlining the Leicester acoustic scene in the wider context of both folk music and mainstream contemporary definitions of 'acoustic' music. It also introduces the members of the scene with a table of ages, occupations and status on the scene.

Chapter three then zooms right in to take a close up view of the individual musicians and their managing and making of musical identities through the presentation of self in daily life. In this chapter I also begin to examine the presentation of self to the self amongst the core participants by examining the musicians' stories of how their adult careers led them to being musicians on the acoustic scene. Here then, the primary focus is on three themes points: a) How did the musicians manage and present their identities as 'musicians' on a day-to-day basis? b) How did the musicians manage the conflicts, tensions, struggles and dilemmas of a dual identity between occupational identity and artistic/musical identity? c) How did the mapping of a musical identity through their life-stories help them to maintain a consistent sense of self within the flux of daily life. This chapter is based on the first series of interviews with the participants and the third series of interviews with the core participants for the life history information.

Chapter four moves on to the ways in which the musicians articulated creativity and the processes involved in 'creating' music. Secondly, it includes the core participants' reflections on their own song lyrics and how they reflected or informed their experiences of daily life. This material was gleaned from the second sessions with the core participants where I recorded them talking about their songs as they listened to recordings of them. Thirdly, this chapter deals with a crucial aspect of the

thesis: the extent to which this group of musicians managed to reclaim or re-shape their everyday lives as a space of creativity, and to what level the exigencies of everyday life nurtured and/or constrained that creative individuality.

Chapters five and six deal with an integral aspect of 'being' a musician: performance. Firstly, chapter five stays with the area of self-identity, discussing reflections on the nature of 'being' a *performer*, including on-stage self-presentation, communicating with an audience and performer authenticity. Chapter six then moves on to a more sociological approach focusing largely on performance conventions, performance settings and the logistical everyday problems of performance events.

Chapter seven examines a crucial aspect of this research: the role of the musical product itself in the making of the musician story. The primary focus here is the song, but also music related documents and possessions. In this chapter I look at the ways in which the acoustic singer-songwriters reflected on their moments of creativity (song lyrics, music) and subsequently interacted creatively with these products by building them into a narrative of the self and their lived experience. As in chapter four the analysis of lyrics here is not a mere textual analysis as my approach focuses on the phenomenological aspects of the songs i.e. the meaningful interaction between the song and its writer. This was achieved through recording the process of the musicians listening to and reflecting on their own songs.

Chapter eight makes an outward movement again, dealing with the way that the structures of the music industry and the market culture impact on the creative identity. This leads us to the ultimate question of whether the individualistic nature of the area of solo singer-songwriters is compatible or incompatible with the idea of community or co-operation. Are the pressures on the individual to conform to a marketized self so great that they threaten the idea of the self-created musical identity? How important is the musical life story in maintaining a strong and consistent identity in the midst of the many threats to it?

Finally chapter nine focuses on managing change in the musical life bringing together the autobiographical with the day-to-day management of identity in examining the dynamic process of re-authoring the self that occurred over the research period, in the

form of an overview of the developments and significant events that the participants experienced over a two to three year time span.

CHAPTER ONE: MUSICAL CONTEXT

Introduction

Before we examine the Leicester acoustic scene specifically it is first necessary to paint a picture of the popular music context in which this scene existed. In this chapter I will first present the recent resurgence of the singer-songwriter in popular music. I will then briefly explore some of the structural music industry elements that may be behind this and then look at the grass roots phenomenon of open mic nights. Finally, I will look in more detail at the first wave of singer songwriters in the late 60s and early 70s and how this genre moved away from its folk heritage.

The resurgence of the singer-songwriter

The first few years of the 21st century have seen a revival of the acoustic singer songwriter: This has involved a stripping down of much mainstream music to the basic elements of one person and an acoustic guitar, and stripping down the singer also in the sense of 'bearing the soul'. A recent article from the BBC celebrates 2005 as 'the year of the singer songwriter':

> Intense radio airplay and strong sales for stars including James Blunt, Daniel Powter, Jack Johnson and KT Tunstall suggests 2005 has been the year of the singer-songwriter...
>
> (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/4546988.stm, 28/12/2005)

For others, however, from both the rock and the folk worlds, this re-emergence is greeted with some disdain. Luke Pritchard from indie band The Kooks for example exclaims:

> James Blunt has inspired this awful rebirth of the singer-songwriter... All that 'Oh, it's so hard for me in my life' stuff - that's not art...its self-indulgent crap.
>
> (Luke Pritchard in *The Independent*: 3/2/2006)

Well known folk singer Kate Rusby[1], also refers in pejorative terms to the 'disappointment' of hearing a good folk performer who then goes all 'commercial singer-songwritery'. (Rusby in *FRoots* magazine, Dec 2005:21)

The acoustic singer-songwriter has always walked a fine line between commercial recognition and accusations of a lack of authenticity; merely representing a diluted folk form. But what is the significance of this re-emergence of the 'acoustic' and the 'solo singer songwriter'? Is it merely a simple result of market cycles and target markets or does it tell us something more. Let me attend to the first question now.

Demographics and music industry factors

In the early 21st century the rock n roll teenagers of the late 50s are now in their mid sixties, the psychedelic counter culture or 'hippies' of the late 60s in their mid fifties. In short, today popular music consumption is no longer the exclusive domain of the 'affluent teenager'. As Keith Negus points out, demographic changes have long been a significant factor for the music industry: there was a drop of around 30% in the numbers of 15-24 year olds, from 9.2 million to 6.3 million, by the beginning of the twenty first century which inevitably results in 'an expanding market of middle-aged pop consumers' (Negus, 1992:68). Just as Britpop may have held appeal in the mid 1990s for middle-aged people who were teenagers in the early to mid 60s, so the acoustic 'singer-songwriter' phenomenon could be having the same affect ten years later, on those who were teenagers in the early 1970s. The middle-aged album buying, festival-going Radio 2 listener is now just as important to the major record companies as the 'youth market'. Back in the early 1990s, one marketing director at a major British music corporation clearly set out the crisis, which a decade on would seem to have been tackled by the industry:

> The biggest challenge facing us as marketing people is the pure demographics of the market. The decline in the teenage population, the decline, relatively speaking, in their disposable income, compared with the 1960s and 1970s and the growth of the burgeoning middle-aged, middle class for whom there is, at the moment, not enough music and no easy marketing outlets, and who are not catered for properly by either

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[1] Rusby with her 'Radio 2 following' might for some herself epitomise the ambiguities over what is mainstream and what is not.

record companies or the media.

(in Negus, 1992:68).

The growth of the open mic night

It is important to state that this popularity of acoustic singer songwriters is not necessarily merely a top down music business phenomenon. There has also been an interesting phenomenon at a grass-roots level in towns and cities across the UK and elsewhere. Out of the ashes of the traditional folk club has sprung forth the acoustic or 'open-mic' night. In fact the Leicester acoustic scene featured in this study was itself centred round such a night known as the *City Acoustic Club*, which had been running for fifteen years. This phenomenon of the open mic night is neither totally organic nor a mere creation of the culture industries. It seems to have arisen from a combination of both.

The early 1990s saw a trend in popular music for famous rock artists such as Eric Clapton, Dire Straits, Paul McCartney, Sting etc. to go unplugged: i.e. switching to acoustic guitar instead of electric, and perhaps using double bass and piano instead of electric bass and keyboards. This trend for 'unplugged' musicians happened on a corporate music industry level but its impact on consumers seemed to have a knock-on effect on grass-roots music too. One 'acoustic music' website that proclaims the birth of a 'New Acoustic Movement' (NAM) accounts for the process:

> It all began a couple of years ago. Musical Exchanges, the largest musical instrument shop in the UK, began reporting a vast increase in the sales of acoustic guitars as all over the country famous and not so famous musicians began to include an 'acoustic interlude' in their sets. Where heroes go, of course, mere mortals follow and it wasn't long before fans of bands began to realise that you didn't need amps or gimmicks to make decent music. A guitar, a decent voice and a passion for high quality lyrics was all that was required.
>
> (www.bluegrape.co.uk, 2005)

Around the same time, during the 1990s, there was something of an explosion of Irish themed pubs and bars around the UK and the rest of the world, undoubtedly spurred on in part by *Guinness's* relentlessly nationalistic advertising campaign and also

influenced by the international success of Michael Flatley's *Riverdance*. During the 1990s all things Irish became fashionable. Part of this fashion led to a revival of live Irish traditional music in pubs and helped to bring it to a more mainstream audience.

The Irish explosion and the phenomenon of 'unplugged' mainstream rock albums gave rise to many more pubs and music venues beginning to hold open mic nights. Such democratic participatory performance events were previously associated almost exclusively with folk clubs. Now, however, they were beginning to take place in student bars and mainstream chain pubs rather than just small locals. Renditions of popular classics such as Oasis's *Wonderwall* or Xtreme's *More Than Words* were now much more likely to be heard than traditional folk songs, and songs such as these two became the acoustic equivalent of *My Way* and *I Will Survive* in Karaoke bars.

Acoustic open mic culture and folk music

As is often the case with popular culture this explosion in open mic nights could be seen as a democratisation of live performance. On the other hand it could be argued that they merely represent a classic example of mass culture diluting something that previously was far more culturally meaningful. A sceptical aficionado may argue that the acoustic music scenes that developed around open mic nights were simply a 'diluted form of folk'. An even more cynical music buff might call it 'karaoke with guitars', referring to the reality that the standard at open mic nights could vary from virtuoso to those barely able to strum two chords.

The democratic element of the open mic night is that anyone can just turn up with a guitar or other acoustic instrument and play anything. As one rather idealistic reading of open mic nights celebrates:

> Commercial pressure? None of it – What was happening here was a group of people playing together for the sheer joy of it. No reward, no personal material gain, just music at its best.
> (http://www.bbc.co.uk/somerset/content/articles/2006/04/14)

In conjunction with the rise in popularity of open mic nights came the increase of more local acoustic acts and small-scale paid acoustic gigs – some solo artists, some

acoustic duos or bands. Subsequently, there arose acoustic scenes, like the one studied here in Leicester.

A crucially significant shift occurred from within folk music culture at the same time as the rise in popularity of 'acoustic' nights: many folk nights began re-labelling themselves 'acoustic' nights in order to appeal to a broader audience. It could certainly be argued that the widening appeal of acoustic music as a whole has occurred at the expense of traditional folk's leftfield status. There are now awards ceremonies such as The National Folk and Acoustic awards, and rather typically the latest ceremony was marred by controversy over whether an award winning piece of music was 'traditional' or not[2]. Through digital channels, particularly BBC4 and televised Radio 2 events, such ceremonies bring folk music to a much wider audience as does the coverage of events like The Cambridge Folk Festival. The flipside to this however, is a lumping together of folk with mainstream acoustic forms, world music or roots, plus new forms such as 'Anti folk' and 'Neo folk'. The cosmopolitan liberalisation of folk has subsequently given rise to ambiguity over what folk should encompass. This has resulted in a loss of power and a loss of a coherent identity amongst the grass roots organisers of folk clubs, previously the place where the cultural reproduction previously occurred. Now it happens at a culture industry level, even with folk music.

It is clear that 'acoustic' is often thrown in next to folk and roots because it is both more inclusive and more appealing to a wider range of musicians than the narrow confines of folk. It is also inevitably about opening up to a younger or a broader audience. For many, folk music is associated with particular connotations of exclusivity and particular types of performer (e.g. floor singers and traditional songs).

Even with Radio 2's exposure of much acoustic music, Brocken highlights the lack of dedicated timeslots for folk:

> It would be fair to claim that folk music has been condemned to a degree of radio exile. After much media speculation, Andy Kershaw was finally removed from the DJ roster at Radio1 in May 2000. Mike Harding's Pebble Mill-based hour of folk

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[2] Seth Lakeman at National Folk Awards 2007 was the centre of controversy when he won an award for a 'traditional' song when it was actually a song that he had written (*The Guardian* 16/2/07)

music each Wednesday on Radio 2 is now the sole nationally broadcast folk programme in the UK.

(Brocken, 2003:138)

A modern day acoustic singer songwriter might be seen as a 'folkie who has sold out' or – to put it less unkindly – a professionalized folk singer, or perhaps even a rock/pop musician trying to steal the clothes of authenticity that folk wraps itself in. In some ways the relationship between folk music and the acoustic singer songwriter is akin to the relationship between gospel music and the first renegade soul singers. Just as professionalised gospel singers gave birth to commercial soul music – substituting the lyrics of songs of worship with words of love and romance[3] – so the professional folk singers' songs of politics, hope and history gave birth to acoustic singer songwriters' songs of unrequited love and introspective self reflection.

An optimistic reading of the acoustic revival might suggest that it was precisely the prevalence of grass-roots acoustic music – particularly the open mic nights – that was in part responsible for the recent re-emergence of the singer songwriter. KT Tunstall, for example, ran an open mic night before she was signed. It seems however that this grass roots open mic movement was spawned by a combination of music industry influence, the growth of chain pubs and themed nights, and the commercialisation or semantic stretching of 'folk' music.

It must be said that there are also simple logistical and economic reasons why this rise of acoustic gigs was propelled. An acoustic gig usually requires only a rudimentary PA system, one or two microphones and one person with a voice and a guitar. This is a much easier way for a venue to provide musical entertainment than hiring full bands who need much more room, bigger PA equipment, sound engineer etc and crucially, demand greater fees.

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[3] This transition from gospel to soul was interestingly presented on *Soul Deep – The History of Black Popular Music*, BBC2, 2004)

The first wave of acoustic singer-songwriters

Although contemporary acoustic music is often associated with folk, it owes its heritage more to the acoustic rock performers of the early 1970s, which as we will see are themselves reflective of societal changes:

> Paul Rees, Editor of Q magazine, argues that the crossing over of singer-songwriters to mainstream audiences is nothing new, citing [David] Gray, Alanis Morissette, James Taylor and Carole King as significant predecessors...Whether it is a 2005 fad or simultaneous emergence of talent, Mr Rees feels this wave of commercially popular, singer-songwriters is likely to continue..."Major labels will obviously endeavour to sign their own version of a Blunt or Tunstall for the next 12 months...But, the singer-songwriter, like the four-piece rock 'n' roll band, is a perennial".
> (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/4546988.stm, 28/12/05)

We can trace the roots of the contemporary acoustic singer-songwriter back to the California sound of the early 1970s, which included artists such as Joni Mitchell, James Taylor and Jackson Browne. Although the 'California set' were influenced in part by earlier New York based folk revival artists such as Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan, their roots were as much in rock n roll and sixties pop as they were in folk (e.g. John Sebastian first found success with pop group *The Lovin Spoonful*, David Crosby with *The Byrds*, Graham Nash with *The Hollies* and of course Carole King as a famous pop songwriter in New York's Brill Building[4]). The singer-songwriter phenomenon is also linked with the concept of the 'rock auteur' (see Shuker, 1994:111) that emerged in the 1960s. This concept of the rock musician as 'serious artist' included figures such as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell, and later Bruce Springsteen. All of these artists were influenced by folk but crossed over into the mainstream and gave rise to the serious rock singer-songwriter. In some ways they bridged the gap between the social/public and the individual/personal in performance, based on an 'ethos of self expression which draws an intimate tie between the personal and the performance' (Street, 1986:5).

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[4] See Roy Shuker (1998:276) *Key Concepts in Popular Music* (London: Routledge) for background to Brill Building songwriters.

36

The veneer of post-war affluence and the optimism of the 1950s and 60s gave way to the economically depressed and disappointed decade of the 1970s. The music of the singer-songwriters reflected the retreat into self-exploration in the wake of the disillusionment of the Woodstock generation after significant social change did not in fact come about. Although we must be wary of taking a crude reflectionist approach by arguing that art always reflects the social conditions of its time, we can acknowledge, through such examples as the birth of rock n roll and post war consumerism in the 50s; soul music, civil rights and black power in the 60s; and post-punk and Thatcherism in the 80s, that music can capture the 'structure of feeling' or 'social character' (see Fromm in Williams, 1961:97) of a particular time. There are clear socio-musical connections between the rise of the early 1970s singer songwriters and the emergence of post 1968 individualism resulting in what Foucault terms the 'California self' (Cohen and Taylor, 1992:21). We can then connect the emergence of a more introspective form of song writing with the maturing of the 'flower-power generation' of the late 1960s, as they began, either to run out of steam or simply to grow up and conform. This movement towards the self in acoustic-based music is illustrated by the following examples. Alternating between examples from folk and singer songwriter the differences in lyrical content is clear. In order to highlight the contrasts, I have indicated in brackets above the titles the general themes of these songs.

Folk: Common ownership of the land

This Land is Your Land (Woody Guthrie)

As I went walking I saw a sign there
And on the sign it said "no trespassing."
But on the other side it didn't say nothing
That side was made for you and me

In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people
By the relief office I seen my people;
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking
Is this land made for you and me?

Singer-Songwriter: Private Property

Our House (Graham Nash)[5]

I'll light the fire, while you place the flowers

In the vase that you bought today.

Staring at the fire for hours and hours,

While I listen to you play your love songs

All night long for me, only for me.

Our house, is a very, very, very fine house.

With two cats in the yard,

Life used to be so hard,

Now everything is easy 'cause of you.

Folk-Rock: Political Struggle

I'll Be There (Phil Ochs)

When the thunder of oppression roars and crackles, I'll be there

When those who would be free are wearing shackles, I'll be there

For the day is gonna come when they'll throw away their chains

Lift their heads and raise their arms for the struggle that remains

And let me tell you, I'll be there

Singer-songwriter: Personal/emotional struggle

Fire and Rain (James Taylor)

Just yesterday mornin' they let me know you were gone,

Susan, the plans they made put an end to you.

I walked out this morning and I wrote down this song,

I just can't remember who to send it to.

Well I've seen fire and I've seen rain

I've seen sunny days that I thought would never end

I've seen lonely times when I could not find a friend

But I always thought that I'd see you again

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[5] Somewhat surprisingly, these song lyrics were featured on a folk and traditional website. This demonstrates again the ambiguities between mainstream and folk. The same page didn't feature Woody Guthrie's anthem *This Land is Your Land.*

Folk-Rock: Social Change

The Times they are a Changin (Bob Dylan)

Come senators, congressmen

please heed the call

Don't stand in the doorway

Don't block up the hall

For he that gets hurt

Will be he who has stalled

There's a battle outside

And it is ragin'

It'll soon shake your windows

And rattle your walls

For the times they are a 'changin'

Singer Songwriter: Life changes: Adolescence

At Seventeen (Janis Ian)

And those of us with ravaged faces

Lacking in the social graces

Desperately remained at home

Inventing lovers on the phone

Who called to say come dance with me

And murmured vague obscenities

It isn't all it seems at seventeen

While paradoxically, by the late early 70s folk music had gone electric with bands such as *Fairport Convention* and *Steeleye Span*; on the UK acoustic scene performers such as John Martyn, Al Stewart and Ralph McTell toured folk clubs with their new brand of introspective material:

> The protest song was the big thing and normally it was anti-war, anti this or anti that. I was a man for ballads myself. I'd much rather protest about my heart than the state of politics.
> (John Martyn *Folk Brittannia* BBC4, 2006)

Just as a big part of what drove the second folk music revival in the 1950s was the quest to return to collective forms of culture built around community, work and place – equally the first 'singer songwriter' revival in the early 21st century perhaps indicates or at least symbolises a deepening of the crisis of selfhood. It is important to note however that this self-indulgent, introspective element did not only arise after the failure of the Woodstock generation to change the world, but was rather something inherent within the movement in the first place: the 'flowerpower' generation was largely a middle-class phenomenon and contained within it a bourgeois self-serving hedonism wrapped up in a shiny package of an enlightened, politicised higher consciousness. The Woodstock generation contained the seeds of the California Self within, which was ultimately responsible for shifting the emphasis from social struggle to personal struggle.

What some may call the incorporation of folk into the mainstream that occurred with these shifts was reflected in what Peter York referred to as 'babytime': a 'magic time' when thousands of adult, sane, bourgeois men and women aspired to Babyhood... The man with the child in his eyes, Kickers on his feet and dungarees round the rest, walked the land' (quoted in Brocken, 2003:113). He links it in with the privatisation of the self:

> By 1970...[f]olk music performance styles were accurately regarded as significant: an intrinsic part of our culture. But British society and culture was also experiencing further radical change. By focusing upon the private, the idea emerged that one could, like a child, also find refuge in the confidential (and privileged). This resulted in abdication – which was also unproblematic when one had relocated to the suburbs...Countless numbers withdrew from urban living into their private spheres within Britain's new suburban landscapes.
> (Brocken, 2003:113)

Brocken epitomises the openness of those who grew up in the 1960s to popular music forms:

> ...if I were brutally honest, it was the magnificent Byrds who had introduced me to the verities of (what one could do with) 'traditional' material. They also led me to an

encounter with Jefferson Airplane and Love...The upshot of this unconventional route into folk music was my taking into account as much value in the work of Kantner and Carthy and Arthur Lee as A.L Llloyd.

(Brocken,2003:i)

Summary

We have seen here then how the resurgent acoustic singer songwriter owes its existence to a mixture of demographic calculations by the music industry, the rise of open-mic nights with the accompanying demise of folk clubs (including the commercialisation of folk), and the re-engagement with the confessional, introspective song-writing styles that first emerged from the California songwriters of the late 60s and early 70s. Within these trends lies a paradox within music and self-identity: as discussed in the introduction, this last influence may be indicative of an advanced state of reflexivity and self analysis in an increasingly confessional and solipsistic society. On the other hand, in a musical sense, the open mic explosion indicates a revival in the situated, democratic and participatory nature of local music space bound communities. Having sketched the wider development of the acoustic singer-songwriter phenomenon I will now present the Leicester acoustic scene and its relationship with folk and contemporary acoustic music.

CHAPTER TWO: THE LEICESTER ACOUSTIC SCENE IN CONTEXT

Introduction

> ...It's a guy getting up or a girl getting up, playing an instrument without any help
> from technology, and just...singing. And I don't care if it's original songs or not.
> I'm not bothered. I like the fact that you can have a folk singer go up followed by a
> guy [who]...just plays some African tunes on a guitar...
> (Neil: acoustic scene member)

> I personally think that it's the most exciting music around, I really do you know, and
> it encompasses everything. It doesn't....restrict itself to...various themes like rock
> music and, you know, rap and garage and all the rest of them. Acoustic music pulls
> out a whole range of things – that makes it very vibrant and alive for me.
> (Steve: acoustic scene member)

Leicester, a medium sized city in the English Midlands of just under 300,000 people
is a relatively multicultural place with many diverse music scenes. In contrast to
Nottingham: its trendier East Midlands neighbour, Leicester is not renowned for its
vibrant youth culture. It is however a very active city in terms of live-music. The
'Acoustic Scene' was amongst the most active.

After an initial outline this chapter will look at the important relationship between the
Leicester acoustic scene and folk. I will then present the scene in relation to
contemporary acoustic music. Finally, this chapter will present the general
characteristics of the 20+ people who made up the core of the Leicester acoustic
scene.

Outline of the scene
There were a range of established local artists on the acoustic scene in Leicester
generally aged between 30 and 60. Some of the members of this scene had been

around for over a decade, and were local celebrities in their own right, regularly performing to enthusiastic audiences. The principal place my research revolved around was *The Musician*: a relatively small, but significant and respected music venue in Leicester. Most of the research participants, and certainly all of the core participants in my research had varying degrees of involvement with this venue and the scene that operated around it. Most of the participants were also involved with, or at least linked to The *City Acoustic Club*, which ran every Monday all year round and provided a platform for budding musicians and songwriters to perform their own material. It was an 'open mic' session, which meant that anyone, provided they arrived earlier than 9pm, was welcome to attend and perform two songs. For the performers, who made up the majority of the audience, admission was free. For those not playing, it cost £1. During the research period the acoustic club celebrated its fifteenth anniversary, though before 1998 it had taken place at another venue – *The Royal Mail* pub.

Alex highlighted the importance of the acoustic club to local singer songwriters:

> I owe a lot...to the acoustic club – going out...I used to go almost religiously on a weekly basis...literally, probably the first two years I probably went over forty weeks of the year... When I started writing songs, I disciplined myself to write a new song every week to play there on a Monday...some of them were dreadful but that didn't matter...

Andrew, who ran the City Acoustic Club, outlined its diverse make up and workings:

> ...the age group and quality and style of music is really quite varied: some people come up and, for the first time they get up on a stage... plug the guitar in and they usually play somebody elses's songs; occasionally, you'll just get somebody who's just sat in the bedroom writing songs for years and years: it's the first time they've...played it in front of anybody...or you get people who've not played for years, wanting to pick up their guitar again...or you get students who play guitars...together and have been down to other acoustic things in the area or where they come from and they just want to get up there and play to their mates...I love it when that happens cos if you get two or three of them in one night it fills the pub, and it's all new people and they get to see all the regulars as well...

43

We have already touched on the development of acoustic oriented music. I will now present a brief outline of where the Leicester Acoustic Scene itself stood in relation to folk music and contemporary acoustic music. We should be aware that 'Acoustic' music is not, strictly speaking, a genre in itself but may be referred to as a 'para-genre': an umbrella term that includes artists and styles from many different genres. Despite its arguably eclectic character, in the discourse of the mass music media 'acoustic' is regularly used in two senses: either in conjunction with the term 'roots' and as a pseudonym for folk or folk related music, or in relation to 'rock' singer songwriters. As we will see, the Leicester acoustic scene drew from both of these pools.

2.1 The Leicester acoustic scene and folk/roots Music

The scene that operated around *The Musician* pub involved some of the city's most well known acoustic songwriters. *The Musician* had marketed itself as The Midlands' premier venue for 'Roots' (invariably meaning blues, Irish or English folk) and 'Americana' (predominantly referring to country styles) but the core acoustic scene members in my research were, on the whole, just as influenced by mainstream rock as they were by such ambiguous generic terms. In fact two or three acoustic musicians said that they thought it was a mistake to narrow the venue down in such a way; and as one very prominent acoustic performer exclaimed, 'I don't know what Americana is. I *don't* know what it is!' 'Roots' is a term frequently used in conjunction with either 'acoustic' or 'folk'. For example, the most prominent folk magazine is called 'F (for folk)-Roots' and the only national radio programme (Mike Harding on Radio 2) on acoustic music labels itself as 'folk, roots and acoustic based sounds' (*Radio Times* 17-23 March, 2007)

Brocken comments on the ambiguous nature of 'roots' in relation to the above mentioned magazine:

> F-Roots pre-supposes (....) a core of natural, unspoilt musical truth: a distinction between 'real' music and the 'artificial' products of the manipulator. Interestingly the use of the word 'roots' in the context of a British folk magazine conveys the idea that 'folk' is of the First World whereas 'roots' are apposite to the Second and Third

Worlds...'Roots' music is written about as if it were the creation of 'unspoilt' (for
which read: backward) natives, who, as much for our benefit as for their own,
continue to interpret reality in a way forgotten by time. The term carries strong hints
of an imperialistic past and a neo-imperialistic present.
(Brocken, 2003:140)

Brocken adds...

The dichotomy of roots versus other popular music types is an
'opposition...articulated in various ways: as that between the local (pure) and the
international (corrupted); between the past (rooted-ness) and the present (dissolution);
between popular culture (participation) and mass culture (alienation)...modern life is
found guilty of having destroyed the characteristics of true identity through a
conglomeration of external influences that are invariably deemed baneful and
threatening and which lead to falsification or travesties of original, authentic
culture...
(ibid: 140-1)

Although the acoustic musicians in my research were not always explicitly influenced
by folk, it must be acknowledged that there was a significant degree of crossover
between the acoustic scene and the folk scene in Leicester. It is fair to say that a
significant proportion of the people involved in this scene either crossed over to folk
music or at least regularly crossed musical paths with local folk musicians. Neil gives
the example of Sheila – a well known folk musician:

She's a right folkie but...she'll come to the acoustic club, but she's as folky
as I know. Once she picks up the guitar and starts singing, she is finger in
your ear folkie and I don't really like it but I like her.

Compared to the local folk musicians however, the acoustic musicians were made up
of a slightly more musically diverse group whose members were from a younger, but
generally broader, age group and who were more open to a range of styles. Steve, a
folk/acoustic crossover musician was often very verbally critical of the folk club
scene:

> What I've done over the last few years is to take music out of the sort of rarefied atmosphere of the folk club...started to write some rock n roll...so there's an element of compromise there...

Ben, songwriter in an acoustic duo, presented a picture of what he perceived as the distinctions between the acoustic scene and the folk scene:

> The folk scene tends more towards people who have a kind of love for the music and a sort of background...and it's about knowing your subject and being well read in it and having a backlog of songs that you can sing, whereas the acoustic scene is a lot more about, 'I wrote this song about a girl who dumped me and now I'm going to sing it to everyone'...I think, to be honest, by its very nature, it's one person on their own which is not particularly selfless.

This last point is reiterated by Brocken:

> Folk music signifies the participant within the collective, whereas rock music is still viewed by many as the individual and exploitative.
> (Brocken, 2003:93)

Neil perceived a crucial difference between the folk and acoustic music scenes as residing in the seriousness of the former and the lightness of the former:

> ...they take their music very seriously...and I think they take themselves far too seriously, and that's what I like about the acoustic club...it tends to be serious but also lighthearted, you can have a laugh...

The image of the regimented and encoded folk club with rules, conventions and disdain for anything not considered within the folk canon or the folk sensibility has caused this kind of 'folk suspicion' in musicians who've largely grown up with rock and pop. Brocken quotes Mick O'Toole, a skiffle musician and folk club attender who talks of folk clubs from the 70s onwards as being populated by 'virtuoso luddites'. He sums up many of the reasons why many acoustic musicians distance themselves from 'folk' music:

...willingness to embrace change became a reluctance to witness change. An interest in the music of the past became an immersion in the images of that past. An interest in alternative music practices turned into a dogged reluctance to acknowledge stylistic and technological change – they wouldn't grow up. It was OK to immerse yourself because there was nobody around from your imagined past to argue the toss.
(O'Toole in Brocken, 2003:114)

Perhaps another reason for the contemporary acoustic musician's suspicion of folk is that, ever since folk-rock, the folk club culture has seemed to many musicians as conservative, staid, and not progressive. Going back to play the folk clubs after a period with folk rock pioneers *Steeleye Span*, Martin Carthy described this reserved nature of folk clubs post folk rock:

It had become apparent that the folk clubs could be very, very easily satisfied – you didn't have to be that good. There was too much of this 'oh, it's just folk music' – it's just *ordinary* people – that means it's *ordinary* music and what that meant for them was that it's actually not very good but it doesn't matter.
(Martin Carthy *Folk Britttannia*, BBC4, 2006)

On the whole, many of the musicians involved in the acoustic scene in Leicester did not perceive themselves as having an automatic relation to folk music. Many of them were keen to distinguish themselves from those often referred to as the 'finger in the ear types'. Part of the reason seemed to be due to the perceived level of a relatively 'anything goes' attitude of the city acoustic club where one could find a mix of serious singer-songwriters, professional standard instrumentalists, or occasional strummers doing music as a hobby and people who were just 'doing their own thing'.

2.2 The Leicester Acoustic Scene and contemporary 'acoustic' music

As has been stated in the previous chapter, and as has just been demonstrated, we are dealing in this research with acoustic singer songwriters who, though connected to folk musicians on a grass roots level, do not see themselves as part of a folk scene nor do the majority of them claim folk as their musical heritage. The singer-songwriters on this scene – like Brocken earlier – were far more influenced by folk-rock or rock artists such as Joni Mitchell, Paul Simon, James Taylor, Nick Drake, Joan

Armatrading, Neil Young, Neil Finn, Jeff Buckley. Some did mention the more folk-related names of *Fairport Convention*[6], Dylan, Richard Thompson, *The Incredible String Band*, although the former rock oriented names were mentioned far more frequently. Few cited out and out folk singers however. Ben, talking about his acoustic duo, stated:

> In no way are we kind of influenced by acoustic music or folk music... ...essentially Steve and I are both rock kids really.

Ben mentioned Mark Knopfler, Paul Weller, Simon and Garfunkel and Christy Moore as the performers they grew up listening to. Another local songwriter Chloe cited influences as diverse as Stevie Wonder, The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, Elvis Costello and Joan Armatrading. Another, Dave, cited rock legends as influences, particularly in relation to the importance of having an image: Marc Bolan, Elvis, Lennon and Richard Ashcroft were all mentioned.

It is clear then that the Leicester acoustic scene's core members were more likely to be influenced by the rock and pop music transmitted to them through the mass media as they grew up than any situated, organic, passed down musical heritage. Through its mediation contemporary acoustic music has become disconnected from any roots in the folk culture. Even those who were influenced by folk were initially influenced, like Brocken, by discovering Dylan or Fairport through the mass media and, if they did discover folk clubs at all, that came later.

For the sake of avoiding too much ambiguity we can argue that the hidden rule for the most common usages of 'acoustic music' today would seem to be that it is specifically 'guitar based' music in which the acoustic guitar and voice are not necessarily unaccompanied, but are at least at the forefront of the overall sound. We can take Mainstream CD compilations that label themselves 'acoustic' as clear examples of this. Artists featured on recent acoustic compilation albums included a mixture of folk artists, rock and mainstream pop. For example, here are random samples of songs from two collections:

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[6] Interestingly Fairport were pioneers of the electrification of folk. See Humphries, P (1996) *Richard Thompson: Strange Affair* (London: Virgin) and Sweers, B (2005) *Electric Folk* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press).

An album entitled 'Best of acoustic' included the following: Joan Armatrading: *Love & Affection* –Sparks: *Royksopp* Simon & Garfunkel: *Sound Of Silence* – Eva Cassidy: *Fields Of Gold* – Travis: *Why Does It Always Rain On Me?* – Suzanne Vega: *Marlene On The Wall* – Bob Dylan: *Just Like A Woman* –Radiohead: *Karma Police* – Dido: *Thank You* – Oasis *Little By Little*.

One amazon.co.uk reviewer's comment speaks volumes about the ambiguity of this generic term applied to this particular collection:

> The title 'Acoustic' is a misnomer on more than a few occasions! Oasis – Little by Little, acoustic? Hardly! And good as it is, it is ridiculous to call Joan Armatrading's Love and Affection an acoustic track! What does the word mean other than non-electric?
> (www.amazon.co.uk)

A random selection from another two collections – *Acoustic Love* and *Acoustic Songbook* include the following diverse artists:

Jackson Browne – *Sky Blue And Black*, R.E.M. – *Nightswimming*, Damien Rice – *Cannonball*, Daniel Powter – *Bad Day*, Sixpence None The Richer – *Kiss Me* Acoustic Version, Katie Melua *Nine Million Bicycles* –, Kooks *She Moves In Her Own Way* –,Norah Jones *Come Away With Me*, David Gray – *Late Night Radio*, Oasis – *Half The World Away*, Pentangle – *Light Flight* The Waterboys – *Fisherman's Blues* Nick Drake –*Pink Moon* XTC – *Dear God*

Even though, on the whole, the artists featured are not strictly acoustic (i.e. literally unplugged with no electronic aids), the sound is usually considered acoustic in the sense that it does not contain many electric instruments and certainly contains no electronic instruments such as sequencers or drum machines (However, even this rule is not sacrosanct[7]). The main characteristic of the sound seems to be that, while they may contain electric basses or even amplified acoustic guitars, electric guitars or electronic keyboards, they are nevertheless, led by real instruments that can be played unplugged (e.g. guitar, piano, strings). On the whole, for most people on the acoustic

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[7] Artists such as Dido and James Morrison used drum machines to underpin the otherwise acoustic guitar based sound. Even K.T Tunstall, recognised as a particularly authentic acoustic artist, exploits digital technology in the use of a digital delay pedal to sample her own voice and loop it throughout her first hit *Black Horse and the Cherry Tree*.

scene, the rule was 'real instruments' first and foremost. Semi-acoustic guitars, the odd bit of lead on electric guitar and even electric keyboards (only using relatively authentic sounds) were accepted. These things would be anathema to folk clubs. Indeed during the course of my research I witnessed, on one occasion, an interesting spontaneous invasion of a folk club by the acoustic musicians and there was indeed semi-humorous booing when an electric guitar was produced!

2.3 An overview of the acoustic scene members

Considering Leicester is a city of well over a quarter of a million people, the local acoustic scene was a relatively small pond. About a dozen key members plus another dozen less involved members made up the total of around twenty to twenty five musicians on the local acoustic scene. The acoustic music world was quite stable: although new people emerged, there was a core of at least a dozen who had been on the scene for the last ten to twenty years. In this sense it had something in common with folk scenes (see Mackinnon, 1993:74).

There were a network of venues and acoustic nights across Leicester in and through which many of the same faces interacted and performed. Importantly there was a great deal of familiarity between members and they circulated, to varying degrees, around the same settings:

> What've we got? We got *The Musician*, *The Vaults*, *The Phoenix*, some concerts, the *International Arts Centre* and some of the smart bars…and it will be interesting to see…how they evolve or how we evolve to meet their needs.
> (Steve)

The acoustic scene was largely made up of the 30-45 age group (around 60%), though a significant proportion of musicians were 45 and over (around 30%). There were a small percentage minority (around 10%) in their 20s. The gender-divide overall worked out at approximately 80%-20% male–female. In terms of occupation – somewhat surprisingly considering the age group – only five of the twenty-four listed in the table below were in conventional full-time professional occupations, three were self-employed musicians. Comparing this to findings on folk and rock scenes, Finnegan describes the occupational make-up of the folk scene in Milton Keynes as

generally middle class in nature. Her description of a ceilidh folk band is fairly enlightening: 'It consisted of six players...Most of the players had academic connections: a couple worked at the OU as editors, one had a PhD in physics, and another was an FE computer lecturer...' (Finnegan, 1989:62). The acoustic scene was more diverse and certainly less explicitly middle class than this. Many participants were educated to degree level but, as we have seen, such a small number were in full-time occupations and some of those were looking for ways out. Some of the acoustic musicians were unemployed and some had gone into major debt (often because of major musical purchases or investments). In terms of class backgrounds the Leicester acoustic scene had less in common with rock scenes, such as the scene in Finnegan's research, but probably more in common in terms of the sheer diversity of economic situations. Finnegan recounts the variety of occupations on the Milton Keynes rock scene as including 'train driver, senior clerk...sales engineer, part time teacher, carpenter, fork lift driver...' (Finnegan, 1989:124). The Leicester acoustic musicians could be described as middle class culturally (many were educated, well read or had been employed in middle-class occupations in the past) but not economically. Demonstrating shades of a somewhat bohemian subculture, it was interesting to note that, in many cases, the older individuals on the acoustic scene were perhaps the most unconventional: most either not working full time or at all in some cases or working in music related occupations, some self-employed in music or the arts. Like Finnegan's folk scene the acoustic scene was a predominantly 'white' culture on the whole. The table on the following page shows the main members of the acoustic scene with their musical and occupational status indicated. It also indicates the varying levels of participation in the research.

MAIN MEMBERS OF THE ACOUSTIC MUSIC SCENE

MEMBER	MEMBER STATUS	MUSIC STYLE	OCCUPATION	RESEARCH STATUS
Andrew (early 40s)	Core member (ran City Acoustic Club)	Acoustic rock/pop plus folk projects	Full Time Customer Services Specialist	Core participant
Andy (Early 30s)	Core member	Acoustic rock/pop	Unemployed	Secondary Participant
Chloe (Early 40s)	Core member	Acoustic rock/pop	Receptionist	Secondary participant
Simon (late 40s)	Core member	Folk oriented acoustic rock	Unemployed	Occasional informal contact
Ben (Early 30s)	Core member	Acoustic rock/pop	Teacher	Secondary participant
Neil (Early 40s)	Core member known on wider scene.	All styles including Acoustic	Professional sound engineer	Secondary participant
Dave (Early 30s)	Core member	Acoustic rock/pop	Cabaret/club singer	Core participant
Dan (mid 30s)	Core member	Americana, Country, Rock, Irish	Music shop assistant	Occasional informal contact
Alex (early 30s)	Core member	Folk and Blues	University lecturer	Core participant
Kate (early 40s)	Core member	Folk oriented acoustic rock plus folk covers	Mature student	Core participant
Laura (early 20s)	Marginal member	Acoustic rock/pop	Student	Minimal contact
Joel (mid 20s)	Key member	Acoustic rock	Music shop assistant	Minimal contact
Nicole (early 30s)	Key member	Folk/Irish	Social Worker	Regular informal contact
Steve(late 50s)	Folk member but well known on acoustic scene	Folk (English and Irish) plus acoustic	Retired social worker Part time gardener	Secondary participant
Roger (mid 50s)	Folk member but well known on acoustic scene	Folk and acoustic crossover	Children's entertainer and Musician	Occasional informal contact
Sheila (mid 40s)	Folk member but familiar to acoustic scene	Mainly Folk but crosses over	Not known	Minimal contact
Dave K (mid 50s)	Folk member but well-known on acoustic scene	Folk and acoustic	Not known	Minimal contact
Rob (early 40s)	Peripheral member but well known	Irish folk and rock plus original acoustic rock	Advice worker/counsellor	Regular informal contact
Steven (early 20s)	Marginal member	Folk oriented acoustic	Student	Secondary participant
Carly (early 20s)	Marginal member	Folk oriented acoustic	Part –time shop assistant	Secondary participant
Craig (late 20s)	Marginal member	Acoustic rock and pop	Part time lecturer	Secondary participant
Bridget (late 20s)	Folk member	Irish folk	Full time mother	Occasional informal contact
Adele (late 20s)	Folk member	Irish folk	Full time mother .	Occasional informal contact
Paul (early 30s)	Peripheral member but well known	Rock/acoustic originals plus folk covers	Part time library worker	Occasional informal contact

Summary

We have seen then that the Leicester acoustic scene had musical links, of both a mediated and a situated nature, both to folk music and contemporary acoustic music. The demographics of the scene showed a diverse range of ages, life situations and incomes. The acoustic musicians sharply contrasted with the stereotypical view of this age group presented in the popular media. The picture of this age group on television for example tends to portray successful professionals with stable jobs, stable families, regular incomes and stable living situations. The Leicester acoustic scene, whilst not a classic underground subculture, was populated in part by what more conservative people might refer to as 'hippies' or 'drifters': most not in conventional full-time occupations. It is true to say that a significant proportion of these musicians grew up with Joni Mitchell and the California set. The younger members in their late 20s and 30s meanwhile had parents who grew up with 60s folk-rock and psychedelic rock. While the Leicester acoustic world was certainly no Laurel Canyon[8], there was a clear close-knit group of creative individuals who regularly got together to 'have a play', smoke a few joints, discover new music, share food, drink a fair amount of wine, and often into the early hours of the morning. As we will see in the next chapter the four core participants presented a mixture of both conventional and unconventional elements in their daily roles and in their musical life histories, demonstrating the multi-faceted nature of the contemporary self.

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[8] Laurel Canyon was the area of Los Angeles where the cream of the California songwriters gathered and lived a relatively hedonistic lifestyle: e.g. David Crosby, Joni Mitchell, Graham Nash etc. See Walker, M. (2007) *Laurel Canyon: The Inside Story of Rock n Roll's Legendary Neighbourhood* (Faber and Faber)

CHAPTER THREE: THE CORE PARTICIPANTS: PRESENTATION AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE MUSICAL SELF

Introduction

> ...In everyday life, th[e] sense of self seems doomed to remain a partial construction. It is never fully articulated in any one of our life worlds, for our sense of relativity ensures that we give less than full personal commitment to each one of them (Taylor and Cohen, 1992:218)

Having outlined the scene I now go into further detail about the key participants' day-to-day musical identities. I shall then deal with their accounts of how they got to be where they are now in terms of their musical self-concept. Two important issues are at stake here: Firstly the balancing of acceptable public and private roles, and secondly the mapping of an alternative career outside of mainstream occupations. The term career is usually associated directly with work. However, as Prus points out, 'the concept of a career far transcends the occupational context and provides us with a means of tapping into the ongoing substance of everyday life' (Prus, 1988:272-3).

The acoustic scene was made up largely, not of full time professional musicians, but rather individuals who were performing a kind of juggling act between two key roles. In all cases one of the roles being juggled was the identity of a musician of course. In some cases the other major role was the identity of full-time occupation. In other cases roles such as 'full time parent', 'student', 'part - time worker' were the norm. In rare cases the juggling was between 'serious musician' and 'musical entertainer' e.g. a covers act, which provided a regular source of income and allowed the luxury of a predominantly musical existence.

All of the participants experienced some level of ambivalence about their identities, which often led in their day-to-day lives to dilemmas, contradictory beliefs and self-

doubt. This is an integral part of life in advanced capitalist society. Gergen's concept of the Saturated Self illustrates the difficulties of maintaining an idea of 'a self' within the self-fragmenting postmodern culture. Here I examine the accounts given by the participants of how they managed these problematic aspects of identity:

> Social saturation furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self. For everything we "know to be true" about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision. This fragmentation of self-conceptions corresponds to a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships...The fully saturated self becomes no self at all...
> (Gergen, 1991:6-7)

As we have already hinted at, the members of the acoustic scene were, in some significant ways, 'exceptional' or 'alternative' in their lifestyles and daily routines to those in the 'mainstream'. While from the core of the acoustic scene over half of them either lived with a long term partner, had children or had a mortgage to pay, it was a significant finding that only two or three of the total number had that traditional triple bind of mortgage, marriage and dependent children. Considering the ages ranged from twenty-five to sixty and the average age on the acoustic scene was around thirty-five, it was clear that the musicians' lifestyles differed markedly from the conventional expectations of people of a similar age:

> You're just kind of aware that the generation before us would probably have all had kids for ten years by now...
> (Alex, 32)

> I think...a lot of other women of forty-one would probably be in quite a different position to me. It's not the usual age to be at college; it's perhaps not the usual age to be single, on your own, no children, all the rest of it, you know, in terms of what people expect and where a lot of people expect to be and are expected to be, I don't think it's extraordinary but I think it's quite different...
> (Kate, 41)

The routines and responsibilities of the participants varied somewhat. Of the thirteen participants I interviewed, four were working in full-time occupations, four in part-

time jobs, three were full-time students and three had only music as an income. Five had mortgages to pay. Five lived with partners and five had children – in two of these cases the children were in their mid to late teens and therefore relatively independent.

Of the four core participants: Alex was living with his partner and working full time with a mortgage to pay; Andrew was working full time with a mortgage, and fellow acoustic scene member Andy was lodging with him; Kate was a full time student lodging in a house; and Dave, who had given up mainstream work to pursue music full-time, lived with his partner with whom he had bought a house. To varying degrees all the core participants were struggling to create spaces for musical creativity within their limiting daily routines. Additionally all were pulled in different directions by the pressures and demands of daily life. This meant that the musicians faced an ongoing daily dilemma in terms of presenting themselves to others. The flux of daily life was kept in check by the storied self. I will draw on McAdams (1993) and his concept of the life story as a self constructed myth in analysing the musicians' accounts of their lives:

> If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life then I too, must come to know my own story…It is a story I continue to revise, and tell to myself (and sometimes to others) as I go on living
> (McAdams, 1993: 11)

Dave

> …You're battling with your own ego…As much as you want to escape from it, you can't because you've got to have an ego and you've got to be a bit of an arse to want to get up there and sing in front of people and play your songs and people clap and say how wonderful you are…it ain't a normal thing to do

Dave was an emerging singer songwriter on the acoustic scene when I first made contact with him. At the beginning of the three year research period, having just turned 30, he had just given up his full-time job of some years as a care worker to embark on a full time music career. His self-identity was still very much contradictory, however, as it was not his singer-songwriter career that was to support

56

him financially but his weekend cabaret act singing to backing tracks. This was a 'double edged sword' as it threatened his authenticity as a serious artist, but it was also the only way he could create enough time to pursue his ambitions as a serious performer. Threats to Dave's 'authentic singer-songwriter self' came from other people's comments on the local scene. For some of the more folk-oriented musicians doing a cabaret act was anathema to serious musicianship. Dave was very sure of his strong identity as a musician, but it was clear that his self-concept had changed markedly over the course of time. Leaving formal employment to make music a living was clearly a big factor in the recent re-evaluation of the self that he presented to general others in daily life:

> **So in terms of your identity now…if someone says "What do you do?" as people often do, would you say, I'm a musician, a songwriter?**
>
> Yeah, yeah, that's what I would say
>
> **And when you were doing music, but you had a job, would you say "I'm a care worker and I do music", or would you just say, "I'm a care worker"?**
>
> Depends who it was…If it was friend type thing, they'd say "ooh, what do you do", "Yeah I'm a care worker" "Oh…what else?" "Oh yeah I like music, I play a bit of guitar and write some songs". But it'd be nothing more than that. I wouldn't say, you know, "I am a musician". I still find it quite strange now when I say "I am a musician" because I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, and it's quite, it's quite strange. [laughter]

Dave pointed out the positive elements of living a musical existence:

> What other job is it where your social life is your working life? They merge. You go out to work at night and your social life is doing the same thing. You're either on stage and you have a drink enjoy yourself and play a gig and then you chat to all your mates or you go and have a drink and watch your mate playing in a band and then have a chat with him and your mates, whereas most people go out to work and then go out for a piss-up…but we've kind of got this thing where our work is our play. Weird that.
> (Dave)

Dave demonstrated a stereotypical 'rock n roll' disdain for 'conventional others' similar to that found in Cohen's research of rock musicians. This was further reinforced by his description of himself as 'probably your typical musician type person' implying an unconventional identity:

> ...That is what I am. That's how I see myself. That is how I earn a living so that is what I am. But it's quite nice, because a lot of people aren't their jobs. You know you could work in a bank, but are you a bank type person? Saying that yeah they probably are, boring farts! [laughter]

It was interesting, however, that Dave still viewed his musical career in conventional terms, as he felt he could not legitimately give himself a musician's identity until he was 'making a living' from it. Furthermore, having 'othered' those in conventional occupations such as bankers, he was simultaneously conscious of distancing himself from a common musician stereotype – that of the idealistic hippy:

> **But it took to be able to be making some kind of a living out of it before you felt that you could say that?**
>
> To certain people yeah, because it can be remarked upon as you know your hippy kind of: "I'm really a song writer" (in affected wishy-washy tone). You know and it's like, it's almost like that doesn't matter, "But what do you do for a living?"...

It was clear that Dave felt his identity should not be judged in terms of what he did or didn't do:

> ...like we used to go to family dos and stuff, and it's like "Oh, what do you do now? What are you now?". Well if you would say, "I don't do nothing", would that make you any less of a person than if you were doing something. I mean what the fuck does it matter? You know, but everybody pins it down to "What do you do?".

On a day-to-day level Dave's 'cabaret' career allowed him more time and space to live a 'creative existence': to write, rehearse and perform his serious material. It was

clear however, that this state of affairs was not exactly what Dave had hoped for when starting out in music:

> ...How I see it, I'm split straight down the middle, which is something that I never thought that would happen. I always thought, yep, serious singer songwriter, and that would be it, and somebody would say, 'Oh play such and such', I'd say 'No way, I'm a singer songwriter' you know...

However, in the early stages of the research, Dave seemed to be coping reasonably well with this dual musical identity:

> So... now, I've sort of got two hats, as it were, both are fulfilling but in different ways. One is paying it's way by singing other people's stuff, and then the other stuff is more satisfying, on a personal level, that's the singer songwriter, you know, you play to people that are appreciative, and hopefully everyone has a laugh or cry or whatever you want em to do, as opposed to playing to a bunch of morons and getting 250 quid at the end of the night which is great...and I can have a laugh doing it as well, so that's pretty much how it is at the moment erm but that's only cos I don't wanna work 9 to 5

Dave ultimately appreciated the fact that he was doing music all the time, in whatever form, as it was something that allowed him to be what he viewed as his 'true self':

> Doing music allows me to be me all the time, whether it's an entertainer doing the covers, or a singer songwriter doing ballads...and that is important because for the first time...it feels like I can be me.

However, he again reiterated the frustration of having to do the more functional music work instead of being the serious musician all the time:

> ...but there's still a part of me that thinks "Oh (dejected manner)... ... you know, I should be the singer songwriter...

Interestingly, having previously presented 'the 9-5' conventional work in a pejorative light, he then drew on the 'the 9-5' tag to placate himself, and to legitimate the less serious, more functional music:

> ...if you look at it as in a 9 - 5 job it's fine. That's what it is, it's a 9-5 job... and it works, it works.

Dave talked about how important his family and friends were to him in terms of giving him confidence. He told me of one occasion when his parents had driven from Lands End to Lincolnshire and back in one day to see him play at a festival; a six hundred mile round trip. Again however, he gave contradictory accounts – initially emphasising peer acceptance and family support as two key factors in keeping his musical ambitions strong, yet later expressing a disregard for what others thought. There were clearly many tensions and ambiguities in Dave's day-to-day identity:

> Regardless of whether people say you're shit or you're brilliant it don't really matter because who are you pleasing at the end of the day? You're pleasing yourself and that's important... ...that's the most important thing...The minute you lose that I think you're fucked cos then you're doing it for the wrong reasons...

Dave's mapping of a musical identity

For Dave the myth or narrative he constructed of his life was a romantic one: that of having temporarily lost his way and then, in adult life, rediscovered what he considered to be his 'true path'. This was framed as we will see through the discourse of epiphany.

As a young child Dave had started playing the guitar but he only played for less than a year and then didn't play again until he was twenty-four. Dave presented this as a kind of rediscovery of his true path:

> I've got photographs up of me camping and I've dogs around me and I've got a plastic guitar...It's almost like, this is really bizarre, that it was almost... written there and then and somehow we forgot our way and you come back to it twenty odd years later and it's like hang on a minute, this is odd, why is it that I had guitars and tents and dogs and all the things that were me at that moment in time...and then life gets in

the fucking way...and then years later you look back at these old photographs or an old scrapbook and you think hang on a minute that is like a picture now...but you've had all that moment in between of like where the fuck did it go, you look back to pictures of like three four, five...years of age...instruments, cats, dogs...tents...They're the basic things...within me that I loved as a child, and I've recaptured it again and that's kind of a magical feeling cos its actually caught my memory...I truly and utterly believe that that's what I was meant to do, but I lost my way for a bit...

Dave's narrative was, to a large extent, also built around the personal myth of music as a way out of academic and occupational inferiority:

My brother's really, really clever...speaks languages, different languages, sister, different languages...seven years older than me... ...and it was always like, well you know, he's got his own business, sister runs a bar in Fuertaventura, and I'm driving a lorry, lifting slabs, but always feeling that I could do something else...

...when I left school at fifteen I was doing hairdressing, and then, then I worked at a builder's yard, and then I've done plastering and labouring jobs, and gardening jobs, and all that sort of stuff that, you know, while this is going on I've always felt that there was something more, you know what I mean, and I never, never really found what it was.

These jobs were then followed by eight years in care work, which Dave clearly got some rewards from but still felt he was missing his real vocation. He explains a road to Damascus kind of moment:

It's almost like one day somebody went 'ding!', "Right now you can play, now you can sing, now fuck off and stop moaning like that... ...you've found what you can do, right now just go off and do it quietly somewhere.

He described the occasion that he clearly saw as the main turning point in his decision to pursue music

Went travelling 97 – went to Fuertoventura. And…my brother in law, he was in a band, and…the first introductory to it was me going through the audience with a microphone doing this rap song…And I thought, 'This is fucking great this is!'. This was brilliant you know cos it was hot and it was, you know, everyone was having a good time; it was a holiday type place, and…I met this guy called Eric Siperstein, and he was up playing his guitar. He was in the band but he'd also do his solo stuff as well, and he'd have this little light on him and that, and he'd play his guitar, and I thought, I wanna do that, I'd love to do that. And that was sort of the turning point really

Dave had grown up in Leicestershire and was well known to musicians in the area. Unlike many other musicians on the acoustic scene it was only in the past few years that he had become a performer, but was fast emerging as one of the most recognised and respected singer-songwriters on the scene. Although Dave's path was perhaps less involved with the acoustic club or the core of the scene he had become very well known to most local acoustic musicians. Dave had suffered with anxiety and manic depression for many years and performing was still something that he often found very difficult. His life-story was largely based on overcoming the adversity of anxiety and the inferiority he had carried since his school days.

Kate

At the beginning of the research period Kate, at 39, was very active musically as a member of three local acoustic groups: *Bryter Layter* (the Nick Drake tribute band), *Strungout Sisters* (a string trio), and a string quartet. She was unemployed, having worked full time for the police in previous years. A few months into the research however she was a mature student, studying landscape management and horticulture. In our first meeting she used the term 'musician' in defining herself, but almost in an apologetic way:

So if someone…you know when you meet someone socially and they say, "So what do you do?" what would you say to that at the moment?

Unemployed musician [laughter]

Kate told me that she had, over the years, begun to feel a little more comfortable about describing herself as 'a musician' instead of '*just* a musician':

> ...and to be able to say, "I'm a musician"...instead of, "I'm just a musician" (mild laughter)...I've been told off for saying that...it is, you know, it is what I do and I will always do it... ...I suppose when I was working and people asked me what I did, I'd talk about...I'd just talk about my job...and I also do this. So it's sort of changed in that respect. People are always much more interested in...in the fact that you're a musician.

Although Kate, albeit tentatively, described herself as a musician and music was clearly a major part of her identity, she indicated that her interests were somewhat broader than music alone:

> I'd like to say, "I'm an archaeologist" or something cos I quite, that's something I've always fancied doing, I might...do something in that line...Cos I think it's important to have other interests as well and...I know that I've got other things that I can do and other things to sort of give so...you know, I'm just trying to find out what those things are.

It was clear that for Kate, music, though integral to her sense of self, had previously been something extra outside of full time work. She had previously fitted music around her work, and in the early stages of the research was experiencing a lot more freedom to express her musical side more often:

> ...I'd like to take it as far as it will go really. I don't know whether that means...full time...I think...I mean, apart from the last year, I've always done music alongside whatever job I've been doing, and that's usually been a full time job, and I've just fitted it in.

Kate's mapping of a musical identity

Having had a very musical youth, Kate was the only one of the core participants that had actually given up music for a time and focused solely on an occupational career instead. Kate's story of her adult career seemed to be based around an ambivalent or love/hate relationship with music. When she was nineteen she had left home and

moved to London where she joined the police. It was the only time she'd been away from Leicester for a long period. She was in the police for three years and didn't play any music during that time:

So what was the significance of that for you...Was it like...breaking away then?

Yeah, yeah sort of leaving it, you know leaving it all behind in a way to pursue what turned out to be a very different life, lifestyle down there, which, you know, it consequently turned out that I didn't feel that it was suitable for me for whatever reason at the time. And I think a lot of that had to do with not playing; having played...all my life up until that point. And I had my instruments there – I just...never had the time. It's not fair to say I didn't have the time, but... the inclination or the people around me to play with...

That was...between 81 and 84 I didn't play. Although I did...I bought a guitar when I went down there. I mean I never did much with it... ...I think I was playing some choruses just like in church and stuff cos... ...when I first went down to London I was still in...into church a bit, but I sort of dwindled after...a few months. I didn't do...obviously I was still...I was listening to a lot of music, but I wasn't playing at all...

I asked Kate if she felt that this time not playing was a significant gap in her music career:

...I suppose it was in a lifetime. Three years is quite a, quite a big gap when I'd been doing it since I was eight. Maybe I needed to have that break as well, I don't know...I could never imagine doing it now, and I know, I just know that if I'd stayed...in, I probably wouldn't have played...I might have joined an orchestra or something, but I wouldn't have done half...anything like the sort of things I've done with music over the years...No I realised quite shortly after I went down there that it wasn't for me...

Kate recollected a significant turning point in her life when she had the opportunity to study music at college. She chose to work in a shop instead and do music part-time:

Something that I nearly forget is that I nearly went to do music at college...at the West London institute, and I got a place. It wasn't a degree course...I don't know I think I thought...When I left, I think I thought, "Well I don't want to do this, I want to do music"...and though that was the way to go at the time. And I remember my dad taking me to the place and erm I just almost decided overnight that that's what I didn't want to do (laughter) and it was like, "No, I don't want to do that after all", and I went back to Leicester, I didn't have a job. So I went back to Gadsby's cos I used to work there on Saturdays when I was about fifteen, so...knew the family and everything so they gave me a job (mild laughter).

I was never sort of, never one cut out to go to music-college.

Right...why...would you say that?

Well, for one I don't think I was good enough, and I don't mean that in a...you know, I could play all right, but I don't think I was up to the standard. I only had one instrument as well. I mean now, if I was doing it now, I'd probably do singing and playing...Yeah so, I think I was like sort of...drifting a little bit...

After going back to live with her parents for three years Kate bought her first house in 1986 and because of this ended up going back to work in the police in the control room. She was there for two years. The job ended when the regular nightshifts got in the way of gigging. She left the job and did various part time jobs:

...It was killing me, I couldn't do a gig and go and work nights. I was taking loads of time off, it was just...Music was taking over again...

Kate described to me how her musical identity became stronger during what was clearly a significant life experience: travelling around America after selling her house in Leicester; primarily playing music while she was there. Kate also became involved in a series of bands. An early band, *The Bijou Pleasurettes*, became established in the local area during the late 80s and early 90s and Kate had kept press cuttings of reviews they received. She was well-known on the local scene by this point:

So...I'm wondering...if there was a turning point...cos a lot of people have pop star ambitions or big ambitions, and then they get older and they become...less idealistic about it. Did that happen to you?

Yes it did and it happened quite early on. It happened probably after the first year.

Oh right. Was that because of exposure to what it was actually like and how much money you actually got doing the gigs and stuff?

I don't know really. I suppose...it was, when we had this manager and he used to tell us, oh, you know, "you're gonna do this and you're that", and I never really envisaged it happening....I don't think I really wanted it...not to that extent. I don't think I really thought about what it could entail, you know, sort of doing tours and recording, never being at home, you know, stuff like that. I think I was just taken up with the idea of it, but not the reality of it...so I never really thought: 'oh I'm going to be famous' or anything.

But what about the lower ambition of I'm going to be doing music all the time and making a living?

[pause for thought]
Yeah I did for a while cos I actually gave my job up in the first year, after I'd been doing it for a few months (working in the police control room in Leicester)...The main reason I did that was because I was working shifts and I was finding it really hard to...we did have a lot of gigs, I mean we had two or three gigs a week, which was a lot and...I suppose I felt you know I'm going to have a go at doing this and see what happens. But...as with most things, before they go tits up (laughter)...it was doomed from the start because A and A [the singer and another band member] were in a relationship, and then when they split up, that's...the band split up really...We were all so sure that we were going to do something with it and when I look back to it now I think ooh, it was OK, it was different, it was quite good, but it wasn't good enough...

In the two decades since these early encounters with the Leicester music scene Kate had been involved in various projects. The one that stood out seemed to be *The Strungout Sisters*, a string trio that were still going today and Kate recounted various

experiences of playing with eccentric singer-songwriter Tom Hall. Kate toured all over the Midlands and the South West with this band. She had many musical documents and mementoes from gigs they had performed in various places. Another project *Just the Dust* was more of a recording band. Kate actually wrote some songs for this band and they had produced CDs which Kate still treasured. Kate had also been involved in a female vocal harmony group. Her adult life was made up of fits and starts both occupation wise and music wise. In the last few years she had continued to be very active on the Leicester acoustic scene including becoming a member of Leicester acoustic band *Bryter Layter* along with other core acoustic scene members. She had also begun the process of recording a solo album and was keen to make her mark as a singer-songwriter in her own right.

Andrew

Andrew was nearing forty at the start of the research period. He was a very important figure on the local acoustic scene as he ran the City Acoustic Club. He had been active on the Leicester music scene for two decades, involved in various genres of music as well as performance poetry. He was amongst the most musically ambitious of the participants, and yet he was also the musician who was most stifled by being tied down to a full-time occupation as a customer sales advisor. He let me know in a semi-humorous manner that he had been in the job much longer than he wanted to be:

> **... How long have you been doing that job for?**

> Four years, two months (laughter), three days and twenty-five minutes (laughter): Far too long.

In the early stages of the research Andrew was determined to leave his full time job because of his perception of its negative impact on his creative self:

> in terms of creativity it's stifled and stifled and stifled the more it's gone on, and the more I think, 'yes I'm leaving', the more my creativity's returning...

For Andrew, his job clearly threatened his self-concept as a creative individual:

> Work life balance at the moment is every day I come home from work...and I'm...
> just no energy to do anything and I'll just sit in front of the telly.

The day job did not only have an impact while Andrew was at the workplace but continued to have an impact when he had come home in the evening, and even on his days off. Andrew had one day off in the week but his job even seemed to cut into that day:

> I've worked out that it takes about twenty four hours to wipe away work
> usually...which is a bummer if you've only got one day off at a time...

Andrew indicated the importance of the acoustic club. In many ways this weekly musical involvement saved him from feeling that he was being enveloped by daily drudgery:

> If I didn't have the acoustic club on a Monday...that is my definite one release in a
> week. I've had weeks when I've not gone to the acoustic club, and by the end of that
> week or even on the Tuesday or the Wednesday of that week I've not had the release
> so things build up more and the bottle starts to, the top's about to explode off...

It was clear that his full-time job demanded a lot of energy as well as time. This meant that his occupational role stifled his musical role to a large extent:

> I guess any day job would be a distraction...Certain day jobs you can do and you
> don't have to think too much about what you're doing but because I've been in this
> one for quite a while and I've picked up quite a lot of knowledge about the thing, I do
> actually have to be...quite up and awake and...concentrating on what I'm doing.

Andrew's official job title was Customer service specialist, which largely involved taking queries on the phone regarding billing issues. On a day-to-day level, Andrew told me that he presented himself in terms of his occupational role, but that he made a point of qualifying the statement by referring to it as his 'day job'. He seemed to find the process of presenting his identity to others a complex endeavour based on the problem of how to 'paint a picture of yourself':

Do you say, I'm a musician or do you say, I'm a customer...customer services specialist?

I usually er...I usually go for customer service specialist strangely enough, but I usually clarify that by saying, "well my day job is customer service"... ...I always think ahead so much when I'm trying to say to people in a formal situation because I'm, you know, you're trying to paint a picture of yourself and...the first thing...I should go with my instinct really but...I...I'm always trying to think right, what are they actually asking me is...is what I'm doing as a day job so...I'll say that, but I really want to get in the fact that I'm a...[musician].

For Andrew, there was a complex juggling act going on in terms of identity management. He made it clear however, that music was far more important to him than his job. Significantly though, he was pragmatic about work and the stability it provided:

...If I could snap my fingers and get rid of it right now I would. But, I do realise that I've got to work hard to earn the wage. Not that good a wage but it's...it's good enough to keep me in a house and a car and...keep me doing what I need to do. But it gets in the way severely...of what I really want to do.

Andrew's mapping of a musical identity

Originally from Consett in the North East, Andrew arrived in Leicester at 18 to begin a performing arts degree at Leicester Polytechnic. He had been in Leicester ever since:

I deliberately chose a university that was not in my hometown...that was part of the excitement of getting out and away from home.

He got involved in a relationship and by the time he was in his second year was married with a child, and a second child soon after. Andrew shows here the way in which music has dominated his everyday life, even when these other responsibilities have been present:

...went through the latter half of my college with...with a child and another one on the way...so...But it didn't stop me getting into bands and...going out doing a load

69

of music, which is probably...what drove my marriage into the ground really cos I was hardly ever at home...

Andrew described the difficulties he experienced of juggling the parental role with trying to forge a serious music career. Interestingly, he validated the decisions he made in this area by appealing to the idea of following the needs of an 'inner musical soul':

> I don't know, part of me...part of me felt guilty for...for not showing them the attention that they deserved, but another part of me was...the very major part of me was the...the soul that is the music that...that is almost a selfish...thing, it drives itself along and...it's only more recently that I've tried to...structure it and push it in a direction and take responsibility for my own actions and actually...make sure that I give the right attention to my kids that I deserve, that they deserve and...but...give them the guidance at times when they need it...so...I guess there's...there's no easy answer to that question, it's not been a matter of juggling, it's always, most things have always revolved around music...

Christianity played a big part in Andrew's younger musical years. The musical direction he had taken in life was evidently linked in with the church. At a certain point in his youth he decided that it was the music and not the church that he was attracted to:

> The funny thing was that I realised was that...that looking back on the time that I'd been in this sort of Evangelical sort of place, the bits that I enjoyed was when we were...hands in the air, we were singing and praising and shouting and speaking in tongues and all that. That was the exciting bit. The rest of it was just...I didn't know how to relate to people...but the music was the bit that I still enjoyed and I thought, well actually let's just cut out all the bad stuff, keep the music, and then I just carried on on the back of music being the only way I could communicate anyway just sent me off on this...musical journey...

Andrew's adult musical career was not fixed by any means to the genre of acoustic music. His first band after leaving college in 1984 was an *a capella* band *Ad Nauseum* formed with his university friends. They were a successful act and, as well as playing to many big audiences in major venues, they also gained exposure on

national television and radio. They appeared on ITV's *New Faces* in 1988 as well as performing and recording in the BBC's Maida Vale studios and appearing on Bob Harris's show on Radio 1. For Andrew the success of this band seemed to represent a shift towards seeing himself as a serious musician:

> **...[W]hen would you say you started feeling you were a serious musician and that you had a chance to kind of make it as...in that field?**
>
> Er...I think at college was the first time, with the *a capella* band. That was where it became...it became more than just either me doing piano lessons and the occasional performance or singing at Sunday school... ... playing to a thousand people at the poly arena in Birmingham University and Cardiff University and...we went all over the place and played to good crowds, and I thought, yeah this is me, and I ended up concentrating more on that...

Despite these levels of success this was still not enough to sustain a regular income.

> **So... ...was that kind of regular income in that band or...?**
>
> Not enough to...to help me give up the day job. I was doing some TV walk on work and stuff as well. And also doing jobs working, delivering fruit and vegetables and eggs and...working...warehouse[s] and stuff like that...picking and packing and...all kinds of jobs like that...

The band came to an end in 1990 after various members moved to different parts of the country:

> Towards the end when I realised that that was all kind of fizzling out, that's when...I got into about three different bands at the time...I'd spend a lot of my time doing as much as I possibly could, almost every night of the week out with a different band practising, writing songs and...improving,

This seemed to mark the beginning of a period of intense involvement in the music scene for Andrew. He led a prog rock band who gigged regularly and recorded in the 1990s. A crucial turning point in Andrew's life was in 1994 when he embarked on what turned out to be a disastrous business venture – putting together a local gig guide for the Leicester and the East Midlands:

I didn't learn how to actually run a business. I'd no idea how to do that. I was so enthusiastic about it that I just ploughed everything in, straight back in, and...you're supposed to keep some behind...

Andrew went through a troublesome period as a direct result of this venture, which involved some conflict with local printers and musicians. He suffered a nervous breakdown after the collapse of the business and became involved with hard drugs for a while:

I was kind of...getting quite tied into a drugs scene by then...and...and I tried to give it up, at the same time as...it was like a year after my business had gone bankrupt

Interestingly, it was poetry that played a big part in his recovery:

I was getting a bit fucked up by it all...tried to give up the drugs at the time, and two days later I just went into a...massive slump, locked myself in my room, played music really loud, played Bob Dylan actually...so it all came back round full circle. And I started writing poetry that night and came out with loads and loads of stuff, which expressed...where I was at the time...

A few years later, Andrew got to know an important character on the local performance poetry scene and became good friends with him. He was asked by him to do a poetry workshop, which was successful and led to a paid spot at *The Brightside*: a local performance poetry night. This led to a successful period with the poetry which peaked with Andrew coming second in the UK all comers poetry final, and winning the San Diego poetry slam whilst travelling in America:

So...was the poetry kind of a part of the recovery...process from the bad...the low points?

Yeah I think so. And that was getting my confidence back. And that's when I started performing and I think when I started talking to people. I started learning social skills, re-learning it, so that I could become, you know, bring out who I really was, instead of covering up the frightened, scared me that...that didn't know how to communicate properly.

Andrew's narrative of his adult career was built around music as a compensating factor for his lack of social confidence

If I'd have carried on then with the confidence that I had then, and didn't go through this period of...feeling crap and owning my own business and...and that going bankrupt and then getting into drugs and doing all that, I'd have been...I'd be in recording studios now maybe I'd have my own studio, maybe I'd be in on television or, you know, directing or something like that, who knows, maybe musical director, but, I didn't, I went on another path, and...you can't regret for the rest of your life not doing that...

In the late 1990s Andrew had got involved with the acoustic club, which he now ran, when it was at a different venue in Leicester:

I went along on the first night at the Spread Eagle and set up the P.A that they had in there...I wasn't running it at the time but...I went along every week to do that...and ...Simon started to come at the...very first Spread Eagle night as well; he just happened to turn up there, and it just sort of drew lots and lots of people in that had not been involved before and it was going nicely...That was.... August 97. Yes, yes it was... And then it was only...it was the following year, 98, when, it was my suggestion, that the...that the scene at the Royal Mail had been dead for a few years and then it just sort of started picking up again...I kind of took the reins really then...and...there was already a committee being formed...And it ended up of course, after the first three or four weeks, being Simon on the door every week...and it became...a good team without us realising it. We worked so well together that when we eventually moved it [to *The Musician*] it was me and Simon...

The band *Bryter Layter* had emerged from the social relationships around Andrew and Simon's involvement with the acoustic club and demonstrated the way that individuals' musical careers were based around the music community:

Looking back at it, how it's all linked with the acoustic club, if it hadn't have been for the acoustic club this band wouldn't have seen the light of day

Alex

At the beginning of the research period Alex was one of the emerging names on the Leicester acoustic scene. A key member of the scene, his combination of traditional blues styles with modern lyrics made him different from many of the country and rock oriented strummers on the scene. However, this also meant Alex had to struggle more

than others to get audiences into his gigs as his music was, by his own admission, relatively less mainstream and accessible.

Of the core participants, he was probably the least outwardly ambitious musically. Although music was of great importance to him, he seemed quite comfortable with his identity being primarily that of his full-time occupation: university lecturer. And, significantly, he was involved in a profession that he enjoyed:

> **And...Is it the case that you would ever say, "I am a singer songwriter" or "I'm a musician"**

> ...Well, there's... this is a really interesting question. No I think I would say, "I'm a university lecturer" because it's how I earn my living... ...I probably wouldn't say I was a singer-songwriter because it could be misleading that people think I do that all day. It's almost like you know, you're trying to be more romantic than you are "No you're a teacher like the rest of us, you're just a boring sod"! [laughter]

Despite this initially straightforward attitude towards his occupational identity, there was an apparent ambivalence running through Alex's presentation of himself. It seemed that whilst on a day-to-day level he saw himself primarily in terms of his occupational role, becoming a full-time musician was, nevertheless, a dream that he could not quite give up on. The way in which he articulated his attitude towards full-time musicianship was something between an ambition and a comforting fantasy:

> Yeah, it's something that runs through my head every week probably that, should I be doing the job I'm doing or am I a frustrated musician? There's a few tensions...it's one of those things, I think if I said I'm never going to be a professional musician or a successful musician...I'd get pretty depressed actually because I do...it really is what turns me on, but at the same time I think most of the excitement perhaps is in the chase. The fact that that dream's there, the fact in my heart of hearts, I think it'll probably never be realised, but I don't tell myself that....

In contrast to the local scene's valorisation of the singer-songwriter, Alex played down the label:

I think... the truth is that anyone who sits down and writes something that means something to them, and then perhaps goes and performs it to somebody else, one or more people, could call themselves a singer songwriter...

Alex again demonstrated the level of ambiguity involved in his ambitions. He liked the idea of being a professional musician, if it was on his own terms, but still he went on to express doubts over the practicality of living that life and his ultimate preference for his comfortable lifestyle now:

...so yeah, I'd certainly want to be a professional musician on my terms. I suspect I could just about feed myself, keep, keep alive teaching and, you know, doing things, even playing in cover bands, doing sort of 50 quid crap gigs...but...I may as well do my job, I'd probably get better paid for it and it's actually probably to me more interesting, it's perhaps not more interesting than playing music complete on my terms, that's playing my music... ...write my songs etc. But if you've got to compromise...I think it's not to be compromised at all costs

Alex's mapping of a musical identity
Originally from Sheffield, Alex had been in Leicester for eight years. After leaving school he had gone straight to Newcastle University to do a degree in English. He remembers being 'pretty skint' at university and was not especially engaged with his degree subject. 'And certainly when I did a degree at university I was sort of clocking time, it didn't really excite me'. His reflection on the experience and the immediate aftermath was quite dour:

...and then you get a job and you haven't really got time to do all the things you dreamed about doing as a student.

In his young adult life, Alex's parents had been fairly encouraging about his musical interests, especially in acoustic based music, as they wished for him to go into a conventional career, and, according to Alex, they knew that 'there was no money' in folk music and so it was safe to encourage it. Also the fact that he now had a degree under his belt eased any worries they might have had about music being his sole ambition.

Alex said that he didn't really know what he wanted to do at that point. He felt that, in himself, he didn't have the organisational motivation to do music professionally. This is an example of the way the participants fixed a myth of themselves. In Alex's case there was never quite enough drive there to pursue music exclusively. He justified this by constructing a myth of musical disorganisation and 'not quite getting shit together' and yet he still clung on to a distant musical dream:

> I didn't play any gigs really I was a long way off, which isn't surprising the amount of time I'd spent at it... ...at...twenty one when I had to support myself, I wasn't good enough. So I knew that even though it was a dream, I wasn't frustrated cos in my heart of hearts I hadn't really got my shit together so to speak!

Alex had done some low key performances with a folk society and, after that, busking with friends:

> ...again it was either me or me with a couple of, mate or two, er...all covers; a bit of Simon and Garfunkel, a bit of Bob Dylan, a bit of Dire Straits, basically just a mixture of sort of classic songs, familiar songs, nothing too strenuous and diverse...

Alex described his entry into the Leicester acoustic scene as something akin to stumbling upon a whole new world of musical possibilities:

> About four years ago started in earnest, it was...the acoustic club...when it was re-launched, I think that's why I heard about it, at the now demolished *Royal Mail*. I came down there, I enjoyed it, and that really fired me up...this place was full of very good musicians, very friendly people, and I was blown away... I wanted to be good as I'm quite a competitive person; I was tremendously impressed by a lot of people there...

He wasn't a songwriter before this entrance into the scene and had only played some covers at the acoustic club. The musical community itself, however, clearly directly impacted on his creative output. This was evidently something of a turning point in Alex's approach to music and in terms of his self-identity: going from a mere guitar player to a singer-songwriter:

Somebody actually said, "Oh I really like your songs". And I was actually doing quite diverse covers and I didn't like to admit I hadn't actually written any of them so, I went away and I just thought "Shit!" This was somebody who er wrote folk songs and I was very impressed with so I thought "Right, yes, if I'm really going to..." That forced me to go away and start writing and fortunately, the first song I ever wrote came very quickly, and it actually er, I quite... I still play it to this day and I enjoy it, and if I hadn't, I think I'd have given up if I hadn't have had that quick, very gratifying quick experience, I'd have given it up because I hadn't got a lot of confidence...I think a key thing is the way it's from being just a guitarist playing to a singer songwriter writing songs and doing more and being much more creative in the last three years, that's an interesting thing that took me that long to get there...so that's a key...for me that's a very key moment.

After a good few years plugging away with his music, Alex was now a recognised and respected performer on the acoustic scene. His ambivalent musical life story and identity, as will see in forthcoming chapters, ran through his musical activities.

It was evident then that the four core participants all had varying degrees of ambition musically, but all were ambiguous about their aims and had to engage in fairly complex identity management and presentation of self on an everyday basis. The core participants, we can say, all had clear dilemmatic aspects to their identities where ambivalence was as much as a factor as ambition. Other respondents demonstrated a relaxed attitude towards their multi-faceted private and public selves.

Carly, a guitarist, pianist and songwriter in her twenties worked part-time in a chemist. She told me that she would only say she was a musician if she was actually earning money from it as a job. An exception to the rule, she embraced having many different roles to play:

If people ask me what I do I usually just say that I work in a chemist part time and I do write a bit of music. I don't really go into much more detail...I don't know...it depends who's asking me what I do. A lot of people ask you what you do and...they mean what do you do as a career, as a profession; that's often what people mean, whereas other people that I know when they ask me what I do, they literally mean *what do you do?* ...If I went to a job interview and someone said, 'what did you do

before you came here?' then I wouldn't say, 'Well I played the piano a bit... I say, 'Well I worked in a chemist' cos that's what's going to get me the job so it depends who's asking me and why.

And what about for yourself personally...do you think in those terms to begin with, 'I am a musician'.

I tend to think of it as I have certain things in me. I feel like I have a musician in me and I feel like I've got an artist in me...I think I have like a lot of things in me but I don't necessarily do those parts of me. I don't think of myself as a musician or as a composer. I think of myself as a person with a set of different abilities.

For local songwriter and part time lecturer Craig, approaching his 30s, it was not about how he was perceived by others but rather how he perceived himself that mattered. He knew music was his main focus but felt it wouldn't be taken seriously enough if he presented himself as a musician or songwriter:

I would tend not to speak about song-writing because it's not a serious thing it's not perceived as a serious thing. Most of the people I hang out with write songs anyway so it's not all that hard for me to talk to them but if I'm meeting people who don't come from our background then...I would just avoid the subject. I wouldn't say that I write songs...I don't do anything all day (laughter). No I'd just say I lecture and I'll be doing my PGCE in September...

It was clear then that, in the eyes of the singer-songwriters, being a musician was seen to have a fairly low status by others 'out there'

...it is important to me in terms of identifying myself but people would rubbish that, people would think it was silly. However, they identify themselves through buying Nike clothes and...it's just as silly. I'm not saying my way's better...but it's just as valid as anyone else's way...

Chloe, in her late 30s and working as a full-time receptionist, gave a markedly contrasting view in terms of her presentation of self to others. She was quite vehement in her response to the stock question:

> I say I'm a musician. I actually have made a conscious effort to change it from saying I'm a receptionist. I've actually consciously changed that now. People say what do you do, I say I'm a musician first

> **So it's come to a point in your life where you see that as your primary sort of identity?**

> Yeah that's what I'm here for.

> And was there a point in the past where it was, I am a...I'm a mum and a receptionist...but I do a bit of music...I actually say I'm a singer songwriter guitarist now because I want that to be true, because I could just say I'm a singer songwriter and lyricist. I try and put it all in there because I want people to know, in a sentence, the extent of my ability, cos if I tell them in a sentence the extent of my ability then they might think, Oh I could do some lyrics for that. I actually, without even realising it, I am always advertising myself...and that might be why I'm getting all this attention!! (laughter).

Summary

This chapter has demonstrated the dilemmatic aspects of the creative musical identity in the midst of contemporary life. The presentation of self to others was clearly a tricky task for the acoustic musicians, which brought about an ambiguity and uncertainty. It required daily creative adaptations in terms of how one presented oneself to the world out there. The arguments of Gergen and other postmodern thinkers about the fragmented subject are in a sense demonstrated by the ongoing ambiguity of self-identity in daily life, but we can draw on Goffman (1969) here to highlight that these daily performances are merely an integral part of the 'dramaturgical' processes of the everyday social world: performing specific roles to suit one's surroundings at the time. As Cohen and Taylor put it:

> As we move from one small world into the next, we are faced with at least marginally different expectations, requiring different role performances, in concert with different sets of people. These small life worlds belong to different 'jurisdictions' and different realms of meaning. We lack a single symbolic vocabulary which binds together the elements of our different life-worlds.
> (Cohen and Taylor, 1992:220)

Crucially, the storied musical self provides an answer to the problem posed by Cohen and Taylor. The mapping of a musical career through the life story acted as an important self-defence of the creative identity. DeNora's use of the term introjection – the presentation of self to self – is crucial here:

> the 'projection of biography is by no means the only basis for the construction of self identity. Equally important is a form of 'introjection', a presentation of self to self, the ability to mobilise and hold on to a coherent image of 'who one knows one is'.
> (Denora, 2000: 62/3)

The sense of 'knowing who one is' is helped considerably through the location of oneself in the context of a musical history, as a historically constituted musical being. This is done through the creative construction of a musical career with clear turning points and key moments and an ongoing reconstruction of a musical identity. The continual striving and struggling to build a musical identity acts as an antidote to the postmodern threats to the consistent self. As Plummer points out:

> Narrative structures enable us to speak, and the multitude of fragmenting
> experiences that constitute our lives come to be patterned into some seeming
> sense of order...without such a narrative...chaos may rule.
> (Plummer, 2000:185)

Drawing on McAdams' idea of life story as a self-made myth is relevant here. Dave's belief that through an epiphanic moment he rediscovered his true musical self, and Andrew's proclamation that 'the inner soul that is the music' drove him on to choose music over conventional responsibilities were both self created myths which obviously contributed to the sense of a consistent and coherent self:

> We are all tellers of tales. We each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing
> experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives into
> stories. This is not the stuff of delusion or self-deception...Rather, through our
> personal myths, each of us discovers what is...meaningful in life.
> (McAdams, 1993: 11)

So we have seen that there was much creative work involved in the presentation of a musical identity and the mapping of a musical self-identity, but what about the ongoing creative day-to-day work that went into the reproduction of a creative identity amongst the singer songwriters? Let us now turn our attention to the act of creativity and the struggle to overcome the constraints of daily life.

CHAPTER FOUR: BEING A CREATIVE MUSIC-MAKER AND THE CONSTRAINTS OF DAILY LIFE

Introduction

In this chapter I will first present some of the important theoretical approaches and conceptions of creativity. I will then move on to look at the creative act of song writing from the perspective of music as craft. After that I will examine the relationship between the songwriter and the song. Rather than analysing the song lyrics as a text I focus on the way the songwriter reflects on them and relates them to their everyday lives. Finally, the last section looks at the tricky negotiating of the daily terrain in trying to find 'zones of creativity' amidst the temporal and spatial constraints of everyday life.

> The longstanding failure of folk music scholarship to take account of individual creativity is perhaps the most visible testimony to the undercurrent of conservatism that has saturated many of our most entrenched concepts of folk music...
> (Brocken, 2003:121)

Michael Brocken's point is all the more salient when we are dealing with a folk-derivative genre that is largely individualistic in character. However, the absence of examinations of individual creativity spreads right across the musical and sociological spectrum:

> Perhaps the most prominent single characteristic of the preoccupations of rock players in Milton Keynes – apart from their variety – was their interest in expressing their own views and personality through music making: a stress on individuality and artistic creation which accords ill with the mass theorists' delineation of popular music.
> (Finnegan, 1989: 129)

While individual creativity is fleetingly acknowledged in music studies it is rarely explored in depth. Ruth Finnegan, above, in her research on musicians in Milton

Keynes, argued that the individual creativity of local musicians in the town demonstrated a refutation of the mass culture theory approach. Like many sociological studies of music, however, in its conscious efforts not to be overly individualistic, her research misses the opportunity to mount a serious defence of individual artistic creativity against the charge of 'pseudo-individualisation' (see Adorno, 1991). Here I attempt to fill this gap.

Concepts of creativity

Creativity is a word that has, in recent decades, been trivialised both in cultural studies and general discursive trends in Western culture. In studies of culture this is due to the pervasion of cultural populism giving rise to concepts such as 'consumer sovereignty' and 'producerly consumption'(see Fiske, 1989), which celebrate everyday acts of consumerism. On a broader sense, in society as a whole, it is a consequence of the pervasive use of the term by wider corporate culture particularly with reference to technological discourse. Negus and Pickering illustrate the problematic possibilities of these trends:

> ...this expanded conception of creativity imbues the most banal of habitual working practices with an aura of artistic inspiration, human worth and social good, as with the commonplace use of creative to distinguish product designers from executives in the advertising industry. Whilst the expanded conception is, at least for some people, motivated by a democratic impulse against forms of elitism, it slips too easily into populist trivialisation, embracing and celebrating as creative all manner of routine discursive practices, postmodern ironic strategies, grounded appropriations, decodings and re-writings, and everyday symbolic resistance.
> (Negus and Pickering, 2004:15)

John Tusa echoes this perspective in his synopsis of the use of the term in the popular media:

> 'Creative', 'creation', 'creativity' are some of the most overused and ultimately debased words in the language. Stripped of any special significance by a generation of bureaucrats, civil servants, managers and politicians, lazily used as political margarine to spread approvingly and inclusively over any activity with a non-material element to it, the word 'creative' has become almost unusable. Politics and the

ideology of ordinariness, the wish not to put anyone down, the determination not to exalt the exceptional, the culture of over-sensitivity, of avoiding hurt feelings have seen to that.

(Tusa quoted in Pope, 2004:33)

It was the emergence of 'culturalist' approaches in cultural studies that first presented an opposition to the previously romantic elitist conceptions of high culture and the artist. This shift represented a democratisation of creativity with the term being applied to a variety of everyday practices rather than merely associated with artistic genius. The cultural turn was instigated through authors such as Raymond Williams' celebration of culture as ordinary and part of the everyday. Notions of symbolic creativity as espoused by authors such as Hebdidge (1979) and Willis (1978) followed in this way, rejecting traditional ideas of creativity as being a gift of the privileged few. They focused on:

> The multitude of ways in which young people humanize, decorate and invest with meanings their common and immediate life spaces and social practices – personal styles and choice of clothes; selective and active use of music, TV, magazines; decorations of bedrooms; the rituals of romance and subcultural styles; the style, banter and drama of friendship groups, music-making and dance.
> (Willis et al quoted in Pope, 2005:12)

Authors such as Fiske (1989) and DeCerteau (1984) (although the latter more critically) have taken this further by celebrating everyday routines such as cooking, walking, shopping as containing subversive elements. With approaches such as this however emerges a danger of a banalisation of everyday life and a diminishing of the critical potential within the quotidian[9]. They moved cultural theory away from the stance of previous critiques of everyday life exemplified particularly in The Frankfurt School but also with the Situationists and the Surrealists in which the commodification of everyday life was something that, it was argued, could only be resisted through either subversion or transcendence of what had become 'the spectacle' of mediated daily existence.

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[9] For an overview of this critical potential see Gardiner, M (2000) *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London and New York: Routledge) and Roberts, J (2006) *Philosophising the Everyday* (London: Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto)

Relating this back to music, writers such as Lawrence Grossberg (1992) and Roy Shuker (1994) have celebrated the agency and power of music listeners and fans. The democratising trends of Mp3s, the internet and interactive TV and radio has added weight to claims that creativity within music is no longer confined to the artist themselves. The danger of such celebrations of universal creativity however, is that they result in a denigration of the musically creative act. Artistic creativity such as music-making or song writing is lumped in with a myriad of banal consumerist musical practices. Pope points out that the prevalence of 'lifestyle' programmes on television is the culmination of creativity as both ordinary and personally fulfilling, it now 'has global appeal as never before'. (Pope, 2004:61). I wish here to put the emphasis back on the 'exceptionality' of musical creativity. This is influenced by Negus and Pickering's re-engagement with the idea of creativity as containing something out of the ordinary or exceptional. With this in mind they warn against the total collapsing of creativity and everyday life:

> To say that all our everyday actions are in some way creative might have a certain
> polemical appeal, but that is all...
> (Negus and Pickering, 2004:45)

Through Negus and Pickering's approach we can see that it is possible to still recognise creativity as an exceptional act that lifts one out of the everyday without over-romanticising or spiritualising the creative and without having to give up on the Beckerian sociology of art approach . Musical creativity is a social process and never a completely individual act.

It is vital to convey however that sociology has been far too strict in its embracing of this sociological axiom. Coverage of musical creativity has shied away from the legitimate study of individuals being creative on their own. Both Finnegan and Cohen are keen to focus on compositional events when the creative act involves groups of people. Accepting that individuals create alone is by no means a rejection of the idea of creativity as social. Creativity of any kind is always collective and there is no such thing as a creative act that is completely untouched by others. Songs are full of memories, words, melodies and harmonies of other people. The singer-songwriters

in Leicester had all made their own CDs or recorded songs. It was often unlikely that many were going to be sold, and some just gave them away to friends. Regardless of this, as Negus and Pickering point out, even if no-one but the writer hears a song, it is still an inherently social act of communication:

> ...the lack of distribution channels, of a public arena or outlet for the work, does not halt the creative process, but it does influence the form it takes (written less with any sense of communication to distinct audiences, and more for an internal dialogue). But it still has a communicative form...The creative act, even that which might seem lone and private, is social and operates within a chain of communicated experiences...
> (Negus and Pickering, 2003:85)

Music making is also treated here as work: productive labour: a craft, and the musician as a craftsperson. I examine here the accounts of individual creativity given by the acoustic musicians. What were their definitions of creativity in the context of everyday life and how did they account for the creative process? Was the Romantic individualistic notion still predominant or were there clear acknowledgments of a social or collective conception of creativity?

4.1 Song-writing as craft

> I have probably saved myself several million dollars in psychiatry bills because I talk to myself a lot. I think most songwriters do. I think most people do, have internal dialogues. I just happened to have trained my internal muscles and the internal spirit to create music...It's a craft...
> (Graham Nash in Zollo, 1997:365)

> When you first start you think you're unique. This music starts pouring out of you, and you think, 'Oh my God, I've been singled out by a greater power!'...The more you write, the more it comes, like this tap's been turned on. In my late teens and early twenties it was like a diary. Later on you meet other musicians and you realise that they're going through the same thing. It's quite a humbling experience. But as I get older it pays the mortgage. It's now become such second nature that I don't question why I'm writing a song.

Above Graham Nash and Steve Tilston respectively discuss the functional and inspirational aspects of being a songwriter: Nash uses terms like 'internal dialogue' and 'the training of internal muscles' and Tilston 'second nature' and 'tap's being turned on'. I found that most of the acoustic musicians were happy to apply a craftsman approach in terms of making music. But this did not automatically mean the dismissal of an idea of instinct, serendipity or even spirituality in the act of creating. Famous singer-songwriter Janis Ian's account demonstrates how the two views can work alongside each other:

> I write a lot from instinct...But as you're writing out of instinct, once you reach a certain level as a songwriter, the craft is always there talking to you in the back of your head. So you may be moving forward on instinct, but there's a little Gieger counter in the back of your head that tells you when it's time to go to the chorus, when it's time to rhyme. Real basic craft. And the nice thing about having enough craft is that you can go on instinct then, because it's second nature.
> (Janis Ian in Zollo,1997:309)

While there usually tended to be remnants of Romanticist discourse in song-writing, more often than not the creative process was perceived by the acoustic musicians as hard work. Salvatore Maddi terms it 'the strenuousness of the creative life':

> We should not, in our admiration of creative acts, construe them as tumbling out of those fortunate persons who have been born right and blessed by favourable environments...We should not let ourselves be confused ...by those descriptions by creative persons of how a great insight came to them when least expected or focused upon. The business end of their creativity was the long, gruelling, intense period of hard mental work preceding the flash of insight...It is a romantic, though understandable reaction, to imagine the creative act to be unrelated to the exhausting, seemingly unsuccessful toil that preceded. In all probability, there would be no creative flash without the work leading up to it.
> (Maddi, 1975:178-9)

Seidel below highlights a frequently heard notion: that artists don't want to analyse their own creativity. This goes hand in hand with the idea that art is 'mysterious' or 'other-worldy':

> many artists tend to regard their creativity as something of a "mystery", the wellsprings of which ought not really be analysed, lest an overly self-conscious analysis of their creative gifts might cause the springs to dry up
> (Seidel, 1966:vii)

Most of the acoustic singer-songwriters however, were more than happy to reflect upon the creative process seeing it as fairly mechanical. Craig provided the most clear-cut example of an anti-romantic idealist perspective. He criticised musicians in general for this tendency:

> ...they have this romantic notion of the artist that they are tapping into this higher level thing, that's the problem. If they were just to relax that opinion for a while and ...recognise that the only reason they are able to tap into what feels like this higher plane is because they've worked, they've studied their instrument, they've studied music. And that's how they got to that point. If they were to realise that and just put it into a 9-5 structure they would become better at writing. I think that would be true of everyone...because for me that's what it always is, it's work and the more you do it the better you get.

Craig strongly believed that the most effective way of writing was to treat song writing as a job. He perceived himself as a productive craftsperson:

> Well as soon as I started to treat as a job in that I would set aside a certain amount of hours then it wasn't so bad. Prior to that I would be often just banging my head against a wall cos I couldn't finish a song or whatever I couldn't find one line to fit or whatever, but now because it's just a job I think well I wasn't able to do it that time...but next time I possibly will be able to because I put in this other work...I've been doing it for...over the last four months I'd say I've been pretty religious about that...now it's quite easy for me to write a song...every week. I'm happy with that turnover

You never would sit down like a job...say "Today I'm going to write a song?"

No

It's something that's got to come to you?

Exactly...I used to think, "Right I've not written a song for a month. I must write a song!", and I'd get really angry and think "Oh, maybe I've lost it, maybe I can't do it! What am I doing?" And then... it'll start again. You know as soon as I leave it and just let it flow and just, you know, think "Well I've got enough songs to be getting on with it, if something comes, great. If it doesn't then, then it doesn't". But that's a fairly recent thing, maybe over the last six months have been like that, but before that it used to be a real struggle, you know, cos I used to think, "I've *gotta* write, I've *gotta* write". But now I don't, not at all.

Andy too gave a workman–like description of song writing equating the process of song writing as akin to learning a trade:

> I've been writing songs on and off for about ten years, but when I started out it was more a case of the desire to write songs than actually knowing how to...so for years I was, I was finding that gradually I was learning about melody properly...learning how to actually write lyrics...I find that I could write some very creative (-) words but it's actually stringing them together, making them coherent...learning how to communicate it it's a gradual process...

As Raymond Williams illustrated:

> The special nature of the artist's work is his use of a learned skill ...the purpose of the skill is the similar to the purpose of all general human skills of communication: the transmission of valued experience...
> (Williams, 1961:42)

While becoming a song writer had not been a conscious plan and the creative act of song writing not something Alex had had to think about too much, he was

89

nevertheless fairly pragmatic in his open attitude to learning about and applying concrete techniques in order to make his songs more polished:

> I'm what I'd call an academic guitarist...I studied a lot of other peoples' arrangements and guitar playing and got music and note for note and learned off videos, taped CDs etc...but song writing I can't say, well I didn't study anyone cos it must have subconsciously gone in on the songs I was listening to but I never sat down with a book on how to do it, I just started...I consciously didn't want to be too influenced...but now I think I've written enough songs, I've been going about it for long enough that I've sort of got my own confidence and I can now use a book just to tweak that rather than to start me off...

Chloe was one musician who took a more spiritual approach. She even claimed to have had visitations from famous dead rock musicians who helped her connect with her music. However, even Chloe was happy to work in a more consciously structured manner. As did Alex, Chloe used the term 'academic' in relation to song writing:

> I would say the way it's influenced me is that to some degree I don't totally think that everything I write is mine I don't necessarily think that it belongs just to me...I like to try all different ways of working at it. I'm quite happy to sort of sit there and let the pen do the writing and you know stuff to just pour out and I'm also quite happy to try a more structured approach a far more...academic approach to writing if you like, I'd be happy to sit down with a rhyming dictionary and do it that way, I mean I haven't got any problem trying any one you like of writing songs...throw scrabble letters up in the air and see if a song comes out of it.

Dave had previously indicated a spiritual approach to music and life in general. His account of song-writing was indicative of such an approach but expressed more of a confused reflection on where the inspiration came from rather than an explicitly divine explanation:

> When I set out to write something I have nothing in particular in mind it just ends up, hang on a minute, this is coming through where the fuck's that, I didn't have this and it's there...It's always the way. I never go in with a preconceived idea of is it going to

be fast, is it going to be slow, is it going to be sad...it's like well, fuck...did I just write that, weird how that happens, weird...

Seidel gives a psychological explanation for this with the emphasis on the unconscious ordering of things in the mind:

> The conscious mind is generally unaware of the largely unconscious preparation of the materials involved in the creative process. From the point of view of consciousness then, creativity appears to arise *ex nihilo*. There was nothing like it existing before, nothing like it produced before...For this reason it is not surprising that many artists and creative persons...have come to look upon their creative gifts as something quasi-divine in origin...
> (Seidel, 1966:169)

Negus and Pickering also emphasise the prevalence of such unknowing creativity:

> In one way we can regard the retention of metaphysical traces in many people's conception of creativity as resulting from the difficulty they have in explaining it, but in quite another way this aspect of their conception remains a positive value to which they consciously adhere. Many poets, musicians, painters and writers have spoken of the experience of being so caught up in the making of their art that they seem to be taken over, as if the strokes of a brush or pen are occurring of their own accord.
> (Negus and Pickering, 2004: 19)

Finally, Ben described the creative process as not spiritual but cathartic explaining it in terms of instant gratification: getting immediate praise and attention for 'being clever':

> ...I don't really see it as a spiritual thing but I see it as a kind of cathartic thing. I wouldn't say that I write a song in order to express myself or anything like that...I don't think I've got a big kind of thing that I wish to communicate with the world...I suppose If I saw it as any way I'd rather see it as just showing off and being clever, it's an extension of being a kid and you just want to show off and be clever and everyone to go "Ooh that's very witty" or you come up with a really good line and you think 'wow''.

4.2 Songs as reflections on everyday life

> The distinction of value, in actual works of art, is always, in the first instance, in the actual power to communicate. Since the meaning and the means cannot be separated, it is on the artist's actual ability to live the experience that successful communication depends. By living the experience we mean that, whether or not it has been previously recorded, the artist has literally made it part of himself; so deeply that his whole energy is available to describe it and transmit it to others.
> (Williams, 1961:50)

Raymond Williams here illustrates the idea of creativity as involving the power to communicate lived experience. Here, by looking at how songwriters reflect on their songs and their lyrics we gain greater insight into the experiences which they are aiming to articulate. Finnegan (1989) talks about the variety of lyrics and their meaning amongst musicians in Milton Keynes but does not give any clear examples of how this relationship between song and songwriter manifests itself. She could be criticised therefore for a slightly banal and cursory commentary.

Finnegan enthuses over the Milton Keynes musicians' emphasis on 'expressions of personality through music making'. However, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between mere expressions of personality on the one hand, and songs as meaningful communications of experience on the other. This chapter demonstrates how the creative process, both the composing and the reflecting on compositions conveys a meaningful communication of experience (see Negus and Pickering, 2004).

Though importantly Finnegan emphasises a point also made by Simon Frith (1996:168) that to a large extent words only really come alive in performance she still defends the meaningful value of lyrics in relation to their writers:

> The words did not stand alone, for it was the way they were realised in actual performances that manifested even their formal qualities (rhyme and rhythm for instance), let alone their intended impact and meaning. But even leaving out the music, the variety of the lyrics makes it difficult to dismiss them as merely the passive copying of ready-made matter. To the players and audiences they were

creative ways of expressing their personal experience and insights in words and
music

(Finnegan, 1989: 170)

Finnegan gives a long list of song titles by local bands (Finnegan, 1989:171). In a
similarly cursory fashion Cohen's research on rock musicians (Cohen, 1991) in
Liverpool included song lyrics but completely disembodied from their writers. This
approach diminishes the value of the song as a meaningful document. Here songs are
examined not merely as texts but in their phenomenological significance in relation to
their writers. Songs come alive on each new hearing but may consistently invoke
over-riding themes.

The songs of the acoustic singer songwriters were generally self-oriented. As one
would expect with the characteristics of this genre, the majority of songs were about
love, loss, insecurity and angst, as Kate demonstrates:

> My songs are very...the words are quite like...not introspective...cos I don't say
> 'I'm' this or 'I'm' that, I say 'you' this or 'you' that but I might be talking about
> myself or I might be talking about with somebody else's voice, but the words are
> quite plain what it's about, you know whether its about loneliness or whether it's
> about somebody that's pissed you off or whether it's about somebody that you're in
> love with

It is important to state however that, along with the socially conscious songs of those
songwriters who crossed over with folk music e.g. Steve and Roger, others too wrote
about issues of a broader social nature. Alex's songs for example were often satirical
reflections on contemporary life (e.g. Newspaper Headlines, Don't You Get It?).
Andrew was also involved in a collaborative project with Steve writing songs about
local folklore and legends in Leicestershire. On the whole though, the songs of
acoustic singer songwriters were more 'California' than 'New York'.

Even with songs of a self-oriented nature however, they were still often meaningful
reflections on daily experience. In this sense we can recognise the important
relationship between creativity, self-identity and everyday life. While the daily

occupations of the acoustic musicians from their own accounts often impinged on their creativity, creative output often emerged through the songwriters' reflections on their daily routines – the song often being an outlet for everyday frustrations. Andrew's song, *You're not there anymore* was also a reflection on the way he felt in relation to his job. He believed he had lost his authentic self due to the drudgery of his job:

> It's a lament to myself and to anybody else who gets stuck in a rut doing their day job and their creativity is destroyed.

The song is also about his life experiences with drugs. Again, ironically this was also a source of creativity. Andrew explains the verse lyric below:

> *I used to like it when you'd see me in stereo and read me in colours with your hands in the air but you're not there anymore...*
> *You got a job pushing paper and all the inspiration left you like the Autumn falling away*
> *Spend all your energy just watching the clock and waiting for alarms to get you there each day*

In one sense the song reflected on Andrew's feeling that he had lost the unconventional side of his character, for example, his past use of recreational drugs:

> 'See me in stereo, read me in colours' is all about drugs really, it's the...hallucinogenic drugs tend to mix the senses up so you literally see the music coming out of the speakers...'but you're not there anymore' so I'm talking about myself but I'm talking about other people as well...

Andrew then continued to talk about the lyric below in the context of losing creativity in his everyday life:

> *I could have stopped the life from leaking out of you but just like you I sat and watched and I cried*

The spark of creation disappeared from your fingers. I couldn't stop that no matter how hard I tried

Musical content was as important as the lyrics in conveying meaning. The style of the song also reflected the way that Andrew perceived his situation. He employed a blues harmonica player who played minor passing notes over a major key to give it the sense of melancholy:

It's the blues....It's a catharsis: by singing about it you throw it away

Andrew's song *Gwendoline Rumbles* was also associated with his job. It was directly based on a specific elderly female customer who used to call the customer advice centre where Andrew worked and presents a colourful character that contrasts with the grey routine of the job:

Twice every evening phones customer services
Tells them how old she is, sings them a song...
And it's oh oh, listen to me now, I'm 73 you know her battle cry from behind bedsit door...

So there are good things that come out of my day job. *Gwendoline Rumbles* came out of that...

So sometimes it just...*Gwendoline Rumbles* came to me all in one. That was just like, Oh hah!! Fantastic! This idea, I've just got this name, but the name was sat around for ages, it was on my desk at home and, I found it when I was tidying up...Ah!! Gwendoline Rumbles, I remember writing this down, I remember talking to her, and by that time I'd...I'd kind of...taken her off into my imagination this...this character and made her into something else, and I'd talked to Simon about her and described her, and...and by that time she'd become this completely new character I mean it's not about the woman who I spoke to on the phone at Powergen, it's...it's now a song about....It's a bit of an Eleanor Rigby kind of song really....lonely old woman who's...who's life must have been really really vigorous and exciting at one time, but now she's...she's stuck in the city without, you know, seventy three years old and...railing against the world really...and er, it didn't mean to be a...to have any kind of message whatsoever, but it ended up being a...being a message about old

people, but it was a...that one came to me, and that was another one where the tune sort of was...was there, just sort of suggested itself, didn't need very many chords.

This account demonstrated how a seed of an idea developed into something more complete. Another of Andrew's songs, When You Would Say, was again a document of his experiences at work:

I remember when you'd say put on your boots let's walk away

...which is again what I'm doing with work, and it's being inspired creatively to do that and just stand up and say 'right we're going out, put your boots on, let's walk away and let's walk away from this and let's head on out into the unknown...

...and because your vision was the sky...

so you had no boundaries in the way you looked at the world...

I wouldn't criticise or refuse
for in that sky the crescent moon's lopsided grin
would see you win whatever games you play...

so it's just about being inspired and going for it really...and I had to say it twice because I thought...when I'd written it I thought, it made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck just to read that sentence and thinking that's exactly what I wanted to say...

Andrew's synopsis of his song is illustrative of a 'moment': a time in which meaning in the individual's life becomes clearer to them through the creative act. Wordsworth used the term 'spots of time' and Dewey 'moments of fulfilment' (Negus and Pickering, 2004:125) to describe such instances of creative insight. Ben Highmore emphasises the significance of the creative moment. He draws on Henri Lefebvre's

concept of 'moments' in relation to the transcendence of everyday life. This can be applied to songwriters and the creative product:

> ...'moments' are those instances of intense experience in everyday life that provide an immanent critique of the everyday...[and] although fleeting, provide a promise of the possibility of a different daily life, while at the same time puncturing the continuum of the present.
> (Highmore, 2002: 115-116)

While these analyses of lyrics could be criticised as individualistic, Andrew clearly demonstrates below how the song as communication of one's own experience always ultimately results in a social product:

> My experience was watching films and reading books...taking something from that; complete imagination, they were never really me, whereas the songs I'm writing now are really, really about me. Suddenly I've found that I can write...and it becomes much more...applicable to everybody when you start talking about personal experience, you realise that other people are having those experiences as well and they relate to them, you play a song that...that you think is just about you and then...suddenly it becomes...somebody turns to you and says, thank you, that meant so much to me...

We can draw here on the communication theory of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin to remind ourselves of the inherently social communicative properties of song writing:

> [I]ndividuality and autonomy are only realisable through the necessary relation of the social self and the other, the self is the 'gift of the other', and speech can never be the property of one individual as it is always involved in active relations with others (Swingewood, 1998:113).

For Chloe the act of song writing was almost always an act of self-reflection, and inextricably linked to expressions of self-identity:

> I don't think there's any [songs] that don't say something about where I'm at or how I'm feeling...but it's not that it's intentional it's just I have to write whatever comes

out and in a way I'd rather just produce what comes out than fight to produce some artificial thing that perhaps I've had to work harder to find...

Alex too describes the importance for him of writing from (and thereby communicating) his personal experience. He felt that it was an authentic practice, which importantly contrasted with commercial song writing:

> ...I don't have any sort of axes to grind or any political agenda...I think I'm a more personal ...I don't want to deal with world issues and I think that I'm not comfortable with those...but inevitably your sort of personality and beliefs are going to slip through into songs...and I don't want to write...what I probably unfairly call commercial songs that are straightforward love songs or straightforward songs in a style...I want them to be something a little bit genuine about them if not completely genuine, there's some integrity there I think I want to keep...

While Alex's songs were to an extent social commentary, they were also examples of the way that themes of individualism could also contain a universal message. Below Alex explains the meaning of his song *Harmony in Paradise*: a philosophical reflection on the search for perfection in life:

> I think this idea like if you were on a Malibu island everything would be all right and you know actually if you actually went there you would realise that you know it doesn't really matter, there's more important things than just situation and sun and everything...It started from this line, for me 'harmony in paradise is like cutting through trifle with a carving knife', which is the idea that if...things can be almost too perfect, you need some sort of resistance to really get rewards out of life, you need something to sort of work at I think...

For Dave, depression was an ongoing theme in his adult life. One particular song, *Distorted Facts,* was a personal account of his experiences with depression:

> When you're depressed everything kind of distorts: your thinking and your thoughts and everything. When you're happy and you're in a normal state of mind everything becomes very clear, or at least it seems clear, when you're depressed, you think well

is it the depression talking, is it me talking, you feel very distorted...so I called it distorted facts.

Don't know what I want but when I think I've got it it's not right

It's like that thing...the double-edged sword...you're running around in circles always trying to fight the good fight, you're always trying to make things work and happen, you're trying to be the good person but you've got this distortion coming in and you're thinking oh god I've done this and done that and I've fucked up here and then this bit I need to find peace...

[At that point in the song the music then suddenly mellows down reflecting the mood of the lyric].

Here again, as with Andrew's blues influenced song earlier, the music, not just the lyrics, communicated the experience of the writer.

4.3 Originality

I think a lot of people get screwed over by originality in music. A lot of people stop doing music because they think 'I'm not original and they think 'I'm sounding like all these other people', whereas for me you can't be original, at least you can't be entirely original and I think it's better to do music than to not do it at all...
(Steven)

There was a certain snobbery on the acoustic scene about cover versions in that it was considered less authentic by some people to 'do a covers set'. However, perhaps a telling difference between the modern acoustic musician and the folk musician was that authenticity had its price:

I would probably try as much as possible to steer clear of places where I thought the audience would actually be very restless if I wasn't doing the majority of covers cos in the end you know I don't want to be a covers singer...Having said that there may be situations where if I get £100 to do two hours worth of covers – take it.
(Andy)

99

Andy had to bow to the inevitability of playing covers sometimes. He accepted that the ideal of performing a set of all original material at a pub would be dangerous:

> But I know that…it would be a real gamble at a lot of venues because, you know, apart from the people that are coming to see you specifically, you're trying to win people over, and you've got to give them points of reference, you've got to give them some stuff they actually know.

It has to be said however that there was a relative openness about performing covers on the acoustic scene. As discussed in the introduction, the 'open mic' culture was very liberal about cover versions but the authenticity and credibility factor did depend crucially on what kind of artist was being covered however. For example, Simon was very critical of Dave doing a cabaret set as his main income, which included material like Michael Jackson and Prince; yet Simon himself was in a Nick Drake[10] tribute band which was very well respected locally. Kate and Andy both covered Eddie Reader and Boo Hewerdine. It would seem that covering respected singer-songwriters from the 'acoustic' field was more acceptable; in fact it could add kudos, whereas pop covers were scorned on by some of the older members. Andy and Andrew both talk about the merits of playing other artists' material:

> Performing covers can actually teach you different things about performance you might not actually learn just playing your own stuff…just singing other people's words, interpreting somebody else's thoughts…By learning from those people actually doing covers, you actually learn to do play your own stuff better…the benefits to their playing of playing covers.
> (Andy)

> …my experience of playing the guitar has been so much enriched by playing Nick Drake, and then learning to play those songs in my own way, I've developed my own style of playing Nick Drake as well as my own style of playing my own songs…
> (Andrew)

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[10] Nick Drake was a pioneering UK acoustic singer songwriter who died in his late 20s in the early 1970s. He has a cult following. Within the acoustic music world he, along with Jeff Buckley was often cited as an influence by many musicians. *Bryter Layter* (named after one of Drake's albums) were a well established six piece Nick Drake tribute act who performed some original material too.

The tensions thrown up by the dualism of originality versus covers was ever-present however. *Bryter Layter*: the Nick Drake tribute band were brought to the verge of splitting up through arguments within the group about whether to become an original band who also played some Nick Drake material, or to continue to bill themselves as a celebration of his music. There were also tensions about whose original material should be performed as there were two songwriters in the band. Fortunately in terms of this ongoing argument changes in band-members' circumstances meant the band couldn't feasibly continue for logistical reasons, which prevented this argument ever having to be resolved!

We are reminded of the inherently social character of writing through the fact that local songwriters would often exchange ideas: chords, riffs, lyrics etc. An example of this free exchange of ideas was a song on Bryter Layter's album: *When you would say*. The song was originally written by fellow songwriter in the band, Simon, and was originally written with local songwriter Steve in mind to sing it. However, Andrew liked it and wrote the lyrics and melody to go with the chords. The melody of the first line, Andrew then admitted, was 'lifted' anyway from one of Steve's songs, 'Dog Eat Dog'. This shows the malleability of song-writing with regard to originality.

Again here we can see the importance of embracing a more social account of creativity not based on romantic ideas of genius. Negus's concept of musical creativity and synthesis, the melding together of previous musical interactions and conversations, rather than originality, is helpful here (Negus,1996:146).

We have seen then that there was some exchange of ideas between solo singer-songwriters but an even more significant phenomenon perhaps that highlighted the reciprocal and socially co-operative nature of the acoustic music scene was the exchanging of songs: local songwriters would occasionally cover each other's songs. Ben from a local acoustic duo acknowledged:

> We've covered Simon's battle of Britain…I think Andy has covered [one of our] song[s]…I never heard it, he wouldn't play it in front of us

Simon had also asked Chloe if he could cover her song *Sweet Arrow*.

The songwriters would often 'redraft' songs or take parts from previously discarded or incomplete songs of their own and tag them onto new songs. This was something that Steven, Alex and Chloe had done. In the first case, Steven, a postgraduate student, likened it to his academic work.

> I suppose I have different ways of doing songs. A lot of them lately have been...almost like redrafted. In a sense I really don't like doing that because it's like I'm doing my academic work and I think I find it difficult to separate those two activities...doing academic writing and writing songs, which I want to be expressive and purely for the sake of it and basically throwaway. I prefer my music to be throwaway but that's not happening at the moment and I don't know whether I'll ever get to that stage where it is throwaway
> (Steven)

> Usually I want to move on. I think, oh I'd rather do something new than try and flog a dead horse if you like but there's the odd thing that just didn't quite work but the fundamental idea's good...and...if other people come along and play and add something to it that's fantastic...I'm very much for that...I'm delighted when that happens
> (Alex)

> ...I'm constantly taking bits of paper home with me sort of arbitrary scraps you know and I'm like aaagh where's that gone and I've got bags and bags and bags of lyrics and I'm still writing more and I want to sit down and try and get it all put on to the computer and backed up on floppy so that I don't have all this paper everywhere but when do I get time to do that, I just don't get time to do that so it all ends up staying on paper...and some of it I don't know if I'll ever unearth it, replant it cos I believe in sort of going back to lyrics, taking a good line out and growing it, propagating it into a new song, you know there's all different things you can do in order to grow new songs. If ever I was stuck for a song I could just go up to all my best...find something to grow a new song out of, you know...
> (Chloe)

4.4 Time, space and everyday constraints on creativity.

> My songs emerge from my life or wherever they do unbidden and unplanned and
> completely on a schedule of their own...I can't legislate a song into being, it just will
> not happen for me. I can make a *space* for it to happen, and sometimes it will come
> and fill the space...
> (David Crosby in Zollo, 1997:373)

Above David Crosby goes against the craftsperson approach saying that he can't sit
down and just write a song, but highlights that he can 'make a space for a song to
happen'. One could safely assume that making a space in David Crosby's house and
economic situation might be a tad easier than for the semi-professional struggling
singer-songwriters on the Leicester Acoustic Scene. This leads us into the discussion
of temporal and spatial constraints on creativity.

As Britain is one of the most 'time poor' countries in the EU,[11] a crucial question I
seek to address here is to what extent the hectic patterns of advanced capitalist society
impact on the struggling artists (in this case semi-professional musicians) and their
attempts to find time for creative practices. Mackie illustrates the ways in which time
and space in contemporary life potentially constrain creativity:

> Through 'number' directionality, clock time and personal or historical time we can
> begin to identify something of the way in which a particular 'space' and 'time'
> concept is imposed to obscure the otherwise open zones of spatiality and temporality
> per se in our experience...We are robbed of an alternate, or spontaneous process of
> meaning – conferral, as an experience both of our 'self', of 'others', and of everything
> we come to perceive around us. That is, we are coming to see the way in which
> 'time' and 'space' together impose a particular mode of consciousness to which they
> bind our experience exclusively.
> (Mackie, 1985:142)

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[11] Britons work longer hours than almost all their European counterparts according to a research project by The Work
Foundation (www.tuc.org.uk/work_life/index).

103

Walter Benjamin discussed the idea of chronological time replacing and acting as a barrier to true experience, contrasting chronos – 'the mere passing of time', with kairos – 'that dramatic moment in which time is charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end' (Kermode in Eagleton, 1981:73). It is interesting to examine just how successfully this group of singer songwriters were reclaiming or shaping their everyday lives as spaces of creativity, and whether, through creative moments, they experienced such meaning-charged moments within their everyday temporal and spatial limitations. Here I look at some of the ways in which the songwriters negotiated structured spaces in the flux or disciplined structure of their daily routines.

Chloe was a musician in an unrewarding full time job. It was an ongoing struggle for her to fit music making into her daily life. Her account of her daily routine below gives us an idea of the time constraints she faced. She also pointed to the acoustic club as her primary means of escape:

> I keep having little pipe dreams at work about how can I escape from this cos out of here at half seven... I get to work for half past eight...get back about half past six... so, then it's like you know, I just throw some food down me and I don't really, I'm not really interested in cooking any more, cos I just want to play my guitar or write lyrics or erm investigate or listen to some, a new CD that I've bought or that kind of thing but erm mainly you know I'm going down to *The Musician* every Monday night still, and supporting that and being part of that...but... it's...I wake up and think about music, I go to bed and think about music, that's all I think about.

Despite this heavy impact on her daily life Chloe demonstrated how she renegotiated the times and spaces either on the way to work or at work in order to reclaim her creative self:

> Sometimes I'll take a radio with me and listen to that, but that just distracts me from thinking about my own ideas and writing lyrics down or whatever. I'm not necessarily always writing lyrics down but if I'm not writing lyrics down I'm thinking about what there is to write and...also thinking about emotional situations that could be put into a musical thing...things that happened in my life that upset me or anger me or excite me or...whatever, so I get to work and...I...I've always got a

paper and a pen... anyway cos of the nature of my job but...if I get an idea for lyrics I start trying to write it, and then the phone goes and I'll just try and hold the thought, and then the phone will go again and I'll scribble down as much as possible.

Chloe also described how she used her lunch break for song writing. This, like her time travelling to work, was not without difficulty however:

> Then...I've got my lunch-break...I need more exercise so I could go and swim during my lunchbreak...or I could designate that time onto singing new melodies onto my minidisk... 'cos the idea was, was that I could then go to work, have a melodic idea and cos I'm in the room on my own a lot of the time, I could just quickly sing it into or say it into the microphone and I don't lose the melody cos one of the problems I have at work is that I'll think of a great melody...then I've got it down on minidisk, and I get home get the guitar out and go ah these are good chords with that and cos words'll come off the top of my head, and in fact it's much better if I can sing lyrics straight down onto something and allow it to just flow rather than...the path between the hand and the pen is almost a handicap, and if the phone's ringing on top of that it can break a really good train of thought...

Chloe's attempts to transform what might be considered spaces and times of discipline was an example of the potential within everyday life to creatively transform it. Chloe managed to maintain at least a level of creativity in the midst of potentially stultifying routines. As DeCertau illustrates:

> If it is true that the grid of "discipline" is everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive, it is all the more urgent to discover how an entire society resists being reduced to it, what popular procedures (also "miniscule" and "quotidian") manipulate the mechanisms of discipline.
> (DeCerteau, 1984 xiv)

Andrew also found ways of negotiating the spaces in the everyday routine to find moments for creating:

> **So generally in terms of...having time and space for creativity, is that something you could fit into a day's work...like in a lunchbreak...to have some idea or to write things down...?**

...I did try that, over the winter when I'm...because of my seasonal affective disorder...I've got my light box, and...I go into the first aid room...and...what I did to start with, the first bit of the winter, I was just reading a book or something, but...as it got towards January and February...I actually wrote a couple of songs in er in my lunch break cos I didn't take a book in...I just went in there and ooh I've got this idea and ended up writing...over three days over three lunch-breaks I wrote a song.

Despite Chloe and Andrew's partially successful attempts at finding moments of creative time in their daily work routines it was clear that this was not without major difficulties. Attempts to transform the day to day were clearly a struggle. Chloe's account below shows that she ultimately felt her potential to be creative was stultified by the work routine:

...Yeah I feel frustrated every day when I have to go to work. I just don't want to do it, and sometimes it really upsets me to the point of tears. I'd love to just stay here, I don't want to fucking go to work and it feels wrong, it just feels wrong...I want to do music full time but I'm trying to find out how without compromising or stifling artistic integrity, so much music's coming out of me now...

As Cohen and Taylor highlight, although a large proportion of the majority of people's lives is spent at work, there is a sense in which it is a reality that is put in brackets. It may be the predominant temporal reality in many peoples' lives but in terms of meaning it is rather considered as obscuring the true qualitative reality:

It is the very bounded nature of the life world of work that enables us to express dissatisfaction not just about the concrete problems which occur at work but about the whole nature of work itself. So work may appear to us not as a natural activity but perhaps as an immovable object to which we must periodically attend, a giant slagheap at which we must shovel away for the greater part of our lives. It stands out there as a world to which we periodically subscribe, but in which we do not really live

(Taylor and Cohen, 1992:216)

Andrew had told his boss at work that the job was destroying not merely his creativity but his ability to be creatively imaginative in his life choices:

> And if I've got to earn my mortgage money [mainly through doing music] then I'll work all the harder and it's about time I did that. I've been stuck in a job for four and a half years and I've lost how to improvise, I've been improvising all my life in making it pay and I've got to get back to that...instead of sitting on my arse for seven and a half hours a day, it's just doing me in...

Andrew, as Chloe did, described a hectic lifestyle. The quote below importantly demonstrates that music is another job in itself rather than just an indulgent hobby:

> It's the rush to get to work and just throwing...some milky breakfast down my neck and...getting out the house, and then...it's only when I get home...have my dinner...I then have to...try and do what I need to do...in the evening, which is answer my emails...practise, if I've got time that evening...it depends on what I'm aiming for at the time...as to what I do in the day obviously, at the moment I've got to print...more EP sleeves, prepare for this gig on Friday...D [partner] always says I've got *so* much on, and I always, you know, if I...if I get rid of one thing and clean my life out...I always end up *filling* it really quickly with loads and loads of other things, and start a new project for somebody else...just...I'm...continuously trying to reassess what, what I should be concentrating on...

For Dave, reflecting on his recent past when he worked as a full-time care worker, he argued more optimistically that somehow creativity would always emerge:

> It always finds its way. It always finds its way. I don't know how, but it does. I think it...If it's within you then, and you've acknowledged that it's within you then it will show itself at the weirdest times.

Dave demonstrated, in the context of his new lifestyle – doing gigs at the weekend, how unstructured his life was in relation to others in full-time work.

> You know I...love the fact that now I could be in rush hour traffic thinking, "This is great. All you lot have been to work, or you're going to work, and I'm sitting there

thinking: "I don't have to do this". That's a *lovely* feeling. It's *great*...or thinking
"Oh it's eleven o'clock, I might go and have a lie down.
[laughter]

For Chloe and Andrew, their jobs (receptionist and telephone customer advisor) were purely a means of income. Not all occupations, however, were necessarily in conflict with a creative existence. Indeed some occupations complemented the creative process. For example, Craig was a part time lecturer in performing arts:

> ...it's good doing the work that I'm doing here cos it does inform...I see it as one part of that whole creative process, it's almost like I'm not stopping. It's almost like I'm doing it all the time I'm working at it all the time. This is informing my opinions about that creative process, about me being a songwriter.

In Cohen's research on rock musicians in Liverpool, many of the musicians were facing the day-to-day existence of unemployment. For example, one musician, Tog, spent most days sitting around watching daytime TV. Another, Huw, was depressed about being on the dole (Cohen, 1991: 31/2). In Leicester Andrew clearly saw the kind of everyday routine, so clearly portrayed in Cohen's work, as just as threatening to creativity as a full time job:

> I tried desperately not to get into the same mode that you get into when you're unemployed which is getting up extremely late and going to bed extremely late...and having a lodger who's unemployed didn't help either...you end up getting into the same kind of routines as them. So I had to sort of fight against that...

In the latter stages of the research Andrew suggested that a new relationship he had become involved in, which additionally included getting involved with his new partner's children had, in some sense, actually saved him from this fate:

> ...I think it probably needed a relationship for me to get to the stage where I've got a family, a regular ordered thing going on rather than being on my own in the house with the capability of getting pissed every night and then not doing much during the day...

This view was echoed by Craig. He expressed grave concerns about the impact of a largely structure-less existence on his creativity:

> If I don't settle down with a girl when I leave my mum and dad I'm going to be in problems (laughter) my musical career is over... because I think you need that discipline around you, you need structure. Otherwise you don't discipline yourself if you don't have...those demands on you...It's those demands that...you get fearful you sort of think, Oh no. When am I going to have time to write those songs, oh I'll have to devote that time to it. If you have too much time too much freedom it's like I can do it whenever. I can do it tomorrow and you just never do it...I just know I need some structure to my life...

In the early stages of the research when Dave had recently given up work in order to pursue music, his weekly routine had been unstructured in a similar way to the musicians in Cohen's study. Later in the research period however he found himself much more in demand as the gigs were starting to roll in due to the work he had put into promoting himself. Consequently his daytime routine had changed so that far less time was spent just sitting around playing as it was at the start of the research, and he was now rehearsing, emailing and taking phone calls:

> Since I've been back, which has been a month, I've not had one day where I go, I'm...doing nothing today, it's been full on...in between...rehearsing, sending stuff off, rehearsing, getting gigs, that's it. But ideally what I'd like to do is get up early...do everything I need to do by 5.00 and then when J gets home at 5.30 I can just sit down and watch the telly...but the body-clock is I don't get to bed til 3 or 4 o'clock...so I get up late, so everything that I need to do, you might not be able to get hold of somebody so you put that to the bottom of the list and then you try and go to see somebody...and that takes longer than you thought and then, so the other things that you've got to do then gets moved, so it comes to 8 o'clock in the evening and I'm still doing all the shit that in an ideal world I'd like to have finished at 5...

One thing that struck me about most of the musicians was how far their daily existence was from the romantic dream of just 'doing music'. The idea of just 'doing music' implies some kind of a transformation of everyday life from a structured routine existence to one of liberated artistic expression and temporally unstructured

activity. However, for those musicians who attempted to seriously make music a serious career, it seemed to have added to the bureaucratised character of daily life rather than enabling the transcendence or transformation of it. The nature of the game involves promotion, booking, administration etc. Indeed in Andrew's case he seemed to thrive on organising himself and working under pressure as one would expect a career person in a high-powered job to do:

> I like deadlines...I like to be put in a kind of emergency situation where I've got to work myself out of it...you've got to learn very very quickly and you've got to make the phone call...at the moment it's been up til now, well I've got to make these phone calls but I don't quite know what I'm doing, I don't know how to do it so I need a kick up the arse...

The core participants all kept diaries for three separate weeks, which gave some indication of their work/life/maintenance tasks balance. The differences between the participants in terms of hours spent on music was dramatically substantial, particularly between those doing full time jobs and those with music as the sole source of income. Alex, for example, who had a very responsible full time job as a university lecturer, was quite taken-a-back to find that from the timesheets he had provided he only spent around 10% of his waking hours doing music related activities:

> Time-wise, as I say, I probably in truth play about three...only about half an hour, three mornings, and probably an average of about an hour a night and a little bit more at the weekend so I'd like to think I probably play...or if not play, music is at least ten hours a week of some aspect of it; flyers, or going and listening to music even or acoustic club or whatever...

From the three separate weeks he documented, Alex actually spent twice as much time attending to daily tasks such as housework, travelling to work and researching and planning trips away with his partner than he did on musical activities. He was still engaged in musical activities for an average of ten hours per week. This broke down into about four hours playing at home: a 45 minute practice each night, three hours per week gigging or doing gig related activities and two hours recording. In

terms of time to be creative and write new material, Alex found that during times leading up to a gig when he had to practise a lot, he was not able to come up with as many new ideas. This dilemma between work and time for musical creativity was magnified by Alex's promotion to senior lecturer at work, and was a cause of worry in relation to the amount of time available for music practice:

> ...Makes you sound really clever but when all you want to do is be a guitar picker you're bloody stupid because you've just got a forty odd hour week to work before you can even pick the guitar up...

Alex had thought about going part time as he was now on a higher wage. However with the nature of academic work he surmised that he wouldn't necessarily end up doing a lesser number of hours than he did now. In relation to this Alex also explained that because music was very much a part-time thing for him he didn't have the luxury that other musicians had of putting things off. Music had to be something regimented to an extent, as it had to fit into very tight time schedules. For this reason if Alex experienced a musical hitch – for example, on one occasion the recording engineer didn't turn up for a recording session that he'd booked – this was an immense setback as it would be a while before he had the time to make available again.

One of the daily activities Alex pursued outside of music was running. Even this was partly in order to listen to music though. He listened to a CD whilst running. Previously his daily walk to work had involved listening to music but more recently he and his partner walked to work together and so Alex now spent that time in conversation instead. Undoubtedly partly for this reason, the physicality of playing the guitar was given an increased value by Alex. He perceived playing music as similar to a workout after a day of sitting at the computer.

In contrast to Alex, Dave's weekdays were occupied with largely music related activities in the domestic sphere and preparation for gigs. Weekends were always taken up with his cabaret gigs. Dave's time was freed up by these weekend gigs, which enabled him not to have to work. In stark comparison to Alex's 10%, Dave spent approximately 60% of his waking hours doing music-related activities. This he

claimed would have increased later on in the research when he was receiving more exposure and promotion:

> We rehearse now. I'm constantly on the Internet doing emails...having weekly meetings with Darren [Dave's manager/promoter], advising me on who to send stuff to and him getting me gigs...It's more of a direction...

Drawing on Hagerstrand's biographical time geography studies David Harvey emphasises this idea of 'coupling constraints' (Harvey, 1990:211) as part of the struggle for autonomy in contemporary society:

> Finite time resources and the 'friction of distance' (measured in time or cost taken to overcome it) constrain daily movement. Time for eating, sleeping, etc. has to be found, and social projects always encounter 'coupling constraints', specified as the need to have the time-space paths of two or more individuals to intersect to accomplish any social transaction. Such transactions typically occur within a geographical pattern of available 'stations' (places where certain activities like working, shopping, etc. occur) and 'domains' where certain social interactions prevail (Harvey, 1990: 211)

While 'coupling constraints' refers to more than just couples, in its literal sense this was of particular relevance here. The way that domestic arrangements evolved between couples and became organising factors in their daily routines regarding allotted times within which musicians felt they could be musically creative, was vitally important. For example, at a particular point in the evening Alex's partner would watch the soaps for an hour. That was his time to engage in his music practice in his designated music room. When I had asked Alex about his most important music-related possessions he had cited his music room itself as one of them.

> We've been here about four years now...fairly important to me really to have this somewhere I can sort of lay my things out be a bit messy but I can come in here switch off and play and be creative and take full concentration...I wouldn't like to lose my guitar...even if I had a great guitar if I had no space to be creative, perhaps that is the most valuable...

Similarly, Ben, a full-time teacher, expressed the need for his own space in which to be creative: very much a private space:

> It's cathartic. After a day where nothing goes right I can play my guitar, shut the door and play my guitar and it's something that I can do that no one can steal. It's just me on my own and I can play and I have utter control over it...and it really irritates me when the missus comes in half way through a song.

Clearly in both of the above accounts there is an evident effect of 'coupling constraints' in the musicians' lives. Some musicians' domestic situations contrasted with this however. For example, Craig still lived in the parental home and the situation was different. He speculated about how different things would be in relation to creative output if he were involved in a co-habiting relationship:

> Well it's that thing of balance isn't it, I mean at the moment it's just balanced nicely I suppose for me to produce songs because I have these demands on me but they're not so great that they eat away all my time. They do afford me spaces in the day to work. If I were to have a wife and a family I don't know where those spaces would come from, so I need structure but there has to be a structure that's flexible enough for me to...work my songs into it.

Early on in the research period, Andrew would spend Thursday to Saturday at his partner's house and would often be without the guitar for those days. Eventually this was a source of concern for Andrew who felt that his music was too separate from his relationship:

> Sometimes I go through some weeks where I only play at the acoustic club. That's painful because I get, my fingers get itchy, really do, and this physical sensation of...wanting to play. And I spend half of my week at D's [girlfriend's] house, and...most of the time I don't even have my guitars...we've got a routine of making a meal and, and catching up with each other to do there, which just, just can't often involve me heading off into a corner and practising all the time....so...I try and tailor my week. If I've got some gigs coming up I'll, I'll practise hard on a Tuesday or a Wednesday... or both or maybe take the guitar off to Delphine's and do half an hour to an hour there. But...very rarely get enough time.

In Dave's case he and his partner lived markedly contrasting day-to-day existences:

> But in terms of structure, there's not really the structure. I'll try and tidy the house,
> and then me and J will go through the bills now and again, but...she's like a surrogate
> mother in a way...Cos I just feel like you know I sit here and, you know, with the dog
> and play the guitar ...usually in that day I'll play the guitar for a couple of hours. It
> could be five hours, but ...every day I'll play the guitar... and she's sort of in the real
> world as it were, you know, on a fairly decent wage, and the bills come through and
> they go into J's drawer, and J will say, "Right, tonight we're going to sit down and
> we're gonna do the bills", and I'll either agree or disagree...she sorts all the bills out,
> she does all the shopping, pretty much everything, she's like a mother!

Dave's partner worked full time in a relatively responsible job and was up early in the
morning for work. Dave, on the other hand, would get up at around 11am and spend
most of the day doing music related activities often of a social nature, e.g. recording at
his fellow band member and producer Neil's house or meeting with musicians or
contacting venues. Otherwise, Dave was practising the guitar and doing some
writing. While his partner went to bed at around 11, he would stay up until 3 or 4 am
writing. If he did go to bed early he would often wake up in the middle of the night
and have an idea and then go and work on it downstairs. Dave vehemently denied
that this caused any problems in his relationship.

Carly too lived with her partner who was a musician as well. They worked together
on some musical projects but importantly also retained an independent lifestyle.

It is vital to state that partners could often be co-operative and contribute to the
creative process. For example, Alex emphasised the importance of the partner's
perspective in relationship to music and the domestic sphere:

> I think I have a very understanding partner – it could create problems so I think that's
> good, so I'm lucky, I don't take that for granted. I kind of think what I do I write
> songs, I sit in my bedroom, I do it, you know my partner's comment is: well at least
> you're no trouble to anybody!

Creativity and transformation of the everyday

> The everyday lifeworld has acquired an artificial triviality and repetitiveness because it is progressively under the thumb of a bureaucratic, functional logic. The result is a homogenisation of the concrete particularities of everyday lifeworld, an 'emptying out' of the richness and complexity of daily experience.
> (Gardiner, 2000:13)

Gardiner here describes everyday life as being made poor in advanced capitalist society. On a day-to-day level pockets of time were found to enrich the everyday through creativity but, on the whole, it was more about successfully working music into the daily routine rather than using music as an escape route from it. Alex, for example, didn't see music as necessarily transcending the day-to-day, certainly not from his own experience of playing. Conversely, he pointed out that the musical routine was a ritualistic thing itself, which enriched the everyday rather than transcended or resisted it:

> I do kind of say...where some people pray, I do kind of find the guitar playing in the morning and...doing that to the best of my ability, and I've actually thought, I wonder if that's my substitute for some people praying and focusing...it's the discipline and the well-being it gives me to play the guitar...

David Harvey highlights the importance of ritual in the chaotic nature of contemporary life. Perhaps we can see music then as part of the ritualistic rhythm of life instead of existing outside of its structure in some other realm:

> In modern society, many different senses of time get pinned together. Cyclical and repetitive motions (everything from daily breakfasts and going to work, to seasonal rituals like festivals, birthdays, vacations, the openings of baseball or cricket seasons) provide a sense of security in a world where the general thrust of progress appears to be ever onwards and upwards into the firmament of the unknown.
> (Harvey, 1990:202)

Andrew also demonstrated that it was not a question of transcending or escaping the daily grind through musical creativity, but rather transforming it. For example, since becoming involved in conducting music workshops for deaf children, Andrew felt far more creatively fulfilled; something that had evidently lowered his tolerance for the banal complaints of telephone customers in his full time job:

> And because I'm doing these workshops, you put yourself in a position where you open your creative mind, anything that seems like banal or somebody is really talking through their arse…you notice it more clearly because you're opening yourself up…If there's something that's niggling away at you that's just not important at all, which is most of what I do…it means I can very quickly snap into just telling them the truth which is a bit dangerous at my job…

Zones of creativity

As we have discussed earlier within the flux of everyday life it was very important for the singer-songwriters to create little spaces in which they could be creative. We might refer to these temporal and spatial pockets as 'zones of creativity'.

Dave had various 'zones of creativity' in his house which could change. He describes one room in the house as being 'anti-creative':

> Nine times out of ten it'll be night time when everything's sort of gone silent and there's no sort of distractions, and at the moment it seems to be the kitchen seems to be the area. I did have a designated music room upstairs, and I found it anti-creative.

Carly talked about designing her environment in order to nurture creativity:

> I try and design my environment as far as possible in a way that allows me to think, to be creative…
> (Carly)

For some it was very difficult to find any space on which to create. For example, in Steven's case it was a problem due to the limitations of the space he lived in:

...the trouble I find is that cos I live in a flat there are people above me and what I can hear of them they obviously can hear of me and it means I'm very reserved in terms of what I'm...I don't like people to hear what I'm playing unless I'm happy with that, especially when I'm practising and coming out with stuff, I want to just be able to sing freely...I need to be able to do it freely and I need to know that there's no one else around to hear me

A similar problem was echoed by Kate. She found it difficult to sing or play the viola and properly express herself in the context of being a lodger and sharing space.

Such spatial constraints meant that the acoustic singer-songwriters tended to discover or create alternative spaces outside of the home, and hence, often transitory spaces in which to be creative. These could be spaces in between the work and the domestic spheres: For example, in Alex's case travelling with his job was his creative space. Ideas for songs often emerged whilst travelling which is why he preferred travelling on the train than in a car:

I do a lot of my writing travelling as well...and I travel a bit with my job...It's not being somewhere else, it's being put in a different surrounding that's stimulating...

As we saw earlier, for Chloe travelling to and from work was clearly a space for formulating ideas for songs:

I've got things written on bus tickets...

For Kate and Dave, walking was a creative space in which to develop ideas:

It happens in different ways. I tend to think of lyrics when I'm walking out quite a lot, usually when I've not got a pen and paper to hand... I try and remember a particular phrase and write it down when I get home, or I've got one of those little Dictaphone things that I...I use that...
(Kate)

I wrote one when I was coming back from the shops, it was to do with sunlight and...I had this line coming to me 'and I need sunlight baby upon my skin, my teeth my hair, my face, my grin', and that, when I came back here I thought ooh yeah right OK, and that, it was the theme of sunlight you know, so that, I had something to work round, as opposed to...just letting it ramble, going anywhere.

Zones of creativity were not just spatial but temporal too. For Dave in particular, there were times that were particularly good for writing:

...I find that if your life is always the same day in day out it's very, very difficult to write a song, unless you have those days that are day in day out but within that you fluctuate like a bloody roller coaster. If you do, then you can write songs, but if everything seems to be hunky dory and everything seems to be smooth and you've not had a laugh or you've not been moved in any way, I can't write a song...I find that when I am depressed...you are in the eye of the storm so to speak, so your thoughts aren't on writing or being creative or doing anything that's positive, cos you're too depressed to wanna do that, but when you're coming out the other side of it I find that, and I start to get happy but I've still got that bit of melancholy in me, *that's* a great time to write because then you've got a little bit of both and they're still quite fresh...that's a wonderful time that is.

Interestingly, it was clear that for Dave these temporal zones depended on some state of flux in his everyday life. When daily life was smooth and life seemed in a state of relative equilibrium Dave found it very difficult:

I'm quite happy at the moment doing the cabaret stuff, and I'm quite happy just doing the odd gig with my own stuff, and it's worrying me because I'm thinking maybe I've got too complacent, and if I get too complacent and become stable and think "Oh I'm happy just to write the odd song now and again and do me...what happens if there's nothing more, what happens if this is it, and nothing ever inspires me again?

Summary

[I]ndividuals and communities retain a remarkable ability to combat the drift towards what the Frankfurt School called a 'totally administered world'...we subvert the total

commodification and homogenisation of experience through `myriad (if sometimes fleeting) expressions of passion, non-logicality and the imaginary. These emancipatory moments are endemic in the everyday, and remain opposed to the utilitarian greyness of official society, overshadowed as it is by the logic of the commodity form and an ethos of productivism.

(Gardiner, 1998:15)

When I began the research, I expected to find that musical creativity was always 'other' to or a 'way out' of the stultifying nature of day-to-day life. However, this chapter has shown that clearly the acoustic musicians tended to see precisely an 'ethos of productivism' as the only real way of making their musical identity come to the fore in everyday life. The 'business' of being a creative individual for the singer-songwriters involved arduous labour, hard graft and tricky negotiation of the quotidian terrain. Focusing on these earthy elements of creativity demonstrates that the concept can be brought back down to earth as a part of the everyday, whilst still maintaining a status as a heightening or exceptional communication of experience. Here we follow Negus and Pickering's example:

Our understanding of creativity...finds its parallel in how we approach experience as ordinary in its continuous flow through the mundane habits and routine acts of our lives and yet also extraordinary in its culminating stages and landmark events. Creativity is central to this process in producing a state of consciousness which is active, open and alert to feeling, perception and thought...a mood of mental and sensual arousal in which we acquire a sharpened sense of our experience or of the expressive form already given to an experience by someone else.

(Negus and Pickering, 2004:30)

This point is reiterated by Gardiner who argues that the everyday should be perceived as containing the seeds of the extraordinary within:

The ordinary can become extraordinary not by eclipsing the everyday, or imagining we can arbitrarily leap beyond it to some higher level of cognition or action, but by fully appropriating and activating the possibilities that lie hidden, and typically repressed within it

(Gardiner, 2000:7)

Having looked specifically at the area of individual creativity I will now turn to the creative act of performance. Whilst I have shown that individual creativity is inherently social and dialogical, performance involves a far more obvious visible sociality. However, it is still tied up with the creative act of the production of musical self-identity.

CHAPTER FIVE: BEING A PERFORMER: PERFORMANCE AND SELF-IDENTITY

Introduction

> People talk all day in a practical way, but real language that penetrates and affects people and carries wisdom is something different...to point out a child's moon to a stranger, is original language, it's the way you originate yourself. And the cool thing is, if you catch people at the right moment it's totally clear. Without knowing why, it's simply clear. That sort of connection is very empirical. It comes from the part of you that just understands immediately. All these types of things are gold, and yet they are dishonoured or not paid attention to because that kind of tender communication is so alien in our culture, except in performance. There's a wall up between people all day long, but performance transcends that convention
> (Jeff Buckley in Ehrlich, 1997:155-6)

> ...I actually sit there and think, 'fuck this is going badly, I wish I wasn't here and what am I going to have for breakfast tomorrow morning...I'm that distracted sometimes I get that mad with it is a reality actually unfortunately sometimes...that's on a very bad day...it's usually when you can't even hear yourself think cos the sound monitors aren't in the right place and it's all just a pile of pants and no matter what you do, nobody's going to listen...
> (Alex: Leicester musician 2003).

These two passages exemplify the contrasts between the ideal of performance and what it often entails at the grass roots level. This struggle between the performance ideal and the lived experience of performing is the key focus here. This chapter will examine what it means to the performers to perform, and whether the singer-songwriters' accounts of performance contain largely social and communicative elements or more individualistic and self-oriented rationales. The conflict between the ethical and the instrumental is especially significant in a musical world such as the contemporary acoustic scene. Here older members have connections with the 'folk' world where the communicative act takes precedence over the performer as an individual. Younger members on the other hand, appeared to be more culturally

attuned to the self-promotional and commercial aspects of mainstream rock/pop. As we discussed earlier, the recent revival in acoustic singer songwriters indicates that contemporary acoustic music is today as much a part of the mainstream, and therefore the 'culture industries', as other genres. However, it is the authenticity of performers that many of its members subscribe to that arguably sets it apart from the mainstream pop, in that it is, at least, a relatively unmediated musical realm. The chapter will also examine recording as performance, focusing on self-expression and self-presentation in the context of studio and stage performances.

5.1 Musicians' accounts of the meaning of performance

We are all engaged in performances of one kind or another on a day-to-day level. As Frith highlights, performances to an audience are not always vastly different from performances in everyday life (Frith, 1996:208) [12]. Indeed there were many performative aspects to the world of the local music maker. For example, we have already looked at the ongoing performance of acting out an identity as a musician, which involves specific ways of presenting oneself to significant musical and generalised others. The aim here though is to clarify the specific type of musical enactment that enabled an individual to be recognised as 'a performer' on the acoustic scene.

Frith states, 'Sincerity...cannot be measured by searching for what lies behind the performance; if we are moved by a performer we are moved by what we immediately hear and see' (Frith, 1996:215). Of course Frith is right to emphasise the immediacy of performance, but while searching for a rationale or a set of motives behind performing will never lead us to an underlying truth about performance, we can still broaden our understanding of it through examining what kinds of values and ideas were held about performance by music makers through their own accounts. I will now look at some of the participants' general approaches to performing and the nature of performance.

Interestingly, Dave initially talked about performance in an altruistic way, making parallels between performing and his previous job as a care worker:

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[12] We must acknowledge Erving Goffman's influence here: particularly his work in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1969).

To me it's like care work in the sense that you are giving somebody else satisfaction or pleasure from what you do...the care work I was somebody's arms and legs for four years and by me doing that, that enabled them to live a so-called normal life...that gave him power, it made him feel great, and it made me feel great that I'd done that. And it also makes me feel great now that I'm doing that in a different kind of way...tonight I'm going to go out and I'm going to play for two hours and hopefully put a smile on somebody else's face... I might not, but if I've satisfied five people, then I've done more than sitting at home...

Accounts of performance such as this often implied that there was what we might term a 'performance ethic' involved with musicians being driven by a social and communicative ideal. Kate demonstrates this further with her account of performance as containing an inherent selflessness:

I don't do it for myself... but if just one person comes up and says they've enjoyed it, then that's...enough you know, if lots of people do, then it's great, and I just think, yeah...I'm really glad you enjoyed it, and it's been worth all the hard work that you've put in...It's not an ego thing...

This kind of ideal of performance as a reciprocal exchange between performer and audience echoes Finnegan's description of performance:

There are various occasions in our society where exchange takes place outside or parallel to the mechanisms of the formal market-place – a form of gift exchange, as it were – and musical performance is clearly one of them
(Finnegan, 1989:292).

In contrast to this socialistic analysis however, there were also more individualistic and pragmatic accounts given for performing:

... the performing side is almost like sticking your middle finger up to everyone now and saying "well, I'm having a good time", look at me... centre of attention...So when I'm on stage I do like it, I do like it...the bottom line is that I get a kick out of performing

(Dave)

> ...it's almost you've got to do it rather than you enjoy it, it's the first thing with
> performing, this whole idea of performance...sort of got to do it...
> (Alex)

During a phase of performing only sporadically, Kate also portrayed performance as something necessary rather than something innately pleasurable:

> Do I really miss it that much? If I'm honest, no, I don't...it's not the be all and end all...and over the summer it...it didn't become, I wouldn't say it'd become a chore but it was, "Oh no I've got a gig..."

Despite the variable attitudes towards performance, there was a kind of 'performance ethic' at the heart of the acoustic scene; ultimately it was 'getting out there' and 'gigging' that gave one meaning as a serious musician. Anyone could perform, but in order to be recognised as a credible performer one had to 'gig'. Kate described how she had left a band that were far more ambitious in terms of recording than they were regarding performance and thus didn't do many gigs. She strongly suggested that to make music and not perform it publicly made the whole venture both inward looking and lacking in meaning:

> ...it was becoming a bit of a chore...they weren't a band that were into playing live.
> We did a lot of recording, and I...appreciate that experience...but it was a little bit
> sort of introspective, you know, Oh aren't we good and all that, and I wanted to get
> out there and gig and in the end, you know, I decided to call it a day and move
> on...And it was mainly...not playing live that was getting frustrating...cos I
> think...that's an important part of it. Otherwise, you're just doing it for...for yourself
> and for your own amusement...

Another local songwriter Craig, not currently performing expressed a sense of incompleteness without performance:

> ...That is definitely missing from my life having that immediate response from an
> audience at the moment ...Yeah I need that. I don't have that; other than just playing

124

these songs on a minidisk – just passing them round to my friends, but that's not the same as having that live experience when you do enter a collaboration with the audience...

Part of the rationale behind performing, for Ben, singer songwriter in an acoustic duo, was its unpredictable nature. This set it apart from other everyday experiences:

I guess if you did it six days a week, six months a year it probably wouldn't be particularly enjoyable but I think the nature of it is that every show's different isn't it. You come to every show thinking, I'm bored or I don't want to do this and then the audience might cheer you up or the audience'll be funny or the audience might not care; there are so many variables. It's not like a day in the office where you think, today's going to be the same as tomorrow, unless the phone rings or I get an email

Alex expressed an ambivalent attitude towards gigs that summed up the complex dilemmas involved in calculating the value of various kinds of performances:

...getting every gig under the sun might not be an optimal route...There's a lot of tensions...Do you take gigs for free because you enjoy them? Do you take miserable gigs for 50 quid, but I don't really need 50 quid to be honest cos I work full time, erm...but then again you think well, it's some kind of reward for what you do, cos if you're playing for free you think you're being a mug in a sense you know, what are you getting out of it, and there's all these questions, but if you're playing for free to an audience of ecstatic, hundred people who are ecstatic at what you're doing then I don't think I'd really care (laughter). But that doesn't usually happen!

Alex's statement reminds us that there was a principle at stake in so much as being paid meant more than simply economic gain but also recognition of a musician's status.

Participants' accounts presented the experience of performance as involving a mix of frustration, drudgery, pleasure, self-indulgence and selflessness. This was often dependent on the situation or mood of the musician at the time and usually dependent on the performance location and how much status or prestige was involved. I will elaborate on this point a little later. Ultimately though in terms of the social actions of

the musicians, regular performing in all kinds of places, and at all sorts of difficult times, continued, despite the variable attitudes of musicians towards it. For the vast majority of the twenty plus musicians I came across in my research there was certainly a nose-to-the-grindstone work ethic regarding performance.

5.2. Recording and performance

As both Cohen (1991:100) and Finnegan (1989:155) found, recording often presented an opportunity for an experience that was equally enjoyable to performing. Finnegan points out that, like stage performance, recording was set apart from the usual run of everyday music making (ibid.). For some acoustic musicians, performance in the recording studio was often more valued and enjoyed than the 'paying your dues' kind of gig, but, on the whole, it was not as valued as a solo gig at a recognised music venue for example.

Developments in recording technology have had an increasingly significant impact on music, particularly in recent years where it has become affordable and accessible enough to enable musicians of all standards to create recordings of professional sound quality. As far back as the late 1980s, Finnegan highlighted the emerging influence of accessible recording technologies:

> With the proliferation of small but well equipped local studios, not to speak of the ubiquitous access to cassette recorders, this had now become a possible medium for musical enactment for even the most local or unpretentious groups, and for a few bands seemed to be as important as 'live-bookings', with comparable overtones of musical enactment and self-realisation
> (Finnegan, 1989:155)

Inevitably the development of digital recording technologies in recent years has meant that higher quality recordings have now become widely possible. Time in the studio therefore has become even more important. There were already a small number of local acoustic musicians with basic home recording set ups, but during the course of my research the rapid birth and development of one particularly influential local musician's home recording studio meant that a new hub of activity emerged for the local acoustic musicians; both for socialising and recording. Importantly this meant

126

that musicians' peers were often there to provide musical input and critical feedback. As Finnegan found in her research, the 'critical exchanges', between musicians and also between musicians and recording experts, usually between takes, meant that, as with a live performance, there was still an audience of sorts present, thus there were strong parallels between recording and performing (Finnegan, 1989:155).

Despite the affordability and accessibility of numerous technical devices, recording nevertheless involved capturing a performance, and the acoustic musicians still strove for a level of performance authenticity in their recordings. For example, Alex recorded vocals and guitar simultaneously live on his first two CDs rather than the more regular practice of recording a guitar track and then overlaying a vocal take separately. The finger-picking style he used also meant that he felt it was easier to do all in one take. Alex's self-presentation as an 'acoustic roots' performer meant that he aimed for a level of 'authenticity' on his recordings to make them closer to the feel of a live performance. This kind of authentic performance was also an aim for Dave who wanted the recording to capture the fleeting moments of magic that couldn't be captured through a more calculated, multi-layering approach. Dave was committed to the use of real acoustic instruments on his most recent album and had enlisted string and woodwind players and a grand piano[13]. At the heart of his sound though was 'the groove' collectively made between himself, his bass guitarist and drummer, which for Dave, was all about the overall 'feeling' created in the performance

While there was a clear desire for authenticity in performance recordings, it was interesting to note the importance of polished sound production amongst the acoustic scene members. Unlike more traditional folk-oriented musicians, the contemporary acoustic musicians tended to want the best quality sound possible and, as with on-stage performance, musicians strove to use the best technical equipment to achieve this. There were some contradictions here though: For example, Neil, sound engineer and the owner of the recording studio, had a strong preference for the use of 'real'

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[13] Despite this quest for a more authentic sound, both Alex and Dave were still taking advantage of rapid developments in technology. Alex was a computer enthusiast and was interested in the use of effects, although only used them rarely. He actually produced his fourth CD at home using his computer. Dave's album, although featuring all real instruments, was still heavily produced and mastered utilising top quality microphones and up to the minute recording technology in Neil's studio.

instruments rather than synthesisers or effects boxes. On the other hand, however, he and his recording artists were more than happy to use technical tricks such as moving parts of a song, punching in, tweaking the timing or tuning of a vocal or guitar part etc. While some tried to stay committed to a level of performer authenticity, others were unapologetic regarding their utilisation of technology. For example, Ben, after telling me about the high frequency of technological 'fixes' in his acoustic duo's time at Neil's studio, argued that there was an inevitable distinction to be made between live performance and studio performance:

> I think the important thing is it doesn't sound like it is [heavily mixed or edited]...If you can play it live, you can play it live. It's like the difference between watching a movie and going to the theatre, everyone knows the two are different don't they? – A movie is shot out of sequence; you can remix it, they overdub new words, they slot in new scenes...and if you go to the theatre you know that you're watching something from start to finish and if they cock it up, you know you're going to watch them cock it up there and then in front of you.

The increasing popularity of the 'album launch' on the local scene was an example of the added credibility gained by recording one's material. However, ultimately, it was the live performance that sealed the high status for the musician. Almost all local music makers saw the completion of an album as not just a creative achievement in itself but a reason to hold a special performance event. During the course of my research, half of the participants had one or more album launches. They were usually a celebration with close friends and fellow performers who had contributed to the recording, but additionally they provided an opportunity for the musicians to present themselves as professional. On a more pragmatic level they provided an opportunity to sell CDs.

Some musicians occasionally contemplated the idea that studio output was of more value than live performances. Alex for example:

> ...I'm trying to think...maybe forgetting live a bit and just focusing on making good records, just recording...and also I think...if I could ever be semi-professional/professional probably making very good records sending them to

somebody that's interested is...probably more likely that something happens that way than playing the Leicester support scene...

Despite these occasional phases however, all the performers I came into contact with continued performing and looking for gigs. Recording was important and when in the process of recording a CD it may well for a time take precedence, but, on the whole, it was chasing live bookings of all varieties that remained the core activity of the majority of local musicians. While Finnegan makes the crucial point that any kind of musical enactment can constitute a performance (1989:154), and we have seen here that recording was certainly viewed as legitimate performance by the acoustic musicians, this usually culminated in the performance of the recorded music on-stage to an audience. Recording was not necessary to be recognised as a serious musician but performing on stage was. Acoustic musicians gained recognition as genuine performers usually through regular gigging rather than through recording.

5.3 Performance capital

We have already seen that performance was often utilitarian, and, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of cultural and social capital, I use the term 'performance capital' to describe the situation whereby performing enabled musicians to develop networks, secure more paid gigs in future and get one's name 'out there'. Equally importantly though, it gave an authenticity and status to the musician, both amongst their peers and to their audience. One example of this performance capital was the growing phenomenon of musicians' personal web pages. These were particularly common amongst singer-songwriters and, amongst the core of around twenty local acoustic scene members, there were at least a dozen local singer-songwriters who had sites of their own[14]. The sites would always list forthcoming gigs but often they also contained lists of gigs that the artist had played in the last few months or the last year. It would seem that displaying the range of places one had played already was as important as advertising new gigs; it was all part of elevating one's status as a 'regular performer'. Another way by which musicians indicated their status was by listing the key artists or groups they had supported[15]. If a musician had played at a festival, it

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[14] It is important to state however that many sites were left for months before any updates occurred. On one site for example, "Happy new year" was the greeting in October! It is also important to point out that many of the sites went off line for long periods or apparently folded.

[15] This was also done informally by the common practice of 'namedropping' in casual conversation.

was important to mention that they had played on one of the significant stages. On Dave's website for example, recent festival appearances at Leicester's Summer Sundae and Stamford's riverside festival note that these performances took place on 'the main stage'.

Sara Cohen found with the rock bands in her research that bands often valued a gig more as a promotional or publicity tool than as a means of generating income (Cohen, 1991:68). Performance capital was more important than financial capital. This was also the case on the acoustic scene. According to Ben, singer-songwriter in a local duo, performance fitted into one of three categories.

1) Money gigs: (e.g. played at a local pub to only six people but got £100 each for the night)
2) Prestige gigs: (Supporting nationally well known acoustic/folk artists; often this was unpaid)
3) 'Getting a booking gig' [We might call these means to an end gigs]: e.g. an open-mic night or free night with a view to getting a booking 6 months down the line'

Ben suggested that all three types were important but he demonstrated the element of calculation that went into judging the worth of a gig:

> It's not so much where we'll go as what we're going for. An open mic night in Milton Keynes can fuck right off; there's no way we're going anywhere near that.

Ben added that a combination of pleasure and utility could be a motivation if a gig was treated more lightly as a "shakedown": a chance to run through your set:

> It's good just to get out and play for two hours, have an audience who probably don't give a shit so you actually have to work for it... and you know it is good practice; it's good fun.

What Ben had termed 'prestige gigs' were deemed worthwhile as they were supporting a bigger act. This meant – not only a bigger audience – but also higher status. Some of the core participants had supported nationally famous name such as Vin Garbutt, Katherine Williams, Davey Arthur and Bob Geldof. In theory these

kinds of gigs would secure a bigger audience for them in future. However, there was no clear evidence that this really did make a huge amount of difference to the musicians' musical recognition or success. In notable cases however, the status of a performer could be increased considerably by performing such 'prestige gigs'. For example, Dave secured a nationwide tour with an internationally acclaimed acoustic performer. This was both financially rewarding and built up his profile as a serious performer as he played in large venues nationally to thousands of people. Dave demonstrated the incremental importance of such 'high profile' gigs, whether associated with a big name or a big venue:

> Once you've got one high profile gig...it's that knock on effect whereby when you speak to somebody, oh yeah I played main stage at...so you've instantly gone up in their mind without trying to sell yourself too much...the higher profile gig you get the easier it is to get another high profile gig.

Talking about his appearance on the main stage at the nationally recognised Summer Sundae festival in Leicester, he said:

> I thought to myself even if it's shit and nobody's there and it's raining and we play shit, we've got the status that we did...we were on the main stage and that's great.

Dave talked about the process of building up to higher status, greater prestige gigs:

> I'm now starting the next leg of the journey trying to build up with people that I respect and admire, whereas before it was like, I just need to gig...

On a more grass roots level, Andrew, demonstrated the utilitarian thinking behind certain gigs. Talking about playing a fairly low status gig in Hitchin, over an hour from Leicester, Andrew describes it as

> ...just an experience gig really. Going to have to do loads of those. Hardly any money for expenses, hardly anybody there, and no appreciation...just to meet people, cos once you've played with loads of other people at those kind of events then they can recommend you and you can start doing slots with people...

Overall then, it was not performance for its own sake that was valued, but rather specific kinds of performance within specific frameworks of meaning and certain kind of settings. The notion of performing as always involving some innate altruistic pleasure was challenged by the continual calculation of the usefulness of certain kinds of performance to the musicians' development or career. For example, there was a far less enthusiastic approach taken towards minor performances such as support slots or pub gigs where there was a chance of either a low turnout or a disinterested audience. These occasions were commonly described as an opportunity for a practice, so although still classed as a performance, they were framed differently from a solo gig at a recognised music venue for instance. It was clear then that performance only had an intrinsic value when it took a specific form. There was a certain performance ethic or principle of performance that pervaded the acoustic scene. However, there were markedly contrasting levels of value attached to various gigs. Listening audiences at prestigious venues were the main priority, closely followed by high status support slots. Acoustic musicians built up performance capital through such gigs. On the whole we can conclude that what performance meant to acoustic musicians was not so much the moment of the performance itself but rather the long-term building up of a reputation, a following and thus a musical career.

5.4 Presentation of the self in performance

Perhaps the most important aspect of popular acoustic singer-songwriters is that they are seen to possess an 'authenticity', a 'real' quality. This is conveyed largely through a perceived sincerity in their song writing that comes through the confessional character of the songs, but probably most importantly through a communicated authenticity in their performance (both recorded and live) which relates to the notion of rock authenticity as expressed by Dylan, Springsteen etc. David Gray and Damien Rice, two of the most successful and widely known contemporary mainstream acoustic artists today, are also renowned for conveying feeling and passion in their live performances. This is contrasted with the inauthentic character of much of the pop mainstream.

Closely linked to the interactions between audience and performer are the ways in which performers presented/projected themselves to their audience. The onstage conduct of most performers on the acoustic scene was markedly different to the

132

conduct of those in more commercialised genres such as rock/pop. Cohen found that musicians on the Liverpool rock scene, for example, often changed personality when performing, 'perhaps a response to the ordeal they were putting themselves through but also as a deliberate dramatic technique' (Cohen, 1991:82). On the acoustic scene this identity projection contained a core element of what we might call *oneselfness*. This would seem to be related historically to the unpretentious character of the folk performer and the 'authenticity' associated with the rock auteur tradition (see Shuker, 1994). Performers such as Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Simon and Garfunkel, and Richard Thompson were often cited as influences; all of whom were perceived as presenting their genuine self through performance. For this reason, the lack of self-conscious style and manner, the head bowed modestly, or as some musicians called it, 'the staring at the feet' approach, was usually the norm rather than the adoption any kind of affectation. However, as authors such as Frith (1996) have shown (particularly regarding Bruce Springsteen), even down-to-earth realness is, to an extent, a manufactured image that takes much identity work. Comparing my own observations of the normally unassuming, reserved acoustic/folk performer with the onstage antics of the bands in Cohen's research (1991:82 e.g. aggressive, exuberant and sometimes angry), there is a clear distinction between rock and pop's dramatic performance conventions and the *oneselfness* or *constructed unconstructedness* of the singer songwriter. However, this distinction was not always so clear cut, as was highlighted through Dave's interviews in which he expressed a sense of slight frustration that he felt restricted from having a certain image or being too comical on stage. In terms of a stage persona, Dave admitted that this was also constructed, especially in terms of his band, although often the level of intimacy between performer and audience would prevent the performer from stepping out of themselves too much:

> When the show gets up and running I want visual happenings...I want lights...beautiful lighting...a very visual show...I see a lot of people down at *The Musician*, great musicians...I'm not knocking anybody, you are who you are but...let's put on a bit of fucking icing on the cake...it's a show. I want to look and feel the part to what I'm playing, I want my hair right, I want to look good...it sells a show, it's the fickle time to which we live in...it's engaging, it's not shiny, it's not

cabaret it's like we are performers...We don't have to all be fat with long hair and beards!
(Dave).

The onstage antics of some of the front-men in Cohen's research could be argued to be more authentic in that the acoustic singer songwriter must always be restricting their behaviour. This is borne out through Dave's interviews in which he expresses a sense of slight frustration that he can't have a certain image or be too jokey on stage. On occasions when he has been, some audience members have commented on the incongruity of the jokey light-hearted Dave contrasted with the serious singer songwriter. This tension was also strongly in evidence in the case of Bryter Layter. It emerges from the perceived incongruity between the serious confessional performance style and the light hearted banter. These are often considered incompatible by audiences expecting a consistent sense of oneselfness. As we will see later the reception of this kind of inconsistency was largely dependent on the performance setting.

The archetypal image of the lone singer songwriter was deeply ingrained into the culture of acoustic music, so when a songwriter performed their material with a band, especially with drums, it was an issue of slight concern for some sections of the audience:

> ...I have people come up to me and say oh yeah great album...but I'd like to hear just you and your guitar; I want you to bare your soul, you don't need all that, you don't need it ...
> (Dave)

As Ben suggested somewhat wearily, however, 'Baring the soul becomes very contrived after a while'.

There appeared to be a perception amongst the local acoustic audience then that a stripped down realism was in some sense equivalent to authenticity. The more the performer was exposed and alone the more honest the performance would be. In some ways this related to the folk ethic of what we might call non-performing

performers i.e. the musician is on a level with their audience and therefore being themselves and not affecting any on-stage persona. As a participant in Mackinnon's research on the folk scene pointed out however:

> Regardless of what most folk singers say, that you 'just sing a song', you are performing. You are standing and you are isolated and everyone is looking at you. If you are not a performer there's no point in doing it. There is no point in just relating the song. You have to perform the song to get something out of it. You are performing whether you like it or not...And when you are performing...you need this certain space between you and the audience to assume that stage persona to perform...You are just one of them, but you also have to be something different before their very eyes...
> (from Mackinnon, 1993:75)

The 'baring the soul' idea relates not so much to folk however, but to the archetypal view of the rock performer (usually singer songwriters) that Street (1986) talks about, i.e. 'personal' and 'confessional''. This personalised type of performance is, however, in itself constructed publicly. It would seem that in terms of image, while audiences appreciated seeing the genuine person between songs, it was the confessional rock-oriented model that audiences often expected.

Overall then, although there was some resistance to the performance image of 'oneselfness', which was far more no-frills than the authentic rock performance image, the contemporary acoustic scene was pervaded by a convention of under-performing. Appearing with no airs and graces, and as one appeared in day-to-day life, was the predominant norm. There were nevertheless clear signs of a struggle between the presentation of self in between songs, i.e. the unpretentious down-to-earth realness, and the confessional Americanised rock leanings during song performances. One local songwriter, Steven, made an ironic statement about the habit of many singer-songwriters of adopting an American twang in their singing style in performance. He did this by feigning an American accent when talking to the audience in between songs. He claimed that this gave a consistency to his performance. The kind of inconsistency Steven was mocking was picked up on by Dave's audience who commented on the difference in his demeanour whilst singing:

very much in the Americanised rock mould; and in between songs: where he was comical, jovial and noticeably 'Leicester' in his dialect. He told me that various audience members had commented on this:

> A couple of people have ...said... ...how he is between songs is like a completely different person to what he's actually singing about.

Performance talk

Communicating with the audience in between songs was in some ways as important as the projection of self during the musical performance. Performance talk reflected the folk-related performance ethic in the acoustic scene in that it indicated a mutual respect and breaking down of barriers between performer and audience. Somewhat paradoxically, it was also a way in which the performer gave themselves an air of authority as well as professional status. Alex and Andrew both highlighted the importance of talking in between songs:

> ...sometimes I just don't say anything I just go on to the next song and I know that's painful, people just tell me, you'll be fine just relax and explain a bit about the songs and...it's something to work on... ...One thing that stopped me was Oh well I'm going to take me a minute to tune, and then everyone's talking you know...just get on with the bloody music. It shouldn't be underestimated how important it is to get the audience relaxed, talk about the songs, they get into the songs; they get into what you're doing more.
> (Alex)

> ...you've got to guide an audience...you've got to tell them when you're coming to the last song...or that you're coming to a bit that's important to you because of this... ...part of my job is to sort of guide that into the next song...to build the audience's expectations of what's going to come next, that's what talking in between songs is all about...
> (Andrew)

Cohen points to 'the spontaneous, unpredictable and thus thrilling' nature of performance where there is always 'the possibility of the unexpected' (Cohen, 1991:95). She draws on John Blacking's argument that 'two performances of the

same song can be entirely different in expressive power and in form' (Blacking in Cohen, ibid). This argument is of course valid. However, there is a danger of being overly romantic about performance here. The reality on the acoustic scene was that performances were often largely prescribed and repetitive and subject to very similar responses each time from the audience. One could usually have a reasonable idea of what to expect if one was familiar with the performers or bands involved. Examining performance talk was a good indicator of this prescribed nature of performance. From nationally well known raconteurs on the folk and acoustic scene such as Rory McCleod to the local performers on the acoustic scene, watching more than one performance provided clear evidence that stories and anecdotes that might appear to be off the cuff or spontaneous usually had a scripted routine. The way that seemingly off the cuff remarks were often repeated at each performance almost word for word each time was evidence of this. Though present in stories and anecdotes this was particularly noticeable in introductions to songs, which for experienced performers were often exactly the same at each performance. In *Bryter Layter's* performances, for example, when Simon, a songwriter in his own right, introduced his own songs, one always began with the comment that this was about 'My inability to ask the girl of my dreams out'. Another was always preceded by Simon's idea that 'we should all hibernate in the winter', and the Nick Drake song *Northern Sky* was always introduced by Andrew as 'One of the greatest love songs ever written'.

The importance of talk, whether prescribed or spontaneous, was demonstrated by the sheer amount of time it occupied during a performance. In one *Bryter Layter* gig at an arts centre in Leicester, breaks for talking in between songs added up to twenty minutes of the total performance time: an hour and a half set. Below are some excerpts of the kind of spontaneous talk that took place between songs:

Neil: Yeah can percussion have more bass and guitar on both channels and can I have some percussion

Simon: And a side order of garlic fries if you would please [laughter from other band members]

Neil: Yeah cos dinner was a bit light weren't it. We all said 'we're not going to get pissed and we're not going to really have a nice big nosh up before we came out. I can see what's going on apart from all the...haze, I've not had a drink or a...or anything else, a smoke

Simon: [introducing Nick Drake song 'Thoughts of Mary Jane'] Last time we did this gig at the White House I introduced this one and I think he's writing about, well I can only surmise he's writing about Mary Jane and its various forms of the pernicious weed and...therefore after that got the song wrong cos I couldn't remember the words. There's a lesson to be learned there isn't there...

...

Simon: Right I'm going then, quick er cigarette

Andrew: Introduces Kate (to a small round of applause and cheers)

[Starts and stops for another 16 seconds to tell audience that they can pick up their free CD]

...

Neil: Yeah thanks to Dominic the guy that runs this place, he's a top bloke.

Simon: Thank Dominic for the smoke as well.

Andrew: This is possibly the greatest love song ever written.

Neil: What key's it in?!

Andrew: I haven't got a clue mate. It's in some fancy tuning Nick Drake came up with...

...

[Coming towards the end of the gig]
Andrew: thank you very much, goodnight.

[Big cheering and applause and shouts for 'more' from the audience.]

Andrew: thank you you're so lovely.

Simon: How long do we stay back stage I wonder, bloody hell!
[Gently mocking the encore convention]

Despite the element of pre-scripted anecdotes then, there was also spontaneous performance talk present. *Bryter Layter* certainly conveyed a sense of unpretentious oneselfness. Andrew argued that this was a natural way of interacting that he believed should not be changed:

> I like the way that *Bryter Layter* actually interact on stage. When you start ordering it
> in a band ...that's when it doesn't work...because we just talk when we're on stage
> and we show our personalities and...by being us and not actually...presenting a
> show, but I know that that is how the show works with BL so...I prefer not to
> interfere with that...We're used to interacting with each other and it comes across as
> a very warm...you feel like you're part of it...As long as there's not too much of that,
> and you know too many in-jokes and things like that, cos there is a danger of that,
> especially with us being a group of friends.

Stagecraft

According to Leicester musicians I came into contact with from other genres such as reggae and soul, 'putting on a show' was a big part of the performance event. For acoustic musicians, however, this was something rarely discussed as performance was all about being oneself and conveying honesty and genuineness. Nevertheless, acoustic musicians still had to develop certain performance skills and stagecraft in order to interact satisfactorily with their audiences. Alex highlighted the important difference between being a musician and being a performer. He said that he used his attendance at the acoustic club over a period of years to perfect the skill of performing:

> I quite fancied myself as a musician, and that gave me a very rude awakening to the
> real world of what it takes...cos being a really good bedroom musician is another

139

thing, but there's all the performing side of things that I'd completely neglected and... over about two or three years, I'd gained all my confidence really from there.

Dave talked about his realisation of how far he'd progressed in his music career when he went to a local open-mic night in the town in which he'd grown up:

> You don't see how far you've come on that journey and then when you go back...to the grass roots level, you think, actually, I can now see... last night was an eye opener, just the way that you sing into a mic that you now just take for granted you know you're close up to the mic, you project yourself to the back of the room, you're not looking down and you're making eye contact with the people...stagecraft...I am confident and I am absolutely in control...even little things like talking into a microphone...

The self-image here then was definitely that of a professional. Dave saw himself as having moved away from and, in a sense, outgrown the 'grass roots' level and stagecraft and performance skills were clearly a large part of what he saw that set him apart from more amateur performers. Dave's account below demonstrates the psychological performance skills learned through years of performing to turn a potentially negative gig around:

> Some gigs, you know when you start that it's just going to...it's going to happen, and then there are other times like Saturday for instance where it was a struggle because N's bass didn't come on...trouble with the sound, then my guitar didn't come on, and then you've got...we started 'distorted facts'...halfway through it and then the PA went off...and then you've got to try and get back into it and people started chatting and started drifting away and...but within that gig there were moments whereby I thought I've got hold this together...I've got to bring them back in, and part of me just wanted to stick my middle finger up and walk off and go this is a load of bollocks and the other part just wanted to dig in and say I'm going to get it back, I'm going to pull it back...

Andrew, who, unlike the majority of local acoustic musicians, had training in performing arts, also demonstrates the professional skill of stage set up and positioning. Running the acoustic club meant that these skills were vital. He

explained how he positioned the mics so that everything was clear on the television monitor near the bar in the musician:

> I'm always the one ...who's setting the chairs out and setting the microphone stands out, getting it all in the right order so that it looks good out from the front and... ...I make sure that the microphone stands are in such a place where...where the...the, where the TV camera that's looking at it, so that people can see the acts who are sitting at or standing at either both of those mikes; seems logical to me cos if you can't see the singer then...people who are in the back bit of the room who can't see aren't going to be able to see the things on the stage at the monitor.

Andrew also demonstrated when performing a covers set, the learned skill of gauging an audience's wants and building up a set to please them:

> I played one or two just to see what the spirit of the night was ...I played a Bowie song, and there was a few people singing along to that so I then said "Oh we've got some Bowie fans in tonight" and a few more people went 'Yeah!' so I did two more Bowie songs and by the time of that I'd got them...and I slipped in a few of my songs every now then, which they gradually more and more appreciated as I did other songs by other people cos they recognised different styles and different influences in what I did...

Dealing with difficult audience members was another important skill that demonstrated professionalism. Andrew talks about how he dealt with a slightly aggressive but friendly doorman who persistently tried to grab the microphone from him:

> At some point...I turned around into the microphone and did some expressive stuff so that I was completely blocking off with my guitar, my arms and my head so he couldn't get the mic stand and I even told him off at one point...not any more stop it!.

Summary

Something that is missing from many accounts of performance is the unique position of *the performer*. To the extent that sociologists have a duty to be consciously Beckerian, the role and perspective of the performer themselves are too often neglected. To counter this neglect I have here looked at the identity of being a

performer through individual articulations of performance. This is part of my continuous movement between the self and the social, foregrounding the sociological with the primary accounts of the musicians themselves. By way of a close examination of both the social and the individualistic rationales of performers: performance authenticity, performance capital and self-presentation in performance, I hope to have succeeded in tying up performance with self-identity and captured the crucial process of the relationship between performer and performance.

Within studies of music scenes, there are many ethnographic accounts of *performance* involving the overall event and the collective work that goes into it. The next chapter will deal in more detail with these sociological aspects.

CHAPTER 6: PERFORMANCE EVENTS: CONVENTIONS AND CONTINGENCIES

Introduction

This chapter uses case studies and ongoing ethnographic observation to explore the extent to which performance 'conventions' both unite and divide. Here I undertake a critical examination of Howard Becker's concept of art worlds in relation to acoustic performance conventions, introducing Bourdieu's concept of cultural fields as a critique of unproblematic consensual approaches to performance. The second part of this chapter returns to the overarching theme of struggle by focusing on the day-to-day experiences of performance; examining the mundane realities that performance often entails in the context of the escapism and euphoria it promises. This takes us back to our overarching theme of the relationship between music and everyday life.

6.1 Performance, audience and conventions

> Someone must respond to the work once it is done, have an emotional or intellectual reaction to it "see something in it", appreciate it. The old conundrum – if a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, did it make a sound? – can be solved here by simple definition: we are interested in the event which consists of a work being made and appreciated: for that to happen, the activity of response and appreciation must occur (Becker, 1982:4)

> ...Performances must... be approached in context, with attention to the actual social conventions sustaining them and not to the musical 'text' alone...There has to be some audience wider than the performers themselves'.
> (Finnegan, 1989:143).

In the first of the above passages Howard Becker highlights the integral part that the audience plays in performance. In the second passage Finnegan follows Becker's approach and highlights his point that art making always occurs within a framework of specific conventions, i.e. a set of broadly agreed upon rules and practices within a

given art world. However, the extent to which such conventions are firstly rigid or malleable, and secondly, consensual or contentious, is debatable.

Ruth Finnegan (1989) in her account of musicians in Milton Keynes notes that different genres of music tend to possess specific sets of generic conventions. As contemporary acoustic music was a loosely defined meta-genre, there was a fragility, fluidity and contested character to these conventions, which was at the heart of the performer-audience relationship. I found that on the acoustic scene, especially with its ambiguous generic status (with origins in both folk and rock/pop), conventions often represented sites of struggle between individuals or small groups rather than unproblematic worlds of co-operation.

Cohen drew on Becker's arguments and applied them to performer-audience relationships:

> Other social events and contexts such as discotheques and pubs also involve a sense
> of occasion and expectancy but live performance differs in that it involves the
> simultaneous process of production and consumption...The different forms of aural,
> oral, and visual communication at a gig are related to the complex interrelationship
> between audience and performers. The audience responds to the performance and
> performers respond, in turn, to the audience and judge the effectiveness of their
> performance from its behaviour...
> (Cohen,1991:94)

Cohen celebrates the dynamic relationship between performer and audience. Mackinnon too describes the performance event on the folk scene as a 'celebration of conviviality' (Mackinnon, 1993: 130). We must be cautious not to over-inflate the role of audiences however. We can acknowledge the crucial point that an audience is a usual requirement for a performance. It must be pointed out though that occasionally, the acoustic performer was performing to as little as two or three people. While the audience's role on the acoustic scene was occasionally significant, it often appeared to be passive and not crucial to performance. Becker's sociological reading of art worlds importantly moves us away from the romanticised idea of art that pervades the majority of music biographies and documentaries. These forms focus on

the individual artist, often overlooking the collective effort that makes musical performance possible. Becker's perspective is crucial to an adequate sociological understanding of performance. We must be aware though that an uncritical interpretation of this approach moves us towards the idea of audiences being what Fiske has referred to as 'producerly consumers' (Fiske, 1989:103-106) whereby the audience are deemed to be as active in the performance process as the performers themselves. Although the broadness and ambiguity of contemporary acoustic music meant that audiences were occasionally similarly pro-active to the rock audiences found in Cohen's research, the acoustic audience was usually a hushed and respectful audience; the kind one might find in classical performance settings or the 'vigilant listener/receivership' Michael Brocken found amongst British folk audiences (Brocken, 2005: 116-117).

In Ruth Finnegan's research much attention was given to the performance conventions within particular musical genres. However, by only giving examples of one performance in each genre, Finnegan overlooked the crucial variable of 'performance setting' i.e. the way that conventions within the same genre can vary depending on the particular venue in which the performance takes place. The acoustic musician, caught between mainstream rock and folk audiences, had to adjust to and contend with a greater variety of audiences than musicians in other musical genres. I will present here the three general types of performance setting I found on the acoustic scene. All are based on an agreed set of conventions but the degree to which they are enforced or unspoken varies considerably between the three.

Performance Setting	Examples of Venues	Audience make-up	Conventions
Uncontested Formal	Arts Centres, Theatres, Folk Clubs	Age range: 30-60 aficionados and regular concertgoers.	Prescribed, taken for granted and largely consensual.
Contested Formal (sites of struggle)	City acoustic club	Age range: 18-55 largely performers	Aspired to by important individuals. Contested and transgressed by some audience members/performers.
Informal	Pubs, bars and local acoustic nights	Age range: 18-45 Ranges from young bar-goers to older pub regulars and fellow performers.	Still present but loosened and low expectations of consensus.

Uncontested formal settings

Acoustic acts were often booked at prestigious or 'serious' music venues such as arts centres where classical and folk were the most common genres of music performed. These settings were most common for the higher status musicians. In the example I draw on here: an arts centre, the physical setting with rows of seats was theatre-like or in some cases even church-like[16]. There was often a hushed politeness and somewhat regimented audience conduct within this kind of setting. In such settings the conventions of silence and stillness were to do with the reputation and even the physical character of the place. There was a silent consensus in terms of audience conduct. However, performers would occasionally subvert this kind of setting. The stage was a much freer space than the neat rows of seats in the auditorium. It was easier for the performers to forget the kind of setting they were in and often with the pre-scripted nature of onstage talk they would fall into habitual patterns of on-stage behaviour that would, if the performance involved more than one performer, often evolve into on-stage banter. However, the conventions were often re-affirmed by the audience in these formal settings. The stage-conduct was in a sense checked by their lack of engagement: the audience's hushed character reminded the performers that this was a formal setting. The band Bryter Layter played an arts centre outside of the local area. There was a predominantly middle-aged, middle-class audience. The conduct of the band was chatty and the kind of in-jokes that worked in front of a local audience were rife. As Kate pointed out, however, it is a fine line performers tread in a place where they are not known to their audience:

> Yeah...They don't know us and, you know, we can all sort of be like smiling at each other on stage and looking like we're enjoying ourselves, which is great, people like to see that. I like to see that when I'm watching a band. But you also want to feel a part of it in the audience as well, and not that you should feel privileged to be there...or you're sitting in on a rehearsal or something (slight laughter)...

On this occasion the audience laughed tentatively at the band anecdotes, in-jokes and long-winded introductions, which were interspersed between serious explanations of

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[16] Huntington Hall in Worcester actually had pews rather than seats and Leicester Cathedral was an increasingly popular music venue for singer-songwriter concerts.

146

Nick Drake songs. The spatial and emotional distance between performer and audience, however, meant that this was a totally different scenario than that to be found at local nights in familiar intimate settings where there was a higher volume of banter between audience and performer. This is an example of the way that formal conventions were always present without being spoken. The audience in this case, by not engaging with or responding to the banter, subtly reminded the performers of the conventions of formality in this kind of setting.

Festivals and charity events might be thought of as the epitome of the informal performance. However, this was not always the case. One folk festival, despite taking place in the summer, featured its main acts inside a hall (albeit with its side doors open so that some people could look in from the outside) and ran throughout the afternoon. Again the setting contained rows of seats and an orderly hushed audience. Any chatting amongst the audience was not tolerated. Another local charity event that took place in a folk club was similar with an indoor venue in the back room of a pub on a sunny day. The event went on from 2.30 to 6.30. The usual rows of seats lay out made it more like a folk club night than a festival atmosphere. One musician told me of his urge to transform these quite repressed performance situations, but said that it was almost impossible to do so.

Local acoustic nights varied in their levels of formality. The Farside was an acoustic 'open-mic' night which also featured a particular local performer each week. It took place every Sunday evening in a theatre setting. Although it promoted itself in an informal manner as an open mic session that welcomed performers from all genres, it was in many ways a very formal atmosphere. Tables and chairs as were carefully placed around the floor of the theatre and occupied by a very polite and quiet audience (about 25-30 people in total on this night). The performers were very much under the microscope as they plugged in, tuned up, changed capo position or changed tuning. The performers were seated on an uncomfortable looking wooden chair, the lights dimmed and the spotlight focused on them. The performers were not on a stage but there were elements of theatre, which would not be present in an ordinary folk club. During a performance, one performer asked specifically for the lights to be dimmed for one of their songs, declaring, "it's a sad song".

The standard varied from those playing guitar and singing in their spare time to those on the borders of professional status. The audience would sit and clap politely to all of it, although more people tended to leave and go to the bar during an act of a lower standard, which was totally separate from the performance venue. If they did leave during a performance the audience had to be careful not to slam the door behind them as it would interrupt the hushed atmosphere. The dominant performance convention here was that performances were totally acoustic with just a vocal microphone. Unlike the city acoustic club the plugging in of instruments was not permitted. One performer sang with a well-known local drummer who tapped the back of his guitar rather than play percussion. This was an example of the way conventions were abided by.

Chloe below describes the experience of playing this venue for the first time:

> basically a spotlight on me, no amplification whatsoever...and it was a pretty packed house as well and I got warm applause...I mean it's pretty difficult to work out whether people are being polite, cos it's a very polite crowd if you know what I mean...

The strict convention of acoustic purity at the Farside presented major technical problems for some. Ben, singer songwriter with a local duo said:

> We can't do that. We almost refused to do that...I don't like it...It's hard to do cos Steve plays lead on the acoustic so it means whatever happens he's going to need an amp and he doesn't sing very loudly either...

Despite the occasionally repressive nature of these theatre and arts centre settings, most performers saw performing at these kinds of venues as their main aim. This seemed to be in some cases due to their high prestige value but in most cases was due to the fact that their songs would actually be listened to properly:

> I prefer the arts centre type. I think that's more...us. I think we need to be, I don't think we're a noisy pub type band cos there's a lot of subtleties in the music and...it's

148

easier to sort of get a relationship with the audience...I want people to listen, get
wrapped up in it...
(Kate)

...When I do my music, I want to play the Guildhall and the Richard Attenborough
centre and the Musician when hopefully people are going to want to listen, be aware
that that's what they're there to do...
(Dave)

Dave talked about a venue in Coventry which he believed had 'the ideal audience'.
He had described it as having just the right kind of atmosphere as they had established
a series of very good performers and charged £3 at the door to prevent people just
dropping in. This meant that there was a listening audience – the audience had to sit
and listen during the performance and people only went to the bar to get a drink in the
interval. It would seem that the formal setting, where performance conventions were
consensual and largely uncontested, suited acoustic performers best. However, these
settings were much more difficult to transgress.

Relatively informal settings
The relatively informal settings were the venues such as pubs in which there were
minimal conventions but where the audience were often inattentive and talkative.
This was very different to the kind of audience present at folk clubs, which often took
place in an upstairs room of a pub away from the loudness of the bar and played only
to its listening audience. Performers in this kind of setting were often largely ignored
and, without a stage, were elevated in neither a literal nor metaphorical sense. Alex
described his lack of expectations from one such gig, which determined how he
conducted himself. This contrasted with the conduct of fellow performer Chloe who
threatened to sit on audience members' laps if they didn't start listening:

I knew it was going...to be hard work and...I just got my head down and did
it...Chloe had certainly more sort of professional pride and sort of refused to do that
and...started making her presence felt by being quite confrontational with the
audience...My view is we were supplied almost as background music, nobody had
paid to get in...

This fact that people had not paid to get in was important to Alex in this case. Alex said that if people had paid then they would have had a right to complain on behalf of other, attentive members of the audience spoil it for them by being noisy. As it was with free entry, neither performer nor audience members had legitimate grounds for remonstration.

Lack of attentiveness from the audience was also sometimes the case in venues that one might expect to be a little more formal. For example, at the 'café folk' slot, which took place in a sedate cafe setting in the upstairs room of an arts centre; during one particular well-respected veteran of the local acoustic scene's performance, a high proportion of the audience were attentive but some read newspapers, others ate their lunch and talked, and one person seated at a table very near the front was talking on a mobile phone during the performance. While this audience, averaging in age between 45 and 65, could not be described as rowdy, this was certainly nowhere near the listening audience usually found at arts centres. Long introductions to songs and subtleties in the lyrics or phrasing were somewhat lost amongst the clanking of trays, cutlery and coffee cups.

Dave, however, suggested that these kinds of informal settings provided a challenge to the performer to try and grab the attention of the audience:

> I know a lot of musicians who say, Oh well I wouldn't play there because they all talk…but there can be also great moments where you can expect them to talk and all of a sudden everybody's quiet and you've grabbed an audience…you didn't think you were going to grab…

Playing at an informal setting also had an impact on the kind of material the performers included in their set. Andy talks about the difficulty of deciding whether to play a particular song of his, which he felt had to be followed closely, at a particular venue, as it was a Saturday afternoon pub crowd rather than a listening audience:

I ummed and ahhed. I actually put in the set...and although I was told by several people afterwards that it was really, really good the feeling on stage was kind of – it's just getting lost.

Other performance situations were informal for different reasons. The acoustic collective evening took place once a month at *The Musician*. This was a night set up by Andrew who also ran the city acoustic club and was meant to promote and celebrate Leicester's pool of acoustic talent. The acoustic collective hadn't really grown in the way that had been first laid out by Andrew but it did nevertheless represent a group of local singer songwriters. It was therefore, a familiar and even familial atmosphere. One particular night was fairly typical: there were three main acts: two established male performers plus a young female performer whose name had become better known in recent months. There was a familiar make up to the audience. It was made up largely of equally established performers and their acquaintances (usually performers too). Consequently there was a lot of banter between performers and audience members as is shown below.

After playing a song from the Appalachian mountains, Roger, a well respected acoustic/folk performer, introduced his next song:

Roger: 'This song is also from the Appalachian mountains',

Neil: 'The same mountain?'

The next performer Joel was having difficulty tuning the guitar.

Neil: 'You'd have thought working in a music shop they'd have given you a decent guitar'.

Joel: I can't afford one

Neil: 'Re-mortgage your house like everyone else!' [More than one local performer had done this and then spent thousands on a guitar]

Joel 'I haven't got a house to re-mortgage'.

151

Other audience member: 'It's only 15 quid for a decent pair of strings, you don't need a mortgage for that!'.

This interaction was followed by Joel's mobile phone ringing twice during his performance. The first time this happened he told the audience that he had been sent a photograph of his girlfriend whilst drunk which he then declared he wouldn't show to the audience. The second time his phone rang an audience member shouted, "You're popular tonight". It also rang on his last song and he ignored it. The fact that no effort was made to switch the phone off while performing shows the extent to which the evening had a relatively loose set of rules. This atmosphere was a world apart from that found in the formal setting such as the arts centre. However, there was still an intimacy present in the close relationship between audience and performer, and once the performer began to play seriously the audience mirrored the serious mood and listened intently.

Dave was one of the audience members on this particular night and was not performing. During the final performance, Dave's mobile went off very loudly. The audience were immediately forgiving of this faux pas. Dave left announcing "I know I'm a c***", which was met with good-natured laughter. Although this was very different to a folk audience as regards serious listenership, one could argue that the folk principle was present in that the audience were on an equal level with the performer. However, there is a crucial point here that demonstrates the importance of hierarchy and status: this kind of conduct was only generally tolerated from the established names and faces in the audiences who were themselves high status performers. Performers like Dave had sufficient familiarity with the audience to be forgiven for bending performance conventions, and as his quote below shows, they were given many more allowances than others:

> ...I played down at *The Musician* the other week and it was dreadful but I had a laugh...I got half way through the first few chords and stopped and said to everybody "this is absolute bollocks, what the hell am I doing up here?" and Simon just shouts from the back "I thought you were a professional" and people laughed...

The acoustic collective night, then, was a clear example of the relaxing of conventions due to the close-knit nature of the acoustic scene. However, even the most seemingly informal settings were still only relatively informal and had certain rules and conventions. The impromptu 'play' or jam, which usually took place at musicians' houses, demonstrates this. Parties, informal get-togethers, or periods before or after a recording session would often be the setting for this kind of performance. Unlike other musical genres where jamming and improvisation were the norm (e.g. blues or jazz), for acoustic musicians the impromptu performance involved a more formal turn-taking pattern: e.g. usually one person playing a song whilst everyone else listened. Even if the initial moment was spontaneous and the venue as informal as someone's kitchen or living room, it frequently evolved into a situation entailing a metaphorical stage and a hushed attentive audience almost as if the performance were taking place in an arts centre. These situations were to an extent planned or prescribed on the performers' part. They usually involved a clear hierarchy whereby those with more musical status tended to play for a lot longer than those lower down the musical scale. For example, at many parties held by local musicians, non-musicians or non-performers would often take a passive spectator role while the status of the veteran performers as stars of the show was reaffirmed. This was the case at three separate birthday parties I attended in which the musician celebrating their birthday spent most of the night performing to a seated audience. So whilst an optimistic outsider might perceive these situations as reflecting a folk culture in which music was part and parcel of a social world, it was apparent that this was often a one way process and something largely participated in by a select few who, while not on a stage were nevertheless raised to a higher level than their passive audience.

Brocken's analysis of the British folk scene is relevant here. He talks about a 'structured informality' present in what might be perceived as 'informal' occasions such as the 'session' or 'jam', which were actually often based on a clear hierarchy and social ordering:

> The construction of informality can work as a liberating force in a session, but only as long as you play. Paradoxically, listeners are often overlooked and feel rather isolated as the musicians rather self-indulgently 'get off' on

each other's [and their own] playing

(Brocken, 2003)

Reiterating the point, one local singer (whose status was relatively low) talked about numerous informal occasions she had attended such as parties in which hierarchies were merely reinforced, and non-performers or, as in this case, lesser-known performers were overlooked. She argued that this was against the spirit of music as inclusive and welcoming, rather than a competitive, exclusive thing. The perception from the participating musicians and better-known performers however was often seemingly oblivious to these divisions and was rather of a harmonious, collective and democratic situation. Kate demonstrated the intrinsic value of these occasions to the core musicians however as she recounts an evening spent with other core members of the acoustic scene.

That particular night sort of sticks in my mind because it was, I know we were all probably in various states but it was really good because we were singing songs. We were doing Nick Drake stuff...and it was the old harmony farm[17] thing going on you know and it was...it was really good and it was one of those times where you wish you'd have been able to sort of capture it, record it or whatever...

Contested formal settings: sites of struggle

We have seen that formal settings, then, demonstrated elements of consensus, and, to some extent, informal settings often highlighted the sense of a close-knit acoustic music community. These models reiterate Becker's concept of art worlds as based on co-operation, which is cemented by certain conventions. However, as I argued earlier, an oversimplified reading of Becker risks understating the power struggles and conflicts within art worlds. The rules and conventions of the weekly City Acoustic Club were relatively relaxed in some ways when compared to acoustic nights more closely linked to the folk world. However, there were distinct characteristics of a folk club in the aspirations of those running it, i.e. egalitarianism, fairness, participation and mutual respect. Brocken has pointed out that the traditional folk club image of 'spontaneous performance' is frequently thinned down by an 'army' of aural

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[17] 'Harmony farm' was the label that one musician had devised for the group of three or four friends and local musicians who had one day spontaneously got involved in performing a variety of harmonies on a fellow performer's album.

legislators (Brocken, 2003). This clearly applied to the City Acoustic Club. The acoustic night, which was intended to give budding new songwriters the chance to play their material was organised by Andrew. There was a clear aural legislation here. He insisted that the audience, largely made up of fellow musicians, were fully attentive to the performers, and hence remained quiet throughout:

> The strong feeling I have is that people should listen to each other...and learn from each other. This is why the thing that annoys me at the acoustic club is when people don't listen. And that gets to me...I say the same thing every week which is, the whole idea of us being here, and there's only one rule, and that is that you listen when people are on stage, and I do tell people off in the strongest possible terms when they...go beyond that....And the scene needs people to do that and to stand up for that kind of support.

Andrew would regularly enforce this rule by literally approaching people with a loud "sssshhh" if they were talking during a performance. This expectation for the audience to listen expressed by Andrew was somewhat contentious with various audience members and musicians. One fairly regular audience member at *The Musician* told me that it should in fact be up to the performer to win the audience over, and that in a pub environment people should not be forced to listen to music if they don't want to. Other audience members and musicians expressed disapproval for this convention too. One musician, a less frequent attendee, who appeared generally hostile to the culture of the acoustic club, described the rule as "bullshit". He told me about another open-mic night at a bigger venue in the city, which was a lot less reverent toward the performers. Apparently some performers from the acoustic club had played there and been heckled, which he and others had found quite amusing as he saw it as exposing the weak performers, something that didn't happen with the level playing field approach of the acoustic club. Andrew's view of this comparison was that it proved the acoustic club was a co-operative and friendly place. An Italian musician who was connected to the acoustic scene strongly disagreed with the 'convention' of the audience keeping quiet during performances at the acoustic club, believing that it was up to the performer to win over the audience. She described this as a typical case of English 'politeness' which resulted in a false reverence towards the performers.

However, there was support for the 'hush convention' from most local musicians. Dave, now an established performer argued:

> I think it's a good thing because there are a lot of people there that have never played before...and they haven't built up the necessary resistance to understand how an audience works so it's respect... ...to somebody that has never performed live and they're nervous as hell and they're standing behind that mic, it's a good confidence thing because if they haven't been told to shut the fuck up then people might be talking all over them and then they would go home and think oh god they're all talking and maybe I'm not very good where they could be absolute genius...

It was clear that while the acoustic music scene contained a great deal of respect for its performers, this in part also added to its exclusivity. There was often not a great tolerance of those spectators who might be unfamiliar with the strictness of the conventions. It was not uncommon for people to be scalded or told rather undiplomatically to be quiet by Andrew. In fact Andrew himself recounted one specific occasion where someone was being so disrespectful of the rule and talking all the way through the night that he actually told them to "shut the fuck up" on the mic, and then followed this up by approaching the person and telling him that he'd be thrown out if he carried on. On this occasion the person in question left a few minutes later. This normally provoked a humorous response. However, it did occasionally alienate audience members; sometimes regulars. We can draw parallels here with Brocken's study of folk club performance where transgressions of listening conventions were similarly punished. One individual in Brocken's study describes a situation in a folk club where Ralph McTell was performing:

> McTell came on...He was great, but I'd had a lot to drink by this time and needed the loo. I had to get up in the middle of a song and everybody just stared at me. I had to go but I was regarded as a social leper. It was one of the worst nights of my life. Even Ralph picked me out and stared at me. I was responsible for a litany of social deviation!
> (in Brocken, 2003)

In Mackinnon's study of the folk scene we find similar instances. Referring to a friend who had taken umbrage at being told 'sshhh' in a folk club, Mackinnon explains:

The folk club appeared very relaxed, with ready movement to the bar, people
heckling, joining in the singing and even some quiet murmuring between
songs. To him this was evidence of a quite different musical occasion, a pub.
gig where the music is in the background, to be listened to if one felt like it
(Mackinnon, 1993:78)

Finnegan's account of the folk club is also instructive here:

Local floor singers were often part of the evening and this meant a high level of
participation from those attending. 'The general atmosphere was relaxed, with people
sitting around tables drinking as they listened or joined in the songs, but there were
elements of formality too. Starting and finishing times were fairly strictly kept to,
there were accepted conventions about introducing and applauding performers, and
the organisers tried to stop too much moving around during the performance of a
song – in contrast to some other musical performances in pubs.
(Finnegan, 1989:59)

Mackinnon describes the folk scene as presenting 'a series of contradictions with
regard to the way it presents its musical performances'. Again we come back here to
the understanding of conventions:

Quite often people at folk clubs do set up conversations during the evening but these
are normally people who are not familiar with the ways of behaving in a folk
scene…Calls of 'sshhh' are fairly common at folk club events and perhaps
surprisingly, they often cause quite a lot of ire in those to whom they are directed
(Mackinnon, 1993: 78)

Just as in the case of the folk scene then, the presence of dissent in the acoustic club
demonstrated that, while based on strong elements of co-operation and consensus, it
was also a site of struggle between audience, performers and organisers. There was a
specific code of conduct operating at the acoustic club, but the conventions of the
acoustic night were not a set of principles that everyone agreed upon, but rather, a rule
that was actively and directly imposed by the particular individual who ran the night,
and was agreed upon by certain other influential individuals. This code of course has
historical origins in the generic conventions of folk music and does not merely stem
from one individual's idea of how things should be run. However, it does highlight
the ambiguity over the perceived differences between folk club conventions and

157

acoustic club conventions. The fact that acoustic music had an audience, which was a mix of more traditional 'folkies' and more mainstream acoustic fans, added to the confusion. This also demonstrates the fact that, while there may have been a recognised set of conventions operating, it was specific individuals who held more power than others in a particular field of relations that ultimately had the last say on how those conventions should be respected and sometimes even enforced! This relates to what French sociologist Bourdieu called 'legitimation struggles' summed up by Negus and Pickering here:

> Legitimation struggles are continually occurring in various artistic and cultural fields and, as people are positioned differently according to their ability to influence the outcome of these aesthetic disputes, for Bourdieu they are ultimately power struggles, with dominant interests seeking to impose their values as legitimate
> **(Negus and Pickering, 2004: 86)**

Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural fields' (1992) acts as an important check to an unproblematic co-operative picture of cultural worlds. It was clear that in the acoustic world the audience and performers did not agree wholeheartedly on a set of cultural conventions. Nor was it the case however that the performers and audience were two antagonistic groups. This world was made up of complex webs of relations and struggles between groups and individuals. There was a strict cultural code in operation regarding acoustic performance, and anyone entering into that world had to work out the code before they could adequately function within it. Within any given art world there are elements of conflict and elements of consensus. There were democratically arrived at conventions as well as conventions that were struggled over and sometimes imposed rather undemocratically by those holding more influence in this world. To some extent the convention of remaining quiet throughout performances was a consensual practice because the acoustic club's audience was largely made up of its performers. Subsequently, the strong principles behind the club stemmed from a mutual respect between musicians. However, if audience members did not go along with 'the spirit of the game', as Bourdieu called it, then conflict clearly arose.

The examination of hierarchy on the acoustic scene was crucially important as I found that conventions in the way the audience behaved appeared to vary depending on the

status of whoever was playing. While the "acoustic club virgins" (those who were performing there for the first time), were, according to Andrew, the ones for whom the listening convention was there for, this was not always respected by the established performers. For example, there was usually a lot more talking in the audience if someone who was unknown or of a lower standard was performing, than there was when an established performer played.

This local hierarchy was even reflected in the geography of the audience at the acoustic club[18]. There was a tendency for the regular or established performers to sit at the back near the bar or the entrance and chat. This was in part due to practical reasons: one or two of the established performers often had the job of manning the door, and other 'regulars' tended to gravitate around that area as it was also near the bar. In practice, however, this resulted in the hierarchy being quite clearly demarcated, with the attentive inner circle (generally the relatively new performers and friends) watching each performer in respectful silence, while the actual inner circle (the established performers and regulars) occupied the periphery, not being particularly attentive (amongst themselves) towards the performances of the newcomers. However, they tended to focus their attention away from conversation and towards the stage when one of their peers (a fellow established performer) performed.

This issue had caused Andrew to become increasingly disillusioned with trying to enforce these conventions and had on one occasion caused him to storm out at the end of the night:

> Two thirds of the room were at the back and they weren't listening.... Some of them are starting to break the rules, and there's only one rule and that's keep quiet while people are on the stage, show respect...and I actually said it over the microphone. I very rarely say it over the microphone...I normally go up to people individually and tell them cos I don't really want to them to...shut up through embarrassment, I'd rather tell them and discuss it with them and glare at them from a very short distance

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[18] For more on the geographical positioning of audiences and its relevance to performance see Fonorow, W (2006) *Empire of the Dirt: The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press) and Smith, J.L *the Ethogenics of Music Performance: A Case Study of the Glebe Live Music Club* in Pickering, M and Green, T *Everyday Culture: Popular Song and the Vernacular Milieu* (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press).

away...but I had a go at the back of the room and got a round of applause from the people in the front bit. No round of applause from the people at the back cos half of erm probably didn't hear it!

Andrew insisted that most newcomers had no problem with the conventions of silence:

> the ones I've got to offend are the ones who've been there for such a long time and know me really well and it's a lot more difficult to handle... ...there's this culture of there being a clique...and I've tried to stop it several times...when there's more people at the back of the room than there are in the front, that's when I'm at my most frustrated... Anybody who does stay in the bar area, I don't want them to carry on their conversations when they come into the main room, I want there to be some kind of air of not reverence but at least respect...If it was up to me I'd know exactly who to clear out of there cos there are certain elements that make it bad for everybody

Mackinnon (1993:79) observed 'a lack of normative cohesion' in the folk club based on 'a divergence of expectations with regard to the nature of the musical performances and of the performance setting itself'. This was clearly the case in the acoustic club too.

Taking on board Becker's perspective helps us to see that the audience are integral to the making of any local music culture. However, while Becker does suggest that certain 'aficionados' in the audience might exercise more influence than others (Becker, 1982) he doesn't adequately address the possibility within art worlds of the differing positions of power and influence that audience members possess according to their role and status, and moreover, the way these status positions might subtly operate. As we have seen, in the case of the acoustic club the audience were largely made up of musicians of varying status and influence. Additionally, there were audience members who were artistically involved in other ways: e.g. promoters of musical events, technicians, music teachers, sound engineers, photographers, website designers etc. There were also casual non-musician audience members who had markedly less influence or power in actually shaping the way things happened in the music scene. All of these audience members possessed varying levels of power and

influence in the overall network of relations, and the extent of that power was visible in the conflicts present in the performance event of the acoustic night.

We can conclude then that while it is helpful to employ Becker's sociology of art to local music cultures, an overly idealistic interpretation of his art world thesis could result in the reading of the performance event as based simply on co-operation, which is cemented by a clear set of consensual generic conventions. By drawing on Bourdieu's 'cultural field' approach, however, which recognises cultural worlds as webs of struggle containing conflict, and competition as well as co-operation, we are reminded of the messiness of cultural worlds. One major stumbling block to consensus in the acoustic world was its own 'genre confusion'. Neither audience nor performers were in agreement about performing or listening conventions because there was vagueness, firstly over which genre conventions were being followed (rock, pop or folk) and, secondly, whether the venue and setting was formal or informal.

Negus and Pickering highlight clearly the kind of problems that an uncritical reading of Becker's conventions as consensual can lead to:

> In various creative activities, the familiar and the unexpected do not exist in separate worlds, or along parallel tracks that never meet. They continually jostle and collide with each other. Becker's art worlds do not avoid the tendency of genre theory towards the abstraction of certain characteristic features – detached from their living, changing context – and a process of theoretical reification whereby the bounded genre (or art world) seems to hover threateningly over and around the creative practices which are being studied
> (Negus and Pickering, 2004:11).

In relation to folk music, Niall Mackinnon (1993) argues that many of the issues surrounding audience reception of performance stem from society having moved on from the time when folk music was part of the everyday culture. Therefore, the very act of listening to music is seen as requiring a special attentive effort rather than being a natural thing.

6.2 The Mundane and technical aspects of performance

> At any gig, the music, its performance, and appreciation of it, formed only part of a
> complex whole. The effectiveness of the music and its ability to move and stimulate
> both performers and audience depended on the structuring of a multitude of
> interdependent factors surrounding and involved with the performance. The structure
> and context of a gig and the social relationships involved were thus interrelated with
> the artistic factors of the performance. Ideally the balance between them was such
> that the aesthetic/artistic factors transcended the social relationships so that the non-
> rational, emotional, symbolic aspects of the gig predominated, overshadowing its
> more rational, pragmatic aspects.
> (Cohen, 1991:101)

The above quote from Cohen highlights the ever-present struggle in performance
between the emotional/artistic and the practical/logistical. As I am particularly
concerned to highlight the day-to-day lived experience of performance I will largely
focus on the latter of these two aspects here.

Becker (1982) brings our attention to the ordinariness of art. The job of performance
is, like any job, full of mundane tasks that must be done in order for the final artistic
produce to be delivered and for that world to tick over adequately. Part and parcel of
this is a set of activities that support the art world in question:

> Other activities that we can lump together as "support" must also take place. These
> vary with the medium...They include all sorts of technical activities – manipulating
> the machinery people use in executing the work...
> (Becker, 1982:4).

While one may think that a music world involving acoustic performance would
perhaps be exempt from these activities, this is not the case. On the surface, there
may be an acoustic or some acoustic performers quietly delivering their music, but
this is only the end result of much technical and practical work. Before and during
the time that the singer songwriter perches on a stool to deliver a song, the mics have
to be set up, the sound levels monitored, the lighting set up or modified, and in some

cases, a 'guitar tech' may be employed to tune an extra guitar off stage for quick changeovers when alternative tunings are required. All these things are part of the music making process. 'In fact, situations of art making lie somewhere between the extremes of one person doing everything and every smallest activity being done by a separate person' (Becker, 1982:9). Drawing on Everett Hughes's (Hughes, 1971) work on the sociology of occupations, Becker argues that 'Workers of various kinds develop a traditional "bundle of tasks". To analyse an art world we look for its characteristic kinds of workers and the bundle of tasks each one does' (ibid.).

The performance event of course always holds the potential of a collective high when a performer and audience make a connection. Schutz emphasises the sociality of performance by highlighting 'the reciprocal sharing of the...flux of experience in inner time, by living thru a vivid present together, by experiencing this togetherness as "we" '(Schutz quoted in Finnegan, 1989: 338). This shared aspect of performance is particularly relevant to the musical worlds presented in Ruth Finnegan's research, which was largely oriented around musical groups:

> ...groups were pleased with applause or a fee, but these were pleasant additions: the central musical enactment, the performance, was its own justification. The shared subjective experience of performing was also part of the expectations of group music-making – an aspect left out in many sociological and musicological works, but of great significance to the performers themselves, clear to anyone either observing or participating in such performances.
> (Finnegan,1989:158)

Research on rock bands such as Cohen's study in Liverpool also found that the performance event was a collective experience, and band members emphasised the collective 'high' or buzz' from performing (Cohen, 1991:97). Dave gives a clear example here of the euphoric elements that performance often entailed:

> ... you get people clapping along...on the high stuff give them the energy and they give you the energy...then you finish that song and you go down into a ballad that's powerful that makes people go "fuck!" that silence you know, you connect with them... ...Gav was playing the other night and he was just in this zone of like...He'd left the planet he was somewhere else and I was just laughing...and Neil was just sort

of...completely digging the groove...I was standing in the middle and looking at these two guys thinking, "fucking hell yeah! This is a good vibe". Nothing can touch it...nothing can touch it!

This performance-as-escape account from Dave took place in a band situation. Acoustic musicians were often lone singer-songwriter performers however. The solitary character of acoustic music performance and thus the lack of on-stage support meant that the responsibility of keeping everything together often outweighed the possibility of reaching a euphoric high from performance or even merely enjoying it[19]:

...I think the solo gig of going at it hard-nosed, trying to crack a crowd and you know at the best you're going to get a clap and that you're not getting paid for it...I mean it's a challenge I suppose it is cos there's still a lot of reward there but I think there's a point of almost, you know, who's doing who a favour here?
(Alex)

The challenge for the lone performer was to attempt to get into what was usually referred to as 'the zone'. The 'zone' is a term increasingly found in various realms of modern life but mainly in sport. One definition is given on a self-help website called mental strength and relates in this instance to sporting performance:

In the Zone you were focused, confident, calm, and in control. You moved easily and effortlessly. You were totally tuned into what you were doing, you were unaware of external distractions, you experienced a sensation of elation, joy and fluidity that was unexplainable. It is that place where your mind, your emotions, and your body were totally connected.
(www.mentalstrength.com)

For Dave, the experience of performance was likened to the experience of running a race:

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[19] Despite the generally solitary nature of acoustic music performance, I found that some of the core participants who started out as solo performers increasingly formed some kind of a band in order to reflect the musical support they had experienced on the recording of a CD. E.g. David became the David (surname) band. Andy, the Andy (surname) band. Kate and Joel were amongst others who also did this.

It's like...the person bangs the gun and you all come off the starting line and then it's... automatic response...you suddenly realise that's somebody's chasing you and the zone goes down and you think, "fucking hell he's on my tail", it's that kind of thing, you're playing it and all of a sudden something happens and it's like "yeah"...It's...how much pressure you put on yourself...If you put too much on yourself you don't zone. It's all about zoning whereby you're not thinking about the chords, you're not thinking about what's coming out, you're just doing it and it's pleasurable...'
(Dave)

This term, then, was used by some of the participants. However, it was often in a vicarious sense rather than from first-hand experience. In Alex's case for example, his familiarity with the concept of the zone came from reading and hearing about it as a concept rather than experiencing it:

I've heard musicians say they don't want to get famous, they don't want to get rich, they just want to hit the zone every time they play which is this sort of area of...again this sort of spiritual idea where music is just flowing out of them and there is no resistance between their brains and their fingers and what comes to the audience...I'm way off getting to the zone.

The absence of the kind of on-stage mutual support and co-operation found in a band situation meant that acoustic musicians' relationship with the person on the sound desk became paramount. Consequently the skill level of the sound engineer was an issue of overriding importance for performers. Referring to a particularly negative experience of a soundman in Hitchin, Ben highlights this issue:

You get... semi pro kind of musicians and amateur sound engineers it's going to sound like shit, and the problem isn't whether it sounds bad or not cos most of the time on stage you can't really hear it...the problem is when the sound man's obviously a dickhead...[I]f you go for that whole kind of acoustic stereotype and you say that you're this tortured poet artist...and you know you're drawing out every creative idea you can and finely written guitar parts and wonderfully written lyrics and then some tit can't work a sound desk...you're placing reputation, credibility, the

ability to get another gig in the hands of someone who essentially doesn't care who you are, has no idea who you are...

Considering this was an acoustic music culture with close links to the local folk scene, it was somewhat surprising to see the amount of emphasis on technical factors surrounding performance, but it was usually technical factors that dominated most discussions around performance. In Finnegan's detailed accounts of various performances in her Milton Keynes study (1989) this integral emphasis on technical aspects of performances was somewhat overlooked.

Alex argued that acoustic performance was in some ways even more technical than other more technologically driven musical styles and forms:

> Unfortunately probably more difficult being acoustic, I think it's more sensitive and fragile to balance sound...All the gear that's needed and it's got to be expensive pick ups and all that and that is a real frustrating aspect of live performance, but if you've got a crap sound you're never going to sound good...I used to be a bit of a purist, if I'm really that good I can get a really shit guitar to sound good, you can't actually...

Kate's account below highlights the technical difficulties of being an acoustic musician. She had played Leicester's Abbey Park festival with her string and vocal trio. They performed with no sound check and competed throughout with the noise of a nearby dance music tent. Although in a group situation here Kate nevertheless demonstrates acoustic musicians' ongoing struggle to 'zone' amidst a background of practical problems:

> We were in a sort of open fronted tent and competing yet again...with a music tent nearby with a loud bass booming out, and...again, you almost have to switch off and concentrate on what you're doing and get up there and do it...no sound-check straight in you know it do it, get away...I wouldn't rush to go and do it again, and again it's not been thought out, we're an acoustic group and you can't compete with the loud...dance music...

A clear example of the extent to which technical language pervaded acoustic music performance can be seen in a magazine interview with internationally recognised

acoustic guitarist Tommy Emmanuel. When asked the best way to amplify an acoustic guitar his response is pervaded by technical jargon:

> Here's what I do: I firstly put a feedback buster in and cover the hole in the guitar. I go out of my guitar into an Alesis Midverb II, right channel, then out of the right-hand channel into a Countryman DI box, then I go left-hand channel out into a AER compact 60 amplifier, then out of that amp into a second DI. That's two signals sent to the PA: direct and amp. I ask the soundman to mix the two channels, pan them to the middle and my sound should be good without EQ
> (Acoustic magazine June/July edition 2006)

Jurgen Habermas (1999) used the term 'technocratic consciousness' to describe the scientifically obsessed nature of advanced capitalist society. He argues that the life-world of everyday communication has been colonised by the technical language of an increasingly rational and instrumental society. We can apply this to the acoustic music world as the technical discourse has clearly colonised much of the talk in acoustic music, including the ongoing use of brand names in relation to sound quality, thereby threatening the notion that these kinds of local music cultures retained autonomy from the mainstream commercial culture industries (see Pickering and Green, 1987).

Even in the folk scene it was clear that PA technology had really moved forward. A former director of the English Folk and Dance Society referring to the Sidmouth folk festival states:

> Twenty years ago your PA rig would be very simple indeed. Now you need a very complicated PA rig, firstly because the performers are more sophisticated. Secondly, the audience expect it. The PA rig is costing a fortune...
> (in Mackinnon, 1993:76).

Examining once again the talk during the *Bryter Layter* performance demonstrates this point further. All the requests to the soundman were made publicly over the mic so the audience is privy to most of the technical aspects of the performance:

167

Neil: Can I have a bit of strings in my monitor...

[Strings play a little to test the sound.]

Neil: Same on the other one as well

Andrew, who fronted the band, had a 'guitar tech' assisting him. For folk purists it would be considered highly inappropriate for a band performing acoustic/folk music to have a guitar technician. The main job of the guitar tech in this case was essentially to tune a spare guitar to the specific alternative tuning required for certain songs and run on the stage and hand the guitar to Andrew. The use of the term 'tech' was fairly tenuous here then but the language seemed more important in that it conveyed a sense of professional status to the band. There was also some ambiguity about how worthy a job this was and thus what proportion of the gig money the 'guitar tech' should receive. Simon, who was far more oriented to the folk ideal of performance, was sarcastic about Andrew's employment of a guitar tech:

> Andrew: "Before we finish here, a big hand for Andy, my guitar tech, who's been running around like a mad hatter".

> Simon: He's a hard taskmaster. We've only been going a short time, he's had two guitar technicians

A telling example of the ever-present conflict between the folk acoustic purity and the technicised rock elements within the acoustic scene was highlighted while Simon was introducing the band as a celebration of Nick Drake: a singer songwriter who wrote all his material on one guitar. Neil, the bass player, and himself a sound engineer, interjected with a request to the soundman:

> Neil: 'Bit more of Andrew's guitar in the monitor?'

> Andrew: 'Is that coming out front as well...? 'Definitely more in the monitor Dan'

> Neil: 'Too much'

Andrew: 'That's better, more than that'

The subsequent events and talk demonstrate just how much technical elements were present in acoustic performance:

Neil [acknowledging how this must sound to the audience] 'We've done this before you know'

Andrew: Fitzy wants more guitar in the monitor as well...Might as well get it right before we start'

Neil: Bit more o that, bit more o that. Yeah that's good and the boran channel I'll need that as well. Thanks. Big hand for Dan on the sound ...

At that precise moment a loud piercing feedback occurs due to an error with the sound desk. This gives rise to laughter from the audience:

Simon: Famous last words!

Neil: As you say it! What you done Dan? Right, that's really loud whatever that is don't do that. You know that button that turns everything off Dan that I told you about, now's a good time,

Simon: It was going so well

Neil: That ain't good. That's really bad. Hit emergency stop. Now's a good time, really a good time...

[Big cheer from the audience as the sound disappears]

Neil: Right, you've put loads of guitar in this monitor, which is not the monitor we needed it in. This is two. Take that down...you need percussion, which is sixteen, fifteen, fourteen and thirteen in this monitor which is two...

Andrew: Appropriately enough this song is a portent of doom and disaster [laughter from the audience]. This is Pink Moon.

169

These excerpts demonstrate the problems caused by technical aspects and the way in which they could often overshadow the purer and more qualitative elements of performance. There were other pragmatic concerns that occupied the acoustic performer too. Alex sums up the range of potential problem areas below:

> I feel it's very mentally demanding like this set...before you had to think about the songs I have to work out am I in the right guitar tuning, have I got the capo in the right place...and then I'm still trying to say something witty to the audience and that's before I even think about playing the music...I'm a university lecturer by day but that's far more difficult than my day job [laughter]

The acoustic musicians' accounts of certain type of gigs conveyed a sense of futility. Kate's sense of resignation in her three separate accounts of performances at functions was reflective of many musicians' experiences of wedding and corporate gigs:

> ...A lot of the gigs we do, we're background music...sometimes you're just there for show...and people will say we want you to sing this song and play that song and you do it and they don't even notice...

> ...they hadn't got any chairs set out for us, there was no specific place to play. We had to...almost sit in a line where people were just sitting around having drinks and they'll...stand really closely and talk loudly and don't seem to realise that you need to be able to hear, and if it wasn't for the fact that we'd be playing together for so long, most of the material we know it off by heart so we can almost do it instinctively...you get paid well for it but that's, you know, almost not enough...people just don't, they don't realise and they don't think. They're focused on their particular event and the last people they are going to worry about is the er...hired help' [laughter]

> ...we were just stuck at the edge of this room where people were having a meal... we didn't have a microphone but we thought we'd be all right cos there was only about sixty people there but they were sixty very noisy people and lots of kids so...that was hard work and we didn't get any feedback whatsoever, and I don't think it's because we were bad I think it...it just goes that way sometimes

It was not just the corporate functions and weddings however that could be difficult. Ben highlighted the fact that similarly unrewarding gigs could just as equally occur on the local gigging circuit:

> We played the Looking Glass…on a Saturday night it was just awful, just utterly pointless. There was us and a rap group on the bill…and we were just mortified throughout all of this thinking, god this is terrible, but it's really, really, really good training cos there's that whole thing of thinking you want be good at something, you want to push yourself at doing something, there's no point doing something unless you're going to do it properly like as if you're a professional…so we got up and we played the show and we collected the money and we went home and we did what good professional musicians do which is, you put up with it, you ignore the fact that it's a shit hole in the middle of nowhere that no one's listening and you collect your cash and you go home.

Despite the negative outlook on this gig, when I asked Ben if he would play there again, the response was more pragmatic, once again demonstrating the strong element of a calculated approach toward performing:

> Yeah…You don't know. I mean there might be a case when you need that money, in which case you say, come on it's 2 hours , we can get through it, good practise, no one's listening, we can cock it up if we need to and we need the money for recording on Monday or something like that you know

In terms of the experience of a performer, it could sometimes seem worst on stage than it appeared to the audience:

> I snapped a string and I didn't have a spare string. It was awful. It was absolutely awful! I've never done a festival…monitor wasn't loud enough so I couldn't hear my guitar playing…so I didn't know which chords…but apparently out front it was OK (Dave)

In the case of local audiences the level of familiarity between performer and audience meant that on-stage mistakes were often accepted as part and parcel of the

performance. This is another example of the marked difference between acoustic music and folk. As Brocken points out:

> a curious perfection process has developed within the folk revival whereby performers have consummated their performance models. Playing has become a striving towards a disturbing perfection, a perfect replication...There are too few mistakes rather than too many and an entire generation of adolescents has been frightened off by this performance rectitude.
> (Brocken, 2003:124)

My observation of the *Bryter Layter* performance at the International Arts Centre demonstrated the frequency of on-stage mistakes that sometimes occurred on the acoustic scene and were tolerated in good spirit. Firstly, a vocal mistake occurred right at the beginning of the band's version of 'Blackbird' by The Beatles; something they had only worked on recently. Another mistake occurred a few seconds later, and then again another twenty seconds or so into the song. Simon began laughing uncontrollably. The situation then became very informal both with band and audience. At which point Neil interjected:

> Neil: Imagine a blackbird kind of floating (starts whistling comically)

There were six mistakes altogether in the first part of the song. However, there was a very warm interaction between performers and audience. Unlike the earlier example of the formal setting in the arts centre, here the majority of the audience knew one or all of the band members on an informal level so this was forgiven.

> Simon: What an encore (said ironically). Thank you very much indeed. You're very kind.

Players left the stage to a slightly less enthusiastic response to the pre-encore applause but warm nevertheless.

Often musicians made the pragmatic decision not to perform in a given set of circumstances. Andrew gives two examples of instances where he decided that not to

play was the best option. This highlights the fact that the performance event itself is always contingent on other factors and itself a fragile possibility. In the first case the lights went at the usual Sunday night open mic venue: O'Neill's, so it was switched to another local bar:

> I got there before anybody else, I got there at quarter to eight...and there was a Christening party in there... it was all...reggae music and everybody dancing...and I went up to the bar and said, 'Am I in the right place?'...and she said 'Yeah, yeah!, we're going to turn the DJ off at half past eight and then...then you can play in there, and I said, 'Are you sure? Are you sure that's a good idea...? ... I was standing there listening to reggae and waiting for the rest of the people to arrive so that we could all group together and say, 'No, we're not doing this'...and this woman came up to me and said, so what kind of music do you play then?!' and I'm going...and my first thought was, if she doesn't know what kind of music we're going to play, she's in for a real shock and they're not going to like it, and I thought, 'What have they let us in for?' ...So...I gave an excuse that I was going to get some food...and ran off to the car, went straight home...as soon as I got back to my car I...phoned Rob. I said, do you realise what's going on?! And he said 'Oh thanks for telling me, I'm really knackered, I've just come off a long...a really long shift...so none of us turned up!

The second instance shown below occurred at a festival:

> We only did one set. We voted not to do another one cos they had put us on later in the afternoon, it just got later and later and other people ran behind...and we eventually said, Oh let's just...the way that this festival music needs to end is by that band that's on at the moment, they're just really wowing the audience ...we didn't want to go and depress them after that [laughter]

Finnegan argues that for most musicians, it was ultimately the 'special performance event' that lay at the heart of performing (Finnegan, 1989:143). However, what the many accounts here reveal is that there are many kinds of performance event and to talk of the special performance event is somewhat idealistic. Sometimes the performance was a 'special' event, sometimes it was not special but rather an arduous task, and on other occasions it was hardly an event at all. When performance did go relatively smoothly however it was highly valued. Finnegan's account below highlights what the outcome represents when it happens:

...the act of performance represented the high point and validation of a whole series

of both musical and back-up activities by performers and supporters before and after

the event, something which, apart from its utilitarian purpose, also gave a special

symbolic value to these specifically framed moments in time.

(Finnegan, 1989:144)

For Dave, getting performance into perspective was a very useful way of achieving

pleasure in performance and reaching this 'high point':

...you think, well hang on a minute this is a gig on the face of planet earth doesn't

mean anything. Your life's not hanging on it. Nothing really is that important; enjoy

it...and if you have that state of mind then the fuck ups become less cos it's almost

like playing in your own house...they're not going to walk out if you play a wrong

note...they know if something's shit, who cares about singing off key...everybody

does, it doesn't matter.

For Alex too perspective was important. Indeed reminding himself of the mundane

realities of performance was a vital way of making light of the day-to-day frustrations

of the struggle to make it in music and distancing himself from the potential failure of

being a musician:

And every time like say yesterday, as I say I was phoned at the last minute, I did a

gig to three people, er you know I say, "Remember this experience...when you're

pissed off that you're not a professional musician" because actually I question just

how much of the romance of it would actually still be there if I did it.

This kind of performance situation was all too familiar for many musicians who

occupied this borderline level between amateur and professional.

Summary
In this chapter, through the ethnographic observation of performance events I have

demonstrated that performance in itself mirrors the changeable and ephemeral

character of daily life. It is always context-bound and shaped by spatial and temporal

factors. By drawing on Becker's theories of art worlds, I have demonstrated the

usefulness of seeing performance as *work* rather than merely a romantic escape from day-to-day life. On the acoustic scene performance was sometimes a necessary evil for musicians rather than a euphoric experience. It also involved a surprising amount of technical elements – before, during and after the performance event itself. These elements involved a range of people in addition to the performers themselves. In fact the performance event, it could be argued, begins with the performer's first telephone conversation to arrange a gig, and continues right through to aspects such as the audience feedback at the end of a gig or sales of CDs etc. We have seen too that there are marked contrasts between the experiences of the acoustic solo performer and the band.

This chapter also explored the issue of performance conventions and demonstrated that the approaches of Becker, and later Finnegan can be criticised for over-emphasising the democratic and consensual aspects of performance whilst understating both the conflictive aspects involved between various members of local music cultures, and the problematic area of generic conventions in an ambiguous meta-genre such as acoustic music. Contrasting Finnegan's uncritical reading of the folk club with Brocken's critical analysis of this performance setting is useful here:

> As one much-travelled folk participant put it, 'they're all the same – and, different. You can go into any and know they'll be friendly.' Women might feel self-conscious in a strange pub, but in a folk club 'you feel quite comfortable'. It was accepted form to walk into an unfamiliar club anywhere, perhaps asking 'Any chance to sing?' or perhaps waiting to persuaded the first time, but then recognised in later visits; names and personal contacts were not needed, for the syst was open and familiar. One experienced folk attender summed it up: 'you just feel at home straight away – a home from home'.
> (Finnegan, 1989: 61)

> A real democracy in performance may persist only if that democracy is constantly brought under pressure. If the democracy slips too far into the hands of the receiver, the power of the performance dialectic is diminished, thus producing a musical stalemate. Consequently the music as a kinetic practice, ceases to reflect external challenges and pressures. The maintenance of stylistic listening processes becomes rigorous and strict... (Brocken 2003:117)

Bringing this back to the overarching theme of self-identity, we are reminded here of the following: not only was the individual always part of a social world in which there were an agreed set of conventions, and which, in order to work, were reliant on co-operation; in addition to this, each member of the acoustic scene occupied a specific position in a web of power relations. We are reminded here that the 'relational' was as important as the 'interactional' in terms of linking the individual and the social.

I have also sought to convey in this chapter, an idea of the 'lived experience' of performance on a mundane level from the individuals' first hand accounts. Like everyday life itself, performance was messy, unpredictable and contingent; depending upon numerous social factors for its smooth running. The solo singer-songwriter may look alone on that stage but there is always an ongoing interaction or social positioning occurring at any performance event.

CHAPTER SEVEN: SONGS, STORIES AND SELFHOOD: CREATING THE SELF THROUGH THE CREATIVE PRODUCT

Introduction

The thread that runs throughout this thesis is the relationship between musical creativity and the creative act of writing the self around a musical identity. As we have seen in earlier chapters, creativity is a very significant part of the construction of a unique life story. Just as songs are written, so too is a life story. Through viewing creativity as both a heightening of reflexivity towards artistic expression and a stimulation of senses otherwise dulled by the uniform choices of consumer culture, we can recognise the merits of both creativity itself and the creative telling of the life story as evidence of a strong artistic self-defence against the culture industries' pervasion of the everyday. Rather than looking at the mere fleeting accounts of self-expression found amongst the archetypal rock performer, the task in hand involves focusing on the process of musicians constructing an individual narrative based on the career of moments of music-making.

> Creativity...has been something that's got me out of a lot of things...coming out of
> every painful moment there's a sudden burst of creativity that sends me off on
> another path but basically the same path of expressing myself...
> (Andrew)

Andrew demonstrates here the way that creativity comes in bursts and often out of particular low points in his life history. Songs can also be seen as 'crystallisations' of moments in the life history. A creative moment contains great autobiographical value. Songs can have a lasting effect and once recorded become a kind of auditory photograph. This relates to Walter Benjamin's concept of the monad:

> A monad is like a crystallisation 'produced by a suspension or leap (Sprung)... of
> ordinary time and the concomitant emergence of another, more originary temporality
> (Wohlfarth, 1996:193).

Earlier we looked at the creative process of creating the song. But the product of song writing – the song itself – once written, once recorded, becomes a life document to be drawn on in the mapping of the self. A song, whether through its musical ambience or its lyrical meaningfulness can trigger a memory of a significant episode in the life story[20]. By looking at the way songwriters responded to their own songs whilst listening to them we combine the examination of music, memory and meaning with individual creativity: the creator is creatively constructing their life story around their songs:

> Focus on intimate musical practice, on the private or one to one forms of human-music interaction, offers an ideal vantage point for viewing music 'interaction', for observing music as it comes to be implicated in the construction of the self as an aesthetic agent'
> (DeNora, 2000:46)

DeNora above provided an interesting account of music and memories in the way people related songs to significant others, moments and places. DeNora's focus was on consumers of music discussing songs or pieces of music they only had a mediated relationship with, however. In this chapter I draw on music sessions in which the creators themselves were reflecting on their own product. Secondly, I undertook this while the musicians were in the process of listening to a song, rather than merely asking them to talk about it. This meant that the song was alive in the moment to be actively engaged with instead of just providing a pre-scripted response.

As Murdock (1992) argues, modernity brought about the prevalence of the image over the story 'Traditions of story telling gave way to the family photograph album. Oral histories were transformed into parades of fashion'. Postmodern commentaries on contemporary culture along with specific developments in popular music culture, such as the rise of the music video exemplify this trend. In spite of these developments, however, the song remains as a meaningful remnant of the storytelling tradition.

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[20] See Keightley, E and Pickering, M (2006) *For the Record: Popular Music and Photography as Technologies of Memory* in *European Journal of Cultural Studies 9: 2,149-165* for similar discussion

The creation of songs and the meanings created around then, as well as the important documents and stories relating to music in the life history, all demonstrate a strategic construction of creative selfhood that attempt to resist the threat posed by advanced capitalist culture to completely dissolve the subject. Of course, as Harvey explains, the poststructuralist concept of intertextuality puts into question the very idea of the author:

> Whatever we write conveys meanings that we do not or could not possibly intend, and our words cannot say what we mean...
> (Harvey, 1990:50)

However, as discussed in the introduction, acknowledging these postmodern critiques of the decentred subject, the fragmented self and the authorless creation does not automatically mean that we should dismiss or demean the individual and their unique life story. We know, for example, that songs themselves are always fusions of already existing musical patterns, structures and words. For example, Negus (1996:146) uses the term 'synthesists' rather than 'originators' or 'pioneers' to describe those exceptional musical figures 'who cleverly fuse already existing forms together in new ways[21]. In the same sense as songs life stories contain a bundle of conventional narrative tools: e.g. turning points, moments of insight etc. However, this does not change the fact that each life story is different in its rich details and in its messy interludes and complexities. Both the song and the life story are always unique creations and need to be recognised as such. Taking this critical humanistic approach of the uniquely documented self involves recognising the various unique life stories in conjunction with the songs and music.

Negus and Pickering discuss Charles Taylor's (1989) use of the notion of epiphanies as an illumination which 'either fosters and/or constitutes a spiritually significant fulfilment or wholeness' (Taylor in Negus and Pickering, 2004: 124). But because of their rich multi layered meanings, songs can be more than just mementoes of a particular time and place; they can also act as informative reflections on ongoing

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[21] This is contrasted with 'pastichists' – those who merely put various genres together in a blatantly imitative rather than imaginative fashion (Negus, 1996:144)

179

themes in musicians' lives. The insight below by French phenomenologist Merleau Ponty speaks volumes about the world of the singer songwriter.

> My own words take me by surprise and teach me what I think.
> (Merleau Ponty quoted in Negus and Pickering, 2004: 25)

Whilst song lyrics often spill out quickly at the time of writing, the song can become a crystallisation of a particular moment that carries a kind of autobiographical significance later in the life course. I will now explore some examples of this below.

7.1 Songs and autobiography

Andrew's song 'Goodnight Good Morning' was written both about and during what he saw as a transcendent moment. As so often with songwriters it was also seen as a moment of enlightenment and a turning point:

> [It] was written about a particular moment that I shared with a close friend at Womad festival...

Andrew recalled it as a very hot day in August and him and the friend decided that they would play and wake everyone up at 5.30:

> *Wake up you sleepy face it's time to rise*
>
> *Open up your smile for a new time*
>
> *We've been up since yesterday or the day before*
>
> *Don't know where and I don't know when*
>
> *But the time is here*
>
> *And it's time to say It's a good good night , good morning*
>
> *It's a good day, a good day to live or die*

Significantly for Andrew it was also at that moment, according to Andrew that he first had the notion to give up his day job:

> ...that was just of the moment really...

During the research period Andrew and this particular friend had experienced a conflict, which seriously threatened and almost destroyed their friendship. In this context Andrew now said that he found it difficult to play this song. The song's optimism and new beginnings had become slightly tarnished. This demonstrates the ways in which a song's meaning is not fixed but can change over time.

Just as the creative act of song writing recollected and documented experiences so too did experiences feed into the way the creative product evolved. After the recent negative experiences regarding friendship Andrew admitted that he was writing with more vitriol in his latest songs. In fact Kate and Andrew had both been affected by this conflict with the same person. Little face-to-face conflict emerged from this, but it was partially dealt with through creative collaboration instead. This is an interesting example then of the way that the song can be an alternative form of expression, especially when face to face encounters could be socially awkward. Kate elaborates below:

> What started it off was writing a song to S because I couldn't say what I wanted to say to him and I got it all out that way...Andrew's taken it on and written a tune and...he's hardly changed the words at all...It's obviously a song about somebody being upset with someone but it doesn't mention any names so it's safe...!

As Williams points out:

> We cannot say that art is a substitute for other kinds of communication, since when successful it evidently communicates experience which is not apparently communicable in other ways. We must see art, rather, as an extension of our capacity for organization: a vital faculty which allows particular areas of reality to be described and communicated
> (Williams, 1963:51)

Songs also often had a dual meaning at the time of writing. Andrew's first track on his CD – *Farewell to Jesus*, for example, had, as its central theme, both an object and an experience. His guitar he had christened Jesus being the object and his rejection of Christianity the important experience:

> And this is a farewell to Jesus, my guitar that I sold, and it's…it's also a farewell to organised religion of any kind…You could say it's about religion or you could say it's about my guitar. It's about Jesus the person or Jesus the guitar, and there's a lot of respect for Jesus in it as well as a person who had the right ideas because my guitar had the right ideas as well and that's where the connection was…

> *Farewell my chosen one farewell my golden son*

> *We pull the wishbone My fire and brimstone*

> *Built me a cornerstone high like I've never known*

> *Cut off my millstone, sang me a new tone*

> *I'll put that on your headstone*

Another song on his album called Little People echoed a broader pattern in Andrew's life story:

> I like songs about moments or hopes or my personal experience…Little People is about my experience of growing up and being separate from people… and what I wish people had said to me when I was growing up…I would have appreciated that…

Alex claimed that his songs were not generally autobiographical. However, it was evident that several of his songs marked important events in his life. His song, *Time Catches Tears but no Regrets* for example, referred to his relationship with his grandmother. Interestingly, as with Andrew, there was a reference here to his guitar, which was bought for him by his grandmother and which Alex treasured amongst his most important objects:

> …the last verse a grandma holds a grandchild in her hands, a lot of wisdom to pass on. It was basically about by grandma who…instilled a lot of life in me and was

important in growing up...and she bought my guitar before she died. I've always wanted to sort of...it's quite nice that that came in...a sort of song written on the guitar [that she bought].

Grandma cradles her grandchild in her arms

Only the last day been born

A bond deep will grow between them

Wisdom to pass on first she says

The influence of family members was often mentioned in and through songs. Discussing his song *Faith* in a local radio interview Dave related it to his mother and grandmother:

> All the songs that I've done so far have been written just through experience and what people have said to me throughout life really and this song is based really on what my mother and my grandmother used to say to me really...you need to have faith...and when I was younger they always inspired me to be creative and mad really and that's following on to now really

Though the singer/songwriter genre often has the reputation of being confessional and introspective to the point of self-centred, songs were not merely reflections on direct experiences but often about the way another's experience had impacted on themselves. The theme of Alex's song *A Smile is All it Takes*, for example, was stimulated by the shock of the suicide of an acquaintance at university. As it wasn't a close friend Alex didn't want to overstate the significance of this event, but he did acknowledge that it changed his general outlook on life:

> It was a complete shock...He was a very serious person, a very sorted person I always thought and it made me realise that if he committed suicide, you look at everyone else around you differently because I believed that anyone else I know could if he could...it changed my perception of how I viewed people, my outlook on life...

The event led to a broader reflection for Alex on people in situations where they get to such a point and the need to be there for one's friends:

But if there's no one around and it's looking like rain
You begin to question why you were born at all
Then give me a phone

One of Kate's songs, *Tell the Truth*, was a personal account of a crossroads in her life about the struggle she faced between the values of Christianity and being gay:

There's no constant theme to your assertion
You refuse to hear the things they say
You would listen to another version
Realise it's not the only way
And you can see it on my face what I'm going to do
Read it on my lips, try and tell the truth but I'd be wasting my time

It was about the struggle with having a religious upbringing and being gay as well and not telling my parents, I suppose trying to tell them in a song…Whenever I write anything it's usually a reaction to something…I wanted to say something and it seemed like the best way to do it…
(Kate)

One of the lyrics in Kate's song was 'struggling to believe'. This was a deliberate reference to a book her parents gave her to read as a teenager by the same title.

Chloe talked about her song *Waveform* as reflecting a turning point in her life. It was based on experience in previous relationships:

It's a combination of things…it's about maybe letting go of people who are influencing your life and just realising that there's more to life than certain people you could say….

I know the moon is golden during harvest time
I know that when you're older your heart will still be mine

184

The musicians' experiences of reflecting on their own songs often brought out deeper underlying themes in their life stories. In this sense the exercise of listening to and commenting on songs and performances in chronological order was analogous to a psychoanalytic process:

> Music can be used as a device for the reflexive process of remembering...a technology for spinning the apparently continuous tale of who one is.
> (Denora, 2000:63)

7.2 Music related documents in the life history

> Identity is found in all the properties – and property with which individuals and groups surround themselves, houses, furniture, paintings, books, cars...and in the practices with which they manifest their distinction, sports, games, entertainment, because it is the synthetic unity of the habitus, the unifying generative principle of all practices. Taste, the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices, is the generative formula of a life style...
> (Bourdieu in Plummer, 2000:57).

> Then there are the array of *personal props* scattered around a life and which help in its telling: from photograph albums to video diaries, to collections of books and 'old records', 'props' are deposited in a trail behind a life as it is lived and can be regathered to enable a telling of a life. Just to look at an old photograph album can help create a sense of who you once were and assist in the telling of a life... A bookcase or a CD collection is a goldmine of biographical incidents.
> (Plummer, 2000:45 and 57)

It was not only songs that provided the details in the life history of the musicians; other documents and objects relating to musical identity also played a big part.

Alex, Dave and Andrew all cited their guitar as one of their most important possessions. This was far more than a functional music making reason however, for all three their guitars had particular symbolic value. Peter Narvaez, in his study of

Canadian guitar enthusiasts (2001), highlighted the depth of meaning that guitars held in amateur musicians' life stories:

> Informants remember their first instrument with fondness or disgust, and radiate joy
> in talking about their first 'real' instrument...
> (Narvaez, 2001:98)

In Dave's case he still owned a guitar that was given to him when he was three or four. In Andrew's case as we saw earlier in the chapter his guitars were personalised possessions rather than mere objects. As we saw earlier, he had even written a song *Farewell to Jesus*, a reference to his old guitar that he'd named 'Jesus'. He had named his new guitar Josephine. Meanwhile, as we also touched on earlier, Alex, had received, as a 21st birthday present from his grandmother, a handmade guitar, which he still played and cited as one of his most important possessions.

For Andrew even a shirt had some meaning in relation to his musical identity:

> My Guatemalan shirt – it's my festival shirt. It's baggy and it's got threads hanging
> off it all over the place, it's falling apart but that's...gone a long way with me, been
> through some great times...

On the whole however, it appeared that memories of great experiences were ultimately of far greater value than objects:

> The souvenir is the memory of it...life is a journey and what you collect on the way
> isn't objects, you can only collect memories and make an impression and be
> remembered by other people for things that you do really, that's what life's all
> about...any objects that are there are all just transient...
> (Andrew)

Andrew selected as one of his significant life moments a gig in York with his band *Bryter Layter*:

> Having my brother there...I'd performed in front of him so many times...but he'd
> never seen me play the guitar...He said, "well I knew you could sing our kid but I'd

no idea you could play the guitar like that I'm just blown away", and he was in tears, so that was another one of those moments...

In Kate's case, newspaper cuttings of gig reviews and programmes for prestigious gigs she had played at were kept as mementoes and triggered associated anecdotes. She showed me programmes of her first festival appearance:

> It was the first band, it was our first photo session...I just remember it so
> clearly...We were doing a lot of gigs at the time

Recordings of appearances and performances were often as important as recordings of songs. In Andrew's case, for example, a video recording of a television appearance on New Faces in 1988 with his first group *Ad Nauseum*: was kept as a significant life achievement. He emphasised the important detail that his comedy hero, Spike Milligan was on the panel. He also recounted details of the shopping trip they went on in London where they had clothes bought for them. He remembered the small details such as the fact that they were paid £222 pounds each for 3 and-a-half minutes for the appearance.

For Andrew a recurring theme in his life story was his feeling of not being able to relate to people:

> I only ever understood people on a musical level really...at the time...I just didn't
> know how to relate any other way

Listening to the songs of *Ad Nauseum* triggered memories of this ongoing life story theme. He commented that relationships between the band members were only really based around the music. There were no relationships outside of the music. This led Andrew to talk about the time when he did some work experience at college in a London recording studio:

> I didn't know how to relate to the people in the studio...until...the studio bloke went
> off for a meeting...they left me in the studio with a guy who'd been recording some
> vocals, and...he sat on the piano, and I sat down and played some stuff, and we
> jammed together, and suddenly we were like we'd known each other for years, that's
> the only way I could relate to people...

Because of this general theme in his life, the value of audio documents was far greater than photographs in Andrew's case:

> These [the tapes] are my photograph albums cos I haven't really got many photograph albums, I didn't take pictures cos I wasn't visual, I was auditory, that was my...thing, so...this is a record of who I was at the time, cos I don't really remember who I was apart from that.

This is an excellent example of the way in which, for Andrew, as with many other musicians, the primary (or perhaps the only) documents of the self emerged in a musical form. It also shows how strong the storied musical identity can be, underpinning and sometimes predominating all aspects of identity.

In Dave's case, a recording of himself at eight-years old playing the guitar was also an important life history document for Dave. On the recording of himself practising a piece, Dave could be heard saying, "have I got it right yet?". He wanted to include this on his new album as an important memory.

> And that bit is going to go on the album...and then it'll come into something now, what we're doing now

On the inside of his album cover he also had many pictures of himself as a child so the theme of songs as autobiography underpinned the album. Recordings of himself together with a fellow musician and friend, Gavin, who was seven years older than him, were important to Dave because the two of them they were now playing music together in Dave's band:

> So that is kind of special in its' own right, because we're now working together which is wonderful...

Another musical performance that Dave played in the interview was a secret recording that his father made of him playing some classical guitar after having had a few lessons. Listening to this particular recording prompted Dave to remember that his guitar teacher at that time told him he didn't have a natural ability. It was this event that Dave said had knocked his confidence and planted doubt in his head about

his own ability. He described this as a trigger which prompted him to give up playing again until he was in his twenties.

Memories and documents were often related to significant musical others in the life story. For Kate, for example, it was Tom, an enigmatic and charismatic performer she had played with in the past for many years. He had died during the course of the research. I interviewed Kate a few months after his death:

> I found some tapes…What he used to do was stick a few songs down on tape and send it to us and somehow I've ended up with all those tapes…we all [*Strungout Sisters* who used to be his backing band] went…

Attending Tom's funeral had reminded Kate of the many different musicians she had met through him:

> It was kind of weird because…I suppose we didn't realise…it reminded us just how many people we met when we were with Tom and how many people knew us…

Kate talked about a planned tribute gig where old musical acquaintances and friends of Tom would play his music 'I think that'll be a good way of marking his…influence on everybody'. One of Kate's most valued documents was the one and only demo tape her band and Tom did together with a caricature Tom had drawn on the front cover:

> I reflect on it quite a lot and I'm glad that I've got recorded stuff that we've done…

Summary

> It is in the first instance, to every man, a matter of urgent personal importance to 'describe' his experience, because this is literally a remaking of himself, a creative change in his personal organisation, to include and control the experience…The artist works on the material until it is 'right', but when the material is right he also is right: the art-work has been made and the artist has remade himself, in a continuous process…he has worked on the material until it retransmits, to himself, his

experience; or that he has discovered, by working on the material a new kind of experience, which he has in effect learned from it

(Williams, 1961:42-3)

We have seen in this chapter that songs are connected with a heightened sense of reflection on everyday life but also about key events in the life story. Only through analysis of the relationship between song and subject transforms the song from a series of inert sentences or a mere dehumanised textual object, into an utterance: a social, communicative form stuffed full of autobiographical but also social meaning. It also importantly presents something malleable in the way that its interpretation can vary. As Negus and Pickering highlight:

...the value of approaching creativity in terms of the communication of experience is that it enables us to counter text-based and artist-centred approaches to creativity at the same time as challenging any assumption that creativity is solely about an act of appreciation or interpretation. It enables us to keep in mind creativity as a relational process...

(Negus and Pickering, 2004:ix)

They add:

The artwork or cultural product is not simply a fixed object to be consumed...It is an event, situated in the flow of time and occurring in a broader context of culture and history...

(Negus and Pickering, 2004:43)

We have also seen the value of musical documents and mementoes as triggers of memories and moments in the musicians' lives. The memories and moments selected tend to be those that support the notion of 'the struggle' to become a true musician or at least the struggle to tell an authentic musical life story.

The telling of the life story through songs and significant musical moments, which are always acts of communication, brings home the point that the private and the public are interlinked and never separate spheres. Songs are littered with others, whether partners, family members, friends. Musical moments too are generally related to

190

significant others in the musicians' lives. Homing in on the creative acts of individuals and their autobiographies isn't a move towards individualism but rather an elucidation of individual creativity as a social phenomenon:

> ...The ostensibly 'private' sphere of music use is part and parcel of the cultural constitution of subjectivity, part of how individuals are involved in constituting themselves as social agents
> (DeNora, 2000:47)

CHAPTER EIGHT: NETWORK, COMMUNITY AND THE MARKETISED MUSICAL SELF

Introduction

Musicians on the acoustic music scene found themselves in a continuously contradictory situation. While this was in many ways a local and close-knit community, it was also predominated by solo musicians, mainly singer songwriters, many of whom were struggling to achieve recognition as serious artists. Ultimately this meant that musicians had to deal with an ongoing contradictory value system: being an equal member of a close musical community on the one hand whilst trying to advance their own reputations and make the right contacts to get ahead on the other. This chapter examines the various aspects of this paradox. After taking a cursory glance at some of the corporate aspects of acoustic music, the first part of the chapter looks specifically at the ways in which music makers promote themselves, asking, is the industry discourse of self-promotion a threat to the uniquely storied self? I will particularly focus on the impact of the World Wide Web on this area. The second part examines the area of networking: to what extent were the musicians forced to be self-advancing and how did this process work? In the third part I return to the overarching theme of everyday struggle by examining the bread-and-butter economics of managing musicianship on a day-to-day level and its impact on the musical identity. The final part then poses the question of to what extent these factors pose a threat to the notion of a reciprocal musical community.

The wider corporate nature of acoustic music

In order to get an idea of the corporate discourse prevalent in acoustic music culture we can look at wider examples from general press coverage of acoustic music plus publications such as 'Acoustic' magazine. The emphasis on 'gear' and technical issues exemplified the strong aspects of the rock ideology that ran through acoustic music. It was somewhat surprising to discover the extent to which corporate rationality had crept into 'acoustic' publications. The foreword to 'acoustic' magazine (the UK's only acoustic guitar magazine) June/July 2005 was largely a sales pitch for quality acoustic guitars, which included the following spiel on how

things were looking good for the consumer and the suggestion that different guitars contained different songs:

> In the past, I've heard players grumble that they are "not very good players", and follow up their self-evaluation with a comment about only having a "beaten up old" something with "rusty strings". Disengaging the brain's tact button for a second or two, one could reply that "you're not a very good player because your guitar is not very good and it's holding you back". Of course, that may not necessarily be the case, but it's been my experience that an upgrade to a better instrument is the catalyst for a chain reaction. Higher quality instruments are easier to play, offer greater rewards, and as a result encourage the owner to play more often, thereby improving technique and repertoires. If you are a songwriter, some even claim that there are new songs on each new guitar. The good news is – it has never been better for the consumer. Higher spec guitars made of quality materials are now within the reach of even the most modest of budgets–so what are you waiting for? You know you want to...
>
> (Acoustic magazine June/July 2005)

This spiel really exemplifies the commercial pull on acoustic music. To what extent did this filter down to the grass-roots though? It was certainly the case that guitars were very important commodities and status symbols in the acoustic music world. A number of local acoustic musicians had a strong interest in discussing different guitar makes and attending guitar shows. Sometimes gigs were connected with the promotion of certain makes of guitar. These were often through connections with the local music shop. Andrew talked about one such gig. In this case the purchase of a particular brand of guitar had secured Andrew a gig.

> That began... as a demonstration gig for Lowden guitars, and it's Eric Roach is the main man... and...Dan at Sheehan's, I don't know if he's anything to do with organising it, but Eric Roach did the acoustic Avalon, and I think it's through Lowden guitars, and Dan knows them quite well, that they were looking for somebody else to...to play on the same bill and somebody who played a Lowden, and...they knew I'd just bought one cos I bought it off them, actually direct from Lowden at the guitar shop, through Sheehans, and Dan's pushed me forward for...this is the first of two, there's another one in September, which is a Lowden

demo. So hopefully that's going to, that's going to yield some good results. I'm
going to get more work from Lowden as well which should be nice

Narvaez, in his discussion of Canadian amateur blues guitarists, highlights the
consumption element attached to acoustic guitars:

> Some guitars to be sure, may also serve as status objects of conspicuous consumption.
> Over half of the informant pool cited Martin or Gibson guitars, the two oldest most
> prestigious and expensive commercial guitar makes in the US, as their 'dream' guitar.
> (Narvaez, 2001:34).

This consumption aspect was echoed in the Leicester acoustic scene. I came across
two local musicians who had each spent over £2500 on an acoustic guitar; one of
them had done so after re-mortgaging his house. However, challenging the idea that
it was all about having the most expensive instrument, Narvaez points out that often,
'[t]he primary reasons offered for this choice…were based on sonic considerations,
not price or prestige' (ibid.) This latter point is supported by the fact that Dave
borrowed a guitar from another older local musician, which cost only £40 in the
1960s but it had exactly the sound Dave wanted.

8.1 Promotional culture and the projection of the self
Unlike on traditional folk scenes, there were strong elements of self-promotion on the
acoustic scene. In part we can see this as clearly related to the necessarily
individualistic and self-oriented nature of the singer-songwriter; the predominant type
of musician on the acoustic scene.

To an extent the contemporary singer-songwriter with their need to 'bare the soul' to
an audience, has also to sell themselves as a person and an authentic artist. This
emphasis on self-presentation also reflects the wider promotional culture and
commercialism that pervades contemporary western society. The music business,
even down to a grass roots level, is ultimately a marketplace in which people sell
themselves. There are also more sociological reasons behind the rapid growth of this
self-promotional climate however. There is a clear correlation between the rise of
self-promotion and advances in technology. In the last decade especially,

technological developments have enabled musicians to become much more self-sufficient. For example, today, a website can be set up, a professional quality CD recorded, produced, printed and duplicated (complete with artwork etc.) solely by the music maker. These advances have meant that musicianship has become a more autonomous and personal thing than it was in the past, when musicians would have to seek the help of others (agents, managers etc.) to promote themselves (see Cohen, 1991: 69). Significantly, these changes have blurred the boundaries between the private/personal and the public/social. On the Leicester acoustic scene, while there were still ways in which individual music makers were helped by promoters, agents, and fellow musicians, most had clearly managed to become relatively autonomous through the acquisition of home technologies and the development of the necessary skills to utilise them. The most important of these, particularly with regard to the presentation and promotion of the self, is the World Wide Web and more specifically personal web pages.

Websites as self promotional tools

Books such as Barrow and Newby's *Inside the Music Business* (1995) and Keith Negus's *Producing Pop* (1992) emphasise both the structural constraints on the creative autonomy of music makers and the ways through which musicians are moulded, almost exclusively, by the music industry moguls. Although these texts focused on signed artists, it is significant nevertheless that they were published before the World Wide Web really started to make a significant impact. The Web has given birth to the phenomenon of totally self-authored websites and subsequently self-marketed musicians. In one sense we can view this development as a democratisation of music culture. In another sense however it has drawn local music cultures more into the corporate culture of the music industry with more musicians constructing an image or conforming to the norms of the corporate music industry scripts of self-promotion. Thus the global discourse of the music industry predominates. This is particularly interesting in relation to the genre of acoustic music, with its emphasis on authenticity and its relationship to folk/roots music. The Web presents a challenge to the idea of acoustic-based music being a last bastion of music that exists outside of the culture industries.

In general, the emergence of the Web has enabled musicians to present their privately constructed selves as a public reality. DeNora's concept of 'introjection', or the presentation of self to self, consequently becomes 'public projection'. Whereas previously musicians would have to wait for reviews from other bodies or individuals in order to have a picture of themselves painted to a wider public, these advances have meant that private achievements such as the completion of an independently recorded album become publicly shared achievements. With the help of Mp3 files on web pages, musicians' songs are available for public consumption by a potentially global audience. Status and reputation can now be, in extreme cases, self-invented, but at the very least hyperbolised. The kind of mythology of the self (see McAdams) we have seen in the life stories of musicians is further inflated within the discourse of personal web pages. This mythology is appended through the validation and support of friends and musical contacts. Advice may well be taken from others, but on the acoustic scene it tended to be others within one's immediate musical community rather than from outside professional music industry figures. For example, Dave demonstrated the influence from close contacts on what kind of image he should present to the public:

> Phil who's doing the website, thinks you ought be able to log on and then after you've logged off, know more about me, whereas Neil thinks, log on think who is David W, all that you see is pictures of me, pictures of the band and the music, and that's it...so you come away knowing fuck all about David W but you see what I look like and you see the music, which could add mystery...

The World Wide Web has meant that local musicians who may be 'big fish in small ponds' can now present themselves merely as big fish. The language found on acoustic musicians' websites was often bold, and while rarely fabricated, was frequently exaggerated to imply fame. In the case of many Leicester acoustic musicians local reputations were reconstructed as national reputations. The following website excerpts from four different Leicester acoustic artists, demonstrates this point:

> ...quite possibly the finest singer/songwriter to break out of the UK acoustic/roots scene in the past few years

... has released several nationally acclaimed albums.

Having wowed audiences up and down the country with his guitar playing, vocal quality and sense of fun...S has bowed to popular pressure and brought his own songs to the fore.

Welcome to the...website where you can find out all about one of Britain's finest new bands

While these were by no means blatant lies they were certainly sweeping statements that implied far more musical clout and recognition than was often the case in reality. In truth most of these acts were only widely recognised in Leicester and the surrounding area.

Reputations and status were also enhanced by claims to authenticity. This was usually done by direct comparisons with respected names; the names would usually be serious folk or rock artists. This was more than just comparison however. It acted as an implicit marker of status and authenticity. The following examples illustrate this point:

Visiting places only inhabited by the likes of Van Morrison and Mike Scott

J's music has drawn comparisons with the likes of Paul Weller, Gin Blossoms, Neil Finn and The Eels.

D.W – Every bit an equal to David Gray, Damien Rice and James Blunt...his beautifully intimate music shares the same fine qualities of Jeff Buckley and Nick Drake, but combined with a unique contemporary feel that's all David's own

Discussing this practice of dropping names of famous musicians/songwriters in the promotion of themselves, Dave argues why this is important: 'I'm not any of those people but there are elements of those people in there...It just helps people to pigeonhole you...rather than "oh, it's country". As we see in the last line of Dave's website spiel above, another seemingly important trait to convey was that of uniqueness and individuality. This implied authenticity, as did words like 'tradition',

197

'roots' and 'storyteller', which cropped up in the spiel of acoustic performers very frequently. The excerpts below from three different local musicians demonstrate this:

> He plays acoustic guitar and sings original songs, which, if it had to be described by one word, is "rootsy". With an eye firmly on "tradition" and the vast heritage of acoustic guitar players the planet is blessed with, he is always trying to develop something fresh and exciting.

> He accompanies his strong, earthy voice with the guitar and mandola, both of which he plays in a distinct and individual way.

> ...songs reveal a strength of commitment to his craft, an individual voice in an increasingly homogenised world and a readiness to meet the future on his own terms

> ...He's a romantic, a creator, a storyteller, and most importantly a performer of the finest nature...No stab in the classifying dark can quite capture the synthesis and musical attack of this artist

Michael Brocken has discussed the way that folk musicians have to include something deeper and more historical and cultural in their own promotion, something that appears to reach beyond the individual. Examples given by Brocken include 'folksinger, storyteller and community musician', 'a cerebral musician', 'spirited sets and honest songs...and love of the tradition'
(Brocken, 2003:132)

Dyer (1991) wrote about the way that adjectives such as 'sincere', 'immediate', 'spontaneous' 'real' and 'direct' and 'genuine' predominated fan literature about film stars and pop performers. Certain adjectives also denoted a performer authenticity. 'Passionate' was a typical example. One artist's claim on his website that *passion* is not a word you hear very often was actually found frequently in other musicians' websites:

> Passion: Not a word you hear all that often any more when it comes to music, but singer-songwriter, PM has it by the bucket load

198

A passionate performer, his powerful voice and stage presence immediately attracts attention.

[A]…must for fans of passionate, literate song-writing

The vast majority of websites also featured galleries: some of which were fairly expansive. These also acted as a visual tool for promoting reputation and status. For example, galleries usually featured photographs with connotations of serious musicianship involving, for example, musicians in plush recording studios or the band playing together, or occasionally the musician/band pictured with famous people or at nationally recognised settings.

The Impact of the 'myspace.com' Phenomenon

Although the myspace.com website only began to take off towards the end of my research period, it is crucial to acknowledge the further impact this has had on the issue of self promotion via the web. myspace has enabled a far greater deal of instant recognition for musicians and in some ways has enabled musicians to have the 'feeling of fame' and at the very least concrete evidence (in textual form) of peer recognition.

Of course My Space is, on the one hand, a great example of the democratisation of music in that, in theory at least, it bypasses the major record companies and hence diminishes their power and control over individual music makers. However, the process we have discussed above about musicians being pulled into a certain music business discourse of self-promotion is even more magnified here. Indeed one could argue that rather than emphasising the uniqueness of each artist, there are equal processes of homogenisation at work here whereby there is a universally accepted way of packaging and presenting the self to the world.

One local musician in his late forties, and very well known on the acoustic and the wider music scene, enthused animatedly about having 'rock chicks' in Los Angeles commenting on his songs. In one sense this spoke volumes as in many ways myspace has accelerated the process of a culturally homogenous packaging of the self not to mention a homogenous culture of self promotion. I will discuss the implications of

myspace in greater detail in the concluding section of this thesis. For now I will turn to CD covers as promotional tools.

CD covers

In contrast to the image-conscious bands featured in a study such as Cohen's on the Liverpool rock scene (1991: 80), one might have expected acoustic musicians not to be particularly image-conscious. However, as we have already touched on in the chapter on performance, there was a particular kind of image projected; what I have earlier termed a *constructed unconstructedness*, which connoted authenticity. This was particularly clear on CD covers of local singer songwriters, most of which demonstrated a very clear image: that of the archetypal serious musician – e.g. contemplative, reflective, tortured. As Negus comments:

> Rock acts and 'serious' artists are often photographed on location...like Tanita Tikaram or Simple Minds they might appear on a hillside with hair blowing in the wind, wistfully staring away into an open expanse of sky. The background provides a series of connotations, which reinforce the artist's musical identity
> (Negus, 1992: 67)

Taking a random selection of twenty five CDs of fourteen local songwriters, it was possible to identify two general types of CD covers: The first type featured the musician's face, which in 80% of cases was serious or thoughtful and looking into space rather than at the camera. The majority of covers featured the musician's face (15/25). Only two of these fifteen covers contained a smiling face. The second type consisted of a picture or photograph, which in well over half of the cases featured a natural landscape. The expression was almost always moody, wistful or contemplative. Only five out of the twenty-five contained neither the musician nor a natural landscape. Below are some typical examples of local acoustic singer songwriters' CD covers.
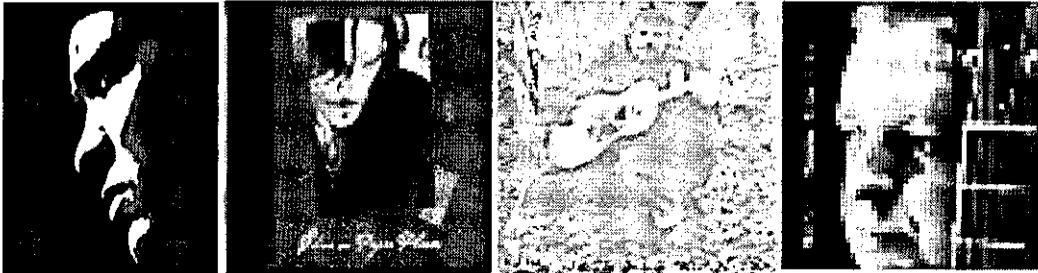
And below: Some examples of famous contemporary acoustic singer songwriters' CD covers. As we can see, the particular image of the singer songwriter that is promoted is similar at a local and a global level. This demonstrates that the pre-scripted music industry discourse is a visual as well as a textual script.
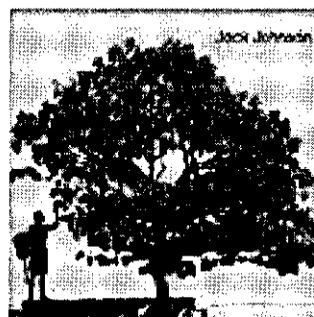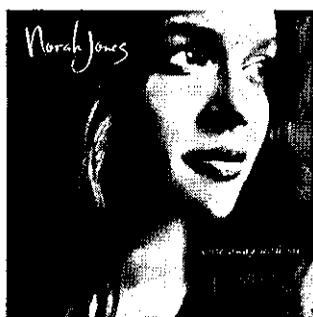
As we will see in the next part of this chapter, despite the autonomous world of the web and self-produced CDs, musicians still had to network with the right people in a face-to-face manner, and subsequently make compromises or changes to fit in with the industry norms. However, it is clear that even the unsigned local musician will today often already have a fairly strong public image that, to a large extent, they themselves have projected by visual means such as web pages or CD covers. Of course it is not clear just how public this image this will have become, but importantly they are now in the public sphere of global communication, which gives the impression to the musician, their peers and their potential public that their audience stretches beyond the often small number of people they may get at their gigs.

8.2 Networking and making contacts

Another important area in terms of the business of musicianship was the issue of networking. There are all kinds of ways in which Howard Becker's notion of art worlds as co-operative comes under threat by the pressure to make important contacts and to develop one's cultural resources within any art world. As Negus and Pickering point out:

> If you want to publish a novel, or get a record contract...your chances may well be shaped by a certain talent and acquired repertoire of skills. But there are specific positions that have to be assumed in different fields in order to realise such possibilities. And as other people will be competing, the chance of realising such possibilities may be more to do with struggles over position than with any skill, proficiency or talent. It may have more to do with professional manoeuvrings, and wheeler dealing, than the sustained application of creative skills or inspiration (Pickering and Negus, 2004:12)

In contrast to the more abstract realm of self-promotion, the process of actually making contacts and chasing bookings was more concrete, often involving an arduous set of social tasks. A musician's position in the local hierarchy played a big part in the levels of work involved in this. For the acoustic musicians who possessed a definite local fan base, a strong network of contacts or other forms of support, e.g. an agent or manager, this was not as laborious a process as it was for those with small fan bases and limited support networks. For example, over the course of the research

period, Dave had built up both a self-made network and an unintended/word-of-mouth network. This meant that sometimes there was little effort required on his part to secure gigs. For example, for the Stamford festival, the Summer Sundae and One Big Sunday festivals in Leicester, Dave didn't have to do much (e.g. sending demo CDs, making phone calls etc.). He got all these gigs through word-of-mouth:

> ...and like this one big Sunday...somebody put my name forward, think it was Andrew, so...relatively I haven't had to do much work at all locally...It's the old thing again it's the word-of-mouth thing. Word-of-mouth is fantastic...I mean going back to the Summer Sundae; I got that gig without having a website, without having an album, and...I'm at this stage which isn't high but it's getting there and I've only had an album out four weeks and I ain't ever had a website, it's just literally gone on word-of-mouth.

Finnegan described the process of rock artists securing gigs in Milton Keynes:

> Performers themselves often took the initiative in approaching the pub, sometimes over the telephone, sometimes coming to see the publican or sounding him out over a drink. The landlord then usually checked their suitability by asking around, hearing them at some other local venue, or requesting a sample tape. Equally often performers came thru personal contacts...
> (Finnegan, 1989: 233)

It would certainly seem that, on the acoustic scene, there is a lot more evidence of the musical grapevine working for those musicians with a certain amount of status without them having to put in too much effort. Finnegan's account seems somewhat outdated now. There is no mention of the complex issues of powerful groups or influential individuals by Finnegan here either. Dave's experience of securing a gig with an internationally recognised acoustic artist demonstrated the typical kind of process that could occur in terms of the musical grapevine helping to secure gigs. It showed that word-of-mouth and knowing the right people could be far more important than self-promotion. In this instance the chain of events was such:

1. Sound engineer at music venue in Derby tells the promoter of the pub about the Dave gig.

2. Promoter tells an internationally famous musician he knows, about him.

3. International musician comes to see Dave gig at Musician.

4. Eventually Dave secures tour with international musician.

Similar results paid off from supporting an emerging nationally touring performer who then passed on details of venues, phone numbers, PA set ups etc. Despite this word-of-mouth process, there was a still much hard work that went into the continuous business of making sure enough gigs were coming in:

> Been on the phone to loads of different people: *The Musician, The Richard Attenborough Centre, The Guildhall*...lots of venues; support acts, being the main acts; any gigs that I can get for January so I start off with like yeah I've got twelve, thirteen, however many gigs...let's keep the ball rolling...

Dave outlined the typical progression from minor gigs to major gigs over the years:

> [Y]ou go from the open mic nights to getting your own gigs, and from getting your own gigs to raising your profile in your own town...to other places in the Midlands...and then from the Midlands to playing festivals and then from the festivals getting support acts and then...to eventually the main picture is *The Borderline* 'David W with support' and that could take a week or it could take ten years...

As we can see from Dave's case, building up a network and a reputation was crucial, but also playing an integral part in the local scene usually ensured that one was part of the grapevine. Andrew was often a primary port of call for festival and event organisers because he ran the City Acoustic Club. Often, however, Andrew's role meant that he was used as conduit to other performers. It did not seem to have propelled his solo musical career forward to any great extent however. Andrew told me that the management of one particular major venue had certain favourites, and that he wasn't one of them. The extent to which people were booked and rebooked was, in part, to do with a particular musician's connections to the management and not merely their level of ability.

In terms of local music festivals Andrew explained that the musical grapevine was very important. Key figures on the scene tended to dominate the choices made for festival line-ups:

> I think all festivals are like that though...Local festivals are...the big ones run on money and big names but the little ones, yeah it is who knows who and who knows what's going on...so...if you're going to try and put music on at an event like that, you've got to...you've got to grab a hold of the people who are in charge of various pockets of music in different parts of the town...

In one instance of a local festival Andrew showed that local festival line-ups could depend on the personal tastes and personal contacts of one person.

> the organiser...picked us, she picked all of the bands that were on because she liked them, it...her own personal festival really...She came to the *Guildhall* gig, loved it and that's why we got the booking, and through the drumming with Fitzy (the band percussionist) so she's sort of connected to all that

Kate secured a *Summer Sundae* festival slot partly through her friendship with Andrew. She accepted that knowing the right people was the main way of getting these kinds of gigs. Although the local acts were billed as the City Acoustic Club, Kate had not actually attended for a long time. There were several others on the bill who were not regular attendees either but who got the gig through knowing Andrew:

> One person said "How come you've got that gig cos you never go the acoustic club" but he was quite right. [It was billed as the acoustic club stage] 'I have played at the Musician a lot and I felt I had as much right as anyone else...and I did go and perform there a couple of times before to justify my place.
> [laughter]

Not all contacts were made through local networking however. Dave, for example, had received some interest from an A&R man from London who just happened to be surveying the local scene in Leicester and saw Dave play. This was the only instance of fortuitous contact I came across with the research participants however, so it would seem to be quite a rare occurrence. Crucially, it was interesting to note the increased

amount of categorisation and industry ideology that crept in just from the brief interaction Dave had with this person:

> He's interested in getting something acoustic... ...It's the 24 plus market. He says at the moment he hears nothing that's radio friendly but that's not to say that it's crap, it's just to say that let's keep working and see what we get...

Ben, a performer with an acoustic duo, emphasised just how rare this kind of situation was however. His cynical account highlights just how important self-promotion actually is for those who want to stand any chance of 'making it':

> We were quite realistic in that we'd both been in bands when we were younger...I mean the whole thing about you're going to be in a band, you're going to make it. It's all bollocks. The bands that make it are the ones that go out their way to make it and they're the ones that you know they want it they go for it, they contact people, you don't get discovered, they write that bit for the music press later on...

Big gigs which performers saw as potential breakthroughs were often followed by a disappointing lull. I asked Dave if anything had happened since his main stage festival appearance:

> No – in a nutshell...It's only been three or four weeks but I want it yesterday you know I'm thinking...people are going to email me, the phone's going to ring and nothing's happened and I'm thinking well I'm just an average singer-songwriter on a record label that nobody knows...

Dave described the hard graft of self-promotion. A lot of it, he said, was being in the right place at the right time reiterating Ben's earlier point. Dave believed that only through out and out hunger and ambition was it possible to become successful as a musician:

> Getting your arse in gear to have the luck.... People always say, oh it was just lucky, I bumped into so and so, but you were actually at that place...getting your name out there...you were ain the right place because you had the initiative and incentive to want to be in that place...Now that I'm on this bit I've just got to keep doing more

and more and more and more…until it's relentless and absolutely boring…I would be amazed if anybody just did a CD, sent it off with no feedback from any record company or any music paper, without having any fan base, to be signed on the strength of 'I think it's a great album'. I would be amazed! I think everybody that's done an album and that's gone anywhere is by sheer dog determination…

8.3 The economics of musicianship on a day-to-day level

On average, acoustic musicians' pay could range from free drinks and a taxi home to £100+ for the average gig. The average payment for a local gig would usually be less than £50, and less if playing with other musicians. It was rare for a solo acoustic musician to earn more than £100 for one gig and often appearances would involve a night as an unpaid support act or as one of a number of performers. In the case of pubs and bar gigs the musician received a set fee, but at a defined music venue such as *The Musician* pub the performer's fee came directly from the door takings. Obviously this meant that self-promotion was all the more crucial if one wanted to be paid.

As we have seen earlier it was common for local musicians to fund their serious musical career with a more commercial or mainstream musical career. Dave for example performed as a 'cabaret' singer in a duo at working men's clubs. Kate played in a string and vocal trio at weddings and corporate functions. Another solo acoustic performer played traditional Irish music at weddings and parties, and another worked as a children's entertainer. This work could bring in anything from £50 to £200 for an individual musician for one night's entertainment. For example, for the average club gig Dave could get £150 (£300 in total for his duo). For a pub gig he could get £80. It usually worked out around £200 per week then for five or six hours entertaining. Obviously from an economic point of view the performers who played mainstream music tended to be better off than those who stuck to their own singer-songwriter material:

> I mean…some days I think, this singer songwriter thing is just a ball ache. It would be so nice to just think I've got all week to just sit here and do nothing. All I've got to do is sing for an hour and a half on a Saturday and Sunday night and come away with a load of money and I've not even got a play a guitar; all I've got to do is stick

that minidisk in and that's my life...Most people would think, you work for three hours and you get two hundred and odd quid and you can sit around and that's it... [but] I forget how much work went into it...
(Dave)

Equally those, like Dave, who played in a duo for his mainstream act, were slightly better off than those who played in large bands. For example, one local eight piece band performing Irish folk and rock covers would receive anything between £500 to £1000 for party or wedding gigs, which would work out at something between £70 to £120 each. However, when taking into consideration the time spent moving heavy P.A equipment and setting up, plus rehearsals and the hiring of rehearsal rooms, the average band probably invested far more time in logistical activities than the solo musician. A solo musician or a duo could just bring a small portable P.A and then set up and sound check within a comparably short amount of time. Additionally rehearsals could take place in a private house rather than having to hire rehearsal rooms.

As Finnegan (1989) highlighted, many musicians create a kind of myth in which they somehow manage to persuade themselves that they are making money when actually they are losing money, but the combination of a good gig with decent pay at the end of the night seemed to make it worthwhile. Musicians on the acoustic scene would frequently have to make calculations about whether a gig was worthwhile or not. The decision would be based on time as well as financial considerations. Alex, for example, said that he would still be very reluctant to play gigs too far outside Leicester (e.g. Coventry, Nottingham etc.):

If it's a gig that's finishing...a pub finishes at quarter past eleven then it's a drive home...for a pub gig playing support or something like that, you know, even if it's only half an hour away on the motorway by the time you've packed your gear up and got home, I'd just find it very exhausting...

Certain venues were noted as being bad payers. At one particular bar, a relatively new venue in Leicester, a few performers faced social awkwardness at the end of the evening as they had to wait around to get paid. There was often a lot of prevarication

in this particular venue, which resulted in the performer having to be very blunt in order to get paid. Dave talked about the second time that this happened at the same venue:

> Again there was a bit of an uncomfortable moment again when we asked for the money...he goes to till, comes away from the till, goes to the CD rack, goes downstairs, comes back, goes to the till...ten minutes has gone by. You shouldn't have to be in the position where you have to ask for the money...Why is it right, you get somebody in to service your washing machine or...service your video or anything...you don't say oh, thanks a lot mate great and they're just hanging around...yeah it was really nice, I'll slip you some money next time...what's the difference? There is no difference you're providing a service

A few local musicians got to know this particular venue for being reluctant payers and stopped playing there altogether. Word-of-mouth operated quite effectively in these situations as people began to hear about this place and developed a wary attitude towards it.

At a different Leicester venue, Alex also highlighted the awkwardness and ambiguity regarding payment at the end of a night when he'd played support:

> At the end of day and...well, nobody really offered me any money at the end of doing it and...I didn't feel I could go and ask...there's somebody on the door, there's the main act to pay, there's the sound man to pay, there's ten punters in...that doesn't upset me because there was other people probably needed the money more than me, but...it's a lot of effort to put in.

Alex went on to measure this in terms of time invested versus rewards received:

> I could still be doing music without doing gigs like that...and again well I practised, worked up to do that gig, quite a lot of time went into it...Is it the optimal use of my time? Then I think, well that's fine I did a gig, but if I was chasing gigs, if all I was doing was chasing gigs like that all the time it just seems a bit of a daft thing to do...

It was clear then that payment was a big issue for the acoustic musicians. Some
venues did not offer any payment. These were rare however. Slightly more common
were the venues that offered payment after a musician had played an initial gig for
free. Then there were those venues that gave the musician free drinks. Dave
recounted his initial reluctance to do a gig at such a venue in which the offer was free
drinks and a taxi home. His argument being that he would have worked for three
hours and therefore expected to receive proper payment. Steve was another local
performer who saw gigs for no pay as an affront to the artist. This gripe was more
common amongst those musicians for whom music was a primary means of income.
However, it seemed to be as much to do with the principle of having entertained a
crowd and brought people in, and an expectation of recompense for that, as it was to
do with financial gain:

> Again it was like well you play for free but we'll give you free beer. Well OK that's
> cool but (A) I don't drink while I'm playing and (B) I don't drink because I'm driving
> so can my mate have the beer, "No, he can't have the beer, it's for artists only…so if
> Neil hadn't have been there I'd have unplugged and I'd have fucked off but N says,
> "Why are you here?" and I said to promote Dave W and he went "Well there you go
> then. Shut the fuck up and get back on the stage"
> (Dave)

Although Dave was persuaded by Neil to continue on this occasion, he was
determined not to play at this particular venue again. Dave highlighted the unseen
logistical preparations for a gig that seemed to be overlooked by some venues.

> I won't go back there again, even though I loved it cos it's not worth my time…there
> has to be a cut off point where you say hang on a minute enough is enough. This is
> an eight hour day. By the time you've got in the van, unloaded the gear, put two new
> sets of strings on; that's 20 quid: time effort, you've played for hour and a half you've
> packed the van up, it's one o'clock. What have you got to show for it: you've got
> two more fans. OK, great. Then you get a telephone bill come through the door the
> next morning like £200, like how the fuck am I going to pay that so there's optimism
> but there's also an element of realism in it as well…Great if you've got a 9 to 5 job,
> fantastic, but if you're trying to be a singer songwriter and make a living from it, it's

fucking hard!...It's putting food on the table that's what it's doing; it's paying for new strings...

Dave found this even more difficult with the knowledge of how much he could earn performing a cabaret set:

> ...Whereas if I went up the road and did a covers set, people would love it and not only that I'd get hundred and fifty quid, no questions asked, thank you very much, you were great; brilliant, when can we book you in again...Every time that I do a David W gig: singer songwriter stuff, that means cancelling a paid cabaret gig so effectively I'm working for nothing. Now I think there should be now, at least if they're...asking me to do a support act then I should be paid for it...

It is important to point out that Dave was in a minority as someone who was trying to do music full-time. The majority of the local acoustic musicians had part-time or full-time jobs and the remainder were unemployed or studying. Both Chloe and Andrew, however, were in the position of doing fairly unrewarding full-time jobs but seriously contemplating the idea of doing music full time[22]:

> ...It just goes round and round in my head and I start sort of thinking about how it could happen and it actually wouldn't be that hard to get it sorted. But it's...but it's just as I say, you know, the thought of where's the next money coming from? And how the bank would view that with me...but I know it would free me up for song writing, even if I was sort of doing weird hours you know...I mean I'm only on two hundred quid a week at work anyway, that's four gigs, but that means I'd have to get four gigs a month...for definite , it could be no less. But when I think about it that way is four gigs a month that hard? It's one a week. It's got to happen
> (Chloe)

> I'm definitely giving up my day job before the end of this year...I've got to...I'm taking the leap...yeah absolutely...yeah I just...I don't agree with the way the industry's going, I don't agree with the company any more, and I think I've been hard done by...and that spurred me on....I don't think I'm going to have enough to earn what I'm earning at the moment but......I need to get gigs. I need to have my album

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[22] In fact halfway through the research period Andrew quit his full-time job to pursue music and performing arts workshops full time.

coming out so I've got albums to sell. That, hopefully selling the albums and er...yeah even...any merchandising really...

(Andrew)

Andrew demonstrated that he had made vague calculations about the feasibility of giving up work. For Chloe the calculations were more exact and based on previous experience of 'doing the clubs'. She expressed ambivalence over whether to go back to the club scene due to certain financial considerations:

God...I mean if I could actually guarantee that I could get enough work to keep me going and pay the mortgage, you know all the hassling and phoning that I'd have to do, and also say rehearsing a 50 number set...I mean to begin with it'd only need to be a 25 number set with a duo, wouldn't need to go that far...god you know, I've got this massive book full of all the working men's clubs I used to go and sing in. I could go and just say to him, 'Look, let's forget it. Let's forget the bloody nine to five, let's just go for it, but I'm scared of doing it cos like the security of getting a regular pay cheque is just a bit hard to...Maybe the way to do it is just do it... and work...I mean some clubs they want a proper band...

Chloe's calculations were also based on the logistics of P.As and payment by specific venues:

[M]ost clubs these days aren't prepared to pay a proper band...and half the time, you have to do your own PA...I mean I've got a PA actually as it goes...it actually wouldn't be that hard to get it sorted but it's just as I say you know the thought of where's the next money coming from and how the bank would view that with me, you know doing that instead of working on a bona fide job but I know it would free me up for the song-writing...But I'm only on 200 quid a week at work anyway, that's four gigs, but that means I'd have to get four gigs a month for definite, it could be no less...

Andy was signing on at the time of our interview. He was keen to get back into temp work though. He had been playing regularly at folk clubs and acoustic clubs for the last few years but had only recently started 'hustling for gigs' in his words:

212

I've made the decision that I'm going to aim to try and go professional…It's…probably since I was about eighteen or nineteen I've become aware that it's all I really want to do…

For Alex who was in a reasonably well-paid job music full-time was a distant dream rather than a realistic consideration. It simply wasn't financially viable:

The money compared to what I do as a day job is kind of trivial…I think what I sort of mean is…it just came to me as a realisation is that this just isn't a financial proposition so you know whether I get paid fifty quid or I don't get paid anything…it's got to be…if I'm not enjoying it why am I doing it.

It was clear to see how work and general responsibilities impacted seriously on the ability to give music the attention deemed as necessary. Alex, for example, discussing his album launch gig, described the limitations of his full time job on his ability to prepare:

If you haven't got a job, you've chilled out, you get out of bed at midday and you've you know woken up, strummed a few chords had a bit of practice and you're all fired up for the gig, whereas I remember my album launch…I took the afternoon off work…I wouldn't take time off work just to do a gig, but I just felt cos I was doing like two forty minute sets with not that much preparation I wanted to be good…but you see I couldn't keep doing that.

Carly worked part time in a chemists' and was trying to make music pay in other ways. For example, she performed music in old people's homes. She expressed a strong sense of resistance to the economic pressures of daily life:

Given my financial constraints…I think I've created a small space that I can just exist in without being influenced too much by outside like things with like they just want me to use me as a financial resource for them and give them all their money… I think I am trying as much as possible to live in a way which is…helps me to…be open minded and perhaps not to become too reliant on…buying things, acquiring things. I don't want to live like that. I'd rather create things rather than just consume whatever's offered to me, just try and create something, my own space

It was not just work that had a big impact but also living situations, ties and general responsibilities. Ben highlighted this point in his description of the attenuated commitment levels of himself and his acoustic duo partner since particular life changes had occurred. Here he discusses the issue attendance at the acoustic club:

> We used to go there every week...We had a phase for probably about a year of going pretty much every week and then...I moved in with my girlfriend, Steve moved in with his and suddenly it becomes less of an issue to go out...and so it got a bit more sporadic so we just started going when we had a gig to plug...and now it's just added pressures, you know, it's work and Steve has a...one and a half year old...

In the latter half of the research period, shortly after Andrew had given up his job to pursue music full-time, he described his economic situation. Had it proved financially viable for him to have given up his day job and focus on music workshops and performing?

> ...Now I need to start taking the reigns and making it work so I can stay self-employed really...The first few months was great...I was earning more than I was earning at [the company], whereas now I'm earning far, far less...and the [workshop] stuff towards the end of the year isn't going to be as much as I thought it was...I'm expecting to get into a bit of debt before it gets better...Definitely need workshops and projects like the folklore project, which can bring in funding because as a solo performer all I can do is do a few gigs that aren't really that well paid and sell my albums to not very many people...the first gigs, the only gigs you can get to start with are really poorly paid half an hour spots here and there and you've just got to go through the grind of doing all of that, which really I should have been doing years ago and building up to the point where I could go self employed and be good enough to do it, but.... that's a continuous grind. I don't think I'm going to be famous for just being a singer-songwriter; it's going to be the projects and...the workshops...

Kate, being unemployed and a mature student, outside of her musical activities, wondered about trying to get involved in a second music related occupation so she could keep her head above water:

Most people I know do...do something else as well, have a career or a...some sort of other work...I suppose the only other people I know in a similar situation to myself is Simon and Neil. Neil does...well cos he's got his sound engineer bit as well, he...he works, but all his work is connected with music. *I'd* like to do something else as well...just sort of broader, you know, broader kind of interests...

So you wouldn't like to be...like be in Neil's position of doing music *all* the time?

[laughter] If I was earning enough money at it! I don't want to bring money into it, but you've got to live haven't you? I mean I have got...you know...I don't want to be constantly struggling to pay the rent...

Whereas Kate's goal was reasonably modest i.e. doing some other music-related activity, Dave had the idea that it was possible to get to the point where he was just living off his income from his song-writing career even without the cabaret act:

I want to be able to give up cabaret and just say all that I do is write my songs and I have a reasonable income...to be able to sustain a living by writing my own songs...that is my main goal...

8.4 The Acoustic Scene: community or competitive network?

As was the case with Ruth Finnegan's research on Milton Keynes musicians, there were many elements of co-operation and community in the Leicester acoustic scene. Howard Becker's interactionist view of art worlds as largely co-operative was echoed on the acoustic scene. There was clearly a reciprocal community operating on the Leicester acoustic scene. Equipment was lent between musicians; musicians would step in for others at short notice and, most noticeably, people played on each other's albums rarely for any money. Below I give some idea of the extent to which these reciprocal musical relationships occurred.

Dan played on Dave K's, Steve's and Dave's albums.

Dave W borrowed Dave K's highly prized guitar for recording his album.

Andy, Chloe, Kate guested on Andrew's album (harmony farm)

Chloe guested on Andy and Alex's albums.

Neil played on Steve's, Dave's, Dan's, Kate's, Dave K's albums.

Neil lent Alex his PA for gigs

Cohen's work (1991:40) on the Liverpool rock scene discussed the 'unity of audience and performers' being a particular strong characteristic in local bands' gigs whereby

> ...each band formed part of the audience for the other and leant its support orally or by assisting with equipment and sound production. Old friends who had previously been in [the] bands...also provided support. The few friends who were able and willing to attend performances regularly, did so mainly out of loyalty to the band and for the social contact and interaction occasioned by the event... (Cohen, 1991:40)

Cohen importantly adds that the connection was more than just superficial:

> ...at the same time most of them took a genuine interest in the development of the band and its music and enjoyed the experience of seeing their friends perform familiar songs, songs that assumed a particular relevance since they knew the context and personalities that produced them
> (Cohen, 1991: 40)

This was very similar to performances by Leicester musicians in this respect. Dave's band for example generally had a presence of at least ten local musicians in the audience at any one gig along with some friends, some family, and other non-musician members of his musical support network.

We can certainly see from the quotes below that the perception of the music scene as a community or even a family was strong. In the extended extract below, Chloe mentions eight different local musicians in the context of a 'community' who had helped her out significantly:

...I really do feel that the musical community...have...seen me making an effort, decided that I'm worth putting energy into, even if just with the odd encouraging word here and there you know...I mean the fact that Dan chose that guitar for me in my absence...I don't even know Dan very well, you know...the recording I did with Alex as well...As soon as I stopped saying, I want you to pay money...and being quite so precious about it all, as soon as I stopped being like that people have kind of flocked to work with me. It's...like the 'fair exchange is no robbery' kind of attitude, which is nice, a bit of barter...so I do...you know like Simon and Andrew...Andrew did loads and loads of playing for me down at The Musician... to me it's been like another family and I've needed it because with my marriage breaking up I needed something to really kind of say, "Yes! This is a great thing to do". I needed a real positive...you know needed some feedback every week to keep on saying to me, yeah this is the right way to go and they're all close personal friends now and all the stuff about...I've met big Neil. He says he wants to record one of my songs. He says he thinks it's so good he's going to record it for free which is lovely of him, whenever he gets the time! [laughter]

Two concrete examples of projects that could be observed as demonstrating the existence of a genuine music community, or at least a perception of community, were the Monkey project and The Acoustic Collective.

The monkey project

The Monkey project began as a humorous idea from a few local musicians – all staff at the local music shop – about adopting a monkey. It eventually grew into a genuine project to raise money through musical performances and Monkey themed CDs for the Monkey sanctuary: *Monkey World* in Dorset. This culminated in a trip in which a large group, including core acoustic members Dan and Andrew, actually went down to visit *Monkey World* (over 100 miles away from Leicester) and presented a cheque to them from Leicester Musicians raised from local 'Monkey' gigs and sales of 'Monkey CDs'. Around twenty people in total including families and friends made the journey. Local musicians played sets along with some acts from Dorset. According to Andrew this community was made up of a combination of the City Acoustic Club people and the staff of the local music shop:

I was on the original coach trip, loved the idea... ...then there was a gig followed up and then we said "let's make a CD" so there was a CD made and there's been a few other gigs since then and it's just sort of built...

Every year there was a Monkey night held at *The Musician* to raise money for the cause. This was a great example of a project that seemed to totally transcend any competitiveness or hierarchies and was done through a spirit of co-operation and fun. There was nothing to be gained for the musicians; just a sense of camaraderie, belonging and being part of a worthwhile project:

Nobody's earning anything from it so it's just like a...very funny hobby. There's a certain dedication to Charlie the chimp who's a great character.

The Acoustic Collective

In Cohen's Liverpool research she examined *The Fringe*: a local charity that attempted to bring all the local groups together on an album as a collective, as opposed to a bunch of commercially motivated bands, in which they would gain benefits from sharing of advice and resources. The bands were cautious and pessimistic at first but it developed into a very co-operative venture (Cohen, 1991:41). The acoustic collective in Leicester was similar in some of its aims, and though it actually had clear business aims, there were similarities in the co-operative rationale. Although it was the brainchild of one musician, Andrew, there was not the same level of initial suspicion amongst Leicester musicians as Cohen had shown from the rock musicians in her research. However, this was partly to do with the vagueness of the project: there was not the same clarity of purpose as there might be for a clearly defined charity benefit. In fact the acoustic collective was something of an abstract idea that seemed to have got lost somewhere along the line. Andrew explained to me what it entailed:

The idea is to help, support, encourage and promote local acoustic music...What I've realised is that musicians...are absolutely terrible at organising themselves. If it was going to be organised by musicians, it would fall on its arse very quickly, so...it needs somebody to grab the reins, get in professional people who can actually do the job of promoting, marketing what we have because that's how it works in the

218

industry, you get people who are good at marketing, you don't get musicians marketing themselves...

There were clearly elements in Andrew's last few sentences of the commercialisation of local music culture here and the potential threat of some kind of homogeneity. However, it was clear that there was also a spirit of co-operation and reciprocity at its heart:

> ...it doesn't have to conform to any kind of structure except that there is a central point where everybody can come and say, 'Right, but how do I do that'...or...I need transport for a gig...or...I'd like to work with such and such a musician but I don't know them...how can we arrange getting together and...all that and being, you know, possibly being an agency for...for everybody because then everybody...if you know that somebody's a musician from Leicester, and they will know exactly where they are and how to get in touch with them and...and what the going rate is...

Looking back to the part of this chapter on self-promotion, Andrew, as well as clearly revealing an instrumental attitude, reiterated his point about the importance of the musicians making themselves 'look big' i.e. promoting themselves in such a way that they looked perhaps more high status than they actually were:

> I think it's good to be part of an organisation like that...that makes you look big because that's all industry is, it's people advertised to *look* big; ...they're no more talented than... people that I know...

While community elements were clearly apparent in this project, the acoustic collective tended to be dominated by the same small pool of musicians. Despite the clear indications of an open and egalitarian community it also exemplified elements of a hierarchical structure of power relations, which shaped the social network of the acoustic scene. Andrew argued for a kind of 'trickledown effect' in which the success of certain higher status musicians through the collective would benefit the whole:

> ...if that means that some individual names get seen more...but if that happens then everybody benefits because they're all part of the same...stable, and they're going to get noticed because somebody's got noticed who's come out of the Acoustic Collective, then the Acoustic Collective name becomes synonymous with...the

various different musicians that make it big...There's a good twenty acts or bands who could be in it...have like a 'kitemark' a standard to live up to.

The corporate nature of this project was evident. Andrew actually made a business presentation to sell the idea to potential local funding bodies:

> Actually had a meeting down at Arts Training Central and had a good half dozen musicians who turned up to...and said what is it that we need: is it an agency to get people more work; a management company...what exactly do people want? And I did a little presentation with flip charts and everything...And what I learned from that was that if I wanted it to be the way that I'd set it down on the flip chart it was going to be more than I could handle on my own and it was going to cost an arm and a leg to set up and do, so I pulled it all back, pared it down to just let's just put on some gigs for now, and see where it goes from there...

Ultimately however, the acoustic collective remained something of an abstract concept rather than a structured organisation. It never really emerged into anything concrete. The logistics of it ultimately meant that it was limited to putting gigs on once a month under the banner of the acoustic collective. There was still no website after two years of it being talked about. Andrew said that the process through which he had began to realise the limitations of his initial idea. In many ways the acoustic collective epitomised the tensions between co-operative community elements on the one hand and commercial, promotional culture on the other.

Hierarchies and Networks

Having emphasised the community elements to the scene I will now look at the idea of the scene as a hierarchical network. The approach of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is instructive here. As we have seen in the chapter on performance, Bourdieu's emphasis on webs of power acts as something of a check to the largely optimistic perspectives of Becker and Finnegan. Bourdieu sees individuals within an art world as occupying particular positions in a competitive network of power relations (Pickering and Negus, 2003:12). While Bourdieu moves away from orthodox Marxist perspectives, his relational theory is still based on Marxist ideas of conflict, with certain interest groups tending to win out in artistic struggles. Pickering and Negus highlight the key similarities and differences between Bourdieu and Becker:

> Like Becker, he [Bourdieu] conceives of creative practices as occurring within certain
> types of networks – but these are characterised by antagonism rather than co-
> operation
> (Pickering and Negus, 2004:11).

While Becker was right to point out that, by necessity, an art world must involve large degrees of cooperation in order to work; it is inevitable that people within that world also occupy differing positions of power, possess different levels of know how or cultural competence, and different levels of 'social capital' in terms of their contacts in the music world and their ability to grasp the ways of communicating within that world. Let us take an example from the acoustic music scene that illustrates the differences between Becker and Bourdieu – the status of musicians who also possessed what we might call technical capital.

On the acoustic scene I found that technical aspects were not only present but of prime importance. Becker, therefore, is right to highlight the vital role that technicians perform, and even within the acoustic world I discovered a surprisingly strong dependency on technical tasks being fulfilled and on technological aspects of production and performance. In the latter half of the twentieth century technicians within music cultures began to be recognised as artists in their own right. Indeed Becker highlights the case of the increased importance of the sound mixer in music generally, citing Edward Kealy's work (1979). Kealy argues that before the 1940s...

> ...The sound mixer's skill lay in using to advantage the acoustic design of the studio,
> deciding upon the placement of a handful of microphones, and mixing or balancing
> microphone outputs as the musical performance was recorded...The primary aesthetic
> question was utilitiarian: how well does a recording capture the sounds of a
> performance?
> (Kealy quoted in Becker,1982:17)

With the movement of post war pop music towards increasing technological emphasis, Kealy points out:

sound mixing began to be recognised as an artistic activity requiring special
artistic talent...[and] once a mere technical specialty, had become integral to
the art process and recognised as such
(Becker, 1982: 18).

Translating this into Bourdieu's terms, this also has an impact on the status of 'techies' within music scenes, I found that sound engineers in the Leicester scene, for example, often occupied an elevated position in the local hierarchy due to their networking influence. The 'soundman' often possessed a lot of useful knowledge of and contacts within the wider local music network. For example, Dave illustrated the importance of having Neil, a professional sound engineer, in his band, as he had built up a lot of contacts through his work, particularly at festivals:

> ...at the moment with Neil doing all these festivals and working with so many
> different people, he's been able to collect names, addresses, phone numbers...as soon
> as we've done that album, he can post it to all these people that he's met...and they
> know him...it's having a foot in the door isn't it; it's always that way.

Applying Bourdieu's approach here, we begin to see then that the sound man is not merely, (as in the case of Becker's example of the 'key grip' or 'crane operator' in film making) an assistant to an overall process, but rather, someone occupying a particular status, an important position of power and significant influence.

Another skill – and a relatively recent phenomenon in music (particularly acoustic music) was that of website design. A few prominent musicians on the acoustic scene were also able to market this skill as their particular bit of technical capital through offering to design websites for fellow musicians. One musician for example, as well as designing his own website, had done sites for at least four other prominent artists in the space of a few months. However, it was likely that the time put in for little financial gain meant we could view this as just as much a co-operative act. There were other perks of undertaking this activity however, as each of these sites had links to other prominent local artists' sites. The website designer then was not merely another co-operative cog in the artworld machine then, but someone who had developed a knowledge of a field and was using his cultural capital with the result

(intended or unintended) of maintaining an important status within that field. Significantly, this particular musician's website appeared as a link on all of the other websites. This, then, also reinforced a hierarchy within the field, identifying those worthy of being on the links section of a page, which thereby reinforced their status on the local scene, and reminding an audience who the main players were on this scene; i.e. who the biggest fish in the pool were.

Employing Bourdieu's concept of 'social capital' (1984) helps us to remember that it took more than merely knowing the conventions and the rules of the game to fit into a local music world. Social skills propelled musicians towards success as much as, if not more than musical ability. Andrew, for example, talked about the impenetrability of the acoustic club inner circle and how it took more confident individuals to gain acceptance and membership:

> ...there's this culture of there being a clique at the front table. I've tried to stop it several times saying right you lot go and sit up the front for a change and listen...I think that people can come in there and feel that there is a clique...so it's difficult to become part of it...What tends to happen is that the braver ones actually talk to the people at the front desk and realise that they've got to make some kind of a connection...

Andrew argued however that this need for a defined clique was based on the inherent insecurity of musicians:

> The music scene is quite cliquey...because I think musicians by their very nature are insecure and need praise, which is why most of them do it in the first place...and it means that they've got to have some form of community and it's got to be tight so people do bounce off the outside of that...and it can be its like mafia family, to the detriment of everyone else...

Chloe although having expressed strong feelings of belonging to a community also expressed a self-conscious acknowledgement that she was also part of a clique:

> I know that I've become a part of like the clique...I do feel part of a whole scene but I also, I do feel a little bit like there's Andy, me, Andrew, Simon, Steve and Ben...and

we all tend to...be there, and Sheila...there's a little bit of cliqueyness there and I'm not actually into cliqueyness.

As Finnegan (1989) found in her research, the lines on the acoustic scene between professional and amateur status were not always clear. However, this does not distract from the reality that there was a clearly perceived hierarchical division, which was sometimes a source of tension. This is demonstrated in the quotes below from Neil and Ben:

> There's a bit of a cliquey thing. There's a hierarchy of musicians ...and I kind of feel like I'm in the middle bit...I think the people below get annoyed more...I don't care. I like the people above me...But the people below me look to those people above me with quite a lot of distaste and they think they're snobs and all that and I kind of think, "why are you doing that?"
> (Neil)

> I think like most scenes it's pretty exclusive...it's quite cliquey...but I think that's the nature of a lot of these sort of kind of semi professional amateur things that they become sort of microcosms of...they become a bit playground in a way...There are those who see themselves at the top end and those who...could be considered to be at the bottom end.
> (Ben)

Chloe demonstrated her realisation that it was vital to climb the ladder of this social hierarchy:

> ... I feel as if I'm moving into the next league now because... ...feels as if I'm beginning to get on the bottom rung of that ladder...up there with the big boys sort of thing...and actually having to kind of grit your teeth and know that when you're at the bottom rung of the ladder it really does mean that and that people aren't always that interested in you...

Finnegan (1989) highlighted the sense of belonging within the Milton Keynes music scene but also hints at a sense of exclusivity:

...though at one level each experience was an individual one and the overall patterns not necessarily fully perceived by many players, the extent of shared conventions and expectations among the practices of the small local performing bands was considerable. This was sometimes locally expressed as the 'local music scene', with comments about how 'incestuous' it was. There was a sense in which, at least for the duration, each member had his 'home' in his own local band, a home that was in turn part of the wider pathways of the ever-changing but still continuing local bands. (Finnegan, 1989: 272)

Cohen's research too demonstrated a cliquey element amongst the bands from the Wirral. While there were cliquey elements, the acoustic scene was more made up of a loose affiliation of singer songwriters who, at one stage or another, (whether formally or informally) may well have played together, but often without the tensions present in bands. This was due to the fact that, as solo performers, they all retained an individual autonomy and identity as well as a group identity. In one sense, this meant that musical relationships on the acoustic scene lasted far longer than they tended to in bands. While fallouts inevitably still occurred, there were histories of social relationships between core musicians that stretched back for two decades in some cases. Inevitably wherever there is history between people there will be messy conflictive aspects somewhere along the line. What this history also meant was that a kind of mythology was present too. Finnegan (271-2) discussed the mythology and narrative that developed around certain band's histories, having shared experiences of drugs, sexual encounters, long drives back home etc. These shared experiences, along with all the band break-ups, disagreements and scandals resulted in tight close-knit worlds in which membership involved a knowing understanding of these myths. This was strongly evident on the acoustic scene. As soon as I came into contact with the scene I noticed the endless namedropping of high status local musicians and the infinite stories of 'great nights' and 'scandals' etc. These close affinities were reinforced through invented traditions such as the Monkey project, local festivals, mini-tours of Europe plus locally legendary events. One instance of Dan, a well-respected musician, struggling with a badly out of tune electric guitar at a folk club, which the acoustic players had gone along to one night, exemplified the kind of night that would go down in local acoustic scene 'folklore'. Dave desperately tried to video the moment of hilarity for posterity. These unifying, community elements however

were perhaps made less stable by the individual ambitions of some musicians to 'make it'. For example, referring to the numerous other musicians on the scene who were also involved in activities such as workshops in the local community, Dave said:

> [T]hey're great because they *do* put the open mic nights on, they *do* do workshops, they *do* help other people. I haven't got the time to do that because I want to get out, I want to get out… and I admire them for it. Great, but I haven't got the time. I want to be on the next level…You point me in the direction I would be there like a shot cos I believe in it!

Dave was keen to point out however, that he had not felt any envy or competitiveness towards fellow musicians on a local level, and he stressed that he didn't place himself above any of his musical peers. Ultimately though, he was clearly not held back by any ties to the local music scene:

> There's an element that wants to help everybody else and say well these are my contacts …I want to pick up the phone and tell all my friends….But now…I'm thinking, why have all these things been given to me anyway? Is it because I've got the sheer determination and the motivation to get my arse in gear to have these phone numbers, so why should I give them away…?

The ambivalence Dave felt about the extent to which he should share information such as 'contacts' and phone-numbers' with other local musicians epitomised the tensions between community and self-advancement inherent in a scene with one foot in folk culture and the other in corporate culture.

Summary

In contrast to traditional folk music culture, the music industry discourse of self-advancement and self-promotion was an accepted and integral part of the Leicester acoustic music scene. In many ways this symbolised the colonisation of the culture industries into the everyday world of grass roots music makers and, to an extent, it also revealed the corporate nature of contemporary acoustic music. The rationality of music as a business has become, even at a local level, a taken-for-granted and unquestioned reality.

But we can also see this as indicative of a wider culture of the self. A crucial issue is the extent to which the influence of certain norms and expectations of the music business were unreflexively absorbed in the way that musicians chose to market and promote the self. Perhaps rather than simply looking at structures of economic power we can take a Foucauldian view and conclude that the forms of self-promotion seen here are inextricably linked to a discursive field of power in which musicians will tend towards constructing those particular kinds of identities that are ingrained into structures within the wider music business.

From an economic perspective, pursuing music full-time was only possible if the musician made compromises regarding the 'authenticity' of their singer-songwriter status by doing mainstream music in clubs, weddings and functions on the side. However, we have seen that, even in the world of the original singer-songwriter, a business attitude was present to a significant extent. The 'dull compulsion of economic necessity' as Marx put it, made this an inescapable reality. Ben emphasises this point:

> It sounds awfully mercenary but... there's no point in *not* treating it like a
> business...we don't go into it going, right O.K, let's spend four and half thousand
> recording an album, we'll sell them for a tenner, we'll get a 100 printed up and we'll
> lose three and a half grand. There's no point in that at all. That's just rubbish, it
> really is.

It was evident then, that musicians on the acoustic scene had to negotiate their identity between a co-operative reciprocal role; being part of a music community, and at the same time being involved in a competitive, hierarchical network. Getting on the *right* side of the *right* people was vastly important. There was a thin line between the notion of a musical community and an insular and exclusive clique.

As well as the individual musician creating their own myth through the life story we have seen here how collective myths were constructed too. Acoustic musicians invented musical projects e.g. the Monkey project, The Acoustic Collective, and various tribute nights such as 'Dead rock stars' night. Additionally this building of

mythologies was done through gossip, minor scandals, and much recounted legendary incidents. These social functions of the scene were perhaps strong enough to just outweigh the conflictive, competitive elements. Ultimately, however, the rigid hierarchical structure kept in place by the scene's conservatism meant that the business of musicianship was much more of a struggle for those new to the scene.

Overall we can say that, while there were clearly elements of a capitalist promotional culture in the acoustic music scene, on a 'grass roots' 'situated' level there was far more evidence of co-operation and community than competitive individualism. The personal website, the myspace website, the CD cover; all presented spaces of individualism away from the otherwise generally egalitarian and open character of the acoustic scene in Leicester. The scene was then, both a community and a network.

Of course, aside from the constant threat of the commercial to the authentic musical identity, another threat to the stability of a coherent musical identity was the unpredictable nature of life events over a period of time. I will now deal with this in the final chapter.

CHAPTER NINE: THE ONGOING MAKING OF THE MUSICAL IDENTITY

Introduction

> Lives and their experiences are represented in stories. ...Something new is always
> coming into sight, displacing what was previously certain and seen.
> (Denzin, 1989:81).

The majority of the musicians on the acoustic scene had experienced significant changes during the three year research period; many of which threatened the stability of the self-made musical career. For example, some of the core participants left relationships; some got married; some left or changed jobs; some moved houses; some had children; some had bought houses; some had sold houses and bought boats! Many changes had occurred in the core participants' lives in the two to three year period in which I interviewed them and followed their stories. The first part of this chapter will examine, one by one, the changes, significant moments and turning points amongst the four core participants. I then go on to link this to the bigger picture of the ongoing struggle that the acoustic singer-songwriters were engaged in. Finally, I reflect on changes that occurred on the acoustic scene as a whole during the research period.

9.1 Changes in the core participant's lives

Kate.

At the beginning of the research period, Kate was living in a flat in Leicester and was unemployed with music as her primary source of income. After a few months she began a course in horticulture at college near Melton. In order to be closer to the college she had moved into a rented room in a village about two miles outside of Leicester. Having been in central Leicester previously and integrally involved in the city music scene, Kate found that her involvement in the music scene dwindled quite significantly. Her course also involved a period of a few months on a placement in

Wales, which obviously affected her membership of the scene. This coincided with a time in which *Bryter Layter*, the Nick Drake tribute band, were going their separate ways. A combination of tensions in the band and differing life circumstances had been the main causes. Kate acknowledged the contradiction in her position from two years earlier when she'd said with conviction that *Bryter Layter* was the sort of band she'd always wanted to be in. She was philosophical about this however:

> Yeah...If you'd have said to me a year ago it was all going to go tits up...No it can't be! But it has and I've got other things to be concerned about...I just think it was good while it lasted and we got some recordings...but that's not to say we might not come together at some point in the future maybe for a one-off cos I don't like to say never again...but for the time being...

There had been other musical changes too. One of the violinists in the string quartet had moved to London so that project had also stopped. The *Strungout Sisters* still continued however and plans were in the offing to expand the string trio with two other musicians: the partners of the other two string players. Halfway through the research the death of Tom, who had christened the band and played with them for many years, reunited the group with many old musical contacts from around the Midlands.

After completing the two-year course (for which she was funded by a local authority) Kate secured a job at an educational nature park. The wage was low however and Kate found that music became more important once again. At the end of the research period she was concentrating heavily on building her profile as a serious singer-songwriter, having always previously been known on the music scene principally as a viola player and backing singer. Appearing as the featured artist at *The Farside* acoustic night in September 2004 was going to be Kate's first gig as a lone performer (singer songwriter). She expressed that as something of a 'milestone' for her.

By the end of the research period Kate was back in Leicester, lodging with a friend and, consequently, had started rebuilding links with the social world of the acoustic scene again. In some ways these three years had typified Kate's relationship with music. Just as in her late teens she had moved to London to join the police and didn't

play for two years, during this research she had time out too. At the beginning of the research period, Kate's social world was dominated by musical contacts – she had almost daily contact with musicians and was playing in three bands. It was clear that the development of her musical identity had been influenced by her close proximity to other musicians. At one point Kate had talked about having no problem taking a job somewhere completely different and therefore not being involved at all with the Leicester scene. However, things had come full circle and she was now re-immersed in the social world of musicians. She stated in a somewhat happily resigned way:

> Well, most of my friends are musicians…it's just the way it is, especially in
> Leicester, everybody, you know, before *The Musician* it was the *Royal Mail*…the
> crowd you know…all the wannabees…
> [mild laughter]

It seemed for Kate then, her relationship with music and the Leicester acoustic scene was a love/hate relationship, but one she always ran back to. Kate's youth had been heavily involved with school orchestras and playing all around Europe. Then from her mid 20s to early 40s she had been involved in numerous local musical projects – including travelling to America and France playing music. It seemed then that, for Kate, in terms of both her private and public self, it was almost impossible to escape from the fact that – in what had been, so far, a fairly changeable life – the one continuous strand throughout was music:

> Obviously I find myself in the same situation as I was two years ago in that I've not
> got a permanent place to live or a job and things are still pretty…insecure in that
> sense but…On good days I can see where I'm going and where I'd like to go and that
> it can be possible to do more than one thing at a time…

Dave

At the beginning of the research period Dave had just given up his job as a full time care worker to embark on his ambition of playing music full-time. At the end of the research period he had managed three years doing this with no work needed outside of music. However, as we have seen, the financial stability was provided by his 'cabaret act' at weekends rather than his singer-songwriter career. In terms of status and

recognition, during the three year research period Dave had gone from a struggling singer-songwriter just emerging on to the scene to a well recognised act on the local scene and beyond. He had played main stages at local festivals on two or three occasions and supported an internationally famous guitarist on a fifteen night UK tour. Dave was now to some extent at least, 'living his dream'! His ambitions had begun to outweigh his anxieties, which he had suffered from throughout his adult life. He had cut down the cabaret singing to just two nights of the weekend in order to focus more on building a profile. He completed his second album during the research period and was now signed to locally run label, *Musician Records* through the *Musician* venue. Dave was in fact their first signed act.

In terms of his daily life however, Dave was still under pressure financially. His time was his own however and he continued to live – in his words – a relatively 'rock 'n roll' lifestyle:

> The benchmark's been changed because I'm now in the same situation as when I started but I'm now on the next level...so I'm just dipping my toe now into – I want reviews, I want to get more high profile gigs, I want to do better support gigs so I know I'm starting that journey

I asked Dave whether if he looked back to three years ago he would have thought he would be where he was at this point. Dave clearly set out a narrative of gradual steps towards his final goal:

> Yeah...because this is the way that I'm trying to view things: Rather then view the ultimate goal, which is what everybody has to have, you've got to look at it in blocks of six months or a year and I think to myself, last year I did more than I did the previous year, this year I've blown last year out of the water...and next year I want to be able to blow the water out of this year...
> (Dave)

Alex

During the research period Alex had been promoted from university lecturer to senior lecturer in his work and so had much greater time pressures. He had travelled a lot to

232

various parts of the world. One long trip was partly in order for him to clear his head after undergoing a personal loss in his family. At the end of the research period his partner was expecting their first child; a reality that – when it had been discussed in interviews as a hypothetical scenario – had been a concern for Alex. He was aware that his partner wanted children and was keen to get as much as possible recorded before it happened while he was still relatively free of responsibilities. Alex's travels with his job usually meant sustained periods without his guitar, so in fact work took over music for significant periods. He had used his travels however as a source of creative inspiration for writing new songs. He was actually the most prolific recording artist of the core participants, producing his second and third complete albums over the two to three year research period, and working his way towards his fourth. He was still gigging fairly regularly (two or three times a month) at the end of research. During the course of the research Alex had gone from solo performer to putting his own band together with a violinist, bass player and keyboard player. This band included another interviewee, Chloe, on backing vocals. Alex recorded two albums enlisting the help of these musicians. He had completed a third album and was planning his fourth album at the end of the research period. His membership of the scene had become more marginal during the two year interview period. He had chosen to focus on recording projects and work with a small band of musicians he enjoyed working with. In a sense then Alex had become more privatised in his musical identity:

> I used to go regularly to the acoustic club, now I just don't go at all. I think it's sort of done it's thing for me if you like…it's taught me and given me the confidence to perform in public…to be honest as well the last few times I went…the actual standard was quite low and I wasn't being inspired by others which I was when I first went, I was blown away by how good people were and it gave me an eye opener just to how good you had to be…now either that standard has gone or perhaps I've improved…and that will happen because new people will come in and they will improve…

The process of recording was also becoming more independent and privatised for Alex. His reliance on others, particularly in a technical sense, had become a source of frustration. After countless problems encountered while depending on other parties

for successful recording sessions, Alex started his own home recording set up. He summed up his general retreat from the wider music scene:

> I guess what I may be seeing is working closely with a few people I've found through that scene and sort of ploughing our own furrow rather than being part of the scene. I think it may be a natural thing just to...you know you...get your start there and it's a place to springboard from, so I probably feel...not less a part of the scene but less a part of the community...

Alex surmised that in terms of general happiness in life, having a well paid day job was a good thing, but in terms of drive and motivation to do the music it was probably a bad thing as it was too easy for him to slacken in his struggle for musical recognition.

Andrew

Halfway through the research period Andrew had finally left the job he had said consumed his creativity: a customer services adviser at a major electrical company. Through a local contact he had become more involved in conducting music workshops and trying to make musical and performing arts activities his sole means of income. He had fits and starts with his music but at the end of the research period he was struggling to keep his head above water without another source of income, although a comedy/poetry double act with a long time friend and well-known local performance poet was taking off. He had relinquished his role running the city acoustic club, passing it on to ex-lodger and interviewee Andy, but he still ran the once monthly acoustic collective night, which featured established acts from the local acoustic scene. Andrew was always finding new entrepreneurial ways of 'getting by' and had a small PA and had now advertised himself as a sound engineer. On a personal level Andrew had experienced the break up of a relationship, a major falling out with a good friend and fellow musician, and the demise of *Bryter Layter* due to changes in the circumstances of people within the band. He had spent the last few months working on the folklore project with another research participant, Steve, but he was also continuing to push himself as a solo singer-songwriter. He had completed an E.P and a full album of his own songs during the research period.

At the end of the research Andrew had become involved in a new relationship. He was very keen to get some order into his life and this was the stimulus:

> I think I'm realising now that this is the time to grab the reigns and go for it and plan...I expect we'll move in together early next year, if not before...

Comparing his situation two years on from the start of the interview period Andrew stated:

> I don't think I had any idea whether I would be self-employed as a musician at the start of this...I was definitely a man with a day job...I was thinking...if it went really, really well and I did loads and loads of gigs then...maybe I could go part time...but as it worked out because...I was trying to stand on my own two feet that sparked off the [music workshop] thing and that was a chance meeting and...Steve talking about the folklore thing at the same time as I was talking about re-mortgaging, packing in work, it all came to a head and I thought yes, time to do it....

9.2 The ongoing struggle

Of course as well as the daily struggle to maintain a musical identity and the struggle to deal with daily conflicting pressures, the thing that continued for all the musicians was the ongoing struggle to climb the ladder: in some cases this meant getting discovered; in others, merely making music the primary source of living. The interesting thing with the acoustic scene – as it involved older people – was that the expectations were much more grounded than the classic pop star dreams of teenagers. This did not alter the levels of determination to succeed however. Chloe demonstrated a realistic attitude but she still hinted at not letting go of younger dreams of stardom:

> I mean I've got to face up to the fact that I'm forty and I doubt very much that suddenly somebody's going to say, 'hey, you're a real talent'...Actually, I think, in a sense, I've got this attitude where I just think, no get your head down, do your best to promote yourself and don't slack on that level, but don't kind of worry about that side of it. I just think...yeah, you know, people can come and make all kind of outlandish promises and you can get sucked into the narcissistic vortex of continuous me-ism or whatever, thinking that you're going to really make it one day and...I just enjoy

playing and singing…and yeah I'd love somebody to hand me over a big load of money and say, yeah do that for the rest of your life and I'll pay you if you do it, but I don't know how much fame interests me…partly because…it could do something to me that I wouldn't particularly like…I mean I'm reasonably vain and stuff like that…I wouldn't want that to get worse! [laughter]

Steve, one of the older musicians, talked about the lifelong struggle to 'make it' with music and the impact upon the self identity when this doesn't go as planned:

> I think there's a knock on effect as well cos I think it has…an effect on your own perception of yourself cos if you don't get successful, whatever you think about yourself, you need that success to generate more interest, to generate your own self-belief and that's never really happened… Almost all the other people that I can think of from the people who are still going now have stopped playing really. You know…they got married, they've had kids…

Dave speculated as to why many local musicians hadn't quite made it in terms of reaching a national audience, being signed or at least being able to make music their career. He surmised that it was all about being willing to go the extra mile – being 'driven':

> Dan's talented, Steve's talented, Simon's talented, Andy's talented, Paul's talented – everybody's talented…what is that thing that makes people on that next level. I'm sure it's just down to being *totally* and *utterly* driven, but how long can you drive for until you just burn out and think, 'fuck it I'm just staying at this level and that's me done, great' because that's comfortable…and I would rather put all this effort in and something good from it, even if was only six months because it's reaching that thing…If somebody said…we want to sign you and we're doing a one album deal, that to me is what I'm aiming for: regardless of whether it's successful or not. That is what I'm really, really aiming for…If that was my job lot and that was all that I was given…I'd say at least I did it…
> (Dave)

When I asked Dave if he would ever consider giving up his musical ambitions and going back to a normal job his reply was direct:

Brilliant, but that gut reaction would go, 'You silly bastard. You gave up everything that you worked for. You were so on the right path and you just took the easy option because you didn't want to cope anymore and that would grieve me to death...

Interestingly, Alex suggested that perhaps it was the struggle for musical recognition itself that was the appealing thing, rather than the end goal. Perhaps the achievement of the end goal would kill the enjoyment:

I also worry that one day if I actually did what I wanted I wouldn't be any happier...the fun's in the chase, I'm a very big believer in this actually...If I got a minor tour going, it would be a hard slog round the country playing to twelve people and I might think, 'give me the day job back'!
(Alex)

9.3 Changes on the acoustic scene

I attended the *City Acoustic Club* at *The Musician* on numerous occasions during the research period and found there to be some aspects that varied from week to week but many more that remained unchanged in the whole of the three-year period. Though there were phases every few months or so where a new collection of faces would emerge, there were also periods of stagnation where the same handful of people would be there. On the whole it was possible at the end of the research to recognise a core group that had not changed significantly in three years, for whom the night was treated much like a night in 'the local'.

On a wider scale, in Leicester some favourite venues of acoustic performers underwent changes. *The Vaults* for example, a favourite for acoustic performers on a Saturday afternoon become *The Basement*: a trendy bar featuring a 'freestyle' night – mainly consisting of funk, hip-hop and jazz styles and aimed at a much younger audience. The enduring image of an older acoustic performer arriving at one of these nights – mandolin under arm – and later in the evening leaving with a bemused expression said a lot about how drastically venues could reinvent themselves. A pub called *Out of the Vaults* soon opened however, and many of the acoustic players got regular slots there. Another pub, *The Criterion* began putting on acoustic nights and

afternoons too. The *Music Café*, which had for a while rivalled the *City Acoustic Club* with a more diverse make up of performers and audience members, changed ownership and ceased to hold significant music nights. *The Farside* at the *Y Theatre* continued but the people running it changed; *Café Folk* on Saturday afternoons at the Phoenix remained popular, and various pubs and bars all helped to keep the acoustic scene thriving. *The Musician* itself underwent major refurbishment for a period and extended its capacity from 140 to 220 so became an even more significant and recognised venue.

The changeable lives of the musicians fed into the fragile and mutable nature of the scene. People's relationships, circumstances, and living situations often meant that planned projects never really materialised, or at least materialised with different people involved. For example, due to Steve's moving to another area for a while the folklore project involving him and Andrew was on and off; the acoustic collective was ambiguous to begin with but seemed to have periods of almost becoming something concrete and then periods of not being mentioned; *Bryter Layter* played two farewell gigs and another one hadn't been discounted.

The musicians on the scene, some of whom were respondents in the research, remained so throughout the three years with accompanying partners and friends on the edge of this inner circle sometimes changing. In three years in the life of the Leicester acoustic music scene there had been many comings and goings, fall-outs, forming of new alliances, changes in relationships, living situations, occupations, economic circumstances etc. Although three or four had moved away, the same membership of around twenty musicians were still there plugging away at their music and chasing new projects, having new ideas, buying new equipment etc. Whatever life changes occurred it seemed safe to bet that in ten years the majority of them would still be making music, but more importantly, making themselves through music.

Summary

Crucially the longitudinal research method employed in this research enabled me to present the lives of the musicians and indeed the acoustic music scene, not as merely a timeless snapshot – as in most research on music scenes – but as an ephemeral,

dynamic, changeable, messy, contingent, unpredictable and most of all human phenomenon. It was too tricky a task to present the thesis in a linear chronological format and therefore this cannot claim to be primarily a study of the life course. However, the central biographical approach of this research has meant that it can lay claim to being not merely a music study but a 'study of lives', moreover a study of 'lives as they are lived'. Rather than the standard autobiography where the life is frozen on the page, here the lives are shown as 'unfinalised' (Bakhtin,1984). No words about the life are written in stone. Dave highlighted the contingencies of life situations and this could impact on musical careers. Referring to a very talented duo on the local acoustic scene, he speculated as to why they hadn't ever been signed:

> And you think why haven't they been signed...? And it's because I think...priorities change and...relationships come on board and circumstantial things happen you know...

I was able to provide thick detailed description of the lives of the participants over a three year period that took into account what was happening during the research as 'embodied history' (Bourdieu in Swingewood, 1998:97). The changes here demonstrate that participants were by no means trapped in the story they told of themselves as musicians at the start of the research, but they did use their life narrative or 'myth' (McAdams, 1993) as a safety net to fall back on during uncertain periods. Raymond Williams sums up the relationship between musical creativity and the making and remaking of the self:

> The man makes the shape, and the shape remakes the man...The excitement and pain of the effort are followed by the delight and the rest of completion, and this is not only how the artist lives and works, but how men live and work, in a long process, ending and beginning again (Williams, 1961:44)

Whether their alternative careers were to lead to success, failure or something in between, the musicians continued on their romantic quest to 'live a musical life'. Age and time inevitably play a part in the levels of faith in this goal. However, perhaps these two differing outlooks from musicians with a twenty-five year age gap between them say it all:

It's never been easy, never been easy at all to make it and to find roads to follow that would help you make it. It's very much about doing your own albums and leaning on people who are similarly inclined and helping each other, but there's no real pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, and if there is, you know, it's a pot of gold that nobody's going to find... There's no real...there's no real interest you'd have to say. I mean that's what it feels like even now. Even now it's still damned hard work. The moguls of the industry steer everywhere but in terms of acoustic music. Now whether that's a political thing I don't know. Of course we're all getting older as well so it's no longer sex, drugs and rock n roll...you don't get many acoustic musicians smashing their drum sets up...They haven't got drum sets....!
(Steve: 57)

If somebody said to you – 'In five years time you'll still be at this level' you would run out of steam, but because you think something might happen tomorrow, because you think something might happen next week, something might happen next month or something's going to be happening next year. Now, five years goes by and you think fucking hell, the only thing that perpetuated me forward was thinking that maybe tomorrow something great's going to happen; that's the thing that you have to strive for... It's the best feeling in the world, and that is the thing that makes you strive forward...if I do actually get it...it will be like euphoric...For those moments of sheer doubt and blackness to having something great and that is what I love, you can feel it and your whole body just goes Yes...! ... And it's that attitude within music – Imagine if you did do it, imagine if somebody did sign you, imagine if you do play main stage at the borderline...Imagine it. It would feel great!!! Absolutely great!! And *you* did it...That's special
(Dave: 32)

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I will review three key strands of the research in turn and reflect on the potential avenues for future research that this thesis opens up in sociology, cultural studies and popular music studies. Firstly, I discuss the value of studying a non-youth based scene. Secondly, I consider the future issues around the themes of self-made musical identities in the context of the contemporary music business and technological developments. Finally I suggest the ways in which this thesis has informed and enhanced our view of a humanistic sociology of musicians.

Sociology for Grown-Ups: Rediscovering The Greying Zone

So what have we learned by stepping out of the narrow realms of 'youth culture'? I argue that we have learned far more about the many messy aspects of adult life which are more familiar to the majority of people in contemporary society than the subcultural or marginal youth cultures so often studied in cultural studies and sociology. The question remains: Why is youth culture so privileged by sociologists and cultural researchers when popular culture is consumed and produced by all ages; when the UK's most widely listened to radio station, Radio 2, is aimed at the 30+ market; when small-scale festivals attract such large numbers of middle-aged revellers; when bands like *The Rolling Stones* at 60+ continue to perform; and, most importantly, when scenes like the Leicester acoustic scene are thriving across the country. It is a thoroughly outdated view to see popular culture as the domain of youth. This, undoubtedly, is based on the traditional assumption that those in the 30+ bracket will be married with children, working full time with only their mortgage and pension plan to think of and therefore only of use to sociologists in relation to studies of the family or the home. But this notion is no longer reflective of contemporary society and hasn't been for two or three decades.

My research has hopefully gone some way to challenging the dominance of 'youth culture'. In Leicester I discovered, with not too much difficulty, a group of over twenty people aged 30-60, the majority of whom did not fit into this conventional picture. All were engaged in popular cultural practices, the building of private and public identities and most importantly the building of an alternative career path, even

if this career was not a great source of financial security. In Cohen's research on young rock bands in Liverpool, for example, the dilemmas and problematic aspects of daily life faced were inevitably immature dilemmas (girlfriends, tribal rivalry between bands etc.) compared to the life baggage carried by the acoustic musicians: complex life histories including nervous breakdowns, drug addictions, marital breakdowns, having children, giving up careers, buying houses, relocating etc. The life history element to the research was intended to illuminate this point. Examining how adults have struggled and continue to struggle to build a musical identity over time is an informative project for the deeper understanding of the self, music-making and contemporary society. If the primary achievement of this work was to bring attention to the active cultural presence of the 'greying zone' in contemporary Britain, then that in itself might be deemed a worthwhile cause.

Future considerations regarding Acoustic music and self-promotional culture

We can conclude from this study that the creative project of building a musical identity through the creative act itself (e.g., song-writing, performing and the telling of the life story) is threatened in numerous ways. It might further be suggested that this is not just by daily pressures but also by the standardised ways of marketing the self in the mediated public sphere of the music scene (e.g. musical networking, self-promotion, image-construction in performance, performance capital, selling CDs, climbing the ladder of the local hierarchy etc). These examples could be said to contain filtered-down marketised music industry discourses. An avenue for future research then might be the extent to which the 'telling' of the self is threatened by the 'selling' of the self.

A cynical reading could view the acoustic music scene as a world which, rather than cohesive and co-operative, contained a series of individualistic struggles based on largely utilitarian, self-advancing rationales. After all, we have seen that creativity often went hand in hand with commerce (e.g. much creative activity by the acoustic musicians was expended on the commercial side of self promotion). Additionally, it is clear that all the musicians interviewed and observed in this study were often intensely business-like in their quest to become recognised performers, and most recognised the need for business acumen in order to 'get ahead'. Even the telling of the self in the life-story and the continuous remaking of the self through musical

creativity and performance were often done in the context of selling the self. The building up of a musical CV was in many ways analogous to the marketised discourse found in the standard occupational CV.

From a Critical Theory/culture industries perspective then, the putatively egalitarian and democratic 'open mic' culture might be viewed as merely a veil covering the reality of a competitive, self serving culture governed by market rationality. However, the evidence of my ethnographic observation provided a strong counter-argument to this: The Leicester acoustic scene was overwhelmingly a nurturing, co-operative, reciprocal community. Within the spatial boundaries of this world, the face-to-face interactions and interdependent arrangements meant that the potential threats of commodification from the wider music industry were unable to overshadow individual creativity and social cohesion. In many ways the familial, local, unpretentious characteristics of the scene kept these elements in check in the same way that a family might control a wayward child. The best example of this was one acoustic artists' experience of dipping his toe into the waters of intense self-promotion with an agent, and having an image makeover – only to return to the fold later, disillusioned and energetically attempting to informally rebuild bridges with local acoustic musicians. Just as it was clear through the musicians' everyday strategies to find 'zones of creativity' that the totally administered daily existence was resisted on an individual level (albeit in an industrious creative manner), so it was also apparent that the acoustic scene's egalitarian and down to earth character – while liberal enough to allow self promotional elements – also contained a strong inner core of resistance to total commodification.

Something only briefly touched on in this thesis but an avenue for future research is the threat to self-identity within a community posed by the internet. The socio-musical relationships on the acoustic scene often emerged organically – usually through like-minded musicians setting up projects. For example: some projects came about from musicians talking informally one night over a drink; some whilst they were jamming or 'having a play' during a local musician's social gathering; and some from an idea that emerged in a late night recording session. The birth of the *City Acoustic Club* in Leicester, and the emergence of spontaneous musical events, projects or groups e.g. *The Monkey Project, Harmony Farm, Bryter Layter* all came

about through similar face-to-face situated social interactions. What the internet and particularly the recent phenomenon of myspace.com arguably lead to however, is the phenomenon of musicians spending more time working on promoting the self and networking behind closed doors as a solitary activity. Just as mobile communications technology has lessened the inherent face-to-face sociality of public spaces such as the street and public transport (e.g. people communicating on mobile handsets, listening to ipods or texting on mobile phones) so the myspace phenomenon, and to a large extent the internet, in general terms, have, it may be argued, threatened to make the music world a more calculated and insular social realm. Of course this process of relating to others is still a social act. However, it is now perhaps based on a more explicitly calculated networking strategy within a prescribed way of relating. On myspace for example, there is certainly clear evidence of a standardised format of biography, film, friends etc.

A big part of the importance of places such as the Leicester Acoustic Club was the face-to-face nature of the night. While myspace opens up many more opportunities to share songs and even performances there is, as with the dawn of music video in the 1980s, a danger of the screen becoming more important than the stage. Attendances in many weeks at the *City Acoustic Club* could be as low as ten people. It would not take many of these to start engaging in more home-based musical activities for these nights to be threatened. While evidently not in danger of extinction, it would certainly be worth considering research into the potentially endangered future of such physical spaces in which people meet together at a designated time and place each week to listen intently to other musicians in the context of the alternatives offered by 'virtual spaces' such as myspace or youtube.com[23].

Perhaps these technological developments makes face-to-face place bound intimate communities such as the acoustic scene all the more important to hold on to with their own mythologies of 'great nights' gossip, scandals, 'having a laugh', 'dead rock stars'

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[23] It is important to remember however that – contrary to the impression given by the mainstream media – there are many culturally active people in their 30s and 40s upwards who did not grow up with this technology and, either felt intimidated by it or refused for whatever reason to get involved with it. Certainly it was notable that on the acoustic scene some of the older and reasonably well-known members were nowhere to be found on the internet.

nights, re-enactments and tributes etc., though there is a danger here of presenting this as a dualism through outdated appeals to situated 'folk culture'. It would be a worthwhile and interesting avenue for future research to track the developments of acoustic nights and scenes over the next few years to examine the effect these changes will have on situated cultures such as the acoustic scene. Additionally, it would be interesting to examine the implications for traditional folk musicians. This could be a dilemma far greater than the past controversies over the use of PA systems and electric guitars!

Contributions to a critical humanistic sociology of musicians

> Dissolve the subject! Although such statements are supported by very sophisticated arguments, they do bring with them the spectre of a dehumanised collective individualism which can kill off any concern for the concrete joys and sufferings of active, breathing, bodily human beings...denying the role of active human beings and their lived experiences...
> (Plummer, 2000:5)

It might be argued that any sociological research involving singer-songwriters could do little more than represent the self-oriented culture of contemporary society. One *could* respond to this line of argument by emphasising that this was precisely the most compelling of reasons to examine this genre. That is to say that the contemporary singer songwriter is even more of an accurate reflection on the 'social character' of today than can be found in the modern day 'pop realists' of hip-hop and indie-rock. After all, which genre more clearly demonstrates the self-reflexive nature of postmodernity discussed by sociologists such as Giddens (1991) and Beck (2000). Singer-songwriters, as we have seen, are wellsprings of emotional and personal self-doubt, anxiety, insecurity; all archetypal early 21st century themes. However, this was not the principal reason for studying singer-songwriters. It was rather that this specific type of musicians seemed to represent a perfect nodal point in the linking up of self and society through the phenomenon of individual creativity. Studying these musicians both as individuals and as part of a local music scene, and observing them in private and public contexts, I have re-engaged with what Denzin called the

'avowed humanistic commitment to study the social world from the perspective of the interacting individual...' (Denzin quoted in Plummer, 2000:1).

There is a clear double-edged character to the nature of creative self-identity in contemporary society: On the one hand the singer songwriters' struggle to defend the idea of the unique self – both through the creative act of narrating a musical identity and the creative product of the song – can be celebrated as a strong argument for the continuing relevance of the notion of individuality. On the other hand, from both a sociological and a musical perspective, this could be interpreted as evidence of the pervasion of self-promotional, narcissistic culture. Acoustic music could be seen merely as 'watered down folk', merely demonstrating that the move from the civic self to the privatised self has finally been completed. I argue here that the first of these two viewpoints holds more weight. For while the Leicester acoustic scene *is* a marketised world in which individuals are positioned in certain webs of power and influence; and while, it was *not* autonomous from the culture industries, this scene also contained clear elements of community, co-operation and reciprocity. Therefore, in spite of the inevitable pervasion of self promotion and marketing into so many aspects of grass roots music cultures, there still remained a situated culture involving frequent face-to-face contact and social co-operation. I have sought to show here that individual subjectivity still matters within a community and that individual creativity is not something irrelevant or outside the realms of sociological inquiry. As Plummer states in his critical humanist argument:

> ...the concrete human must always be located within...historically specific
> culture...my conception of the human subjects and their experiences is one that
> cannot divorce them from the social, collective, cultural, historical moment. But in
> the face of the inherent society-individual dualism of sociology, I argue that there
> must surely always remain a strand of work that highlights the active human subject?
> (Plummer, 2000:7)

The individual then is always a social being. Acts that may be considered at face value as subjective acts are often 'intersubjective' and I have shown here that the creative process of song-writing is social in the ways that it not only draws on experiences of interactions through the life story with significant others but also in the

246

ways that songwriters exchanged ideas, songs, influences etc. Creativity is immersed in the communication of lived experience. However, it is vital to point out that each individual has a unique bundle of experiences which they bring to the creative product:

> It is right to recognise that we became human individuals in terms of a social process, but still individuals are unique, through a particular heredity expressed in a particular history. And the point about this uniqueness is that it is creative as well as created... (Williams, 1961:117)

This study of acoustic singer-songwriters has hopefully managed to shed light on approaches to creativity and self-identity. The saturating nature of everyday life and the conflicting roles the musicians had to play threatened the project of a consistent musical self, but it may be that such consistency is a false ideal and that a musical self can be said to thrive under circumstances where it assimilates different influences and processes regardless of any aspiration to making them perfectly cohere. Through the notion of the self as a snowball, a self which gathers more significant experiences as it moves through life, the musicians were able to create a strong shell of selfhood, not through holding on to a true self or an inner core, but by *creating, remaking, and re-invoking* the musical identity with each musical experience and with each telling of the musical life story.

This thesis has through a continuous movement between self and social, demonstrated that the creative self is always social and yet also uniquely individual. Only a study which features the richness of individuals' experiences and stories within a give social world can adequately demonstrate this. Despite the increasing importance within acoustic-based cultures of polished recordings, websites, CD artwork, networking, technicality etc. there remain core realities at the root of such cultures. Firstly, the social and embodied practice of performance – the simple act of picking up a guitar and singing a song to an audience – and secondly, the unique subjectively creative human being with a life story to tell through their music. The songs may be 'confessional' rather than 'traditional' but as long as individuals continue to *'sing the self'* in this way we can rest assured that the 'acting and interacting unique human being' or the 'individual in society' is alive and well.

[W]e always arrive in the final analysis, with the human voice, which is to say, we come up against the human being
(Bakhtin, 1981:71).

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