

SONGWRITING AS A TOOL FOR UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY AND DEALING
WITH CHANGE

by

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ABSTRACT

How can songwriting be used to understand one's identity? How can songwriting help the writer deal with change? These two questions are at the center of my Honors thesis, in which I employ a method combining autoethnography and arts-based research. Integrating these two methods allowed for an examination of large-scale, comprehensive themes through the study of personal, individual creative work. By writing four original songs, keeping a journal for reflecting on these processes, and reviewing relevant literature, I explore how the act of songwriting can create meaning and provide an opportunity for the writer to develop self-knowledge and induce personal growth.

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INTRODUCTION

As a member of two different bands over the past five years, music has become my principal recreational activity. However, it is the act of songwriting, which has been a central piece of my band experience, that is the most honest way I express myself. While I have written about my experiences, relationships, and ideas for several years, I have never undertaken such an exercise as to revisit and analyze my original music in order to draw conclusions about my identity, and further to apply these conclusions to the future.

Background Information

In order to undertake this kind of study, there are a few topics and areas of thought that must first be understood, including arts-based-research, autoethnography, music as a method for arts-based research, and the relationship between music and identity.

One foundational topic that must be understood is autoethnography. Because I am performing a qualitative study in which I am both subject and researcher, understanding the

concept of autoethnography is essential. Overall, autoethnography can be defined as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and critically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis et al., 2011). In the case of this thesis, I will be analyzing myself via my original music in order to understand my identity. In general, music is a relevant approach to autoethnography, because, “[at] the heart of both [music and autoethnography] is the desire to communicate engaging and personal tales, through music and words, which inspire audiences to react, reflect, and, in many cases, reciprocate” (Ellis & Bartleet, 2010). In general, these two subjects are related, and are equipped to complement each other in a study such as this.

Next, arts-based research must be defined, as it is a basis for this study. Essentially, arts-based research is an alternative form of research that is “no less rigorous or valid” than traditional forms (Leavy, 2020). Arts-based research (ABR) is essentially a “turn to the creative arts in social research” in an attempt to merge researcher and artist interests, “while creating knowledge based on resonance and understanding” (Leavy, 2020). In this thesis, arts-based research will be the primary method of gathering data in the form of original music.

Understanding how music serves as a method for ABR will also be critical for this thesis. First of all, the function of music in ABR “can be viewed less as an experiment and more as a *realization*,” with which “researchers access, illuminate, describe, and explain that which is often rendered invisible by other research practices” (Leavy, 2020). There are many functions of music in ABR, “including the evocation of emotion, the creation of beauty, the growth of the individual artist, and as a part of many cultural rituals. Music can be a means of

accessing truth” (Leavy, 2020). In terms of this project, there will be particular focus on how music relates to emotion, truth, and the artist’s personal growth.

One final foundation for this study is how music relates to identity. In a general sense, creativity can be very closely linked with one’s identity. One study found that there is not only a qualitative link between the two, but a quantitative one as well. The findings in this study “demonstrated that those who emphasize their inner personal identity and who are information seeking in style seem to have the greatest potential for creativity,” which highlights the link that exists between the two domains (Dollinger et al., 2005). More specifically, there is a significant link between music and identity, as illustrated by Timothy Rice. In Rice’s essay, “Reflections on Music and Identity in *Ethnomusicology*,” he explores many ways in which the two are connected, the most pertinent of which to this project is how “music gives symbolic shape to a pre-existing or emergent identity,” with that shape being “inherent in the structures of music and usually [constituting] an iconic representation of elements of identity” (Rice, 2017). In other words, music serves as a mode for representing one’s identity, giving it a form that can be created, perceived and interpreted.

With these considerations in mind, I have decided to undertake a creative project for my Honors thesis. Through this project, I plan to research the following questions:

1. How can songwriting be used to understand one’s identity?
2. How can songwriting help the writer deal with change?

Through research of related literature, as well as writing a set of 4 original songs, paired with journal reflections, I plan to perform an autoethnographic study in order to answer these two questions.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, I employed two main forms of data collection: original songs and journal reflections on the songwriting experience. The project can be best understood with the original music being the primary form of data, with the journal entries serving as supporting data.

The artistic songwriting process can be difficult to describe, as it almost always varies in time, as well as form, efficiency, and more. However, my songwriting process follows a loose, open structure that is best explained by Rick Rubin, a renowned music producer, in his recent book, *The Creative Act: A Way of Being*. As explained by Rubin, the creative process consists of four distinct phases: the Seed phase, the Experimentation phase, the Craft phase, and the Completion phase.

The Seed phase is marked by the act of “searching for potential starting points that... can grow,” which, for a song, could be “a phrase, a melody, a bass line, or a rhythmic feel” (Rubin & Strauss, 2023). In the case of this project, the Seed phase featured a guitar riff that caught my attention, a pleasing line of melody, or a concept of great personal interest.

Next is the Experimentation phase, where the artist “play[s] with different combinations and possibilities to see if any of them reveal how the seed wants to develop,” in attempts to find “which [iteration of the seed] holds the most promise” (Rubin & Strauss, 2023). With my project, the Experimentation phase featured exploring different tempos, chord progressions, melodies, and more, in attempts to discover which version of each song had the most potential.

Next, the Craft phase is explained as one with a “clear sense of direction,” with which the artist “work[s] to add to a foundation that has revealed itself through [the]

experimentation” (Rubin & Strauss, 2023). Furthermore, this phase does involve some creative work, “but it often carries less of the magic of exploration and more of the labor of brick-laying” (Rubin & Strauss, 2023). In this project, the Craft phase often took up the bulk of the work for a given song, and featured fitting ideas related to the theme into verses with established melodies and timing, as well as determining how the different elements of the song should be structured.

Last is the Completion phase. This phase features a “sense of fulfillment,” with which the artist “leave[s] behind discovery and building” (Rubin & Strauss, 2023). Now, the “final form [of material] is refined to be released into the world” (Rubin & Strauss, 2023). In the case of this project, the Completion phase takes place with the addition of the songs to this paper, and takes place with the performance and submission of the thesis.

Supporting the original music is a series of journal entries. For this project, I kept a journal, in which I primarily wrote about each song, with some additional entries about the overall thesis itself. More specifically, my journaling process for each song featured two distinct phases: (1) a preliminary reflection on the topic or theme in question, and (2) a subsequent explanation of the song’s lyrics and musical elements with an exploration of the song’s identity implications. While music can be an honest depiction of one’s ideas, as is the case with my original music, the curated nature of lyrics can make it difficult to understand their significance. This is where journaling comes in. The benefits of journaling are various and well-documented, but in the case of this project, it will serve as “a way to read [my] own thoughts, [and] to mine them for understanding” (Cooper, 2013). The journal entries will help with addressing both research questions. In the instance of understanding one’s identity, journals “can help us understand both who we are and what we are doing with our lives,” in

addition to helping the writer make sense of their “evolving identity” (Cooper, 2013). In terms of the second research question, regarding how songwriting can help the writer deal with change, journaling is also highly relevant, due to its ability as a practice to help the writer “make more informed decisions about [their] life,” as well as identifying problems and “find[ing] a way to grapple with them” (Cooper, 2013).

DATA - ORIGINAL MUSIC AND JOURNAL ENTRIES

Song 1: Big Sky

Big Sky

Tuning: Standard (EADGBE)

Key: F (Capo 1st fret)

Verse 1:

There's a Big Sky overhead,
 But I've been looking down instead.
 This time, all the snow is gone,
 And all the clouds the sun's been shining on.

Prechorus:

The grass is growing green again,
 And I've got no idea when
 The wind will pull the leaves off of the trees.
 The creek is running free again,
 And, really, there's no telling when
 November air will make the water freeze.

Verse 2:

Early morning is a shade of navy;

The sun's been rising later lately.

Northeastern winds are slowing down;

The trees are losing all the brown

Prechorus

Chorus:

I miss running out of time,

I miss losing my mind,

I've been running out of light

To see this Big Sky

Break

Prechorus

Chorus

"Big Sky" Journal Entries:"Big Sky - Preliminary Reflection"

For this song, which features a lot of E, I think that I want to write about nature & such. As it warms up here in Boone, I'm starting to spend more time outside.

I think a good metaphor to include would be to mention the sun melting the snow, but making it personal. Something external shines on me, & strikes (?) away the cold & the clouds, which in turn reinvigorates something within me. This could be about this thesis reawakening my creativity, about someone reawakening powerful feelings in me, opportunities reawakening passion within me, or even a combination of all these, & more.

I could talk about how that melting in turn fuels the growth of something else, like it would a plant. I could also talk about the conditions of things before the "sun" came & melted everything.

It could also be interesting to explore the contrast between my world before & after the "sun". Really highlighting this would illustrate a powerful picture.

Overall, I want this song to be about the concept of creative inspiration, & what it feels like when you strike gold with a great idea.

I think that I also want to address, through this nature metaphor, the difference between the way it feels ~~to~~ when there is a real lack of ideas & inspiration (which feels like a place that I have been lately), & the way it feels when the good ideas are flowing & are present, like melted water. I would also like to mention my worry or fear that I could return to that "winter" of no ideas.

I think I'd like this song to have more of a positive energy to it than most of the others I've been working on.

"Big Sky" Preliminary Reflection - Page 2

"Big Sky" Reflection Explanation	
<p>Today I finished writing my song "Big Sky". This song is essentially a reflection on creativity, inspiration, etc. within me. Overall, I use nature-related metaphors throughout the song to talk about these ideas.</p>	<p>of the song expresses little worry about the metaphorical "winter" returning, & focuses instead on just being happy & grateful for the warmth.</p>
<p>First of all, the song is in the key of E, which personally makes me think of camp songs & generally spending time outdoors. The picking pattern between E & Esus is reminiscent of "To the Mountains" by Lizzy McAlpine, which also has themes & energies that are naturey.</p>	<p>The second verse continues to develop & illustrate the image of warming weather. It talks about the idea of a kind of creative jumpstart by mentioning "spring forward", or Daylight Savings Time, with the line "the suns been rising later lately".</p>
<p>The first verse introduces the "Big Sky" idea. I know that this is also a term for Montana, but in this case it's a symbol for creativity. This verse discusses how creativity has always been there, but I haven't been tuned into it. However, the verse ends with the positive, hopeful image of melting snow & disappearing clouds.</p>	<p>Following another prechorus is the Chorus. I chose to save the chorus for this late in the song to show how the payoff &/or resolution of creative work does not happen immediately, but rather is the result of spending time & effort on an idea. The chorus talks mostly about how much I've missed working creatively.</p>
<p>The prechorus is almost like a chorus in itself, with a catchy melody, & it has a good chunk of lyrics. It's a very positive take on the inspiration & ideas that I've been having lately. Additionally, this part</p>	<p>At the end of the song, I sing both the prechorus & chorus again, in order to, like with some of my other songs, really drive home my satisfaction with working creatively again.</p>

"Big Sky" Explanation

Song 2: Drive OnDrive OnTuning: Open E (EBEG#Be)Key: G (Capo 3rd fret)Verse 1:

The tires are thinning and they're tired from all the spinning

But they roll just the same.

The windshield's broken and I can't see where I'm going

But I'm still on my way.

Intro RiffVerse 2:

The road is blurry and I'm starting to get worried

That I'll never get there.

My hands are shaky, I don't know where this will take me

But I'm starting not to care.

Chorus:

Slow down, speed up,

Am I enough

For this trip that I'm on?

I'll buckle in,

and drive on.

Intro RiffVerse 3:

Am I going to slow, or was my exit long ago?

I just can't tell.

Am I going in reverse, or am I driving in a circle?

Do I bid the road farewell?

Chorus: x 2

"Drive On" Journal Entries:

"Drive On" - Preliminary Reflection

I started a new song today, for which I don't have a title, & I can't really identify what the theme is in one word, but if I had to say what it's about, I would say that it is more or less about my overall personal life journey.

For a while now, I've wanted to write a car/road trip related song, & I think that this is the right song to use that metaphor. Traveling by car feels like it has been a decently big part of my life, & I think there are a lot of good metaphors & ideas I could use for it.

I think that I would like to use this song as a space to discuss how, even though I am young in the grand scheme of things, there are areas of my life, in which I feel pretty tired, & pretty dinged up. I'd like to explore how that feels & how it relates to my next steps.

I think I also want to examine feelings of uncertainty about my path, my pace, if I'm doing the right thing, etc. These concerns are very real to me, especially lately, as I am approaching a major life change.

"Drive On" Preliminary Reflection

2/20/23 "Drive On" - Explanation

written

I've ~~written~~ a new song! I'm not sure yet what to call it. I've been using metaphors about cars, driving, etc. to look at some larger themes.

I guess in the case of this song, I myself am the "car", & my journey ~~is~~ through collage & into life beyond is the "trip" or the "road". In a way, it sort of reminds me of some Jackson Browne songs.

The first ~~chorus~~^{verse} talks about being tired & weary, as well as having trouble w/ seeing where it is I'm headed. However, in both cases, it felt natural to still mention that I'm carrying on. In my personal journey, I definitely feel tired at times, & I certainly feel as though I'm headed into the unknown.

The second verse talks a little more about being worried & uncertain. As I approach graduation & "the real world" I do feel marked w/ a sense of worry about the uncertainty. However, yet again, it felt right to kind of resolve it w/ the "drive" to fight on in some way.

The third & final verse has more to do w/ direction & being on the right path. It's a kind of reflection on the fear of being on the wrong path & being unable to right yourself. I know that this idea may be a little naive but I truly don't know where to go or what to pursue sometimes.

As for the chorus, I feel best about how it sounds & how it's written. It discusses the changes in pace on journeys when you aren't sure what the destination is. It mentions my insecurities about being "enough" or being capable for this journey. However, it once again ends w/ the resolution that all I can actually do is continue. I just have to drive on.

"Drive On" Explanation - Page 2

Song 3: ReleaseReleaseTuning: Standard (EADGBE)Key: A# (Capo 3rd fret)Verse 1:

I don't want to feel this moment

More than I already do.

Floating in the things you're saying

With nothing to hold onto.

Verse 2:

I try to pull myself together

But you're pushing me apart.

My mind is wrapped up in the ending

Of what never had a start

Chorus:

I've been waiting for release,

Is it too late to have some peace?

By now, this should be obsolete,

But I'm still waiting for release.

Bridge:

It might be if it had been, but it wasn't, so it's not (you'll see)

It might not be that heavy, but it sure does weigh a lot (on me)

Chorus x2

"Release" Journal Entries:"Release" - Preliminary Reflection

I'm going to write a song about the concept of "release," as in the release of pressure or tension. Without getting into too many specifics, I'll be writing about some regrets, lost relationships/friendships, & holding on to notions & feelings that I know I need to let go of.

It's interesting to me how I can simultaneously be aware that I should let go of things, & be unwilling to do so. Perhaps writing about it will aid in that process.

I know that I am not alone in feelings of pressure & tension. I think I feel them most regarding big decisions, large tasks or endeavors, & conflicting relationships. In some ways, with lasting feelings of pressure & tension, it feels like a wound or a cut or a scar that is made at one point in time, & as you move through time as if you're moving through space, the wound gets bigger & deeper. It's only through the letting go of it that healing can begin. Perhaps fittingly, I'm planning to use a progression I've been sitting on for a while, waiting for the right time to use it.

"Release" Preliminary Reflection

"Release" - Explanation

I have officially finished "Release"! I'm excited about this one, I think it has a good emotional resonance to it.

First of all, in the interest of pressure & tension, there's a kind of some tension created in the Dadd11 chord, between the F# & G notes, which is released once it slides down to a ~~E~~ C chord & the F# note becomes an E. Also with that verse progression, another kind of tension is created as the Dadd11 → C repeats several times, without resolving to the G chord. There is then a kind of musical release with the continuous walkdown progression of the chorus.

In the first verse, I talk about feeling lost & wishing not to be in a given moment. Perhaps straightforwardly, this describes my desire to feel differently, but also feeling suspended or "floating," & unable to do so.

The second verse discusses someone pushing me apart. I chose pushing instead of pulling, because it implies that the person is doing so from within, showing that this person still holds a lot of real estate in my head & my heart.

Also in the second verse, I talk about how I'm still holding on to the loss of a friendship that had such beautiful potential.

The chorus is a repetitive expression of the desire for release. I bookended the chorus with the line "I'm waiting for release" to really emphasize it. Additionally, there is the recognition that this concern or feeling should probably be resolved by now, but I'm still holding onto it.

The bridge starts with a quite confusing line, that might make the reader feel that they don't have the full picture. That was intentional, as the contrast between the hypothetical & reality makes sense only to the writer. The bridge concludes with a line about the metaphysical tension between what something seems, & what it actually, subjectively, is.

At the end of the song, I repeat the chorus twice. This is to further emphasize the point that I want the feeling of release.

Song 4: UntitledUntitled

Tuning: Standard (EADGBE)

Key: C (Capo 5th fret)

IntroVerse 1:

You're alright, yeah you're okay,

You're gonna live another day.

Feel the wind land on your face,

Try not to forget this place.

Prechorus:

Why can't you let it, why can't you let it all go?

Look on the bright side, feel how the bright lights glow

Verse 2:

You're so concerned with what's to come

And not with where you're coming from.

Here it comes, so don't look now,

These are the dreams you dream about

PrechorusChorus:

There's more than the future, you can't be too sure of the past

Let go of your notions, and breathe in the moment at last

BreakPrechorus

Chorus"Untitled" Journal Entries:"Untitled" - Preliminary Reflection

I started work on my last song of this project to Jay. It's a little bittersweet. I want to keep writing songs (which I can, but the lack of being held responsible by the project might make it more difficult), but I'm also relieved to be close to finishing. However, for right now, I want to focus on right now. I think that will be the general idea of the song: a call to action to be present.

This is definitely something that I struggle with. I think that I spend too much time worrying about both the past & the future. Especially as I approach graduation & the job search, I've been worrying an awful lot, instead of focusing on enjoying my last semester.

For some songs, I like to run with an idea & see where & how far I can take it, but for this song, I think that I really want to focus on the simple idea of being present. It's a message that I really need to hear, so I'd like to take this idea very deep, as opposed to taking it far laterally.

"Untitled" Preliminary Reflection

"Untitled" - Explanation

I have just finished my last song! I definitely feel relieved. First of all, I think I'll just refer to this song as "Untitled". I suppose, in keeping with the theme of the song, I didn't want to settle on a name that I wouldn't be totally satisfied with, & I wanted to push the listener to digest the song & be present with it in order to understand it, instead of getting any ideas or pre-conceived notions from a title.

I decided to go with a simple chord progression, & strumming instead of picking, to again highlight the simplicity of the idea, & to encourage the listener to focus on the message in the lyrics, rather than the technical music aspects.

The first verse starts with some advice I was recently given, while feeling stressed - it's okay, you'll live. This line is meant to bring you back to reality. It's important to keep things in perspective, & understand how things like school assignments hold little real importance.

This verse ends by encouraging the listener to

notice where they are, & to commit to remembering it. This could be something you wish you did more later on.

In the prechorus, I ask: why can't you let go? I wanted to ask this, instead of telling the listener to do it, in hopes that the listener will do some more thinking about their current mental state - being present. I also encourage the listener here to remain positive, which is important in connection with the theme.

The second verse mentions how people are so often concerned with the future, instead of focusing on being true to themselves. Additionally, it finishes with a line that, to me, means that the things we live now will become memories that we have dreams about. We should focus on them now, before that happens.

After another prechorus, I sing the chorus with a much higher, more noticeable melody, in order to really emphasize its message. Overall, the chorus talks about letting go of the past & the future, & truly focusing on the present moment. To me, repeated discussion of these ideas really drives the point home.

"Untitled" Explanation

DISCUSSION AND EXPLORATION

Having written four original songs, in addition to thorough reflections on them, I can begin to address my research questions.

First of all, I feel strongly about these songs as an honest depiction of my identity, based on my experience writing many other songs. This honesty can be understood as an important precondition to drawing conclusions about one's identity based on their original music, which is supported by David Carless' work, in which he notes that "[good] songs deal in truths" (Carless, 2017).

The four songs that I have written and reflected on can be, for the most part, understood to each embody one significant theme: creativity and inspiration (*Big Sky*), life journey (*Drive On*), letting go (*Release*) and being present (*Untitled*). Through extended meditation and contemplation on these themes by way of writing the songs and journal entries, I am able to draw a series of conclusions about my identity.

The song *Big Sky* and its complementary journal entries suggest that creativity and artistic expression are central to how I perceive myself, as well as how I find joy. The imagery in the song depicts a stark contrast between a cold and wintry setting, where creativity is not present, and a warm and pleasant one, where creativity returns. The fact that both of these circumstances are present in the song shows that I am not always able to tap into my creativity to my full satisfaction, and the distinction between them demonstrates how critical creative expression is to my happiness. This contrast is also addressed in my journal entries, in which I discuss the difference between the way it feels when there is a lack of inspiration, and ideas are "frozen" in a way, versus when inspiration is present, and ideas are "flowing like melted water." In a way, writing this song was my attempt to capture and return

to the act of creating. Because this was the first song I wrote for my thesis, and because it was the first song that I had written on my own for several months, I wanted to begin by exploring my relationship with creativity.

In the song *Drive On*, as well as its related journal entries, there is a great deal of concern expressed over the course of my life, as expressed in lines like “The road is blurry and I’m starting to get worried that I’ll never get there.” As stated in the journal, I know that “I am young in the grand scheme of things,” but I still feel worried about where I’m headed, whether it is right for me, and if I will become too tired for a given path. Additionally, there is an expression of concern in this song and its related journal entries regarding whether I have enough strength to undergo significant life changes. Overall, this song demonstrates concern with my future, and illustrates some insecurities about being ready for it.

The song *Release* is arguably the most despondent of the collection. Instead of concern over the future, as is the case with *Drive On*, this song is focused on the past. The lyrics in this song, as well as its accompanying journal entries demonstrate my ability to recognize the existence of unhealthy feelings and behaviors within myself, while simultaneously being somewhat unable to move beyond them. This inability to move forward is demonstrated in the line: “Floating in the things you’re saying, with nothing to hold onto.” Additionally, the repetition of the chorus, through the lyrics as well as the recurrent chord progression, provides an added level of emphasis of these ideas.

The last song, *Untitled*, largely features the recognition that being present is truly important, shown by the line: “Let go of your notions and breathe in the moment at last.” However, unlike the previous three songs, which were written in the first person, *Untitled* is written in the second person, making observations and asking questions of an unnamed

“you.” This demonstrates my personal struggle with heeding this exact advice. The title “*Untitled*” was chosen to illustrate the importance of being present. With this title, it encourages the listener to be present with the song, instead of forming any notions about the song’s theme before hearing it. Overall, this song is a healthier reflection on how I aim to live and operate, even if I am unable to do so at times.

Answering Question 1

With these conclusions in mind, I can address the first question: How can songwriting be used to understand one’s identity? In attempting to navigate this question throughout the process of this project, I have kept in mind that, “[as] a mode of inquiry, what [is] important about art [is] ... how it create[s] meanings” (Bochner & Ellis, 2003). In terms of art-making through the act of songwriting, there is a great deal of potential for the creation of meaning. For me, the process of writing these songs created meaning by voicing what I think and feel more effectively than through other methods, such as simply speaking or writing. Additionally, I found that these thoughts and feelings were better and more thoroughly explored through the act of writing about them. For example, in the song *Big Sky*, I was able to examine my relationship with creativity and art-making in such a way that I am unable to otherwise. Exploring how I associate with creativity through the actual act of creating gave me the chance to study this relationship in real time, in a much more intimate and profound way. This discovery is supported by the work of Kristina Jacobsen, who writes that “[s]ongs ... give us the ability to voice the ineffable, allow listeners to access emotions we didn’t even know we had or were capable of feeling” (Cahnmann-Taylor et al., 2018).

Songwriting can be understood as an effective tool for understanding identity by pushing the artist to reflect. However, this reflection on the self is more intensive and

thorough than typical mental reflection. The nature of songwriting most often requires multiple sessions of work, causing the artist to revisit a topic or project multiple times, each time with a different headspace. Throughout this project, each song required several writing periods, encouraging me to contemplate my thoughts and feelings over and over, helping me learn about myself and my relationship to the topic at hand. Additionally, the process of writing lyrics for a song is often bound by the actual musical part of the song. Words, as well as the ideas that they represent, must often be altered to fit the melody, to match with the tempo, or to find a rhyme. I encountered this phenomenon repeatedly throughout the songwriting phase of my project. As a result, I was forced to find different ways to voice my ideas. If I was committed to the technical musical side of a song, I would try to think differently about what I wanted to say. This occurred while writing the song *Untitled*. The actual chorus being only two lines meant that I did not have very much room to convey all of the messages I had in mind. I found that adjusting my ideas to fit the song's structure encouraged more thought about how to express my ideas. Through such an exercise, the writer of a song is compelled to consider their thoughts and their feelings in a variety of ways, allowing them to learn while creating.

In my experience with songwriting, I found that it can be further seen as a tool for understanding identity by providing a space for the writer to be both inquisitive and critical of themselves. Throughout my writing process, I consistently questioned my connection and relationship to the concept I was writing about. As a result, through attempting to answer those questions, I developed a greater sense of self-knowledge. In an article titled "Identity-in-the-work and musicians' struggles: the production of self-questioning identity work," Nic Beech, Charlotte Gilmore, Paul Hibbert, and Sierk Ybema support this notion.

These authors note that identity work for artists “is oriented towards critical questions and self-provocations” (Beech et al., 2016). In addition to allowing the writer to be self-inquisitive, I also concluded that the act of songwriting allows the writer to be self-critical. Throughout my autoethnographic study, I was able not only to identify personal qualities, but also whether they were positive or negative aspects about myself. For instance, in the song *Release*, I demonstrated recognition of my limited ability to move on from prior suffering, despite acknowledging that it is something I should do. This notion is also supported by Beech, Gilmore, Hibbert, and Ybema, who describe how the work of independent songwriters “[illustrates] several processes that [contribute] to identity work: expressing difficult emotions, ... [and] reaching into uncomfortable parts of the self” (Beech et al., 2016).

Answering Question 2

Keeping in mind the conclusions drawn from my songs, journal entries, and first research question, I can begin to answer the second research question: How can songwriting help the writer deal with change? As someone who is preparing to graduate from undergraduate university and seek a full time job, this question was of particular relevance for me. Significant life changes can be daunting, and I was eager to investigate how my passion can help me prepare for and manage these changes. I found that music can fulfill this function in two main, interconnected ways: (1) the identification of qualities and characteristics within themselves, and (2) the connection between expression and action.

The first part of this question’s answer comes from the conclusions drawn about songwriting as a tool for understanding identity. For instance, songwriting, as well as reflection, allows the writer to identify qualities and characteristics within themselves:

strengths and weaknesses, what builds them up and what breaks them down, and how they address physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual issues. By firstly becoming more aware of their identity through songwriting and reflection, the songwriter can gain a greater understanding of how they are likely to navigate life changes vs. how they should ideally do so. For example, with the songs *Release* and *Drive On*, I highlight the tendency that I have to worry about both the past and the future, respectively. Moving forward, as I embrace change, I can build upon this recognition to try and be more present. Understanding and recognition of one's identity is not solely enough to help someone manage changes, but it is an important first step, which can be provided by songwriting.

The second part of this question's answer has to do with the connection between expression and action. Throughout this project, I have discovered more deeply how music and songwriting help me bridge the gap between what I am feeling, and therefore expressing, and how I am acting. This action piece is dependent on the prior recognition of identity, as previously discussed. Once there is understanding of one's identity, as well as how they would like to develop themselves moving forward, action can be taken. In a way, the connection between expression and action has a great deal to do with the process of admission and acceptance. Only by accepting who we are can we work on improvement moving into the future. This finding, that songwriting can help connect expression and action, is supported by the work of Miroslav Pavle Manovski, who undertook a similar autoethnographic study. In a book detailing his personal experiences with music, oppression and adversity, Manovski demonstrated "how music is used to represent life or how it manipulates it," as well as how music can be used to "make connections or deeper meaning" (Manovski, 2014).

CONCLUSION

My experience with this thesis was one defined by exploration. Whereas “traditional” research, which is often more scientific in nature, is dependent upon logical analysis, my practice of arts-based research, which is more suited to social research, was more of a looser, unrestrained exercise. This allowed me to freely examine my original music, without being restricted by the norms of conventional scientific research, which tends to be more linear and less accessible than arts-based research. This opportunity, provided by arts-based research, was an essential foundation for a study based on creative expression and reflection.

Personally, this thesis helped me to establish a status for myself in my own mind as a songwriter. More than ever before, I was able to see how my identity is reflected in the songs that I write. Furthermore, pairing my songwriting with journal reflections helped to unlock more creation, in addition to spurring more thought about what my songs actually mean. Moving forward, I believe that continuing such a practice of journaling in conjunction with the act of songwriting will help to increase the authenticity and potency of my music and the conclusions I can draw from it.

Music is one of the world’s most prominent art forms, and always has been. However, in the music culture that exists today, it can be startlingly easy to overlook the role and impact of the act of songwriting. This process is at the heart of music’s existence as a form of self-expression. As a space for creating self-knowledge and working to evolve the self, songwriting is a highly effective method of both expression and growth.

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