



ISSN: 1893-9562

DOI: 10.32063/1012

In search of my voice

Mikael Bäckman

Mikael Bäckman is a harmonica player active mostly in the field of country music and blues. He performs with his two bands John Henry, www.johnhenry.nu and Ramblin' Minds. Mikael is currently working on his PhD in Musical Performance at the School of Music in Piteå, Luleå University of Technology, where he also teaches harmonica, music history and ensemble playing.

Introduction

In my ongoing PhD project, I examine how to transform a performer's voice through a process of transcription and imitation. I aim to immerse myself in the tradition, or practice, of country harmonica playing by imitating the iconic Charlie McCoy. In the traditions of both country music and the blues, it is commonplace to learn the language of a musical style by transcribing solos of artists you admire. It is implied in these traditions that the transcriptions should not end with merely reproducing the recordings, but rather that the transcriptions should be used as a vehicle towards the creation of your own personal voice.¹ But how does one achieve that?

In this article I present a way of finding a personal voice based on transcription of recordings. I wanted to examine how this would work for me: would I actually be able to transform my own voice in a significant way? I use the term 'transform' my voice since I had played the harmonica for approximately 30 years when I started the project. The method I developed aimed to find out who I am, and more importantly, who I want to be as a harmonica player.

¹ Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 95–119.

The audio paper

<https://soundcloud.com/music-practice-2/audio-paper-mikael-backman/s-J60KVuWS5sF>

Audio 1. Audio paper presenting musical examples and discussing how Charlie McCoy developed his idiolect. <https://soundcloud.com/music-practice-2/audio-paper-mikael-backman/s-J60KVuWS5sF>

This audio paper (Audio 1) is a part of my ongoing PhD project, where I examine the transformation of my own voice.² Much of what is touched upon here will be further developed in my thesis. In the audio-paper, I present how Charlie McCoy developed his idiolect while working as a session player in Nashville during the 1960s and 1970s. This is presented in McCoy's own words, in the words of his peers and through musical examples. The musical examples are all performed by me. Towards the end of the audio paper, I show the beginnings of my own voice-transformation, inspired by McCoy's idiolect, and further encouraged by interviews with harmonica-players Buddy Greene and Mike Caldwell.

Throughout this article, I refer occasionally to clips from recordings appearing in the audio paper (Audio 1).

Idiolect and voice

In this section I seek to define two concepts which are both central to my research: 'idiolect' and 'voice'. As we will see, the two concepts have many similarities, and by defining them more closely I will also explain how they each function in my project. I start out with voice, which Gorton and Östersjö define as 'a manifestation of the artistic identities of musicians'.³ The authors also state that 'A musician's voice, then, emerges from the interplay between the affordances of an instrument, one's habitus, and the natural body'.⁴ The concept of voice is thus personal, subjective, and embodied, but it also builds on a combination of the perspectives of embodied music cognition⁵ and the sociocultural context in which habitus is shaped. Voice is a multifarious concept which contains all the aspects of a musician, what makes an artist

² The audio paper and its transcription have previously been published in the Research Catalogue <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-exposition?exposition=1368800>

³ David Gorton and Stefan Östersjö, 'Austerity Measure I: Performing The Discursive Voice', in Catherine Laws, William Brooks, David Gorton, Nguyen Thanh Thuy, Stefan Östersjö and Jeremy J. Wells, *Voices, Bodies, Practices: Performing Musical Subjectivities* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), 36.

⁴ David Gorton and Stefan Östersjö, 'Choose Your Own Adventure Music: On the Emergence of Voice in Musical Collaboration', *Contemporary Music Review* 35/6 (2016), 579–98.

⁵ Embodied music cognition is a research paradigm that argues that 'bodily involvement is crucial in human interaction with music, and therefore, also in our understanding of that interaction'. Marc Leman et al, 'What is Embodied Music Cognition?', *Springer Handbook of Systematic Musicology*, ed. Rolf Bader (Berlin: Springer, 2017), 747–60.

unique.⁶ Gorton and Östersjö also argue that voice emerges ‘at levels that are largely beyond the verbal domain’.⁷ In order to study voice, with all the embodied knowledge it encompasses, one needs to consider both the body image and body schema. Body image – the perception we have of our own body – can be understood through introspection and reflection. The body schema, however, which involves our bodily habits and capacities, needs to be observed to be understood.⁸ Thus, voice can only be properly approached through a combination of perspectives; some types of knowledge are only available through a first-person perspective, therefore the need for introspectional methods. Other types require a third-person perspective, and require observational methods. Consequently, studying the voice of McCoy is beyond the scope of this paper, since it would demand a comprehensive documentation of his performance of a nature which is not presently available.

Idiolect, on the other hand, is a concept with a similar but more limited scope. Just like voice, idiolect operates on a level which, according to Allan Moore, is ‘conceived to be subsidiary to style’.⁹ He exemplifies this by stating that style can be geographical and historical, e.g., 1920’s Mississippi, but individual musicians such as the Beatles are better described using idiolect. Moore goes on to write that ‘key to the identification of idiolect is recognition of the normative practices of one or more musicians’.¹⁰ With Anwar Ibrahim, Moore writes that a musician’s idiolect ‘can only be properly approached through close attention to its recorded output’.¹¹ Importantly, from these accounts it is clear that a third person observational analysis of audio recordings would be sufficient data for a study of another performer’s idiolect. Furthermore, Moore writes that idiolect ‘refers to the individual stylistic fingerprints ... of a performer’.¹² That claim highlights two aspects of the concept: 1) no two idiolects (fingerprints) are identical and 2) to see clearly the fingerprints and their differences (or identify the features of an idiolect), one must study their traces closely. An idiolect can embrace many different aspects of performing; for a country harmonica player it can be the way they phrase swing, the tone they produce (your timbre), their choice of notes, choice of instruments and so on. All of these

⁶ Jonathan I. Goldman, *The Shape of Jazz Education to Come: How Jazz Musicians Develop A Unique Voice Within Academia* (MA thesis, McGill University, 2010). Naomi Cumming, *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000)

⁷ Gorton and Östersjö, ‘Choose Your Own Adventure Music’.

⁸ Gorton and Östersjö, ‘Austerity Measure I’, 36.

⁹ Allan F. Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 120.

¹⁰ Moore, *Song Means*, 167.

¹¹ Anwar Ibrahim and Alan Moore, ‘Identifying Radiohead’s Idiolect: The Music and Art of Radiohead’, in *Sounds Like Teen Spirit*, ed. Joseph Tate (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005).

¹² Moore, *Song Means*, 166.

aspects contribute to the uniqueness of any given idiolect. I can often detect the influence of McCoy in the playing of other country harmonica players. But I never confuse them with McCoy; there are always aspects of their idiolect which separates them from other harmonica players.

These two concepts, idiolect and voice, certainly overlap. They are both used to study what makes a performer unique, but I also find their differences useful for making a distinction between different stages of my artistic research project. In my study of McCoy's recordings, I adapt a third person perspective which is characteristic of the study of idiolect. However, in order to study my individual development, it is necessary to also involve introspection. Hence, it is possible to study another performer's idiolect through audio recordings, and I carry out such a study with the further aim of transforming my own voice.

In some genres, such as country music and blues, the use of pre-learned licks is important in establishing a performer's idiolect. In this project, I chose to study the licks and tactics found frequently on McCoy's recordings. By tactic, I mean something McCoy plays frequently that is not a precise lick, but rather a more general approach to be used in a specific situation, such as playing an ascending bebop dominant scale on the dominant chord. This part of an idiolect is sometimes referred to as *particular tendencies*,¹³ sometimes as *patterned choices*.¹⁴ Since McCoy has had so much influence on the way country harmonica is played today, studying his idiolect also gives me an insight into generic country harmonica playing. By immersing myself in the idiolect of an influential musician, I also learn about the conventions of how my instrument is performed within a specific context – in this case, how country music is played on the harmonica. Studying McCoy's idiolect informs me in what way, and how much, I can alter McCoy's licks while still remaining true to the conventions of the genre. In the words of Naomi Cumming, I am learning about 'the domain in which freedom of choice may be exercised and monitoring its degree'.¹⁵ Since I have spent so much time listening to McCoy's influential recordings, I intuitively know what is not only innovative, but also appropriate in my domain: country music.

¹³ Ibrahim and Moore, 'Sounds Like Teen Spirit', 141.

¹⁴ Cumming, *The Sonic Self*, 10.

¹⁵ Cumming, *The Sonic Self*, 39.

My working strategies

When I made my transcriptions, I mainly focused on learning to play the original harmonica parts along with the recordings. This is a process which requires purposive listening:¹⁶ very close listening in an attempt to appropriate McCoy's playing in my aural transcriptions. According to René Rusch and colleagues, 'aural transcription refers to the embodied process of learning and memorizing one or more parts of a recording by ear, and notated transcription to the process of selecting, augmenting, or creating visual symbols to represent sonic components perceived in the aural transcription'.¹⁷ Christophe de Bézenac and Rachel Swindells observe that 'for musicians operating outside of the Western classical tradition, recordings often constitute a type of aural score, a source from which material may be repeatedly studied and eventually reproduced'.¹⁸ I did, however, notate the transcriptions in order to enable an analysis of McCoy's idiolect. The purpose of this analysis was to find licks and tactics which McCoy frequently uses, what one might call his signature-licks. These signature-licks were to become the material I would use at a later stage when I set out to create licks of my own. The notation method I used is a form of tablature, which is instrument-specific and efficient.¹⁹ Since the aural score was already available to me in the form of the original recordings, there was no need to write a transcription with great detail. However, the details which are missing in the notated transcriptions do not go undetected, they are played by me in my aural transcriptions, and the embodied process is repeated when I play along with the recordings. There are most likely details in, and aspects of, McCoy's playing which are lost in translation in my aural transcriptions. Yet, every transcription is in a way a translation, a filtering of the original through a different medium. In every translation, there is something lost, but there is also potential for something to be gained.

The process described above, contains several steps and produces different types of knowledge. The aural transcriptions give me a tacit, embodied knowledge, and the written transcriptions enable an explicit knowledge which makes analysis possible. This process goes back and forth

¹⁶ Lucy Green, *How Popular Musicians Learn: A Way Ahead for Music Education* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002).

¹⁷ René Rusch, Keith Salley and Chris Stover, 'Capturing the Ineffable: Three Transcriptions of a Jazz Solo by Sonny Rollins', *Music Theory Online* 22/3 (2016), 5.

¹⁸ Christophe de Bézenac and Rachel Swindells, 'No Pain, No Gain? Motivation and Self-Regulation in Music Learning', *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 10/16 (2009), 17.

¹⁹ The tablature is efficient for me since it enables me to notate quickly and with sufficient detail. Examples of my transcriptions can be seen in the exhibition in Research Catalogue where my audio paper is published: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-exposition?exposition=1368800>.

between the different types of knowledge.²⁰ When I transcribe, I start by listening to a phrase and imitating it, then I write it down with tablature. This procedure is repeated until I have imitated and notated the entire recording, phrase by phrase. Next, I proceed to memorize larger units, at first guided by my tablature, but eventually playing by rote. This is repeated until I have put all the units together to a whole. In this process I am constantly going back and forth between the embodied, performative knowledge of playing, and the explicit knowledge of notating and reading tablature. The last step of the process is when I communicate my findings, then I transcribe the tablature to regular western staff notation.

The knowledge production described above is the foundation I needed to proceed with the next phase of my project, which was to create original material based on salient features of McCoy's idiolect. This is where my written transcriptions served me well. They provided me with a visual representation enabling me to search for similarities and differences in McCoy's playing, leading me to detect licks and tactics which McCoy utilizes frequently. These licks and phrases are, I would argue, an important part of McCoy's idiolect.

Verifying my analysis

After completing the transcriptions, I made an analysis of one particular aspect of McCoy's idiolect: his use of recurring licks and tactics. I found several licks that McCoy plays frequently, sometimes verbatim but most often with variations. When this analysis was completed, I wanted to verify it somehow. Were the licks and tactics I had chosen to highlight really those that were most salient in McCoy's idiolect? Had I missed something in my analysis? I decided to interview McCoy to see if he would agree with my findings. Since this interview took place during the pandemic, it was conducted over Zoom. The audio recordings of McCoy's voice which appear in the audio paper are taken from this interview. I set the interview up in a very practice-driven way, with my harmonica at hand. I played licks to him that he has recorded many times throughout his career. My hope was that he would recognize these and that we could discuss when and where he came up with these licks. McCoy was reluctant to discuss his music at such a micro-level, however. Perhaps this reluctance related to how he learned those licks:

When you learn these licks from a recording you have the possibility of rewinding and listening again and again. This is likely to reinforce the origin of the lick in your memory. McCoy, on the other hand, heard these licks fly by him all day in situations where he was focused on performing at a high level, i.e., doing his job. This, I would argue, is why he is now unable to

²⁰ See Stefan Östersjö, 'Art Worlds, Voice and Knowledge: Thoughts on Quality Assessment of Artistic Research Outcomes', *IMPAR Online Journal for Artistic Research* 2 (2019), 60–89.

point to exact references as to where he picked up different licks and ideas. He was simply marinated in first class country licks, all day long.²¹

McCoy was much keener to discuss his role as an ensemble player in the studios of Nashville during the heyday of the elite group of session players known as the Nashville A-team.²² During this conversation McCoy gave me many clues to how he developed his idiolect,²³ and in doing so, he explained where he found inspiration to his various licks.²⁴ This conversation did not do much to validate my analysis of my transcriptions, however, so in order to achieve that I also interviewed Buddy Greene and Mike Caldwell, both well-established country-harmonica players. In those interviews, which I again set up in a musical way, they both responded with enthusiasm to the licks I played, and we were able to discuss McCoy's idiolect on a more harmonica-specific level. After these interviews were made and my analysis of McCoy's idiolect was confirmed by Caldwell and Greene, it was time to start spending more time with my instrument.

Embodying the transcriptions

When my written transcriptions of McCoy's recordings were completed, I started the process of learning to play the original harmonica parts along with the recordings. McCoy's playing style differs from mine in several respects. Firstly, I play in an embouchure which is known as tongue-blocking: in order to play a single note on the harmonica, I open my mouth to cover three holes of the instrument and place my tongue on the left side of my mouth, covering all holes but the one in the right corner of my mouth. Though McCoy sometimes play with a tongue-block embouchure, he mainly plays with what is known as a pucker style embouchure. In a pucker embouchure, you simply reduce the opening of your mouth to correspond to the size of one hole on the harmonica, much like how you shape your mouth when you whistle. These two embouchures arguably produce different tones, but when McCoy played both embouchures to me during the interview, I had a hard time telling which was which. When I played alongside the original recordings, I did not attempt to adapt my embouchure, I played tongue-block the whole time. I did not strive to mimic McCoy's tone, but rather the notes he

²¹ Mikael Bäckman, 'The Real McCoy: Tracking the Development of Charlie McCoy's Playing Style', *International Country Music Journal* (2022). The journal may be accessed at <https://www.internationalcountrymusic.org/icmc-journal>.

²² See audio-paper at 04.50.

²³ For a more in-depth analysis of the development of McCoy's idiolect, see Bäckman, 'The Real McCoy'.

²⁴ See audio-paper at 09.48. McCoy points to various instruments he is inspired by such as the fiddle (12.16), the steel-guitar (12.56) and the guitar (13.20).

played and how he phrased them. The tone a harmonica player produces is perhaps the most personal and significant feature of his or her idiolect. This is in part due to that the tone is substantially affected by the size and shape of the player's vocal tract. Since my vocal tract is obviously different from McCoy's, it was an easy choice not to try to mimic McCoy's tone. In the words of Barthes, perhaps one could say I was engaging with McCoy's pheno-song but protecting my own geno-song.²⁵

Another difficulty I encountered when playing along with the original recordings was that on several occasions, the tempo of the track is quite fast. When I started to practise these fast tracks, I was at first unable to play as fast as McCoy. The solution to this problem was to adapt my technique to the way McCoy, as well as Buddy Greene and Mike Caldwell, play fast passages. They all move their jaw instead of their hands (i.e. moving the harmonica) when they alternate from one hole to another. It took some time to learn this new technique, but when I had mastered it, I was able to play as fast as McCoy.

Lick generation process

The transcriptions and interviews described above were of paramount importance for this project, but they were only the first step of my journey towards a new voice. My goal, after all, was not to become a clone of Charlie McCoy, but rather to make my own voice more distinct and original. Therefore, the next step in my process was to generate new licks, based on my favourite McCoy licks and tactics.²⁶ The method I used was to focus on a single McCoy lick or tactic, play that lick over and over until I heard, by audiation or inner hearing, a different way of playing that lick. One might describe it as a different solution to a musical problem; in other words, if McCoy turns right, what would happen if I turn left? The first variations were naturally quite similar to McCoy's original lick, but as I continued to create new variations, the licks gradually became more original. This is an interesting development; first I am playing McCoy's lick, then as I change it, it is no longer McCoy's lick, but it is not quite mine either. The lick is in a liminal state, not owned by McCoy, but not yet sufficiently altered to be regarded as my lick. As the process moves along, the lick gradually becomes mine, I assume ownership. On the other hand, as argued by Benson, ownership of a lick cannot be claimed until the lick is recorded. When the lick is recorded, and ownership thus established, it simultaneously becomes public property: 'fixing of the lick by way of recording opens up new

²⁵ Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 179–89.

²⁶ See audio-paper at 14.18.

possibilities of transforming the lick'.²⁷ In other words, it enables someone like me to transcribe the lick, and then alter it enough to claim it a new lick, with a new owner, once it is recorded that is. I am yet to record my new licks, they are now in the early stages of contextualization, as I play them in rehearsals and concerts with my band. However, these concerts are sometimes documented by an audience member, then uploaded to YouTube. This is a type of documentation and dissemination which today generates a much wider spread than an actual recording in a proper recording studio. In that respect, a number of these new licks are already 'owned' by me, and therefore open for any musician to transcribe, transform and transfer ownership.

Results

The main outcome of my project is one of self-discovery: I found out who I am as an artist, and more importantly, who I want to be. The road to find myself was, paradoxically, to study McCoy's idiolect slavishly. Through my analysis of the salient features in my Charlie McCoy transcriptions, and especially through the process of learning to play these transcriptions, I became very aware of which parts of McCoy's idiolect I enjoyed playing the most. Certain licks and tactics which he employs frequently were not so appealing to me when I played them myself, whereas other licks and tactics I just could not get enough of, and this was the material I decided to build upon. I also found out, through the interviews, what has already been explored in my field, and, more importantly, what is relatively unexplored. The method of combining transcriptions, learning to play them, analysis of the transcriptions, as well as interviews concerning these transcriptions, provided me with a state of the art of country harmonica playing.

This method has enabled me to study an artistic practice, using it as a springboard to develop my own voice. The transcriptions can be seen as a reconstruction of country harmonica playing in the 1960s and 70s, leading not only to a creative further development of my voice, but also a contribution to the evolving tradition of country harmonica playing.

Conclusion

The method I have used has created a sense of agency for me in country harmonica playing. Through my many hours spent transcribing and practicing McCoy's solos a profound embodied knowledge of country harmonica playing has emerged. This embodied knowledge has guided

²⁷ Bruce Ellis Benson, 'Stealing Licks: Recording and Identity in Jazz', *Recorded Music: Philosophical and Critical Reflections*, ed. Mine Dogantan-Dack (London: Middlesex University Press, 2008), 137.

me in my creative process, I tacitly knew how to make my new licks sound traditional yet at the same time innovative. I have studied a practice, aiming to embody the idiolect of McCoy, not with the aim of being a skilled copy-cat, but rather to step further into the world of country harmonica playing and to solidify myself as a fellow practitioner in the practice I share with McCoy. In other words, my study provided me with agency in my art-world, with a voice of my own. This is, of course, an ongoing journey. I can identify the beginning of this particular project, but I suspect, and sincerely hope, that it will never end. I have initiated a process which is likely to affect my performing for the rest of my career.

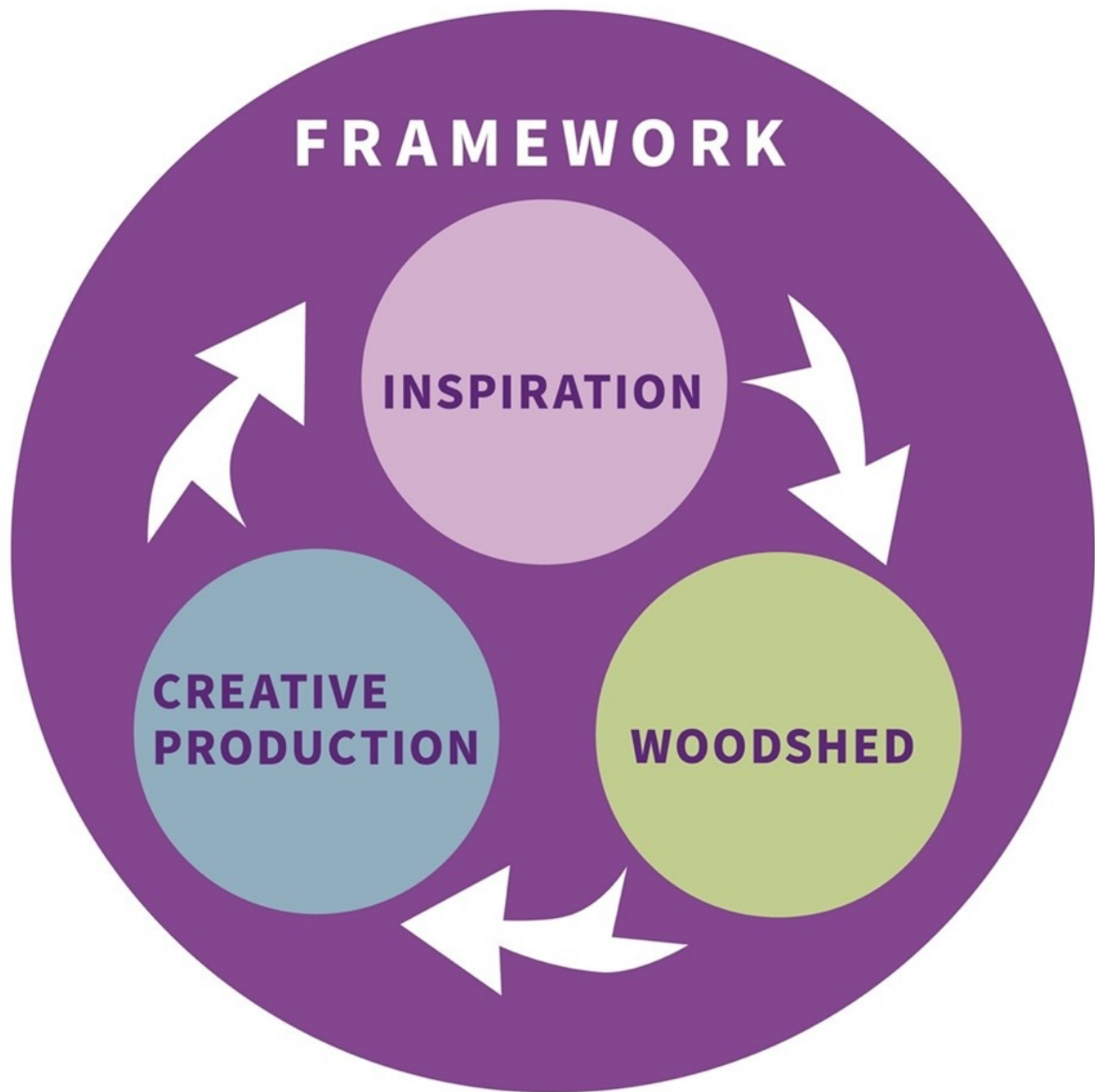


Figure 1. The four main ingredients of my artistic method. Illustration by Ulrika Weinz.

The importance of my method, and its applicability to others, lies not in its specifics, but rather in the general ingredients. I view this process as having three stages, see Figure 1. All three stages are encapsulated by the *framework*. The framework is the context of one's artistic experience, the art world where it will take place.²⁸ In my project, the framework is, broadly speaking, country music. This is the framework McCoy is situated in on the recordings I transcribed. It is also the framework within which I apply my new, transformed voice, with my band John Henry. The first stage within the framework, *source of inspiration*, is what ignites the entire process. In my case, it was the harmonica playing of Charlie McCoy, and my choice to let his recordings inspire me. The second stage is what I call *the woodshed*. This is where the hard work is done, in my case; transcribing and then learning to play those transcriptions. Many hours are spent in the woodshed, this is where you develop as a musician. The woodshed takes place inside the framework, but it is a reciprocal relationship. The woodshed also shapes and informs the framework as work progresses. Hence, the framework scaffolds the woodshed, and the knowledge gained through working in the woodshed solidifies the framework. This framework is crucial in the method, in a way similar to how tennis is so much more enjoyable, and challenging, with a net and lines drawn in the tarmac.

This intensive idiolect-study inspired me to want to follow in McCoy's footsteps, to carve out an immediately identifiable voice for myself, just as he did in the late 1960s. This is where the last stage arrives, the actual creative process, the *creative production*. This is where the artistic material which will be applied in the chosen and defined framework is produced. Charlie McCoy is the source of inspiration for this project, but the inspiration that leads to the creative production stems from the many hours spent in the woodshed part of the model. Inspiration does not arrive, it has to be worked for. Action draws out inspiration.

²⁸ Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).