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An Evolutionary Narrative of Popular Music Learning Cultures: A Case Study of the United Kingdom

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Abstract

For a very long time, popular music learning cultures had been characterised as informal and aural traditions. However, literature on the ways popular musicians learnt have documented increasing instances of popular musicians engaging with formal and non-aural modes of learning as time went by. Using the United Kingdom (UK) as a case study, the aim of this article is to establish an evolutionary narrative of how popular musicians learn. It begins with a chronological review of literature that examined the learning experiences of popular musicians between the 1970s and 2010s, and then discusses some observations regarding provisions of higher popular music education. In doing so, it revealed how the formalisation of popular music learning and technological advancements propelled the processes of becoming popular musicians in the UK to expand beyond features of informal learning and playing by ear. It argues that popular music learning cultures today comprise diverse combinations of formal and informal learning modes, notation- and ear-based practices, and resources made available by technological advancements, and thus, the informal and aural narrative pinned onto popular music learning cultures needs to be re-examined. Finally, it hopes to encourage discourses surrounding the learning of popular music to evolve beyond the issues of informal and aural-based learning and allocate more attention towards other means of learning in popular music.

Keywords: formal and informal learning, online music resources, music education, notation and ear, popular music

Introduction

Much of the literature on rock music has concentrated upon lyrics, youth culture, rock stardom, or the record industry, focusing upon the ideological and theoretical issues involved with rock as mass culture. … Two other important features have been omitted [sic]: the grass

roots of the industry … and the actual process of music-making by rock bands. (Cohen, 1991, p. 6)

Cohen, in her book published in 1991, captured certain realities of scholarly examinations on popular music before the 1990s; there was an "absence of musicological and ethnomusicological data on Western popular music" (p. 7) which exposed the processes and practices of becoming popular musicians. However, she noted three exceptions: the works of H. S. Bennett (1980), Finnegan (1989) and White (1983). There had since been further such works, including Cohen's (1991) own book, Green (2002), Robinson (2010), G. D. Smith (2013), Mok (2014), Bruford (2019), and Choong (2021) to name a few.

However, such works were often sporadic and isolated examinations that characterised the journeys of selected popular musicians in certain periods of time. These works are informative of how some popular musicians learnt their crafts but lacking from literature was examinations of how these works could contribute to the understandings of popular music learning cultures, specifically of how popular musicians' learning experiences evolved with the changing world[1], and thus, how the ways of becoming popular musicians changed.

> Categories of popular music are particularly messy because they are rooted in vernacular discourse, in diverse social groups, because they depend greatly on oral transmission, ... yet another factor is that some of the main sites of popular culture are still "the street" and other social spaces where many value their relative independence from or even resistance to social authorities, educational institutions, and the music business. (Holt, 2007, pp. 14-15)

In the above quote, Holt credited the challenges in categorizing the varieties of popular music to their informal and aural nature as well as their resistances to institutions. This notion that popular music is an aural tradition that primarily operates in the informal realm has generally remained unchallenged, and numerous studies had further reinforced this perception. As of 4 March 2022, a Google Scholar search with the keywords "'popular music' and 'informal learning'" returned 3,860 results[2]. Furthermore, Google Scholar also indicated, on the same date, that the book *How popular musicians learn* by Green (2002) which, among other things, sought to uncover the informal practices of popular musicians, and claimed in the very first sentence that "popular musicians acquire some or all of their skills and knowledge informally", had been cited 2,566 times. It is only fair to assume that some literature did not intend to portray popular music as purely informal and aural, but rather just limited the scope of their work to the ear-based practices engaged with during informal contexts of popular music-making. Nevertheless, the fact that so many works focused on the informal aspects of learning in popular music promotes the impression that "informal" is a defining trait of popular music.

However, it will be demonstrated in the following sections, through an examination of literature on the subject matter in one specific region (the UK), that popular music learning, at least in the UK, can no longer be described as an aural tradition that predominantly operate in the informal realm, and that a general

evolutionary narrative can be achieved. The examination, which proceeds the clarifications of the terms "formal", "informal" and "popular music", consists of two parts: A chronological review of literature that investigates the ways popular musicians accumulated experiences, knowledge and skills that contributed to their developments, and an observation of Higher Popular Music Education (HPME) provisions in the UK.

Terminology

Formal and Informal Learning

Folkestad (2006) identified four common approaches to defining formal and informal learning, each centering on specific aspects of learning: "Situation", "learning style", "ownership" and "intentionality". "Situation" refers to the physical context in which the learning took place, whether inside or outside institutional settings, "learning style" characterizes the learning process, whether by written notation or by ear, "ownership" revolves around the question of "didactic teaching" and "self-regulated learning", while "intentionality" denotes the intention to learn how to play or to play (pp. 141-142). Though it may seem that Folkestad positioned "formal" and "informal" as opposites, he clarified that such observations were "far too simplistic" (p. 142) and asserted that "formal – informal should not be regarded as a dichotomy, but rather as the two poles of a continuum; in most learning situations, both these aspects of learning are in various degrees present and interacting" (p. 135). Similar proclamations were also made by Green (2002) and G. D. Smith (2013).

This article acknowledges and agrees with Folkestad (2006), Green (2002), and G. D. Smith (2013), but clear distinctions between "formal" and 'informal" are needed to facilitate discussions. Thus, with additional reference to Green's descriptions, this article draws from Folkestad's "situation", "ownership", and "intentionality" approaches to outline the definitions of "formal" and "informal". "Formal" in this article describes contexts in which learning takes place in institutional settings, in the presence of a teacher, that uses a defined pedagogy, while "informal" describes contexts in which learning takes place outside of institutional settings, is self-directed, and "holistic" (Folkestad, 2006, p. 137) or "haphazard" (Green, 2002, p. 207).

As formal music learning typically encompasses the use of music notation (G. D. Smith, 2013) and playing by ear frequently deemed a quintessential feature of informal music learning (Green, 2002; Robinson, 2013), it often results in delineations that observed learning from notation as a "formal" practice and learning by ear as an "informal" practice. An approach termed "learning style" by Folkestad (2006) and observed in the works of Green (2002) and Robinson (2010). However, the "formal" and "informal" terms used in this article do not indicate the ear or notational practices engaged with during those contexts, these are instead characterised under broad umbrella terms: "ear-based" or "notation-based" practices[3]. "Ear-based" practices denotes practices that engage the use of the ears without any forms of music notation. "Notation-based" practices on the other hand,

denotes practices that involve translating notational representations of music. This article observes learning contexts (formal/informal) and learning practices (notation-based/ear-based) as distinct from each other, for as discussed above (and will be demonstrated below), it was possible for notation- and ear-based practices to occur in both formal and informal learning contexts.

Popular Music

The term "popular music" generally had been used to describe music, that among many other things, "[required] no prior training to appreciate", was "shared by entire communities" (H. S. Bennett, 1980, p. 3), and/or was "conceived for mass distribution to large and often heterogenous groups of listeners" (Tagg, 1982, p. 41). It was also used to distinguish one music from another (Finnegan, 1989, p. 104).

Birrer (1985, as cited in Middleton, 1990, p. 4) argued that many definitions could be placed into four categories: "Normative", "negative", "sociological", and "technologico-economic". Definitions could fit solely into one category or combine features of multiple categories, but all definitions were plagued by their own imperfections[4] and there had been no unanimous agreement on what popular music meant, for meanings could change, and definitions revised (Jewell, 1980, as cited in Finnegan, 1989). Therefore, it had been used to describe vastly contrasting forms of music that sometimes could include "jazz, ragtime, blues, rhythm and blues, country, rock (and rock 'n' roll and rockabilly), pub rock, punk rock, acid rock, heavy metal, bubblegum, and reggae" (Shuker, 2001, p. 6).

This article acknowledges that using the term "popular music" is problematic as "it is part of a living language, not a strictly technical term" (Jones & Rahn, 1977, p. 81), but a workable definition is necessary for the examination to move forward. Thus, this study adopted Green's (2002) descriptions of "popular music", in which "popular music" refers to "Anglo-American guitar-based pop and rock music" that include "anything from blues to charts pop, music for advertising, country, soul, progressive rock, punk, jazz, pantomime music and many other styles and substyles" (pp. 9-10). This is to distinguish musicians who either sang or played Anglo-American popular/rock music on more traditional musical instruments such as the guitar, bass, piano/keyboards, and drums, from those "involved in purely or largely synthesized/sampled fields of production" (p. 10). DJ decks and other devices such as the Novation Launchpad can and have been configured to be used as musical instruments, but musicians who use such devices as their primary instruments acquire some of their musical skills and knowledge in ways that are different from those that this article intends to examine. Therefore, the boundaries of "popular music" in this article should reflect this distinction.

It should be noted that what this article terms "popular" is sometimes referred to as "rock" in the literature reviewed hereafter. While there are inclinations by some scholars and musicians alike to contrast and polarise the terms "popular" and "rock" based on the ideologies of authenticity (Shuker, 2016, p. 99) and identity (Finnegan, 1989), the delineations between "rock" and "popular" are oftentimes ambiguous and the terms used interchangeably, and the literature examined were no exception:

> Whereas the sample could reasonably be described as "rock musicians", I have referred to them throughout by the more general and inclusive term "popular musicians", except where the context demands more specificity. (Green, 2002, p. 10)

> These bands all fell broadly within the "rock" and "pop" area, but it became clear both that the boundaries were not clear cut and that wider generalizations were of little interest to the practitioners. (Finnegan, 1989, p. 105)

Other examples include White's (1983) work where "*popular* musician" in one sentence was immediately followed by "*rock* musician" in the next (p. 107), and Cohen's (1991) clarification that the term "rock" includes "a variety of music labelled in many ways, such as 'alternative' or 'pop'" (p. 4). Additionally, Cohen used both terms together in her book title: *Rock Culture in Liverpool: Popular Music in the Making.*

Methods and Materials

The literature analysed are those that provided insights into the learning experiences of UK-based popular musicians between the 1970s to 2010s. Though reviews of literature that captured the learning experiences of a more restricted locality or a more narrowly defined social/cultural group at various points in time would result in more valid comparisons, this article could only limit the scope more broadly to the UK in general as longitudinal studies on more defined geography or demography are lacking.

Through a chronological review, it will be revealed in the following paragraphs that subsequent studies into the learning experiences of popular musicians captured data that exposed changes which occurred over the years and illustrated how the learning journeys of popular musicians evolved as the world experienced various developments.

The literature is divided into three periods: 1970s-1980s, 1990s and 2000s-2010s. The 1970s-1980s includes the works of White (1983), Finnegan (1989) and Cohen (1991), the 1990s encompasses the work of Green (2002), and the 2000s-2010s comprises the works of Robinson (2010) and G. D. Smith (2013). The reason for such divisions is that the 1990s, as will be demonstrated hereafter, is arguably a pivotal decade in popular music learning in the UK.

The rationale for sampling literature from the 1970s onwards, which Cohen (1991) expressed adequately and noted earlier in this article, was the scarcity of literature on the subject in the 20th century. Thus, the literature selected, in addition to Cohen's work, were those identified by Cohen: White (1983) and Finnegan (1989)[5]. Scholarly interests in popular music had grown exponentially since Cohen conducted her study, but texts revolving around the learning practices of popular musicians in the UK only comprised the works of Green (2002), Robinson (2010), and G. D. Smith (2013). Green produced arguably one of the most important texts on the subject which influenced Robinson's investigative approach into exploring

How Popular Musicians Teach, a title adapted from Green's book. She also played an important role in G. D. Smith's thesis which was converted into a book titled *I Drum, Therefore I Am*.

There are other literatures such as the works of Cohen and Baker (2007), S. Smith (2013) and Thompson (2012) that examined the music-making practices of other popular musicians in the UK, and they gave deserved attention to "popular electronic music-making" and examined the learning strategies of "DJs, turntablists, dance and Hip-hop producers in their own right" (Thompson, 2012, p. 2). However, their studies fall outside the scope of "popular music" in this article.

The examination first characterises the 1970s-1980s, 1990s, and 2000s-2010s periods respectively, then discusses the changes that occurred. This is followed by a review of literatures examining higher popular music education (HPME)[6]. Any understandings of popular musicians' learning practices in the 21st century must consider the role of higher popular music education (HPME) in the narrative. As mentioned above, and will be demonstrated below, the 1990s was a significant decade within the context of popular music learning in the UK as this was when institutions began inducting popular music into mainstream education. This induction was not limited to just primary and secondary school education, but also at a tertiary level.

The literatures reviewed hereafter examined broad rages of aspects pertinent to understanding the journeys of becoming popular musicians, but this review only focuses on learning contexts (formal/informal) as well as the learning practices (notation-based/ear-based) engaged in.

Findings

1970s-1980s

Informal Contexts. White's (1983) research, conducted during the late 1970s, explored the musical and non-musical conventions and constrains in the operations of a jazz and rock band in the UK. Though not explicitly stated, the general sense from descriptions is that members of the rock band primarily engaged with ear-based practices to accomplish their musical tasks such as learning to play the song, rehearsals, playing at gigs, and recordings:

> No system of notation was used in the recording studio project. (p. 195)
>
> In the actual case of learning to play the required music in the band's repertoire several techniques were employed. The most usual was sheer repetition. (p. 198)
>
> …a taperecording [sic] would be made of the material to be learned and members of the group would work individually on their own parts from a copy of the original recording. (p. 198)
>
> The learning situation occurs most successfully in the ensemble playing situation. (p. 199)

In Finnegan's (1989) book of the varying musical activities, practices, cultures, and learning systems in Milton Keyes during the 1980s, it was reported that most rock, jazz, folk, and country musicians identified as being completely self-taught, and "reliance on notated music was uncommon" among them (p. 139). They developed skills and knowledge through attempts to emulate sounds heard in recorded music, and after acquiring abilities to play some basic chords or rhythms, they continued developing additional skills in group music-making contexts.

In Cohen's (1991) book on the music-making practices of two rock bands in 1980s Liverpool, it was reported that "none of *the Jactars* had any musical training and none could read music" (p. 138), and the processes of music-making were all done by ear as a collective involving high levels of "repetition and experimentation" (p. 141). Though not explicitly indicated, it was implied that all but one of *Crikey it's the Comptons!* members did not have music training as none could "read music" (p. 160). They had a "different style of rehearsal and composition" (p. 155) to that of *the Jactars*, but their group music-making processes were similarly centred around their ears.

Formal Contexts. In all three works, there were mentions of lessons and using some forms of notational systems. Though most musicians in Finnegan's (1989) study were entirely "self-taught" and engaged in ear-based practices, some reported being "mainly self-taught supplemented or initiated by some private lessons" (p. 137), as well as "initial use of chord charts as a basis for further development, often discarded later, or written or printed lyric sheets" (p. 139). One bassist in Cohen's (1991) study had piano lessons when he was younger, another taught himself to play the guitar and bass with books, and another used his own personalized notational system. All members of the rock band in White's (1983) thesis had some music tuition, and though they primarily operated without notation in most of their music-making activities, lyric sheets and chord charts were occasionally used as temporary memory aids during rehearsals and gigs.

One observation that should be pointed out is the attitudes toward lessons, notation, and technique. It was unclear if the music tuition these musicians engaged with were popular or classical in nature, but regardless, there was a "combination of prejudices and mysticism" towards "tuition and development of musical skills in a strictly educational environment" (White, 1983, p. 197). In cases where musicians began with classical music, they "sometimes explicitly [reject] their classical experience", while other times "[made] use of it while aware of the contrasts involved" (Finnegan, 1989, p. 141). The musicians themselves saw the "classical mode" of instrumental learning, which was based on a "framework of acquiring measurable musical literacy", to be contradicting to their conventions of music-making, which "did not demand written musical theory or notation but the acquisition of performance skills which could be effectively learnt by ear and on the job" (Finnegan, 1989, pp. 133-34, 139).

Furthermore, while the "value" of institutionalized music skill learning "was seen for what it was", the rock band members of White's (1983) study felt strongly against "excessive technique" and opined that while it was suitable for "certain kinds of music", it was unsuitable for "developing an overall feel for less specialist types of music" (p. 197). Similar sentiments were found in Cohen's (1991)

study. *The Jactars* highlighted their "musical incompetence" and contrasted bands like themselves to those that were "particularly concerned with musical techniques and skills" (p. 139). One member even took pride in their "lack of musical ability" (p. 140). For *Crikey*, "musical incompetence was an integral part of their style as a band", and of the members that readily admitted to being "musically incompetent", at least one had no interest in "learning musical notation or terminology" (p. 158). There was one musician who believed instrumental instructions were beneficial and was keen to take lessons, but such sentiments are unusual. It is more common for popular musicians to have "an aversion to show or acknowledge that [they] actually know musical theory. It is part of 'rock mythology' and 'authenticity' that [they] should not have musical schooling, but come 'directly from the street' and spontaneously play [their hearts] out" (Lilliestam, 1996, p. 201).

1990s

It was briefly mentioned earlier that the 1990s is a pivotal period in the UK in terms of popular music learning, and reasons for this are succinctly explained by Green's (2002) account of formal music education changes that occurred in the UK, as well as discussions of how those changes influenced popular musicians' learning experiences.

Popular Music's Induction into Formal Music Education. In her book, Green (2002) discussed how classroom music lessons went from "traditional music education" (p. 135) where there was a "hegemonic position of classical music, history, and singing in the classroom" (p. 156), to the "new music education" that saw a "vast increase in the diversity of the curriculum content…[occur] during the 1990s" (p. 151), which included the induction of popular music.

The journey that "crumbled" (p. 156) classical music's hegemonic position in the classroom began in the 1980s with the demand for the broader study of music from various quarters, of which Graham Vulliamy is one of many that deserves special mention as his work laid the groundwork for the radical changes that took place. The introduction of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in 1986 also had "a major effect on music education in England and Wales" (Green, 2002, p. 155), as the syllabus comprised the study of a variety of non-classical music (including popular music). Five years after implementation, the GCSE heavily informed the syllabus that the Music Working Party proposed for the Music National Curriculum (MNC).

The induction of popular music into formal music education through the MNC in the 1990s was also accompanied by the emergence of popular music examination boards such as Trinity Guildhall (now Trinity College London) and Rockschool (G. D. Smith, 2013), as well as a proliferation of higher popular music education (HPME) provisions (discussed later). Thus, making the 1990s an important period in the evolutionary narrative of popular music learning in the UK as the formalisation of popular music led to alternative (to informal and aural) modes of learning in popular music.

Formal Contexts: "Traditional" vs "New" Music Education. The impact of popular music's entrance into formal education on the learning experiences of

popular musicians was captured by Green's (2002) contrast of 14 popular musicians. The nine older musicians experienced their secondary school years between 1960 to 1990 (traditional music education) and the five younger musicians from 1990 onwards (new music education).

Classroom Music Lessons. The nine older musicians who experienced traditional classroom music lessons, which promoted the study of classical music, found lessons to be "alienating and difficult to relate to" (Green, 2002, p. 142). Though there were inclusions of popular music, they were done in ways that "rendered it implicitly inferior" (p. 142). Nevertheless, the school played a major role in their developments[7]; many formed their first bands with schoolmates, rehearsed in school spaces with school's instrument, and were offered performance opportunities within the school. However, all these took place outside classrooms, were largely unsupervised and without support from the music departments. Their teachers were unaware of, or disinterested in, their passion for music, and the school generally ignored the popular music skills and knowledge they were developing on their own. For these musicians, while the school environment was essential, their classroom music learning experiences did not contribute to their journeys of becoming popular musicians.

The five younger musicians experienced the "new music education", where teaching strategies had undergone radical changes, that placed more emphasis on "classroom performance and composition, integrated with listening" (Green, 2002, p. 159), and included a variety of musical styles including "popular and world musics" (p. 160). Nearly all opted for the GCSE, where they experienced lessons that were in line with the descriptions of the "new music education". Thus, they viewed the GCSE Music course positively. Outside of classroom music lessons, they received more support, recognition, and encouragement to produce popular music within the school environment. Furthermore, some were even provided with instrumental lessons to help with GCSE Music courses and were part of school-sanctioned musical groups such as the orchestra, classical music ensembles and jazz bands. Therefore, not only did they have more positive attitudes toward formal music education, they also did not find it to be significantly contradictory to their developments as popular musicians but found it beneficial instead.

Instrumental Lessons. All but one musician had experiences with either classical or popular music instrumental lessons, or both. Of the nine musicians (five older and four younger) who had classical instrumental lessons (CIL), most abandoned them after four lessons, finding them "boring, the progress slow and the music difficult to relate to" (Green, 2002, p. 148). The sentiments expressed by these musicians toward CIL, akin to those expressed in 1970s-1980s literature, were negative. Thus, signifying that despite the passage of time, CIL was likewise unpopular among popular musicians in the 1990s.

A different group of nine musicians (also five older and four younger), experienced popular music instrumental lessons (PMIL), and though PMIL was described more positively, six ended lessons within a year, while the remaining three persisted with lessons for 3-4 years. The older musicians' engagements with PMIL were akin to their engagements with CIL, lessons did not last long and/or were sporadic. Contrarily, of the four younger musicians who had PMIL, three had

extended periods of engagements. It was noted by Green (2002) that the three who had sustained engagements with PMIL received those lessons from peripatetic teachers at their schools, and that this was "a situation which could not have occurred…before the mid-1970s and was still rare in the mid-1980s" (p. 152). Be that as it may, Green's findings suggested extensive engagements with PMIL may not solely be due to increased accessibility, but may also be a result of positive experiences with the "new music education". All three who had extended periods of PMIL opined that they benefitted from them and described lessons favourably.

Notation. It was not explicitly stated, but Green's (2002) interview quotes and paragraphs on PMIL implied that of the nine musicians, at least six (two older and four younger) were taught to read and play from notation, and at least one had lessons where notation reading was central. Furthermore, most younger musicians had not only learnt "notational skills" from formal music education, but also acquired "analytical skills" (p. 163).

Informal Contexts. Green (2002) also paid attention to the informal learning histories of the musicians, whose developmental stages took place between the 1960s to 1990s.

> Young popular musicians were able to make connections between many of the skills and knowledge they were acquiring through formal and informal means. In spite of this, from all the evidence so far, their informal learning practices continued unabated. (p. 176)

Green's (2002) findings indicated that, regardless of time period, copying recordings by ear and peer-directed and group learning are central practices to popular musicians. Copying recordings by ear was "solitary and [involved] purposive and attentive listening linked to the close copying of recordings, as well as more distracted listening leading to loose imitation and improvisatory adaptation" (p. 96), while peer-directed and group learning "[involved] learning from each other in pairs and groups, through casual encounters and organized sessions, both aside from and during music-making" (p. 97). In addition to these central practices, some musicians supplemented their learning with notation and/or technical books. While some acquired notation knowledge from prior formal classical music lessons, there were instances of notation being self-taught.

2000s-2010s

Green's (2002) book revealed, due to the induction of popular music into formal education, there were increased engagements, and improved experiences with, formal popular music learning (FPML) since 1990, but informal learning and ear-based practices remained dominant features of learning in popular music. However, as demonstrated below, through the works of Robinson (2010) and G. D. Smith (2013), the dominance of the informal and aural may be losing their steadfast positions in popular music learning.

Engagements with Formal and Informal Contexts. G. D. Smith (2013) conducted a study with 127 drummers with the aim to "investigate drummers'

identities, what drummers do and how drummers learn to do what they do" (p. 2). The drummers were categorized into teenage (aged 13-19) and adult (above 30 years old) drummers. As the teenage drummers were between the ages of 13 to 19 at the point of data collection (2008-2009), their learning experiences took place in the 2000s-2010s either primarily or entirely. Among the 72 teenage drummers, 12 reported being entirely "self-taught"[8], 24 professed having only learnt from lessons, and 36 indicated that they learnt from being self-taught and from lessons. These figures could be translated to 83.3% (n=60) of teenage drummers had FPML experiences. Given the educational developments in the 1990s, such figures were expected.

What was fascinating though is that the number of popular musicians learning entirely in the informal realm (16.7%, n=12) during the 2000s-2010s had been eclipsed by those with only FPML experiences (33.3%, n=24). The 24 drummers represent a segment of popular musicians whose learning histories are in stark contrast from those that came before them and imply a shift in how popular musicians were becoming who they are. This shift is observable within G. D. Smith's own sample through a comparison between the teenage and adult drummers. 10.7% of adult drummers reported having had lessons only, and another 53.6% had both formal and informal learning experiences. In total, 64.3% of adult drummers had experienced FPML. Thus, G. D. Smith's findings exhibited that the teenage drummers had more engagements with FPML, whether solely (33.3% vs 10.7%) or overall (83.3% vs 64.3%).

Formal Contexts. G. D. Smith's (2013) inquisition of drummers' experiences with lessons revealed they were generally taught in "'semi-formal', hybridized" (p. 38) ways from teachers. Lessons comprised "a mixture of formal and informal practices" that took place "in a school setting with a designated teacher" but did not work towards "qualifications or credits" and included "playing along to recordings" (p. 39). On the other hand, there were also lessons that had "more formal [approaches] to learning" as exemplified by one drummer's (Ella) experience:

> I have a book that we work through and if I want to do my grades I would do them, ... so he goes through the book and we play some pieces ... It's generally just book stuff. (p. 39)

For those learning in tertiary institutions, they experienced learning sight-reading, theory, rhythm studies, and techniques in different classes. Furthermore, all materials were taught from books and sheet music, and there was an emphasis on observing music analytically.

Robinson's (2010) thesis examined the ways eight popular musicians taught others to play within formal contexts, and the findings revealed details about the PMIL that their students experienced in the 2000s[9]. Though Robinson's musicians incorporated informal learning features that accentuated the importance of ear-based practices, their methods and philosophies generally resembled CIL which included "studying music theory, acquiring 'correct' technique, and taking grade exams" (p. 139). Students were registered for graded exams if available, the emphasis on

understanding chords and scales were part of regular lessons, and some insisted that technique be the first thing students learn. The study of, and emphasis on learning from, notation was common, but to varying degrees. Some taught notations from the beginning, some did not teach it at all, while others used standard and/or other forms of notation in various ways and degrees. These descriptions offer glimpses into what enthusiast of popular music might experience when engaged with PMIL in the 2000s, which did not diverge much from Green's (2002) participants' experiences in the 1990s.

All in all, the learning that took place in PMIL were varied and situated at various points of Folkestad's (2006) formal-informal continuum. However, there seem to be a consensus that though PMIL incorporated features of informal learning and ear-based practices, it is still dominated by features of formal learning and generally comprised, and at times even emphasized, learning music from notation rather than by ear.

Whether learners enjoyed lessons or not, or if it contributed to their developments was beyond the scope of Robinson's (2010) study, but an analysis of G. D. Smith's (2013) findings revealed adult drummers generally rejected lessons in favour of learning by ear for they felt uninspired after a few lessons and/or perceived that being "taught by someone" (p. 42) hindered developments of individual styles. Others chose to be self-taught either because lessons were unavailable, or they felt that they were not needed as it was "relatively easy to learn to play" (p. 43). On the other hand, as can be seen by some interview quotes of teenage drummers' experiences in higher education, they were more receptive of lessons and generally perceived them as beneficial to their developments:

> We play in all different classes, erm, sight reading, theory, aural, rhythm studies …. They had Latin percussion, which was really cool so we learnt a lot.
>
> … it's like, really, really stupidly like magnified technique stuff, and, er, which is awesome, no it's really, really good but it gets pretty full-on, like, … It's down to a point where you're like robots. You go over everything in such detail. (p. 40)

Informal Contexts. The descriptions of drummers' "self-directed learning" (G. D. Smith, 2013, p. 41) generally coincided with Green's (2002) descriptions of informal learning, where "listening to music that they know and like, tackling whole pieces of music, and imitating and learning by ear" (G. D. Smith, 2013, p. 43) were central, along with a range of peer or group learning activities. For those that had lessons, they also mentioned "subsequent or concurrent self-directed study using books" (p. 43).

The descriptions of "self-directed learning" may not be entirely applicable to the segment of musicians who only had FPML experiences. G. D. Smith (2013) did not address the practices of these drummers outside of lessons, but the findings of Choong (2021)[10] provided some insights. Choong found that popular musicians who only had FPML experiences[11] had more extensive engagements with notation even outside of lessons and significantly lower engagement levels with peer or group learning activities. Thus, there are grounds to presuppose that the music-

learning practices these drummers engaged in, outside of lessons, were likely to be done solitarily and dominated by notational practices.

In addition to learning by copying recordings, and for some, by reading notation, G. D. Smith's (2013) sample of drummers reported watching "drumming videos" and drum lessons on YouTube (p. 28), as well as learning from instructional DVDs. However, the most frequently cited means of learning was "film footage of other drummers" (p. 45) as it "[helped] drummers understand what it is to be drummers, beyond how merely to play the instrument" (p. 46).

Evolutionary Narrative

The Dominance of the Aural and Informal in the 1970s-1980s Era. The writings of popular musicians' learning practices in 1970s-1980s UK suggests it generally comprised aural traditions that primarily operated in informal realms. Music-making processes were dominated by ear-based practices, from learning music by ear solitarily, to group music-making activities such as rehearsals, recordings, and gigs. Although there were some engagements with notation-based practices, these were only used in the initial stages or as temporary forms of memory aid. Generally, developing into a popular musician is a journey that takes place beyond institutional walls. Though some musicians engaged with formal modes of music learning, many found their experiences to be antithetical to their practices in popular music. Furthermore, some musicians with no musical training took pride in their independence from institutionalized learning.

The Formalization of Popular Music in the 1990s. In terms of informal learning, the 1990s did not significantly diverge from the 1970s-1980s. The centrality of learning songs and developing music-making skills and knowledge mainly through ear-based practices, solitarily or in group settings, without expert guidance did not diminish as time passed.

Literature of the 1970s-1980s did not provide much detail about the formal music education nor the nature/duration of musical instructions their musicians experienced. However, logic dictates that these musicians had experiences akin to those of the older musicians in Green's (2002) study, as their accounts were based on events that took place during similar periods. Thus, there are grounds to presume their experiences did not diverge greatly from Green's nine older musicians, and comparisons between Green's older and younger musicians' experiences with formal music education are sufficient to illuminate discrepancies between the 1970s-1980s and the 1990s.

The core difference between the 1970s-1980s and the 1990s is the increased engagements with PMIL brought about by changes in formal music education. Thus, popular musicians whose learning experiences occurred after 1990 were more likely than those before to have increased access to PMIL provision, extended engagements with learning popular music within formal contexts, learned popular music from notation, and to perceive formal modes of music learning as beneficial to their developments as popular musicians. However, despite being taught to read notation and employing notational skills in various ways during their learning

processes, notation remained secondary in their learning practices, and was always used as a supplement to ear-based practices.

Green's (2002) findings indicated that though many ear-based and informal features of learning popular music continued into the 1990s, formal popular music learning, because of music educational changes in the UK, had made headway into popular musicians learning processes. Unlike the 1970s-1980s, where most were self-taught (Finnegan, 1989), all in the 1990s experienced learning popular music in formal music education, and a majority had extensive engagements with PMIL. Furthermore, unlike earlier musicians who perceived formal music education negatively, some in the 1990s perceived such modes of music learning positively and gave it credit for aiding their developments as popular musicians.

The Diversity of Learning Practices in the 2000s-2010s Era. Though formal popular music learning contributed to the developments of popular musicians in the 1990s, developing skills and knowledge informally through ear-centric practices was still central. A majority in the 2000s-2010s era had similar experiences with those in the 1990s, but there was now a growing segment of musicians who only developed within formal contexts.

These musicians experienced PMIL that comprised features of formal and informal learning, as well as notation- and ear-based practices, but there were general emphases on learning from notation, observing music analytically and acquiring conventional techniques. As indicated by earlier literature, popular musicians of the past, especially in the 1970s-1980s era, generally were apprehensive towards such modes of learning, but those in the 2000s-2010s era were increasingly receptive towards it.

Among those with informal learning experiences, the dominance of ear-based practices in solitary or group learning activities continued unabetted, and notation remained in a supplementary role when used. However, the emergence of popular musicians without informal learning experiences, but instead learnt entirely with a teacher in PMIL that were governed by features of formal learning and dominated by notation-based practices, meant that for some notation played more central roles in their practices[12].

One area that appears unique to the 2000s-2010s era was engagements with technology induced learning resources such as the internet and instructional videos. While all earlier literature had no mentions of such resources in the learning process, Robinson (2010) postulated that "the use of demonstration videos and subscription websites offer audio-visual models which may be replacing (or at least supplementing) purely audio recordings as 'texts' for popular music learners" (pp. 263-264). G. D. Smith's (2013) sample of drummers who reported extensive use of such resources in their learning experiences, not only confirmed Robinson's postulation, but also indicated the learning practices of popular musicians had expanded even further.

> The increased availability and sophistication of the Internet is an important feature in expanding the ways in and extent to which people are able to engage with different modes of learning – drummers can now receive tuition, watch concerts and listen to music all for virtually no cost; drummers of all ages are

> embracing this technology. (p. 52)

Music-learning and -making resources have since expanded beyond demonstration videos on YouTube, to include websites, softwares and applications. Though some incur a certain cost, many are widely available for free, such as *Chrome Music Lab, Groove Pizza*, *PlayPerfect, GarageBand*, *Vanido* and *Riff Station*.

Observations of Higher Popular Music Education

Following the intellectual momentum and the establishment of the International Association of Popular Music in the 1980s, several institutions in the UK began launching HPME programs in the 1990s, some notable pioneers include University of Liverpool, University of Salford, Leeds University, and University of Westminster (Cloonan and Hulstedt, 2013; Warner, 2017; McLaughlin, 2017). The 2012 mapping exercise by Cloonan and Hulstedt (2013) "examined the extent of Popular Music Studies (PMS) undergraduate programmes in the United Kingdom" (p. 63) and revealed numerous other HPME programs had been introduced from 2001 onwards; at the point of the authors' research, there were a total of 76 PMS degree programmes provided by 47 institutions.

Cloonan and Hulstedt's (2013) research also revealed that rising tuition fees did not deter applicants from applying to these programmes, indicating resilient interests from enthusiasts of popular music to develop within HPME environments. Therefore, characteristics of HPME programmes matter to the discourse as popular music enthusiasts turned to such modes of learning to facilitate their developments as popular musicians.

Literature examining characteristics of HPME revealed that "practices of popular music [were] presented as skills and knowledge to be taught and learned" (Parkinson & Smith, 2015, p. 95), faculty-curated canon of songs was "taught in a formal, transmission-style manner" (p. 108), pitch-based skills were disproportionately emphasized (J. Bennett, 2017), learning "often still [relied] on the master-student model" (Lebler & Hodges, 2017, p. 273), and there was a relatively strong presence of notational elements. In terms of notation, Fleet's (2017) findings indicated that 46% (26 out of 57) of UK HPME programs required students to be familiar or even fluent in music notation reading upon graduation. As for analytical components, Cloonan and Hulstedt (2013) found there was considerable emphasis placed on "the theory and analysis behind broader concepts in popular music, such as cultural and historical studies" (p. 68), as 27 out of 31 programs comprised of between 20%-100% analytical elements.

While HPME programs with such characteristics can contribute to popular musicians' developments, it "may in many instances be ignoring vital elements of traditional ways of learning this type of music" (G. D. Smith, 2013, p. 31). The master-student model in FPME was one where students "cultivated" a reliance on their master's teaching, "possibly at the expense of the development of autonomy" (Lebler & Hodges, 2017, p. 273). Canon-orientated pedagogy, in rewarding "accurate replication", implicitly discouraged transgression, thus "such an approach

in HPME inhibits the development and expression of a performer's individual musical voice" (Parkinson & Smith, 2015, p. 109). This concern was similarly expressed by Alper (2007), and he further argued that "formal teaching" might get in the way of popular musicians' "creativity" (p. 160). The emphasis on notational practices conflicted with the aural features of popular music learning, but Alper further argued that "standard notation" was unable to capture "much of the complexity of popular music" (p. 160). Therefore, popular musicians who engaged with HPME, and in extension formal popular music learning in general, would have experienced learning popular music in ways that were vastly different from those who only learnt within informal contexts.

Conclusion

As demonstrated through the chronological review of literature and observations of HPME, what was initially a predominantly aural tradition that occurred outside the confines of learning institutions, where notation played a secondary role and was avoided in performance, was gradually joined by diverse and unique learning experiences due to the bourgeoning provision of, and accessibility to, formal popular music education and internet-based resources since the 1990s.

As more and more enthusiasts of popular music turn to formal provisions of learning to develop as popular musicians, where the learning of popular music is accomplished in an atomistic and teacher-directed fashion, which often emphasized the study of notation, prescribed techniques and analytical observations of music, the characteristics (aural and informal) that had been so commonly associated with popular music may have lost their dominance. However, as demonstrated, engagements with formal learning did not mean an absence of informal learning, and vice versa; it was common for learning histories to include learning in both formal and informal contexts, and aspects of formal and informal[13] learning can coexist in most learning situation. With formal music education increasingly adopting informal features of learning, it is possible for one to learn by ear in lessons with a teacher where one has certain levels of autonomy to negotiate what, how and when to learn. Likewise, with the increased accessibility to information through the internet, learning to play written music, understand music theory and conventional techniques are no longer skills and knowledge that could only be acquired within institutional settings and/or from a teacher, nor is pedagogical learning a feature exclusive to the teacher-student situation.

Therefore, it may now be a stretch to say that popular musicians today generally learn to play popular music entirely by ear and without any expert guidance. A more accurate statement would be that some popular musicians do develop this way, while others do not, but for many, their developments comprised diverse combinations of formal and informal learning modes and notation- and ear-based practices.

The intention of this article was to demonstrate, though simplistically, how the ways popular musicians developed had diversified from a predominantly aural and informal narrative into one that comprised increasing engagements with formal

modes of learning in popular music, notation-centric practices, as well as resources made available by technological advancements. This article does not proclaim to have established a clear and precise narrative of popular music learning in the UK, as the sample studied is relatively small. What was achieved instead is a narrative that captured some generic truths but falls short in exposing the nuanced diversities among the variations of popular music learning today.

It was the results of scholars' and educators' efforts to "[formalize] the informal" (G. D. Smith, 2013, p. 29) practices of popular music that changed the landscape of how popular musicians learned, yet music education still strongly associates popular music with informal learning. Therefore, this article hopes to encourage discourses surrounding the learning of popular music to evolve beyond the issues of informal and aural-based learning and allocate more attention towards other means of learning in popular music, including but not limited to all forms of formal popular music education, notation-based learning and learning enabled by technology induced music-learning and -making resources.

Endnotes

[1] Green (2002) accomplished this to some extent in her book *How Popular Musicians Learn*.
[2] Skimming through the search results showed that at least in the first three pages, nearly all were literature related to music education.
[3] The "learning practices" described here are akin to Folkestad's (2006) "learning style" consideration.
[4] Refer to Middleton (1990, pp. 4-5) for more details.
[5] H. S. Bennett's (1980) work was excluded from this review as his findings were based on conditions in the US.
[6] Alper (2007), Cloonan and Hulstedt (2013), G. D. Smith (2013), J. Bennett (2017), McLaughlin (2017), Parkinson and Smith (2015) and Warner (2017).
[7] An observation also made by H. S. Bennett (1980, p. 125).
[8] The "self-taught" term in G. D. Smith's (2013) work is akin to the "informal' label that this article used.
[9] His findings regarding their learning experiences did not contribute to this article's understanding of how popular musicians learnt 2000s-2010s. This is because they were more indicative of learning experiences in the 1970s-1980s era, as their secondary school years coincided with Green's (2002) older musicians as well as those in the 1970s-1980s literature. Therefore, accounts of learning experiences in Robinson's work, bore resemblances with accounts of learning that took place prior to, and during, the 1990s.
[10] Choong's (2021) study investigated the relationships between the learning experiences and musical proficiencies of popular musicians.
[11] The characterisations of lessons in Choon g's (2021) study were akin to Green's (2002) and G. D. Smith's (2013).
[12] The impacts of such learning methods extend far beyond the reliance on notation; refer to Choong's (2021) study for more information.
[13] [13] [13] The "formal" and "informal" referred here comprised of Folkestad's (2006) four approaches to "using and defining formal and informal learning" (p. 141).

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Biography

Hueyuen Choong is a popular music scholar, drummer, and lecturer at UCSI University, whose research interest primarily revolves around the music-learning cultures of popular musicians, and whose PhD explored the impacts of learning histories on the music-making practices, attitudes, dispositions, and musical proficiencies of popular musicians. Hueyuen's latest research examines this subject matter within the Malaysian context, and future research plans include a closer examination of HPME, and the disturbances that such modes of becoming popular musicians caused within the popular music-making culture.