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Navigating Proximities: The Creative Identity of the Hired Musician

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This article concerns itself with the creative role and identity of the hired musician. As part of an ongoing study of musicians working in studio environments, I interviewed a number of freelance musicians in order to gain some insight into their sense of identity and the creative process. I chose subjects that had climbed the career ladder high enough to allow them a degree of agency not afforded musicians who play what Bruce MacLeod refers to as “club dates,” nor the interchangeable laborers of Robert Faulkner’s study of Hollywood session musicians.¹ Because of their visibility within the professional realm, many of the subjects of this study requested that their words be attributed anonymously, and I have honored those requests.

Performers and audiences alike think of music as the authentic creative expression of unique personalities. As Simon Frith contends, “The contrast between music-as-expression and music-as-commodity defines twentieth-century pop experience.”² Frith goes on to describe the language of rock criticism as, “what is at stake here is the *truth* of music—truth to the people who created it, truth to our experience.”³ Those musicians whose creative endeavors are deemed “true” by their audiences are considered “artists.” Artists who attain a large measure of public recognition become “stars.” Popular music in particular supports a celebrity system centered on highly visible and easily identifiable individuals. Yet much popular music is in fact made by unknown, unidentified musicians, hired collaborators who work out of the public eye in the recording studio or in the shadows of the concert stage. Unlike club date, film scoring, or commercial jingle session players, these musicians are prized for their unique musical and social personalities, not merely for their instrumental skill. Their individual, even idiosyncratic contributions, are highly valued by their employers. Though they may not be commonly identified with the work, these musicians view their contributions as forms of creative expression and have a considerable emotional investment in the projects in which they participate.

Displaying Process—Identifying the “Right”

I was watching a documentary about Steely Dan’s 1978 album *Aja*,⁴ part of a series on the making of “classic albums.” I’ve never been much of a Steely Dan fan, but I seem to have an insatiable appetite for making-of-album documentaries. I watched the whole series, even the episode on Phil Collins. Rock critics often cite *Aja* as the epitome of Steely Dan’s jazz/rock fusion, and of the group’s increasing practice of hiring studio musicians, rather than existing as a functioning “band.” Mark Coleman’s thumbnail review of their work in the *Rolling Stone Album Guide* describes these session musicians’ contributions as “accomplished, cold, brittle.”⁵ Such judgments are common in popular music criticism; professionalism is equated with sterility, the music made by “hired guns” is inorganic, disconnected, inauthentic, unreal.

Yet as the documentary unfolds, it becomes clear that each session musician was called not simply to execute the ideas of masterminds Walter Becker and Donald Fagen, but to supply original ideas, to make vital contributions, to express individuality, to say something. Nowhere was this more evident than in Becker and Fagen’s search for the “right” guitar solo on the song “Peg.” Numerous players had taken a stab, and a number of these takes still exist on the multitrack tapes. As each attempt was auditioned in the video, I was struck by how different, how singularly unique each solo was. “Right” in this case was not simply “correct,” but special, idiosyncratic, individual.

While artists are most commonly associated with the works that bear their name, hired musicians make vital contributions to the projects they work on, and are often responsible for prominent musical features that lead to the success of a recording. Think of Steve Cropper’s guitar intro to Sam and Dave’s “Soul Man,” Steve Gadd’s drum pattern on Paul Simon’s “50 Ways To Leave Your Lover,” or Clyde Stubblefield’s groove on James Brown’s “Funky Drummer.” Even David Mason’s trumpet solo on The

Beatles' "Penny Lane" must be considered a vital ingredient of the artistic whole.⁶

Though most hired musicians are relatively anonymous, they do not work in total obscurity. Session musicians are often given credit and acknowledgement, though their acclaim must never supersede that of the artists they are hired to support. Certainly financial considerations play a part in deciding which projects a musician will agree to become involved in, but remuneration is by no means the only factor. None of the musicians I interviewed are "only in it for the money." Again and again, they claim that they are motivated by opportunities for creative expression, and enticed by the rewards of the collaborative process itself.

Join Together—Collaboration

The emphasis on process results from circumstances in which musicians have little control over their environments, or over the resulting products of their labors. They must derive immediate gratification from the process because future reward will not be forthcoming. Though freelancers embark on individually determined career paths, much of their creative activity involves processes of musical collaboration. Sociologist Alfred Schutz described collaboration as, "the mutual tuning-in relationship, the experience of the 'We.'"⁷ And for most of the individuals I spoke with, the collaborative experience, the experience of the "We," was the most musically rewarding and fulfilling.

Collaboration is a complex process of assertion and accommodation. Reconciling the contradictions associated with establishing a creative identity in a field where contributions are considered "works for hire," and thus regarded as significantly less important than that of the artists they work with, is a particularly difficult endeavor, and one that many musicians wrestle with perpetually. Often fundamental differences of taste, opinion, and approach become apparent, and lead to a creative impasse. When this happens, a musician must defer to the dominant power structure, yielding to either the artist or an outside producer who has final say over the entire project and process.⁸ Consequently, the musician must construct alternative identities, or alter egos,⁹ in order to comfortably express "someone else's ideas."

For many session musicians, conceptions of identity, of self, are often in conflict with those identities assigned from the outside.¹⁰ Much is revealed in the terminology my informants used to describe what they do,

as well as who they are. One singer, who maintains a solo career in addition to her session work, uses the term “hired gun” to describe herself when she is hired to sing for commercial jingles. As a musical mercenary, she *is* somewhat detached and does not feel the need to assert her identity into the proceedings. Interestingly, she never uses that phrase to describe other musicians, especially those she hires to play with her on stage and in the studio. She does not consider them hired guns because she wants these musicians to be involved and invested in her music, at least up to a point. She prefers the term “back-up,” a word that has implications of support, but also delineates a hierarchy of “back” as opposed to “front.”¹¹

Another word choice is emphasized by a pianist, who considers “collaborator” to be a more empowering term than the word often used to describe her role: “accompanist.” Collaborator implies a non-hierarchical relationship that may in fact be at play on stage, though she is quick to note that the audience rarely perceives her role in that way.¹² The desire to be recognized as an equal is perhaps related to the more intimate, one-on-one collaborations she participates in. For those musicians who work within a larger group context, such sentiments are often less pronounced.

One drummer describes his function as a “supporting role.” Supporting rather accurately describes the musical foundation the drums provide in most settings; he helps to create a space and establish a structure his fellow musicians can work in. Support also reveals a positive relation to his employers, as his musical contributions, and those of the other players, enable the artists to create and express themselves to the fullest.¹³

Into The Music—Establishing Identity

Ambivalence about the subordinate identities formed by imbalances in power between the session players and the artists who hire them causes many musicians to shift their creative focus from a direct relationship between musician and artist towards one of musician and *music*.¹⁴ For some, the ego is an obstacle that must be pushed aside in order to successfully accommodate and create the music.

I’m trying to sublimate me and get to the music. I’m not thinking me in the center with the music going on around....The music is the center, and we’re all kind of putting stuff in from the outside, trying to make the thing in the middle right.¹⁵

In this case, the music is seen to exist in an unrefined, or embryonic form. The task of the musician is to “make the thing in the middle,” the music, “right.”¹⁶ They view their role not as one of servitude, catering to the dictates of their employer; rather these musicians view themselves as being at the mercy of the music. This is not simply a given state, but rather one of constant negotiation, as one musician confides, “You’re walking along that line all the time.”¹⁷ Consider the following:

I think it’s kind of nice ’cause some people who I admire have said they recognize a certain touch. What I would run a mile from would be stamping an identity or a style on something. I mean that’s not good. That’s not good because that’s not serving the music to say, “Here I am, I’m me, I do that.”¹⁸

For this musician, specific contributions are unimportant, and can in fact be problematic. What he believes his employers most value in him, and what he values most himself, is a *sensibility*. “What the artist is saying is, ‘I like the way you think.’”¹⁹ Not one of the musicians cited specific abilities, but rather an *approach* as key to one’s musical identity. A pianist describes the three components of her playing as “my piano technique, and my actual sound, and sort of ‘way.’”²⁰ One musician believes he is hired because he is prepared, someone who “takes the job seriously.”²¹ Yet another stresses her “special” and “idiosyncratic” approach as her hallmark. If she isn’t allowed to flex her creative muscle, she is disappointed. “The times when they do want something very straight, I’ve always walked away feeling kind of dissatisfied. Like they didn’t get what I do well, they didn’t get that on tape.”²² Though highly refined skill sets are a prerequisite for admission into the upper echelon of studio work, it is the musician’s *unique* ability to assess and adapt his or her “way” that makes one a desirable hire.

Just as successful actors continually demonstrate the ability to disappear into a role, freelance musicians must fully inhabit identities that are temporarily adopted for a particular session or gig. It behooves freelance musicians to develop either multiple identities or identities that contain a wide range of expressive possibilities. They must be malleable, moving from unobtrusive scenery to the center of attention and back again. They

must shadow and support, or jump-start, initiate, and generate momentum and excitement. They must simultaneously project, and be devoid of personality. The musicians most in demand are the ones who can cover the most bases, the ones who can execute the proper stylistic figures to match a given musical genre. They are fluent in a number of musical languages, and have the ability to translate, or quote, across genres. They must deliver the right performance on call and with consistency. This is the professionalism so derided in popular music journalism, and even by a number of musicians. Yet, freelance musicians must be able to deliver more than the expected *right* notes, the most successful musicians deliver the unexpected, the execution of particular and unique musical choices that define an identity to employers and to fellow session players.

Displaying Prowess—Claiming Identity

About a half hour into the Steely Dan documentary, an examination of the song “Home at Last” focuses on the contributions of drummer Bernard Purdie. Becker and Fagen had auditioned several drummers on the song, but none were able to capture the indefinable feel they wanted. Purdie heard them describe what they were looking for and announced, “Fine, let me do the ‘Purdie shuffle.’” He then proceeds to demonstrate his virtually trademarked pattern. Purdie appears unconcerned with notions of sublimating the ego; his is on display for all to behold.

The best artists have the power to hire the best bands, converting both economic and social capital into cultural capital, and vice versa. Two forms of validation by association²³ are at play here. If a virtuoso musician is willing to play supportive parts for most of a performance, the voluntary suppression of ego and ability exalts the status of the artist. Conversely, being a featured musician with a popular artist also elevates the musician’s standing, both in terms of audience perception, and among one’s peers who are quite aware of “who plays with whom.”

Getting what a musician does well on tape not only benefits the music, but also the session musician. As much as an employer may value a sensibility, it is the embodiment of that sensibility, a standout performance, which does the most good for the musician’s career. A number of musi-

cians recognize the value of a good performance, preserved and promoted in the marketplace. The competitive nature of the freelance world requires musicians to refine their skills at self-promotion. It is precisely this stamp of identity, of style, that must be trumpeted, a musical calling card left on someone else's record.

When Purdie is first introduced, he opts for another kind of identifier, a recited litany of musicians who have had the good sense to hire him. He doesn't elaborate—no anecdotes, no particular song or album titles—just a long list of famous names, carefully selected and ordered. He juxtaposes genres and time periods; it seems that the entire history of recorded popular music is on his resume. In fact, the list is so long, that the video editors simply fade out his monologue.

In some instances, a freelance musician's career arc may parallel that of the popular artist/employer. Just as the pop marketplace has an insatiable hunger for the new, certain session musicians become hot properties, "must have" collaborators whose contributions ensure creative and commercial success. Their names become omnipresent in album liner notes, their faces vaguely familiar in the back line on national television. These in-demand musicians are free to collaborate with any number of high-profile artists, and work to maintain this freedom by forming only short-term attachments to any specific project. However, once the vogue for these name players pass, these musicians must work to establish more extended relationships that will sustain them over the course of a career.

Emotional Rescue—Transcending the Employer/Employee Relationship

Real social bonds develop among artists and supporting musicians. Economically based associations lead to musical connection; musical connection evolves into friendship. All parties can become increasingly invested in the comfort and security of a stable gig, where commitment is based on friendship as well as musical worth. Generous contributions of time and creative expression on the part of the musician reflect a high degree of emotional attachment to a project, and if these attachments are treated lightly, it can be taken as a personal affront. A musician related the

following anecdote to me:

There's no guarantee at all that it's going to continue.... Many moons ago I worked with [an artist]. We did a record and we went on tour; it got very comfortable. And then she decided to change her band. And I was really, really hurt. I thought, "Oh God, what have I done?" And she said, "You go off and play with lots of different people—I want to too." And it was a light bulb [going off]. I thought, "How obvious."²⁴

Such experiences, though infrequent in the full course of a career, are common to most freelance musicians, and can leave a lasting impression. With all such professional connections so tenuous, it is little wonder that for one player the golden rule is, "save a part of yourself."²⁵

Still, some freelance musicians enjoy the benefits of short-term commitment. They welcome the freedom to explore other musical avenues, rather than having to sustain a commitment to one artist or one genre. If disco gives way to hip-hop, art rock to power pop, they simply master the new styles and continue working. If freelance rock guitarists wish to play jazz, they are only held back by the degree to which they successfully incorporate new musical languages into their playing. They are not bound by obligations to an audience. This can give a greater measure of control over their artistic direction than the artists that employ them may have.²⁶

Displaying Purpose—A Face In The Crowd

The camera focuses on Donald Fagen's hands as the opening chords of "Peg" sound from his piano. As a second camera pans across the room, we see Fagen's compatriot Walter Becker seated with a guitar. Bernard Purdie, he of the trademarked shuffle, is at the drum kit. Chuck Rainey, who has given a quick lesson in creative bass playing earlier in the video, is seated at Becker's left. There is an unknown figure in the corner, playing a Fender Rhodes. We'll never know his name. There is a second unknown figure seated at Becker's left, also playing guitar.

Except, he's not unknown to me. I recognize him as a session player I've worked with. My first thought is, "Hey, that's Jon Herrington!" My second is, "Wow, that's great that he got the Steely Dan gig. What a nice guy, he deserves it." As the song progresses, I become uneasily aware of the difficult position he is in. Fagen and Becker are notorious taskmasters, and I pray that he doesn't make a mistake, or commit some uncharted aesthetic sin. Earlier in the video, Becker and Fagen had commented on Larry Carlton's rhythm guitar work on the song. When the video cuts back to the performance footage, we see Jon creating a very believable simulation of Carlton's guitar. It's clear that Jon has been hired for his ability to replicate the guitar parts from the original recording. He has the ability to cast off his own identity and become Larry Carlton, Dean Parks, or any number of guitarists depending on the dictates of the set list.

But a remarkable thing happens. When the band arrives at the part of the arrangement where the guitar solo should be, I assume Becker will take the spotlight. But the camera pulls back to reveal that Jon is in fact the soloist. At first, he neatly paraphrases the original guitar solo, acting yet another role, but gradually, he begins to insert his own musical ideas. As the solo builds in intensity, I realize that he is no longer paraphrasing and emulating, he is expressing. It is clear that in addition to impersonating Los Angeles session whizzes, the job demands new and unique musical contributions. He has also been hired to be Jon Herrington.

Successful freelance musicians occupy a border zone that is neither completely in, nor out, of the spotlight. A standard showbiz cliché would indicate that these musicians were simply biding their time, calculating the proper moment to emerge from the chorus line and leap into stardom. This is rarely the case. Most of the musicians I spoke with have made conscious choices to avoid the white-hot spotlight at center stage, opting for the more muted shades of the perimeter. This might imply a discomfort with being

in the limelight, and to a degree this is true for some of the musicians. But just as often, many feel they benefit from the advantages unique to their position. While the artist is constantly distracted by the machinations of the entertainment business, the supporting musician is generally free from having to devote time and energy to mundane and draining tasks like interviews and photo ops. Supporting musicians are afforded a degree of privacy; they are allowed to be in a bad mood or to be disinterested, whereas the star must always be “on.”

The distance maintained by supporting musicians from the mechanisms surrounding the collaborative process confers a measure of objectivity to their perceptions and memories of the musical experience. Thus session musicians are often called upon to supply a voice of authority to historical considerations of important recordings or musical events. On occasion, these voices may be deemed more reliable than those of the artist in question, and are sought out by authors, scholars, and especially producers of music documentaries (like the Steely Dan video under consideration) to supply contradictory or corroborative evidence to the historical narrative.²⁷

The supporting players may come to consider themselves superior to the star as *musicians*; they don't “make show,” they make music. These musicians are concerned about a different audience—one composed of other musicians, their peer group. Recognition by their peers is an important element in their musical career, and often freelance musicians seek the most high profile employment for the visibility it affords them among their colleagues. Though they stand in the shadows, their peers recognize them because their peers know where to look. By avoiding the spotlight, musicians can focus their attentions more directly and consistently towards “the music” while simultaneously advancing their careers as well as enhancing their status within their own subculture.

Conclusion—Investment and Meaning

This paper has focused on the many ways identity is constructed and maintained by the freelance musician. Many work against stereotypes of disinterested, disconnected, clock-watching, dollar-counting automatons.

Instead, these musicians have a real stake in their work; they invest their contributions with care and feeling, and sessions are often the outlet for highly personal creative expression. That they do this in the face of a system designed to discount and devalue them as individuals is all the

more impressive.

The degree of emotional and intellectual engagement demonstrated by the musicians of this study should dispel any myth of the distanced, jaded, “hired gun.” Though one musician’s description of standing outside with the music in the middle might imply a certain amount of distancing, in reality, these musicians are often fully committed, gleefully diving into the center of the projects they work on. Though not all projects are equally desirable or rewarding, the individuals of this study have exerted a great deal of energy towards guiding their careers so that they are almost always presented with projects worth diving into.

All other factors, both positive and negative, aside, it is the process of making music that is most appealing to these musicians, and the prospect of collaboration rather than working in isolation represents the music’s greatest reward. As each person describes, the experience of making music is one of intense pleasure. It is addictive, and compels the musician to make whatever efforts are necessary to ensure repeated opportunities for satisfaction, just as a child will spend hours repetitively dragging a sled uphill for the few exhilarating moments of the downhill slide.

Such expenditures of energy can be tiring, and each musician confesses frustration with one aspect or another of his or her musical environment. Nonmusical distractions and complications such as audience expectations, lack of recognition, inequitable pay scales, lack of job security, and the large amount of preparation and practice required to maintain the necessary skills each musician is expected to exhibit make freelancing a very difficult career to pursue.

Yet each individual in this study expressed a great deal of satisfaction with musical life. Though none of them were wealthy, each one lives in varying degrees of comfort and has been doing so for a number of years. Though there are areas of minor and major dissatisfaction, not one of the participants expressed any bitterness or regret over his or her choice of occupation.

Perhaps the most surprising revelation of our conversations was the degree these musicians had investment in, and attachment to, projects that did not bear their names, and over which they had no measure of control. They spoke passionately about the musical process, and often reverently of the artists they are hired to support. Paul McCartney might have said, “Can’t buy me love,” but when he hires one of the musicians interviewed for this study to play on his records, that is indeed what he gets. For the

most part, these musicians care deeply about their work and the people they work for, though this is not always recognized or acknowledged by their employers, or by the audience that listens to the results of their creative endeavors.

Lack of widespread public recognition may be why the musicians look to the music and the process of music-making for satisfaction. Clearly, the sense of one's identity is closely connected to a musician's role in the musical structure and creative hierarchy that is constantly present on stage or in the studio. Each person assumes his or her place within the structure, and determines the criteria for happiness and satisfaction in it. In turn, each musician must relate to other musicians who perform different roles and functions. It may be that most musicians look to other musicians, especially those immediately present, the collaborators, for recognition and support. The shared experience that the knowing nod or wink in performance indicates, or the celebration of a job well done at the end of a concert or recording session may be barely verbalized, but it is often these small rewards that validate and justify the efforts at creative expression.

Finally, each musician's contribution to a musical project is a form of creative expression. It may be done at the behest of the employer, but whatever is said musically, the musicians say for and about themselves. They exercise their own aesthetic criteria with each musical choice they make, and they apply their sensibilities freely and consciously. They are less concerned about compensation or recognition for any one particular contribution than they are about creating, maintaining, and expanding the opportunities for participation, collaboration and expression; the making of music is its own reward.

Coda—Let The Credits Roll

He is playing well, and for a moment something resembling real excitement seems to suffuse the music, though maintaining a façade of cool, none of the musicians risk eye contact. However, the moment passes; the solo comes to an end, and he returns to Carltonesque chord comping. He has relinquished his brief hold on the spotlight, and the camera accordingly moves back to Fagen at the piano, reinforcing that this is a Steely Dan documentary, not a Jon Herrington video. He has slipped back into

the shadows of freelance anonymity. He is never identified. When the credits roll, his name does not appear.

Endnotes

1. MacLeod, 1993; Faulkner, 1971.
2. Frith, 1988.
3. Ibid.
4. Lewens, 1999.
5. Coleman, 1992.
6. Other notable session musicians include studio rhythm sections such as Los Angeles' The Wrecking Crew, The Meters from New Orleans, and Motown's Funk Brothers—the foundation for many landmark pop recordings.
7. Schutz, 1977 [1951]: 115. See also Pond, 2000 for a discussion of mental telepathy among musicians on stage. One of my informants, Richard, related the following anecdote about connection via headphones, "If you're in that close contact with someone, like say with headphones on, there's this other connection. That you're almost inside the other person's brain in a way. It's very intimate—That you're processing someone else's ideas, and it's just being thrown around in your head that quickly, is a pretty cool process. Yeah, it's a wonderful thing." (Richard interview, 2000).
8. See Porcello, 1996; Massey, 2000; Buskin, 1999, for roles in the recording studio.
9. J. Keith Murnighan and Donald Conlon published a fascinating study of power relations within a group of British string quartets. They found that instrumental function dictated specific roles, and that these roles became internalized as identity. (Murnighan and Conlon, 1991). Many of the musicians I worked with have also internalized assigned roles based on their chosen instrument. This was especially pronounced in bass players, who often took subordinate positions in musical interactions, or by drummers who went to great lengths to distance themselves from the stereotypical "bad behavior" associated with drums and popular music. (Richard interview, 2000; Dave interview, 2001).
10. Jeff Todd Titon refers to assigned identity as "stance," see Titon, 1985.
11. Lucy interview, 2001.
12. Judy interview, Feb. 2001.
13. Dave interview, 2001.

14. I am using the term “ambivalence” to describe the mental process for the reconciliation of conflicting schema as outlined by Claudia Strauss, see Strauss and Quinn, 1997; Strauss, 2000.
15. Ibid.
16. Charles Keil describes the musical liminal state: “You now are the Other, or the Other is in you. You are in the music. The music is in you.” (Keil and Feld, 1994: 164) The idea of being “in the music” is one that collapses the center/periphery boundary that the drummer established; the musician is no longer separate from the music, making contributions from outside, but rather is completely immersed, and possibly submerged, within it. In many cases, “disappearing” into the music is the ultimate musical experience.
17. Dave interview, 2001.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Judy interview, Feb. 2001.
21. Richard interview, 2000.
22. Lucy interview, 2001.
23. This is a concept that one of the informants explored at some length. Judith felt compelled to send me a message emphasizing the role such associations have in terms of career advancement and visibility. This visibility had as much, or more, to do with audience recognition, and the reception of her performance, as it did with recognition among her peers and collaborators. Judy personal correspondence, Mar. 2001.
24. Dave interview, 2001.
25. Ibid.
26. Stars are given much less latitude to follow the changing tides of fashion. A few stars have made stylistic leaps successfully, but most often these shifts are considered unconvincing or unwarranted by their audience.
27. For example, Steve Cropper may be one of the most visible session musicians in the public eye by dint of his numerous appearances as a “talking head” in documentaries on soul music. The recent film about Motown’s Funk Brothers, *Standing in the Shadows*, is another example of subordinate musical voices as historical witnesses.

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