

Esslin-Peard, Monica

## **Practice is performance: a study of the musical development of popular music undergraduates**

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Music Education and Educational Science

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Monica Esslin-Peard

## Practice is performance: a study of the musical development of popular music undergraduates

*Much has been written in the last 30 years about musical practice and performance, but there is little consensus over what practice really means, or how musicians progress by practising. Whilst academics historically focused primarily on the experiences of Western classical musicians and on individual learning in the conservatoire, more recent research has been devoted to popular, jazz and folk musicians. Informal behaviours, such as aural learning, self-teaching and jamming out in the band are central to the way in which popular musicians learn. The current research project has a major focus on the practice and performance of classical and popular musicians as described in university undergraduate students' reflective essays. This paper offers insights into the musical development of one cohort of popular musicians over the three years of their study, including examples of their practice behaviours, the development of technique, collaboration with band members and gigging off the university campus, as drawn from their reflective essays and semi-structured interviews.*

### Introduction

The "Art of Practice" research project at the University of Liverpool, Department of Music seeks to explore how students of classical<sup>1</sup> and popular<sup>2</sup> music acquire the knowledge, skills and expertise of practising. The main field of enquiry is to discover how an individual matures through musical practice. This prompts not only an investigation into the process of practice, but also the educational and social context of learning. This paper presents a review of relevant literature

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1 "Classical" is used to describe musicians who have been educated in the tradition of Western classical music, for example, those who play orchestral instruments or piano or sing and largely perform works from the Western classical oeuvre. These musicians generally start their instruments at a young age and are used to the expectation of several hours of practice a day as adults.

2 "Popular" is used to describe musicians who are largely self-taught and whose preferred style of music is popular. These musicians typically learn from peers or musicians whom they admire, and – prior to entry to higher education – develop their skills more informally through experimentation and group practice sessions.

and reports on the experiences of popular music undergraduates, based on data gained from reflective essays for the three years of their study and in one-to-one interviews with the Head of Performance and selected students.

## Background

It is well documented that practice is a key part in the development of musical performance excellence (e.g., Austin & Haefner-Berg, 2006). Classically-trained musicians often report having had 10,000 hours or ten years of practice to reach professional standards (Ericsson et al., 1993). Extensive research has been conducted over the last 30 years by academics into the practice habits of classically-trained musicians (for an overview, see Miksza, 2011). Surprisingly, researchers have not agreed on a single model of musical development which encompasses practice behaviours. Hallam (2001, p. 28) investigated expert practice and conceded that even the definition of an expert is open-ended. However, she concluded from interviews with 22 professional musicians that they do indeed 'learn to learn'. Papageorgi et al. (2010, p. 34) suggested that professional musicians develop over seven stages: although their research was conducted with classical musicians, the model importantly touches upon the formation of musical identity, which is key for popular musicians in a band.

Green (2002, p. 16) gave a definition of informal learning, based on the behaviours of adult popular musicians, and revealed that popular musicians are largely self-taught, influenced by their peers, and work aurally with reference to audio or video material, rather than using printed notation. Lebler (2007, 2008) explored peer learning and assessment amongst popular music undergraduates and highlighted the importance of university courses mirroring professional practice in the music industry in the sense that students learnt to produce recordings as well as performing. This compares with the wider skills which form a part of informal learning identified by Welch et al. (2008). Their research focused on adult classical, folk, jazz and popular musicians. The other-than-classical musicians identified professional skills such as networking, listening to music of their preferred genre and making music for fun as being more important than private practice. Mak (2009) described non-formal learning as highly contextualised and involving high levels of participation from learners, which is typical for popular musicians working in a band.

In their review of the development of popular music tertiary education at an Australian conservatoire, Lebler and Weston (2015, p. 125) pointed out that early popular music courses were based on pedagogical approaches which were more suited to classical musicians, such as a teacher-led programme of study and a focus on individual technical development. Przybylski and Niknafs (2015, p. 104) noted that although some institutions were adopting informal learning strate-

gies, 'there is still a discrepancy between the ways in which musicians learn and practise music making inside and outside the academy.'

Folkestad (2006) importantly presented the notion that musical learning can take place across a formal-informal learning spectrum, which is echoed by the research conducted by Mornell (2009) in Germany. In the last ten years, research has started to emerge which attempts to posit a theory for musical learning for popular musicians; Smith (2013, p. 22) has developed a 'Snowball Self model' to describe the complex nature of the development of drummers, pointing towards the need to include social and psychological factors to understand musical maturation. Siedenburg and Nolte (2015) have posited a model for popular music learning in German music schools for adolescent students which focused on the importance of community involvement and peer learning in locations which are suited to band practice. Jorgensen (2011) has highlighted that learning may take place outside of lessons and lectures, pointing once again to a more informal approach. Such an informal approach, both in terms of pedagogy and location would seem to be key, as popular musicians may regard formal tutor-led approaches to learning as "anti-establishment", as Parkinson (2013) noted.

Finally, reflective practice – as an approach to learning – has been embraced by tertiary educational institutions in England, Scotland and Wales over the last two decades, following theories of reflective practice that were developed by Schön (1987) and refined for educational practice by Ghaye (2011) and Pollard (2002), amongst others. It is reported that reflective journals or practice diaries offer one tool to develop metacognitive thinking skills. Leon-Guerrero (2008) emphasized that music students need to develop skills in reflection in order to develop their understanding of practice and performance. Lebler and Weston (2015, p. 128) have also described the introduction of written reflection as part of the peer assessment process of recordings made by popular music students. As Mak (2009, p. 42) suggested, openness to different styles of learning, including reflection, could be a unifying factor which brings together formal and informal learning, creating lifelong learning.

## The research question

The primary goal of this research into the practice and performance behaviours of music performance undergraduates at the University of Liverpool is to establish how, through written reflection, they understand their own maturation as musicians over a three-year course. Thus I draw upon their reflective essays, supplemented by tutor and student interviews and student focus groups, to identify how musical maturation relates to established theories of musical learning, both informal and formal, and highlight the factors (individual, group, sociological and cultural) which influence this process. The research question is, 'What are the key factors which contribute to the musical maturation of popular

musicians taking the performance module?' It is important to note that the findings presented in this paper are drawn on the subset of data concerning popular musicians. The wider scope of the research project is to compare the musical maturation of popular and classical musicians, which is not discussed here.

## The institutional context

The University of Liverpool offers three-year undergraduate courses in music and popular music. The intake each year is approximately 65 students who can choose the performance module<sup>3</sup> in all three years of study. We focus below on the core elements available to popular musicians, whilst acknowledging that classical musicians follow a similar course. The popular performance module, which does not explicitly include jazz, requires popular musicians to perform twice a year. These performances are assessed by university faculty staff using a standard marking protocol generating 70% of the final grade. All performance students (both popular and classical) are expected to keep a practice diary, or online practice blog. The diary is used as a prompt for the 1,500-word, end-of-year reflective essay about the individual experience of practice and performance which is marked according to agreed criteria (see Appendix 1), generating 30% of the final grade. This combination of practice diary with an assessed reflective essay and performance is unique amongst comparable universities. The two tutors for popular (and classical) performance hold weekly two-hour workshops for students, as one of the tutors explained in interview:

The first years – pop and classical – get a lot of input in class into aspects of learning and practising. Some sessions are people explaining in front of the class what their one-to-one instrumental or vocal lesson content has been, followed by “how” they practised it, what problems arose, discussions as to how it could be practised and then all have to make notes as to what they could use (Shorrocks, 2015).

It is important to note that the tutors take care *not* to ‘instruct’ their students how to practise. Even though bands may be visited during rehearsals, coaching from tutors is deliberately kept to a minimum: the emphasis is on a process of self-discovery, which is enhanced by discussion with peers and tutors. This concurs with Cowan’s approach, as a mentor to engineering students (2013, p. 4):

---

3 The Performance Module is one of a range of optional modules which may be chosen by students who have strong instrumental and/or vocal skills. Two specialist modules are offered, for classical and popular musicians. The pedagogical focus for the popular musicians’ module is on developing performance skills within the traditional acoustic or amplified rock or pop band, with students encouraged to write their own material in the second and third years of study. No formal tuition in song-writing was offered to popular performance students at the time of this research.

I want to empower each learner supportively [...] I try to help them to be the best that they can be – but always leave them to decide what to do and how to do it. I certainly do not instruct, or tutor.

Cowan highlights the concept of empowerment, which has been explored extensively by Rappaport (1995) and linked to theories of narrative research in a community context. Rappaport goes on to explain that community and organisational narratives may have a strong effect upon the behaviours, beliefs and identities of those involved in an empowering process. This would seem to be very relevant for the present research project, as I am seeking to understand how students progress during their three years of study.

## Data gathering and methodology

The data for this project are drawn principally from the students' reflective essays, which are made available to the lead researcher at the end of each academic year, after formal assessment results have been made public. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher to gain more insights into student experiences. These interviews took place on campus with students who had volunteered to provide more detail and background about their musical learning.

As the research project developed, it was recognised that it would be useful to collect background data about students' secondary school experiences, the influence of teachers, parents, peers and admired musicians, and pose open questions about students' prior understanding of the term "practice" and their experiences of making music. Data were gathered through a questionnaire which was emailed and handed out to musicians participating in this study in their final term in May 2015. The return rate for popular musicians was 47%. For reasons of space, I am not formally addressing the prior musical experiences of the cohort.

Data are drawn from the reflective essays, with only two quotations from interviews. Close reading of the student reflective essays ( $n = 32$  for each of three years, 96 essays in total) has resulted in the identification of common themes, verified by an independent professional popular musician (performer/recording specialist) working in music education. These data can be used for both quantitative and qualitative analysis, using a mixed methods approach (see Bryman, 2006).

Quantitative data derived from counting frequencies are used to show trends. As this study focuses on the self-reported behaviours and musical experiences of students over three years, qualitative data drawn from the reflective essays and interview transcripts play a much more important role. The key principles underlying the analysis of the data are theories of narrative research and phenomenology. I am not seeking a priori to establish a hypothesis about how students

mature musically, but rather use the reflective essays (which I might also term narratives, following Rappaport 1995, p. 796) to try to understand the learning and developmental process from *the students' point of view*. The initial findings and conclusions which are reported here are therefore made based upon the comments made by students; this also accounts for the deliberate inclusion of verbatim quotes from student essays in this paper.

The qualitative analysis of the reflective essays is based on the principles of textual analysis. Following McKee (2003), the focus is on understanding how students make sense of their practice behaviours. Repeated close reading of all the available narratives was considered to be the most appropriate method to gain an understanding of how students' behaviour and attitude towards practice was changing, which is similar to the "zooming in" approach of Johansson (2013) and methods adopted by Green (2002) and Smith (2013) in exploring data generated from interviews with popular musicians.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University Ethics Committee in October 2012. Students were given information about the research project and a total of 47 signed a consent form to confirm that they understood the nature of the study and wished to participate, and that they were free to withdraw at any time for any or no reason. This form also offered an opt-in clause for taking part in interviews.

As the lead researcher, and a full time music teacher in London and part-time doctoral student, I have made considerable efforts to keep my distance from students when conducting focus groups and one-to-one semi-structured interviews in order to avoid influencing the content of reflective essays. I was not involved in any marking or assessment of the cohort's reflective essays or performances.

## Findings – The 2012-2015 cohort of popular musicians

Thirty-nine first-year students enrolled for the popular music performance module in October 2012, 32 of which had given their consent to take part in the research project. As can be seen in Figure 1 below, the most common areas of musical experience gained before entering university were vocals, guitar and keyboard. Fifteen of these students reported that they had secondary musical skills, for example, a lead guitarist who also sang, and three mentioned both second and third areas of instrumental or vocal expertise, for example, a singer who also played trumpet and keyboard.

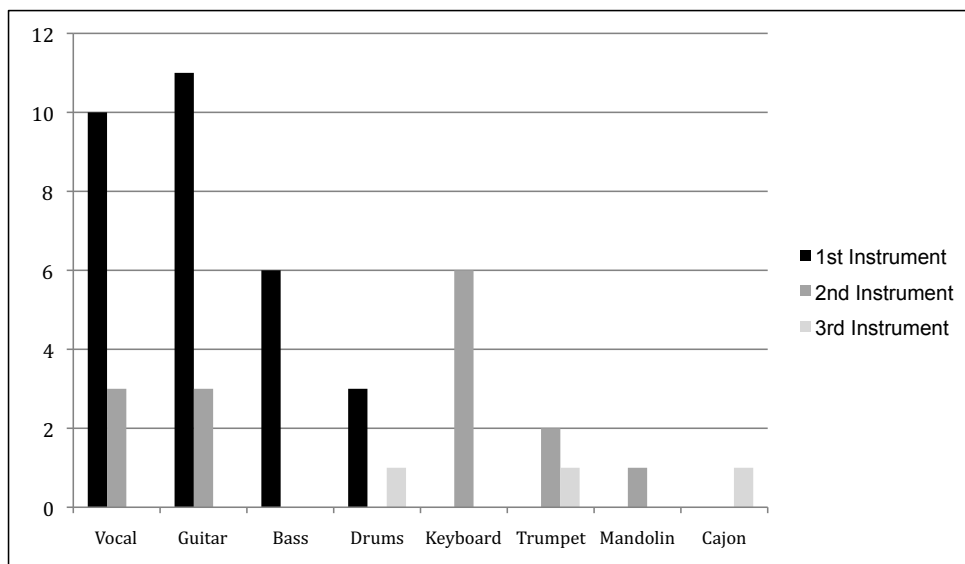


Figure 1: First Year Popular Musicians, 2012 ( $n = 32$ ) Instrumental and Vocal Skills (Multiple answers possible)

These data strongly suggest that whilst students may have considered that they specialised on one instrument, perhaps because they had lessons at school, they nevertheless extended their instrumental or vocal skills to meet the needs of bands they were playing in. It was not uncommon to find guitarists who were also vocalists, or 6-string guitarists who could also play bass guitar if needed. The exception was the four drummers who only drummed. No other students reported that they had experimented with drumming, perhaps because drumming was seen as a specialist skill.

## Themes in reflective essays

In close reading of the reflective essays, three main themes emerged related to musical development, namely technique, insights and targets, which have been discussed elsewhere with regard to both first and second-year popular musicians (see Esslin-Peard et al. 2015, p. 132-134 and 136-138).

For the purposes of this paper, the focus is upon self-reported descriptions of musical learning. Drawing upon the reflective essays, the themes to be discussed below are lessons, individual practice, writing original material, the influence of other musicians and experiences within the band, both in practice and in performance.

All students are offered one-to-one tuition in their principal study, provided free of charge by the Department of Music. Unlike their classical musician peers



(*n* = 15) who all took lessons, initially 40% of popular musicians did not opt for one-to-one instrumental or vocal lessons, but this proportion decreased each successive year, presumably as more became aware of the potential benefits from talking to their peers or recognising that they needed help to improve their technical skills, (see Figure 2 below).

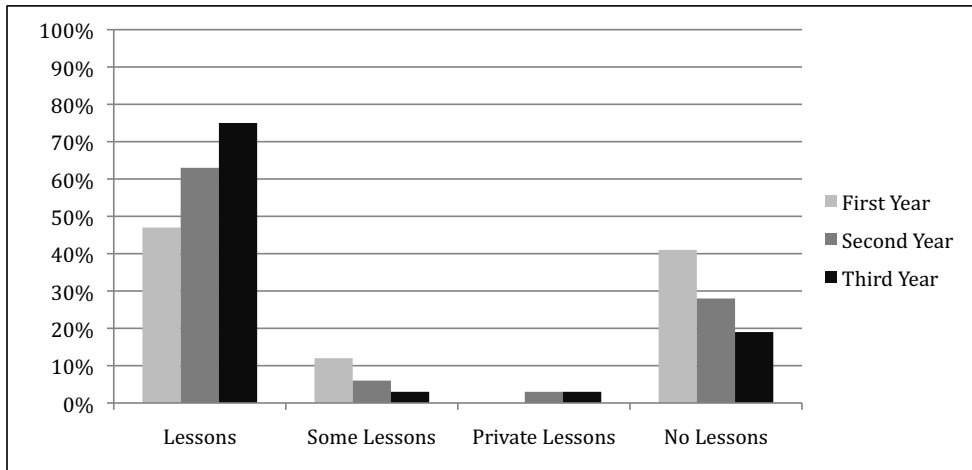


Figure 2: Popular Musicians: Lessons over three years (*n* = 32)

One drummer explained why she did not take lessons in her first year:

I have never had any instrumental lessons. It was never part of my agenda, growing up. Mostly because, it was time-consuming, costly, and there weren't many female drum teachers. The first ever drum lesson I had was in Liverpool. It was an interesting experience. For me, it was like going to the dentist for the first time (LF, 2013).

This echoes the discussion of the challenges facing female drummers by Smith (2013, p. 139-140). This student drummer subsequently revealed that she had started lessons in her third year, illustrating a change in attitude:

Perhaps I felt a bit more relaxed because he was a friend before a teacher. And it is all very casual. I learnt new rudiments and learnt to like the metronome. I am a lot more solid with tempo than I was last year (LF, 2015).

Nevertheless, the data show that there was an increase in uptake in the second and third years, perhaps because students heard that lessons could be useful and, as is discussed below, because technique development is related to the increasing complexity of band repertoire. As students realised that they needed technical competence to perform in public, they were more likely to turn to professional peripatetic teachers for individual lessons and support. It is also

important to note the possible effect of the institutional culture on student attitudes toward lessons. The popular performance course evolved alongside a classical performance course and thus there is perhaps an unspoken institutional expectation that individual tuition and the development of technique should be valued.

## Individual Practice

The notion that individual practice facilitates the development of technique, supported by regular lessons, is not self-evident for many popular musicians, who often appear to work through musical challenges during band rehearsals, rather than practising on their own.

In the first year, 63% of students mentioned individual practice, and 74% mentioned technique, but there were no reports of how long students were practising on their own. All of the 60% of first-years who were taking individual lessons wrote about technique, citing new areas of repertoire, such as jazz modes and scales for guitarists, and a wide variety of warm-up techniques for vocalists.

First-year students described a variety of learning behaviours which encompassed informal playing along with audio or video tracks, using YouTube lessons and working aurally, echoing Green's findings (2002, p. 86-93) with adult popular musicians. A drummer commented that 'I found the practice tedious, so I bought a Rockability book.' Levels of motivation for individual practice were reported by some to be low, like this singer:

I did not feel motivated to practise in the first term.

However, the reflective essays demonstrate a gradual increase in motivation to practise over the three years of study. In the third year, technique is mentioned by 66% of students in their reflective essays, both in principle, with mention of particular aspects of technique, and in the context of recognising that technique needs to be improved to meet the requirements of performing with a band. A third-year guitarist described using both formal and informal learning methods:

What I believe has improved my playing this year is that I have spent a considerable amount of time practising scales. During such practice I have been using a metronome, which I believe has had beneficial and noticeable results on my rhythm, which has greatly improved [...] What has also been greatly beneficial to me has been learning by ear note for note other people's songs; this has developed my playing, understanding, musical ear and songwriting. For instance, I have been learning jazz and blues standards, which have helped me find new chords and progression. Furthermore, the more complex melodies have helped make my voice more melodic and trained my ear (RJ, 2015).

This comment suggests that this student had either decided to adopt a more formal approach to developing his technique, as well as working on his aural improvisation skills through the medium of jazz. A realization that the development of their craft was important was recognized by all the singers who had lessons. They described not only regular use of warm-up techniques, but also a greater awareness of pitching, control of breathing and projection.

## First-year students: The band experience

At the start of the first year of study, students were assigned to bands by their performance tutor. This led to considerable difficulties for many of the students: 59% reported problems with attendance at band practices, saying 'We never knew who was going to turn up, it caused tensions' and 'Attendance hasn't always been 100%. I can't perform if nobody else shows up.'

Students had access to dedicated rehearsal spaces within the department, but even this did not facilitate regular rehearsals for many of the bands. Reasons given for lack of attendance included part-time jobs, going away for long weekends and involvement in other bands outside the university which were considered more important.

With the pressure of the first assessed performance in December, one might expect that bands would quickly agree on the songs that they would be performing. But 37% struggled to agree on repertoire for their gigs: 'There was a divide in musical taste. We were unable to decide on songs.' Eventually all the students managed to finalise their set lists, but not without some arguments, which were mentioned in 33% of the reflective essays:

This band was in all honesty a nuisance. Many of the scheduled practices were half empty, with the few practices that were fully attended, rife with arguments, raised voices with lots of finger pointing and shoulder shrugging (DM, 2013).

## Writing original material

In the first year of study in tutor-assigned bands, the majority of students put together sets of musical covers for their assessed performances. However, in the second and third years, the expectation was that undergraduates would write their own material. Song-writing as such was not taught as a module: instead, students were expected to discover how to create original material on their own. Figure 3 below shows the development of song-writing skills.

Year of Study	First Year	Second Year	Third Year
Individual composition	11%	44%	52%
Composition within the band	22%	44%	66%

Figure 3: Development of individual and collaborative song-writing skills ( $n = 32$ )

In the first year, song-writing was taking place outside the tutor-assigned bands, either by individuals or bands formed outside the course, such as *The Sneaky Nixons*.

In the second and third years, when bands were formed through choice, the majority of students were involved in creating original material. Band communication and cooperation improved markedly, but it was not always apparent which band member or members were responsible for leading the creative process. One lead singer recognised that taking tight control of artistic creativity helped to keep the band together:

We have never really had a solid line up and I feel that that has stopped us from forming any kind of identity as a group. The only thing I feel has led us in any form of direction lies with the fact that I've written all of the songs; therefore, we can assume some form of consistent style has been retained (LT, 2015).

On the other hand, one singer-songwriter and lead vocalist with two bands was frustrated that he could not pursue his individual interests as a singer-songwriter:

Whilst I greatly enjoy being a member of multiple bands/ensembles, I feel that as a result of focusing on pursuing the success of these groups, I have unwillingly accidentally managed to severely neglect my musical pursuit as a solo artist throughout my time at university (DG, 2015).

Whilst this paper does not focus on song-writing in detail, (for an interesting discussion of the experiences of undergraduates following a taught song-writing module, see Blom and Poole [2015]), the student comments in general point to a lack of institutional support and instruction in song-writing. In order to address this, for the academic year 2015-2016, the university has appointed a part-time tutor in song-writing, which may change students' perceptions of their own ability to write original material, which is not within the scope of the present study.

### Third-year students: Taking control

The data gathered from the students' reflective essays cover a wide range of topics, and an account has already been given of a broad range of factors which influence musical development in the first two years of study (see Esslin-Peard et al., 2015, p. 141-142).

In the third year, there was a marked difference between the progress made by students who were in bands playing in the city of Liverpool and further afield, and those only playing for course assessments on the university campus. Practice became more important for all the students, related to the needs of their bands, whether for university assessment or external gigs. Undergraduates reported both a more disciplined approach to practice, and more focus on technique, as the following comments illustrate: 'This year my practice has become much more focused'; 'disciplined and intensive private practice to improve my technique.' These students also displayed behaviours which pointed towards the deliberate use of metacognitive practice strategies: 'I started by practising the difficult things, slowly at first, then gradually increasing the tempo'. Some students who were in multiple bands described their practice to develop their craft within bands, rather than on their own, noting that they were not motivated to develop their technique in private practice, as a guitarist explained: 'My personal practice is sparse: from playing for eight hours a week in bands, my motivation [to practise alone] is low'.

Regular performances on and off campus not only stimulated students to practise more, but also to think more critically about their performance. One singer reported 'the band had more purpose than just to perform at the final [university assessed] performance. We started getting gigs at various venues.' There was also an increased understanding about stage presence. A vocalist explained that 'the more I was gigging, the more confident I was getting, especially with my backing vocals.'

As two members of the band *The Sneaky Nixons* explained in interview, they regarded public performance as practice, whether the gig was good, bad or indifferent. This brings into focus the importance of learning to deal with different venues, acoustics, technical equipment and playing to a live audience. Supporting a more famous band in another city was a tricky experience, compared with the home crowd, as the lead singer explained:

The away days in Manchester where you play in front of twenty people are tough trips. Especially compared to the previous night in Liverpool where the venue was twice as big, the crowd hit one hundred and pretty girls all come running to offer congratulations after the show (DM, 2015).

This view was echoed by another lead singer:

It is these gigs outside of uni [university] that I feel make us stronger as a band. It's playing to a group of people who not only don't know you, but on the most part don't care if they offend you that makes it such an effective part of gigging (LT, 2015).

Playing in front of audiences also had an impact on the eight piece function band, *Soul Funk Continuum*, as one of the saxophone players explained in interview:

These gigs have pushed us to increase the professionalism of the band and get two hours' worth of music that everyone knows really well. Playing gigs a lot has also helped the band to develop, as gigs are when you find if the music really works and also how well you know music, and what needs work (AW, FSC, 2015).

Similarly, a drummer reported that regular external gigs helped not only with their sets, but also with confidence when performing:

Playing our new songs in lots of new venues every other week or so has tightened our set far more than just practising in the practice rooms could do. The experience gave us more opportunity to play the songs in a genuine live situation and see what worked and what didn't, as well as gradually get more comfortable on stage (CA, 2015).

Many of the students took advantage of Liverpool's vibrant music scene to see other amateur and professional bands in performance, which helped them to understand their own performances in a more holistic way, as one bassist related:

For me, it always feels like we are doing more than just playing a song. Instead, we are creating an atmosphere, creating an image for the audience. It doesn't matter, when the song is playing, how intricate my bass lines are because the bass lines are not a single item: they are part of the collective (AS, 2015).

Although the students themselves were responsible for organising their own gigs, it is clear, as Jorgensen (2011) suggests, that an important part of their musical maturation was taking place *outside* the lecture theatre. In other words, the performance itself, as the students reported, is regarded as practice.

## Discussion

I have already presented the key factors in musical maturation over the first two years of study, drawn from the students' reflective essays. For details, see Esslin-Peard et al. (2015, p. 141-142). In this paper, I want to draw attention to the

experiences of the 13 students from the 2012-2015 cohort who were awarded a first class undergraduate degree (70% of marks or over) for popular music performance.

An analysis of the data from these 13 students showed that the most important factors pointing towards a high grade were writing their own material (100%), external gigs (100%), taking individual lessons (92%) and recording in the studio (38%). Importantly, as the music department does not offer lectures in song-writing, or recording techniques, nor how to obtain bookings for external gigs, the statistics above point strongly towards the power of self-directed and collective peer-to-peer informal learning, driven by the aspirations of members of the bands and a willingness to take risks beyond the university campus. This would suggest that the students are empowering themselves, which echoes the findings of Rappaport (1995, p. 796):

The goals of empowerment are enhanced when people discover, or create and give voice to a collective narrative that sustains their own personal life story in positive ways.

This would appear to hold true for the post-graduation aspirations of eight out of these 13 students, who are still performing regularly, either in bands formed in Liverpool or back in their home towns, as evidenced by their posts on social media and online media reviews of their gigs.

Another significant success factor for these first-class students was their membership of multiple bands – eleven were in at least two bands, with one bassist playing in six bands in his final year. The two lead singers were the exception, as they sang with only one band, perhaps because they identified more strongly with their own bands.

## Conclusion and areas for future research

From an institutional perspective, the evidence suggests that there is a delicate balance to be maintained between offering music students a large amount of freedom to find their own way in this creative art, whilst still offering a scaffold of elements of formal structure, including individual tuition, the weekly lectures and regular assessment that is both formal and informal, formative and summative. Whilst the current longitudinal data cover only one cohort of students, further research may throw light on knowledge sharing between different cohorts (i.e., more experienced and relatively naïve), which may support networks to facilitate the arrangement of external gigs, or choosing appropriate recording venues.

Whilst the maturation of popular musicians may appear to contradict the established learning path of classically-trained musicians, this research project

suggests that undergraduates studying popular music initially exhibit a strong bias towards informal learning behaviours, which may reflect their prior experience of playing in bands in secondary school. However, as they progress through their three-year course of study, some begin to adopt formal learning strategies, including some metacognitive practice strategies, to help them to perform more effectively with their bands. Moreover, for those who start to go into the studio to record tracks, there is a clear understanding that the quality of the product they are producing, namely a potentially viable commercial track or music video, requires professional levels of performance. This echoes the findings of music educators running the popular music course at Griffith University in Australia (see Lebler & Weston, 2015).

The current research project may be influenced by local socio-cultural factors, c.f. the spirals of reflection model (Esslin-Peard et al., 2015, p. 143) and the background biographies of the participating musicians, which is part of the ongoing research but is not discussed here. Nevertheless, the data gathered suggest that popular musicians mature independently, without necessarily relying on the input from tutors. The key motivating factor is the potential, or actual, success of the band(s) in which they play, strongly underpinned by performances in front of external audiences.

These findings are echoed by the lead singer and manager of the most successful student band of the cohort, *The Sneaky Nixons*, writing at the end of his third year of study:

We have now signed two record contracts, released two singles and an E.P. with three more singles and a second E.P. on the way. We played three times in Manchester, once in Brighton and once in London, with many more dates to follow. [...] Although we are far more successful than the majority of other incompetent university bands, we are still a million miles away from any real commercial success (DM, 2015).

Whilst the experiences described above may not be typical for the cohort, it is clear that the popular musicians in this study have been empowered to extend their learning as far as their motivation allows, and some may, over time, be successful commercially. Despite considerable inter-band conflict in 2015, *The Sneaky Nixons* completed a three day recording session in March 2016 and are performing regularly. Plans are in place to interview the band members in the coming months, three of whom graduated in 2015.

This leads to the need for more longitudinal research following student cohorts after graduation. Combined with data from the background questionnaire and reflective essays, such longitudinal research could enable researchers to explore the development path of popular musicians from secondary school to their emergence as professional musicians.

Research is continuing with current students on the performance courses, which may, in time, reveal more consistent trends in musical maturation. This, in



turn, could have implications for course design and changes in the pedagogical approach for popular music studies in tertiary education.

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## List of sources for quotes from students.

Names have not been given to protect the identity of participants.

- AS (2015) Reflective essay, guitarist  
 AW (2015) Interview saxophonist, interview conducted 29.04.2014  
 CA (2015) Reflective essay, drummer  
 DG (2015) Reflective essay, vocalist  
 DM (2013) Reflective essay, vocalist  
 DM (2015) Reflective essay, vocalist  
 LF (2013) Reflective essay, female drummer  
 LF (2015) Female drummer, interview conducted 18.02.2015  
 LT (2015) Reflective essay, lead singer  
 RJ (2015) Reflective essay, guitarist

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Appendix 1: Assessment Criteria for Reflective Essay for Performance Modules (Years 1, 2 &amp; 3)

<b>F Fail</b> 0-39%	<b>E Pass</b> 40-44%	<b>Class 3</b> 45-49%	<b>Class 2.2</b> 50-59%	<b>Class 2.1</b> 60-69%	<b>Class 1</b> 70-100%
<b>GRASP OF FIELD OF STUDY</b>					
Inadequate understanding of issues and insights into the field of study	Very limited understanding of issues and insights into the field of study	Basic understanding of issues and insights into the field of study	Clear understanding of issues and some insights into field of study	Clear understanding of issues and good level of insights into field of study	Outstanding grasp of issues and high level of critical insights into field of study
No review or reference to literature	Inaccurate and/or scant review of literature	Unfocused review of literature	Basic critical competence in reviewing literature	Wide ranging, coherent and critical review of literature	Extensive, insightful and critical review of literature
No reference to lecture material, content or activities	Inaccurate reference to lecture material, content or activities	Unfocused review of lecture material, content or activities	Basic critical competence in reviewing lecture material, content or activities	Wide ranging coherent and critical review of lecture material, content or activities	Extensive, insightful and critical review of lecture material, content or activities
Confusion in the application of knowledge	Little development of ideas in the application of knowledge	Limited development of ideas in the application of knowledge	Elements of independent thought in the application of knowledge	Elements of creative thought in the application of knowledge	High levels of creativity and independence of thought in the application of knowledge

<b>UNDERSTANDING AND EVALUATING RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGIES</b>				
Lack of understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge and how these apply to students' own research and/or practice	Scant understanding of how research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge, skills and creativity and how these apply to students' own practice	Basic understanding of how research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge, skills and creativity and how these apply to students' own practice	Some understanding of how research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge, skills and creativity and how these apply to students' own practice	Good understanding of how research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge, skills and creativity and how these apply to students' own practice
No handling, presenting and inferring from external data	Inadequate or confused handling, presenting and inferring from external data	Some evidence of an attempt at creative and critical handling, presenting and inferring from external data	Some evidence of creative and critical handling, presenting and inferring from external data	Convincing creative and critical handling, presenting and inferring from external data
<b>STRUCTURE, COMMUNICATION &amp; PRESENTATION</b>				
Disorganised and unfocused presentation of arguments and conclusion	Basic competence in organisation and presentation of arguments and conclusions	Some clarity and focus in organisation and presentation of arguments and conclusions	Some evidence of fluency in organisation and presentation of arguments and conclusions	Fluency in organisation and presentation of arguments and conclusions
				Exceptional clarity, focus and cogency in organisation and presentation of arguments and conclusions