

1 Introduction

Background

I started playing drum kit around thirty-three years ago when my maternal grandmother gave me drums for my twelfth birthday. About six months later I formed a rock band, *Purple Freuds*, with two school friends, and around the same time I joined another band, the *Dooberie Hounds*, with some other friends. After learning a few covers, we mostly wrote our own material; the other band members would come with riffs, chord sequences or a fully formed song with melody and lyrics, and I would negotiate a drum part that the song's originator felt suited the material. We practised songs till they were as good as we could get them and performed occasionally in local shows. This *modus operandi* has guided my musicmaking to this day; playing in bands with friends and peers centres and grounds me. In the words of jazz musician Joe Gardner in the movie, *Soul*, 'it's my reason for living' (Docter, 2020).

For thirty years, I played with many bands that had names like *Fizzy Wig*, *South Lands*, *Bodega*, *Mass Defect*, *3rd Day Rising*, *Peyote*, *Three's Company*, *Sanction*, *Neck*, *DSK*, *Leo's Garden*, *Eruptörs* and *the Hummingbirds*. I drummed with singer-songwriters Ally Brown, Daniel Spiller and Gillian Glover. We rehearsed and performed together as frequently as we could, and with all these bands the main aim was the same. We had almost no business *savoir faire* and as little business interest. For the resources we poured into making music, the reward was making that music together as best we could. In this we flourished and thrived (Smith, 2017).

Writing this Element, I felt variously pretentious, self-indulgent and like I was surely wasting my own and others' time. Reminded by my own response to others' philosophical writing, though, I also felt motivated by the possibility that any insights I shared might prove useful, provocative, challenging or comforting in some way to others. I write quite a lot, primarily out of a compulsion to try to make sense of my world. My compulsion to write is matched or exceeded by my compulsion to play drum kit. Perhaps in a subsequent piece of writing, I will explore my compulsion to reflect and to write and to try to understand things – however contingently and fleetingly and incompletely that understanding might always be. This Element, though, explores my louder compulsion, the one that takes up so much physical and sonic space in my life. I am writing this Element because I have met at least scores, probably hundreds of other people for whom making music is as important as it is to me – it is as vital to us as breathing, and far more laden with meaning. Unable to speak for others, I wanted to set down on paper the ways in which drumming matters to me, and how it is that it matters in those ways.

I hope my attempt to articulate the compulsion to musicking might resonate with other musicians and those with whom our lives intersect.

Writing and drumming provide a sort of yin and yang for my mind, body, spirit and schedule. Drumming provides the immersive, explosive, physical, intensely present moments to counter the abstract, slow, careful work of meticulously crafting and re-crafting prose. I am grateful to be able to accommodate both of these in my life, for I know when I have had too much of one then the writing or drumming experience becomes numb and uninspired; I need to invest in the other to rebalance and refill the ways in which I make meaning.

It hardly seems necessary to note that drumming and writing are far from the only ways in which I make meaning; but they loom large in my life, and as a scholar of music and music learning, I felt compelled to produce this manuscript. I might just as well have played drums about writing, but probably no one would have known that was what I was doing. Numerous people have been claimed as originators of the adage, ‘writing about music makes as much sense as dancing about architecture’. While I wholeheartedly disagree with the underlying sentiment about the pointlessness of writing about music, with the comparison, I concur; moreover, were I a more confident dancer, I might very well dance about architecture, or about anything else to which I wished to respond. I have drummed about (or because of, in response to and in order to help me process) all manner of experiences and encounters. Processing experiences through artistic expression – and, equally, artistic impression (Matsunobu, 2007) – are important ways in which musicians make sense of our world. Hand in glove with this understanding is that writing and reading about artistic practices are essential to [me, anyway] developing fully as an artist, a scholar, a musician, a writer, a teacher and a human.

This Element is not intended as a justification for me or anyone else playing drum kit. For one thing, I don’t think playing drum kit needs justification, but I am also not interested in using this space to convince anyone that my life choices are more or less morally acceptable. Basically, playing drum kit is really important to me, and in this Element I attempt to explain the ‘how’ of that importance. I touch a little on *why* too, but I am woefully underqualified for that job. According to a life coach I chatted with a handful of times, I am trying to please my father (I guess he’d been reading Jung); internet browsing tells me I probably have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (based primarily on anecdotal evidence, this is not uncommon among drummers); I’ve always found it pretty easy and unendingly rewarding to play drum kit, and I’m good at it (a lot of people – including my dad – have told me this, so it must be at least a bit true). But that is perhaps the extent of the neuro-psycho-socio-cultural reasoning I will undertake for explaining why I do what I do. I cannot undo the

fact that drumming is important to me, so instead I attempt herein to explain the ways in which playing drum kit matters to me.

Why Write a Philosophy of Playing Drum Kit?

I did not set out to write a philosophical tract. I have always been interested in philosophy but felt it was the business of others to write it – those with greater understanding of the inner workings of the universe, who have a stronger grasp of the questions they are asking and who feel far more assured of the value of their ideas than I do my own. I felt, and I still feel, rather unworthy of authoring a philosophical treatise! That being said, I have known for a while that I wanted to write *this* Element, which contains the current culmination of my understanding of its topic.

David Elliott and Marissa Silverman – two of the pre-eminent thinkers on music and music education – describe philosophy in the following way: ‘Philosophy is an active endeavor, a long-standing and continuing social practice that people carry out individually and with others through careful analyses of commonsense assumptions and the construction of fine-tuned, logical argumentation . . . [‘Argument’ here means] a set of logically connected statements that presents a person’s reasons and evidence for his or her claims or beliefs’ (2015: 26–7).

In a similar vein, although writing for a more general readership than Elliott and Silverman, David L Norton and Mary F Kille note that philosophy ‘functions to enlarge our lives and transcend our limitations. It enriches our experience by sounding its depths and widening its horizons. It awakens us to possibilities within ourselves which . . . have gone unrecognized. In so doing it affords us opportunities of freedom and choice in the interest of meaningful living’ (Norton & Kille, 1971: 1). From these assertions, among others, I realised I have been engaging in philosophical praxis and consequently titled this Element ‘A Philosophy of Playing Drum Kit’.

It is worth quoting Elliott and Silverman further, since they explain a good deal of what this Element does and why I found it necessary to write it. Elliott and Silverman (2015: 27) note that ‘philosophy is the process of thinking carefully about our thoughts, mindsets, and actions’; it is doing precisely these things in regard to playing drum kit that led me to compose this text. Elliott and Silverman go on to say that ‘doing so allows us to develop an understanding of others and ourselves and reasoned principles of personal and social conduct . . . It helps us understand more fully our own and others’ ideas and actions’. I could not have more precisely articulated the effect that I hope

this Element might have on readers; for me there is no higher goal for my writing than that it could help people to understand one another better and more fully. Lastly, Elliott and Silverman note that ‘doing philosophy contributes to a wider sense of personal and professional meaning and opens our eyes to wider possibilities of human experience, including our experiences as musicians, teachers, and ethical human beings’. Through better understanding myself as a drummer, I hope to be more patient, compassionate and kind in my life and work.

Both affirming and assuaging my feelings of pretension and self-indulgence, Norton and Kille (1971: 1) tell us that ‘good philosophy begins in scrupulous attention to one’s own experience’. A good portion of this Element is devoted to little else, although I hope this introspection serves its intended purpose of increasing comprehension of the human condition from the perspective of a drummer trying better to understand both myself and my fellow humans. North and Kille identify philosophising as both ‘the most human of activities and the most necessary’ (1971: 1). I (along, presumably, with Maslow (1954), for example) am not sure I would characterise philosophy or philosophising as pre-eminent among human activities, but I agree it is a worthwhile endeavour. I might, however, put making music atop that pre-eminence pedestal.

I wrote this Element in summer and winter of 2021, during the waning days of the Covid-19 pandemic, at least in the USA where I was living and writing, where vaccine production and distribution accelerated with remarkable speed in the first half of the year. Earlier in the pandemic, musicians and artists in my home country of the United Kingdom were beset with government guidance to retrain – as teachers, accountants and computer scientists. While there may well be some good sense in suggesting that musicians diversify their income streams, the rhetoric was offensive, inhumane and inhuman in its focus on arts as functional in an entirely economic rationale. I know many dozens of musicians personally, and have met several hundred more, and I can say with complete certainty that none of us makes music solely for monetary gain. Moreover, with the exception of a minute handful of individuals for whom music performance provides all their income, music is one of the most unreliable ways to make a living. And while the arts can and do generate revenue, *money is not the reason artists do art*. Art making persists in every culture and society worldwide. Music helps us to make sense of who we are, collectively and individually. It is necessary for the human experience and helps us to thrive. I would prefer that in moments of social crisis like a global pandemic, governments should encourage more and more making of art, by as many people as possible. Musicking should not be a contest, despite pressures of the commercial music marketplace

and relentless media efforts to present musicians as fiercely competing in some kind of Hunger Games for money and fame. For musicians, the fundamental reward for making music is that we get to make music. This is not to deny that musicians *absolutely should* be remunerated for our work; we are fortunate that our work is also deeply rooted in our individual and shared humanity.

Meaning, Mattering and Drum Kit

According to Harry G Frankfurt (1998), ‘the importance of reflexivity to those in whose lives it occurs is readily apparent. A creature’s sensitivity to its own condition . . . is essential for purposeful behavior’ (162). I concur. Playing drum kit has long held an important place in my life. It has determined much about my schedule, the type of car I drive and the size of home I live in. As an educator who has taught musicians for twenty-five years and musician-teachers for more than a decade, reflexivity about playing drum kit, and about what it means to be a particular type of musician, has felt increasingly like a moral imperative. I want my students to know that I think deeply and carefully about how music makes sense in my life, to encourage them to do similarly for their own lives. As Elliott and Silverman (2015) tell us, this perpetual work of reflection does not guarantee the best answers, but it is necessary nonetheless to work mindfully and consciously through what it means to be who we are.

For about as long as I have been a drummer, and all the more in my adult life through numerous moves from one apartment or house to another, between cities and between countries, I have wondered why I keep doing it. Let me be clear: I have never considered *not* being a drummer, but it has occurred to me from time to time that I have not really articulated the ways in which why I find drumming, in the various forms in which I do it, so very compelling. I have found fulfilment through every aspect of being a drummer. Not playing drums or not having the opportunity to play drums is unimaginable to me. While such a claim might seem outrageous to some, to me this is very real indeed. As drummer-scholar Bill Bruford acknowledges, drumming is ‘what I do, and what I do is who I am’ (Bruford, 2009: 251).

I know many musicians to whom making music is so vital that to not make music in particular ways would amount to not being themselves. I believe it is important that we be ourselves, with the caveat that this should do no harm to others. Writing that, I understand that my music making almost certainly causes harm to many people. Being a privileged inhabitant of the exploitative Global North, I do not see most of the harm that my musicking does. Nonetheless, I acknowledge that the plastic drumheads I play, the bronze cymbals I strike, the hickory drumsticks I wield, the electricity needed to

make the rock music that I love and the petrol that powers the car in which I drive myself to rehearsals and gigs are all made from materials drawn unsustainably from deep within the Earth that is our fragile home. I do not fully understand the ways in which I need to be a better steward of our planet's resources, and this remains a work in progress for me. Frankfurt (1998) acknowledges the inherent complexity in what a person can be compelled to do, noting, 'there may be a conflict between how someone wants to be motivated and the desire by which he [sic] is in fact most powerfully moved' (164). This tension is tangible in my own life in the aforementioned ways, and I feel similar perpetual challenges in my life as a father, husband, neighbour, professor, teacher and community member.

I frequently find myself discussing with individual students or colleagues an existential crisis they feel in regard to conflicting identities and roles. This often begins when young adults take on a job in addition to being a musician; when will they find time to practise? If they take on work in another domain, will they lose all their chops, credentials and respect as a musician? If they keep putting time into practice as a performer, will that negatively impact their work as, for instance, an educator? For doctoral students and fellow professors, the tension is compounded, now that they also have to spend countless hours reading, writing, editing and formatting dense academic prose. Adults accrue responsibilities – for example, as lovers, spouses, friends, community activists, parents, homeowners and more. How on earth can you be productive and effective in one domain without crashing and burning in all the others? Can you even keep all of the plates spinning? Can a person remain authentic to themselves at all?!

I think balance is possible, although maybe it feels like perpetual imbalance. In a given day, I cannot devote the time I would wish to my drumming, writing, teaching, family, fitness, home, friends, diet, mental health and whatever else needs doing. Over a week, though, one can address more, and over a semester or a year the balance becomes still more even. Over a longer timeline, it is possible to see how different priorities ebb and flow. I find time to attend conferences, write papers, go on hikes and vacations with family, attend my daughter's softball games and theatre performances, make lunches, walk to and from the school bus, commute to work, keep up with scholarship in my field, stay in touch with friends, practise karate and even sometimes clean the interior of my car. Balance is in the constant motion, tangible although perpetually just out of reach. For me, this is philosophical praxis – acting and reflecting in symbiosis, carving out a rhythm, a groove. The thing that has stayed with me the longest and strongest – across countries, cities, homes, relationships, jobs, careers, institutions, competing pressures and stress – is playing drum kit. It is a massive part of what makes me, me. *I drum, therefore I am.*

In his compelling essay, ‘The importance of what we care about’, Frankfurt (1998: 81) determines that people ‘need to understand what is *important* or, rather, what is *important to us*’ (emphasis in original). That about which one cares is not objectively more or less important than ethical or moral obligations, although depending on the degree to which one cares about a given thing, it may concede to, or take priority over, other such considerations. Frankfurt (1998) calls the compulsion to a particular course of action (such as a lifelong commitment to playing drum kit) ‘volitional necessity’ (87) and describes how ‘a person may be in some sense liberated though acceding to a power which is not subject to his immediate voluntary control’ (89); that is to say, one does not get to choose that about which one cares. He also points to something of a paradox here, whereby [I as a drummer] might feel at once both in thrall to and empowered by the volitional necessity to play drum kit. To an extent, we may choose how we *respond* to our passions and compulsions, but we must acknowledge that ‘we are creatures to whom things matter’ (80); to me, playing drum kit matters.

Frankfurt locates a person’s volitional necessity both internally and externally – individually and socially – which Ed Sarath accounts for in terms of a musician’s self-identity, explaining that this is necessarily located in a particular musical–cultural context, that is, the particular musical practices about which we care. In order for musicians to attain self-identity, they must

identify that musical culture that most strongly resonates on the soul level, or however one might describe music to which one connects deeply on emotional and spiritual levels. Because the primordial, archetypal impulses that are, from a transcultural vantage point, important to the soul connection are embedded in the primary musical culture, the significance of this kind of self-cultural grounding cannot be overstated. (Sarath, 2018: 32)

The musical culture with which I identify most strongly is, broadly, rock music, and more broadly still, anything that involves me playing a drum kit to provide a steady groove in collaboration with others. ‘My’ music is the largely Anglo-American rock- and jazz-influenced fusion music that grew out of jazz and blues in the US commercial music boom of the early to mid-twentieth century. With rock at the centre, I branch with varying degrees of comfort into jazz, hip-hop, RnB, pop and related styles and genres. As Sarath (2018) is also keen to emphasise, the specific genres are less important than the ethos that informs the music I make. I like music that requires me to play repeated deep rhythmic grooves in a small ensemble with others. That music is usually amplified and in various ways electronic (I usually play mostly acoustic drums, which are amplified depending on the size of performance venue, with instruments and

voices that are amplified, since in rock styles the drums tend to be played energetically and loudly; more on this later). This music requires creative input from me, in originating or selecting rhythms for a given song, musical piece or moment and in improvisation throughout iterations of playing, performing and recording that music.

Succumbing to/choosing/living the volitional necessity to play drum kit is incredibly fulfilling. But the fulfilling life is rarely one of smooth sailing. As Susan Wolf points out:

Someone whose life is fulfilling has no guarantee of being happy in the conventional sense Many of the things that grip or engage us make us vulnerable to pain, disappointment, and stress. [Furthermore,] spending one's time, energy, money, and so on, on the projects that fulfill you necessarily reduces the resources you have for engaging in activities that are 'merely' fun. (Wolf, 2009: 14)

I enjoy playing drum kit alone, and I especially like doing it in collaboration with others.

I love the sound of a drum kit, and I cherish how drumming allows and requires me to be fully present, in ways that very little else does, and rewards me endlessly for my attention. I love the physicality of playing. I love to create a groove with others. I love the dynamics – the drum kit can whisper and roar, with dynamic extremes so much greater than many other instruments. Behind the drum kit is one of the very few domains where I feel secure in who I am. It is of course always a work in progress, but there I feel completeness, competence, rightness, wellness and freedom. It is comparable to how I feel in the best moments with my immediate family, but those relationships are so much more complicated. My wife and I have a mortgage and car loans to pay off, changing priorities, conflicting schedules and complex emotions to manage. I feel love and peace with my daughter, along with excitement, terror and anxiety for her future well-being and thriving. At the drum kit, everything is simple and straightforward, or at least it can be worked out. There, I take the anticipated and the unexpected in my stride. I can steer the music, respond to the music, listen to the music and be the music.

My life would be far *easier* were I to ditch playing drum kit, and the many frustrations it causes me and my family would be gone, but so would the incredible highs, the potential, the possibilities and the joy! The stakes are too personal and the commitment too deep for me to seriously consider letting it go, as Frankfurt points out, observing, 'a person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it Insofar as the person's life is in whole or in part *devoted* to anything . . . it is devoted to this' (1998: 83). As I explore elsewhere in this

Element, this purposeful life pursuit has been called ‘eudaimonia’, and adherence to this commitment, ‘eudaimonism’. Maslow (1967) is cited by Norton and Kille (1971: 118) when they note that this individualistic version of ‘eudaimonism . . . admonishes us to keep our desires constant with what we are’ – aligning one’s actions with authenticity to the self. Norton describes eudaimonic individuals as ‘quietly and decisively living their lives according to their own inner imperative[s]’ (1976: xiii). Similarly, Waterman describes such people as ‘liv[ing] in accordance with the daimon or “true self”’ (1992: 58), roughly following what Frankl terms a person’s ‘will to meaning’; Frankl indeed urges that, where possible, one has a *responsibility* to live according to their true purpose ([1959] 1997: 121).

A purposeful, eudaimonic approach to life has been contrasted with a shallower, hedonic perspective (Ryan et al., 2008). For Wolf, however, such a ‘Fulfillment View’ is itself ‘a form of hedonism’ (2010: 15), since the eudaimonic individualist seeks constant satiation of their needs. Wolf’s view contrasts with Frankfurt’s perspective, where the volitional necessity [to play drum kit] is not fully under the drummer’s control. I appreciate Wolf’s perspective and feel that I *should* accept responsibility for my choices, but my own conscience rests easier with the Frankfurtian view that, as much as I might choose playing drum kit, playing drum kit keeps on choosing me.

Method

This Element comprises an autoethnographic, lived aesthetic enquiry that focuses on my praxis as a drummer, presenting a somewhat ‘complex mediation and reconstruction of experience’ (Pinar et al., 1995: 567). As Chang (2008) articulates, ‘the data collection field for autoethnography is the researcher’s own life’ (89). Reed-Danahay (1997) affirms autoethnography as ‘a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context . . . both a method and a text’ (9). Drawing on Jones and colleagues (2013), Denzin elaborates, stating that ‘Autoethnography is the use of personal experience and personal writing to (1) purposefully comment on/critique cultural practices; (2) make contributions to existing research; (3) embrace vulnerability with purpose; and (4) create a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response’ (Denzin, 2014: 20).

While this Element meets these criteria to differing degrees, I (1) comment herein on the cultural practice of playing drums to make music in various contexts; (2) contribute to existing research by developing my own body of work about drumming praxis, to drum kit scholarship more broadly and to the burgeoning of area scholarship in making and learning popular music

(Green, 2002; Smith et al., 2017; Moir et al., 2019); (3) embrace vulnerability through an honest and sincere account of personally meaningful musicking in an effort to understand that more fully and (4) welcome any responses at all from reader-interlocutors/correspondents.

As someone who continues to write, play drum kit, teach, read and undertake research all as vital components of who I am personally and professionally, I find it essential to work to understand how these things all mesh, fold and cohabit. A life in music is well suited to the openly subjective ‘autoethnographic paradigm, [wherein] the corporeal knowledge of a musician’s body and the physical act of music-making can be at the centre of the autoethnographic enquiry and used to explore both the creative process and musical output’ (Bartleet & Ellis, 2015: 10), as I do in the sections that follow. Bartleet and Ellis further note how an autoethnographic approach ‘frees the voice and body from the conventional restrictive mind-body split that continues to pervade academic writing’ (2015: 10). As Ingold (2011: 240) underlines, ‘there is no division, in practice, between work and life. It is a practice that involves the *whole person*, continually drawing on past experience as it is projected into the future’ (emphasis added). The ‘whole person’ includes accounting for emotions, traditionally excluded from academic prose – even in domains so emotionally imbued as music – but I am encouraged by Robert R Sherman’s (1985) insistence that philosophising *begins* with emotion; he asserts, ‘humans cannot think effectively, if at all, if they suppress their emotions’ (7); as such, I write herein openly about my emotions in music. Admittedly, some may find it distasteful for me to air my dirty laundry in this way – or to wash it, in the US American idiom – but I borrow again from Sherman, who argues it is better to wash the laundry than to continue to wear it. In the words of ethnomusicologist, Gregory Barz:

I have long since given up on objectivity; I am strongly affected [i.e., influenced] by what I have experienced ... and thus my stories reveal a rather personal engagement ... In the singing of this [text], therefore, I find it tiresome to feign unemotional detachment; those reactions to perceived authorial reflexivity, subjectivity, and perhaps even self-indulgence that will likely be raised by readers are thus understandable. My stance, however, is not without power, and I do not pretend to adopt a defensive posture. I am present in this story. (2006: 2)

Indeed, more than present, I am wide open here. Friends and colleagues have long told me I read like a book; I hope this Element reads like me.

Mark de Rond describes the approach I take to autoethnographic writing, observing of his own work that The writing [is] a vital part of the research;