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Meaningfulness and Spirituality in Drumming During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper presents an autoethnographic account of how a drummer found meaningfulness through engagement in asynchronous, collaborative music making with friends in a period of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The author learned how to record drum kit in his garage using a rudimentary studio setup, and how to edit the recordings in a basic digital audio workstation. Using Boyce-Tillman's (2011) framework of Spirituality, the author details how, through activity in the domains of Materials, Construction, Values, and Expression, he was able to achieve liminal, Spiritual experience that provided focus, meaning, and purpose in a challenging and unsettling time. The author argues that students could benefit if arts educators recognize and value music making and learning as more holistic, Spiritual experiences.

Introduction

I started playing drum kit about 32 years ago, when my maternal grandmother gave me one for my 12th birthday. About six months later I formed a rock band, *Purple Freuds*, with two school friends, and around the same time I joined another band, the *Dooberie Hounds*, with some other friends. After learning a few cover songs, we mostly wrote our own material; the other band members would come up with riffs, chord sequences, or a fully formed song with melody and lyrics, and I would negotiate a drum part that the song's originator felt suited the material. We practiced songs until they were as good as we could get them, and performed occasionally in local shows. This modus operandi has guided my music making to this day; playing in bands with friends and peers centers and grounds me. In the words of jazz musician Joe Gardner in the movie, *Soul*, "it's my reason for living" (Docter, 2020).

For 30 years, I have played with many bands with names like *Fizzy Wig*, *South Lands*, *Bodega*, *Mass Defect*, *3rd Day Rising*, *Peyote*, *Three's Company*, *Sanction*, *Neck*, *DSK*, *Leo's Garden*, *Eruptörs*, *the Hummingbirds*, and *VI*. I drummed with singer-songwriters Ally Brown, Daniel Spiller, and Gillian Glover. We rehearsed and performed together as frequently as we could, and with all of these bands the main aim was the same. We had almost no business savoir-faire and as little business interest. For the resources we poured into making music, the reward was making that music together as best we could. In this we flourished and thrived (Smith, 2016).

When I moved from the United Kingdom to the United States in late 2017, an almost-two-year hiatus from being in a regular band ensued while I secured residency status and a permanent home. This was unsettling and rudely disrupted my sense of purpose and self (Smith, 2021a). I finally joined a band in autumn of 2019, but we broke up the following summer due to irreconcilable differences over mask-wearing during the pandemic. Abruptly rent from that holistically fulfilling experience which, every Friday night, satisfied my emotions, body, and soul (Smith, 2021b), I found myself – like millions of musicians the world over – stranded at home. From March to November 2020, I made music alone and with others, exclusively from my garage. I felt incredibly fortunate to have this space in which to make music at the drum kit during isolation, particularly as I knew many musicians who were not in so luxurious a position. This paper explores how I found meaningfulness through collaborative music making during the period of social isolation and "lockdown" in spring and summer of 2020.

More than merely presenting reflections on my personal experiences as a music maker, this article addresses a long-held concern that came into focus while I was teaching at a music college in London, England in the early 2000s. I realized that, in teaching musical skills,

repertoire, and attributes that we hoped would prepare students for futures as professional musicians (Smith, 2013), my colleagues and I frequently if not always failed to focus on the moment, the present, the now-ness of making music, even in performing it. In my 10+ years as a studio teacher, I had also focused students' attention too much on "getting the notes right," to the exclusion of vital social, cultural, and emotional cues as to the meaning of what we were doing. However, musical meaning works holistically, and it is the relishing of the wonderful immersive present, and recognizing and being open to expansive "timespace" (Voegelin, 2010, p. 171) moments, that account for so much of the reason that I and, I suspect, many other musicians, make music at all (Smith, 2017). In music education contexts from private studios to the classrooms and stages in schools and universities, there can be a tendency to maintain a teleology of *techné* (Hunter, 2019; Stapley, in press), where the ends of teaching and learning are focused almost exclusively on developing technical skills in service of executing ideal performances. Of course, there is tremendous value in developing and honing technical expertise, but to do so at the exclusion of fuller artistic experience is limiting and educationally deleterious (Dewey, 1980 [1934]). June Boyce-Tillman (2011), on whose theoretical framework I draw further, below, has described this as focusing on musical Construction at the exclusion of a more holistic musical education that situates music making as Spirituality. Herein I provide an interpretive autoethnographic account (Denzin, 2014) of playing for two projects – with producer/songwriter/guitarist, [Stephen Wheel](#) (hereafter, Stephen), and with progressive rock fusion collective, [The New Titans](#).

Method

This autoethnographic, lived aesthetic inquiry focuses on my practice as a drummer. It is written for an audience of artist-scholar-educator peers, presenting a somewhat "complex mediation and reconstruction of experience" (Pinar, et al., 1995, p. 567). As Chang (2008) articulates, "the data collection field for autoethnography is the researcher's own life" (p. 89). Drawing on Jones et al. (2013), Denzin elaborates, stating that:

Autoethnography is the use of personal experience and personal writing to (1) purposefully comment on/critique cultural practices; (2) make contributions to existing research; (3) embrace vulnerability with purpose; and (4) create a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response. (Denzin, 2014, p. 20)

While this paper meets these criteria to differing degrees, I (1) comment herein on the cultural practice of playing drum kit to make music collaboratively with friends; (2) contribute to existing research by building on my own body of work about drumming praxis (Smith 2017, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, in press) and to the burgeoning area of scholarship in making and learning popular music (Green, 2002; Smith et al., 2017; Moir et al., 2019); (3) embrace

vulnerability through an honest and sincere account of personally meaningful musicking in an effort to understand that more fully; and (4) welcome any responses at all from reader-interlocutors.

Denzin (2014) further notes how “interpretive researchers attempt to secure self and personal experience stories that deal with events – mundane and remarkable – that have effects at the deep level of a person’s life” (p. 43). In the sections below, I hope to demonstrate that the personal experiences I describe were both remarkable and mundane. They were mundane inasmuch as a middle-aged man playing drum kit in the garage of his suburban Pennsylvania home is part of life’s social-sonic wallpaper. They were remarkable because of their deep and residual meaningfulness to me. In spring 2020, I was between jobs and health insurance policies, struggling, as many people were, to understand and respond to what the COVID-19 pandemic meant for me, my family, and our futures. I was dealing with depression, anxiety, and uncertainty, and the focused, intense music-making opportunities I describe below were nothing less than my salvation.

Mark de Rond describes the approach I take to autoethnographic writing, observing of his own work that:

The writing [is] a vital part of the research; I mean to produce evocative and engaging text that reveals to readers as much as possible of the particularities and depth of experience felt, thereby avoiding being ‘dishonest’. For it is thus that readers become privy to the writer’s experience. (de Rond, p. xii)

While agreeing that “the real has to be described, not constructed or formed” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. xi), I am reminded that, as well as being descriptive, any writing is also necessarily interpretive, since my descriptions are selective, edited, and filtered through my memory, interests, and intentions for this paper (Smith et al., 2009). As such, I am “at one and the same time player and instrument ... possessed of sensitivity and memory” in regard to the experiences for which I account (Diderot, 1966, p. 157).

I seek to interpret my own experience, not to be self-indulgent or to pretend that my own life is any more noteworthy than anyone else’s, but because “with understanding yourself comes understanding others. Autoethnography provides an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and the world” (Muncey, 2010, p. 36). Indeed, from my prior autoethnographic work, I believe I have come to be more sensitive to the depth of others’ experiences and I hope that this continues from this work, that I can be more compassionate and understanding as a teacher, scholar, musician, parent, and spouse. Furthermore, as I continue to wrestle with the ethics of studying and writing about others (Hess, 2018; Kallio, 2020), it is a comfort to

know that these challenges are perhaps fewer when I am the subject and object of my research (notwithstanding the problematic, reinforced every time I write, of again elevating the voice of yet another White, protestant, anglophone, cis-gender, straight male). As Kuntz (2015) pithily articulates, “methodological work is inevitably political” (p. 12) in various ways, not least in terms of the “globalized neoliberalism” (Kuntz, 2015, p. 12) that frames and demands relentless, competitive hyper-productivity of contemporary academics conditioned by a culture of “acquisitive individualism” (Docherty, 2018, p. 38). Nonetheless, in writing this paper for a journal on arts education, I hope that other arts educators might find the work helpful for themselves and in nurturing young musicians in their care – helping them to thrive through learning and doing music (Smith & Silverman, 2020).

Meaningfulness and Spirituality During a Pandemic

During the pandemic and the attendant “lockdown” or “rest-in-place” orders into which many millions of people were suddenly thrust for an indefinite period from spring 2020, I found it hard to concentrate. I was constantly and intensely anxious, confused, uncertain, and afraid, plus I felt guilt and shame from having the privilege of staying safely at home and of not being a front-line worker. As I have noted elsewhere, I found music to be a source of sanctuary and solace during these strange and unsettling times (Smith, 2020a, 2020b). I was drawn to making music collaboratively with others, by playing drum kit. I craved it. This drumming with others helped me to maintain my sense of self and purpose – what I consider to be my eudaimonia (Smith, in press). Drumming and writing about playing drum kit, provide “a window into my soul” (Smith, 2021a).

Friends invited me to play drum kit with them in asynchronous collaborations, whereby we would play “live” and record individual parts in our respective locations, then later share these with one another, and one of the group would mix all our contributions into a coherent whole. I jumped at the chance – something that might make me feel good! A way to connect with people! A focus in this newly horizonless time of apparently perpetual hiatus! I did not articulate or realize my motives at the time. I acted on instinct. I did not yet know if I was even capable of satisfactorily recording the drum kit, never having recorded my own drumming before. Philosopher Susan Wolf explains that this responsive spontaneity is often how creation of meaningfulness works:

Because meaning requires us to be open and responsive to values outside ourselves, we cannot be preoccupied with ourselves. If we want to live meaningful lives, we cannot try too hard or focus too much on doing so. (Wolf, 2009, p. 52)

I did not instigate these projects, nor consciously seek meaningfulness through them. Rather, I was reminded, during and long after the process, that these were where I could find meaning.

At the time of writing, some months hence in the latter part of 2021, I am trying to better understand and articulate what happened.

Wolf mentioned finding meaning through responding to values outside of oneself. As Wolf (2009) articulates, I experienced, “Meaning [as] something we want for ourselves and others” (p. 49); as such, “I [was] drawn by the particular values of my friend[s]... They are values I respond to, for which I have an affinity – a subjective attraction, if you will” (p. 51).

Acknowledging the roots of meaningfulness as being both within and without the self, led me to June Boyce-Tillman’s model of spirituality (Boyce-Tillman, 2004, 2011, 2020) (see Figure 1).

A Theoretical Framework for Spirituality

Playing drum kit in a band with people I like is meaningful to me in ways that no other domain of activity is (Smith, 2021a, in press). It is then that I feel the most intensely present and alive (Smith, 2017, 2021a). At its best, playing drum kit feels hyper-real and transcendent – an experience that June Boyce-Tillman (2011) characterizes as “Spirituality.” Boyce-Tillman (2020) explains that humans can achieve Spirituality through alignment of activity in four domains:

- Materials—the instruments, the body and the technical aspects involved in producing sound as well as the acoustics of the space
- Construction—the way music is put together—what is repeated, what is changed, the degree of contrast
- Values—the context of musicking and its cultural meaning
- Expression—the feelingful aspects of the experience including those within the sounds themselves (intrinsic) and those locked onto the sounds by significant life experiences (extrinsic)

These combine to account for:

- Spirituality/liminality—a different way of knowing where time and space operate differently

(p. 75)

In what follows, I discuss two asynchronous, collaborative music making projects which are further supported by audio and video examples throughout the paper.

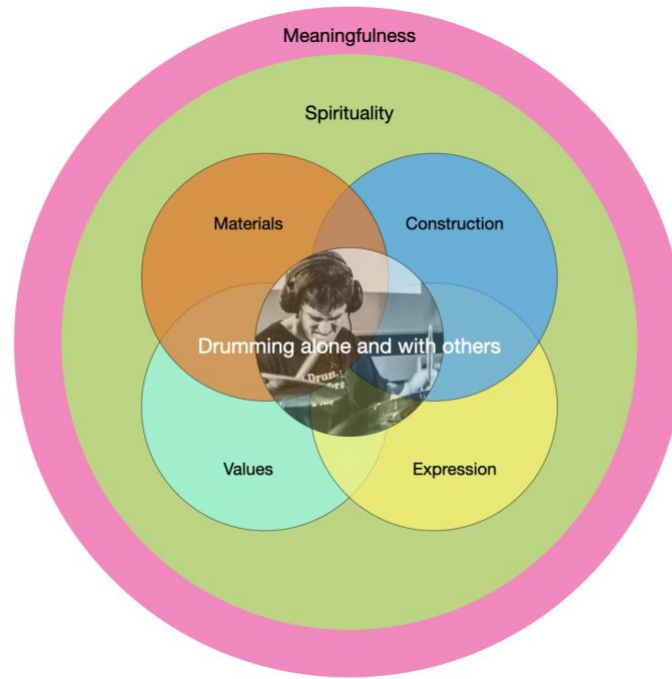


Figure 1. Meaningfulness and Spirituality derived from collaborative drum kit practice.

Drumming During Lockdown

In this section of the paper, I describe aspects of the process of learning, playing, and recording music at the drum kit for Stephen Wheel’s [Sun Sessions EP](#) and [The New Titans](#) from May to August 2020. Links to audio recordings of music from these projects are provided throughout. The tracks can be listened to diegetically, or after reading the paper; though regardless of the approach to engage with them they are integral to a full “reading” of this paper. Using Boyce-Tillman’s (2020) framework of Spirituality, I focus on my process and practice in each of the domains of Materials, Construction, Values, and Expression. As Boyce-Tillman acknowledges, experiences in these domains necessarily overlap as they combine to form transcendent, Spiritual experience. While necessarily edited and concise accounts, I have taken care to craft these vignettes as candid recollections of my experiences. I believe such reflections are “one essential part of arts research that strikes at the core of human experience” (Smith, 2017, para. 3).

Recording drum kit was new for me. I had played drum kit while others recorded me many dozens of times, and because one or more people had been designated as technician/engineer/producer of a session, I had allowed them to do their job while I concentrated on doing mine. Figuring out how to use the sound-recording equipment I had at

my disposal was a test of my confidence and identity as a drummer. Since deciding in 1999 not to study on a graduate two-year music technology program, but to take a teaching position instead, I had perceived and cast myself as entirely incompetent with music technology. Nonetheless, when first Stephen, and then Phil Thomas from The New Titans, invited me to make music with them, I was eager to do my best.

Materials

Crucial components in my recording process were the physical and digital recording spaces that I worked within. I worked alone with one \$300 microphone; a thinly carpeted garage with no sound insulation, walled with drums, tools, camping gear, and other paraphernalia; a cheap, two-input USB audio interface; an eight-year-old MacBook Air (see figure 2); and an entry-level digital audio workstation (DAW), GarageBand, with no expertise or training in how to use it. I experimented with the few parameters of the microphone and rudimentary audio interface, positioning the solitary microphone above and slightly in front of the drum kit (see figure 4.)



Figure 2. My recording studio: a two-input USB interface and a MacBook Air.



Figure 3. The Rode NT2A microphone that I used to record everything.

I own two drum kits and set up the smaller one (see figure 4.) because 1) it was capable of about 50% of the volume of the larger kit, so hopefully would antagonize the neighbors to a lesser degree, and 2) there was inadequate room in the garage for the bigger one. I chose three crash cymbals that were quiet (for the neighbors) and characterful (for the rich textural and dynamic possibilities). I sometimes added auxiliary sounds such as a China cymbal, such as in The New Titans’ “[Old Shoe](#),” or mark tree (chimes) and double bass drum pedal in The New Titans’ “[Hero 1](#)”. I worked with [MoonGel dampening pads](#) to achieve a balanced sound across the kit, since I had only one microphone capturing the sound. Following feedback on

my initial recording of Stephen's "[Moving Away](#)," I learned from Stephen to overdub crash cymbals (record them later on a separate track) because their closer proximity to the one overhead microphone meant they momentarily drowned out the sound of the rest of the kit.



Figure 4. My small drum kit with cymbals.

With each song, I enjoyed sinking into the familiar comfort of drumming, where “you have to be the rhythm in order to play it” (Smith, 2013, p. 102). The materiality of playing drum kit is “delicious” (Bruford, 2009, p. 100); “The listening and feeling become one in a cyclical, instantaneous intra-personal feedback loop between my head, hands, feet and every sinew of my body; and, on the best days, every part of my being” (Smith, 2013, p. 185). Playing drum kit is when I feel most confidently and capably, me.

I started recording with brushes (far quieter than wooden drumsticks), in part to avoid inviting complaints from neighbors, and because brushes made the drums sound bigger than when struck with sticks; each note lasted slightly longer due to the greater surface area of the brush compared to the tip of a drumstick. I occasionally used sticks for the Sun Sessions EP, such as in “Sun Sessions” where I wanted to play the ride cymbal and that required a stick for the

clarity and dynamic required to match the rest of the drum kit. When I came to record for The New Titans, I realized that the speed, articulation, and intricacy of this music required that I use wooden drumsticks. I picked the ProMark Evelyn Glennie SD740s that are large in the hand but small and light in the tip. These enabled me to play fast and (relatively) light, without compromising my grip or the stick's feel, since they are identical in girth to the heavier 2Bs that are my go-to sticks but which produce rather more noise than I thought would be neighborly.

After an extended and emotionally testing period battling GarageBand software's interface, I became increasingly at home in that digital domain. When I recorded dozens and dozens of fills around the kit for "Old Shoe;" I just threw fill after fill into the DAW, letting inspiration and the sound world of the song guide my playing, selecting the best takes to use. I soon craved the focused alone-time to tinker in the DAW, obsessing as I meticulously cut and compiled takes and overdubs for The New Titans. When Stephen and Phil emailed or texted me from across the Atlantic to say they were happy with my recordings, I was thrilled and quite proud.

Construction

For both projects I began the process of Construction when I learned the arc of each song by listening to them repeatedly. I listened casually with the music in the background a few times before listening with intention while writing out a chart detailing how long different sections were (see figures 5 and 6). I decided what rhythms to play and what to emphasize, for instance along with the guitar in the case of Stephen (he had only sent me guitar recordings to play along with) and along with the bass for The New Titans, as I remembered that Phil, the bassist, liked to "lock in" with my drumming patterns; I did not know the other musicians in The New Titans so well. The next step in constructing the drum parts was to practice them over and over on my "practice kit" – a set of rubber pads that are almost noiseless (compared to a full acoustic drum kit, anyway) that allowed me to play for hours, trying out grooves and achieving the effortless fluidity I sought before attempting to record, without disturbing neighbors or co-habiting family in the process. Becoming fluid and fluent on the practice kit was reassuring and filled me with excitement and the anticipation of delayed gratification ahead of realizing the parts on my wonderful acoustic drum kit.

brushes

Add rim clicks to $\text{M9} + \frac{5}{4}$

Cowboy Song (Drums)

2 bars guitar

2 bars intro

9 bars V1 → crash on 6, 7, 9

4 bars intro

9 bars V2 → crash on 6, 7, 8

4 bars intro

M 8
4 bb
4 b b] p p p p / 7 | / / / / | / / / / | x2

5 bars groove

4 bars intro

9 bars V3 → crash on 6, 7, 8

4 bars intro

M 8
4 bars
4 bars intro p p p p / 7 | / / / / | / / / / | x2

CODA
12 bb → crash on 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12
2 b louder
4 bb

V 4 + crashes 7 bb x

Figure 5. Drum chart for “Open Spaces” (formerly “Cowboy song” by Stephen Wheel)

Splashes ^{cymbals} $\text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R}$ | $\text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R}$ | Drums
 Δ Shaker
Congas

Δ $\text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R}$
[B] ~~rests only~~

Old Shoe

16 Bars ^{Shaker over 8 bars} gradual build on cymbals
inc. splashes
~~Shaker over 8 bars~~ Last bar big Fusion tom Full + Chimes

[B] 12 bars ^{Shaker} RIM CLICK / HH

[C] 16 bars ^{RIDE} $\text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R}$ ~~||||~~ |||| x 4

[C] $\text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R}$ |||| $\text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R}$ |||| x 2
(Full last x $\text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R}$)

$\text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R}$ | $\text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R}$ | only cymbals | mark tree ||
|||| | ||||

[B] 12 bars SNARE Congas in

[C] CHINA x 5 $\text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R}$ | $\text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R}$ | $\text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R}$ | $\text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R}$

[C] $\text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R}$ | $\text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R}$ | $\text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R}$ | |||| Full ||

[C] 16 ^{MATS} ~~[C]~~ ~~[C]~~ ([C]) ^{in parallel?}

[B] RIM CLICK & RIDE Loads of epic Fulls

HALF-TIME FEEL $\text{L} \text{R} \text{L} \text{R}$ | |||| | 22 bars ✓
6 Bars Congas, SPLASH ✓

Hoop crash
bbs 2, 4, 6, 8, 10 etc

Figure 6. Drum chart for “[Old Shoe](#)” by The New Titans.

Stephen's songs were not recorded to a metronome or click track, so I had to learn each song's ebb and flow. I liked working this way and had done similarly with Stephen many times before. This challenge required that I listen deeply and intently and immerse myself fully in the process of learning each song as an entity. I knew I *could* record the songs piecemeal and stitch sections together, but it would be more satisfying to nail each song in a single take, as this is how Stephen and I worked together when we recorded music in person. There were some instances where I was unable to record a single take cleanly, such as in title track, "[Sun Sessions](#)," where I chose to switch from playing with brushes to sticks, and vice-versa (while I could pull these off easily in performance, the changes would create unwanted noise on the recording, so I recorded respective sections separately and glued them together later in the DAW). I eventually allowed myself to enjoy the burgeoning competence and confidence I felt as a recording engineer – belatedly expanding my skillset as a musician, following decades of being certain I was not up to the job of capturing my own sound “on tape.”

Recording for Stephen, the Construction usually stopped for me once I had finished the recording. I just sent him the best take for him to use when he mixed the project in his studio. With The New Titans, on the other hand, the recording was a middle part of the process. The DAW became for me a new liminal space in which to construct multiple, complex drum kit and percussion parts as I wished to present them. I spliced different takes together, and edited shaker, triangle, tambourine, cabasa, washboard, and other percussion parts to complement the drum kit. The fact that the demos I received for these tracks were recorded precisely to a click track meant I was able to be more ambitious with my parts. I recorded numerous versions of rhythms and fills and then selected my favorites. For example, I recorded over eight minutes of fills, to provide just 20 seconds of fills for "[Old Shoe](#);" the process of Construction here became more layered – I improvised, imagined, and played various patterns, and then got to play with them all a second time when arranging them in the DAW. The most intricate web that I wove was in "[Physh](#)." This was very creatively fulfilling, as I detail further, below, under Expression.

Values

Stephen and I are very close. He has called me his John Bonham (famed drummer and engine room of pioneering heavy blues/rock band, Led Zeppelin) and his Uma Thurman – an actor whose performances are integral to several films directed by Quentin Tarantino. Stephen and I had formed the deepest of bonds making music together. We lived in the same house for years, and I have been the only drummer on the scores of songs Stephen has written and recorded since the late 1990s. The Sun Sessions EP was about friends and family. The lyrics were explicitly about spending time with loved ones, like “Golden Light / Omnicoda” on which Stephen invited me to contribute lyrics about spending time outdoors during the

pandemic with my daughter. I was delighted to contribute in this way to an album that was about our friendship and shared love for our families – capturing this particular pandemic moment “like a Polaroid” (personal communication). Stephen told me that the only people he needed to like this music were me, his wife, and himself; if we three were happy, it would all have been worth it for him. And I only needed Stephen, my wife, and my parents to endorse it, really.

The participants in both projects shared some overlapping aesthetic Values. Firstly, we were all perfectionists – meticulous in our playing, recording, arranging, and production decisions. There was never any room for sloppiness; we set the bar high and ensured we jumped it cleanly. Secondly, we were making the music for ourselves; none of us had any serious commercial ambitions for the music. We had no commercial nous, and no one among us had the skillset, patience, or desire to seek agents, management, or reviews. Making the music was eudaimonic and put me in a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Smith, 2016, 2017, 2019a).

The players on The New Titans also did not explicitly discuss the values underpinning our collaboration. However, I was invited to the project by Phil Thomas, a bass player with whom I had been friends for 20 years. Phil and I had bonded over admiration for overtly technical and complex music played by progressive rock bands such as Porcupine Tree and Dream Theater. Unlike with Stephen’s music, it seemed that with The New Titans it would be impossible to play too many notes. While the bass playing on the demo tracks I received was sometimes understated, there was plenty of show-off lead guitar playing and I heard room in there that I suspected the band would like me to fill with my ideas. The first track they sent me to play on – “[Beaver](#)” – reminded me strongly of tunes by Snarky Puppy, a US/UK jazz-rock-hip-hop fusion ensemble full of cutting-edge musicians and tasty, slick, dance-able, virtuosic playing. Demonstrable instrumental prowess, then, seemed to be the name of the game. When I asked, “If we’re going full ‘Snarky Puppy’ here, can I go nuts?”, Phil told me “you have total free rein on this!” to play whatever I chose (personal communication). I liked the sound of that as this would allow me to embrace our shared musical Values and, through doing so, to express important aspects of myself.

Expression

In creating the recordings with Stephen, I was expressing reciprocated love for my close friend, saying “I love you, man.” This expression took the form of abundant joy in my drumming. I loved leaning into the idiosyncrasies of Stephen’s playing in each song. For instance, the choruses in “[Delia Flower](#)” are about 10 bpm slower than the verses, and I loved nestling into his guitar playing and transitioning between sections in such a way that it sounded natural and organic. When practicing, I closed my eyes and imagined him there with me, playing guitar. Along with my love for Stephen, I also expressed gratitude and joy at

making this great music with a person who meant so much to me.

While I have always found it very rewarding to play Stephen's music, I have also learned that it is really his music, in the service of which I play. Stephen and I often negotiate drum parts, but he gets the final say, as the songwriter/arranger/producer (Smith, 2019b). I have a good instinct now for what he likes, and on the Sun Sessions EP I only had to completely re-record one of the songs because we had respectively envisioned different grooves for it. I feel I play tightly with Stephen and for Stephen; but it is less about me expressing myself musically. So, whereas I felt Stephen's Sun Sessions EP recordings were primarily an expression of our in-person relationship, The New Titans were making slick, metronomic, jazz-rock fusion that enabled me to express myself with more creative flair and to tap deeper into my drummer skills. They trusted me to play whatever I chose. They never asked me to record alternative drum parts, and never took out any of what I played. I had complete artistic autonomy, which was exciting and freeing.

While I knew Phil and the other members of The New Titans less well than I knew Stephen, the music of The New Titans was much more exciting to play. The two projects allowed me respectively to express different, vital components of myself as a drummer. With Stephen, I was giving and loving in the performances that I recorded for him as a close friend, and with The New Titans I was able to perform the role of a creative drummer and craft my own rhythmic-sonic palette. In both cases, and for different reasons, my drumming was positively effervescent. Bill Bruford (2018) describes these two types of performance as existing towards either end of the "functional/compositional continuum" (p. 38) along which he situates drummers' work. Both projects had me in a state of flow; with Stephen, the challenge was to nail the vibe and make the music sound live and organic, while with The New Titans the challenge lay in pushing myself to create intricate, sophisticated parts and combine them into a coherent whole.

Conclusions and Implications

Undertaking this reflective study has affirmed and deepened my understanding that playing drum kit collaboratively, creatively, and expressively in rock bands is vital to my holistic wellbeing, Spirituality, and to meaningfulness in my life. While I was never in any doubt about the centrality of playing drum kit to my sense of self and purpose in life, undertaking this analysis of *how* drumming was meaningful to me during a specific period has highlighted the particularity of contexts and conditions required for me to achieve Spirituality. Making music during the pandemic saved me from a deep, lingering, emotional and existential slump, aligning with what MacGlone et al. (2020) identified as, "positive effects of music participation [during the COVID-19 pandemic] on aspects of mental health in terms of self-expression, confidence, mood... and interaction with others" (para. 60). These collaborations

certainly “raise[d my own] perceptions about the value of music in psychological and social wellbeing” (Cabedo-Mas et al., 2021, para. 39).

Making music with my collaborators, and with Stephen in particular, exemplifies what Compte-Sponville (2001) identifies as *philia*, or love-as-friendship, where he notes that, “*philia* is love-as-joy... the joy of loving and being loved... In sum, *philia* is active love” (p. 254). In undertaking these recording projects, I also felt and expressed gratitude. While I understand *about what* I was grateful, I was and remain usure about *to whom* I should direct my gratitude, but as de Botton (2012) points out, one does not need a target for one’s gratitude in order to feel it deep down and express it with abundance. Compte-Sponville (2001) similarly affirms that “gratitude essentially is... joy itself” (p. 136). The philosopher goes on to suggest that, “Gratitude, then, is the secret of friendship, not because we feel indebted to our friends since we owe them nothing, but because we share with them an overabundance of common, reciprocal joy” (Compte-Sponville, 2001, p. 139). Both of these projects provided thoroughly joyful experiences.

When I listen back now, more than a year later, to the finished recordings, I feel a sense of pride over the parts I crafted and recorded for The New Titans. When I listen to the Sun Sessions EP, as I often do on my long commute to or from work in the car, I feel the warm glow of my affection for Stephen, as though listening to the music allows me to re-make it somehow, and in so doing, to affirm a friendship that is so important to me, so intrinsic to who I am musically. When I listen to the music of either project, I feel grateful to my friends for the salvation they provided me during a profoundly challenging time.

Implications for Music Education

In the words of my friend and colleague, Christopher Cayari, “drumming is what gives [me] life!” (personal communication). Through drumming, I find meaning. As music education sociologist, Lucy Green (1988/2008), has said, issues of how meaning is made and what meanings are valued in spaces of music making and learning are critical to how people see themselves and value themselves and their culture in the world. It is therefore important to understand the music-making experiences of music-makers, and how these bring about meaning. However, as Smith (2021) laments, “Most of us go through life enjoying the performing arts and connecting with them in our own ways, oblivious to the experiences of the artists themselves” (para. 9). I argue, then, that it is vital for artists to acknowledge and explain the ways in which we find and derive meaning. Such accounts have particular salience in music education contexts, where, in order for teachers to facilitate meaningful music making opportunities for students, “it must be worth caring about what to care about” (Frankfurt, 1998, p. 92) so we can understand where meaningfulness lies. The more educators understand about how music means what it means to others who make it, the broader might be

the range of goals and versions of success those teachers are willing to consider for themselves and the students in their classrooms. With, for example, happiness, friendship, and Spirituality as musical-pedagogical goals, what types of music might teachers encourage their students to make, and for whom might it be performed or played?

As I suggested towards the beginning of this article, it is important for arts educators to consider the value of music making in terms far greater than a teleology of techne, to which teachers and students are wont to limit their work in all manner of educational contexts. I argue it is vital to adopt a pedagogical ethos that embraces the holistic human experience that Boyce-Tillman calls Spirituality. It is this powerful aesthetic aspect of being human that brought me back, time and again, to playing the drum kit during the pandemic. If more arts pedagogy were to include in its teleology, consciousness of and in liminal space, I believe it could be even more impactful.

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