

Informal Music Making

One of the interesting things to come out of the Musical Futures and Music Manifesto documents is the idea of informal music, that is, 'what happens when young people organise and lead themselves without adult supervision'. Trevor Mason, Youth Music's Regional Co-ordinator for London, describes how that happens in London.

The idea that many musicians have taught themselves by watching and imitating musicians around them, rather than more traditional methods, is worthy of further investigation. But while we're talking about definitions perhaps its useful to consider Andrew Peggie's take on what he has called 'rough music' in his treatise 'Tuning Up': 'direct, noisy, energetic, sentimental, quickly assembled and usually transmitted orally... [which] invites participation and instant gratification, perhaps at the expense of sophistication' (Peggie, 2002, p. 19). This definition perhaps better captures the aesthetic and emotional aspects of informal music. What is rarely discussed, however, is where informal music takes place, which is interest to those who work in music education.

Of course, the traditional teaching methods, including those used by community musicians, are pretty well-known and acknowledged. The pathways beaten down by Kathryn Deane et al to both the front and back doors of policy makers have been tarmacked to bring a more equitable employment culture between formal and non-formal musicians. But who speaks up for informal

music-makers? Lucy Green has done some good work in this area, likening informal music to popular music practices. Popular musicians largely teach themselves or



'pick up' skills and knowledge, usually with the help or encouragement of their family and peers, by watching and imitating musicians around them and by making reference to recordings or performances and other live events involving their chosen music. Do you recognise yourself?

Research carried out in July 2005 by *The Observer* newspaper which published the results in *What is Britain listening to?* (a), found more than one in four Britons play

a musical instrument and among those aged 16-24 years, this figure rises to 44%. This music is likely to be based around an axis of guitar and piano/keyboards, as these are the most played instruments. Similarly, in October 2005 a *YouGov* survey (b) found 85% of Britons learned to play an instrument as a young person but only 22% have continued. As we know, 92% of children and young people nationally drop music-making at aged 14 at school, but where, little more than two years later, do they begin to pick up an instrument?



It is clear where formal and non-formal music-making happens. Both have distinct settings which some may argue may influence to an extent the pedagogy and music genre. Keith Negus,

however, provides an eloquent insight in his book *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* that suggests how we organise ourselves influences the music we make: '...musical sounds and meanings are not only dependent upon the way an industry is producing culture, but are also shaped by the way in which culture is producing an industry' (Negus, 1999, p. 13). If this is the case, is there a need for public intervention to support and develop equitable access to informal music-making opportunities as there tends to be in the formal and non-formal sectors? With a greater emphasis on participation more than ever before, underpinned by a political will for the democratisation of culture through public policy (see *Every Child Matters* and *Youth Matters*), funding schemes (Big Lottery Fund) and regeneration initiatives (Olympics 2012, Thames Gateway), one wonders if there is a greater need to understand how informal music could help deliver some of the priorities handed down to us from on high?

As part of an MA thesis I decided to look at the informal music sector in London and initially had trouble identifying it. This work aimed to explore the

definitions and provenance of informal music, particularly in a group music-making context, rather than private and informal self-learning. But to start with – where does informal group music-making take place?

I set up a focus group of professionals working in music education in London and asked them to give examples of where they had seen informal music take place. They came up with the following:

- youth clubs, community settings
- rehearsal studios
- workshop session/jam
- living rooms and garages... - commercial rehearsal room
- Rehearsal rooms, recording studios, bedrooms, garages, - schools, youth centres, back rooms
- pubs... common room or bar
- garages/garden sheds /bedrooms
- school facilities outside of school hours
- premises
- A jam session, at home, or a street parade...
- at school and in youth centres or at each other's houses

The most commonly sited physical spaces were in the home (6) followed by a youth club or community setting (5), rehearsal studio (4), garage (3), school (3), pub/jam (3) and recording studio (1). I also made a quick trawl through websites, publications and reports which suggested there are six

categories of music spaces where informal music happens:

Categories of music spaces:

Performance venues with learning and participation spaces eg The Sage Gateshead
 Community music spaces eg Margate's Pie Factory
 LEA Music Service & school music learning spaces eg Kent Music's Astley House
 Commercial training facilities eg London School of Contemporary Music
 Commercial rehearsal and practice rooms
 FE/HE and conservatoires' practice rooms

There are many existing models of professionally equipped music spaces in the public sector attached to concert halls, arts centres, conservatoires, FE & HE colleges, youth centres, schools, music centres, etc, ostensibly attached to a pedagogical approach to what the *Music Manifesto* describes as formal and non-formal music-making. Public access can also be limited. This raises the question about the variety of rehearsal and production settings where informal music-making takes place. The amateur and mainly private informal music sector is invariably characterised by the back rooms of pubs, homes and garages which remain unsuitable, poorly equipped and inaccessible, possibly with the added annoyance of any number of the following:

- Environmental complaints from nearby residents of noise pollution
- Bad parking
- No storage facilities
- Cold, draughty and damp
- Dangerous electrics, poor

lighting and bad fire precautions

- Poor acoustics
- No refreshments
- An atmosphere at odds with fostering talent
- Poor access to networking, training and progression routes to develop skills
- Sense of isolation and limited opportunities for social and business exchange

Definition of a music rehearsal space

A music space is a dedicated acoustic environment. This can be defined in terms of its purpose and layout, its acoustics and treatments used to modify them, and its furnishings. This space is designed to keep sound inside and often has a PA system and microphones.

Music spaces vary according to the economic needs and the size of the community they serve, and to their system of financing. Some must necessarily be for general (and perhaps limited) purposes, whereas others may specialise.

The cost of running music rehearsal spaces is such that their number can be supported by any given population is limited. With a smaller population it may be difficult to sustain this number: there may be only two rehearsal rooms or even one, jeopardising its very survival.

Adapted from Alec Nisbett's *Sound Studios*, 1995 (Focal Press)

Schools have for a long time played a major role in the development of informal

musicians through the provision of resources such as rehearsal spaces and instruments, formal and informal performance opportunities and, most particularly, large numbers of young people with shared musical interests. But Lucy Green has argued in her book *How Popular Musicians Learn* "...this input by the school traditionally occurred almost entirely outside the classroom ...largely unsupervised and often flew in the face of the music department's ethos" (Green, 2001, p. 146). I decided therefore to look at the commercial music rehearsal sector in London due to my assumption that better equipped and larger rehearsal rooms will be located in major cities where much informal music takes place.

I found a total of 47 music rehearsal organisations with a pre-booking facility available to music-makers within the 33 boroughs of London. I also found:

- These largely function as independent business units, some subsumed within the activities of other businesses
- Many are small and medium-sized businesses, in some cases struggling to survive
- Competition is probably intense, and with the likelihood that most are constituted as sole traders
- There was a total of 196 individual professional rehearsal rooms in London in July 2006 ranging from 2 to 14 spaces per music rehearsal organisation
- Hourly rates by average ranged from £5 at Abbey Music Studios to £30 at English National Opera's Rehearsal Studios giving a

mean hourly rate to hire a music rehearsal space in London at £10

- Not all music rehearsal organisations work at full capacity, although some rooms are hired permanently to record companies for use by their artists
- A steady increase in their number since 1976 at a rate of nearly 3 new organisations established every two years, not accounting, of course, for the number that ceased trading during this period
- An annual number of individual visits to London music rehearsal organisations of 380,000 (of course many are repeat visits)
- The demand for the traditional recording studio space has waned with the advent of affordable home computers and accessible software where the end product can be written, played, recorded and mixed for as little as £2.50 in a fully equipped bedroom/garage
- Such facilities tend to be concentrated in more deprived areas

All music rehearsal organisations offered variable hire rates according to what was provided (although not all provided all of them) based on the following:

- Size of room
- Time of day
- Weekday or weekend
- Block-booking discounts
- Whether equipment - and/or instruments were supplied/hired
- Some had a technical employee on hand

Unwittingly, music rehearsal organisations are

concerned with talent development.

Case Study : Keith Negus

A number of us had made the transition from back rooms and bedrooms to performing regularly in pubs, community centres, youth clubs, parties and then more recognised venues. I had become a participant member of a passionate, competitive yet convivial and somewhat idiosyncratic music scene.... After stints in numerous bands, I ended up performing with the lesser known and more embarrassingly named Coconut Dogs, who released a couple of singles and played numerous clubs, bars and provincial venues before sinking into ever deeper obscurity.

Keith Negus in Music Genres and Corporate Culture, 1999

As most of these companies are small, their overall economic significance goes unnoticed, over-shadowed by the massive economic force



of the corporate record companies. But the cost to hire such a space is completely beyond most teenagers' pockets. Once a group has found a satisfactory and affordable rehearsal space they are perhaps likely to make a regular booking

(perhaps taking up a block booking discount scheme). This is also good practice as regular rehearsals disciplines the music-makers before performing live. Indeed, money earned from performing will go towards paying to hire a rehearsal space. Of course, groups who play together for any length of time find a group style and empathy. Playing music of one's choice, with which one identifies personally, with like-minded friends, and having fun doing it must be a high priority in the quest for increasing numbers of young people to make music meaningful, worthwhile and participatory.

It would be misleading to think such musicians are 'outside' or independent of the music business, or that they are only tenuously connected through their consumption and appropriation of various products (instruments, amplifiers, recordings, etc.). Clearly, amateur or voluntary musicians involved in music-making on an informal basis contribute to the wider music industry.

However, the education needs of informal musicians may require different patterns of organisation. While there may be 'grown-up'

commercially-run rehearsal spaces in urban areas, this research indicates they do not however run structured training, outreach or strategic inclusion projects.

Should policy makers make a

similar intervention to informal music to the extent they do with formal and non-formal music sectors when the products of its practice adds so much to the UK economy? Making spaces for informal music-making within the community has far reaching implications for social and cultural policies.

Making such connections between school life and the community has the potential to make explicit equitable routes by which true talent can navigate to wider audiences. By better understanding how informal music-making works will at least legitimise a rewarding pastime if nothing else. But don't take it from me, listen to Andrew Davies, Minister for Economic Development in Wales, who said: 'These rehearsal rooms represent the beginnings of a Music Hub; not only providing a place for musicians to interact and exchange creative ideas, but generating considerable benefit for the local music scene and the local economy (c).

References:

- (a) <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/omm/story/0,13887,1528542,00.html>
- (b) www.mia.org.uk/features/index.cfm?featureid=80
- (c) www.culture.gov.uk/global/press_notices/archive_2006/dcms012_06.htm