

Musical life stories: coherence through musicking in the prison setting

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Abstract

Despite the strong relationships evidenced between music and identity little research exists into the significance of music in prisoners' shifting sense of identity. This article explores musicking as part of the ongoing identity work of prisoners in light of theory on musical performance, narrative and desistance and discusses implications for penal practice and research. Through the presentation of an ethnographic study of music therapy in a low security Norwegian prison we show how participation in music activities afforded congruence between the past, the present and the projected future for participants by way of their unfolding musical life stories. Complementing existing conceptualisations of music as an agent for change, our study suggests that musicking afforded the maintenance of a coherent sense of self for participating prison inmates, whilst offering opportunities for noncoercive personal development. We argue that research into musicking in prison offers fruitful ways of tracing how the complexities inherent in processes of change are enacted in everyday prison life, and that it can advance our knowledge of relationships between culture, penal practice and desistance.

Keywords

Cultural criminology, desistance, music and identity, musical life stories, music therapy, prison ethnography

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Introduction

Drawing on Small's influential concept of *musicking*¹ (Small, 1998) this article considers music in the prison setting as a form of collaborative storytelling (Foster, 2015). By exploring how prisoners who participated in a music therapy research project co-constructed, performed and developed their emergent *musical life stories* (Bonde et al., 2013) we hope to illustrate affordances of musicking for prisoners in their ongoing identity work. The article complements the growing body of research into musicking in everyday prison life² (Hjørnevik and Waage, 2019) by presenting findings from an ethnographic study centred around an established music therapy practice in (withheld) prison, a Norwegian low security facility for up to 90 adult male inmates serving short term sentences (average sentence time ≤ 4 months). Building on our concept of the prison as 'a therapeutic music scene supported by a music therapist' (Hjørnevik and Waage, 2019: 454) we show how participants musically constructed coherence and meaning through the themes of *belonging*, *musicianhood* and *activism* (Hjørnevik and Waage, 2019: 466-467). In face of the maintained focus in penal practice upon reform comprising a break with the past self, for example, through mechanisms of 'identity decoupling' (Rogers et al., 2017: 219), we found that people's engagement in musical activities reconnected them to aspects of their past self which rather than being 'cast-off' (King, 2013: 152), were cultivated and mobilised as resources (Rolvsjord, 2010). Our findings complement a growing body of research that explores music, identity and desistance (Dickie-Johnson and Meek, 2020; Hjørnevik and Waage, 2019; Thomas et al., 2021). In line with this research we do not seek to establish empirical links between participation in music therapy and desistance. Rather we aim to show, through the lens of a music therapist practitioner researcher, how musicking afforded coherence and meaning within the participants' emergent life narratives as performed in (withheld) prison.

In contrast to previous research which largely portrays music therapy with offenders as a forensic mental health treatment in the form of psychological and behavioural interventions (Cohen, 1987; Coutinho et al., 2015a; Dickinson, 2006; Fulford, 2002; Gallagher and Steele, 2002; Glyn, 2003; Hakvoort, 2002; Kellett et al., 2019; Reed, 2002), this thesis explores the significance of supporting musicking as an everyday practice for prisoners. As such, the research and practice presented aligns with principles of Community Music Therapy (CoMT) which views music therapy as an emergent, co-constructed, situated social practice that emphasises notions of mutual care and the cultivation of musical and health resources (Ansdell and Pavlicevic, 2004; Procter, 2013; Stige and Aarø, 2011; Wood, 2016). Whilst there are few studies specifically of CoMT in prison settings (see Tuastad and O'Grady, 2013 as an example), our findings suggest that CoMT's impetus to 'follow where people and music lead' (Ansdell and Pavlicevic, 2004: 30) may provide people in prison with a technology for what Kougiali et al. (2018) call 'noncoersive personal development' (p. 1).

Identity, prison and music

Research into desistance from crime has seen an increased focus on the significance of *coherence* within the life narratives of those who desist (Giordano et al., 2007; Hunter and Farrall, 2018; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster and Bushway, 2008; Presser and Sandberg, 2015). Maruna (2001), outlining a phenomenology of desistance, has argued that 'to desist from crime, ex-offenders need to develop a coherent, prosocial identity for themselves' (Kindle location 285). Although

there is general agreement that processes of desisting follow more complex, non-linear paths than the constructs of primary and secondary stages of desistance suggest (King, 2013), empirical studies exploring desistance have mainly focussed on researching secondary desistance³ from a retrospective position in the form of interviews (Aspden and Hayward, 2015; Presser and Sandberg, 2015). Consequently, we know less about how prisoners' emergent life narratives are performed and co-created in the prison setting (King, 2013; Maruna and Toch, 2005).

Prison communities are arguably sites of enforced desistance (King, 2013; McNeill and Schinkel, 2016) where emergent life narratives are continuously performed, disrupted, recreated and developed. King (2013) has called for a deeper understanding of the prison conditions in which transitions between stages of desistance might take place, and Maruna and Toch (2005) have noted that more research is needed 'to make sense of [the] complicated interactions between life course trajectories and prison experiences' (p. 140). Whilst a growing body of research has documented the role of the arts in processes by which prisoners integrate the prison experience into their life narratives in meaningful ways (Coutinho et al., 2015b), more evidence is needed in order to detail music may form a part of their ongoing identity work.

Relationships between music and identity have formed a longstanding focus for interdisciplinary inquiry within the field of music studies and beyond (Ansdell, 2014; DeNora, 2000; Hesmondhalgh, 2013; MacDonald et al., 2002; Ruud, 2013; Sloboda et al., 2001) and increasingly the ubiquity and significance of music in places of incarceration is well documented (Coutinho et al., 2015a; Harbert, 2010; Hjørnevik and Waage, 2019; Mangaoang, 2013; Somma, 2011). In a parallel development, music therapy has become an increasingly established field of practice across prison and forensic settings (Coutinho et al., 2015a; Daveson and Edwards, 2001; Hjørnevik and Waage, 2019; Leith, 2014; Tuastad, 2014) with a growing body of research documenting how participation in music therapy activities can contribute to a wide range of social and health outcomes such as stress reduction, anger management, improved self-image and increased participation in resettlement related activities (Dickinson, 2006; Leith, 2014; O'Grady, 2009; Tuastad and O'Grady, 2013; Tuastad and Stige, 2015). Music therapists are concerned with the disruption of identity through illness, disability or trauma (Ansdell, 2014) and a salient observation from music therapy research is how music can help people to reconnect with healthy aspects of the self by rekindling practices, relationships, memories and resources (Ansdell, 2014; DeNora, 2013a; Solli, 2014). Such 'biographical disruption' (Ansdell, 2014: 122) is experienced by many in the prison setting, for example due to trauma⁴ from childhood neglect, addiction and a criminal lifestyle (Stokkeland et al., 2014).

Perspectives on narrative

Moving beyond the notion of a single fixed and continuous life narrative, Victor and Waldram (2015) describe how an evolving and situated selfhood develops through 'the dynamic process of narrativization' (Kindle location 2349), supporting the notion that our stories about who we are can be seen as continuously emergent and prone to significant and rapid fluctuations along our path (Ansdell, 2014; Kroger, 2007). This complicates, but does not diminish, the role of narrative within the ecologies of illicit action, penal systems and desistance. Indeed recent developments in the fields of cultural and narrative criminology open up to wider understandings of narrative form, and Presser and Sandberg (2015) point to a need for 'expanding the methodological toolkit'

(Kindle location 5552) to complement formal interviews as the prevailing method of choice. Asserting that narratives need not be verbalised, Sandberg and Presser call for studying 'storytelling in context' and to scrutinise 'implicit narratives in [. . .] events' (Presser and Sandberg, 2015: Kindle location 5656). This call for a methodological shift leads us into the realm of non-verbal and artistic forms of *action-as-narrative*; as people perform 'themselves' and their life stories, new stories are created through, and about, these performances (Ansdell, 2014).

Presser and Sandberg (2015) allude to arts-based methodologies when they suggest visual narrative analysis as a way of capturing the 'stories people fear telling or for which they lack a vocabulary' (Kindle location 5666). Echoing their vision we consider musicking and musical performance to represent such 'implicit narratives in [. . .] events' (Presser and Sandberg, 2015: Kindle location 5553), and argue that to deepen our understanding of the dynamics at play in the co-construction of self-narratives in the prison setting, the growing body of interview research in the criminological field could fruitfully be complemented by ethnography and participatory arts-based approaches to research (Barone and Eisner, 2011; Foster, 2015; Leavy, 2017). In addition to interviews, we therefore sought to understand how people's stories about themselves were performed through, and emerged from, musicking. Foster (2015) has outlined how artistic performance as a form of collaborative social inquiry can help us to 'pin down ephemeral experience and narratives that are non-linear and tangled' (Kindle location 949). Life narrative in our context does then not refer to a fixed, linear and necessarily verbalised story, but rather to the evolving tapestry of people's stories about themselves as performed through and emerging from musical experiences.

Musicking as storytelling

For the purpose of this article we consider musicking (Small, 1998) as storytelling on three levels. First, we consider musical performances to be a form of storytelling in their own right. Foster (2015) describes artistic performance as an arena where people 'are given the opportunity to explore their own lives and the lives of those around them, and then to perform glimpses of these lives to others [. . .]' (Kindle location 1893). Musical performances yield such 'glimpses' into people's lives, histories and aspirations. Ansdell (2005) has described musical performance in music therapy as 'being who you aren't, doing what you can't' (Ansdell, 2005), referring to the paradox of performing 'oneself' by being 'someone else' (Ansdell, 2005). Auslander (2006) posits that 'what musicians perform first and foremost is not music, but their own identities as musicians, their musical personae' (p. 102). Assuming a performative *musical persona* for example in the context of a music therapy event in a prison, can thus be a way for people to articulate 'something about (their) relationships with their peers, the institution, and music itself' (Epp, 2001). In performing, we interact with the expectations associated with what Auslander (2006) calls 'discursive domains' (p. 102), for example, a particular musical genre or style of performance. For example, the songs of Johnny Cash and the narratives surrounding his performances at Folsom prison (1968) and San Quentin (1969) have set a powerful precedence for rock music performance in prisons.⁵ However, building on Goffman, DeNora distinguishes between a view of cultural materials (in our case songs, genres and musical precedence) as mere tools or restrictions, and the view that 'cultural materials – physical and symbolic – are equipment for living, that is, not merely presenting oneself to impress' (DeNora, 2013a: 37). This notion that musical performance is

simultaneously a performative engagement with established cultural practices *and* a way of making 'sense of reality: here, now, artfully, pragmatically and with consequences' (DeNora, 2014: 126) underpins our understanding of musical performance as storytelling, and of music as a technology of self (DeNora, 2007) in the prison setting.

Secondly, we consider stories that emerge *from* and *about* musical performances or events to be forms of musical storytelling. The musical discourse within the prison came to form part of people's narratives about prison life, contributing to the prison's *institutional memory*; 'the accumulation of stories an institution tells about itself' (Linde, 2009: 4). Linde states that 'Narrative is [. . .] the link between the way an institution represents its past, and the ways its members use, alter or contest that past, in order to understand the institution as a whole as well as their own place within or apart from that institution' (Linde, 2009: 4). In this way musical events and the stories about them become part of the collective stories about (withheld) prison.

Thirdly, we consider how people informally present their unfolding *musical life stories* through conversations, interview situations, performances or lyrics. The concept of musical life stories has been developed within the field of music therapy to specifically explore connections between music and health within a range of therapeutic and everyday contexts (Bonde et al., 2013). Whilst an explicit emphasis on health is highly relevant also to our study, our focus in this article rests on the biographical coherence that musical life stories afford and on how musicking 'helps to create, stabilise and preserve the broader dimensions of familial, cultural and national identity, class and sub-cultural affiliations, ethnic and sexual identities [. . .]' (Ansdell, 2014: 135).

Method

Data was collected during two 5-month periods of field work in 2015 and 2018/2019 by the first author in (withheld) prison, Norway, where he has worked as a music therapist continuously since 2008. He employed ethnographic methods of participant-observation, interviews, audio recordings and the collection of artefacts. Participant-observation took place in music therapy sessions but also in the form of *hanging out* (Geertz, 2000) in different situations and areas of the prison such as corridors, lounges and other communal areas. Some formal semi-structured interviews were conducted ($n=18$), however audio/video recordings of musical interactions and fieldnotes formed the most significant proportion of the data. A total of 31 prison inmates were included in the project, consenting that data generated from their participation in music therapy and everyday life activities in the prison be included in the analysis. During the latter period of field work the first author and participants in the project developed an approach to participatory arts-based action research (PABAR) that involved recognising musicking both as a form of action (Bradbury, 2015; McNiff, 2013) *and* as an epistemic practice (Conquergood, 1991). In his work to facilitate structured cycles of action and reflection, the first author identified what he came to call the participants' *relentless turn to music*, that is their explicit inclination towards musicking both as their preferred form of action, and as their preferred mode of generating and mediating understandings. As the data will illustrate, it was taking the step of taking part in musicking which in itself constituted action for change for many participants. It is the aim to co-publish the outcomes of these processes at a later date.

Inspired by developments in the field of 'everyday life' research (Brinkmann, 2012; DeNora, 2013a) the first author sought to identify and understand affordances of musicking for people in

the prison. Field notes and interview transcripts were subjected to processes of open coding (Charmaz, 2014) and consolidated with the analysis of selectively sampled audio-visual materials and artefacts (Brinkmann, 2012; Pink, 2009), employing Ansdell and DeNora's (2016) analytic concept of *the musical event* as a way of structuring narratives around the before-during-after of musical interplay. It is not our aim to present a complete synthesis of the findings here, but rather to present aspects which relate specifically to *coherence* through musicking which emerged as a significant category in the analysis of the data material.

The first author's dual role as practitioner researcher brought particular methodological and ethical challenges. Whilst power dynamics are always an issue in ethnographic research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), the first author's position as an employee of the prison placed him in a rare position of power in relation to the participants in this study. The resultant complexities of this role in terms of insider/outsider positioning, pre-understandings from previous practice and influence on the culture to be researched demanded a high degree of reflexive scrutiny (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000). The first author thus worked to ensure the *ecological validity* (DeNora, 2013b) of the analysis through regular research supervision, critical peer feedback and through sharing emerging analysis with participants in the project. No data was collected without the expressed permission of participants, and inmates who did not want to take part in the research were still able to participate in music therapy activities. All names have been replaced by pseudonyms for the purposes of this publication.⁶

The research context

As Ugelvik (2014) points out, the order of prison life has historically been greatly exaggerated; whilst prisons are often considered for their routine and imposed restriction of movement which they bring upon their inhabitants, depictions of everyday life in prisons often describe environments of flux, change and unpredictability (Crewe et al., 2014; Hjørnevik and Waage, 2019; Shammass, 2014; Ugelvik, 2014). Particularly marked by this flux are low secure facilities which house people serving shorter sentences, and whom have closer interactions with the local outside community. (Withheld) prison where this study is based is a low security facility in Western Norway for 90 male inmates serving sentences ranging between three weeks and up to 6 years, although few serve more than two years within the specific institution. At the time of data collection the average sentence time was 12 weeks. Inmates represent a range of nationalities including Norwegian, Polish, Lithuanian, Eritrean and Somalian. In 2018 the prison had more than 450 new admissions with an average sentence time of 3 months. The (withheld) prison community thus presents as a fluid entity in a state of constant emergence. Inmates hold keys to their own rooms and are able to move relatively freely within the premises. They are expected to engage in activities offered by a comprehensive school department and the prison's work and maintenance department. Since its inception in 2006 (withheld) prison has championed the use of culture and the arts in their approach to rehabilitation, and have employed visual artists, a novelist, a philosopher, a music therapist and interior designers (Hjørnevik and Waage, 2019).

The music therapy service around which this research project is based has been established for eleven years. Activities include individual and group music therapy sessions, band work, songwriting, sound recording and performance projects, often in collaboration with music therapy students on work placement, other music/arts professionals and external partners. A significant aspect of

the music therapy provision is to support a wide range of structured and un-structured opportunities within the institution. Prison inmates are invited to take part regardless of musical skills or previous experiences of musicking. We have previously conceptualised the prison as a 'therapeutic music scene supported by a music therapist' (Hjørnevik and Waage, 2019), highlighting the significance of musicking in shaping the 'emotional geography of prison life' (Crewe et al., 2014: 1). This concept echoes a wider disciplinary shift towards music therapy as the facilitation of *health musicking* (Stige and Aarø, 2011), concerned with providing opportunities for music making in everyday life situations as much as with more formal music therapy sessions and interventions, and sensitive to the *ecology of musical relationships* (Ansdell, 2014), that is relationships between sounds, people and context, within and beyond the institution. The music therapy service is informed by theories of *communicative musicality*, that is the notion that all humans are musical (Malloch and Trevarthen, 2018). Also, a significant finding of the study was that even for those prisoners who had little previous experience of making music, music featured as an often strong part of their cultural identity.

Music as an ambivalent presence in the prison

Noting critically that 'the study of music in carceral space does paint a largely empowering perspective' (Waller, 2018: 285), Waller shows how 'music's relation to the internal life of the subject' (p. 285), which he sees as central to DeNora's concept of music as a technology of the self (DeNora, 2007), can also be 'applied to others, and [. . .] used to objectify them' (Waller, 2018: 281). With a specific focus on the 'carceral soundscape' (p. 281), he constructs a theory of music as a technology of power in penal systems. A culturally sensitive approach to music therapy in prison begets an awareness also of potentially coercive or oppressive implications of musicking in this setting. Historically, music has held many contrasting roles in places of incarceration. It has been associated with counterculture and resistance, it has been employed for its perceived edifying virtues and it has been valued as an arena for social learning and transferrable skills (Coutinho et al., 2015a; Harbert, 2010; Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Vest, 2020). Also, as is increasingly documented, music has been employed as an instrument of power, discipline, incarceration and torture (Cusick, 2008; Digard and Liebling, 2012; Grant, 2013; Mangaoang, 2013; Waller, 2018).

This warrants a nuanced appreciation of music's affordances in prisons, particularly in cases such as ours, where the first author was employed by the prison to provide music therapy. It was therefore important to gain an understanding of music's roles also outside of music therapy activities. Ranging from deeply private moments of relatedness in a cell to impromptu performances in communal spaces, musicking formed part of the mundane interactions of everyday life. Such as when a prison inmate in the corridor began to dance whilst singing "'T" is the season to be jolly' in response to an officer's ill-tempered and apparently unreasonable refusal to hand out extra cooking ingredients. Upon this humorous display the officer, the singing inmate and the random audience of inmate bystanders all chuckled. The brief impromptu musical performance had temporarily interrupted the unfolding of inscribed roles, that is 'officer' and 'inmate'. On the other hand, performance could elevate the mundane into something extraordinary.

Nigel: 'When I was first placed in the isolation cell in the remand prison I heard a girl's voice singing through the concrete wall from the cell next door. I don't know if she knew I was there or whether she was singing for me, but it felt comforting'. (Interview, Nigel)

As Foster points out, ‘something transformative [. . .] happens when everyday issues are performed [. . .]’ (Foster, 2015: Kindle location 1885). This potential for musicking to transform, subvert and interrupt *the extraordinary ordinariness of prison life* made musical performance a rewarding, but also risky, business.

The beautiful risk of musical performance

The perception that the prison environment was charged with latent frustration and tension added to the risks associated with musicking, yet the risks involved in musical performance also carried great affordances in terms of group cohesion and community building. Procter (2013) has shown how the management of musical risk can be an important factor in establishing trust, a concept of particular significance in an environment that is fundamentally associated with distrust (Crewe et al., 2014). Musical risks, Procter argues, ‘take place within and get prepared by the musical context’ (Procter, 2013: 206).

In a performance project devised by the first author music therapist, a band comprised of five prison inmates, two music therapy students, the first author and two prison officers performed live in front of an audience made up of inmates and staff. As part of this concert the band performed a Norwegian adaptation of Bob Dylan’s original song *Make you feel my love*. It was sung as a duet between a female First Officer and Trond, a young man hailing from a family of amateur musicians serving a 6 month sentence.

When the rain is blowing in your face

And the whole world is on your case

I could offer you a warm embrace

To make you feel my love

(Extract from *Make You Feel My Love* (Dylan), retrieved from www.bobdylan.com)

Given the intimate and emotive content of the lyrics, performing this duet with a First Officer in front of an audience of fellow inmates made for a moment of extraordinary personal risk for Trond; what was at stake was not only his credentials as an authentic performer (Moore, 2016), but his status as an *authentic inmate* (Ugelvik, 2014). Likewise, the First Officer risked being seen by colleagues as wasting time on frivolous activities and compromising her authority by enacting the female part of what could be construed as the performance of a romantic relationship with an inmate. In addition to the social risk, they faced shared musical risks; both were exposed vocally in the musical arrangement, singing at a relatively low pitch and backed initially only by acoustic guitar. As the moment for the performance arrived Trond introduced the song to the audience by smiling and quipping that ‘doing this will secure me my early parole’ (transcript from audio recording). This small humorous gesture immediately seemed to place him in a position of autonomy and social awareness. Trond and the First Officer then performed the song with conviction and feeling (strong stable vocals, controlled vibrato), leaving no room for doubt regarding their personal commitment to the song and the authenticity of their performance (Moore, 2016; Ruud, 2013). As the song came to an end, the band received a raucous applause and shouts of ‘Go Trond’ from the audience (transcript from audio recording).

Exploring relationships between risk behaviour and crime in a community of young car racers in a Swedish town, Balkmar and Joelsson (2016) found that risk was not a side-effect of reckless thrill-seeking, nor an expression for (self) destructive impulses. On the contrary they identified risk as a deliberate and planned strategy for performing control and expertise (Balkmar and Joelsson, 2016). In a similar way, the performance of this particular song was by all accounts a deliberate staging of risk. As in the case of the car racers in Balkmar and Joelsson's (2016) study, the musical risk also afforded the performance of forms of musical and social expertise by Trond and the band. The event had thus afforded the enactment of complex tensions between power and resistance, vulnerability and strength, professionalism and intimacy and through the way in which the song had been introduced and performed these were played with (DeNora, 2013a) and challenged. The performance illustrates the potentials for musicking in the prison to temporarily disrupt inscribed roles but also highlights the potentials in drawing on these roles in creating tension and theatre, facilitating transient community and a sense of musical belonging and identity.

Identity coherence through musical belonging

The sense of belonging through music emerged as a significant category through the processes of data analysis. One participant explained the connection between sound and relationships:

Erik: 'These sounds, they create a feeling of wellbeing, right. And when you put these sounds into a system you can get a togetherness by creating a harmony together. And by doing it together you get a kind of social belonging, because you are playing the same melody, at the same time' (Interview, Erik)

It was clear that musicking afforded vital forms of connections (Dusselier, 2008) for and between people in (withheld) prison. It was a way of connecting to other people in the moment, but it could also connect people to their past and to significant others. A prevalent finding was how music had figured as an important part of people's childhood and early relationships. This was true also for people who had not actively pursued music making previously. Boris, a man in his early 60s serving a sentence for possession and driving whilst under the influence of cannabis, had no previous experience of singing or playing music with others. Growing up in a small and remote village he had felt like an outsider all his life, and music had been central to his sense of alienation from the local community as he was the only young person in the village with a love for classical music and jazz when 'everybody else' liked rock 'n' roll.

Boris: 'I'd sit on my grandfather's knee when I was little and listen to violin music on the radio. He didn't play himself, but he was very interested. And my dad, he loved the brass bands. He used to play in one before he became ill. And then my ten year older brother would come back from the city with jazz records. Ella Fitzgerald. . .' (Interview, Boris)

Although Boris's musical preferences contributed to his estrangement from the local community, music had clearly connected him intimately with members of his family, and listening to music was paradoxically what helped him through his sense of isolation:

Boris: 'Beethoven was my big hero in puberty because he has written some of the most beautiful melody lines and the grandest works, right, and that was music which suited a struggling kid. Then I felt at peace. Even though I felt like an outsider, I became so fond of Beethoven. It became a place where I sought peace' (Interview, Boris)

When invited by the first author music therapist to take part in a music performance project in the prison, Boris became tearful when asked about his relationship to music (fieldnotes). He reminisced to the first author about how he had been moved to tears seeing an American jazz band perform during a jazz festival in 1980; he had been moved by the musical display of togetherness, manifested for him in the rhythmic tightness of the band which symbolised the quality of relationship he had missed in his own life. When asked later why reminiscing about this concert moved him to tears he explained:

Boris: 'I've thought a lot about it [being moved by the jazz band performance] you see, because I think it is to do with me feeling so on the outside when I was a kid. And when I see that really tight performance, and things are so well connected, then [. . . becomes tearful again]. Because it is super-communication, right, which happens in a fraction of a second, when everybody is playing tight, and when it grooves, and the whole group is together. I mean, that's what it's about' (Interview, Boris)

With these previous musical experiences as a backdrop, Boris took the big step of singing publicly for the first time as a part of a prison concert. Having had close follow-up and encouragement from music therapy students on work placement in the prison, he performed *Smile* by Charlie Chaplin and *Hurt* by Trent Reznor (in the style of Johnny Cash). Both songs had been carefully chosen by Boris because he felt they addressed issues that were important to other inmates. After the project, he described his experience of taking part:

Boris: 'Fantastic fun. It was. At first I was determined not to sing [laughs], because I felt embarrassed and ashamed. Yes, it was positively cringe-worthy the first few times. And getting over that was fantastic. I am eternally grateful for that. Bloody good!' (Interview, Boris)

Moreover, this experience became important in Boris' planning for the future:

Boris: 'I have always wanted to join the choir in my village, I moved there fifteen years ago and have really wanted to join [laughs], but haven't had the courage. But now that threshold is much lower. Brilliant. And then I'll get out among people again, so that it also has a therapeutic effect' (Interview, Boris)

Taking part in music activities in the prison had brought Boris' life story into being in the present. The feelings of belonging that he associated with music from earlier times in his life created a coherent link between his childhood, his present and his future within a narrative that incorporated change whilst preserving central features of his musical identity.

Identity coherence through cultivating musicianhood

For Ben, a young man serving a four-month sentence for drug and violence related offences, the act of entering the prison gates for the first time with his guitar on his back was a way of physically carrying a part of his musical identity with him inside.

Ben: 'When I realized that I had to come here and I had received my sentence I had never been to prison before, so I was a bit like "arghhhh, should I run away?" I discussed it with my dad and the first thing I thought after that chat, was that I am **definitely** bringing my guitar. Because I know from experience that when I've had rough times, the guitar has been a good friend' (Interview, Ben)

A recurring theme was how people had actively engaged in playing music growing up, but how this had got lost by the wayside in their transition into adulthood. The act of taking up music again for example through (re)learning to play the guitar, rekindled memories and connections to family and loved ones in particular:

Ben: We lived in a house in town, and I was in the third grade, and my mum had bought a brand-new Yamaha guitar, one of those nylon string guitars.

First author: Like the ones we have here?

Ben: Yeah, pretty much. Very good sound from those guitars, right. Very easy for learning to play. And she played a lot at that time, for us. For the kids, me and my sister and my brother. And then when I was about nine or ten maybe, I started handling the guitar myself. And then my mum would be on at me and say "you have to do fingerpicking" (Interview, Ben)

In the same way that listening to Beethoven connected Boris to memories of sitting on his grandfather's knee, so the guitar embodied Ben's memories of his mother. This illustrates the material agency of instruments (see figure 1), and their capacity to act as a *mnemic*⁷ technology (Hogg, 2012).

Throughout his teenage years Ben had cultivated an identity as a musician performing in front of friends and learning from others at local parties.

Ben: 'No matter where I went, a guitar always popped up. Whether it was at the cabin, in our boat, or at a party. I played a lot of stuff that I had just learnt on my own, or picked up from others, other mates and that. Because everybody had a song, right, and if you came to a party or some gathering when you were growing up, and you heard a song, it was "Hey, can you teach me that?"' (Interview with Ben)

Ansdell states that '*being a musician* is a role that is performed and elaborated across all aspects of the self' (Ansdell, 2014: 133) Describing *musicianhood* as an 'all-encompassing musical identity' that is typically 'long lasting', he states that musicianhood 'comes when there is a particular match between how a person experiences themselves in relationship to music, and how this comes to be recognised and acknowledged by others' (Ansdell, 2014: 134).



Figure 1. Image of prison guitar showing the wear over the years on the bottom three frets (corresponding to a set of basic chord shapes found in the rock/pop repertoire prevalent in the prison), telling its own story about craft and cultivation of musicianhood amongst the prisoners and how musical instruments became a material link between players.

Using the country music classic *Detroit City* (Dill and Tillis, 1963) as a template, Ben wrote *The (withheld) Song*. It was a humorous account about doing time in (withheld) prison. With the support and help of the first author music therapist, different incarnations of the song were developed in different band constellations that Ben participated in, allowing for the input from fellow inmates. The song eventually became a collective effort between several inmates and was recorded multiple times.

Versions of The (withheld) Song:

- Informal rehearsal version recorded in the music room in (withheld) prison (Ben, first author, Henrik, Andrew – 19/05/15)
- Recording made in professional music studio in (Norwegian town) (Ben, first author, Bull, two sound engineers – 01/06/15), later released on a non-commercial CD produced by the county's prison education branch.
- Demo recording initiated in the (withheld) prison music room using Logic software (Ben, first author, Harry, Nick, Thomas – 09/06/15), added to by two other participants over the summer of 2015.
- Performance by Ben on radio (the regional branch of the national broadcasting corporation – 19/06/15)
- Performed as a sing song at a concert in a venue in (Norwegian town) for bands made up of previous and current prison inmates (Ben, first author, Bull – 31/01/16)
- Comedy version performed in theatre project in (withheld) prison (Frank, Aslan – May 2016)

The song became well known amongst inmates and staff due to several impromptu performances of it inside the prison, often by Ben alone:

Ben: ‘The officers came over and said “have you made a song about (withheld)?” I had just been messing around singing “I wanna go home”, I hadn’t even started playing properly yet. So I said “yeah, do you wanna hear it?” You know, I think it took them by surprise. So then I just went for it, and I noticed they were just stood there like this (surprised look on his face). . .both of them (laughs). . .it was hilarious. There I was, singing about beer and bosoms, and their eyes just got bigger. They probably thought “what on earth is he on about”’ (Interview, Ben)

A live version of the song was broadcast on the regional radio station in connection with a radio interview about prison music therapy, and with the support of the first author music therapist the song was eventually performed at a public concert in a local venue and released on a non-commercial CD. In this way Ben’s song also entered the public domain, potentially feeding into public images of prisoners and penal practice. Subsequently, using multi-track digital recording technology facilitated by the first author music therapist, a version of the song was recorded over an extended period of time where new inmates could contribute to half-finished recordings-in-progress made by previous inmates who had already left the prison. In this way contemporary recording practices afforded a cumulative creative process between prison inmates who had never met, forging new *connections* (Dusselier, 2008) between people, traversing physical separation in time and place and forming a representative musical expression on behalf of many.

Through the legacy of the song Ben remained a part of the prison music scene, contributing in absentia to the *institutional memory* (Linde, 2009) of the institution. Ben seemed to have captured certain shared sentiments within the prison population, and he developed this understanding into an artistic expression that people could not only relate to, but which they contributed to and made a part of *their* story about serving time in (withheld) prison. Speaking of his motivations for writing and performing the song, Ben explained:

Ben: ‘For me, it’s just like with the birds. If it’s dark in the winter you don’t hear the birds sing. But when the sun shines and we have the sunset breeze, you hear the seagulls completely change their tune. You hear it in all nature, there’s just something there. We are a part of that system too, and we have to sing along. We have a real need to sing. And if people can’t do it themselves, then they really need to hear others sing for them’ (Interview, Ben)

Songwriting and performing was then not only linked to individual goals for Ben, but also about acting on behalf of others, providing a voice for people around him and assuming some responsibility for the collective wellbeing of the prison population. As such, the song took on a dual narrative function; the song itself told a collective story about being a prisoner in (withheld) prison, contributing to a sense of shared identity (Linde, 2009) and community. In addition, the story *about* the (withheld) song and its creation became a story about how people, and Ben particularly, imbued the prison experience with meaning through musicking.

Identity coherence through musical activism

Other participants were more explicit about their agenda to create social change, and their engagement in musical activities in the prison fitted in with a larger narrative about political activism. Jermaine came as a refugee to Norway when he was a teenager. He served a five-month sentence in (withheld) prison for assaulting another man outside a nightclub. Jermaine claimed that the other man was drunk and threatening, and felt that the courts were biased because Jermaine did not have a permanent residency permit to live in Norway. He expressed a strong commitment to help other young immigrants, and he had previously done a lot of work in the immigrant community in his local town. He came across as unusually apt at straddling the boundaries between mainstream society, the immigrant community and the local youth culture. Whilst listening to music had always been an important part of his life, Jermaine had never attempted rapping or writing his own lyrics before his participation in the music therapy programme provided an opportunity to pursue it:

*Before I go I have to write this song
As a child the civil war made me flee
It's gradually what you see
every time you turn on the TV
It's too many brothers dying on the sea
I'm trying to make a living but that ain't easy, G
Music will always be a part of me
That's why I'm creating history
So I can leave a legacy*

(Extract of lyrics from *Life of a Refugee* – Jermaine)

Jermaine explained that for a long time he had wanted to develop skills in rap and Hip Hop to reach out to younger immigrants so 'they don't have to make the same mistakes that I've made' (interview, Jermaine). When discussing possibilities for musical action as a part of our participatory arts-based action research (PABAR) project, he talked about his dream to record and release a song, and to create a platform where he could meet and speak to young people. With the help and support of the first author music therapist Jermaine and another inmate who produced electronic beats on the computer went to a professional music studio and were recorded by a leading national hip hop producer. On the day of the recording Jermaine was looking every bit the part of a true rapper wearing his Gucci watch, sunglasses and a pair of designer trousers. In performing the established characteristics of the rap *persona* (Auslander, 2006), Jermaine was both expressing his allegiance to a culture which has come to represent similar political agendas to his own, whilst also drawing on cultural materials as 'equipment for living' (DeNora, 2013a: 37) – enacting his own unique positioning in the world;

Jermaine: '[. . .] music also lets you influence things. I mean, music makes it easier to communicate across different groups, because music has no colour. For me, it has to have a theme, like asking what can be improved. So music is definitely political, because it helps people to make a statement, to reach their dreams, to develop. I would say music is the most important thing in my life. Next to that, family is the most important. But it gets you connected to other people, you have something in common and you come closer to each other. Music is the key to be heard, and to speak for yourself and others. And it makes difficulties visible in society' (Interview, Jermaine)

Jermaine's song tells the tale of a disrupted and chaotic life trajectory, addressing the current migration crisis in Europe and giving a rare voice to a marginalised population in Norway. Yet his form of musical activism provided for a coherent narrative outlining how important music had become for him in telling his story, helping others and leaving a legacy, conveying a strong and congruent sense of self.

Conclusion

'Being in prison means to want to be somewhere else' posits Ugelvik (2014: 159), and for most people in our study being in prison, albeit mostly for short sentences, represented an abrupt break away from life on the outside, a forced gap between 'before and after' in an often fragmented life story. At the same time we have shown how musicking, supported by a music therapy service, posed as a powerful technology of self (DeNora, 2007) for people in (withheld) prison, enabling the re-connection with, and performance of, aspects of identity which, in line with resource-oriented perspectives on music therapy (Rolvsjord, 2010), could be harnessed in processes of development and change.

Desistance has been linked to the development of a new 'non-criminal' identity, leaving behind aspects of the self which allowed crime to happen. As Toch puts it; '[. . .] those who are reformed have had to relinquish an old self and invent a new one. The individual is only truly reformed when he or she has acquired new purposes, a fresh set of meanings, and a satisfying new role' (Toch, 2001: Kindle location 123). Maruna nuances this fundamental notion by asserting that in contrast, for many, 'desistance can be reshaped as a process of "maintaining one's sense of self or one's personal identity" (Waldorf et al., 1991: 222) rather than the "schizophrenic" process of rejecting one's old self and becoming a "new person" (Rotenberg, 1978)' (Maruna, 2001: Kindle location 1800, quotes in original), emphasising the importance of maintaining a coherent sense of identity over time. The contradictory sentiments within these statements highlight the complexities inherent within criminological conceptions of change, pointing to the paradoxical quest to change whilst somehow remaining the same. The findings presented in this article speak to this paradox, firstly in that musicking clearly offered 'new purposes, a fresh set of meanings and a satisfying new role' (Toch, 2001), but secondly in that the value of music for the participants was not so much about relinquishing an old self and inventing a new one as it was about preserving and maintaining a coherent sense of identity. Lofland (1969) asks 'How can an apparently discontinuous life trajectory be made a related, meaningful train of events?' (Lofland, 1969 quoted in Maruna, 2001: Kindle location 289). In response we might turn to Presser and Sandberg (2015)

who call narrative 'the creative and artful construction of coherence and consistency' (Presser and Sandberg, 2015: Kindle location 275). For Boris, Ben and Jermaine, musicking became a form of performative storytelling through which they could connect to their childhood and upbringing, to family and loved ones, and to times and places of significance in their lives, and bring these aspects of self to life in affirmative performance situations within the prison.

McNeill and Schinkel (2016) emphasise the importance, for people who desist, of belonging to a moral community in the creation and maintenance of a coherent sense of identity, and show how prisons often work against such rehabilitative factors. On the contrary, prison communities are regularly associated with debased and immoral characteristics, and prisons are often cast as crime schools (McNeill and Schinkel, 2016; Tuastad, 2014). Dusselier (2008) problematises the very notion of a prison community, explaining how the conditions of incarceration complicate the idea of 'community as a concept of shared values or other forms of "sameness"' (Dusselier, 2008: 88). She points instead to *connections* as 'a way of thinking about the countless, complex, and imbricated practices that aid relational understandings among people while encompassing conflict and differences' (problematises: 88). Our study indicates that in face of the flux and fragmented social fabric of the carceral space, music therapy could provide such connections (Dusselier, 2008), allowing for transient experiences of *musical community* (Ansdell, 2014) marked by generosity and mutual care as exemplified by Boris, Ben and Jermaine. We suggest that music therapy in prisons which is aligned with CoMT (Wood, 2016) can facilitate a sense of belonging to the sort of moral community that prisons are often seen to preclude. For penal regimes this implies a focus not only on offering music as part of structured therapy sessions, educational classes or behavioural programmes, but also on supporting professionally a range of everyday musicking practices within the prison music scene (Hjørnevik and Waage, 2019). We argue that musicking here does not feature as a moral technology of the institution (Waller, 2018), but rather that it affords noncoercive means (Kougiali et al., 2018) by which the participants' resources for identity work become recognised. This is in line with the mission statements of prison services across several countries (O'Donnell, 2016) including that of the Norwegian prison service which states that it should enable offenders to change their criminal behaviour 'through their own initiatives [. . .]' (www.kriminalomsorgen.no).

As Foster points out, 'art is not merely contemplation, it is also action, and all action changes the world, at least a little' (Foster, 2015: Kindle location 1895). In their own ways Boris, Ben and Jermaine instigated change through musical action and participation, which again enabled them to integrate their prison stay into their wider life narratives in meaningful ways. In a culture where social media, technology and globalisation amplify the emphasis on how identity is performed and life stories are told (Back, 2007), prison research that studies musical practices can bring new understandings of prison cultures as sites for the co-construction of life narratives. We suggest that in addition to standard interviews and ethnographic methods, future research into relationships between prisons, music, identity and desistance needs to draw more widely upon participatory and arts-based methods for action and reflection (Barone and Eisner, 2011; Leavy, 2017) in order to facilitate the integration of participant, practitioner and researcher perspectives. Further, we suggest that studies of devised music projects and structured musical interventions need to be complemented by studies of everyday musicking in prison environments in order to better understand relationships between music and identity in processes of desistance, and how we might best support such processes.

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Notes

1. Small (1998) defined music as 'to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing' (p. 9).
2. The notion of everyday life in prison may seem like an anomaly. In using the term we do not intend to ignore the extraordinariness of incarceration, but rather recognise that for many prisoners it becomes the ordinary; *the extraordinary ordinariness of prison life*.
3. Secondary desistance is the sustained maintenance of a non-criminal lifestyle and the adoption of a new non-offending identity (King, 2013).
4. A recent study based in (withheld) and (withheld) prisons indicated that as many as 70% of inmates may suffer from PTSD, the symptoms of which are often mistaken for ADHD (Stokkeland et al., 2014).
5. Two of the most prolific songs repeatedly suggested by participants in music therapy activities in (withheld) prison remain 'Folsom Prison Blues' (Cash) and Johnny Cash' rendition of 'Hurt' (Reznor).
6. An account of the method as well as ethical and methodological challenges associated with the first author being a practitioner researcher have been published elsewhere (withheld) 2018)
7. Hogg (2012) describes a mnemonic technology as one that directly embodies information from the past, for example in the form of the practices or memories it affords. These memories are 'actualised' in 'their encounter with a living embodied consciousness' (Hogg, 2012: 224). An example is the phonograph (Hogg, 2012).

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