

An Autoethnography of a Punk Rocker Turned Music Teacher

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Abstract

The criteria used to admit prospective music teachers in colleges and universities across the United States has remained relatively unchanged since their inception. These criteria disenfranchise a population of potential music teachers who hold musical backgrounds outside the Western European art tradition. This autoethnography illuminates the challenges and barriers experienced by a self-taught musician who attended two traditional music programs in a midwestern region of the United States. Using Berry's (1980) six dimensions of acculturation as the theoretical framework to interpret these data, the author exposes challenges associated with his journey in achieving music teacher certification. As a qualitative investigation, an analysis of results suggests that prospective music teachers—particularly those who hold musicianship skills outside the Western European art tradition—will continue to face significant barriers, and sometimes rejection, in pursuit of a teacher certification in music from a traditional college or university. The author posits that colleges and universities in the United States, specifically those with traditional performance expectations in classical repertoire, should expand their understandings of musicianship, redefine what it means to be musically literate, adapt admissions criteria to affirm musicianship outside the Western European art tradition, and consider opportunities for informal or self-taught musicians to study, perform, and learn music within formal institutions.

An Autoethnography of a Punk Rocker Turned Music Teacher

Issues related to access and music teacher education have become more ubiquitous than ever (Allsup, 2016; Bowman, 2007; Clements, 2009; Jacobowitz et al., 2000; Koza, 2008; Palmer, 2011; Talbot, 2017; Tobias, 2013; Vasil, 2015; Williams & Kladder, 2019; Williams, 2007, 2012, 2019). Some scholars have argued that many music programs across the United States remain focused on the Western European art canon, while others have interrogated exclusive practices in the profession related to race, gender, instrumentation, and pedagogy (Fitzpatrick et al., 2014; Koza, 2008; Talbot, 2017). As direct connections exist among undergraduate music programs (UMP), music teacher preparation programs (MTPP), and P-12 teaching, many have suggested broadening musicianship experiences, expanding curricula, and adapting admissions criteria to embrace a broader range of musicianship ability (Bowman, 2007; Kladder, 2019; Kratus, 2019; Palmer, 2011; Talbot, 2017; Williams, 2019).

To further this notion, in 2014, the College Music Society organized a task force aimed at addressing these issues. The task force produced a lengthy document entitled the *Manifesto* (CMS Task Force, 2014), which has now become a central mechanism for change in reorganizing and redefining the types of experiences in an undergraduate music curriculum. Led by Patricia Shehan Campbell, past president of the College Music Society, the task force investigated what it means to be a well-rounded musician in contemporary society. The authors agreed that the music curriculum in colleges and universities across the United States are in need of change, where a diversification of the current curriculum should be reenvisioned to include increased opportunities for creativity, a diverse breadth of music experiences, and integration across the curriculum. The *Manifesto* states:

The state of university and college-level music study is vastly different from the one around which the field has typically been conceived. Whereas central features of

contemporary musical practice beyond the academy include the creative, cross-cultural engagement, and synthesis emblematic of the societies in which this practice flourishes, contemporary tertiary-level music study—with interpretive performance and analysis of European classical repertory at its center—remains lodged in a cultural, aesthetic, and pedagogical paradigm that is notably out of step with this broader reality. (p. 11)

Their realization that the “pedagogical paradigm” for music programs in many colleges and universities remains “notably out of step with this broader reality” is not a new topic of discussion. For example, in the late 1960s, the Young Composers Project (1959-1962), Yale Seminar (1962), Contemporary Music Project (1963-1973), Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project (1966-1970), Tanglewood Symposium (1967), Comprehensive Musicianship Project (1965-1971), Multicultural Music Education Symposium (1990), and a variety of seminars and conferences (e.g., Choate et al., 1967; Washburn, 1960; Werner, 1979) addressed similar challenges in the field of music.

Proponents for change argue that music educators, defined as *all* faculty in higher education, hold responsibility in expanding the types of music taught in P-12 schools by dislodging barriers associated with music participation and allowing more students the opportunity to participate in music, regardless of prior experiences (Palmer, 2011; Talbot, 2017; Williams, 2019). For example, Cremata (2017) advocated that music classes should embrace and validate student experiences outside the Western European art canon. These arguments are based on empirical evidence suggesting that a significant portion of students do not learn, make, or perform music in school because it is not relevant to their lives outside school (Burnard, 2012; Jaffurs, 2004; Kratus, 2007; Williams, 2007, 2012).

The impact of UMP and MTPP on P-12 education should not be disparaged, as exclusive practices are continually perpetuated within the profession (Williams, 2019). Furthermore, admittance into UMPs continues to focus on a monolingual form of musicianship, often

controlled by policy makers and the larger music core curriculum (Kaschub & Smith, 2014; Kratus, 2019; Talbot, 2017; Williams, 2015). Audition criteria used to evaluate prospective music teachers is tied to core music curriculum and continues to focus on Western European repertoire, often impacted by performance departments, enrollment needs, and larger administrative concerns (Palmer, 2011). Unfortunately, this often disenfranchises some prospective students from participating in music. Until these criteria change, the music teaching profession will remain lodged in its current practices (Jacobowitz et al., 2000; Koza, 2008).

Although efforts toward change and an awareness of these issues have gained momentum in recent years, change is slow, and may continue to force “non-traditional” musicians away from the teaching profession or require that they find alternative approaches to certification. The purpose of this manuscript is to illuminate such an alternative approach. It showcases my journey as a “musically illiterate” punk rocker who overcome barriers associated with access to a MTPP using a somewhat subversive approach. As a vernacular musician who learned music through informal approaches (Green, 2002, 2008), I showcase how I eventually achieved a degree in music education from a traditional four-year music program in the midwestern region of the United States. This autoethnography seeks to challenge the current admissions landscape found in most UMPs and suggests a reexamination of its policies, where new pathways might be created within the music curriculum so that MTTPs in colleges and universities may diversify.

Literature Review

Investigations into the types of admission criteria used in UMPs and MTTPs across the United States are limited in scope (Brand, 1987; Kaschub & Smith, 2014). From the investigations that do exist, most are not empirical, which is reflective of the limited data on the topic (Koza, 2008). One of the earliest studies related to admission criteria in MTTPs is authored

by Brand (1987), who surveyed three institutions: West Virginia University - Morgantown, Florida State University, and the University of Cincinnati. Although the number of participants was not published, Brand found a wide range of criteria for admitting students were used across institutions, including: speaking, hearing and listening comprehension tests; the National Teacher Examination Professional Skills Test; grade point average; Scholastic Aptitude Test scores; communication abilities; a successful interview with a music education faculty member; teaching demonstrations; and music performance.

Brand also found that “music education programs have requirements that are more stringent than those for admission to the institution as a whole. Clearly, music education faculty have a broader vision of competencies needed for entry into music teacher education” (1987, p. 35). In conclusion, Brand advocated for several “non-musical” elements to be used in determining whether a prospective student was ready to be a music educator, including flexibility, sense of humor, and enthusiasm. He argued that admissions procedures should become *more* stringent and emphasize a wider set of skills and attributes than musical performance. However, these criteria—performance and sight reading ability on the student’s primary instrument, evaluated by a performance faculty member—remained lodged among those for admitting students into each institution’s music program.

Koza (2008) observed a variety of prospective music education students in voice auditions at the University of Wisconsin and compared current performance expectations in auditions with previous years. Although this writing is philosophical and no specific number of observations were indicated in the manuscript, Koza (2008) interrogated the admissions process, challenging the “Whiteness” used to admit students into the UMP and the increased stringent expectations for students to be accepted. Koza (2008) proposed changes to the admissions

criteria in ways represented ethnic proportions in culture and society. Using qualitative observational data from previous years' audition requirements, Koza found that audition requirements for prospective students became more stringent each year, with higher performance expectations and increasingly rigorous sight reading requirements that had reduced enrollment to the MTPP. Koza (2008) offered three conclusions: (a) the quality of student performance had risen dramatically, (b) students who had not studied privately before the audition were typically denied, and (c) the acceptable style of audition music was strictly limited to classical repertoire of the highest skill level. Koza (2008) criticized the repertoire requirements because they required music training and the financial means to afford private lessons prior to auditioning, which marginalized a significant population of prospective students. Koza (2008) concluded by stating that admissions criteria "jeopardize school music programs, the people in them, and the people they shut out" (p. 154).

Palmer (2011) also exposed issues of access to MTTPs in the context of race, socioeconomic status, test scores, gender, and cultural expectations (i.e., accepted music styles). Using Critical Race Theory as a theoretical framework, Palmer interrogated common issues related to access in MTTPs for people of color and suggested a massive disparity exists in "standardized test scores, grade point averages, school curriculum, educational experience, and socio-economic statuses" among different ethnic backgrounds in school-wide contexts. Palmer also noted the severe underrepresentation of people of color in music education programs across the United States. Importantly, Palmer argued that "If students of Color are given the opportunity to audition, the requirements and assumptions surrounding the audition process may also play a factor in limiting access" (p. 14). Palmer continued:

Specifically, music schools in the United States focus primarily on the study of Euro-American forms of music (Bowman, 2007). Since few schools offer the study of popular

styles of music, a number of excellent musicians are denied access to music programs. They do not fit the mold of what is expected by music schools when they may have incredible potential as music teachers. (p.14)

Palmer uncovered issues related to marginalization in music programs across the United States and reported that students who gain access to particular institutions were:

. . .expected to perform music from Euro-American traditions. That means a Gospel singer from Detroit who has a beautiful voice and the desire to teach music to children may be denied access because of his or her limited knowledge of classical singing. (p. 14)

Although Palmer's study was not empirical, he called for change in audition requirements into music programs across the United States, by changing policies that create a "narrow concept of audition and admission procedures for music education students" (p. 20) to policies that offer a broad conception of musicianship and validate music styles from all cultures.

These authors exposed challenges associated with access to a music education degree, especially those associated with what Johnson (2004) termed as an idiomatic hegemony of the Western-classical tradition. According to the aforementioned studies, access to music teacher education is limited because of gatekeepers, written policy expectations (e.g., grade point average, standardized test scores), and a predetermined set of music skills. A synthesis of this literature suggests that the criteria used to evaluate prospective music teachers remains stronger than ever, are focused on performance and a monolingual form of musicianship, and discriminates against those with limited access to private lessons (Koza, 2008).

Research Design

This investigation uses an autoethnographic design to analyze and interpret data. An autoethnography is an approach to "research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand a cultural experience" (Ellis et

al., 2011, p. 1). Autoethnographic writing is often a representation of an event, or series of events, that occurred in the past and told in first person (Gouzouasis et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2013). As a branch of qualitative research, autoethnographies use artifacts that may include song recordings (Bakan, 2014; Gouzouasis, 2013; Gouzouasis & Regier, 2015), photos (Irwin, 2013; Irwin & de Cosson, 2013; Rugg, 1997), journals and fiction (de Vries, 2007; Gouzouasis, 2011; Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Leavy, 2013), or poetry (Prendergast, 2006; Richardson, 1994).

Autoethnographic work tends to focus on personal or interpersonal experiences and are about the “essences” and “meanings” in the writing itself. They are often a reconstruction of past memories and experiences, where artifacts from journals, photos, and performance recordings were revisited by the author (Denzin, 2006; Gouzouasis, 2014; Richardson, 1994; Richardson & Pierre, 2005; Van Maanen, 1988). As Ellis et. al. (2011) explained, “A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product” (p. 2). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) wrote that autoethnographies are a movement in progressive research designs, where educational researchers recognize the challenges associated with objective truth in empirical investigations, often disconnected from the educational community.

As a branch of qualitative research, autoethnographies have become more prevalent in music education research (Krueger, 2014). According to Krueger, “ethnographic methodology, involving an in-depth study of a limited number of subjects in their natural setting, may be an appropriate research approach to certain educational programs and questions since it allows for exploration of understandings, meanings, and actions of participants” (p. 136). In music education research, this approach began in the mid-1980s and covered a variety of topics, including school music curriculum at the elementary level (Zimmerman, 1982), significance and

value of music in children's lives (Campbell, 1998), fifth-grade student musical productions' rehearsal processes (Feay-Shaw, 2001), culture within choir classrooms and the changing voice (Bartolome, 2010; Kennedy, 2004), collaboration between rural public schools and local universities (Soto et al., 2009), creative music making in the classroom (Beegle, 2010), and music experiences in and out of school (Snead, 2010). There are many benefits of using autoethnographic designs because they offer insight into "the dynamics within music classrooms, the beliefs, values, and understandings of music students and teachers, the influence of societal trends on music classroom culture and curriculum creation, and the effects and processes of music teacher education" (Krueger, 2014, p. 144).

Theoretical Construct

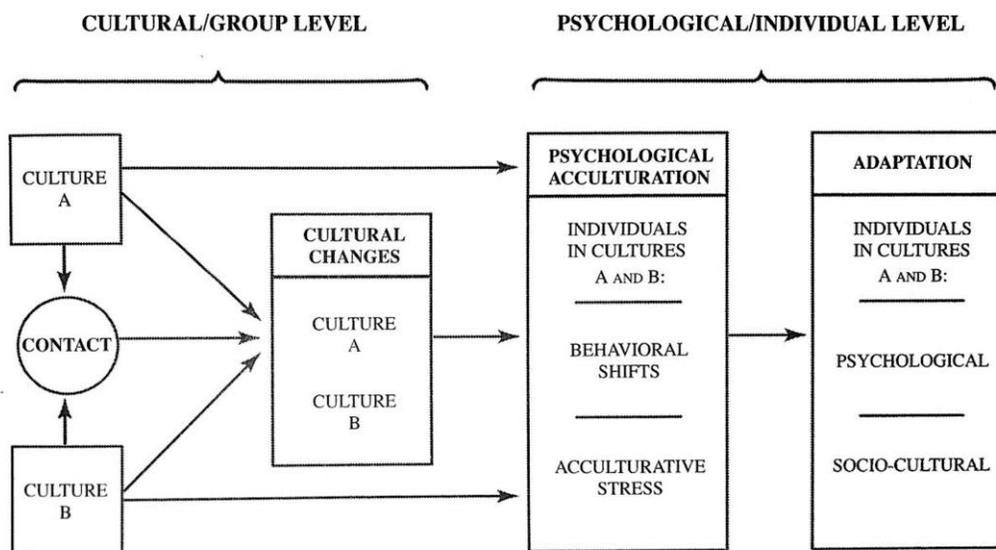
The theoretical construct of acculturation is used to interpret the findings from this autoethnography. As a social-cultural phenomenon, acculturation was first defined by Redfield et al. (1936) as "phenomena which result when groups of individuals, having different cultures, come into continuous first-hand contact..." (p. 149). More recent scholars, including Sam and Berry (2006), defined acculturation as "the meeting of cultures and [the] resulting changes" (p. 1). Acculturation focuses on how "the cultural context in which a person develops might shape (either promote or constrain) behavior" (p. 1).

Redfield et al. (1936) identified three building blocks integral to the acculturation process: *contact*, *reciprocal influence* and *change*. *Contact* is the "meeting" of two opposing cultures, while *reciprocal influence* is when each group influences each other. However, as Sam (2006) pointed out, "due to power differences, in terms of either economic power, military might, of numerical strength, one group exerts more influence than the other" (p. 15). In this modus, the values and identity of the "dominant" group overtake the "sub-dominant" group.

According to Sam (2006), *change* is fundamental to the outcome. *Change* is where one group (often the sub-dominant group) “assimilates” or is “accultured” (two terms used synonymously across the research) within the dominant culture. Graves (1967) identified that acculturation may occur at a macro (i.e., group) level but is most common at the micro (i.e., individual) level. From either perspective, research has shown that a dominant and a sub-dominant group often appear throughout the process (Sam, 2006). A visual representation of the acculturation process is provided in Figure 1, which illuminates how cultural norms of the dominant group change the individual.

Figure 1

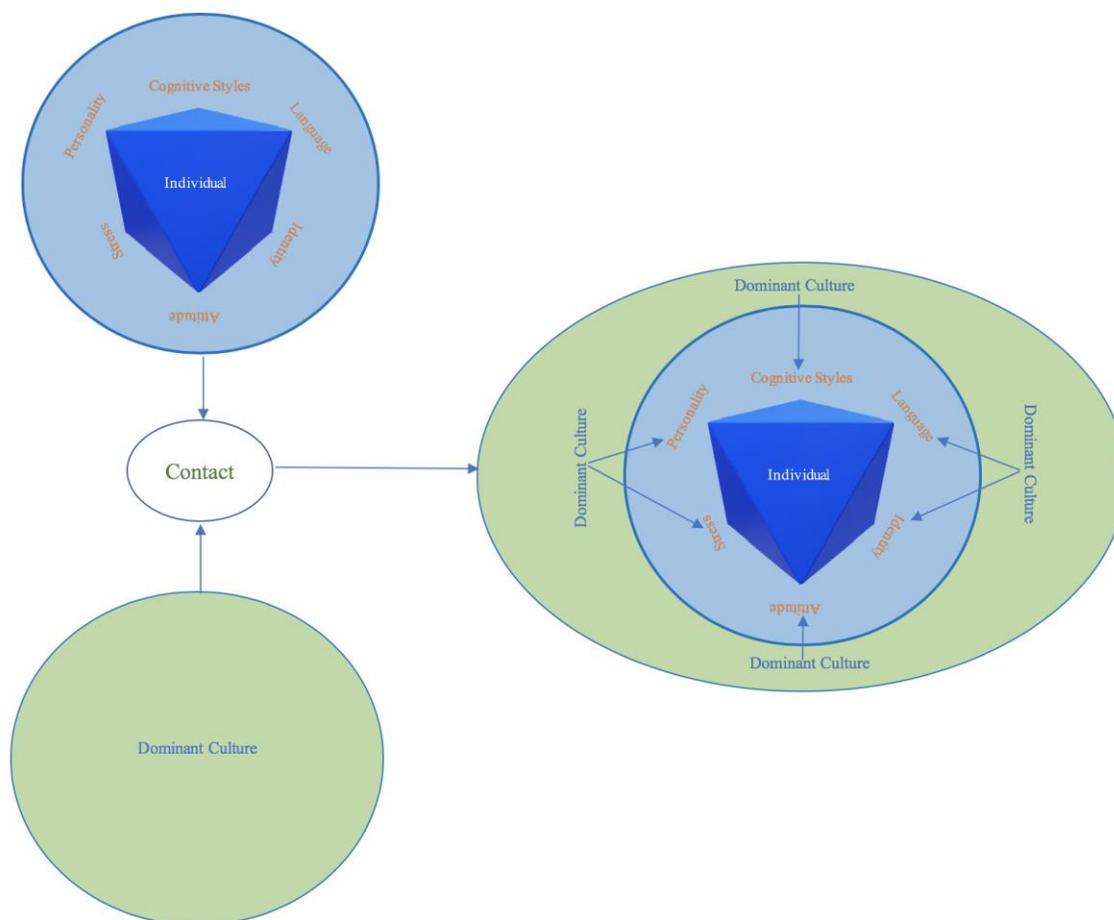
A Framework for Conceptualizing and Interpreting Acculturation (Sam, 2006, p. 21)



Berry (1980, 2006) demonstrated that acculturation, at the individual (i.e., micro) level, changed the individual within six dimensions: language, cognitive styles, personality, identity, attitudes, and acculturative stress. A conceptual framework for interpreting Berry's work is provided in Figure 2. This framework showcases the process whereby contact between a dominant culture and an individual occurs. The interaction between the dominant culture and the individual showcases that, over time, the individual will assimilate into the dominant culture, where all six dimensions of the individual (i.e., sub-dominant culture) are altered.

Figure 2

A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting the Contact Between a Dominant Culture and an Individual Using Six Dimensions



This autoethnography showcases a single individual's experiences over a 15-year span, from early elementary school through college graduation. All of my experiences occurred in a midwestern region of the United States in traditional P-12 and college music programs. I will use the aforementioned models and definitions of acculturation to assist in interpreting and evaluating the process illustrated in this autoethnography. Furthermore, Sam (2006) and Redfield et al. (1936) offer a grounding for interpretation and a lens through which I am able to showcase how a dominant group culture (i.e., macro) influenced my musical identity (i.e., micro) in all six dimensions.

Look up, then down. Repeat.

I can remember the smell of the living room and the piano on the days my mother asked me to practice. Although I concurred, I dreaded these moments. Dragging my feet across the living room carpet, I obliged by sitting in front of the piano. Usually with my head down, I would place my hands on the keys. Our piano was handed down to my parents from my grandmother and although it was aesthetically beautiful to view, it smelled of old wood, dusty strings, and felt hammers that were worn and used. The piano bench was made of hard wood and on top, embroidered flowers in the fabric were faded and weathered. Given the age of the piano bench, the once beautiful colors in the flowers had dissipated from its use across the decades. The keys of the piano were real ivory and, through many years of them being played on by my mother and grandmother, were worn and stained yellow. With my fingers placed on the faded keys, the frustration of reading music would gradually emerge. I looked up at the written notation and then down at my fingers and repeated the process.

Mistakes.

Look up, then down. Repeat.

More mistakes.

“*Ugh...All those notes on the page,*” I whispered to myself.

Look up, then down. Repeat.

Again, mistakes. Eventually, I would cry in defeat. Frustration set in. Often, the tears would land on the ivory keys causing my fingers to slip off.

Look up, then down. Repeat.

More mistakes.

At eight years old, I would look deeply at the written notes on the page trying so hard to decode their meaning. The notes, rhythms, measures, and the numbers above the notes that my teacher required for each finger to be placed on the correct keys. *So many rules.* “*Why?*” I wondered. “*Why do I have to play it this way?*” Most of my failed attempts to play what was on the page were mediated by my ability to “make up” songs by ear. I created melodies and harmonized chords through a process of making mistakes and figuring out what “sounded good.”

After a few years, I managed to convince my parents that I should quit piano lessons. I think my mother recognized forcing me to read notes on the page was not worth the frustration and tears it was causing. That same year that I heard a professional saxophone artist perform in an Easter musical. I was hooked. My parents obliged to my request to learn “*what that guy played in the musical.*” We picked up a saxophone from my cousin who had recently quit playing in his high school band.

From that moment forward, my life changed its trajectory.

I literally taught myself how to play the saxophone; I listened to recordings and emulated what I heard. I used my ear and never looked at notation. I chose the tunes I *wanted* to play. I would hit play on the cassette deck, then listen and hit the stop button. The controls would snap

up and the cassette would stop rolling. I found the notes on my instrument. I would hold the rewind button down, as the cassette screeched until I hit the stop button. Then press the play button again.

Listen.

Play.

Rewind.

Repeat.

Things were going so well. My mother rarely asked me to practice. I loved sitting and listening to the cassette and figuring out what I heard on my saxophone.

Then school started.

For most of my peers, the first day of band class was a day of new beginnings. An exciting journey of experiencing a new musical instrument for the first time. I can remember it well. The smell of the hallways, the bustle of everyone finding their instruments, the sound of excitement in their voices. There was a miraculous-ness in the chaos of it all. Most of my peers were so excited to begin playing, they were pushing their way through the hallways to reach the gym as soon as possible. Walking eventually evolved into a quick run towards the gym. Our teachers exclaimed sternly, “Walk in the hallways please, no running!” Instrument cases were used as ramming devices and the flutes (*all* girls), quickly separated themselves from the masculinity of the boys in the brass sections. Percussionists used their sticks in whatever way possible. The hallway became a herd of cattle, chaos, and ambiguity. It was survival of the fittest. I held some of the same excitement as my peers. However, I fell behind in the chaos. I was timid and quiet. I usually was the student lost in the crowd.

Once in the gym, the confusion and chaos escalated. We all entered the gym like a perfect storm. The chairs were already setup in neat rows. The music stands were perfectly placed in front of them. The method books sat on the music stands and the line of students continued to grow in front of the teacher. “*Saxophones, you sit in the second row, behind the flutes. Flutes, front row, not there!*” The teacher shouted. “*No, no, trumpets... not there! You are in the wrong seat! Pick up and move please!*” The frustration in her voice continued to grow. The chaos resumed for some time. I found my seat and laid the case down. I opened the latches and put the instrument together and correctly adjusted the neck strap and mouthpiece. I placed the mouthpiece in my mouth and made some sounds. My best friend turned, looked, and listened. “*How do you know how to do that?*” he asked. “*I don’t know, I just do.*” I replied.

Listen.

Play.

Rewind.

Repeat.

With everyone’s cases on the floor, unopened, I sat back in my seat with my saxophone in my lap. The teacher turned and made eye contact with me. Much to my surprise, the teacher’s finger was pointed directly at my saxophone. The class fell silent. “*Did I say you could put that together yet?*” She asserted in a defensive, angry, and condescending voice. As a shy and timid kid, I turned red. I was embarrassed. *I thought we were here to play music.* Listen. Play. Rewind. Repeat. Right?

“*Take your instrument and head to that room in the back of the gym!*” She shouted. “*Stay there until I come to get you.*” My stomach hurt and my face turned cherry red. I was embarrassed, deflated, and discouraged. I will never forget the walk to that room. Every step felt

like ten years. My peers' eyes pierced through my back. They all watched me as I maneuvered through the maze of chairs and stands. You could hear a pin drop. I wanted to go home.

Band class did not work out for me. I realized there was a different set of values and definition of what "real" music was. I quickly understood the music my teacher chose for us to play was not the music I wanted to learn. Most importantly, I realized the mechanism for learning music was not the mechanism I learned most effectively through. I quit band.

However, I continued to play the saxophone on my own. I played solos at weddings, receptions, churches, and other social events. I was paid for my playing. I used the same approach to learn all the music for each event: Listen. Play. Rewind. Repeat. Soon I picked up guitar, bass guitar, and drums. I used the same approach to learning. I was a self-taught musician. I made money performing. I was my own teacher.

Power chords. Broken strings. Ringing ears. Repeat.

"Turn your amp up!"

"What?" I yelled.

"Turn your amp up, I can't hear your solo!"

I bent down and moved the volume and gain knobs clockwise; from 5 to 7 on the dial. I played a few notes on my guitar.

"Yes, perfect!" screamed the drummer. My ears were already ringing.

In middle school I joined a punk rock band and grew dreadlocks. I pierced my ear and wore baggy jeans. There was an image associated with being a punk rocker, so I followed suit. As a band, we would practice for hours and rehearsed three or four times a week. Saturdays were consumed with practice, sometimes for eight hours straight. My ears would ring for the next day straight. None of us minded. We recorded albums and played rock shows. I broke guitar strings

regularly and made new friends at rock shows. We hauled gear up and down flights of stairs, through the snow, up steep hills, sidewalks, and into recording studios. We had a small group of roadies that followed us to each show. We opened for large venues.

Our rehearsals were focused, but haphazard and loud. Chaotic and orderly. We set our own goals and made sure we would do everything to meet them. We developed our own culture as a band and did not think anything was odd about it.

Power chords.

Broken strings.

Ringling ears.

Repeat.

“When you played the note on the third beat, why don’t you repeat it a few more times like this...?” The drummer played a rhythm on his snare. *“Ok, you mean like this?”* I played the note in time and echoed his pattern. *“Yeah. That sounds really good. Let’s put it all together.”* The drummer clicked his sticks and screamed at the top of his lungs, *“One, two, three, four...”* We all start playing together and I play the new rhythm on the guitar riff.

“I don’t think the bass line fits with the chords here,” the lead singer said. I play the section in power chords.

“What do you think?” I ask the bass player.

“Let me try a different riff.” I played the progression; he made something else up.

He doesn’t like it. We try it again until we find something that fits.

This mucking around takes over 15 minutes. The drummer goes and grabs some food from the kitchen and returns. The lead singer starts playing something different on his guitar. *“Dude, that second riff you played was killer. Use that one,”* says the drummer. *“Which one?”* the bassist

asks. *“The one that goes, dah, dah, dah, dah...”* He sings the riff out loud. *“Oh, yeah, this one?”* He plays the riff. The drummer clicks his drumsticks, and everyone comes in together. The rehearsal continues.

These musical moments shaped my understanding of music. To me, music was life. It was social and collaborative. It was messy and chaotic. It did not exist in school. Music was punk rock, guitars, saxophone solos, gigging, recording studios and exploration. Most of all, we made a lot of mistakes. I was passionate about music and wanted to become a music teacher.

Read. Critique. Play. Repeat

“I have to audition to study music in college? What do you mean?” I asked, inquisitively. One of my mentors, a fellow musician, suggested that if I wanted to study music at college, I start preparing for an audition. Ok, no problem. I have some guitar and saxophone solos I had recently learned. *“I was thinking of playing the saxophone solo from last weekend at the gig I performed.”* He looked down and shook his head. *“You have to play a different kind of solo.”* I was confused. Knowing my musical background, he replied, *“There are certain schools you could apply for that don’t require you to read music.”* *“Read music? You mean that is a pre-requisite to studying music in college?”* He nodded. *“There are two that I would recommend you look into. They are in Nashville. You could study music there, not in music education, maybe in music business, or music production. You could teach on the side and focus on the business aspect of music.”* My head felt like it was spinning. I wanted to be a music teacher. Because of this barrier, I was encouraged to attend a local community college and, if I really wanted to pursue music teaching certification and was successful in the school, I could achieve an associate degree in music. I was told the credits would transfer to most universities and four-year colleges. Most importantly, I was told that the community college did not require an audition.

So, I signed up for music classes. No one asked any questions about my music illiteracy. On the first day of applied lessons on the saxophone, my private studio instructor said, “*Most students I teach drop out in the first three or four months.*” “*Great,*” I thought. He sternly looked into my eyes, “*To be successful, you need to practice. Show up to your lessons and prepare for juries.*” “*Ok, juries? What are those?*” I asked. “*You perform written solos I choose and scales for faculty who determine whether you should pass or fail.*”

Silence.

I looked at his desk and back up at him.

“*Next lesson, you should have the following repertoire...*” He placed a piece of paper down and wrote down the titles of solo saxophone repertoire, composers, etude study books, and scale sheets. “*Practice this one for next time.*” He pointed to the title of the piece.

“*Our lessons will be one hour in length. Sometimes more. Practice, at minimum, 4-5 hours a day.*”

That was the end of our first lesson.

I picked up my saxophone, that sat unopened, and left. The anxiety and stress began to swell in my chest. I can remember the panic that settled in. I went home and ordered the repertoire. It arrived at the house a few days later. Opening it, I remember the sinking feeling. The pages were black with notes. “*Oh, this is not good. How will I ever be able to read this?*”

Read. Critique. Play. Repeat.

I locked myself in practice rooms for 7-8 hours a day. I took the solos one measure at a time. I used a form of recording to help with difficult passages I could not read.

Read.

Critique.

Play.

Repeat.

My life became inundated with Western-classical notation in theory, aural skills, history, and applied lessons. The dominant culture I experienced shifted from music made in punk rock bands to music composed in classical European traditions. I became inundated with a culture of peers who were proficient music readers and performers from their high school bands, orchestras, and choirs. My peers were musicians who were products of their music directors.

I had entered a world that was completely foreign to me. Over time, the music I listened to changed. My iTunes list slowly evolved away from punk rock and ska to Gregorian chants and classical music from the Western world. I listened to classical saxophone literature solos and felt guilty any time music outside the Western European classical paradigm played in my car, headphones, or computer. My studio professor encouraged this, by assuring me the music repertoire I was listening to was from the studio and in my music classes. I cut my hair. I changed what I wore. I removed my earring. I spoke about music using the terminology of my professors.

My identity as a musician was changing.

Upon successful completion of the requirements for an associate degree in music, I set my sights on a four-year institution. Because of my hard work and determination to succeed at the courses I had taken at the community college, I had prepared a portfolio of advanced saxophone solo repertoire for an audition. I worked diligently on my sight reading skills, as I knew this would be a determining factor in my acceptance. My general core music courses at the community college including music history, aural skills, theory, piano technique, and general studies were complete. Although they were challenging and required more work than most of my

peers, I had passed with honors. My community college did not include any music education curriculum and I was ready to embark on the pedagogy aspect of my academic career.

I auditioned at three institutions in the Midwest and was accepted into the music education program at two of the three. Entrance requirements into these institutions required SAT scores, studio audition with a sight reading exercise, and a brief interview with a music education faculty member. Once I had chosen the school, I began the myriad of technique and pedagogy courses in music education. This included woodwind and brass techniques, which focused on beginning sounds and rudimentary techniques, all achievable with some hard work and dedication. Although playing brass and percussion instruments were foreign to me, I was a quick learner, and worked diligently to pass basic playing requirements. The pedagogy courses in elementary and secondary instrumental music education were simple. With the application to classroom practice, I began to gain excitement that I was nearing the possibility of someday teaching music in my own classroom. However, courses like conducting and ensemble directing felt strange, as they required my ability to lead and rehearsal a large ensemble, using formal rehearsal techniques, which were all relatively counter-cultural to my musical experiences until college.

Although I felt the change, interestingly, I never thought to question it, because I wanted to be a music teacher and I would do whatever it took. I desired to teach music more effectively than most of my previous music directors in elementary and middle school. This was one of my major drives towards becoming a music teacher. I also held a strong desire to work with students in music, regardless of what my college education required of me. For these reasons, I made whatever sacrifices it took to make it through the gates. What I did not realize at the time, is that

not only had my identity changed, but I was becoming a part of a cultural system that existed for nearly a hundred years.

As time marched on, I never looked back or sought to validate any of my previous music experiences outside the music program. Most of the musical skills and techniques for making music, which were largely trial-and-error, aural/oral, explorative, and personally motivated, were placed in the past. For some faculty members, these music experiences were reprehensible and a disgrace. For fear of retribution, I was silent about my musical background and often felt ashamed to talk about it. My improvisatory guitar and saxophone playing experiences were replaced with saxophone concertos, where I spent thirty or more hours each week practicing written notation in isolation. The social element of making music was largely supplanted with individual practice, an externally motivated phenomenon to pass juries.

In addition to the challenges thwarted by high performance expectations, I also spent considerable amounts of time—often more than twice the amount my peers spent—with advanced music theory requirements. In aural skills, I could hear and repeat complex musical patterns exceptionally well. However, these classes emphasized sight reading skills, which were based in written notation. This was the source of additional anxiety. Through the support of a piano and a practice room, I spent considerable time navigating these challenges alone. The outward pressure to perform written notation at such a high level was enormous and extremely challenging, as my musical background was so misaligned from both the community college and four-year institution. In the face of all these challenges, I continued, determined to pursue through the setbacks, learning to read music, analyzing chord progressions in classical repertoire, and developing my sight signing abilities until I graduated.

As time continued on, the dominant culture, one rooted in Western classical music, influenced my identity, attitude, language, and personality. Over time, I looked and sounded like any other music student in my music program. I never spoke to anyone about my past music experiences and no person—faculty member or otherwise—asked me about them. After I graduated, I lived the language, attitude, personality, and values of the dominant culture. I successfully achieved employment as a middle school band director.

Discussion

This autoethnography offered a single perspective in examining the musical pathway of a self-taught musician who began learning music through traditional means, diverged to informal approaches, and acculturated back into formal and traditional designations (Green, 2002). It also illuminated how a monolingual musical understanding, one culturally dissimilar to the values and norms of the dominant culture, was highly discouraged. The experiences in this manuscript suggest that aural/oral music making in popular music milieus were misaligned with the values of the music program at both institutions I attended. It also exposed challenges associated with acculturating into dominant culture with alternative values, language, attitudes, and personality.

This autoethnography portrayed a difficult pathway to teacher certification, where I (part of the non-dominant culture) acculturated into a larger group (the dominant culture) with a different set of beliefs about the types of music performed and the values that accompanied them. As Sam (2006) wrote, “acculturation covers all the changes that arise following ‘contact’ between individuals and groups from different backgrounds” (p. 11). In this case, two opposing musical cultures came into contact with one another, one rooted in Western European tradition and the other, a “popular” music ethos with informal approaches to performing and making music (Green, 2002). The process of acculturation began when consistent and regular contact

occurred between these two opposing cultures. As an informally trained musician, I realized that the only pathway to teacher certification was to acculturate to the identity, values, and practices of the larger cultural system, specifically those of the Western European art music tradition. This placed what Sam (2006) termed as “acculturative stress” (p. 16) on both my psychological and sociocultural existence within the institution. I felt embarrassed with my inability to read music and devalued as a musician. I felt that all my previous music experiences were invalidated and disingenuous in the context of what others determined as “real” music. However, my strong desire to impact the next generation of musicians, my inherent love of music, my strong desire to be an effective music director (one very different than I had experienced), and drive for teaching *all* types of music propelled me forward, regardless of the opposition I faced.

As the acculturative process occurred over a five-year period, Searle and Ward’s (1990) research points towards an even larger impact of this process: the notion that I was “adapting” to a new culture, which impacted my psychological well-being. I eventually acquiesced to “the culturally appropriate skills needed to negotiate or ‘fit into’ a specific of cultural milieu” (p. 17). According to Sam (2006), the *ideal* acculturation process is reciprocal, where both cultures influence each other in positive ways. However, Sam (2006) wrote that, “Due to power differences ... one group exerts more influence than the other” (p. 15). The influence of the dominant group altered my understanding of music making, thus changing my language, attitude, values, personality, and ultimately my identity as a musician.

The process of acculturation was difficult and painful. It required a significant amount of resocialization, where “previously acquired skills necessary for meeting the demands of particular society” (Sam, 2006, p. 20) became essential for survival. I acculturated through the types of language used in rehearsals and in individual practice routines. Instead of using

terminology like “loud” or “soft,” I began referring to dynamic changes using a Western European designation including “piano” or “forte”. Rehearsals and individual practice sessions required a new set of terminology, where reading music required the understanding of tempo indications and phrasing or articulation markings in ways I had not previously experienced. The punk rock shows I had attended were replaced with refined, quiet, and observational “formal” concert experiences where talking was discouraged or not permissible. This process required that I learn the terminology and language for performing the “accepted” form of music. I disassociated myself from my past musical identity. Even my attire became formal. I wore dress slacks, collared shirts with ties, and dress shoes. I changed in almost *every* way. I isolated myself from the social aspects of what rehearsing and performing music used to exemplify in rock bands and sat quietly in large performance halls, directed and told how to play the music by the ensemble conductors.

Although this autoethnography depicted the difficult and challenging process of acculturating into a larger dominant culture and suggests that an alternative pathway to teacher certification is *somewhat* possible for a limited few, this manuscript showcases a specific need that is severely missing in higher education: spaces and access points for prospective students, particularly those who are self-taught or learned using informal approaches, to perform, study, and learn about music in colleges and universities across the United States. These “non-traditional” musicians could offer expertise in areas that have been deemed necessary in P-12 education contexts by many in the profession, including rock bands, digital ensembles, beat making, hip-hop, or other emerging ensembles (Kaschub & Smith, 2014). Furthermore, accepting a more diverse range of musicianship will assist in “bridging the gap” between in-school and out-of-school music (Rodriguez, 2004).

Similarly, once admitted to the music program, curricula for all music education and general music studies programs should expand, adapt, or change to reflect the diversity of music making experiences that exist across the world (CMS Task Force, 2014; Jaffurs, 2004; Williams, 2015). This includes, but is not limited to: creating new courses in popular music on guitars, electric bass, and electronic instruments (Kladder, 2016; Randles, 2018; Tobias, 2013); forming digital music ensembles, rock ensembles, or hybrid ensembles (Kladder, 2019; Ruismäki, Juvonen, & Lehtonen, 2013; Williams, 2014); and creating new or adapting existing courses to include improvisation, oral/aural-based music making, composition, songwriting, and music production using digital tools (Hamilton & Vannatta-Hall, 2020; Kaschub & Smith, 2014; Olesko, 2020; Randles, 2014; Williams, 2015; Wright & Kanellopoulos, 2010). This may mean reductions in advanced theory and history courses to allow for choice of popular music theory, history of hip-hop, rock, or other courses (Williams & Randles, 2017). It may require music faculty members in all areas to modify their instruction and course content. Faculty expertise will need to expand to include experiences in popular music, including its analysis and historical roots, and perhaps most notably, some institutions may need to consider the addition of faculty who hold expertise in digital and popular music milieus. This will support a more diversified and inclusive undergraduate music curriculum, allowing for flexibility, responsiveness, and relevance to student's music outside the formal music school. Much of these suggestions align with Jones's (2006) suggestions:

In order for music education to regain relevance and return from the musical fringe to the musical mainstream we must rethink the curriculum. A 21st-century music curriculum must be designed to invigorate musical learning and to musically empower students in pluralistic societies...it should connect students with the musical environments in which

they live. In order to connect students' in-school music education with their out-of-school musical lives, music offerings must emphasize music they will find in their communities (p. 12).

To advance this notion, Jaffurs (2004) portrayed the types of experiences participants had when making music in a rock band, suggesting that the field of music teaching and learning would do well to learn from these practices, enriching social-collaborative and student-led music making that is both relevant and meaningful. Others have justified similar claims (Kratus, 2019; Williams & Kladder, 2019). The analysis and results from this autoethnography support previous publications that make strong, worthy, and honorable rationale for the inclusion of alternative approaches of teaching music (Frith, 1998; Jaffurs, 2004; Woody, 2007; Woody & Lehmann, 2010). Undoubtedly, change will take time (Randles, 2014) and require significant rethinking (Cutietta, 2007; Kaschub & Smith, 2014).

My experiences as a non-traditional musician expose a difficult pathway through the music curriculum at two traditional institutions in the midwestern region of the United States. As an informal and self-taught musician who held a strong desire to be a music teacher in school, the monolingual focus on reading and performing Western classical music created tensions between my previous music experiences and personal identity as a musician. In most cases, my music, music that fell outside the Western classical paradigm, was discouraged. This is a needed area for change in higher education and represents a key issue facing the relevance and success of music programs in colleges and universities in the United States. Therefore, I would suggest music programs consider new pathways forward in admitting prospective students; pathways that embrace informal and self-taught musicians and a multi-lingual form of musicianship, that realize the significance and richness of music making across a myriad of approaches.

In music education, Brand (1987) and Koza (2008) criticized audition requirements as being overly focused on test scores and performance, and suggested an evaluation of a student's flexibility, adaptability, teacher readiness, and personality. To further this notion, creating multiple access points for prospective students could include: portfolio work, where students submit improvisational experiences/solos, composition projects, written philosophical beliefs regarding music teaching; recordings of solo work (e.g., songwriting, compositions, improvisation); and experiences playing and learning a wide set of instruments (e.g., guitars, drums, iPads). Furthermore, prospective students might choose the type of repertoire or musical selection for consideration, which could span a range of genres or styles, be compositionally based, or improvisational. Rather than a strict focus on sight reading skills, students might demonstrate creative abilities, including improvisation or free-style rap.

Broadly, if music programs do not begin to adapt and respond more quickly to what Johnson (2004) calls an idiomatic hegemony of the Western classical tradition, the profession will continue to exclude prospective musicians with diverse sets of musicianship abilities; abilities that are valuable for music programs, music teacher preparation programs, and P-12 music programs. Embracing the future of music learning in contemporary culture begins by creating new access points and accepting excellent musicians beyond a Western European canon, creating a variety of entrance pathways for prospective students who desire the opportunity to study music at the collegiate level.

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