

INFORMAL POPULAR MUSIC LEARNING PRACTICE AND THEIR RELEVANCE FOR FORMAL MUSIC EDUCATORS

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Introduction

I would like to start by listening to the opening of a song. It is performed by Nanette Welmans, an English popular musician who I interviewed as part of a study on how popular musicians learn. Nanette does all the singing on the recording, including the backing vocals; she plays all the instruments and she mixed the recording herself. She also composed the music and wrote the lyrics. Like the majority of popular musicians, she had hardly any formal music education at all. She had taken a few piano lessons when she was ten years old, but gave up because in her words: 'I just couldn't relate to them, at all'. She became a professional singer at the age of 17, but only went to a singing teacher later. She had two separate periods of taking lessons, mainly concentrating on diaphragm breathing. At the time of creating this song, she did not know how to read notation; and it emerged after the interview that she had notation dyslexia. She had never had any education in composition, form, harmony or counterpoint.

There are three main questions I wish to address in this presentation. Firstly, how did she, and other musicians like her, go about the informal processes of acquiring their skills and knowledge; secondly, what kinds of attitudes and values did they bring to their learning experiences; thirdly, and more briefly, to what extent might it be beneficial to incorporate these learning practices into the formal environment of the general school music classroom?

The research involved detailed interviews and some observations with 14 popular musicians living in and around London, UK, aged 15 to 50. They were all engaged in what can broadly be termed Anglo-American guitar-based pop and rock music, as well as other styles cutting across jazz and theatre music. I excluded rappers, DJs and musicians who produce electronic, synthesised and sampled musics. This is because the learning practices involved in such musics contain some significant differences from those of guitar-based rock. I wished to maintain a focus, enabling a deeper rather than broader treatment of the issues within one sub-style; and leading to findings that



could of course be compared to learning practices, attitudes and values in other sub-styles, by other research.¹

In Brazil musical life both inside and outside schools and other institutions is of course very different from that in England. However I hope that the study will be of interest to Brazilian musicians and particularly, music educators or amateurs who work in classrooms and in social projects in poor urban areas. I am sure that although the details might be different, the basic principles of learning and their application to organised group-learning contexts have many similarities.

The London musicians were divided into two age groups. This was because amongst other things, I wished to ascertain how much their informal learning practices had changed over the last forty years or so of the twentieth century. I was also interested in their experiences of formal music education. Those in the older group were aged from 23 to 50, and had started secondary school between 1960 and 1987, which is, in general terms, before the entrance of popular music into schooling in England. Those in the younger group were aged from 15 to 21, and had started secondary school after 1988, during a time when popular music became a normal, established part of the curriculum. The youngest four interviewees were still at school at the time of the research. Apart from age, the only other selection criteria were that none of the interviewees should be personally acquainted with me (there were two minor exceptions); the older ones should be professional or semi-professional popular musicians; and the younger ones should either play in a popular band (professional or not), or be just about to start one. Other than that, I interviewed the first fourteen musicians I came across, accessing them in various ways, from purely coincidental meetings to networking.

I did not interview any famous stars: it was the acquisition of musicianship, rather than stardom, that I was interested in, and of course, the two do not always coincide. However, the oldest five musicians had worked with several well-known artists and bands, including Joan Armatrading, Long John Baldry, Jeff Beck, Eric Burden of the Animals, Ian Carr, Georgie Fame, Isaac Hayes, Hawkwind, Van Morrison, Leo Sayer, the Stylistics, Danny Thompson, Pete Townshend of the Who, and more. The next six in age were in semi-professional originals, covers and/or function bands, two of the youngest were in their first rehearsal bands with school friends, and the very youngest was planning to form a band soon. Chart 1 gives a summary profile of the interviewees.

NAME	AGE	MAIN INSTRUMENT(S)	MAIN MUSICAL ACTIVITIES
Bernie Holland	50	Guitar Bass, Drums Keyboards, Perc.	Session Composer/arranger
Terry Ollis	46	Drums	Originals band Covers bands
Rob Burns	45	Bass Guitar	Session Composer/arranger
Nanette Welmans	38	Voice	Covers/originals bands
Brent Keefe	34	Drums	Freelance/session
Peter Williams	27	Bass	Covers band Originals band
Will Cragg	23	Guitar Drums, Bass Voice	Covers band Covers duo
Steve Popplewell	21	Bass Guitar	Originals band
Simon Bourke	19	Drums Guitar, Bass	Originals band
Andy Brooks	19	Guitar Sax	Originals band
Michael Whiteman	17	Drums Guitar, Keyboard	Covers/originals band
Emily Dicks	16	Guitar	Rehearsal band
Richard Dowdall	15	Guitar Drums, Keyboard	Rehearsal band
Leo Hardt	15	Sax Voice, Keyboard Guitar, Bass	Planning a band

Chart 1. (The main instrument for each person is shown in bold. Many of them had also played other instruments which they had given up.)

Popular musicians acquiring skills and knowledge

Enculturation

By ‘enculturation’ I mean immersion in the music and musical practices of one’s environment. This is a fundamental aspect of all music learning, whether formal or informal. However it has a more prominent position, and plays a more important part in some learning



practices and with relation to some styles of music than others. Imagine a baby banging a spoon or some other object on the kitchen table of an indigenous English family in London. The adults are liable to take the spoon away, or somehow get the baby to stop ‘making a noise’. By contrast, in his observations of the Venda people of South Africa, John Blacking observed that in such a situation, the adults or other children would be more likely to join in, adding a polyrhythm to the baby’s banging in such a way as to turn it into music.² In both cases, the baby is being encultured into the music and the music-making practices of (or their absence from) its surroundings.

As soon as banging a spoon becomes a *musical* activity, it already involves all of the three main ways by which we engage in music making, that is: performing (whether playing or singing), creating (whether composing or improvising), and listening (to ourselves and to others). All the musicians in my study, regardless of age, had acquired musical skills and knowledge, first and foremost through being encultured in these three activities, related to music which they were familiar with, they liked, and they heard around and about them. This involved the equivalent of banging spoons: they had an instrument, and they experimented with it, discovering what different sounds it could make through trial and error.

However, there are some crucial differences between how these young people learnt and how the Venda baby learnt. Most folk and traditional musics of the world are learnt by enculturation and extended immersion in listening to, watching and imitating the music, and music-making practices of the surrounding community. In some folk and traditional musics, as well as in many art musics of the world, and to a large extent in jazz, there are also systems of what might be called ‘apprenticeship training’ whereby young musicians are brought into, and explicitly trained or generally helped by an adult community of expertise. In relation to popular music I wish to highlight two main departures from these tendencies.

Firstly, most young popular musicians are not surrounded by an adult community of practising popular musicians who they can listen to live, watch and imitate, or who initiate them into the relevant skills and knowledge. Even though in Brazil, for example, the musical culture in the home and the streets may be more vibrant than in the UK, nonetheless the music involved tends to be Brazilian Popular Music or traditional musics, rather than the teenage popular music that comes mainly from the USA. Hence young pop musicians involved in such areas tend to engage in a significant amount of *solitary* learning. Secondly, in so far as a community of practice *is* available to young popular musicians, it tends to be a community of *peers* rather than ‘master-musicians’ or



adults with greater skills. Next I will consider these two areas: firstly the musicians' solitary activities, then their group activities.

The main learning practice: listening and copying recordings

By far the overriding learning practice for popular musicians, as is already well-known and is also clear from the few existing studies (see note 1), is to copy recordings by ear. It seems an extraordinary fact that this practice has developed, in only eighty years or so since the invention and spread of recording technologies, across many countries of the world, through the activities of children and young people, basically in isolation from each other, outside of any networking or formal structures and largely without adult guidance. I wish to distinguish two extreme ways of conceiving of this practice, each situated at the opposite ends of a pole. At one extreme there is what I call *purposive* listening, that is, listening with the conscious purpose of adopting and adapting what is heard into one's own practices. At the opposite extreme, *distracted* listening (or even hearing), occurs when music is heard in the background, and enters the mind almost entirely through unconscious enculturation.

Here are some examples of the musicians in my study, from the oldest to the youngest, talking about how they had approached copying recordings in relation to the first category, *purposive listening*. It is worth noticing that although they all did this, each interpretation and use of the method was idiosyncratic.

Rob

— I'd listen to the line over and over again till I could sing it, the bass line. And then I'd work it out from singing it.

Andy

— Without even knowing at the time, I'd get a phrase, just one single phrase and I'd do that and I'd copy it, get it perfect and move on to the next bit and then once I'd got it all, I'd play along with it and I'd keep on playing along with it.

Will

— At that age [c. 10 to 12] I was really, really into the Beatles, and a lot of Ringo's stuff is very easy to follow and I was just learning about where you put the bass drum, where you put the snare, where you put the hi-hat, and just, and I was just trying to co ordinate the three to be able to do that.

At the opposite extreme from learning through purposive listening, some practices involve a very *distracted* approach to listening or even just rely on inattentively hearing a large variety of music. For example, as youngsters the musicians would play, from a mixture of memory and imagination, the kinds of sounds they heard around and about.

Terry

— Well, I mean I'd be listening to the record anyway so it would probably be on the radio or I'd be playing it. It was obviously one that I liked, and so I'd know it.

Richard

— You just listen to it and — at that time I just kind of played the — moved the chords around 'til it sounded right... Usually when I'm at home on my own I play along to it just like that, and if there's nothing on I'll just think, 'I feel like playing that song' so I just play a bit of it.

Not only purposive listening, but also distracted listening carries on beyond the early learning stages and into professional realms. For example: Terry was a founder member of the British psychedelic band Hawkwind, which had a large cult following during the early 1970s. He left the band just before it achieved some mainstream chart success, when he was about nineteen. During his life-time there followed many periods when he was not involved in any music-making at all. Once, after one such gap of seven years, he received an unexpected phone call asking him to play in a covers band. Playing in a covers bands obviously requires knowledge by memory of a large number of songs, which can be anything from fifty to several hundred depending on the individual and the band. But not only that, it requires the ability to reproduce them at short notice, or sometimes no notice at all, in ways that sound as exactly like the original recordings as possible, in conditions far removed from the rather more ideal setting of a recording studio.

Terry had never played in a covers band in his life before. So I asked him if before the first gig, he had to refresh his memory by listening to, and playing along with a lot of recordings. He said 'no'...

Terry

— ... because it's like, you know, the bass player or someone would say, 'Oh it's High Heeled Sneakers' and there's loads of songs that are the same as 'High Heeled Sneakers' for the drums to play; or it's a shuffle, you know, and I'd just do it from that.

— Lucy: And you do the fills and stuff from feel?

— Terry: Just feel, yeah.

At the time of the interviews, he was playing in a Jimi Hendrix tribute band:

Terry

- It's a bit like the Hendrix stuff, I was saying, because I'd know the stuff so well I could remember how it goes, do you know what I mean?
- Lucy: Right. Well that's slightly different though isn't it, if you're doing it by memory without ever having sat down and played along, or listened over and over to the recording, you're not attempting to get exactly what Mitch Mitchell [Hendrix's drummer] did or whoever it happened to be are you?
- Terry: Well I was, well I am you know, we try to play it almost exactly how it's played.
- Lucy: Yeah right.
- Terry: As opposed to a band playing Hendrix stuff, in *their* style, we play it in Hendrix's style, you know.
- Lucy: And you don't have to go back and check your memory very often then now?
- Terry: Well, yeah I mean you listen to the tape and think, 'Shit I'm not doing that!', things like that, you know what I mean.

However, a comparison of his band's performances with some of the original Hendrix recordings revealed a high level of accuracy, and not only accuracy, but a reproduction of the 'feel' of the original (a view which has been confirmed by a number of musicians to whom I have played the music).

Playing with peers

Copying recordings is almost always a solitary activity, but solitude is not a distinguishing mark of the popular music learner. On the contrary, group activity is of great importance, and occurs in the absence of adult supervision or coordination. It is characterised by two aspects. One is peer-directed learning, which involves the conscious sharing of knowledge and skills, through, for example, demonstration. The other is group learning, where there is no *conscious* demonstration or teaching as such, but learning takes place through watching and imitation during music-making; as well as talking endlessly about music during and outside of rehearsals.

Bands are formed at very early stages, even if the players have little control over their instruments and virtually no knowledge of any chord progressions, licks or songs; or even if they have no instruments to play! All but two of the musicians in this study had started up a band or a series of bands within a few months of beginning to play their instrument. The youngest age was 6, but most others were between ten and fifteen. Although early bands are nearly always formed with peers, age is less important than musical ability, or in other words, the fact that the band-members should all be at a roughly similar standard.

The bands jammed, played covers they knew and liked, and made up their own music. In all cases, different band-members would demonstrate learnt or original musical ideas to each other, and usually each member of the band would put in their own touch.

Andy

— The main writer is the singer — he does come up with all the lyrics — and more often than not he comes up with the basic tune. But as soon as we get into rehearsal it's no longer what he came up with — we pull it apart, we reform it, we restructure it — add the harmonies, the bass line, the beat, the rhythm, everything to it. And it comes out as a different product

So performance, composition and improvisation abilities are acquired not only as individuals, but crucially, as members of a group. This occurs through informal peer-directed learning and group-learning, which is both conscious and unconscious. It takes place in the absence of an adult or other person who can provide leadership or bring greater musical experience to bear.

Notation

As is well known, scores are very rarely used in the popular music world, apart from a few cases such as highly professional function or theatre bands, or in an occasional manner, such as when a musician in a rehearsal scribbles something down on a piece of paper (usually to be screwed up and thrown away as soon as the instruction is internalised). Session musicians are more likely to have constant work if they can read. But the main means of learning and passing on music is through recordings, either commercial ones or 'demos' passed between the musicians; and even when it *is* used, notation is never used on its own but is always heavily mixed in with purposive listening and copying, using recordings as the central resource.

Six of the fourteen musicians in this study used notation, mostly having been introduced to it through some, fairly minimal, amount of formal music education. However, even given this presence of adult guidance, they all nonetheless adapted the relevant skills to their own use through highly idiosyncratic means. Here is the oldest musician, Bernie Holland, talking about his use of notation when he was first learning. Having had guitar lessons for one year only from a musician in his father's factory dance-band, he extended the skills by...

Bernie

- ...listening to records...I'd buy the LP and it would run at thirty-three revs per minute. I had a record player luckily that had a sixteen-and-a-half rpm speed, and what I'd do is, I'd get their guitar solos, and I'd play them at sixteen-and-a-half revs, and write them down, because at that speed I could write it down onto paper, and then I'd learn them...

Another of the very experienced session musicians, Rob Burns, had a grounding in the treble clef through classical trumpet lessons as a boy. But he was entirely self-taught on the bass guitar, and in his own words, never connected what he was learning on the one instrument with what he was teaching himself on the other. Then, early on in his professional career, the following occurred:

Rob

- As far as reading bass goes, it was an ordeal by fire, because I'd just got a gig in this band that backed soul artists, the Stylistics, and it was the first tour I ever did, and they had an MD who took no prisoners, and he just gave us all the charts, [notation] counted us in, and I learnt to read bass clef in an hour!
- Lucy: You understood the principle of it before?
- Rob: Oh yes, I knew treble clef pitch, it was only a question of reading everything a third down, but it was nerve-wracking. But I was determined not to fail.
- Lucy: Was it a completely notated part, or sort of just partially —
- Rob: The majority of it was completely notated. I was just flying on adrenalin.

Aural copying of course pays attention to a number of factors which are not readily communicated through notation. These include idiosyncratic and non-standardised timbres, rhythmic flexibility, pitch inflection and many other aspects, not least those never-to-be-defined but always recognisable qualities, groove, 'feel', swing. Here again, not only conscious, focussed, purposive listening and copying, but also loose imitation related to continuous, unconscious enculturation and distracted listening are relied upon as essential parts of the early learning process, and continue to be the principle means through which music is transmitted and reproduced throughout a musician's career.

Acquiring technique

The concept of technique as a *conscious* aspect of controlling the instrument came late to most of the musicians, and was in many cases, incorporated into their playing either immediately before, or some time after having become professional. For example, Rob was a highly proficient, virtuosic bass player who, at the time of the interviews, was Head of Bass Guitar at one of the first popular music colleges in Britain:



Rob

- Lucy: How did you go about learning your [bass guitar] technique?
- Rob: I didn't. I did it all by ear until at the age of, I'd just turned nineteen, it must have been around March or April when a guitar playing friend of mine said 'Your hand technique's dreadful,' and I said 'Well I'm fast, I can do this, that and the other', and he said 'No, no, no, it's dreadful'. And he showed me correct classical guitar technique.
- Lucy: Right. And you were nineteen?
- Rob: I was nineteen. And I turned professional in the September...By this time I'd become obsessed with technique and I used to watch every bass player that I regarded as being an icon at the time, and I noticed that the majority of them did use the technique that [my friend] had shown me.

Acquiring knowledge of technicalities

By 'technicalities' I mean, not the executive psychomotor *technique* involved in playing or singing, but knowledge and understanding of music 'theory'. This came haphazardly, according to whatever music was being played and enjoyed at the time. To begin with, the musicians could *use* musical elements in stylistically appropriate ways, but usually without being able to apply names to them, or to discuss them in any but vague or metaphorical terms. For example:

Will

- I mean when I first started playing I didn't know the names of things, like modes, but it was more about the feel of it...

I asked Steve: 'So how did you acquire your understanding of harmony?'

Steve

- Um. Trial and error [laughs]. What sounds right. Just get the bass note, the first note that they're playing, then work around that.

As a rule all the responses to such questions referred to listening as the prime source of the learning, with working out the relationships between sounds, following on from that.

Thus learning about theory was lead by the excitement of the music.

Michael

- My Dad said 'Well put in this F in the C chord here and then make it go down to the E and I thought 'Ooh that sounds nice'. I started doing it all the time after that.

Later on he came to refer to this as a 'sus4', or the rock term 'suspended 4th'. Another commentator responded, (again using rock terminology):



- You discover A-augmented-6th because you want to play a Stevie Wonder song; you discover A-augmented-9th because you want to play a Jimi Hendrix song; you discover A-major triad over a B bass-note because you want to play a Carole King song...

As time goes by the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle fall into place, to differing degrees depending on the individual, and can of course lead to highly sophisticated levels of theoretical knowledge and understanding.

The development of the ear

Not surprisingly, all this emphasis on listening also leads to the development of quite sophisticated aural capacities. Here are three examples of how some of the musicians surprised even themselves in this respect:

Andy

- Through [listening and copying], you don't just pick up what they're doing, you pick up techniques, you pick up common sorts of progressions and so forth. And nowadays I can hear a record and I just know what's coming next. I know exactly what the notes are as well. This is a recent thing. I can listen and I can pick out the pitch I know that's a C major or whatever. And I never thought I'd be able to do that, the way I've learnt music, you know, it's really strange.

Richard

- You just listen to it and at that time I just kind of moved the chords around 'til it sounded right, but now I can usually tell, like if it's in A it's going to be that chord next because it's got, you know what I mean? It's I can't explain it.

Michael surprised his schoolteacher:

Michael

- I can often pick out chord sequences just from, if I know a song I can play it...
- ...I do remember once a teacher playing us two pieces of music and asking us what the connection was between the two. And she was quite surprised when I said they were both in the same key. She didn't think anyone was going to spot that.

Practising

Some of the musicians practised their instruments for five or six hours a day in the early stages of learning, others practised for considerably less time, and one (Terry) hardly ever practised at all. They all approached practice according to their mood, other commitments in life, or



motivation by external factors such as joining a new band or composing a new song. Their development was marked by some periods of relatively intensive practice, interspersed with other periods without any practice. Most importantly, practice was something they did so long as they enjoyed it. If they were not enjoying it, they did not do it.

Popular musicians' attitudes and values towards music and musicianship

'Feel'

I asked every interviewee the question: what do you value most highly in another musician? Unsurprisingly, nearly all of them gave one type of answer, which I would expect of any musician the world over. This was that they valued 'feel', 'sensitivity', 'spirit' or other similar attributes, over and above technical ability. For example, Bernie described attending a concert of virtuoso guitarists:

Bernie

- ... and for the first half an hour my tongue was hanging out, my jaw dropped, but after that I thought 'Well was that it? Well, come on what else?' And it was rather like a circus act...
- ...You've got this chord sequence and you've got these bars and you've got to make sense of it, and be musical as well. It's not enough to be clever and technical. You've got to be musical, you've got to sing, you've got to be lyrical, you've got to make your instrument sing.

Similar sentiments were echoed by all the others. For example:

Terry

- I think with all music, it's the feel that makes the music, you know you could be technically brilliant and as boring as anything. I think it's what people put into it really.

Rob

- Passion I think, I've got to be moved by music.

Brent

- Spirit, I would say. Spirit or feel or whatever, however you want to describe it, the sort of, the way in which they play. The way they attack things for want of a better word. You know you can get people who don't have much technique but really have a great feel about what they do, and you can get people who've got phenomenal technique who are just totally soulless. So you know when it comes down to it I think it's feel or spirit.

Leo

- Um, really, I'm not quite sure I think...especially if it's improvisation, then, the melody, or how they're playing it, how they've interpreted it, is more important than their actual quality of playing.
- Lucy: Right, so, what do you mean by 'how they interpret it'?
- Leo: Um, well, whether they play it, say, just if they put their own life into it like, I mean like, interpret it their own way...they've added something extra.

Friendship and co-operation

More unexpectedly, in answer to the same question on what qualities they value most highly in another musician, many of them said they valued friendship, tolerance and shared taste: 'being a nice person', 'being able to fit in with the band', 'people that can sit in a tour bus or on an aeroplane week after week and not drive everybody else insane or have murderous thoughts', people with whom they had 'had a great sense of sort of a bond'. Commitment to the music and to the band, were also viewed with immense importance: as Andy said in an aside, 'I value loyalty above all else actually'. I am not suggesting that all young popular musicians are exceptionally well-balanced individuals who never have arguments! But what does emerge is that co-operation, sensitivity to others, commitment and responsibility are explicitly highly *valued* by the musicians.

Furthermore, this emphasis on friendship and commitment concerns not only the social relationships that surround the band practice or performance, but are necessary conditions of two further aspects. One is that, since the music being played is arrived at through choice and group negotiation, all the productive activities of the band are reliant on a consensus of taste, and/or the willingness to tolerate the potentially differing tastes of others, as well as the ability to co-operate and the responsibility of arriving at rehearsals and concerts at the correct place and time, with the correct equipment, all without any adult guidance. Without such co-operation, (especially in the absence of incentives such as fame and money, but even with such incentives) a band will eventually disintegrate. The other aspect is, most fundamentally, that friendship, co-operation and the ability to be sensitive to other people also affect the precise nature and feel of the music being produced. For example:

Michael

- The most important thing to me in, well in pop music certainly is empathy with the rest of the band. And my band I play in we're very empathetic, whatever that word is. Having played with the guitarist for five years of course it helps that, but occasionally from time to time I'll think, 'triplet run coming up here', and I'll play a triplet run and



the guitarist will also play a triplet run without having communicated beforehand and that — I think that's absolutely excellent when that happens.

Enjoyment

Enjoyment was very high on the agenda I mentioned earlier that the musicians did not practice unless they were enjoying it. But more than that: love, even passion for music were explicit in the words of everyone I interviewed. For example:

Rob

— Most of my colleagues now are sort of over 40. I mean we've been working together since we were all in our mid 20's... I like them to still be as passionate about what they do as I am. I'll never forget my first BBC session where we had a string section playing with us and all the rhythm section, i.e. the kind of young guys, dashed into the control room at live break to hear what we just put down, and all the string players pulled out their *Guardians* and sat reading the paper. I thought, 'I never want to end up with that kind of, "it's a job", attitude'. So I think it's like, if they still have a great enthusiasm. I can still walk into certain music shops and it's still like being 15 — it's like 'Oh, wow, want one of those, want one of those too'. And a lot of people tend to think of it just as a means of earning a living and that's — if somebody has that same view as I have, that they can still be excited, then, you know, I like working with people like that.

Or in Terry's memories of Hawkwind:

Terry

— It was almost a spiritual thing, you know what I mean, particularly when we were playing, because... I believed, you know I think we all did really, totally in what we were doing, absolutely. I mean I always remember if I had died at the point, at any time when I was playing, I couldn't have died doing anything better, you know, I'd have been completely fulfilled, if you like, doing my utmost for something I believed in you know, it was great.

Self esteem

I did not ask the musicians any direct questions about self esteem, but nonetheless several of them indicated that playing music raised their self esteem and their own perceptions of their status amongst peers. This was often, again, a source of pleasure. For example:

Steve

— You just want to learn a song and you just want to learn it so bad so you can play it so when you go to school next day with your guitar you can show your mates — 'Oh guess what I can play!'



Andy

— Yeah, I mean, first of all it was getting the right chord progressions — you'd walk into school, you'd just learnt 'Knocking on Heaven's Door' or something, sit in the music centre in front of everybody else and you'd play it and they'd be like 'yeah, that's right, yeah'.

Emily

— Well it's really nice when someone says 'Oh that's really cool, did you write that?'

Nanette, a professional singer since she was seventeen, told how at the age of nine, her low self-esteem and general maltreatment at the hands of her peers due to a lisp, were reversed in the space of two minutes when other girls accidentally heard her singing the contemporary hit by Shirley Bassey, 'Hey Big Spender', in the girls' room. The girls at first thought it was the original record playing, and they were so impressed that they took her all over the school and got her to repeat the performance standing on tables, from which time she felt well liked and accepted by her peers.

'Other' music

I also asked all the musicians how they felt about music other than their favourite styles, including classical music. The majority were bursting with enthusiasm for a wide range of music, and no-one showed the slightest disrespect, least of all for classical music. Many of them had taught themselves to play a variety of classical pieces — especially J. S. Bach in the case of guitarists — to widen their knowledge and skills, or just for fun. In the words of the youngest:

Leo

— I find that when I listen to classical music, I feel very belittled. Because it's so big, there's like, so much in it and it must be so hard to write a classical piece because, it's just so much more than what I, what I do, like when I write a piece I just sit down at my keyboard or computer; but when I think about classical, sort of it, it's mostly in the head, and the parts are massive, the scores are huge, and that just sort of baffles me how people can do it, but it's amazing I guess.

Towards formal music education

Although popular music has entered formal music education in many countries, it is only very recently that the informal learning practices of popular musicians have come into schools.³ Even some popular musicians themselves, once they become teachers — whether they are



instrumental teachers or classroom teachers — seem to have overlooked or downgraded the importance of their own informal learning practices. Between 2002 and 2007 I lead a project on how we can adapt informal learning practices for the school classroom, and in my current project I am adapting these for the instrumental lesson. Today I want to mention a couple of aspects of the classroom work only.

The first thing I did was to bring together the main characteristics of informal music learning into a concise statement, and identify how those characteristics tend to differ from the main approaches of formal music education. I found it helpful to group this into five main categories:

- Perhaps the prime factor is that informal learning always starts with music that the learners choose for themselves; music, therefore, which they like, enjoy and identify with; whereas in formal education, teachers or other experts usually choose the music.
- Secondly, as everybody knows, the main method of skill-acquisition in the informal realm involves copying recordings by ear; as distinct from responding to notation or other written or verbal instructions and exercises.
- Thirdly, informal learning takes place not only alone, but alongside friends through peer-group learning, usually without adult supervision or guidance.
- Fourthly, skills and knowledge tend to be assimilated in somewhat haphazard ways, starting with ‘whole’, ‘real-world’ pieces of music; whereas in the formal realm learners follow a progression from simple to complex, often involving specially-composed music, a curriculum or a graded syllabus.
- Finally, informal approaches tend to involve a particularly deep integration of listening, performing, improvising and composing throughout the learning process, with an emphasis on personal creativity; as distinct from the increasing differentiation of skills and more of an emphasis on reproduction in the formal realm.

For the classroom work we adapted informal learning as follows. First, we simply allowed pupils to bring in their own choice of music. Then they had to get into small friendship groups; listen to their music; choose one song or piece; choose instruments (including rock instruments where possible, but these were not available in every school); and attempt to copy the music by ear, directing their own learning as a group.

The role of the teacher was different from a 'normal' lesson. It was very important that the teacher did not direct who was to work with whom, make suggestions about what music or which instruments to select, or give instructions about how to organise the learning. For the first couple of lessons, the teacher was asked to stand back as much as possible, observe what the students were doing, attempt to empathise with the goals that students were setting for themselves, and only then to begin to act as a guide, adviser and musical model. At that point teachers would, for example, demonstrate some notes to students; help them with a rhythm; suggest a more efficient way to hold their instrument; help them listen to parts on the recording, or help in a range of similar ways.

What I've just described lasted for around 4 to 6 lessons of general music class once a week, in normal curriculum time. We don't have 'band' or music streams in the UK, apart from as extra-curricular activities, so all music classes are mixed ability and most children do not play an instrument outside school. By the end of the 4 to 6 lessons, the student groups were able to play a basic rendition of their chosen song in front of the rest of the class. Some groups played along to the original recording, and some played without it.

After this first stage of the project, we introduced a number of different, related activities, some of which were more structured and some of which were similar to the above. This included two units involving the aural group copying of classical music. The teaching strategies and materials, plus films of the project, are all on the website: <http://www.musicalfutures.org.uk/c/Informal>.⁴

As time is short I can only limit myself here to a few general comments. Overall, we found that the motivation of the children increased, often quite dramatically. At the start of the project the teachers were anxious and in some cases very sceptical about its likely success. However, they changed their minds quite radically within the first two or three lessons. Whereas they had expected the pupils to take advantage of the freedom by being disruptive and doing no work, the opposite happened. Students cooperated better than normal in their groups, and applied themselves with commitment and energy to the task. In particular, many students who had previously been identified as having emotional or behavioural difficulties, or who had shown no interest or ability in music, emerged as able musicians and enthusiastic group-leaders. Teachers were particularly impressed with the level of aural skills students developed, and many stated that they now realised that they had previously under-estimated their students' abilities. All the teachers found that being part of the project positively affected how they approached teaching music in their other classes, and they developed a strong commitment to incorporating informal learning practices into their schools.

The pupils themselves identified the following opportunities as highlights of the project: being given independence to direct their own learning; being trusted by teachers to act responsibly; choosing their own music and (where possible) instruments; being allowed to work with friends; and learning through practical engagement with music, rather than by following the instructions of a teacher.

The adaptation and incorporation of informal music learning practices is occurring in an increasing range of contexts across many countries, including schools, social projects, community music forums, and instrumental learning (see Note 3). There is much work still to be done in this exciting and challenging area.

Notes

1. The research reported in this presentation is discussed in more detail in my book, *How Popular Musicians Learn: A Way Ahead For Music Education* (2001) Aldershot: Ashgate Press. The literature on popular, jazz and traditional musicians' learning practices is growing fast. For some examples, see H. Stith Bennett, *On Becoming a Rock Musician*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980 (this was one of the first major studies involving popular music); Odd Are Berkaak, 'Entangled dreams and twisted memories: order and disruption in local music making', *Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, Vol. 7, no. 2, 1999, pp. 25-42; Patricia Shehan Campbell, 'Of garage bands and song-getting: the musical development of young rock musicians', *Research Studies in Music Education*, no. 4, June, 1995; Mary Ann Clawson, 'Masculinity and skill acquisition in the adolescent rock band', *Popular Music*, Vol. 18, no. 1, 1999, pp. 99-115; Sara Cohen, *Rock Culture in Liverpool*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991; Sharon Davis, "'That thing you do!'" Compositional processes of a rock band', *International Journal of Education and the Arts*, 6, 16, 2005; Ruth Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; Lars Lilliestam, 'On playing by ear', *Popular Music*, Vol. 15 no. 2, 1996, pp. 195-216.
2. John Blacking, 'Versus Gradus Novos Ad Parnassum Musicum: Exemplum Africanum', *Becoming Human Through Music*, Connecticut, the Western Symposium, 1984, p. 46.
3. For some examples of research on the challenges and incorporation of popular music and/or informal learning in education, see for e.g: Charles Byrne and Mark Sheridan, 'The long and winding road: the story of rock music in Scottish schools' in *International Journal of Music Education*, no. 36, 2000, pp. 46-58; Peter Cope, and H. Smith, 'Cultural context in musical instrumental learning', *British Journal of Music Education*, Vol. 14, no. 3, 1997, pp. 283-289; Peter Dunbar-Hall and Kathryn Wemyss, 'The effects of the study of popular music on music education' in *International Journal of Music Education*, no. 36, 2000, pp. 23-35; Evelein, F. 'Pop and world music in Dutch music education: two cases of authentic learning in music teacher education and secondary music education'. *International Journal of Music Education*, Vol. 24, no. 2, 2006, 178-87; Eve Harwood, 'Learning in context: a playground tale', *Research Studies in Music Education*, No. 11, 1998, pp. 52-61; Eve Harwood, "'Go on girl!'" Improvisation in African-American girls' singing games' in Bruno Nettl and Melinda Russell (eds) *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 113-26; Jaffurs, S. E. 'The impact of informal music learning practices in the classroom, or how I learned how to teach from a garage band'. *International Journal of Music Education*, Vol. 22, no. 3 (Dec), 2004, pp. 189-200; Kathryn Marsh, 'Children's singing games: composition in the playground?' *Research Studies in Music Education* no. 4, 1995, pp. 2-11; Kathryn Marsh, 'Mediated orality: the role of popular music in the changing traditions of children's musical play' *Research Studies in Music Education*, no. 13, 1999 December; O'Flynn, J. 'Vernacular music-making and education'. *International Journal of Music Education*, Vol. 24, no. 2, 2006, pp. 140-7; Rodriguez, C. (Ed) *Bridging the Gap: Popular Music and Education*, USA Music Educators' National Conference: The National Association for Music Education (USA), 2004; Vakeva, L. 'Teaching popular music in Finland: what's up, what's ahead?'. *International Journal of Music Education*, Vol. 24, no. 2, 2006; Kathryn L. Wemyss, 'From T. I. to Tasmania: Australian indigenous popular music in the curriculum', *Research Studies in Music Education*, no. 13, 1999, December; Westerlund, H. 'Garage rock bands: a future model for developing musical expertise?'. *International Journal of Music Education*, Vol. 24, no. 2, 2006, pp. 119-25; Trevor Wiggins, 'The world of music in education', *British Journal of Music Education*, Vol. 13, no. 1, 1996, pp. 21-30. There are also the journal special issues: Special Issue on informal learning and Higher Education in music, *British Journal of Music Education*, Vol. 27, no. 1, (Mar), 2010; Special Issue on Lucy Green's *Music, Informal Learning and the School, Action, Criticism and Theory in Music Education* (ACT), Vol. 8, no. 2, (Oct), 2009; 2008, Special issue, 'Beyond Lucy Green: operationalizing theories of informal music learning', *Visions of Research in Music Education*, Vol. 12, 2008.
4. This work is discussed in detail in Green (2008) *Music, Informal Learning and the School: A New Classroom Pedagogy*, Aldershot: Ashgate Press. Some findings from my more recent project involving one-to-one specialist instrumental tuition will soon be published as 'Musical "learning styles" and "learning strategies" in the instrumental lesson: some emergent findings from a pilot study' in the journal *Psychology of Music*.

