
The Role of Personal Expressiveness in the Formation of Musical Identity Among Beginning Songwriters

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Abstract

Identity is comprised of one's own view of personal abilities, values, beliefs, and social roles. Having an identity is important in making clear choices, having healthy relationships, and feeling a sense of direction and belonging. Musical identity is one's view of personal abilities and tastes as a listener, performer, or composer of music. This chapter examines the formation of musical identity among non-music majors in a one-semester collegiate songwriting class. The lens through which I examine musical identity in novice songwriters was developed by psychologist Alan S. Waterman. His view was that one's true identity is not simply reflected in their commitments but only in those commitments experienced as fully engaging involving feelings of personal expressiveness. The students' own words from their songwriting journals serve as evidence of their developing identities as songwriters.

Keywords: Identity, Songwriting, Creativity, Alan S. Waterman, Martin Buber, Sharing.

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El papel de la expresividad personal en la formación de la identidad musical entre compositores noveles de canciones

Resumen

La identidad está constituida por la propia concepción de las capacidades personales, los valores, las creencias y los roles sociales. Poseer una identidad es importante para tomar decisiones claras, establecer relaciones saludables y experimentar un sentido de orientación y pertenencia. La identidad musical es la concepción que una persona tiene de sus propias capacidades y gustos como oyente, intérprete o compositor de música. Este capítulo examina la formación de la identidad musical entre estudiantes universitarios que no cursan estudios de música, en el contexto de una asignatura semestral de composición de canciones. El marco teórico a través del cual examino la identidad musical en compositores de canciones noveles fue desarrollado por el psicólogo Alan S. Waterman. Según su planteamiento, la verdadera identidad de una persona no se refleja simplemente en sus compromisos, sino únicamente en aquellos compromisos que se experimentan como plenamente implicativos y que conllevan sentimientos de expresividad personal. Las propias palabras de los estudiantes, recogidas en sus diarios de composición de canciones, constituyen la evidencia de la progresiva configuración de sus identidades como compositores de canciones.

Palabras clave: Identidad, composición de canciones, creatividad, Alan S. Waterman, Martin Buber, compartir.

Introduction

The answer to the question “Who am I?” does not come easily to most people. Benjamin Franklin wrote in the 1750 edition of *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, “There are three things extremely hard: steel, a diamond, and to know one’s self.” One’s identity is comprised of certain traits, values, beliefs, and social roles denoting oneself as an individual and as a member of certain groups. A person’s identity is formed through life experiences, interactions with others (e.g. family, friends, co-workers), personal interests and beliefs (e.g., religion, hobbies), and roles (e.g. daughter, teacher). Although one’s identity evolves over a lifetime, the most intense changes occur in adolescence and young adulthood (Erikson, 1968, Waterman, 1982). Musical identity is a subset of identity. Musical identity can be viewed as one’s personal listening choices and uses of music for mood regulation (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, (2007) or social interaction (Hallam, 2010), or as one’s belief in their own musicianship, or as the importance of music in one’s everyday life (Hargreaves, MacDonald, & Miell, 2017). This chapter examines the formation of musical identity among non-music majors in a one-semester collegiate songwriting class.

Identity and Musical Identity

William James (1890), one of the founders of psychology, referred to the study of identity as “the most puzzling puzzle with which psychology has to deal.” Since that time, psychologists have proposed various theories of identity formation (Erikson, 1968, Freud, 1914, Mahler, 1971, Marcia, 1966). James Marcia (1966) considered two behaviors to be responsible for identity development: exploration and commitment. Exploration is trying something new, usually something out of one’s comfort zone in a search for values or roles. Commitment is taking actions to devote oneself to a choice. Both exploration and commitment can be exercised at a high level or a low level. Marcia writes that when one is neither exploring nor committing, one’s life is adrift, which he labels Identity Diffusion. Identity Foreclosure occurs when one commits to something blindly without exploring other choices (low exploration), like when one simply commits to one’s parents’ values. Identity Moratorium is the state of a high level of active exploration and experimentation with no commitments yet. Identity Achievement occurs when there is strong commitment after a period of exploration. Marcia does not consider these stages to be sequential, and a person can flow from one stage to another during a lifetime. It is during adolescence and young adulthood that most exploration occurs.

Having an identity is important in making clear choices, having healthy relationships, and feeling a sense of direction and belonging. For example, I consider that a core part of my identity is as a good husband, and that leads me to do certain things and not do others. Identities can also lead to less exploration. If one considers oneself to be a poor musician, that person is unlikely to pursue musical activities. For adults, identity is often related to one’s occupation, one’s family or circle of friends, and one’s hobbies or interests.

The best succinct definition of musical identity I have found is as follows: “The understanding that a person has over time of him or herself as a musician, as it is reaffirmed in light of biological, cognitive, and social development and reevaluated in the context of social interactions” (Kastner, 2009, p. 10). One’s musical identity can also result in musical tastes shared with a broad community of listeners. Hebert and Campbell (2000) write “Among all of the activities humans possess as means by which to create such a powerful sense of identity and community, music may be among the most personal and the most meaningful.”

Identity as Personal Expressiveness

The lens through which I examine musical identity in beginning songwriters was developed by psychologist Alan S. Waterman. His view was that one’s true identity is not simply reflected in their commitments, as James Marcia proposes, but only in those commitments experienced as fully engaging. For example, the CEO of a tech company has committed to the identity of a business leader, but may secretly feel more alive as the weekend drummer in an amateur punk band. Waterman proposes that the missing element

from traditional definitions of identity is the *feeling of personal expressiveness* (1992). Activities that are fully engaging and engender feelings of personal expressiveness share the following six characteristics:

- An unusually intense involvement in an activity.
- A feeling of special fit or meshing of an activity that is not characteristic of most daily tasks.
- A feeling of intensely being alive.
- A feeling of being complete or fulfilled while engaged in an activity.
- A feeling that this is what the person is meant to do.
- A feeling that this is who one really is.

Other humanist psychologists have described similar experiences as identity building. Abraham Maslow (1968) is best known for developing a hierarchy of human needs starting with survival needs and, at its highest level, self-actualization, deriving from peak experiences, which are the most intense, joyous moments in a person's life. Maslow considered these peak experiences to be "acute identity experiences," when one is most true to oneself. Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow experiences (1990) merges action and awareness, has clear goals, focuses on the task at hand resulting in a loss of self-consciousness, distorts time, and allows for a feeling of control in risky situations.

Songwriting has been studied in therapeutic contexts regarding its effect on wellness and identity (Baker & McDonald, 2017). What has not received attention in the literature is the effect of songwriting experiences on students' musical identity in an educational setting.

The question I asked myself was, "Can students who have never composed a song before develop the identity of a songwriter in a single four-credit collegiate course?" Waterman sets the bar for committing to an identity quite high. Is writing a song an act of personal expressiveness? I wanted to find whether the students in my songwriting class would not only complete the required assignments (commitment), but also would adopt the identity of songwriters.

Welcome to Songwriting Class

Until the year 2000, I never considered my own musical identity to be that of a songwriting teacher. I had been a self-taught songwriter starting at age 13 and continued into my early 30s, playing guitar in a series of rock bands and folk ensembles. As a general/choral music teacher in my 20s, I composed and arranged songs for my students. But once I became a collegiate music education professor, I focused on studying creativity in others rather than being creative myself.

That changed in 1998. I felt that my life may have taken a wrong turn. I was suc-

cessful in my career, happy in my marriage, and solvent in my finances, but something felt off. I arrived home from an evening graduate class and went to the basement, where I banged on the keys of an electric piano for hours. At four o'clock in the morning, I composed my first song in 15 years. Over the next six weeks, I wrote 90 minutes of music. I had nowhere to share this music, so I asked the dean of the school of music if I could perform a faculty-artist recital as a songwriter. He agreed (reluctantly). I rehearsed with eight undergraduate students and gave a well-attended concert that garnered good reviews from the campus press.

In the fall of 1999, a student who had attended my 1998 concert asked me if I would teach her an independent study in songwriting. As a songwriter, I was an autodidact. I was unaware that songwriting was a subject that could be taught. She was persistent, and I agreed to a one-hour meeting once a week, with the expectation that not much would come of it. She had a friend who had a friend who had a friend who wanted to join the independent study, so I agreed to teach it as a one-time special topics class in the spring of 2000.

Eighteen students enrolled in that class, divided evenly between music majors and non-music majors. At the end of the semester, two students dropped out of college to pursue careers as singer-songwriters. I was shocked and came to understand the power of a one-semester songwriting class to develop a student's identity.

In the following years, I taught several iterations of the songwriting course. One version of the class was as a four-credit humanities course satisfying a university-wide requirement for 50 undergraduate students. I taught a 50-minute lesson once a week with guided listening and discussion of topics regarding lyrical and musical aspects of songs. Students were then divided into three smaller groups of 16 or 17 students. These groups participated in two 80-minute classes a week, in which they performed their songs for other class members under the guidance of graduate students. I traveled from one group to another during the semester.

Ninety-two percent of the students in the class were not music majors, and the quotations presented in this study were from non-music majors only. Students were required to perform something for the class once a week: a new song, a portion of a song, or a revised song. The class members sat in a semi-circle around a chair and an upright piano. After each performance, students applauded and commented on the song. When the students returned to their seats, the class applauded again. A total of seven completed songs were required during the semester. Students were also required to analyze a favorite song and maintain a journal of their songwriting experiences. The journal had to contain at least 200 words a week and should describe their accomplishments and feelings about their accomplishments as songwriters. All students agreed to have their journals shared with others anonymously. The quotations from the following section were directly taken from students' journals.

Evidence of Identity Formation

In this section, I will show examples of students' writing that exemplify Waterman's six characteristics of experiences that are fully engaging and engender feelings of personal expressiveness. The first of these, "an unusually intense involvement in an activity," is found in this student's journal entry.

Last night I was supposed to do math homework, but all I could think of was playing guitar, so instead I played a lot of guitar. I got some sweet riffs down and thought about some lyrics too. It's so crazy how some passions can drive you to the point where you can't think of anything else. Guitar is my obsession. I think about it constantly and when my fingers touch the strings, I am just in heaven. I know a lot of the people in class feel the same way.

The words "passions" and "obsession" clearly denote intense involvement. The phrase that shows an unusually deep involvement is, "when my fingers touch the strings, I am just in heaven." The final sentence suggests that the author may not be the only class member to feel this way.

A second criterion for an activity resulting in personal expressiveness is "a feeling of special fit or meshing of an activity that is not characteristic of most daily tasks." In this example, the student's songwriting took precedence over the daily task of attending class.

So I was sitting in class today learning about the atmosphere and Mars and the ocean and all that jazz, when it hit me... I don't belong here. So I got up in the middle of class and walked out with my guitar in hand. I went to the international center and sat outside and started playing. I began writing something, but nothing really came out. It was just nice to relax and enjoy playing again.

The author's admission that "I don't belong here" in class illustrates a separation between the daily activity of college students attending classes and the special fit of playing guitar. There was joy in the guitar playing, even when it did not result in the production of a new song.

The third quality of experiences that result in personal expressiveness is "a feeling of intensely being alive."

I was walking home from class and just had to sit down and write because I was so inspired suddenly by how beautiful campus was as the sun was setting. That was pretty neat, lyrics just sprung out of me as I looked around campus. All in all, an amazing day for music.

I suggest that, all in all, it was an amazing day for this student. Philosopher John Dewey (1934) believed that when we engage with works of art, such as songs, our experiences of everyday life become more perceptive and more artful. This quotation is a perfect example of this maxim in action. Would there have been days prior to taking a songwriting class when this student suddenly sat down on the way home from classes and began writing, while admiring the beauty of campus at sunset?

Waterman's fourth criterion for personal expressiveness experiences relates to closure, "a feeling of being complete or fulfilled while engaged in an activity."

YESSSSSSSSSSS! COMPLETION OF MY FIRST SONG! Oh rarely have I felt this much relief. I think that down the road I can revise it some more but right now I am content. ... Boy do I feel good. Let's hope I nail it tomorrow in class. I need a couple days to unwind from this I think.

One important element of Waterman's theory of identity formation (1992) is intrinsic motivation. The goals that one sets in developing an identity are entirely (or mostly) self-imposed. The joy that this student expresses is not related to some grade that the song might receive in class, but rather to the successful competition of a personal goal of writing a first song.

The fifth characteristic of experiences leading to personal expressiveness is "a feeling that this is what the person is meant to do." This aspect varies from identity theories like Marcia's (1966), because Marcia considers active commitment, actual doing, necessary in identity development. Waterman's view is that the commitment may be what one wishes to do or knows what one is meant to do but may be prevented from doing so by circumstances.

I hate all my classes except this one. I have a paper due practically every day, and everything is so subjective. I love writing and I love thinking, but I hate literature and philosophical babble because that's just what is – babble, bullshit, nonsense and all of this nonsense stresses me out because it's so time consuming when all I want to do is sing and be creative on my own terms . . . I feel like I need to lock myself in my room for 2 days, a week, a year and just produce a demo.

This student is committing to a clear goal, produce a demo. But the reality of remaining in college prevents the student from doing so. In another songwriting class, I had a student who locked himself in his dorm room for three days, missed classes, and had friends bring him food so that he could complete a song and produce a demo.

Waterman's sixth criterion for personal expressiveness directly speaks to one discovering one's true identity, "a feeling that this is who one really is." Later in his career, Waterman (2011) borrowed from Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* to introduce two valuable concepts to the discussion of identity: "daimon" is one's true self, and "eudaimonia" is one's best life, a life in which one flourishes (pp. 358-359). A knowledge of one's daimon provides direction and purpose in life, even if that life is not yet realized. In the following excerpt, the student is discovering something real and true about music and compares it to other life experiences.

Music takes so much out of me. I love it and I have a huge passion for it, but a lot of the time, I find that I get so consumed in it that I cannot put any effort into anything else. Many times, my papers or work get ignored and take a backseat to music and guitar. It's so crazy how music can be such a driving and influential force that it steers you away from obligations. But I think it is because it is real. Music is true. When I play, it is one of the only times I feel I am free, and this feeling is so addicting. I cannot get it from anything else. Music is the only real thing to me at this point in my life. Working out is fake. Working is fake. School is work and the job search I am conducting currently does not hold a candle to music. I wish this could be my career.

Achieving eudaimonia requires making life choices. This student clearly knows what a best life would be. Whether it was eventually achieved is unknown.

In the following passage from a journal, the student describes a very specific direction and purpose in life. I include it here, because it made me laugh out loud when I first read it.

My dream career is to play groundbreaking, cutting edge indie-powerpop-dance-postpunk-guitar rock while I'm young, and then switch gears and play gutsy blues rock when I'm a veteran of the scene. That would be the ideal life. So I figure I'll stockpile the more old-fashioned riffs I come up with, and then I'll be ready for a roots rock revival whenever my hipness starts to fade.

The passion that these seven students expressed in their journals appeared in journal after journal. Waterman's belief that identity emerges from activities that are fully engaging does not explain why those actions are fully engaging and not simply participatory. In the next section, I explore the social context of personal expressiveness.

The Social Foundation of Personal Expressiveness

The social context in which the students were engaged was a songwriting class with other students. Over the course of the semester, the students learned each others' strengths and weaknesses. They applauded when a novice guitar player learned new chords. They shared parts of their lives in their lyrics in ways that they could not communicate in normal conversation. It was not unusual for a performed song to result in classmates weeping or participating in group hugs. The students supported one another in ways not seen in most other college classrooms.

Philosopher Martin Buber is probably best known for his writing about two kinds of relationships between the self, "I-It" and "I-Thou" (Buber, 1923/1970). In an "I-It" relationship, the "It" serves a particular function to the "I." For example, if the "It" is a chair, it serves the function of something I can sit on. If the "It" is a bus driver, that person enables me to travel from one point to another. In an "I-Thou" relationship, however, there is an understanding that the "Thou" also has needs and wants, and the interaction between the self and another person is much closer.

Buber wrote that the purpose of education was to contribute to an understanding of the self, one's identity. He wrote that the education of oneself required the exploration and development of two autonomous instincts: the originaive instinct and the communion instinct. He defines the originaive instinct as follows:

Man, the child of man, wants to make things. He does not merely find pleasure in seeing the form arise in material that presented itself as formless. What the child desires is its own share in this becoming of things; it wants to be the subject of this event of production. . . .What is important is that by one's own intensively experienced action something arises that was not there before (Buber, 1944/2014, p. 85).

Buber's definition of the originaive instinct perfectly describes the act of songwriting. The songwriter is the "subject of this event of production" and creates something "that was not there before." (Note to readers: Buber uses the male pronoun exclusively in his writing, as was the custom in the first half of the 20th Century.) The originaive instinct for songwriters includes musical knowledge, skills, creativity, and attitudes.

The instinct for communion is the desire or need to share what has been created with others. Buber describes the importance of the communicative instinct in this way:

As an originator man is solitary. . . Only if someone grasps his hand not as a "creator" but as a fellow-creature lost in the world, to be his comrade or friend or lover beyond the arts, does he have an awareness and sense of mutuality. An education based only on the training of the instinct of origination would prepare a new human solitariness which would be the most painful of all. . . .What teaches us the saying of *Thou* is not the originaive instinct but the instinct for communion.

In other words, it is the sharing of what one has created with others in a community is a necessary component in the development of songwriters' identity. Without this sharing, it is doubtful that one could develop the identity as a songwriter.

The feedback that students received after their performances was subtly guided by the instructor in three sequential levels across the semester. The first level is Supportive, and the instructor asked the class, "What did you like in the song?," not "Did you like the song?," or "What do you think about the song?" The first level of assessment provides the songwriter with positive, and not generic, feedback. After several weeks, the instructor moved to a Descriptive level of assessment, asking the class about the musical and lyrical features of the song performed (e.g., "What unexpected incident happened to the man in the last verse?" "How was the strumming in the chorus different from the strumming in the verses?") The purposes of this level of assessment are (a) to highlight those unique aspects in the song that other class members may want to use in their own songs, (b) to provide the songwriter with the knowledge that his or her song is worthy of analysis. The third level of assessment, Prescriptive, cannot be attempted too early. At this level the students and teachers may provide suggestions for improvement. In some cases, songs can be workshopped in the moment.

This level of communication between performers and listeners results in an I-Thou relationship among students. The following journal entry by a songwriting student explains this relationship.

Songwriting is very therapeutic....even more so than general music playing because I can make it for me and by me. My last comment is about the students in the class, the bond is like going to a therapy group, though we may not all be friends outside the classroom, inside we are all very close and bonded. I have never had such a close relationship to so many people in a classroom as I have had in this class.

Notice in this entry that the student writes that songwriting "can make it for me and by me" much as Buber wrote that the student "wants to be the subject of this event of production."

Another student who noted the close connection to other class members wrote as follows:

This class has been a great opportunity to meet people who share the same passion for music that I have. I feel we can connect and appreciate each other on a different level that is deeper than normal conversation. We can provide feedback for each other and help each other grow, not only as songwriters, but as people too.

The following student described the experience as a songwriter with friends outside of other class members.

Looking back on this semester, I can't believe how much my songwriting ability has changed. I've written, recorded, and played live for my friends and complete strangers my own blood sweat and tears. Just last night I was playing some original stuff for a few friends at a party we had. It felt really good to have someone say, "play something" and just being able to play something I wrote myself, then when they ask, who is that? I say, it's mine!

The pride that students took in their songwriting reinforced their identities. The students were also aware of each others' abilities compared to their own. What I find interesting, is that this was not a matter of jealousy. The ability that other students display is an inspiration.

I tend to find once I play a song more and more, it sort of evolves on its own. It's beautiful to create something like that and it is kind of like having children in a way. You create this "thing" and then carry it with you and show it off for a while and then it naturally becomes a part of you and becomes its own at the same time... I am trying to learn from all of them [other class members], mostly with the guitar. I watch a lot of them play and am so envious of their abilities. However, I am so proud of myself for the creativity and voice I possess. Not to toot my own horn, but toot-toot!

As a responsible college teacher, I wanted my students to excel in all their studies. I found myself encouraging them to do their homework . . . in other subjects. As some of the journal entries previously cited noted, the students often abandoned their other homework to spend more time songwriting. The following journal entry describes a passionate effort not only to write songs, but also to note the limitations of what is possible. This writing, I believe, is one of the best expressions of artistic creation I have ever seen.

I stay up late into the morning with my desires smoldering and aching inside of me, as if waiting for a better time. I've felt so much, thought so much that I'll never place into a remembered lyric, and deep inside of me I know now that really doesn't matter. We do what we can, when we can do it. What I express is beautiful in its finiteness, and in the process, is made infinite. The tenderness of the attempt surpasses the accomplishment.

The line, “The tenderness of the attempt surpasses the accomplishment,” haunts me. It explains the allure of a middle school band concert and an elementary school choir concert. In fact, it describes most of artistic performance in all but the highest level of execution.

Revealing the Daimon

In this final section, I provide a glimpse into the musical identity formation of students younger than college age, and I follow the path of identity formation of a single student in the songwriting class.

One may well question whether students younger than college age can also form identities as songwriters. I have not had experience teaching songwriting to high school students, but a former student of mine has. She had previously taken both my songwriting and secondary general music methods courses. Her first teaching position was as a high school choral/general music teacher in a small working-class city in the midwestern United States. One of the courses she developed in her first semester as a teacher was called “School of Rock.” The course content included both guitar instruction and songwriting.

Halfway through the semester, she asked her students to anonymously submit their responses to the question, “What does your songwriting mean to you?” She shared their responses with me, and I share them with you.

I want to write music to help me learn more about who I am.

Music makes me feel part of something bigger than myself.

I want to write songs that inspire and motivate people. I want to be the voice for those who can't be heard and I want to expose the injustices in the world.

I am so sick of hearing songs that are about having sex and partying all the time. I've been through a lot of rough stuff in my life and I want to use those things as inspiration to write songs that will help others. I want people to be able to reach for my songs for comfort when they are in distress.

Songs can be a way for people to realize that they are not alone in this world.

Even though I had come to learn the power of songwriting in shaping the lives of college students, the high school students' responses stunned me. Their powerful words speak for themselves and need no embellishment or explanation from me. I include their words to encourage other scholars to investigate the rich world of songwriting by secondary students.

Finally, I present the last journal entry of one undergraduate student in the songwriting class. In it, the student traces a passage beginning with reluctance to take the class, through the period of learning, culminating with the musical identity as a songwriter. I have highlighted in boldface the phrases regarding the beginning and the culmination of this journey.

I wasn't going to take this class because I felt I didn't have a good voice and I had never been able to write a song before. But my buddy who had taken the class the semester before really recommended that I take it. So I did. It was one of the best decisions I've made. Taking this class forced me to write songs, and to be able to get in front of strangers and confidently sing my songs to them is like some sort of huge revelation for me. Never in a million years did I think I would ever get up in front of an audience and share a song that I wrote out of my own experiences. Songwriting is also very therapeutic. I feel free when I pick up my guitar now to play anything and most importantly sing anything. If I'm happy or sad, I can write a song about it. Sometimes I think writing a song can keep me a little sane.

Enrolling in the class required the student to step beyond the comfort zone and try something new, what James Marcia calls "exploration." As the course progressed, the student gained further self-knowledge about performing in front of others and about using songs to explore inner feelings. The journal entry continues.

Now that I'm a songwriter, I am able to listen to others songs in a bit of a different light. I notice structure, rhyming schemes, word play, composition, and other intangibles that would have otherwise passed through my ears. . . The only regret I have about songwriting is that I didn't start it earlier in my life. I feel like I've made a world of progress just in a few months. I can't imagine where I would be if I would have started just a few years earlier in high school. I believe that every student in the country should have this opportunity that I was able to seize, whether in college or high school. Because **now that I am able to write and compose my own songs, I just can't imagine the rest of my life not possessing this skill.**

The phrase, "now that I am a songwriter," says it all. One can safely say that this student has reached the level of Identity Achievement, a high level of exploration and a high level of commitment (Marcia, 1966). The daimon, the true self, has been revealed (Waterman, 2011).

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