

Embodied Experience of Rock Drumming

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Music & Practice, Volume 3

Scientific

Tags: [drumming](#), [rock](#), [aesthetic-experience](#), [embodiment](#), [autoethnography](#)



Gareth Dylan Smith in action: “I value the opportunity to present a personal perspective and intend my writing to stand as part of a growing body of literature which offers insights from and into performed experience”. (Photo: Josefa Torres).

Introduction

This paper presents an autoethnographic study of rock drumming, in which I weave together theoretical writing on the importance of accounting for understanding bodily

knowledge and somatic experience with accounts of drumming in a rock band in London, England, in the summer of 2016. The chapter includes excerpts from diary entries that I made during the course of rehearsing for and performing the debut concert of re-formed NWOBHM band, V1.¹⁾ I am a professional drummer, and have been for 20 years, so my personal experience and embodied knowledge in drumming reflect an expert positionality that brings a depth and richness that musicians with significantly less experience may not recognize (but which other musicians of similar vintage perhaps will). I privilege a performer's perspective in this article, not because I consider it to be in any way superior to the perspectives of, say, a listener or a group of listeners or dancers, but because it is my perspective as a drummer – such is the subjective orientation of an autoethnographic study.

H.L. Goodall observes 'rock n roll ... is not a spectator activity';²⁾ indeed it is not (entirely), yet scholars have tended to favour studying rock music as object,³⁾ subcultural artefact or (neo)tribal identifier,⁴⁾ or as a social/societal phenomenon or praxis.⁵⁾ Even when academic writers attempt to capture the essence of rock performance, as does Harris Berger in his ambitious and compelling book, *Metal, Rock, and Jazz: Perception and the Phenomenology of Musical Experience*, they can miss the mark. Berger asks 'what is the drummer's experience like?' but he does not answer the question, telling readers neither what the experience was like nor what it was in the case of any of the drummers he interviewed.⁶⁾ Berger also errs in assuming (or implying) that there is 'a' drummer, thereby also erroneously suggesting that understanding the experience of one drummer might be generalizable to an understanding of all drummers' experience(s). In order to grapple with describing these intrinsic aspects of drumming I have chosen to turn inwards, towards investigating my own performed experience.⁷⁾ It is, thus, a deeply personal perspective that informs the approach taken to research in this paper. I do not intend to imply that this is more 'authentic' than another approach would have been; other drummers have written, for example, from perspectives that focus on creativity or interaction with a local scene.⁸⁾ There is room in this paper to explore the subject matter through just one lens, and, as an autoethnographic approach demands, I have undertaken the study in the way that makes most sense for me as a practitioner-researcher.

This paper explores my embodied experience of rock drumming, following Bruce Benson's affirmation that 'music is experienced in time by fully embodied beings whose experience of music is just as bodily as it is mental'.⁹⁾ I discuss what is for me the essential nature of rock music 'as an actual experience ... music is a physical phenomenon ... [and] in the context of music it is not at all contentious to claim that not only experience but knowledge is located in the body'.¹⁰⁾ I articulate various aspects and contexts of that knowledge and experience, with reference to rehearsals and a performance with a rock band in summer of 2016. This

type of reflection, I argue, is one essential part of arts research that strikes at the core of human experience; for Denis Diderot, the very essence of identity for humans is consciousness founded upon 'the memory of [one's] own actions' - one is whom one remembers oneself to be.¹¹⁾ John Freeman, meanwhile, urges prudence in relying on memory in research, cautioning that scholarly writing can become little more than 'research spin doctoring' if one does not exercise due caution.¹²⁾ While heeding Freeman's warning, I hope to avoid this potential pitfall by framing my work in terms of Shusterman's construct of 'aesthetic experience',¹³⁾ and eudaimonism.¹⁴⁾

Embodied experience in music performance

Goodall urges that to overlook the perspectives and experiences of practitioners, 'favors the rational and reflective over the emotional and spontaneous'; these latter factors are at the very core of why I play rock drums (this is not, of course, to suggest that other experiences of music and drumming, such as listening, cannot be spontaneous and emotional, but that emotion and spontaneity are at the core of the meaning of rock drumming for me).¹⁵⁾ When scholars examine rock music but sideline the direct experience of the performer, they are missing the central reason why I engage with rock drumming practice - such academic habits have not escaped the attention of self-appointed guardian of popular music scholarship, Philip Tagg, who urges a reorientation of popular music studies (and music studies more widely), aimed at 'turning "music studies" into music studies'.¹⁶⁾ Such an elision of the performed experience in popular music studies is entirely consistent with the majority of Western thought around music historically, amounting to normative disembodied understandings of music that have become embedded as reified epistemological and ontological truths in higher music education and higher popular music education.¹⁷⁾ One advantage of an autoethnographic orientation such as I am taking in this project, is that, as Neumann notes, 'autoethnographic texts ... democratize the representational sphere of culture by locating the particular experiences of individuals in tension with dominant expressions of discursive power'.¹⁸⁾ Without wishing to overstate the potential that this paper could have to affect established discourse in popular music studies, I value the opportunity to present a personal perspective and intend my writing to stand as part of a growing body of literature which offers insights from and into performed experience. Moreover, as Norman Denzin reminds us that 'persons and their lives and their experiences are constituted through discourse in discursive systems', so I acknowledge how my perceived need to undertake this writing has emerged from, in response to and as part of discourse in musicology.

The focus of this study, then, is on 'the inextricability of music from practice',¹⁹⁾ facing what

Auslander calls the 'challenge of understanding ... music as performance'.²⁰⁾ As such I aim to document in writing an effort to articulate the tacit, embodied and intellectual knowledge that, for me as a rock drummer, 'the performance of music is an embodied event' in which 'the physical body becomes one with the instrument and with the sound produced'.²¹⁾ Denzin asserts that performances 'are the practices that allow for the construction of situated identities in specific sites'; for me, the site of identity realization is playing drums with a rock band. Denzin goes on to suggest that the effects of experiences on a person 'are the epiphanies of a life'; I second that.²²⁾

Richard Shusterman identifies the area of my interest as 'aesthetic experience', of which he names four features, three of which resonate with the locus of this study of rock drumming:

- Aesthetic experience is essentially valuable and enjoyable;
- It is something vividly felt and subjectively savoured, affectively absorbing us and focusing our attention on its immediate presence;
- It is meaningful experience, not mere sensation;
- It is at the core of what makes art, art.²³⁾

I use the first three of these features to structure the main body of this article. Supporting the claim of the fourth feature is largely beyond the scope of this study; however, it is worth noting that that some scholars would reject the salience of writing such as this paper by dint of its addressing music of popular culture,²⁴⁾ while others argue that scholarship in popular music performance is important, and here to stay.²⁵⁾

Shusterman contends that as a homogenized and homogenizing society today we are experiencing a dearth of attention to immersive bodily experience; 'too many of our ordinary somatic pleasures are taken hurriedly, distractedly, and almost as unconsciously as the pleasures of sleep'.²⁶⁾ I spend a large portion of my time typing and sending electronic messages into the ether; my days are punctuated by emails, text messages and social network interactions - such is the modern mode of work.²⁷⁾ The largest record of my presence in the world exists virtually, online; Shusterman suggests 'the more the new communications media strive to free us from the need for physical bodily presence, the more our bodily experience seems to matter'.²⁸⁾ Perhaps this why I find rock drumming to be such a sanctuary - it is when I feel the most awake, the most *me*.²⁹⁾

Diary excerpt no. 1 (V1 rehearsal, 15 July 2016)



I have spent the whole of the last week writing. I have had marking to do, a book to finish and a conference to attend all of next week, so the past seven days I have hardly stopped typing and thinking and typing and reading and typing. I have been quick, efficient, anxious, tired, impatient and stressed. Every moment in my life has been diarized and I have been working intensely and fast. When the bus to band rehearsal doesn't come immediately I get angry and need to tell myself to calm down - it's a short trip and I'll be there in time, which I am. I set up the drums, and guitarist, Terry, arrives with a big, warm handshake and a smile and I feel my shoulders start to relax. By the time we're halfway through the first song, 'V1 Rocket', I feel amazing - totally in control of my world, powering through a classic rock shuffle

with the bass guitar next to me pumping in sync with every note of my double bass drum rhythm. For the next three hours everything makes sense – working on corners of songs, finding the right tempos, and playing massive single-stroke fills around kit into the choruses. This is where I can do no wrong, where I belong.

Shusterman developed his work on aesthetic experience into ‘somaesthetics’, which he suggests can be provisionally defined as ‘the critical meliorative study of one’s experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning’.³⁰⁾ Somaesthetics offers valuable ways in which to view, understand and value rock drumming, being ‘a discipline that comprises both theory and practice’.³¹⁾ It took me a long time to accept that rock drumming is my solace, because I have always felt pressured to be more sophisticated in my music making and to want to play subtler musics. But allowing myself to embrace the feel of rock, in an act of self-fashioning as Shusterman here suggests, has indeed been educative and fulfilling to me. Shusterman views somaesthetics as part of a broader concept of ‘body consciousness’, which he acknowledges carries multivariate meanings; it is thus a helpful tool with which to interpret theoretical work on listening, musicking, consciousness and eudaimonism in relation to (my) embodied experience as a rock drummer.³²⁾

Through engaging in conversations with scholars and fellow musicians (many of my interlocutors were both), I have come increasingly to accept that my primary mode of expression as a drummer is in and through rock music. Although I have played many types of music over the years – musical theatre, Western classical, jazz, blues, hip-hop, marching band, Irish and Scottish traditional and more – rock is where I have felt most at home. This preference is doubtless evidence of my upbringing and background, what Pierre Bourdieu termed ‘habitus’ (although I grew up surrounded by numerous musical genres and styles).³³⁾ The conventions of rock performance allow me to play in an uninhibited fashion – I am permitted to *be me*.

Something subjectively savoured, valuable and enjoyable

Eudaimonism is an ideal, a philosophy, a way of life; it describes the approach I have taken and continue to take to my life, and that many colleagues and friends in music seem to take to theirs. David Norton describes eudaimonism as ‘a feeling and a condition ... [which] signals that the present activity of the individual is in harmony with the daimon that is [her

or] his true self'.³⁴⁾ Eudaimonic philosophy is founded on the principle that a person's 'search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life. ... This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own *will* to meaning'.³⁵⁾ My compulsion to keep doing what I do engenders a perpetual experience akin to what Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi identified as 'flow'.³⁶⁾ My life has a purposefulness, seriousness, joyfulness and alacrity about it that recall notions of 'play' explored in depth by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Johan Huizinga, the notion of 'leisure play' discussed by Kevin Rathunde and Russ Isabella, and Robert Stebbins' writing on 'serious leisure' and 'devotee work'.³⁷⁾ Eudaimonism, then, may be 'a valuable lens through which to view the lives of music makers, because it draws attention to aspects central to lives lived in music that may remain unseen and unexamined through other approaches'.³⁸⁾

In John Dewey's famous book *Art as Experience*, he writes 'experience, in the degree in which it is experience is heightened vitality ... it signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events'.³⁹⁾ Thus for the purposes of this article I focus primarily on exploring my own experience of playing the drums in a rock band setting, from philosophical and autoethnographic perspectives. In this study, I am, in Denis Diderot's words, 'at one and the same time player and instrument ... possessed of sensitivity and memory'; it is these attributes that this essay explores and upon which it is founded.⁴⁰⁾ My approach is, therefore, phenomenological inasmuch as I seek primarily to describe (and to understand *through* description), rather than to unpack or unpick my experience. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty urges us to remember, 'the real has to be described, not constructed or formed'.⁴¹⁾

Jason Toynbee notes that 'sometimes artists reflect on their own performativity, but in other cases what counts is "just doing it"'.⁴²⁾ For me the latter position is simply not possible - this paper is partly an acknowledgement of the deeply reflexive, feeling-full and self-critical mode in which I have come to accept that I exist. Mark de Rond articulates the centrality of the process of this orientation to one's work:

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.⁴³⁾

I aim for a similar transparency as that to which de Rond aspires (and which he achieves) in

his work. I have endeavoured herein to be full and frank in my account, whilst aspiring to necessary concision.

Diary excerpt no. 2 (V1 rehearsal, 6 August 2016)

Although I have taken two weeks off, the double bass drum patterns seem as solid and intact as before, if not stronger. The tempos feel right - not too fast or too slow - and when I attempt the double-tempo idea at the end of 'Runner' it works great, better than ever before. At one point I wonder if I'll come off my bike, but I just focus again on being in the song. It's hard to remember what I do there actually, but I think what I do consciously is surrender - I get out of the way and let my legs and arms play the song. I go straight in to the normal time section again without a hitch, wonder why I haven't managed it before, and hope I'll be able to reach a state of being where I can pull this off as effortlessly in the gig. A similar thing happens later in the same song, where I build up to constant semiquavers on the bass drum and manage to go to the cymbal and bass drum stabs without event. I have never done this before, but I found myself thinking that I wouldn't be able to think about this as the song was moving too fast and I hadn't practised it enough to remember a helpful tip, so I relax, let my body do the work and - lo and behold - I land on the stabs with aplomb (again hoping I pull this off on the day of performance!).

This study is an attempt to come to terms with some of the primal, human essence of music making from behind a rock drum kit. As Férdia Stone-Davis suggests, for me 'the physical character of musical experience discloses a first-order mode of being, one that involves a suspension of the distinction between subject and object (promoting instead their mutuality), or, rather, a retrieval of the pre-reflective moment before this distinction asserts itself'.⁴⁴⁾ Similarly, Merleau-Ponty asserts that 'it is this pre-objective realm that we have to explore in ourselves if we wish to understand sense-experience'. He goes on to claim that any truths derived from empiricist constructions are 'subordinate' to 'all the basic phenomena which they conceal'.⁴⁵⁾ In terms of rock music, Berger acknowledges that 'what is primary for human research is the lived reality of meanings': when I play rock drums, I want to know only the now, to experience it to its, and to my, fullest.⁴⁶⁾

Vividly felt experience

Shusterman argues that heightened awareness of our bodies can ‘enhance one’s knowledge, performance, and pleasure’, while Chris Shilling underscores ‘the *necessity* of understanding humans as embodied beings’.⁴⁷⁾ I would argue that this is absolutely the case with rock drumming. The movements I make in this context are large and effortful, and as I have come, through this study, to pay closer attention to my embodied understanding in drumming, I have developed a fuller knowledge of myself as a drummer, better able to articulate and enjoy what I do. The main drumming page of my website bears a poem that reads:

I am a drummer
Drumming is when I am me
Then is who I am

The haiku focuses on being and doing in time, so I am keen in this essay to explore what Larissa Tuisainen refers to as ‘accounting for the concept of presence in performance’, through accounting for the experience of it.⁴⁸⁾ In this regard, Shusterman claims that ‘heightened somatic consciousness can improve one’s use of the self’.⁴⁹⁾ Placing my body and my experiences of and in it at the centre of this research aligns with Shusterman’s concern for ‘using its cultivation for heightened consciousness and philosophical insight’.⁵⁰⁾ For ‘cultivation’ I might for the purposes of this project substitute learning (entraining my rocking body) to play the songs of V1; over the longer term, I mean the 28 years of variously intensive training my body has undergone to be able to play rock drums at a professional level. It is when playing rock drums that I am most keenly aware of my ‘body’s role as [my] primordial instrument or *ur-medium*’; indeed, my body is the instrument that plays the drums.⁵¹⁾

I like to play hard, move big and be loud. I love the immersion I feel in a rock band rehearsal or performance. I am in most situations not a fan of loud noises, or not a fan of them in my ears, anyway. The loudness of sounds I find uncomfortable, but I do like volume, i.e. a big *size* of sound. I have worn ear plugs as a drummer since long before I discovered drumming in the way that I now play rock, with big arm movements and making a big sound. So for me rock is less about the loudness itself and much more about doing what it takes to be loud. It is about the physicality of creating the loudness and the immediate feedback of that that I love. This is similar to the way in which I enjoy loud music when driving a car. I do not care

for the tinny crashing in my ears of the high mids of the vocals and guitars that are audible over the poor-quality stereo in the van of the Irish punk I have toured with on and off for many years. However, I love the feeling of the rounded, bassy, throbbing feeling of playing rock CDs in the smaller space of my own car. The sound envelopes me. Similar, but all the more exhilarating and fulfilling, is the experience of when I create, hear, feel, listen to and react to the sounds when playing the drums in a rock band.

Diary excerpt no. 3 (from V1 rehearsal, 6 August 2016)

I love the feeling of hitting the crash cymbals on the button of the groove too, sinking into the metal with the stick as the sound explodes simultaneously with the feel of the right stick striking the crash as the left stick pounds the snare drum or my right foot lands on the bass drum. There are many wonderful moments today - like the in-the-pocket-ness of the syncopated groove in 'Lights' that I have never really liked in my conscious mind but which works as a powerful, deeply sunk groove as I feel it, the sound and feeling merging as one with the bass and guitar and my body. Damn, Dwight is an epic bass player!

Playing rock drums is such a wonderful place of retreat - my home. Although writing as a listener and consumer, Theodore Gracyk articulates a point equally salient to performers, noting that 'rock creates a cocoon of sound', going on to assert that, 'physical and sensual, felt and heard, rock invites us to crank the volume and overwhelm consciousness'.⁵²⁾ I feel strongly that rock heightens and focuses my awareness, rather than overwhelms it, but the experience is likely similar to what Gracyk describes - his point is about the power of rock, and that is absolutely something that I feel, physically, as embodied consciousness.⁵³⁾ It is worth noting here Antonio Damasio's point that 'consciousness is an entirely private affair and ... it is not amenable to the third-person observations that are common in physics and other branches of the life sciences'.⁵⁴⁾ Shusterman describes eloquently much of my feeling about my experience of rock drumming as embodied, when he writes,

the body is not only a crucial site where one's ethos and values can be physically displayed and attractively developed, but it is also where one's skills of perception and performance can be honed to improve one's cognitions and capacities for virtue and happiness.⁵⁵⁾

I am not certain that my drumming experience amounts to or defines an especially virtuous existence, although Shusterman's argument aligns with eudaimonism (discussed briefly above), according to which 'living one's own truth constitutes integrity, the consummate virtue'.⁵⁶⁾

Feeling the groove

When I play rock I do it mostly because it fulfils me. I like to be part of creating in real time what Mickey Hart calls the 'magic ride' and what is widely known as the groove or pocket.⁵⁷⁾ This being said, however, I do not especially love a jazz groove or a funk groove, or a groove that is ticking along nicely in the pit of a fringe musical theatre show (and goodness knows, I have played hundreds enough of those to know). I love, need, crave and feel the irresistible allure of the feeling - physical and emotional - of playing a rock groove. I am at my happiest when I am rocking:

I find ... that I am completely absorbed in the song - the music is all I hear, all that I am in those moments ... Going in to the music, I am happy to descend, contented to be enveloped by it entirely. Being *in* a song, or *in* a piece of music is like a total immersion of my self - emotionally, mentally, physically.⁵⁸⁾

I wrote the above-cited text in reference not to a rock band experience, but about being in a folk-blues band that tended to play more quietly. The words ring true for rock music, but there is an additional level of satisfaction that comes from the physical component of the aesthetic experience of playing rock. I am only ever really satisfied if I come off stage or out of a rehearsal sweaty as hell, having worked out hard and long and known the power of a huge flowing groove for the best part of an hour or more. This 'drummers' high' is, like 'the runner's high' that I also know and love, a euphoric state related to release of endorphins.⁵⁹⁾ I experienced a particularly successful practice session during the run-up to the V1 show:

Diary excerpt no. 4 (personal practice, 22 August 2016)

I had been worrying about one particular rhythm for a little while as it felt under-practised to me in rehearsal. I took my cowbell into the drum practice booth to run over the pattern a few times and as I played it, it felt gradually better. When I came back to try the rhythm again the next day it started off good and then got to feeling incredible. I could not really hear the cowbell but I could feel it. I knew

the strokes were in sync with my bass drum foot and left hand, and then I could hear it, but my body felt like it was not producing the sound but that it was somehow the sound it was making by striking the bass drum, cowbell and hi-hat. I stopped, grinned uncontrollably and shouted 'YEAH!!' to myself and to the drum kit. We did it! If I can pull this off in the gig the band will be on fire!

Jean-Luc Nancy suggests that Western philosophy has neglected listening in preference for emphasizing understanding. He suggests that the philosopher 'neutralizes listening within himself, so that he can philosophize'.⁶⁰⁾ My concern has not been so much that I was or that musicians have been ignoring listening; rather, my interest lies in what I have previously construed as a deeper form of listening.⁶¹⁾ I should point out here that my use of the term 'deep listening' is different from that which has been explored in some depth by Pauline Oliveros.⁶²⁾ While Oliveros emphasizes a listening that is geographically broader and societally more profound, my conception is of a listening that has greater depth intra-personally; with hindsight, my writing about 'the ultimate luxury of the total human experience that for me is not internal or external but both - the ('omni-ternal'?!)' phenomenon of making music to which I am in that moment devoted' is probably better understood with reference to Shusterman's aforementioned work on aesthetic experience than through (mis-) appropriating 'deep listening'.

Don Ihde writes about 'sound beyond human hearing' when talking about vibrations that are too quiet to hear.⁶³⁾ This notion is helpful (although perhaps paradoxically), however, for considering aspects of how I experience sound and its production as I (rather loudly) play rock drums. Percussionist Evelyn Glennie lighted on this when she explored hearing and listening through different parts of the body, stating that 'hearing is a form of touch' and that we 'hear through the body'.⁶⁴⁾ Nancy tentatively positions the type of somatic knowledge that I seek as existing 'between a sense (that one listens to) and a truth (that one understands), although one cannot ... do without the other'.⁶⁵⁾

I tried previously to articulate this, in the context of working with a blues-rock band, as follows:

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. The loop is also inter-personal, and how I wish it could be every time I play. I find it frustrating when I (or we) cannot achieve this sense of oneness, of total submersion, for whatever reason.⁶⁶⁾

Nancy affirms that ‘the sonorous [is] tendentially methexic (that is, having to do with participation, sharing, or contagion’, and for me this experience of the sonorous is greatly heightened through simultaneously and collaboratively creating that which is experienced.⁶⁷⁾ There really is nothing like a mutual groove, greater than the sum of its parts.⁶⁸⁾ Nancy further asks how it is that sound has ‘a capacity to affect us, which is like nothing else, and is very different from what has to do with the visual and with touch?’⁶⁹⁾ In the context of rock drumming, sound and touch are – as Glennie also identifies – not so distinct, but are bound up through perception as indistinguishable, or aspects of the same phenomenal experience. When I strike my drums, the hearing and feeling are experienced as two parts of the same sense – each is necessary to me for the other to feel real.

Immediate presence

When rocking out with a band all playing at an appropriately loud volume (size of sound), I cannot usually hear the bass drum unless it is also played back to me through monitors; I do not trust the sensation of playing the drum unless I also hear it simultaneously; the low frequencies of the bass drum in fold-back are also experienced as feeling as much as they are heard as sound. Nancy explains a crucial part of this phenomenon, noting ‘sensing ... is always a perception [*ressentir*], that is, a feeling-oneself-feel [*se-sentir-sentir*].’⁷⁰⁾ As Salomé Voegelin explains, ‘sound ... is its immediate sensibility’ – ‘the aesthetic moment is the now in which sensation meets perception’.⁷¹⁾ As Lori Custodero observes, ‘feedback is immediate ... we can feel music in our bodies as we perform and listen to it ... Action and awareness merge ... doing and thinking are fused together and we can be fully present in the moment of musical creation’.⁷²⁾ When I am drumming, this feeling in my body, and the conscious, embodied knowledge that I am core to the band creating and perpetuating the sound that I hear and feel around me, compel me to continue making the music, making and luxuriating in the perpetual now. This immediate (unmediated) knowledge that there is no time to articulate in the moment, and that can only be comprehended in performance and by playing the drums, is what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘another type of intelligibility’ in which ‘consciousness derive[s] its clarity from sensation.’⁷³⁾

Regarding subjective experience of the temporal, Nancy observes what he terms ‘sonorous time’:

Sonorous time takes place immediately according to a completely different dimension, which is not that of simple succession ... It is a present in waves on a swell, not in a point on a line; it is a time that opens up, that is hollowed out, that

is enlarged or ramified ... that stretches out or contracts.⁷⁴⁾

In a similar vein, Ihde observes how 'sound dances timefully within experience. Sound embodies the sense of time'.⁷⁵⁾ In grappling with this ineffable, yet tangible experience(ing) of sound in time, Voegelin writes of 'the complexity of a timespace moment' and 'the sonic now' which are experienced as 'an expansion of experience in timespace'.⁷⁶⁾ She also refers to the 'fleeting permanence' that is familiar to so many musicians - that altered perception of time passing that is part of successful music performance (in concert or in rehearsal).⁷⁷⁾ All of these evocative, poetic phrases help to convey elements of my aesthetic experience in rock drumming. It is immersive, submersive, consuming, and continues only as long as I, with the musicians around me, keep creating the sound as I feel it and as I feel myself feeling it.

Diary excerpt no. 5 (playing the show, 31 August 2016)

The first song, 'Let me take you higher', feels like a solid ensemble performance, and the rest of the set bodes well. The cowbell is moving away from me; I'll fix it later. After my count and fill into 'Croydon boys', both the bassist and the guitarist miss the start. This knocks me off balance - the song feels rushed and unsettled throughout: is that my adrenaline and irritation, or the actual tempo fluctuating? 'Devil Devil' feels more confident, although I over-analyse every note and phrase, unable, as a result, to get into it. The bassist begins 'She's So Easy', but I need to fix the bass drum pedal that has slid unhelpfully across the floor. I signal the guys to continue and the guitarist starts noodling over the bass line. The song eventually goes all right - we nail a decent shuffle groove in places, then the singer loses the structure completely! I try to signal the end by diminuendo-ing dramatically, then he comes in belting a chorus, the guitarist cranks up again and I follow. When we finally stop, the ending is tight enough but we are in danger of overrunning our time. 'Lights' feels good till I misinterpret the end of the guitar solo (dammit!), although the bassist catches me in less than a beat, nearly disguising the mistake. The intro to 'Rock star' is tight, loud and aggressive, and I am especially pleased with my execution of the guitar 'stabs' ornamented by my bass drum, floor tom and snare drum flourish. This song flows and I finally start to experience the feelings and sensations I crave. 'V1' feels very grooving indeed as the triplet bass-and-drums pattern rumbles the room! I stumble on some fills because I allow myself to start thinking, and consciousness gets in the way again at the end, in the very last few notes where I rush the

footwork and end up with my feet finishing just ahead of my hands. I scream internally, as I worked so hard to get that just right. I knew I needed to relax! 'Ready for Action' follows the previous two songs by proceeding with speed and intent (I even remember to reposition the cowbell). I finally feel my body relaxing through the home straight of the set. The double-bass-pedal fills with the bass guitar are spot-on, and it feels like the music is working. 'Runner', the closer, canters along well, feeling powerful and tight. My double-tempo section at the end with double pedals works fine, I think, although it feels different from every other occasion I've played it, like my feet try to run away from me, but I just manage to rein them in. Something has happened to loosen the hi-hat mid-song so I lose definition and nuance by the end: a minor frustration, but still irritating.

Immediately following the gig I am struck by the depth of emotion that performances bring out in me. I feel despondent on account of a combination of factors impinging on my ability to focus on the 'now' of the performance and to allow the aesthetic experience to happen. Before we started playing, the singer was unhappy about taking ages to park his car (at some expense) and the guitarist disliked his sound throughout. The sound guy was late to our sound-check, leaving us insufficient time to gauge the room and get settled. I didn't much feel like I had the opportunity to just enjoy the rock like I did in rehearsals. The show was mostly good in places, though; the Texas shuffle in the 'She's So Easy' guitar solo worked great; my tom fills in 'V1' were really satisfying; the trickier rhythms in 'Devil Devil' and 'Lights' flowed along great. 'Rock star' felt possibly the best, but the hi-hat work wasn't as clean as I'd hoped for and know I can easily produce. I am an emotional wreck by the end.

While falling short in curating ideal 'timespace moments' for me, this gig exemplified much of the complexity of my experience of performing at the drums. Performing the material felt somewhat unfamiliar; the band had to forego a full sound-check; we made mistakes that triggered in me some anxiety; I was unable to silence the voice of my inner critic and *just be* in the music - overall, V1 needs to grow more familiar with playing concerts together. Such experiences are typical in my drumming life, and the magnificent, awesome, mutual deep groove was in sight, albeit this time just out of reach. We were close, though, and I expect we'll get even closer the next time.

Discussion: Towards meaningful experience

Daniel Wegner notes that 'each human mind is carried around, serviced, and ultimately constrained by an elegant sack of meat, a body ... The body will announce itself ... the body cannot be overlooked.'⁷⁸⁾ Following Merleau-Ponty's assertions regarding the primacy of embodied understanding it seems appropriate to underline the inherent difficulty - contradiction, even, or irony - in using such an inadequate medium as text to argue for the importance of recognizing and privileging embodied knowledge and understanding. As Maxine Sheets-Johnstone notes, language is problematic as a means for coping with 'dynamic events experienced in a directly felt sense by sentient living bodies', in part because 'we experience the world and ourselves in wordless ways before we come to language our experience'.⁷⁹⁾ Sheets-Johnstone reassuringly advises, then, that in order to negotiate this tricky issue, there is a 'need to experience it in person, turning attention to experience itself, acknowledging and in turn examining what is there'; that, indeed, was the purpose of this study.⁸⁰⁾ Her words echo Shusterman's aforementioned emphasis on somaesthetics being both theory and practice, and recall Dewey's wisdom regarding the unity of body and mind.⁸¹⁾ While in rehearsals I experienced that unity, the personal and external circumstances of the show did not permit this experience to triumph. In terms of Shusterman's attributes of 'aesthetic experience', the show was 'vividly felt', although not really 'savoured'; it was 'enjoyable' up to a point, but this pleasure mostly was eclipsed by anxiety; and it was certainly meaningful to me beyond 'mere sensation'.⁸²⁾

Damasio (a neuroscientist) argues that what I have discussed in this article as embodied knowledge is necessarily 'known' in our brains, albeit unconsciously.⁸³⁾ He understands feelings as internal, private experience of emotions, and suggests evocatively, 'it is possible that feelings are poised at the very threshold that separates being from knowing and thus have a privileged connection to consciousness'.⁸⁴⁾ This proposed privileged connection may help to explain why drumming can feel so great when I'm doing it well, and how - when the experience is less terrific than anticipated - it can be so completely soul-destroying. For Damasio, though, however integral and valuable we may consider feelings to be,

This component [is] sandwiched between the basic survival kit (e.g. regulation of metabolism; simple reflexes; motivations; biology of pain and pleasure) and the devices of high reason ... For less-complicated species than humans, and for absentminded humans as well, emotions actually produced quite reasonable behaviours from the point of view of survival.⁸⁵⁾

One can see how this view, by placing my rock drumming at primarily a somatic level – as, to a degree, I am doing – arguably lends support to the somewhat patronizing stereotype of a drummer as being less sophisticated and less musical than other musicians (in Damasio’s terms a less-complicated species!) and resulting in widespread use of drummer jokes, their assumed implicit truths, and associated other tropes in media and employment/labour practices.⁸⁶⁾ The most salient and intriguing aspect of Damasio’s thinking for this project is thus how work such as the present study operates at the very brink of consciousness, between and traversing the membrane of consciousness that lies between feelings (derived from emotions) and higher reasoning.⁸⁷⁾ Damasio, then, endorses my presentation of drumming as a possible (and, in my case at least, successful) route to erasure of the unhelpful, even symbolically violent body/mind split that has plagued Western philosophy for centuries. Rock drumming as a route to holistic body consciousness allows me to experience being fully human.

Conclusions and implications

This paper described the music-making experience of a competent performer who enjoys making music – such are the vast majority of musicians playing in popular styles.⁸⁸⁾ In lieu of economic value in music, I have dealt with value in ways that are more universal and thus, I hope, more deeply meaningful to more people – somatic experience and ethics of the self(ish). Rather than being merely a self-indulgent navel-gazing exercise, this study might prove relevant and useful inasmuch as it has to a degree 1) addressed the dearth of performance focus in popular music studies, 2) redressed the continued absence of the body and bodily experience from music and music education discourse, and 3) positioned enjoyment, pleasure and eudaimonia (back) at the heart of an understanding of what music making is for. I hope, therefore, that this essay may shed light on or open conceptual doors to framing and understanding the experience and knowledge of others.

Potential avenues for further research include studying more musicians, other artists, those engaged in sporting activity, or anyone for whom somatic knowledge is (or could be) vital to understanding the essence of experience; autoethnographic writing has a very powerful role to play in such work. I also see this project appealing to those who work towards achieving a more democratic (music) education for all,⁸⁹⁾ and resonating with colleagues who seek to create and curate musicking experiences as acts of hospitality;⁹⁰⁾ the primary value in this paper lies in leading towards ‘greater attention [being paid] to the concept of aesthetic experience ... reminding us of what is worth seeking in art and elsewhere in life’.⁹¹⁾

Affirming the significance of this view in application to music performance (and higher music education), Dan Sagiv and Clare Hall assert, ‘there is no substitute for the body

aiming at the creation of its own conscious aesthetics' – somatic experience must not be overlooked.⁹²⁾ Winter explains the significance of looking, sensing, outwards from the self, urging, 'the transcendent is not out there, but within each of us – in our capacity to experience the depths of our awareness of our own selves and the form of our empathetic connectedness with the selves of others – our inter-subjectivity'.⁹³⁾ In a world becoming increasingly divided and divisive as diverse mainstream media constantly reinforce messages of individualism and isolationism at the expense of society and community rarely, if ever, has Winter's advice been more pertinent.⁹⁴⁾

I agree with Ellen Dissanayake, who tells us that experience and knowledge in art have:

The power to grasp us utterly and transport us from ordinary sweating, flailing, imperfect 'reality' to an indescribable realm where we know and seem known by the sensibility of another, united in a continuing present, our usual isolation momentarily effaced. And in such states, we recognize that *this* is the reality, and ordinary reality is only an illusion.⁹⁵⁾

This, indeed, is why I keep playing the drums.

Endnotes

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