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# What sociologists learn from music: identity, music-making, and the sociological imagination

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## ABSTRACT

Sociologists very often have extra-curricular lives as musicians. This article explores the relationship between musical life and sociological identities. Through a range of examples from Howard Becker's grounding in field research as a pianist in the Chicago jazz clubs and his theories of deviance, to the connection between Emma Jackson's life as a bass player in Brit pop band Kenickie and her feminist punk sociology, an argument is developed about the things sociologists learn from music. Based on 28 life history interviews with contemporary sociologists this paper shows how sociologists learn – both directly and tacitly – to understand society through their engagement with music. Music offers them an interpretive device to read cultural history, a training in the unspoken and yet structured aspects of culture, and an attentiveness to improvised and interactive aspects of social interaction. For sociologists, involvement in music making is also an incitement to get off campus and encounter an alternative world of value and values. Music enables sociologists to sustain their research imaginations and inspires them to make sociology differently. However, the article concludes that in the contemporary neoliberal university it is harder for sociologists to sustain a creative hinterland in music. The tacit knowledges that often nourish sociological identities may run the risk of being depleted as a result.

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## Introduction: sociological secrets

Sociologists are often secret musicians. It is true of myself because for most of my career as a researcher and teacher I have had a parallel life as a journeyman guitarist performing in clubs and bars; often turning up to give weekend keynote lectures bleary eyed after a late night travelling back from a far-off gig.

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My experience is not exceptional, and the story of musical sociologists goes all the way back to founding figures like W.E.B. Du Bois and Max Weber in the nineteenth century, for whom musical life was always woven into their sociological thinking. These founding figures had strong attachments to music and both men had fine singing voices (Back 2020). In the twentieth century, Frankfurt School Marxist, Theodor Adorno was himself an accomplished pianist and composer. As a young person Adorno even dreamed of being a professional musician (Müller-Doohm 2005, 38). He famously argued that the commodification of music exacerbated this rationalization that resulted in a 'regression of listening' (Adorno 1991, 40–41) that also produces in the masses a moronic economic conformity to capitalism and political submission (Adorno 1989/90).

Du Bois, Weber and Adorno are not isolated cases, I could have chosen many other examples including pianists Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall. In recent times, there have been numerous appeals to use music to reimagine sociology itself. For example, David Beer (2014) has called for a punk sociology – urgent and vital like a Clash single – as an antidote to the showy and technical 'prog rock' tendencies in the mainstream discipline. Other authors have pointed to why music matters for those interested in understanding society (Hesmondhalgh 2013; Street 2012; Turino 2008). This article examines the relationship between music and sociological thinking. Antoine Hennion has shown that learning to play music involves an immersion within a culture that has rules, languages and rituals and as a result 'music is a form of sociology' (Hennion 2020, 292).

If learning to be a musician involves implicitly learning to be a sociologist, then I would suggest the reverse is also true. Sociologist Tia Di Nora is a good example, her extensive body of work on music sociology draws on her 40 years of playing the flute (see also DeNora 2014). This is equally the case for anthropologist Georgina Born who has written extensively on music's materialities and digital forms (Born 2022). Born studied the cello and piano at the Royal College of Music in London, and performed classical and modern music as a member of the Michael Nyman Band, the Penguin Cafe Orchestra and the Flying Lizards. As Adam Croom (2015) has pointed out, there is a growing literature on the palliative value of music making but, in this discussion, I want to examine how an involvement with music making can act as a resource for thinking sociologically.

Today's musical sociologists often keep their musical lives to themselves. There are some exceptions of course but most are wary of making it part of their professional identity. There are many reasons for this shyness. For some, it is about making a clear break with the painful aspects of musical fame, or, in other cases, playing music becomes a kind of refuge and escape from academic life. The relationship between musicianship and sociological thinking is a hidden story, but what is it that sociologists learn from music?

From the outset I should say that I am not outside this story myself although I am in the introvert camp. I have in large part kept my own life as a guitarist a secret. My involvement in music making has been a kind of hinterland for my sociological thinking, teaching, and writing. I was a member of Earl Green's touring band for over 10 years (2003–2013). Earl was Britain's first black British blues singer and garnered many awards, and we played hundreds of gigs together from London clubs to international festivals. That experience informed my research and the way I teach. For example, at the beginning of a lecture, I often use music to set the key and mood of the session. I also get students to make 'playlists' as a way of engaging them including choosing 'alternative national anthems' or their own 'personal protest songs'.

This article is not a personal exploration. Rather than taking an autobiographical approach, as others have done sometimes successfully (Sennett 2003; Sudnow 1978), I wanted to ask colleagues about their experience of being both a musician and a sociologist. Is there a relationship between their sociological identities and musical sensibilities?

They were not difficult to find, and over the course of 10 years I have been recruiting the participants in this study, otherwise known as colleagues, either through chance encounters or referrals. The core 'empirical material' is drawn from 28 life story qualitative interviews with contemporary sociologists (10 women and 18 men) from a range of class and cultural backgrounds who either play music currently or have done in the past. Some wanted their identities to be anonymized although most were happy to be attributed and be the owner of their insights.

I have utilized a loose and open definition of music as organized sound in the broadest sense, including a wide range of genres of music from the classical repertoire to punk rock to dancehall reggae. Musicians here are defined as people who have learned the techniques of music making and/or have been involved in the production or circulation of musical cultures; both the conventional learning of instruments and digital forms of production. Some of the participants had formal training in reading musical notation and keyboard harmony, while others are self-taught and learned their musical chops in a DIY fashion by playing in bands or being involved in musical scenes. The blurred lines between professional and amateur in both sociology and music provided an interesting point of departure. As I will show later, in their separate domains, musicians and sociologists as cultural producers often face similar pressures of precarity where their fortunes and security rely on being entrepreneurs, ceaselessly 'disseminating' and promoting themselves. There are interesting parallels in terms of how the spaces of production – the 'office' and 'studio' – have been redefined within and beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic. As Emilia Barna and Paula Wolfe have shown, for women musicians the 'home studio'

production can offer opportunities as well as challenges (Barna 2017; Wolfe 2012, 2020). A guitar or keyboard seen in the background of a home office during an academic Zoom call is a sign of the leaky boundaries between sociology and music, and the public and private aspects of scholarly life.

I contacted participants in this study through serendipity and recommendation. The conversations we had were less the traditional sociological interview and more like shared reflections and time to analyse the place of music in their life and work. My knowing participants were all too aware of the tricks and conceits of the trade. There was a moment when this was laid bare when interviewing Paul Jones, a sociologist from the University of Liverpool who is also an indie rock bassist. When I tried to ask about the relationship between musical and sociological craft, Paul responded 'I don't know, you know, what do you think?' I replied playfully: 'Listen, Paul I am asking the questions!' And we laughed with the relief at the breaching of sociological etiquette. I decided to abandon the conventional model of interviewing that presupposes the interviewed person has a stable, pre-existing view of the topic in need of extraction (following Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Rather, what is presented here in the spirit of a collaborative ethnography (Lassiter 2005) or 'sociable sociology' (Sinha and Back 2014). This account has been produced in dialogue with the participants who have read drafts, and the analysis has been generated in an iterative way although the responsibility for the arguments developed here is mine alone.

The argument developed in this article emerges from the close reading, coding, and analysis of the themes that emerge from the interviews. However, the results are represented through individual portraits of sociologists and their connection to music to convey some of the subtlety in the lessons they draw from music.

### **Music is the thing: playing, insights and limits**

I want to start with Paul Gilroy, the world-renowned cultural critic who has taught sociology at the University of Essex, Goldsmiths and the London School of Economics, English literature at King's College, London and who is now Professor of the Humanities at University College London, and Founding Director, Sarah Parker Remond Centre for the Study of Racism & Racialisation. While Paul Gilroy is recognized as one of the best interpreters of the experience of the African Diaspora (Gilroy 1987, 1993), it is not so widely appreciated that he is also an accomplished guitarist (see Gilroy 2003). As we talked about his musical life and his work, the whirring sound of a faulty valve in his beautiful hand-made Carr Rambler guitar amp provided a sonic backdrop. During this conversation that took place at his north London home in

2014, I asked Paul if there is a relationship between his life in music and his life as a writer?

I am sure that . . . my dabbling in music and my experience of playing and my – sort of – rituals of playing and the conversation that I have with people who are musicians who are not academics about the world has enriched my understanding of what culture is and how culture functions. And I think that music is not something we consider to be a representational medium. In the sense that all the other things we love and cherish about cultural work and cultural making. Making culture in art, in literature, in poetry, in painting – they are all about the world. There is the world and then there is the representation but with music . . . The music is the thing. It is not representing something else.

Here, an understanding of the practice of musicality becomes a resource to understand the nature of culture itself. As he says, ‘music is the thing’, it does not represent culture but constitutes and enacts it. In his study, the guitar is never far from Paul’s reach. As he picks up his vintage Telecaster it feels like he is both illustrating his point but also opening a space for further possible thought or comment.

Music is a resource to understand what culture is but to point to utopian possibilities of what it might become. He continued:

And I think as I got more confident about my understanding of the relationship between music and utopia I began to see that there are all sorts of ways in which I’d brought things in from my relationship with music as organised sound that just wouldn’t have been there otherwise. It’s hard to begin to build an inventory of resources that come into one’s life in that way. And the kind of map you make of thought, the map you make of history and critical thinking is very different if you are self-conscious about the fact that you are working with things that have been supplied to you by people who have had that struggle in their own lives.

As we talked, he reflected more on the ways in which his own ideas and work were shaped by musical thinkers and theorists:

There are people that really influenced my understanding about what culture is and how it works and it is odd to be forced by your own development to have to reflect on the fact that they were musicians and therefore they thought about what they were doing in a certain way. And the most obvious and the most important of those people is really Ralph Ellison actually, and I think now someone went to the trouble of editing together a little volume of Ralph Ellison’s writings on music and he is in my head in a sort of special place because I think he is someone, he is someone who became a writer because they couldn’t really cut it as a musician . . . then of course there are other people [Ernst] Bloch and [Theodor] Adorno who are similarly people who, you know, have a musical life and write music and produce music and to whom the experience of musicking (see also Small 1998) is an integral part of their critical commentary on everything else about culture and social life . . . everything else and in particular the question of utopia and how utopias become apparent to us, how they are able to enter into our lives.

Paul Gilroy comments here on how utopias become apparent to us in the transcendent possibilities in sound, from the reggae blues dance to the sanctified gospel in the grain of Mavis Staples's voice. Music is the place where different emergent possibilities and openings occur. So, music is a valuable resource because it calls us to the emergent sense that a different kind of world *might be possible*.

Other participants said similar things about how playing an instrument opens a different way to think about a problem or cope with the everyday stress of academic life. In a similar vein to Gilroy, other participants recognize that music offered an interpretative device to understand cultural life as in the case of our next musical sociologist. Cath Larkins is a specialist in children's citizenship and a children's rights activist who teaches at the University of Central Lancashire. She's also a guitarist and singer. She talked about how her guitar offers a resource for thinking and processing things that are sometimes difficult. During a conversation in Preston in 2018, she commented: 'On a day when I'm not writing particularly, if I'm dealing with something that's really challenging, instead of trying to deal with it, craft the email right or stress about how I'm going to manage a variety of people. If I have a guitar, I will pick it up. I will walk away and I'll play some music. Then I'll come back and I'll be able to do the thing that I need to do from a completely different space'.

Cath was born in the English Midlands in the 1960s and she came from a musical family with roots in South Wales. Her mother played the organ in church and her grandmother, with whom Cath lived for parts of her childhood, sang in chapel choirs and Eisteddfodau. As a child she sang with her mother and grandmother and although she learned to play the piano and read music, it was the guitar that she embraced as a something that was truly hers. She has played and performed widely including opening for Manchester Mardi Gras in 2002 in front of thousands of people. So, she was well-accustomed to performing long before she needed to take to a different stage, the lectern. She says. 'There's something really nice about having this whole part of you which is not the academic and not shared in that world. In the same way as it creates that internal space, it creates a sort of identity space as well'.

The guitar and songwriting are used in her sociological work. She explained: 'Doing my PhD, the way I analysed the data from the very first focus groups I did with Gypsy and Traveler young people ... I wrote a song about it. It was just brilliant because it meant I could deal with some of the things I'd found challenging about it and eye-opening'. The stories communicated by the young Travelers had revealed their families' experience of generations of discrimination. The songs were a way for Cath to process those experiences emotionally, but also bridge the gaps between what was said and left unspoken, to bring to light the endemic nature of the violence the

community had experienced. I asked Cath what she did with the fieldwork songs? 'Nothing ... except to carry them with me' she replied. The songs themselves provided an invisible interpretative device. Now Cath is experimenting with creative writing and storytelling as a way of communicating sociological data. She explained: 'it gives you permission to imagine and fill in the gaps. You can take what you've heard and allow yourself to experience whatever it makes you feel ... then try ... to put it into music'. What she describes is how the songs allow her imagination to move through her research data. She concluded: 'I can feel all this, it's not my experience. If I try to connect to it through music, then I'm connecting to it in a way in which I'm being my most honest self. Then I'm most open to understanding what it might be'.

The collaborative potential of music making enabled by digital technology can also reveal possibilities and challenges within scholarship. In the Afterword to his book *Popular Music, Digital Technology and Society*, Nick Prior attempted to do an auto-ethnography of digital music making with his students (Prior 2018, 173–185). The resulting piece appropriately entitled 'Digitus' was produced not only through seven participants, but a multitude of technological forms including two iPads, seven smartphones, an 88 key digital piano, a laptop, drum pad and sampler, a 66-key MIDI controller and a 'Kaossilator' a touch based digital synthesizer. This collaboration was not just between people, but between digital devices. In an email dated NaN Invalid Date NaN Nick explained: 'when music becomes digital data, that generates additional methodological (and ontological) questions to do with where music is, what it is and how to reconstruct it. So, it's also an attempt to show what might be interesting and unique about contemporary (digital) modes of production'.

When I asked what Nick learned from the experience, he outlined many lessons, but one particularly relevant to the current argument: 'Bit rot is real! That is, while the idealisation of digital files as seamless and indestructible is still prevalent, when you actually try to reconstruct or write the traces of a digital collaboration, it's almost impossible because file systems, software, folders, etc. are mutable. The same might be said of contemporary forms of scholarship relying on digital recordings, pdfs and immaterial data. Nick continued: 'Hence, writing histories of music production, which was once a matter of finding scraps of paper written by sound engineers, locating edits, searching the cutting room floor, etc.' is now about navigating what are often hidden and inaccessible folders and spaces. That has implications for how historians of music are able to tell the story of music'. Scholarship and research today have a similar immaterial nature, where 'academic stuff' has been replaced by pdfs and computer files in offices that are increasingly devoid of scraps of paper with scribbled notes on them, or voices on



cassette tapes or even books. The story of sociology is experiencing something similar which may leave fewer physical, accessible traces for its historians in the future.

For musical sociologists, the physical and material aspect of music making taught other lessons linked to their scholarly craft. Professor Evelyn Ruppert who is an authority on 'Big Data' and an actor network theorist (Isin and Ruppert 2015) illustrated this point. It is less known that Evelyn, who grew up in Toronto, Canada, is a jazz trumpeter (although, now she rarely plays). 'For the last thirty years I have had different fits and starts to return and it somehow never quite happens' she commented in the summer of 2018. And yet her experience of learning to play music has had a deep effect on her life. She picked up the trumpet because 'I wanted to be heard . . . I wanted that loud shiny thing . . . it was a gender thing' she said. She grew up in a large working class family, had a difficult home life and in a way, the trumpet was her way of being noticed and of 'getting through school'. Playing in jazz orchestras helped her understand how the music was enacted through all the elements interacting; from the instruments to the social dynamics of feeling together, tuning to other people and improvisation when playing music together. There were also injustices and inequities in this world as the boys broke off to form smaller bands and develop their capacity.

When we met to talk about her life in music, she brought a prop to the interview (see [Figure 1](#)). Evelyn explained:

'My prop is a sock which comes from my High School years . . . that's like thirty years ago. And it was always in my trumpet case and I used to shine my trumpet with it. And it has lots of stitches in it and inside is my pride and joy my trumpet, which has a custom-made mouthpiece. Which is gold plated'. For trumpet players the mouthpiece is the most precious part of the instrument and – as in Evelyn's case – it is often adapted to the needs of its player. Evelyn's mouthpiece was gold-plated as a special birthday gift to her by her partner.

Evelyn comments that playing music taught her how social differences can be bridged through making music together and being 'in tune' with others (see also [Schütz 1951](#)). But perhaps the most significant lesson that Evelyn's trumpet offers is as a reminder that material things matter in the social world. Evelyn explains:

It's not just the material [quality] . . . it's easy to say and its really lovely, I love the material and I spent hours shining that thing and cleaning it in the bath tub and taking it apart and reassembling, oiling and there is that kind of care of it too and it almost like it's a friend that you take [of] . . . So there's that - the object matters immensely but it is what comes out that is between you and the object that I feel is important. The sound, which is the two of you, you know together, would be impossible for either to exist. That I think you know is amazing. That I think is maybe a good metaphor for what many of us write about as the more



**Figure 1.** Evelyn Ruppert's musical props.

than human relations we have that one could not produce that without the more than human relation. And there is that agency of the trumpet.

Evelyn also talked about the pressures on her time from her academic job, and also the broader vocation of intellectual work that make it hard to dedicate the time needed to practice her instrument. The trumpet in her flat is a reminder of these limitations. She captures this beautifully when she personifies her trumpet speaking to her from its standing, issuing her a challenge:

Are you [going to play me]? Seriously . . . ? 'Ok come on . . . are you gonna really? Or, are you just gonna play with this?' [Laughing] Are you serious or not? Or are you going to just spend five minutes and put me away again?' Or are you really serious and going to re-establish this relationship because relationships are work?

I love the idea of the trumpet talking back to her and questioning her commitment and seriousness. The time pressures of academic life make it harder to do the embodied work – in the case of the trumpet, strengthening the embouchure and practicing scales – to be an active musician. I want to return to this issue later in relation to the pressures of academic life today, particularly for young scholars. The lessons Evelyn has learned from music endure as a resource for her thinking – from tuning social life to the relationship between the human and material world. The trumpet on the stand in her

flat symbolizes this lesson whether or not she picks it up and holds it to her lips to play.

### On the road: getting out in the world of value and values

Howard S. Becker's classic study *Outsiders* is built out of his experience of playing jazz and popular tunes in Chicago strip joints and taverns in the 1940s and 1950s (Becker Howard 1963). He was just 15 years old when he started playing professionally in jazz trios during World War II when most musicians were in the army. He explained: 'There was a shortage of musicians ... so everybody winked at the fact that there were these kids like me working in there'. He became a 'tune hound' fascinated with the chord structures of the jazz repertoire but he also studied with the legendary Chicago piano player Lennie Tristano. As a teenager he was playing in bars 7 hours a night until 4am, making \$80 dollars a week and a living wage of \$4,000 dollars a year. This was as much as a junior academic was earning in the 1950s. Becker received his undergraduate degree in sociology at the University of Chicago in 1946 and continued his studies there, gaining an M.A. before writing a doctoral dissertation on Chicago school teachers. He finished his PhD at the University of Chicago in 1951 at just 23 years of age. 'No one was going to hire a kid to be a college professor at 23' he said with wry pragmatism.

Howie, as his friends called him, died on August 16th, 2023 at his home in San Francisco. We had a long friendship, and I visited many times, and we recorded a series of interviews in about his life and work. I met Howie in 2014 at his home in Paris where he was living during the autumn and winter months. I asked him what he had learned from his life as a musician. 'It did a lot of things for me, Les', he explained. 'One thing ... it made me completely aware of the fallacies that are embedded in conventional thinking. I mean when I read something like Talcott Parsons talking about 'American values' and I thought 'which American values that he talked about are being enacted when I see the owner of the club give fifty dollars to a policeman? [Laughter] Because I would see that'. He continued with another story that was like a parable of his theories of deviance and labelling. 'I remember vividly working in a bar on 63rd Street in Chicago, I was playing with a trio, and we played this place you know 8 hours a night. And it was run by a guy who was a hoodlum. I mean he wore expensive suits, and you know he was well spoken but ... that was the kind of business it was ... So one night Joe – the owner – they had, they called it dice girls, they had a sort of game that you played. It's too complicated to explain and it's not worth it but the girl would throw the dice and you would make bets. And it was all you know chicken feed – I mean it was like bet a dollar. So this one guy was a little drunk and he was pestering one of the girls who happened to be the girl that Joe was romancing. She finally signalled for Joe to come over and get him off her

back. So, he did. He pulled him away, took him into the men's room and beat him up with a blackjack ... Then he dragged him out of the bathroom and he's bleeding and a little groggy and then Joe called the police and had this guy arrested for disturbing the peace. And then he gave the cop some money ... Now not that all American values are like that but that has to be accounted for. It made me think that it (Parson's way) is a ludicrous way to talk'.

The world of the tavern was a ready-made ethnographic laboratory for fieldwork. What Becker learned from this experience was an alternative way to think about how norms and rules are applied. 'I learned not to believe pious cant about how the laws embody eternal wisdom and the enforcers of the law are righteous activists working to make sure that eternal wisdom gets followed. I learned that by simple observation' (Cox 2015). Many of the insights written in his classic study *Outsiders* (1963) are furnished by conversations that took place before the gig or exchanges that happened in breaks between sets. This links directly to the sociology of deviance and 'labeling theory'. From the piano stool Becker could see how labels were made to stick (like the guy in the story who is beaten up and then arrested) and who can apply them (Joe and the cop) and what consequences follow from this.

For Howard Becker, musical training requires both learning musical language and also an appreciation of how to make music with others through improvisation, even without a notated score. Here there is also an understanding of the way in which culture works in motion and through interaction. Becker developed this later in his work with Robert Faulkner in their book *Do you know ... ?": the jazz repertoire in action* (Faulkner and Becker 2009). They show how culture is made and assembled like players trying to figure out a tune that only one member of the band knows or achieved through second-guessing, following hunches and improvising with what is known. The lesson for Faulkner and Becker is that cultural life itself is like making music.

Later in our discussion I asked Howie whether musicians are more attentive. He dismissed the suggestion with dry and unsentimental precision: 'Oh I don't know, Les ... you know there's a lot of musicians who are not very attentive. They are just barely attentive enough'. We laughed and then he continued: 'I think that's a skill you know. You have to learn to pay attention; to me it's a Zen lesson. That's the basic lesson of Zen Buddhism: pay attention. Pay attention to what's right there in front of you'. Howie continues: 'There is a second part to this ... See one of the worst things that happens to sociologists is they become academics'. He then goes on to cite a paper written by his friend and colleague Harvey Molotch called *Going Out* (1994). In this article, Molotch argues that campus life insulates academics within what he calls our 'taken-for-granted world' that ultimately offers only a 'thin slice of human

experience'. Molotch calls for us to thicken our biographies by 'going out' or going 'on the road' and understanding the world 'through its edges' (Molotch 1994, 231).

While musical life guarantees no special ear for society, it does make sociologists get out and about within its fringes. I think this is perhaps the key lesson that Becker alerts us to: take sociology on the road and encounter the world in all its tangle of vice and virtue. As Alain Pessin pointed out, Becker's thinking 'is far from sermonizing. It does not bow to any moralism. . . . What characterizes his sociology, from start to finish, is its lightness . . . ' (Pessin 2017, 83–84). That unsentimental sense of things combines both a sceptical but curious wonder. Becker learned this from observing how things roll from the vantage point of his piano stool.

The Tavern was a profoundly gendered world too – the Dice Girl is a symbol of that in Becker's fable – but it is not something that sociologists of his generation were so focused on. Yet, it is the gendering of music making that comes through so strongly in other accounts of musical sociologists. Emma Jackson is from Sunderland in the Northeast of England. At 17 she was playing bass in a female-fronted band called Kenickie, performing under the stage name of 'Emmy-Kate Montrose'. Kenickie quickly rose to stardom as part of a wave of indie bands in the nineties.

Emma's biography is prototypical of what Dave Beer (2014) calls *Punk Sociology*. Beer argues the technical and narrow professionalism of sociology today is analogous to the overblown virtuosity of seventies 'progressive rock'. By contrast, his vision of 'punk sociology' is urgent, direct, DIY and collective. Emma was influenced by her musical interest in the Riot Grrrl music movement during the 1990s that presented a Third wave feminist version of a punk aesthetic in bands like Bikini Kill, Bratmobile and Heavens to Betsy (see Figure 2).

Kenickie had a meteoric rise but for Emma it was all over by the time she was 20. She had always planned to study sociology because it was her favourite subject at school, and at 23 she studied sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. Having gained a PhD she is now one of the most interesting and distinctive voices in UK sociology (Jackson 2015, 2019). As a student Emma was very hesitant to talk about her musical life. More recently she has been more open to talk about it. Looking back on her experience now she realizes just how much sexism she experienced in the music business, from being abused on stage to condescending journalists who would assume that the only male member was the leader, and TV presenters who would ask the band to model sunglasses when they were there to feature their music. Developing a strong cohesiveness within the band was a way of coping and protecting themselves. Anna Bull has written similarly about sexism within classical music and the patriarchal modes of authority, and class distinction that are institutionalized within orchestral music in the UK (Bull and Scharff



**Figure 2.** Emma Jackson with her bass.

2017). As a trained cellist herself, Anna experienced this closely and used this insight as a resource for her sociological research and analysis.

Emma talks about the guitar shop as one of the iconic places where she experienced musical sexism. She explains: ‘Guitar shops I hate still to this day ... I went to go to buy a load of plectrums one day – for the whole band – not just myself and I was sort of ruminating over my choices and the man in the guitar shop – this is like back in Sunderland – in the nineties. And he’s like ‘do you know what a plectrum is? You pick ... you strum it, you draw it over the strings of the guitar and that’s what makes the noise come out. And I was like “yeah, yeah I know thanks? I am in a band”. I then I noticed he had our local paper the *Sunderland Echo* on the table and there happened to be a piece about us in that Echo ... “Yeah my bands in the paper”. (Laughing) That’s me! “The agh ... Ok err”. But just those little kind of things really – you know we call them micro aggressions now’. I asked Emma if her musical life had influenced her style of sociology. She explained for her, music and sociology had a two-way relationship: ‘actually sociology helped me to understand what had happened to us. Especially reading some of the work by Bev Skeggs on class and respectability and the way [Kenickie] were presented. I think it really helped me to make sense of my own experience. So, that’s one thing. The second thing ... I really enjoyed and relate to Dave Beer’s *Punk Sociology* and for me having been involved in music I am used to a) standing up in front of people.

Which helps when you have to do this for a job, which is quite [a] strange job. b) Trying to create things as a group rather than always be this sort of Lone Wolf academic. I think that's a model of scholarship that's really important to me. I think my approach to that is influenced by a background in music'. Here, sociology is a collective endeavour like being in band and drumming up the nerve to try things out and play your song in public. Emma sums this up as 'not feeling too over precious about what you put out into the world ... I mean more trying and experimenting with different forms of writing and having a go at something. Rather than being the equivalent of the person who works on their music demo forever and just adds more and more but never dares show it to anybody. Being the sociology equivalent of that, you know, is to be avoided [and] just having your one thing that you sort of polish and polish forever'. And yet again this experience of music is also an incitement to a different mode of sociology that is collaborative, urgent and publicly orientated (see for example Jones et al. 2017). Another female participant in the project, who didn't want to be named, described how 'reconnecting with my music may help me to be a braver sociologist'.

Dave Beer expanded on the relationship between music and sociological form in an interview that took place in his office at the University of York in 2018. He is a guitarist and was deeply involved in indie rock subcultures in the north of England during his youth. He uses music to shape his style of sociology, but also to inspire him and give him the energy and desire to do it. He explains:

I'll let the music guide me and I still do that now. That is ... how I work and often in ways that are hidden in the texts. It wouldn't be obvious necessarily. It permeates everything so it can be ... so just like I imagine the books as albums and then that gives me the motivation to do it. And I imagine the covers as record covers and things like that but also [a] simple thing: *Metric Power* (Beer 2016) has three movements and a coda. So a musical structure starts to play out. Or, the tone of what I am saying I can kind of get out of the tone of a song. I'll try and write in the tone of the Jesus and Mary Chain or something like that.

Music helps Dave shape his sociology but also acts as an incentive to complete his books and articles.

Music is also a way of coping with the vicissitudes of campus life. The small guitar Dave has in his office was given to his young daughter by his grandfather. After being cast off by her, the guitar is now permanently in Dave's study. 'You know when you've had those meetings? You know those meetings, Les. So you have those meetings and you come out dispirited and then ... ' he strums the melancholy sound of an E minor chord from the tiny guitar on his lap (see [Figure 3](#)). We both nod at each other and smile.



**Figure 3.** David Beer's office guitar.

Arguing that musical life augments sociological identities might seem fanciful given the atmosphere of stress and anxiety in UK universities today (see Loveday 2018). Clive Nwonka, is one of the most insightful new voices in film criticism (Nwonka 2021; Nwonka and Saha 2021). We met in January of 2021 on Zoom to talk about his relationship to music. Clive grew up on the St Raphael's Estate or 'Raphs', a working-class district in north west London. He explained: 'a social environment or culture one where the black Nigerian identity is actually the minority black identity. It was West Indian [and] very, very multicultural'. Clive describes his early life as being 'surrounded by reggae music' and one of his neighbours was reggae guitarist Gus Anyia who was a founder of the roots reggae group Dambala that produced the hit record *Sound of the Trade Winds*.

Clive's home was filled with an eclectic variety of music because his father worked as a bouncer in the Lyceum Theatre in central London and would bring music home. He was involved in the UK Garage dance music scene in the late 1990s with his friends. But his love of music facilitated a broader cultural curiosity: 'You went to clubs and you danced. Yeah, you got dressed well . . . double denim and you tried to be Craig David, and you go to Watford or Baglies . . . But on the other hand, which is more of a personal thing for me is I was exploring guitar playing. I was into Bert Jansch, I was buying Duane Eddy CDs, I was trying to understand what is it when you have chord progressions and notes and finger picking and buying Led Zep[ellin], and buying Nile Rodger's stuff I was really exploring what it is to be guitar player and drawing from a wealth of all the different influences that are listening to in Lewis Taylor, or Funkadelic, or something else. So it's joining the dots'. For



Clive, his love of music and the guitar enabled him to develop his own interpretation of culture.

Listening to music and playing the guitar provided Clive with the tools to decode culture and read social life: 'I don't necessarily see the process of writing an article, any different from the process of listening to music, reading music, thinking about music, trying to play music'. However, Clive felt his musical life was a luxury he could not afford if he was to give himself the 'best possible chance of surviving academia'. Clive started his PhD in 2010: 'I put my guitars and other things as well into a storage unit. And they've been there ever since and it has been 10 years, I've not played the guitar since then'.

It is the precarious academic footing that working class scholars like Clive experience that imposes a limiting and anxious practicality. Clive concluded: "For myself as a black British academic, who works in a very white field . . . the academic journey is like, I guess 'Snakes and Ladders' in like, you can get to there. But one false move, and you're back to square one again."

### **Conclusion: music lessons**

Having an involvement in music making and listening provides sociologists with *an interpretive device* for reading social and cultural life or practical form of insight. This is not only confined to the artful sociology at the more humanities end of the disciplinary spectrum, but can be found even amongst scholars who see sociology as a science. It is there in Evelyn Ruppert's understanding of the relationship between the material world and human social life, and Cath Larkins's fieldwork songs. Learning notation or forms of musical communication other than ones built from words is also training in *the unspoken* and yet structured aspects of culture. The training in the non-verbal and non-discursive realm can foster an attention to feel, touch and an ability to tune in to social and cultural life. It also leads to an appreciation for the ways in which improvisation and interaction are at the heart of the choreography of life and the enactment of culture. Many of the people interviewed here have mentioned this as one of music's great lessons.

Being a musician is also an incitement to get off campus more. It means encountering routinely alternative worlds of value and values. Here there is also the opportunity to: first, test the theories of the lecture hall and seminar, like Howard Becker's irreverent dismissals of Talcott Parsons on American values; and second, to use sociological tools to make sense of the social divisions that shape music-making, as Emma Jackson describes so brilliantly in her description of sexism in the guitar shop.

I am not suggesting that being a musician is the only way to understand society better. Neither is there anything inherently liberating about music as

a vocation. As Sally Anne Gross and George Musgrave (2020) have shown, music as a vocation is self-punishing and unhealthy in many of the same ways that the neoliberal university can be as place of work. This passage from their book *Can Music Make You Sick?* might have easily have been written about contemporary academia: 'The intersection of financial precarity, entrepreneurial individualism and the struggle to define work boundaries ... leads to musicians struggling to know when to stop working, trapping them in a reflexive loop of production and debt that affects all social relations and impacts their sense of self in ways they describe as distressing' (Gross and Musgrave 2020, 117). My argument is that all cultural producers need a hinterland to their craft that nourishes imagination, be it recreation or creation. Part of our opportunity now is to do sociology *with* these other crafts (see also Bocquillon 2022). The pressure placed on academics – particularly young scholars – from the twin forces of specialization and professionalization bear down on these possibilities. Do we have time for this, they might justifiably ask? The pressures are considerable, as Evelyn Ruppert pointed out. Satisfying campus priorities to teach, write and publish books means we certainly do not have the time to put in enough practice time. But like Evelyn's trumpet that sits silently in her flat, an un-played instrument can continue to act as a resource for thinking differently. The power of music is that it alerts us to the inchoate, not-yet or utopian movements of imagination described so eloquently by Paul Gilroy. Music also has the power to evoke not only *what is* but also *what might have been*.

The sound of Miles Davis's trumpet asked this aching question for the great cultural theorist Stuart Hall who died in 2014. During an appearance on B.B.C. Radio 4's Desert Island Discs in 2000, he told journalist Sue Lawley that listening to modern jazz filled him with a regret for the loss of a life I might have lived but didn't live. I could have gone back, I could have been a Caribbean person and I am not that anymore. I can't ever be English in the full sense although I know and understand the British from the inside like the back of my hand. So I am a sort of diaspora person and the uncertainty, the restlessness and some of the nostalgia for what cannot be is in the sound of Miles Davis's trumpet (see Brunston 2021, 327). Fittingly, the luxury Stuart chose to keep him company on that lonely desert island was a piano. As Marcus Anthony Hunter has pointed out, Stuart Hall's feel for the importance and value of black music and arts was a key signature of the politics of his sociology (Hunter 2018).

To end, compared to the professional instrumentalism and status obsession that pervades academia, being involved in making music is a reminder of the things that inspired us to think, research and write in the first place. However, the worrying coda to this argument is that under pressure to be academically productive, sociologists today often feel that time for making music – whether it is because they are

scholars of colour, or they are on temporary contracts, or are struggling to balance childcare, or people from working-class backgrounds – is an unaffordable luxury. My argument is that academic pressure and instrumentality winnows the sociological imagination and inspiration.

Many of the sociologists I have spoken to use listening to and playing music as a spur to be brave and bold in their work, allowing them to find new forms and modes for sociology itself. Living with music is inextricably linked to keeping the sociological imagination alert and attentive to the unfolding nature of society. In a time when universities around the globe are often under attack – be it from political pressure, auditing academic worth, or ever-increasing commercialization – thinking with music is also a reminder to let our sociological ears be tingled by the things that really matter. Completing this article in the hot summer of 2023 I received the hopeful news that Emma Jackson's new band was going well, although this optimism was tempered by being informed the same week that Clive Nwonka had sold his guitar.

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