

# INVESTIGATING THE RECIPROCITY BETWEEN BODY AND PERFORMANCE FOR A PROFESSIONAL MUSICIAN

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the body of a professional musician (JK) and his music performance. The influence that the body has on performance and the influence that performance has on the body are both explored. The paradigms of Embodied Cognition (Hutchins, 1995; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) and Embodied Music Cognition (Leman, 2008) frame the integral way in which JK's body impacts his music performance. Dejours' (2006) understanding of work and Hochschild's (1983, p.7) notion of emotional labour as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" help illustrate the inescapable impression that music performance leaves on JK's body.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Research investigating the phenomenological experience of music performance from the perspective of the music performer is markedly absent in the research literature. In the majority of extant research, experimental methodologies have been used to examine the impact that music has on the music *listener* (eg. Gabrielsson & Juslin, 1996). The smaller number of music performer studies have used experimental methodologies to investigate how music and performer relate in specific areas such as gesture (eg. Keller, Knoblich, & Repp, 2007). Within this research, the few studies focusing on the musician's phenomenological experience of performance have a number of limitations. Although work examining the experience of jazz musicians is valuable (Berliner, 1994; Monson, 1996; Sudnow, 1978), this experience naturally cannot be applied across all genres. Berger's (1999) cross-genre work investigating the experience of performance for heavy metal, jazz and rock musicians is more aligned with the aims of our research. Yet this work has limited relevance due to a strong historiographical and ethnomusicological foci and the noticeable impact of researcher bias on his findings.

This paper explores the links between a musician's body and music performance through an examination of the performance experience of one professional musician. Two distinct relationships are in operation here. The body both influences *and is influenced by* the experience of performance. This paper will discuss results from the current research in relation to both of these relationships. Due to the gaps in past research, these discussions will be preceded and contextualised by an examination of the theoretical frameworks which both inspired and underpin the current research. Before doing so however, it is necessary to briefly discuss the methodology used in the current research.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Grounded Theory (GT) is the ideal methodology for this research program due to the paucity of past research available in the subject area. Defined by its founders Glaser and Strauss (1967) as "the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research" (p. 2), GT's recent reworking by Strauss and Corbin (1998) further emphasises sticking closely to the data. GT involves bottom-up theory building derived from strict adherence to data rather than demanding example verification or perfect description. The importance of the researcher's self-reflexivity, an evolving sampling mechanism and safeguards against researcher bias are additional and desirable features of GT.

The data on which this article is based are drawn from a semi-structured interview carried out with Jeremy Kelshaw (JK). Having played music for over twenty years, JK is currently the bassist in a self-described indie, alt-folk, pop band named Cloud Control. Together for over four years, Cloud Control has enjoyed a moderate amount of success on the Australian music scene. Chosen as an interviewee due to his friendship with the researcher (AG), JK's interview was initially going to be used as a pilot study. Upon closer inspection however, the data emerging from this interview were rich and substantial enough to allow the interview to be included as the first in a program of research. This program is intended to fulfill the requirements of a postgraduate psychology doctoral thesis, scheduled for submission in 2012. Due to the unpredictability of theoretical sampling and the incomplete nature of this research, the findings reported in this article are only preliminary and may differ somewhat from the end results of this research program.

## 3. BODY AND PERFORMANCE

Traditional accounts have differed regarding the amount of emphasis they have placed on the role of the body in performance. Those emerging from more cognitivist backgrounds (Chaffin, Imreh, & Crawford, 2002; Ericsson & Kintsch, 1995) have foregrounded top-down, cognitive processes in performance. Overarching cognitive modules and highly effective retrieval strategies are viewed as essential foundations in this process. Other accounts influenced more by phenomenology (Csikszentmihályi, 1990; Dreyfus, 2002), have accorded primacy to the role of the body in performance, taking the focus away from the role of higher-order cognitive processes. These processes are viewed as a crutch necessary only for beginners, with thinking being transcended as skills increase. Thinking is viewed as threatening to the flow of the attuned, automatic and deeply embodied smooth coping employed by experts to effectively meet the demands of any situation.

Embodied Cognition (EC), a paradigm emerging over the last decade, offers a more integrative approach to the mind-body dichotomy which has plagued past research. Moving away from an understanding of cognition as the carrying out of formal operations on abstract symbols, EC theorists (Hutchins, 1995; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) emphasise the real-world context in which most thinking is carried out and the practical ends to which this thinking is employed. This shift in focus transforms the human being from a Cartesian “thinking thing” into a Heideggerian subject, an (inter)active agent constantly coping with the demands of being in the world (Andersen, 2003). As opposed to the construction of complex, abstracted, overarching, pre-planned, higher-order models of the world, EC theorists view the world itself as its own best model. EC reconceptualises cognition as an inevitably embodied activity situated in a specific context.

Closely related to EC but tailored specifically to the area of music is Leman’s (2008) theory of Embodied Music Cognition (EMC). For Leman, the biological body is essential for musical appreciation and communication, mediating the relationship between physical sound energy and one’s mental representation of the experience of this sound energy. In a similar way to EC, EMC assumes that knowledge doesn’t emerge from passive perception but rather from the need to act in an environment and therefore “the link between mind and matter is based on the role of the human body as mediator between physical energy and meaning” (Leman, p. 43).

In contrast to previous research, EC and EMC hold that thinking and doing, perceiving and acting, self and world and body and mind are inextricably linked in performance, as they are in all other activities. With such a strong emphasis on the body, EC and EMC may possibly be more closely aligned with traditional, phenomenological perspectives on performance than their theorists would care to admit. However, they still offer a more integrated approach to performance than earlier theories, placing equal importance on the role of thinking (albeit embodied, situated thinking) and the role of the body in successful performance.

After exploring background theory, it is now time to examine JK’s experience of how his body influences his music performance. At times, JK’s experience of music performance seems to resonate with a more cognitivist understanding of performance, emphasizing the role of thinking over that of the body in performance. For JK, rather than posing a threat to skilled movement, active concentration on technique can actually enhance performance:

*There may be pieces that you are familiar with but that are so technical you have to concentrate on them. And people definitely do appreciate that as an audience member . . . you’re communicating that this is difficult to play so I’m taking the time to actually play it well because I think it is worth playing well.*

JK also describes a number of tactics which may be implemented by Cloud Control during performance if they seek to establish a stronger connection with the crowd or if they sense a connection with the crowd has been lost. Changing the setlist to meet the demands of the audience, having a conversation with the audience, actively trying to have fun and be energetic on stage and constantly

maintaining eye contact with other band members are all examples of performance tactics which require the performers to constantly monitor and think about the dynamics of their performance at a meta-cognitive level.

Although higher-order processes play an important role in JK’s experience of music performance, in line with the more phenomenological approach of EC and EMC, also important in JK’s experience is a more embodied type of skilled coping:

*A song that we’ve been playing for months and years [is] really fun to play because you don’t have to think about anything musically . . . You’ve just built up so much muscle memory that you just roll with it and your fingers know exactly what to do . . . I think in that blissful moment . . . your body knows what to do and you just . . . enjoy yourself and you don’t have to think.*

JK’s performance experience here is seen as being governed not by higher-order cognitive processes but by a type of surrender to the guidance of his body. Once familiar with a song, JK entrusts the reins of performance control to the automaticity of his embodied knowledge and experiences this as intensely pleasurable. This sounds remarkably similar to Csíkszentmihályi’s (1990) notion of flow, in which one becomes completely absorbed in a particular activity, experiencing a heightened sense of concentration and reward.

Although JK’s account of his performance experience resonates with past understandings of the role of the body in performance it also suggests that a more *dynamic* relationship exists between the amount of emphasis placed on higher-order processes and on the body in performance. This dynamicism is captured in JK’s description of the degree to which songs are free to vary on stage:

*There is always something that is set and it just becomes appropriate sometimes to add, to change, to subtract from that . . . they’re probably more ornamental type of things . . . Al [the lead singer] will roll with how he’s feeling at the time towards how to express or phrase a melody.*

In this example, certain parameters are set, yet still remain open to spontaneous variation at the discretion of the performer. This sense of dynamicism in performance characterizes JK’s description of his performance experience. As EC and EMC theorists believe, a truly successful performer won’t *just* rely on higher-order processes or on their body during performance. Yet, unlike EC and EMC, JK’s account suggests that the amount of emphasis placed on higher-order processes or on the body is free to vary throughout a performance.

JK’s account emphasises flexibility as the mark of a truly successful music performer. Such a performer is able to accurately discern whether the unfolding demands of the situation require a reliance on higher-order processes, the body or some combination of both, and adjust accordingly. In a highly technical section of a piece, the performer may need to concentrate solely on following a rehearsed mental mind map, on executing top-down cognitive control and retrieval structures. The performer may then rely more on their body to determine what sort of performance ‘feels right’ in a more familiar part of a piece. After checking the connection with the crowd at a meta-cognitive level and executing various strategies to maintain it, a performer

may immerse themselves in the 'blissful moment' of following the body for a while before checking back in with the crowd.

Previous accounts of performance have differed in the amount of weight they have accorded the role of the body in performance. Common across all accounts however is the static nature of the aspect of performance which each account foregrounds. Whether it be higher-order processes (cognitivist accounts), the body (phenomenological accounts) or an embodied type of cognition (EC and EMC), this aspect *always remains in the foreground during performance*. JK's account of his performance experience dynamicises the role of the body in performance. The amount of emphasis JK places on the role of his body varies throughout the performance according to choices he makes in order to meet specific, unfolding situational demands. JK's ability to flexibly vary the amount of attention he allocates to his bodily experience during performance is key to his performing successfully.

#### 4. PERFORMANCE AND BODY

An exploration of the dynamic effect the body has on performance is complemented by an examination of the effect that performance has on the body. In an attempt to understand the potential impact of performance at a bodily level in JK's account of his performance experience, it is helpful to frame music performance with the theories of work and emotion posited by Dejours (2006) and Hochschild (1983).

For Dejours (2006), engaging in work has an inescapable impact on the body. All work involves an inevitable gap between what one is told to expect in a job (prescriptive reality) and what one must face in a job (concrete reality). The body is seen as the medium through which we experience subjectivity, the locus of intelligence and experience because "it is through the body that the subject first enters the world in order to appropriate and inhabit it" (p. 49). For Dejours, the inescapable gap between perceived and concrete realities manifests itself as failure. Due to the body's close ties to work, this gap is always experienced by the subject as suffering at a bodily level. In order to minimize suffering and work effectively, one must attempt to bridge the gap between prescribed and concrete reality. To facilitate this process, Dejours believes the body and the machine(s) needed for work must exist in a symbiotic relationship, in a relationship where man and machine become one. This process is necessary yet costly. In order to minimize suffering involved with work, one must become obsessed by working, obsessed to the point where one's body is closely aligned with the tools needed for work and where one's body 'becomes' the machine.

However, Dejours' (2006) understanding of work appears mainly limited to physical labour. As Hochschild (1983) notes, the modern assembly-line worker is now an outdated symbol of modern industrial labour, being replaced with a steadily increasing demand for workers in the service industry.

What impact on the body may working in the service industry have? According to Hochschild (1983), working effectively in the service industry requires the successful management of emotion. Emotion management traditionally belonged to the private sphere, yet the advent

of the service industry brought about its commoditisation. In this process, emotion management becomes transformed into emotional labour which is sold to a company who then 'own' and manage the way in which their employee expresses emotion on company time. For Hochschild, engaging in emotional labour undeniably impacts the body, especially if this labour remains unrecognised. For example, a flight attendant obeying company policy and smiling at every customer regardless of how this customer treats him, risks becoming estranged from his smile. The smile may be severed from the underlying emotion that would usually prompt it. An underlying emotion which may not be appropriate to express in a work situation may be suppressed and, over time, come to elicit a weaker internal signal to the individual. Hochschild's concern is that when the private management of feeling is transformed into emotional labour and traded for a wage, the vital signal function of emotion can become impaired, alienating people from their own emotions.

JK's description of his performance experience demonstrates the large amount of work involved in performance, the large component of emotional labour involved in his work and how this work may, potentially, take some sort of bodily toll on JK.

The hard work involved in music performance is clearly evident in JK's description of his performance experience:

*It's not four individuals trying to create a connection to the audience. It is the four of us, first and foremost, trying to create a connection with each other and then that coming across and being broadcast and us displaying that to the audience . . . The better performers make proactive steps to increase [connection] or to get it back if it's been lost during midset . . . It's very similar to a conversation in that if you're talking to somebody that isn't a good conversationalist . . . the thing that is forefront in your mind is how awkward this conversation is*

Not only does JK have to work at establishing connection with other band members on stage but he must then work at effectively broadcasting this connection to the audience and engage the audience in high quality 'conversation'.

As described earlier, JK refers to a number of proactive steps or tactics that a performer may take to connect with an audience. One of the most interesting tactics that JK describes is the intentional performance attitude that the band harnesses on stage:

*We try to have fun first and foremost and that gets displayed to the audience who then can engage with that . . . I think you've gotta be intentional about it . . . you can actually choose to have a good time.*

JK places high value on intentionally having a good time on stage because it adheres to what he believes are the audiences' expectations:

*I think that as an audience member, to see that the artist you are going to see is enjoying themselves and wanting to be there . . . you feel privileged that who you're paying to see . . . is wanting to be there as much as you are.*

Yet what if JK's mood is not conducive to having a good time onstage? According to JK, the show must go on:

*Some may argue that performance should be only what you're feeling at that time and that you should never go against what you're feeling at the time. I think . . . you should give it your best. Putting that energy in can create that connection [to the audience] . . . But at the same time . . . you do have to be yourself as well*

JK acknowledges that a performer needs to be himself onstage. However, from JK's description, essential to a successful performance is this performer putting in their best effort to create a fun, energetic performance regardless of how they may actually be feeling at the time. This is a form of embodied labour.

JK's assumption about the unique nature of performance underlies the work he carries out onstage and exacerbates the demands made on him by this work:

*I think [performance] is always creating something that couldn't be created unless those people were there, at that time . . . A live performance is unique in that it happens once and then it's gone.*

JK's belief in the inherently unique nature of music performance means that the performer has no second chances onstage, increasing the pressure on JK to carry out his performance work correctly.

So, what impact might performance have on JK at a bodily level? JK's description of the work involved in music performance resonates with Dejours (2006). The inherently unique nature of music performance would seem to facilitate the gap between perceived and concrete reality in a performer's onstage experience. Elements in JK's performance will always be recalcitrant and unpredictable and, following Dejours, this will impact his body. Dejours' hypothesised symbiotic man-machine relationship can also be seen to exist in JK's account of his performance experience. An ability to discern the quality of connection between band members and to an audience would seem to require JK to align himself with the band and audience in a similar way to which Dejours' worker aligns herself with the machine of work.

JK's intentional creation of a good time on stage involves engaging in Hochschild's (1983) emotional labour. Just as a flight attendant's effective work performance relies on his ability to produce an unwavering smile, JK's effective work performance relies on his ability to display and engage in unwavering onstage enjoyment. The successful performance of both an air flight attendant and JK rests on their ability to, reiterating Hochschild, manage feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display. Although the flight attendant is employed by a company and JK is self employed, if their emotional labour is not executed correctly, both will not be effective at their jobs, and, it seems reasonable to assume, both will struggle to earn a wage. Further research is needed to gain a more precise picture of how music performance work can impact the body of the performer.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the links between a musician's body and music performance through an examination of the performance experience of one professional musician. Using theories of Embodied Cognition, Embodied Music Cognition, work and emotional labour, it has been demonstrated that the body can both influence and be

influenced by the experience of performance. It is hoped that, using conceptual variables as units of comparison, the iterative nature of theoretical sampling in GT will lead to future research which will continue to enrich the understanding of the reciprocal relationship of body and performance.

## 6. REFERENCES

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