

Accidents, Obstacles and Opportunities

The Lives of Musicians

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In this paper I discuss two issues: the nature of live music performance and the shape of live music careers. In both cases my concern is with how musicians make choices. My argument is that such choices are not made freely but should be understood, rather, as a response to constraints and opportunities. In the first part of the essay I suggest that the interest and pleasure of a live concert lies not just in what we hear but equally in what we see: performing gestures which signify musical decision making. I consider how musicians indicate different kinds of motivation: entertainment, self-expression, formal discipline, attentive listening, the exploration of feeling. And I discuss the social and material constraints involved in the choice of musical instruments and performing colleagues. In the second part of the paper I focus on musical careers and critique analytic and common sense attempts to confine music-makers to specific genres. I argue that musical careers are essentially accidental and fluid, the result of particular local conditions and opportunities. It is from this perspective that I describe musicians as ordinary. Music-making must be understood in terms of everyday life and the musical role of such institutions as families, churches, education, the military and holidays. What makes musicians extraordinary is not who they are but what they do and how they use their opportunities. We should admire successful musicians not for their integrity but for their opportunism, a term that needs rescuing from its negative overtones.

Keywords: Musician, Performance, Opportunity, Career, Genre, Affordance.

In the spring of 2021 I reached the end of a collective enterprise in which I had been engaged for many years. The third and final volume of *The History of Live Music in Britain Since 1950* was published, covering the years 1985 to 2015, the culmination of a research project that began with a paper published in 2007.¹ Now, in the afterglow, I have begun to reflect further on some of the issues onto which our history cast unexpected light. In this paper I discuss two of these issues: the nature of live music performance and the shape of live music careers. In both cases my concern is with how musicians make choices. My argument is that such choices are not made freely but should be understood, rather, as a response to constraints and opportunities.

1. See Frith 2007 and Frith et al. 2013, 2019 and 2021.

Musical Performance

Some time around the turn of the millennium it became commonplace to argue that musicologists had neglected musical performance. Classical musicologists had, it seemed, for too long focused their analytic attention on the score; popular musicologists were now focusing too much analytic attention on the recording. In response to such criticism, performance studies emerged as “an area of serious musical enquiry” (see Cook 2014).

What ‘performance studies’ meant was different in different subject areas. In Britain the study of performance in classical musicology developed, paradoxically, as an aspect of the analysis of recordings. CHARM, the Centre for the Historical Analysis of Recorded Music, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) from 2004–9, morphed into CMPCP, the Centre for Musical Performance as Creative Practice, funded by the AHRC from 2009–14. The question here was what could be learnt about a work from a finely detailed comparison of its different performances, a comparison made possible by recording technology. In popular musicology the focus was on performance as scripted (rather than scored), most interestingly in the work of Philip Auslander, who applied concepts from theatre studies to rock and pop concerts, treating musicians as actors. Again, though, just as the CMPCP researchers referred what live musicians do to a score, so Auslander suggested that rock performance is shaped by recordings, the equivalent of play scripts (see, for example, Auslander 2001). In both these cases a performance is treated as an interpretation of something else: the score or the album that determines what the performers are doing.²

Do concert audiences actually attend to live music with this sort of attention to something that isn’t there? The pleasures of live music are surely more immediate, more visceral, and such visceral responses are necessarily an effect of what *is* there. It makes no sense to describe any component of a live musical experience as ‘extra-musical’ and attempts to privilege, say, the sound over the sight of live music are clearly ideological. The 19th-century argument that classical music was a morally uplifting art form (and not just another form of entertainment) involved a disdain for the pageantry of performance. By the end of the 19th century serious listening meant a refusal to be distracted by spectacle (except, perhaps, in Wagnerian opera) and, similarly, attempts to distinguish rock from pop, ‘authentic’ from ‘commercial’ music-making, have meant trying to disentangle what is heard from what is seen, the ‘primary text’ from the secondary distractions of the show.

Even from these perspectives, though, the visual aspects of an event are as important as ‘the music itself’ to its meaning. In teaching 19th-century audiences to listen to classical music silently, for example, conductors were teaching them how to perform silent listening and Stephanie Pitts and her colleagues have outlined in entertaining detail

2. One question raised by this approach is how audiences make sense of performances of new, unrecorded music. As a rock critic in the 1970s I quickly learnt to refer new acts to the recorded performers they sounded like and to what I knew of their own biographies (usually taken from press handouts). This is still the reviewing norm. Write-ups of early concerts by Britain’s latest indie rock sensation, Sam Fender, referred without fail to both the musical influence of Bruce Springsteen and Fender’s working-class upbringing in North Shields, a small port town on the Tyne.

how differently today's jazz and chamber music audiences in Britain perform listening. An important strand of our research was to follow the history of listening behaviour in different music worlds.³

Here, though, I want to focus on a different question: what is being performed by the players on stage? What is a *musical* performance? The starting point must be that at a live music event we see people making music; we don't see people pretending to make music (unless they are miming or lip-synching). In film biographies of musicians, actors' performances of musical performance are almost always their least convincing bit of acting. To see someone making music is to see causal effects: the musician makes a bodily movement; the result is a sound. But in assuming cause and effect here we are describing two processes: technique and intention, one visible, one inferential. Technique describes what the musicians do to their instruments (which may be their voices) to cause the sounds we hear. Technique is learnt but not necessarily thought much about on stage. It is a matter of discipline and habit; it is what skilled musicians take for granted when they make music. To watch an unskilled musician is to watch someone who is visibly thinking how (rather than what) to play. For skilled musicians there is no perceived gap between deciding to play a note and playing it; they don't seem to need the intermediary 'how' stage. For the audience, though, the question of how is as common as the question of why, hence the popular appeal of the virtuoso.

The why question refers to intention, the decision-making involved in determining which sounds to make when. Can we see a performer making musical decisions or do we just infer these decisions from the sounds they make? Does this depend on the kind of music being made? Musicians in the Berlin free improvisation scene, interviewed by Tom Arthurs, suggested that their "posture, body language and facial expression provide essential information as to their honesty and intent." Their argument was that musical decisions are necessarily visible, involve physical as well as mental processes. As one of the Berlin improvisers put it: "there is no question [here] of role-playing – of 'performance', in the sense that both cultural theorists and interpreters of pieces and genres use the word."⁴ Free improvisation draws attention to the fact that all music-making choices are the result of the play of freedom (musicians are free to make any sound they're capable of making) *and* constraint (the sounds they make are necessarily shaped by acoustic, material, social, political and cultural circumstances as well as by their technical abilities).

In much of the academic work on performance, as I have already suggested, the emphasis is on the musical material with which performers are working, whether this is an actual score (as in the case of classical music or big-band jazz), an implied score (as in the case of small group jazz), a recording (as in the case of rock and pop) or a song or a tune (as in the case of folk). It is such musical material that is the analytic

3. See, for example, Pitts 2005, Burland and Pitts 2012.

4. Thanks to Tom Arthurs for this information. For the outcome of his research in Berlin see Arthurs 2015.

focus for performance studies and, in the abstract, it seems possible to posit a linear scale: from musicians who are completely constrained by the musical material (playing the notes exactly as written) to musicians who are free to play whatever they want (the militantly free improvisers). But for all performers making music means making choices, managing a continuous series of decisions. Even in the classical music world, as John Butt has argued, this involves not just the issues that are not specified in the score (such as absolute tempo and rubato) but also creative deviations. The history of classical music may involve the increasing dominance of the score (and the composer) but improvisation didn't disappear. Rather, as Butt shows, it was devalued and therefore ignored by historians of 'serious' musical works (see Butt 2015).

In his book on Schubert's *Winterreise*, the tenor Ian Bostridge writes of the score creating "an objective space in which the dangers of self-indulgence can be held at bay." This can only be achieved "through utter immersion in the work and a merging between the composer's work *and* the performer's personality" (Bostridge 2015: 488 – my emphasis). This echoes comments by the Berlin improvisers studied by Tom Arthurs. Their freedom to play what they like on stage is in practice an effect of decisions made before they got there, decisions about their instruments, the musical idiosyncrasies of their co-players, the acoustic and listening organisation of the venue, the sense of the occasion, the shared or disputed understanding of what 'free' improvisation means. These musicians, too, seek an objective space in which the dangers of self-indulgence can be held at bay.

All musicians are subject to the constraints of music-making as a social practice. This involves not just other musicians but also the audience, the sound crew, venue managers, promoters and so forth; these interactions defined for us the most significant British music worlds: folk, classical, jazz, rock, variety. Such worlds are distinguished from each other not just by different musical material and audience expectations but also by the different ways in which shared problems are solved. Live music-making, for example, tends to be a hierarchical practice in all music worlds. Musicians' decisions are, so to speak, subcontracted to an agreed authority, to a conductor, arranger or band leader, to a manager or promoter, to a sound engineer or broadcaster, to a record company's A&R or marketing department. In all playing situations there are 'musical differences' (covering a remarkably wide range of dispute) that need to be negotiated and resolved.

From this perspective the performing arts should perhaps be called the making arts: live music draws attention not to a work but to a process. And this is not just a matter of observational interest, watching through a window into a craftsman's atelier. Live music-making performance is pleasurable *because* it is observed, because it is therefore self-conscious. For an artwork to be an artwork it must draw attention to the way its effects are achieved. An artist has purpose; their artwork reveals the

process of being purposeful. I can now answer the question I asked earlier: what is the 'performance' a musician is performing? What is being performed is not music, the effect of what musicians do, but musical motivation.

It makes sociological sense at this point to assume that the performance of musical motivation works differently in different music worlds, but all music makers, it seems to me, signify their decision-making by reference to the same repertoire of motives; where they differ is in the relative weight they give to the different components of this repertoire. I classify the available choices as follows:

Entertainment

Entertainers are in show business and so indicate that they are motivated by their audience and its responses to what they do. This involves highlighting two aspects of their musical decision making: on the one hand, entertainers are always considering the effect of the notes they play on their audience (their purpose is to be pleasing); on the other hand, they are always considering the effects of the notes they play on their own audience-ratified personas, their sense of their performing selves as characters – David Bowie is an obvious example here. Musical entertainers do put on shows that could be analysed in the terms of theatre studies, the performers treated as actors, although such music-making usually overlaps with another kind of self-conscious performance that is not theatrical in this way.

Self-Expression

Here the indicated motivation is truth-to-self and musical decisions are taken to express this self; musicians' performances are accounted for in terms of their 'sincerity'. The issue here is not whether someone's music is 'honest' (whatever this would mean) but that we understand their musical choices as direct expression of who they are – it is their honesty (not that of the music) that is being indicated. The problem is that while for their audiences such honesty means that these musicians are not 'putting on an act', for a sociologist their honesty can also be understood as a performance of 'honesty'. Take the case of Keith Jarrett. As is quickly revealed by a Google search, Jarrett's individual genius is defined by his obdurate pursuit of his own musical ends, from note to note, regardless of his audience. But it is equally possible to watch his live shows as absorbing performances of genius, genius indicated not by the notes played, but by Jarrett's enactment of the intense, self-absorbed thought processes involved.

Musical Discipline

Jarrett's genius is a particular quality of his individual improvisations. Most musicians play with other musicians, and their decision-making is thus obliged to be part of a collective music making purpose. This is most obvious when the players' sound-producing movements seem to be choreographed (as in big band playing or in the dance routines of backing singers – whose approach to the notes they sing looks very different from the stars whom they're backing). What is indicated here is that the sounds made are being motivated by the musical material, by the score or arrangement, and this overlaps with my next category.

Listening

Here the musical decision-making process is shown to be an effect of the notes being played by other musicians. Live folk groups provide good examples of performed listening, especially when the lead is being swapped around different instruments, so that each musician indicates different kinds of musical decision-making at different points in a song's development.

Feeling

This is the most important aspect of a musician's intentional repertoire, a way of understanding musical decisions in which all the above motivations come together. Here performers indicate that their decisions depend on the way the music at that moment 'feels'. This necessarily involves listening to and being disciplined by the musical material itself as well as responding to the audience but it is also central to what is meant by self-expression, the integration of musical and music-making emotion (Ian Bostridge's merger between the composer's work and the performer's personality). What this makes clear is that not only do music-makers in all music worlds refer in one way or another to all kinds of music-making intention but, also, that even within a single music world there can be quite different ways of performing. In classic rock, for example, as Adam Behr pointed out to me, musicians can indicate their being overwhelmed by the sounds they make either by wildness, a kind of physical abandonment to the music (The Who, say) or by stillness, a kind of mental absorption in the music. Eric Clapton is one example. Even in Cream he seemed to be making musical decisions in a quite different way than Ginger Baker.

What I am arguing here is that we can analytically separate what musicians do to make music (their technique, the particular movements of hands, breath, etc.) from what they do to indicate the decision they made to play this note in this way rather than another. As an overgeneralization one could say that a performance of making music

necessarily involves (for technical reasons) different parts of the body than the making of the sounds. Singers thus tend to indicate the intentions behind what their voice is doing in the movements of the non-sounding parts of their body, their hands in particular, although I did once hear the mezzo Sarah Connolly tell a presenter on BBC Radio 3 that when she first started singing Bach with early music groups, one conductor (Phillippe Herreweghe, I think) told her to stop singing “with a nineteenth-century face”.

Certainly for those who don't play wind instruments or sing what matters most to this sort of self-expression is facial movement. This is humorously celebrated in Jesse Phillips' Guitar Face series of guides to rock guitar playing on YouTube.⁵ As another YouTube clip (by Bret Dallas) shows, it is decidedly odd to watch a rock guitarist play without making any facial gestures at all.⁶ This clip illustrates both the difficulty of such expressionless playing for the performer (who can't stop his lips twitching) and how unengaging for the audience the music is without the appropriate music-making gestures. This is a further indication that we cannot bracket off the visual aspects of a musical performance as 'extramusical'. Live music is not and cannot be a purely aural experience. Even when a performer cannot be seen (at a cathedral organ recital, for example) the visual context, the religious architecture and the God-like invisibility of the organist, still determines how we hear the music-making.⁷

Musical Careers

In a useful essay on genre in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Rock Research* Nick Braae remarks that “the act of categorising instances of music is fundamental to Western music culture” (Braae 2020: 225). This is certainly true of popular music culture. As a music journalist much of what I wrote involved naming genres, periods, markets and sounds, tracing the boundaries of music tastes and music worlds. As a sociologist of music I shared the music business urge to categorise. Such labelling is the essence of music marketing – and thus music criticism. In the age of Spotify and Apple Music it is embedded in playlist algorithms.⁸

To write a history of live music, though, is to give a different account of the processes through which marketing genres emerge and merge, change and disappear. These processes are more confusing in live than in recorded music history. Record companies keep control of their taste publics through their marketing strategies, their organisation of sales charts, their star-making machinery. Live-music venues, by contrast, have to host a variety of musical events and to gather a variety of overlapping local audiences, sometimes in the same place at the same time, as in music festivals. Early-career musicians learn their performing skills in local scenes with local mentors for whom genre labels are essentially fluid. For almost all performing musicians income comes initially from

5. See, for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQuasZNd9PQ>

6. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PmgNnL92Dc>

7. One effect of living under lockdown was that my classical concert experience became the Royal Northern Sinfonia's weekly livestream from their empty concert hall, Sage Gateshead. These featured close-ups of the musicians in action not available to the audience in a live concert setting. I found myself noting the different physical ways in which individual instrumentalists expressed their musical engagement. In terms of facial gestures, cellists were by far the most expressive, timpanists the most deadpan.

8. See Eriksson et al. 2019.

selling music services rather than from writing or recording royalties and this remains true for most working musicians throughout their careers. Musical services can be sold directly to the public without the need to take heed of a record company's A&R conventions. A history of live music is therefore a history of the porous boundaries between supposedly quite different genres. This was best illustrated for us by the autobiographies of musicians that became central to our research. The way popular music is usually written about does not describe the way popular musicians think.

In a National Public Radio Music blog post in March 2021 Nate Chinen noted that Chick Corea, the recipient of 23 Grammy awards, the most for any jazz artist ever, added two more posthumously at the 2021 show (best improvised jazz solo for his piano work on 'All Blues' and best jazz instrumental album for *Trilogy 2*, the album on which the track appears). And yet Corea was, in Chinen's words,

the exact opposite of a genre essentialist, though he always self-identified as a jazz musician. His artistic purview was capacious enough to encompass acoustic post-bop and electronica; Mozart and Mongo Santamaría; Brazilian samba and Spanish flamenco; and just about every subspecies of fusion. In other words, Corea was always practicing the sort of genre fluidity we now consider a core competency, simply by pursuing his own fascinations. Which made him both an ideal paragon for Grammy ubiquity – the sort of boundless virtuoso game enough to say, "Sure, I'll play a live telecast with The Foo Fighters" – and an outlier in a system ruled by sorting mechanisms. As Amanda Petrusich wrote in the *New Yorker* this week: "It's difficult to imagine a Grammy ceremony that doesn't rely on genre as its organizing principle – I suppose that would entail the bestowing of just one award, Best Music – yet genre feels increasingly irrelevant to the way we think about, create, and consume art" (Chinen 2021).⁹

As Chinen points out, Chick Corea himself made this point at least as early as January 1983, when he told *The New York Times* that the relentless categorizing of music was less a concern of musicians than a preoccupation of "the media and the businessmen, who, after all, have a vested interest in keeping marketing clear-cut and separate." For a musician, by contrast, "a style is not something you learn so much as something that you synthesize".¹⁰

There's a sense in which musical careers, even those of musicians as gifted as Chick Corea, are accidental. Much depends, for example, on a performer's initial choice of instrument, a choice determined by family circumstance and school music teachers, by instrument manufacturers and local retailers, by friends and idols. To learn an instrument is to subject oneself to its constraints and to challenge them, to learn how it should be played and to discover how it can be. Learning combines discipline and experiment.¹¹ The early careers of musicians are equally

9. I was involved in the creation of the UK's Mercury Music Prize for Album of the Year in 1992 when it was decided that *all* British albums in *all* genres would be eligible. The first shortlist thus included albums by Erasure, The Jesus and Mary Chain, jazz pianist Bheki Mseleku, Simply Red, U2, the acid jazz club band Young Disciples, classical composer John Tavener and Primal Scream, that year's winner. This was a policy that journalists found baffling though musicians have always liked the prize precisely for its lack of attention to genre rules.
10. For audiences the significance of genre and style labels is in terms of expectations. Most audience members go to an event expecting a certain kind of experience and feel 'cheated' if the music played does not match the music promised. For some artists, however (Chick Corea?) and some audiences (self-defined fans of experimental music for example) the possible 'failure' of an event is a part of its appeal: it is expected.
11. Two recent histories of musical instruments (the drum kit and digital samplers) provide excellent examples of how performers are shaped by instruments and instruments by performers (Brennan 2020; Harkins 2020).

determined by the local availability of performance *spaces* (places in which to practise and play, which have their own idiosyncratic size, shape, access and acoustic), performance *occasions*, people to play with, audiences to play for and, above all, by the *circumstances* in which music is needed – for dancing, for meetings, for celebrations, for show. The importance of the locality for musical careers (and the necessary movements across genre, cultural and taste lines) is beautifully captured in Mark Slobin's recent history-cum-memoir of music making in Detroit (Slobin 2019), and I will return to this in my conclusion.

In Volume 1 of our history we compared the careers of percussionist James Blades (born 1901) and guitarist Vic Flick (born 1937). Both were self-taught musicians, both started out working in semi-pro bands that provided music for “weddings, garden fetes and other festive occasions”, playing in whatever style was demanded. Blades's first professional job was with a circus, Flick's in a holiday camp; Blades worked in cinema orchestras and hotel dance bands, Flick with rock 'n' roll and skiffle groups in ballrooms and on variety bills. Both men became in-demand session players in film, broadcasting and recording studios. Blades developed a close working relationship with Benjamin Britten and was increasingly hired by chamber groups and symphony orchestras; Flick enjoyed stardom with the John Barry Seven.

These musicians' successful careers obviously reflected their technical skills but depended equally on keeping pace with technological change and developing music-business contacts. Their work is best known to the public, if anonymously, from their distinctive contributions to iconic moments in British film history: Blades sounded the gong that introduced pictures produced by the Rank Organisation, Flick played the twangy guitar phrase that still introduces James Bond films. In their autobiographies the musicians are retrospectively resigned (Blades) and bitter (Flick) about the meagre one-off session fees they were paid for this work.

The tension here between the rewards of authorship (the ownership of copyright) and the rewards of craftsmanship (fees for services) were exacerbated by the commercial success of rock, with its romantic ideal of the artist. But what was happening here is perhaps better understood in terms of the popular cultural dominance in the 1960s and 1970s of record companies. In Volume 2 of our history we focused on the career of Bill Bruford, a self-defined jazz drummer who played with three of Britain's most successful progressive rock bands, Genesis, King Crimson and Yes. From his perspective it was rock stars who subjected their music to commerce, to the demands of their record companies. He describes the tension in the prog rock super-group UK (1977–80) between the jazz musicians (Bruford and Allan Holdsworth) on the one hand, who played what they liked and hoped someone else would like it too, and the rock musicians (John Wetton and Eddie Jobson) on the other, who sought to provide a known product for a grateful customer.

The difference between the two was, I thought, succinctly drawn when, one day, Eddie asked Allan, one of the best improvisers in the world ... to perform the same solos nightly that he had performed on the preceding album, presumably in the name of product consistency. Allan's mind utterly failed to compute the origin of this request, so bizarre did it seem. (Quoted in Frith et al. 2019: 177–8.)

Bruford's contrast here of jazz musicians' freedom with rock musicians' subordination to 'the product' is a replay of the previous decade's contrast of rock musicians' freedom with pop musicians' commercial servitude, which suggests to me that such contrasts between different music-making motivations are misleading. In Volume 3 of our history we compared the careers of drummer Gordy Marshall and guitarist Adrian Uttley. Marshall followed the usual freelance route into pit bands in the West End of London and on UK theatre tours of hit musicals and rock 'n' roll revival packages. In 1992 he auditioned successfully for the Moody Blues and for the next twenty years was a band member for their global tours and residencies on cruise ships and in Las Vegas. His job was to help the band give their audiences the 'Moody Blues experience', night after night. Uttley's early career also followed a familiar pattern. He played with rock, blues and jazz bands in clubs and holiday camps, at weddings and for recording sessions until, in 1993, he joined forces with Beth Gibbons and Geoff Barrow to form Portishead and to explore digital music-making technology and the dance market. *Dummy*, Portishead's debut album, won the 1995 Mercury Prize (see Frith et al. 2021: 174, 177).

The final career I want to outline here did not feature in our books but extended across the time period covered by all three put together. John Baldwin was born in January 1946. He started playing piano aged six, learning from his father, a pianist and arranger for big bands. His mother was also in the music business and the family performed together, touring England as a vaudeville comedy act. Because his parents were often on tour Baldwin went to a boarding school, where he studied music formally. Aged 14, he became choirmaster and organist at a local church and bought a bass guitar, joining his first band at the age of 15 and going on to play bass for a jazz-rock collective that included guitarist John McLaughlin. In 1962 he was hired by Jet Harris and Tony Meehan of the Shadows and in 1964, on the recommendation of Meehan, began to do studio session work with Decca Records. He went on to play hundreds of recording sessions, initially as a bassist but soon also playing keyboards, arranging and undertaking general studio direction. He worked with numerous artists, from the Rolling Stones to Françoise Hardy, from Dusty Springfield to Donovan. By 1968 (now working under the name John Paul Jones) he was completing two to three sessions a day, six to seven days a week: "I was arranging 50 or 60 things a month and it was starting to kill me." He was, unsurprisingly, therefore happy to join the band being formed by a fellow session musician, Jimmy Page, which became Led Zeppelin: "When I first joined the band, I didn't think it would go on for

that long, two or three years perhaps, and then I'd carry on with my career as a musician and doing movie music." In this band Jones shared a love of funk and soul grooves with drummer John Bonham:

Yeah, we were both huge Motown and Stax fans and general soul music fans, James Brown fans. Which is one of the reasons why I've always said that Zeppelin was one of the few bands to "swing". We actually had a groove in those days. People used to come to our shows and dance, which was great. To see all the women dancing, it was really brilliant. You didn't necessarily see that at a Black Sabbath show or whatever. So we were different in that way. We were a groovy band. We used all our black pop music influences as a key to the rock that went over the top.¹²

Jones continued to do session work during his Led Zeppelin days and since the band's demise has collaborated with a remarkable range of artists from not only the rock/pop world but also from contemporary art music (Diamanda Galás, for example) and the early music scene (Andrew Lawrence-King's Harp Consort, John Potter's Red Byrd). In 2011 Jones was in the onstage band for Mark-Anthony Turnage's opera, *Anna Nicole*, at the Royal Opera House, following a stint in a rock supergroup with Dave Grohl and Josh Homme and preceding a UK tour with the Norwegian avant-garde improvisation band, Supersilent.

What kind of musician is John Paul Jones? A session musician and a superstar, a fixture in recording studios and a member of one of the great live bands; a player who was equally at home in blues and jazz and rock bands and playing with free improvisors and early music ensembles. His career was not confined to a particular music world or set of genre conventions, nor was it determined by some sort of artistic or expressive need. It reflects, rather, a remarkable ability to seize opportunities driven, it seems, as much by curiosity and new musical challenges as by the exigencies of making a living. I was born the same year as Jones and as a music consumer I recognise his career as a kind of summary history of British music culture since the 1950s, embodying the trajectory of rock culture but exemplifying also the relentless development of hybrid musical tastes.

Jones can be seen as the 'ideal type' of a working musician. To give a different example of such a life, closer to home, over the last eighteen months or so my stepson, Barnaby Archer, a classically trained freelance percussionist and timpanist, has slowly emerged from the Covid pandemic's total music shutdown. His first jobs were on recording sessions for the music of the Disney 2020 Christmas movie and for the Aldi 2020 Christmas TV commercial, in the orchestra for a studio performance by the Scottish rock band, Biffy Clyro, being videoed by Amazon Prime, in the pit band for the brief December 2020 re-opening of *Les Misérables* in London's West End, on a recording by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra of work by the Polish composer

12. Quote and information taken from Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Paul_Jones_\(musician\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Paul_Jones_(musician))

Mieczysław Weinberg and as timpanist for a livestream performance of Haydn's *Sinfonia Concertante* by the Royal Northern Sinfonia. In other words, his life as a musician has started getting back to normal.

The career patterns I've been describing here have long defined musicians' working lives. In her recent book on Beethoven, for example, Laura Tunbridge shows in entertaining and scholarly detail that the musicality attributed to his (unworldly) genius also indicates his (worldly) ability to win and make the most of paying commissions, to respond to the public's changing musical tastes and political and religious emotions, and to exploit developments in piano technology and the availability of skilled instrumentalists. His inventive abilities were, indeed, remarkable, but his 'need to create' was always guided by his equal need to enjoy a reasonable income and maintain an appropriate reputation (see Tunbridge 2020).

In live music-making practice distinctions taken for granted in daily discourse are not easy to disentangle. In researching our history we were quickly aware, for example, of the difficulty of distinguishing between amateurs and professionals. Separating the 'skilled' from the 'unskilled', the 'taught' from the 'untaught', musicians who played for money from musicians who played for love was impossible. In Volume 1 we noted the everyday difficulties the Musicians' Union had in trying to protect the work of 'musicians' from the competition of 'non-musicians' (Frith et al. 2013: 164–9); in Volume 3 we showed that amateur players are essential for classical music commerce (Frith et al. 2019: 182–3). The distinctions here involve differentiating between full-time and part-time musicians and the difficulties of doing this are obvious. On the one hand, musicians change status (or earning power) through the course of their careers: from amateur to semi-pro to professional to semi-pro and back again; on the other hand, few professional musicians live exclusively off their performing or recording or composing income – even musicians with permanent orchestral contracts need to supplement their salaries with teaching income. In most music worlds playing for money is combined with making a living in a quite different occupation. This is most obvious in folk and jazz, which have limited markets, but can describe other kinds of musician too. Even combining a medical with a classical music career has been known and the fact that musicians work in other people's leisure time, at weekends and in holiday seasons, makes part-time professionalism manageable.

In many countries of course, making money from music is limited by the size of the audience and to be fully professional – to make a full-time living from music – means becoming an international star, like Björk or Víkingur Ólafsson. In his study of the Icelandic music scene, sociologist Arnar Eggert Thoroddsen suggests that it was therefore important for local 'amateur' musicians to *perform* professionalism. He gives the example of Hlynur Þorsteinsson, a hospital doctor who has released around forty albums in ten years, under various guises.

The remarkable thing is that so many aspects of the production were of proper standards, i.e. album cover artwork, the production of the CDs, the CD cases etc. Everything was put into shops, the library; and the Icelandic music industry and copyright agencies contacted, etc. The music was recorded in his home studio and some session players were involved. The reason he stopped in 2012? His computer crashed. As simple as that. He has not produced anything since. This was a hobby and he stubbornly released everything, as he simply assumed that's what you have to do. Even when things didn't go to plan, a flat note, strange recording sound ... everything was put out there.¹³

While all musicians seize the opportunities that come their way, such opportunities are not equally open to all musicians. Performing possibilities are shaped by access to material and cultural resources, by the effects, for example, of one's gender, class and ethnicity. One of the aims of our history was to trace the impact of economic and political change on musical lives: for instance on women musicians. During the First World War army recruitment left orchestras short of players. Female instrumentalists, previously blocked from such work, had new employment opportunities. When the war was over these women had their jobs taken from them. The work was given back to males and the Musicians' Union could once again categorise music work as men's work. Even when women players did begin to get orchestral seats they still found their playing opportunities restricted. In his history of the London Symphony Orchestra Richard Morrison notes that although the distinguished oboist Evelyn Rothwell was eventually

accepted into the orchestra [in 1935] she was never given the plum engagements; the lucrative film sessions. "Gordon Walker [LSO chairman and first flute] was the fixer", she later wrote, "and he and others concerned preferred to engage men".¹⁴ (Quoted in Frith et al. 2013: 69.)

Such male networks of fixers and players were equally apparent in the 1960s recording studios in which John Paul Jones worked although in the 1970s more women did begin to appear on the studio scene. The jazz trombonist Annie Whitehead, for example, who had started her professional career in 1971 as a 16-year-old in the Ivy Benson All Girls Orchestra, became the brass player of choice on many rock, jazz and dance sessions. But the most likely work for female session musicians in studios and touring bands was still as backing singers. It was Tessa Niles whose employment most nearly matched Jones's in terms of its range of genres and performing authority. She began her professional singing career as an 18-year-old in 1979 and went on to work with most of Britain's rock aristocracy (Stones, Clapton, McCartney, Bowie, Sting ...), with R&B acts (Tina Turner, Buddy Guy), pop stars (Robbie Williams, Kylie Minogue, Tom Jones), with the classical singer Kiri Te Kanawa, and the show singer Sarah Brightman, with the jazz funk group Morrissey-Mullen and prog rockers Mike Rutherford, Bill Bruford and Rick

13. Quoted from personal correspondence and see Thoroddsen 2018. YouTube has become a wonderful resource for performances of professionalism by amateurs.

14. Rothwell and fellow oboist Natalie Caine were the LSO's first female woodwind players.

Wakeman, with Italian singer-songwriter Zucchero and such different performers as Cher and Everything But The Girl. Her voice is familiar (if unrecognised) to most Brits from its use on many TV commercials.

Niles had the musical ability to provide whatever vocal sound was required. Other singers seized the opportunity to help shape the sound of new musical movements. Caron Wheeler, Claudia Fontaine and Naomi Wheeler formed Afrodiziak, one of the most successful backing groups of the 1980s, appearing on numerous pop, rock and reggae hits (most memorably The Specials' 'Free Nelson Mandela'). Wheeler became a key figure in the emerging sound system culture as featured vocalist for the Soul II Soul collective. Fontaine, whose career had begun as a studio singer for record producers on the Lovers' Rock scene, went on to work with The Beatmasters, pioneers of British electronic dance music. Manchester-based Denise Johnson, who began her professional career singing in a soul band, became the studio singer of choice for the 'Madchester' scene and provided the defining vocal sound of the hybrid of indie rock and rave celebrated by Primal Scream's 1991 Mercury winning album *Screamadelica*.

It wasn't only session singers who were offered new opportunities by electronic dance music. Tracey Thorne, from the band Everything But The Girl, describes how her increasing disillusion with the commercialism and laddishness of indie-rock led her to accept an invitation to sing with Fairport Convention at the 1993 Copenredy Festival:

One day I am on stage in a country field in front of a crowd of bearded, real-ale folkies, euphorically singing a Sandy Denny anthem as the late afternoon sun dips behind the trees and hedgerows. And then, almost the next day, or so it seems, there is a phone call from Massive Attack asking me to collaborate and sing on their second album. (Quoted in Frith et al. 2021: 175.)

Massive Attack's *Protection* was released in 1994, as was Everything But The Girl's next album, *Amplified Heart*. This brought together veteran players from Fairport Convention (Richard Thompson Dave Mattacks and Danny Thompson), the jazz saxophonist Pete King, *cor anglais* player Kate St John and avant-garde producer/programmer John Coxon. House DJ Todd Terry remixed the album's sixth track, 'Missing' as a single. It was a top ten hit around the world. In genre terms Everything But the Girl's music had become difficult to place.

Conclusion: Musicians are Ordinary

It sometimes seems as if I have spent much of my professional life having to think about performers' authenticity, originality and creativity.¹⁵ These are not only issues for rock fans. Jazzers are preoccupied with 'real' jazz and folkies with 'authentic' folk, while many

writers about classical music still assume that any music that is in any way 'commercial' cannot be taken seriously. Academics like Richard Peterson may have definitively critiqued the ideological assumptions of such notions of musical truth but they remain embedded in audience and institutional discourse (see Peterson 1997). Reviews and interviews, programme notes and press releases, radio presenters and promoters all reinforce the image of musicians as people driven by intense creative needs and expressive impulses. This is, though, to confuse music-making with music-marketing. My argument is that we should admire successful musicians not for their integrity but for their opportunism, a term that needs rescuing from its negative overtones.

A concept we found useful in understanding live music history was 'affordance', which for us meant referring to the obstacles to and possibilities for action offered by particular objects (musical instruments, say) or situations (live performance, for example).¹⁶ The question that came to interest me particularly was not how musicians became stars but how they used the musical opportunities offered in everyday life. The institutions that are most important for musical careers may not be the most obvious national and specialist music institutions – record companies, publishers, broadcasters, arts councils, music schools, conservatories, etc. – important as they are. Local, informal music-making opportunities are, as I have already suggested, just as important for how musical lives are lived, and these are tied up with the institutions that shape the everyday, the ordinary. I can best illustrate this schematically and, following Slobin, use personal experience.

The Family

I grew up in households with a piano. My father was a good player (later in his life he played organ for the local church) though as far as I know neither of his parents had any interest in music at all. My older brother played violin well enough to lead the school orchestra and after he married held string quartet evenings with his wife and their friends. My younger brother became a famous musician, Fred Frith, a violinist, a guitarist, a composer and improviser. My father-in-law was a singer/percussionist who became band leader at the Savoy; my sister-in-law sings and plays guitar and keyboards in a folk-pop duo, Dave Ellis and Boo Howard, that has been gigging (and releasing new records) for more than thirty years.¹⁷ My stepson is, as already noted, a professional percussion player and timpanist; my daughter a professional flute player and music teacher; my wife, who studied oboe and piano at school, now sings in two amateur choirs, plays recorders with friends and is a member of both the Northeast Early Music Forum and the Society of Recorder Players.

The intertwining of musical opportunities and family life is common in all music worlds and across the social spectrum, most obviously,

15. For a useful overview of the use of these terms in rock scholarship see Gracyk 2020.

16. This concept was originally formulated by the ecological psychologists James and Eleanor Gibson, but has been widely adopted in other disciplines, including sociology.

17. See <http://www.daveandboo.com>.

perhaps, in the familiar phenomenon of children learning to play the same instrument as a parent.¹⁸ Mavis Bayton told me when she was researching *Frock Rock* that a significant number of the female guitar players to whom she talked were the daughters of guitarist fathers who had no sons (see Bayton 1998). In the autobiographies of Britain's garage and grime stars there is often reference to their parents' inspirational influence as reggae record collectors, dancers and DJs.

But even without such lineages, family occasions are important for musical employment. Musicians of all sorts, from jazz harpists to club DJs, from crooners to metal bands, make money from weddings. As a teenager, my daughter-in-law was a member of her family's string quartet. Her parents, professional orchestral musicians, ran a successful wedding music business. Wedding anniversaries and significant birthdays are also a common source of music income. When my daughter was at primary school her best friend invited her to a family birthday do, a grandfather's 70th. It was a grand affair (he was a wealthy builder and property developer) with a star-studded line-up of performers, none of whom my daughter had heard of. Top of the bill was Dionne Warwick.

The Church

In his autobiography Bill Bruford describes the Anglican church as "a powerful cultural agent" in the making of English progressive rock. Most prog rock singers, he notes, had originally sung in church choirs and many prog rock keyboard players had originally played church organs (see Frith et al. 2019:138). I have already noted the role of church music in John Paul Jones's career and the experience of singing in church choirs is usually in the background of successful choral, *lieder* and opera singers, on the one hand, and gospel, soul and r&b singers, on the other. Churches have also long provided occasions for secular musical performances, fetes, garden parties and fundraising events. John Lennon, George Harrison and Paul McCartney famously played their first gig, as The Quarrymen, at the St. Peter's Church Rose Queen Garden Fête in Woolton; today, abbeys, churches and cathedrals are important venues for local live music ecologies.

Education

I'm less interested here in the obvious importance of music education in the making of musical performers than in the importance of high schools and Further Education (FE) colleges, art schools and universities for performance opportunities, in the provision of spaces, stages, audiences, collaborators, promoters, resources, time, technologies and technologists. In our study we showed the importance, for example, of art schools and universities for jazz and folk in the 1950s and 1960s and for rock and the Early Music movement in the 1960s and

18. So Sam Fender, for example (see footnote 2) may have had a disrupted upbringing but his musical aspirations and early pub and club gigs were nurtured by his guitar-playing song-writing father and older brother.

1970s. By the turn of the century students were the key market for the development of the club scene and electronic dance music, while FE colleges, once the setting for emerging punk acts now became settings for the development of the art of grime. Above all, these educational settings give musicians opportunities to experiment, to be pretentious and to fail.

The Military

The role of the military in the history of popular music is a neglected topic. From the beginning of the 20th century the Musicians' Union treated military musicians as unfair competition to MU members in their provision of entertainment on the bandstand or the pier, but such musicians had successful enough performing careers for Richard Morrison to suggest that even in 1970 ex-military bandmen still had a significant presence in the LSO (cited in Frith et al. 2013: 65). A history of British jazz and beat music in the 1950s and 1960s reveals the importance of National Service as a setting in which young men got access to instruments, tutors and performance opportunities. They emerged from their army service to be in-demand players and mentors for the plethora of local DIY skiffle and blues bands. Sixty years later several of my daughter's contemporaries at the Royal Northern College of Music were signed up to regimental bands as a way of getting their courses funded and being sure of musical employment on graduation; one of her college experiences was a week's residential workshop with the band on a naval base. In other musical worlds – brass bands and piping, for example – military bands are customary (and often successful) competitors at national and international events. For many pop and rock groups from the 1960s to the 1990s tours of British and American European military bases were essential to their economic survival.

Holidays

The history of live music is, among other things, the history of holiday entertainment, from seaside variety (an important source of summer employment for classical and jazz musicians), through holiday camps and talent shows (an important source of summer employment for skiffle and rock 'n' roll musicians) to today's multi-music festivals, new versions of the camping holiday, and clubbing weeks in Ibiza and Aya Napa, new versions of the package holiday.

Raymond Williams's famous essay 'Culture is Ordinary' (first published in 1958) is, in part, a polemic against the idea that 'culture' is something that belongs to the 'cultured'. But it is, more importantly, a celebration of the ways in which expressive and signifying beliefs and practices give meaning to (and take meaning from) everyday life. As Williams argues,

it makes no sense to describe the Welsh working-class family in which he grew up as uncultured (he even remarks in passing that “at home we met and made music”) (Williams 1989: 94). Williams suggests that culture has two aspects:

the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to, the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative. (ibid. 93.)

It is from this perspective that I describe musicians as ordinary. Music-making too must be understood in terms of everyday life. What makes musicians extraordinary is not who they are but what they do and how they use their music-making opportunities. ■

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