

# The self-taught career musician: Investigating learning sources and experiences

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## Abstract

This article reports early findings from a qualitative study of 10 full-time musicians who are self-taught, to investigate their learning biographies. The aim is to identify, define and explore learning sources and experiences across the musician's learning biography. Conducted in Melbourne, Australia, the musicians were recruited through snowball sampling through researcher's own connections, from previous work within the music industry. Analysis of transcripts from semi-structured interviews has revealed some early commonalities and patterns, although this study is still in progress. The early findings are: how they began to play music; progression from playing alone to playing with others; Adolescent learning phase; progression into full-time professional engagement; developing skills to a professional level; learning to be adaptable; learning through types of mentors; and learning from each other – both self-taught and formally taught. It is hoped that with attention paid to aspects of a self-taught musicians learning biography their sources of learning may contribute to music learning both within and outside formal settings and the achievements of self-taught musicians may be given more recognition and research attention.

**Key words:** Self-taught, learning biography, contemporary musicians, social learning, biographical learning.

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## Introduction

Self-taught professional contemporary musicians have been given more attention within general public media than they have within scholarly research. Attention paid to contemporary musicians since the emergence of Rock and Roll in the 1950s has, though, gradually obscured the fact that many were and are self-taught, this is in both general media and academic literature. In response to this, and through re-evaluating data from a previous study on contemporary musicians (Watson, 2008), research is being conducted that focuses on the self-taught career musician from the perspective of their learning. The aim is to identify, define and explore learning sources and experiences across the musician's learning biography. While currently in its

early analysis stages there are emerging findings and observations indicating some commonalities regarding early childhood home environments, initial introduction to learning an instrument, musician peer groups, and mentoring.

## What inspired the research?

Initially, inspiration for the current research emerged after revisiting a previous study (Watson, 2008) that explored the choice to pursue a career in contemporary music and its impact on a musician's personal life. While it wasn't required selection criteria, the participants in that study were all self-taught, and had been working full-time as performing and recording artists for between 22 to 49 years. The musicians gave detailed responses

which on later review showed direct or indirect reference to how and from where they learnt music from early childhood, musicianship and adult career progression. This prompted questions regarding the learning sources of self-taught musicians, in particular those who continued into full-time careers in music.

## **Development of the research question focus**

Taking these findings consideration was then given to contemporary popular music from the emergence of Rock and Roll in the 1950s onwards. In a preliminary review of archival magazine articles from 1956 to 1981, such as in *Creem*, *Rolling Stone*, *Guitar Player*, *Go-Set*, *RAM*, and *Juke Magazine*; music newspaper articles found in *Melody Maker* and *New Musical Express*; as well as academic journals (Cohen<sup>1</sup> 1991; Finnigan, 1998; McCarthy, 2013; Morrisey, 2001; Teachout, 2006) it was found that many of the earlier musicians in the emerging new genres were referred to as self-taught. There were frequent articles explaining how artists had acquired their music knowledge and skill, as well as informative articles on how to learn instruments, obtain management, purchase equipment and instruments. This provided insight into the early music scene of emerging contemporary genres in terms of possible influence, where many musicians entered into professional careers through being self-taught during the late 1950s into at least the 1980s.

A question still remained regarding being self-taught, if they were not learning formally, apart from the music magazine and newspaper sources, how and from where were they acquiring their music skills and knowledge? Specifically, what were the learning sources of those who established on-going full-time careers as musicians? Why did they not engage with any formal music education? Is there something in the process itself of being self-taught, of learning contemporary music outside formal music education systems that was different, that enabled progress into and sustaining of often long term careers in music?

## **A sample list of successful self-taught musicians**

In considering self-taught musicians who have sustained a long term full-time career in music the following are a sample list of those who have become well known: Joni Mitchell, Joan Armatrading, Bonnie Raitt, Prince, David Bowie, Bob Dylan, Dave Grohl (Nirvana, Foo Fighters), Brain May (Queen), Noel Gallagher (Oasis), Carlos Santana (Santana), Billie Joe Armstrong (Green Day), Beatles (All members), Keith Moon (The Who), John Butler (John Butler Trio).

## **Literature on self-taught musician research**

There are relatively few studies investigating how self-taught musicians learn, particularly when viewed in comparison to research on formally taught musicians. Those that have researched self-taught musicians have tended to focus on skill acquisition (Green, 2001), career progression (Coulson, 2012), aspects of adult career (Creech et al., 2008) or teenage collaborative learning in garage bands (Barker, 2012). A large proportion of studies have focused on students within, or in connection to, formal music education that includes partially or solely a contemporary music component. Studies focusing on currently working self-taught contemporary musicians who have ongoing full-time careers are limited, and specifically in-depth focus on sources of learning across a learning biography to date are found to be non-existent.

## **Research focus**

The research focus of this study is to investigate learning music outside formal education systems, where that learning progresses and enables an ongoing career as a full-time musician, particularly within contemporary music genres. Research questions are aimed at locating and defining what sources of learning are evident from childhood onwards, taking into account learning experiences, learning content and contexts. The choice to focus on specifically learning sources and experiences is

to try and see that journey from their perspective, to gain insight into development of not only how they learnt to play an instrument but also performance skills, coping skills, understandings of musicianship, being able to work with others and collaborate. Another reason is, as summed up by participant 1, “we’re getting older, if you don’t ask us these questions now you might never know”.

An overview of the research process will follow, with firstly an explanation of central terms. The term self-taught is defined in part through what was absent; they do not have any level of qualification in music, and there was no private teaching through a structured method or system. Learning sources are taken as defined by Jensen and Markussen (2007) who see learning as being something that occurs within everyday life, so it needs to be seen *in situ*, and not abstractly.

## Theoretical perspectives

This study is guided by two theoretical perspectives, used as complementary to each other. They are Biographical Learning as developed by Tedder and Biesta (2007) and Social Learning Theory as described by Salmon and Perkins (1998). The approach taken in this study is that sources of learning can be both internal and external to a person. Both are seen as relevant. Biographical Learning, a concept advanced within Lifelong Learning and adult learning research aims to understand experiences of learning, and acknowledges learning from life where a person will process their individual experiences to draw from in making future choices. Social Learning Theory views learning as a process of shared engagement, it is socio-cultural, where knowledge and meaning is formed within life events, through unintended or purposeful interactions. A guiding factor in the choice to choose these two theories as the guiding framework also came from noting participants in the previous study (Watson, 2008) expressed their personal experiences in terms of how they applied that new understanding to benefit their music careers, as well as how external events and opportunities aided their development.

## Research methods

Participants were recruited through a form of snowball sampling, three musicians were initially invited who were already known to researcher, each participant then further invited another musician until there were 10 in total. The selection criteria were that they had not had any formal music education at all, including community level courses; they had to be full-time musicians with the majority of their income from performing, recording or session work; and that they had been working as such for at least 10 years. Nine lived in Melbourne and one in Sydney, and nine were male and one female. Everyone could play more than one instrument, ranging from piano, keyboards, drums and percussion to lead, rhythm and bass guitar as well as acoustic and 12 string guitar. Their ages range from 49 to late 60s. After stopping at 10 participants other musicians asked if they could be in the study, and while they could not be included even though they did all meet the criteria, it was noticed it would have given the study an age range of 30 to late 70s.

Data was collected through conducting two interviews each, taking a narrative biographical approach, with an interval of at least 4 weeks between them. The first was guided by 8 question areas, and the second was a follow up of more in-depth and clarifying questions about responses from the first interview. They follow three life stage categories; childhood/adolescence; early entry into professional career; and adult career. The question areas are: How were they introduced to music, how did they begin to learn music; How did they progress from being an individual learning music to then performing with others; What were their understandings of ‘being a musician’; did that influence the relationship they had with learning, with career choices; What were their sources of learning when developing a more skilled and professional level of performing? How did they go from initial paid work to becoming full-time; How did they learn to perform on stage, to interact with other musicians and to cope with an audience; How did they learn to manage change, progression of career;

Did they have mentors, or engage in later adult career learning?

## **Some early findings**

### **Early childhood**

Analysis is still under way, although there are some early common themes emerging. Participants were asked to firstly describe their early childhood recollections of music, and all responded with portrayals of home life where there was always music, it included the radio often being on, records always being played, watching early Television shows featuring live music, a family member playing a musical instrument and family playing together, or frequent house parties with either live music or records being played. It was here at this early age, from about 3 to 6 years old, they told of being excited, interested or intrigued by music, some described it as like a puzzle they wanted to solve and for others they said it simply made them happy.

### **How they began to learn to play music**

Participants were then asked how they began to learn to play music, and this started at between 6 to 9 years of age. Responses were not as anticipated, all told of firstly having spent a long time just listening intently to a lot of music across different genres, often on their own or with older siblings, or a close friend and their older sibling. Descriptions included references to being drawn to want to emulate the music, see if they could get the same sound. They referred to listening to what the music was doing, of how hours were spent trying to get a sound right and the joy of finally achieving it to then fail again on the next try. So an early learning source was from intentional and focused listening, interest in understanding the patterns and ways in which songs were constructed and then self-directed hours spent slowly building up their ability to listen and emulate what the instruments were playing in a song.

### **Progression from playing alone to joining with others**

Progression from learning on their own to then playing with others has shown a common pattern.

Predominantly in either late primary school or early high school they met other students who also played instruments, there were also local neighbourhood connections as well as through family. A typical scenario was that an older student would come up to them and ask if they would be willing to 'jam' together in the school gym, with two to four joining in, they would decide what songs they could all play, and as a few said 'have the best time even though we sounded terrible'.

### **Adolescent learning phase**

During this learning phase participants all mention being the ones who chose to engage with or instigate the forming of bands, and all played regular public performances, from every few months to every weekend, in these bands, from the age of 13 through to ending high school. In terms of what they learnt during this time they had similar answers which are summed up in these quotes "it didn't matter how good you were or thought you were, if you couldn't get along with others, then you didn't last, and that was both on and off stage" (Participant 7) and "you realised that more was learnt in one live performance especially to the public, than you could learn in 10 or more rehearsals" (Participant 4). There was also mention of the bands essentially debriefing after each performance where they would go over how the night went. One factor that may be an influence is noted in their references to being able to work with others through a genuine openness to learning from other musicians and as Participant 3 said, "realising that you had to fit musically into any band, and not try and take over, that it was about the song and not you".

### **Progression into full-time professional engagement**

Participants were asked how they went from high school bands to becoming full-time musicians, and what they learnt in that process. In answering that question the following generalities have emerged: they all were expressing a sense of compulsion to stay with music, and learnt that if accepting any offer of a gig kept them progressing they would

take it, they also learnt to accept trying new styles or genres of music which they generally saw as challenging them to 'step up' and see what they could do, some sought out other musicians through going to gigs, and responded to audition calls in magazines or newspapers. Because they had all spent so many years earlier listening to and absorbing styles of music and how songs were written they said they were able to recognise how the patterns of different song styles went so it was easy for them to 'understand it' and then learn it. So, they went from teenage amateur to early full-time career through either actively engaging with as many chances to perform and 'jam' with others as they could, and from this exposure learning how others progressed, or instigating the forming of a band themselves. Another comment frequently expressed was they were offered or told of a chance to perform through word of mouth, which appeared to be networking. When this was put to those who had made the comment they generally stated that it was more a natural flow from being with others of the same interest rather than the intentionality implied in the concept of networking.

### **Developing skills to a professional level**

In asking them how they developed a higher level of skill and professionalism they generally responded with the same answer: play with musicians who are better than you are, and take in as much as you can. All spoke of learning through observing everything that was around them, particularly from how the other musicians in the band interacted with each other both musically and verbally. Improving their skills was cited as also through playing in more successful bands where there was pressure to perform well because of a tendency of other musicians to "check them out" (Participant 7) at the gig. At this stage of their learning it appears to be predominantly through working with others, peer musician group culture and pressure, as well as experience in performing with musicians who they saw as an authority because they had played for a longer time. In follow up questions they were asked at what point a

musician was seen as having what they were calling authority as a musician and all said only after you had played for at least ten years professionally were you considered accomplished and experienced.

### **Learning to be adaptable**

During the interviews each musician spoke of how they had learnt to actually play their instrument, and in describing their later career stages the question arose regarding how they worked with such a variety and volume of different songs, as well as with musicians who were formally taught, or had taught themselves music theory. It was explained that through spending so many hours, if not years of listening, figuring the notes out, and working out what the song was doing they developed their own form of notation, they learnt to memorise songs and through that the music patterns they heard in those songs. This meant they could quickly pick up what another musician was playing and play in with it, it was how the interviewed musicians said they learnt to improvise.

### **Learning through types of mentors**

Another question area was mentoring, and the responses all included someone who was up to five years older, often an older sibling or older brother of a friend. But the more influential form of mentoring can be shown in this example: Participant 2 told of going to a midweek show, the band was from Sydney and as yet unknown in Brisbane where he was, he had heard through other older musicians that this band was very good, so he was almost sure they wouldn't perform when he saw there were very few people in the audience. This band was called Midnight Oil and they were known for being very energetic on stage, and on that night they played as if to a full house. Participant 2 said he, and all the other musician friends there that night, went away having seen what they called a truly professional band because it didn't matter how few people there were they still played their best. There were other stories like this in the interviews, and each participant reflected that it taught them as Participant 10 said "how to be a musician worth listening to." Generally mentoring as expressed by these participants was

largely non-verbal, it occurred through observing something and then going home and trying that way of playing or technique themselves and finding their own way of achieving the same result.

### Learning from each other: from self-taught and formally taught

Throughout the interviews all participants spoke of their respect for formally taught musicians, saying they couldn't play music from the same approach, which they called from the head, but they have over the years learnt from them as frequently as they have other self-taught musicians. This was described as learning something every time they played with others, on stage, in recording sessions or just 'jamming'. Also the participants mentioned that once they started playing the music it didn't matter how each musician had learnt, all that mattered was how well the songs were played and how well they played together.

### Conclusion

In conclusion the following points have arisen: this study is located in Melbourne, Australia and as found in the recruitment stage it appears not uncommon to be a working self-taught musician in Melbourne. Whether this is unique or not requires further investigation. With participant ages ranging from 49 to late 60s it is recognised that being self-taught, learning in their particular way could be a reflection of the eras they grew up in. The interest from musicians who were in their early 30s up to late 70s who also could have qualified as a participant, does suggest it may not be as strongly a generational learning style as initially considered. And lastly, each participant told of how they felt inspired by the experience of thinking through their past in answering the questions. This encouraged some to ask other musicians how they had learnt music and they found that across the range of stories there were many similarities to their own

experiences, which they found surprising, and this researcher found encouraging. It is hoped that with attention given to aspects of a self-taught musicians learning biography their achievements may be given more recognition and research attention.

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