

# That blissful feeling: Phenomenological conceptions of music performance from one performer's perspective

**Andrew Geeves and Doris McIlwain**

Department of Psychology, Macquarie University, Australia

Inspired by the small amount of relevant past research available (Berger 1999, Berliner 1994, Monson 1996, Sudnow 1978), this paper focuses on the type of performance experience an individual musician views as worthy of striving toward (and avoiding) and the possible way(s) in which this can be accomplished. Using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) take on Grounded Theory (GT) as a methodology, data obtained from a semi-structured, in-depth interview with Jeremy Kelshaw (JK), a professional musician, are examined. JK's subjective, phenomenological experience of music performance comprised a detailed understanding of an ideal performance which emerged from JK's understanding of excellence and the uniquely uncertain nature of music performance. Also important in this experience were a number of strategies implemented by JK and his band Cloud Control in an attempt to establish, maintain, and regain vibe, the mysterious key ingredient of a desirable performance experience. Alongside the implications it holds for music education, this research also provides a unique insight into an individual musician's understanding of an ideal performance experience and the strategies used to achieve this.

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The bulk of past studies examining music performance within the discipline of psychology have utilized an experimental research paradigm centered on the music listener. These studies have particularly focused on the relationship between music and the listener's emotion experience (Gabrielsson and Juslin 1996, Huron 2006, Minsky 1982, Sloboda 1991, Waterman 1996). In comparison to the music listener, the perspective of the music performer has been relatively underrepresented in this literature. The majority of studies have used an experimental research paradigm to examine the importance of per-

former-related factors such as emotion and memory (Dunsby 2002, Palmer 2005, Williamon 2002). The specific nature of these studies restricts the amount to which they are able to contribute to an understanding of a musician's gestalt experience of performance.

A handful of studies have examined a musician's broader experience of music performance using self-report and in-depth interviews. One difficulty among many when discerning the relevance of this research to the current research project is that different genres make different use of a large number of variables including musical form, convention, and performance setting. These variables must have an impact at the level of phenomenology. In this way, work by Berliner (1994), Monson (1996), and Sudnow (1978) examining the experience of performance for jazz musicians is valuable, but naturally cannot apply across all genres. Aligning more closely with the aims of our research, Berger (1999) investigated the musician's experience of performance across three genres, discovering a close link between performer affect, music structure, and aspects of the performer's social life. However, noticeable researcher bias, coupled with the strong historiographical and ethnomusicological foci of Berger's work, limits the relevance of its results to our research. We aim to allow the "data to speak" by being more exploratory in our focus and choice of methodology.

Arising from this context, the main objective of our research is to ascertain which sort of performance experience, if any, a musician views as worthy of striving for (or avoiding) and the possible way(s) in which this is accomplished. By conducting and analyzing semi-structured, in-depth interviews with professional musicians, this research aims to build a Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998) of the musician's performance experience. An interview with a single musician, the first in this program of research, forms the basis of this article.

## MAIN CONTRIBUTION

### **Research methodology and background**

Strauss and Corbin's (1998) reworking of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) Grounded Theory (GT) is the ideal methodology for this research program due to the paucity of past research available in the subject area and the aforementioned difficulties associated with attempting to investigate phenomenology and experience. Rather than demanding example verification or perfect description, GT calls for bottom-up theory building derived from strict adherence to data. To aid theory building, GT employs theoretical sampling, a piecemeal approach in which "sampling, rather than being predetermined

before beginning the research, evolves during the process” (Strauss and Corbin 1998, p. 202).

The data on which this article is based are drawn from a semi-structured interview carried out with Jeremy Kelshaw (JK), an experienced bassist currently playing in Cloud Control, a moderately successful self-described indie, alt-folk, pop band. It was initially thought that JK’s interview would serve as a pilot study. 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 involving interviews with professional musicians. The unpredictability of theoretical sampling and the incomplete nature of this research make it important to stress the preliminary nature of findings reported in this article.

## **The interview**

### *Excellence and the blissful moment*

In describing his ideal performance experience, JK not only spells out the specific type of performance experience that he aims to create but also reveals his understanding of excellence:

If you’re not nervous and [the] crowd is already into it...and if it’s a song that you know backwards...you just go into a little bit of a zone.... In that blissful moment it’s the same feeling you have when you really enjoy anything I think.... Your body knows what to do, and you just go into this trance.... You just enjoy yourself, and you don’t have to think.... It’s that feeling of success and a feeling of accomplishment and privilege at the same time.... It’s just bliss.

Phenomenologically, excellence in performance for JK comprises feelings of bliss, success, accomplishment, and privilege. “Trance” and “zone” are used by JK in an attempt to convey the other-worldly nature of this experience, amplified by the high level of intensity and extreme pleasure accompanying these feelings. Csíkszentmihályi’s (1990) notion of “flow” is helpful here. Just like one experiencing flow, JK’s experience is characterized by concentration, absorption, and reward.

### *Vibe*

Although the word was originally introduced into the interview by the researcher (AG), JK demonstrates a predilection toward using *vibe* in his de-

scription of performance experience. Closely linked to JK's ideal performance experience, *vibe* approximates to an emergent something that binds the blissful moment together. Its nexus between individual band members, *vibe* can expand to fill the space between band and audience and band and song, with all three of its manifestations being interrelated:

It is the four of us, first and foremost, trying to create a connection with each other and then that being broadcast to the audience.... In the same way that you can't force a *vibe* with an audience, you can't force a *vibe* with a song.

### *A fleeting uniqueness*

JK's understanding of the unique nature of music performance underpins the performance experience that JK aims to create:

A live performance is unique in that it happens once and then it's gone....  
[It] is unique to you and unique to the people that you're playing with.

The inherent uncertainty in music performance resulting from its vulnerability to temporal and contextual specificity is, ironically, of greatest threat and value to JK. Feelings of exclusivity, privilege, success, and accomplishment stem from the informed yet inevitable gamble with uncertainty JK must take during performance and the sense that it has, on this occasion, paid off. Yet uncertainty also serves as the biggest obstacle to JK's desired experience, with performance being a fleeting, nonreplicable creative experience. A certain quality of performance then, a specific type of experience, a particular type of *vibe*, can all be aimed for but can never be taken for granted nor guaranteed.

### *Indefinable connection*

Like *vibe*, there is also an element of uncertainty in the connection to audience. Although vital to a successful performance, the way in which a dynamic and reciprocal connection to the audience emerges seems unable to ever be completely fathomed:

So much of a successful performance is a connection with the audience...  
We can't pin it down but I think...the better performers still look for that connection, look for that connectivity.

Although partially reliant on variables such as audience expectation, genre, and location of performance space, the unpredictable elements of a connection to the audience, just like those in an ideal music performance, guarantee against its certainty. As a result, performance for JK must always involve working hard to establish, maintain, and prevent the loss of both connection and vibe.

### *The shaping of a successful performance*

Cloud Control implement a number of tactics in an attempt both to prevent an undesirable performance experience and to increase the likelihood of a desirable performance experience. Among pre-performance strategies such as ensuring familiarity with a piece of music and thinking thoroughly about a set list, Cloud Control carry out a pre-performance routine. Prior to performance, the band finds a physical space in which they can sit, collecting their thoughts, singing together and listening to a motivational speech delivered by JK. This routine ensures band members are on the same wavelength before performance. Cloud Control also execute a number of strategies onstage. The most important of these strategies for JK centers on his notion of intention. For JK, performance is never a haphazardly random occurrence into which the performer is thrown but is rather a planned experience over which the performer can exercise control:

I think you've gotta be intentional.... You can actually choose to have a good time.... You just have to give it your best, and people will respect that.... If it's out of your control then that's fine.... How you respond to that is in your control.... That is all you can do really.

Although some variables may be out of a performer's control, for JK, the amount of enjoyment derived from a performance and the amount of effort put into a performance are not. Even if other factors are less than ideal, intention seems conducive to establishing vibe.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

Analysis of an in-depth interview with a single professional musician provides a unique insight into the particular meaning that excellence holds for JK in the context of performance. Using conceptual variables as units of comparison, the iterative nature of theoretical sampling in GT will allow this picture to expand continually over the course of the research project. It is hoped that dissemination of the results of this project might also renew

appreciation for the amount of work and talent the intricacies of successful music performance demand. This work also holds potential implications for the ways in which music is learned, taught, and performed.

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### **Address for correspondence**

Andrew Geeves, Department of Psychology, Macquarie University, Balaclava Road, North Ryde, New South Wales 2109, Australia; *Email*: andrew.geeves@psy.mq.edu.au

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