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Crafting a Music Community: Making Music and Musicians in Concert

Joyce Reenste Walker

I explore the process of writing, recording, and producing a song, within a group of musicians and sound engineers who have all be fostered/encouraged in some way through participation in a "music community" in Kalamazoo, MI. The goals of the project are: 1) To actually explore the timeline of production (an EP-length set of songs) with the group, who are all working from "amateur" status—learning the tools, practices, and skills as they compose; 2) to explore (through short video vignettes) how this particular production has been shaped by participation in the community over the last several years; and 3) To explore the artifact (one of the songs) in more detail, unpacking how each member of the group adds to not only the overall practice, but to their understanding of the music and their own musical skills.

Normally, folks don't think about creating a song as a kind of *crafting*. I know when I think of the word, I tend to think of physical acts (painting, embroidery, knitting, pottery, wood working, etc.) in which an individual engages, and with practice over time becomes adept. Craftspeople can engage in their craft for a living or for a hobby. As Andrew Wagner, former editor of *American Craft Magazine*, explained in an interview in the 2009 documentary film *Handmade Nation*, "That's kind of the definition of crafting: It's someone making stuff for themselves, by themselves" (2:42–2:52).

But if we want to think about the human activity aspect of crafting, then a definition of crafting as "people making stuff for themselves, by themselves" might not be enough. We might need to enrich this understanding by moving beyond a focus on crafters as people who make *stuff*, and more towards the idea that crafters are engaged in particular kinds of (social) activity. From this view, what crafters really produce is an *activity* called crafting (from here on in, I'm going to refer to this as "craft-activity") as well as a certain kind of identity: a *craft*.

In this piece I want to examine the role that craft-activity can play in identity production, a role that works simultaneously to shape both individual crafters and the communities they invent and inhabit. But in order to do this work, I want to move away from activities that we might normally consider "crafting," partly to avoid the pathway

that tends to move our awareness smoothly (and in a single direction) from an individual, to an act of making something, to the thing that is made.

I want to consider some folks who got together to make music.

Instead, I want to consider some folks (non-professionals) who got together to make recorded music. This process, at first glance, probably won't seem much like "crafting" to you. It's messier. It involves multiple pieces, multiple participants, and multiple technologies. And while it might ultimately result in the making of a thing (an EP album), its value for the makers was more in the social productions than the artifact they produced. They engaged in craft-activity, and in the process they recorded songs. But their collective work also produced crafters (song-makers) and a community (a group of interconnected song-makers).

Making Music: Who Gets to Play?

So, let me start this section by saying that I think music-making can be considered a craft—something done by an *artisan*—which fits with the idea of a crafter as someone who engages in an activity over time in order to become adept. Musicians could also be considered "crafters" in that they produce artifacts (songs or tunes) that can be used or shared. Even though it's kind of weird to think of making a song in the same way as one would think of making a picture or knitting a sweater.

Or is it?

When I was talking to the group of folks who helped me to produce this piece, we discussed two possible ways that the idea of "crafting" could be applied to music-making. Firstly, if we think about music-making as an *activity one does* rather than as an *artifact one produces*, it becomes possible see the whole, wide range of different kinds of craft-activity that are part of making recorded music, like learning to play an instrument, learning to write songs, teaching others the songs one has written, or learning the software used to record music, as just a few examples. But the group that I

worked with also considered an even bigger idea, which is that a community (people being together and connecting as a group) is also something that they could (and did) craft.

Crafting is an activity in which a maker and the made balance.

Lots of crafters belong to communities: knitters who get together to knit, painters or potters who share studio space. And I believe that, ultimately, these shared activities produce crafters and communities as much as they do sweaters, pictures, sculptures, or tableware. But, in the documentary *Handmade Nation*, a repeated focus on individuals at work on different types of craft-activity tends to continually shift our attention away from the making of craft *culture*, and back toward the importance of a single person making something.

Crafting is an activity in which a maker and the thing made balance at the center of a large, diffuse, often unmapped crafting terrain. The crafter might be working on multiple projects, might be sharing ideas, learning from and even collaborating with others, but if making stained glass is what he/she does, then the pieces produced are understood to be artifacts produced by a single person, making a single artifact.

When we think of music-making, we're thinking of a group working together to bring something into being.

But making music, while it can be (and often is) done alone, also has an extremely rich history of needing collaboration to exist. Yes, a single musician can purchase a guitar, learn to write and sing and play songs and then go out and perform or share them (say, writing a birthday song for a partner and giving it as a gift).

But when we think of music-making, we're just as often thinking of a group of players or singers working together to bring something (a song, a concert, a "set" of music) into being. And even the solo singer/songwriter often depends on a cast of many (backing

musicians and vocalists, sound engineers, recording specialists, videographers, etc.) to produce an artifact (a CD or digital file, a vinyl record).

Perhaps even more importantly, when music is recorded it can be, as Mark Katz claims in his book *Capturing Sound*, “distinctively tangible, portable, repeatable, and manipulatable—in other words, it is differently able than live music” (Conclusion). So the craft of music-making is not only complicated because it can involve many people acting over time and multiple artifacts, productions and tools, but also because the activities that people engage in (especially when making recorded music) are shaped by the things the tools allow them to do.

For example, in the audio files in the section below called [Acts of Crafting, Intertwined](#), you can see that different musicians using different instruments (including voices) were able to make music together, over time, while also making music separately (each in a small room with sound equipment used to capture the sounds onto a separate digital track). The sense of “bringing together” that happens at the end, when the whole song is completed, is actually created through the use of digital tools that blend all the separate sounds into a coherent whole.

The collaborative physical process can help to shape the sense of community.

And the collaborative physical process—both the activity of layering individual sounds on the different tracks and the process of physically hanging out together and talking about the song, or just about life, while different individual members are in the other room recording—can help to shape the sense of community that members of the group feel toward each other. If members of a group are collaborating digitally, a relationship of course still exists, and in those environments the sense of community can be perceived somewhat differently, as it spreads across wide geographical distances.

In the project that I’m describing here, the *crafters* involved are both men and women (although mostly men), and they came to the act of crafting through a community,

rather than forming a community of like-minded crafters and then dreaming up a collaborative project.

I think that the collaborative features of this particular craft-activity make it a bit easier to observe how these activities included physical and social affordances that were used to keep a community of people interconnected, and that this community-making was actually the primary artifact produced. And as a bonus, we've also got some cool music and conversations to share as part of our work to represent how the making of music can also be part of the making of community.

If It's Not Crafting, Maybe It's "Musicking"

The thing that concerns me most about music making as a craft-activity is just that: the *activity*. If crafting is a thing that people do, and musical crafting is a thing that is done collaboratively (among multiple people and their shared tools and texts) then the idea of music making as crafting is connected very closely to an idea that was presented by Christopher Small in his 1998 book *Musicking*. Small explains the idea of musicking in this way:

The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found . . . between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance. . .”
(13)

So what I want to do (and have tried to do) here is work with some music-makers to think about the collaborative nature of their activities and ultimately how these activities shaped their understanding of (and appreciation for) the things they produced.

And I also want to try to tease out some ideas about how the activities of music-making worked to weave people in the group together—with each other, with the music as a collaboratively produced thing, and with a community of people who believe that shared music-making is a powerful way to maintain relationships. We “music” (a verb) in order to make meaning and to make community.

I'll Know When I Get There

The group of folks who agreed to work with me on this project includes four core individuals who got together to record and produce 12 songs that Kevin Hamman had written. These four people include Kevin Hamman (songwriter, guitar player), Chris Schleuder (multiple instruments, including guitar, and sound engineer), Tony Roth (bass guitar) and Ken Campbell (percussion). Other members of the larger Kalamazoo, Michigan, community participated by providing vocals and other instrumental additions to the songs. These folks knew each other before the project but were brought together more closely as Kevin used the contacts he had (and the contacts that other members of the group had) to create a group that would help him record his songs.

It would take too long to explore here the origins of the project completely, but a couple of notes might be important for readers. Firstly, no one in this group is a professional musician. While I think it's possible also to see professional musicians as crafters (they are certainly "musickers"), the goals of professional musicians and the ways they might produce artifacts (albums, CDs, digital files, vinyl records) would be significantly different from the activities of this group.

In fact, this group of musickers doesn't even have a band (although they sometimes play together at open mic events around Kalamazoo). It was actually the songs that Kevin had written over many years that served as the impetus for bringing the group together on the project, although the four had met at the "Song Shops" held at the Miss Muse house in Kalamazoo.

The story of the project goes something like this: "I wonder if we could do it."

The group (both the four core members and the other participants) worked on the project over the course of the four or five months, using Chris Schleuder's bedroom music studio as their base of operations to record and produce the songs. None of the participants got paid for working on the project, and there isn't any underlying "let's have a band and make an album" story that drives these group members.

As far as I can tell from observing and talking to the group, the story of the project goes something like this: “I wonder if we could do it.” This story—the idea that the group could do things they’d not yet done, and learn and improve while producing something tangible—was a big contributor to the sense of community that the project has encouraged.

The title of this section, “I’ll Know When I Get There,” is one of the 12 songs that the group recorded. The group picked this song (at least partly) because it was one of the songs that showed most clearly the ways that different voices, instruments and mixing techniques worked together to make the whole.

At this point, if you are interested, you can watch Kevin explaining the origins of the song:



See Additional Files for Transcript:

<https://doi.org/10.15760/harlot.2015.14.5>

Musicking and Antecedent Knowledge

So in this project, “musicking” means some people doing some things (together and separately) to create some songs and record them. Craft-activity related to music. Musicking. As the video in the last section illustrates, these individuals didn’t just get together to record a song that had already been composed. They worked together to construct and record the songs, which evolved and changed in response to this activity. And while in a simple view, the “songs” were already artifacts produced (sometimes years earlier) by Kevin Hamman, they were also constructed over time—transformed and reinvented by the people who added their individual acts of music to the whole.

To understand this, it’s important to think about how these individuals came to the project—and what skills each brought with them. In the following video, members of the group talk about the tools they used in order to participate in the project—both skills they brought with them and skills they learned in the making:



See Additional Files for Transcript:
<https://doi.org/10.15760/harlot.2015.14.5>

For me (observing from the in/outside), it’s really important to see how each person brings sets of skills into the space/time of the project. These skills and knowledge

inform their practice, which in turn shapes the activity of crafting an album. This kind of “bringing-in-from-the-outside” is known as “*antecedent genre knowledge*” in my field of Writing Studies. It is discussed by Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff in a study they completed about student writers in 2011. For Bawarshi and Reiff, the idea is that if you want to investigate what someone is doing when they are doing something complicated, you need to consider how the knowledge that person already possesses is coming into play.

This includes not just knowledge the person uses consciously, but all of the life experiences and subconscious knowledge that shapes how an individual can even begin to think about the activity s/he’s engaged in. (Bawarshi and Reiff were studying writers writing, but the same idea would be true for other complex activities like cooking, making music, etc.). The term “antecedent knowledge” is also used in an interesting way in Kathleen Yancey, Liane Roberston, and Tara Taczak’s 2014 book, *Writing across Contexts: Transfer, Composition and Sites of Writing*. Their idea is that it’s not just important to think about what kinds of knowledge people are bringing to a new composing (writing) space—it’s also important to consider how flexibly they are using that knowledge to apply to new kinds of thinking and activity.

For example, Chris Schleuder’s music-practicing experience shapes his activity in ways that make them different from Tony’s and Ken’s activities, because Tony and Ken are both (by comparison) more novice music-makers, and so have different antecedent knowledge. But Chris’s shared knowledge definitely shaped the way that Tony and Ken participated in the project: working with Chris and his more extensive knowledge shaped the kind of music-crafters Tony and Ken became by the end of the project.

Similarly, Kevin’s experience, as the songwriter, is fundamentally different from the experiences of other members of the group who didn’t originally compose the songs but did help to shape (and thus compose) them as they evolved during the studio experience. However, if Kevin’s understanding of the songs hadn’t been flexible, then the opportunity for others to bring new information to the crafting process would have been more limited. That doesn’t mean that the songs wouldn’t be good, but they would be differently collaborative.

Acts of Crafting, Intertwined

In this section, I want to include some audio tracks. They include an initial track of the “I’ll know When I Get There” song (with just Kevin playing and singing). It might seem like a lot of work to listen to each track, but listening for even a few seconds to each one can help to establish the layering that happened as each successive voice or instrument was added. For those who don’t have experience with sound recording, the different tracks can help you imagine what it feels like for the musicians, who are listening to the original track through headphones and then recording their part over the original track. Then, thinking about the location (Chris’s house) where the recordings were being made, you can imagine each track being recorded while other members of the group sat in another room—just “shootin’ the shit.”

See Additional Files for Sound Recordings:
<https://doi.org/10.15760/harlot.2015.14.5>

Song Lyrics:

I’ll Know When I Get There by Kevin Hamman

I was walking, down dark woods

People were down by the lake.

And they were singing that life is a dream

We won’t know now until we awake.

Chorus

And I’ll know when I get there (yeah)

And I’ll know when I get there (yeah)

Seen the light, seems to be coming my way

And I’ll know when I get there (yeah).

And I was walking in the night

Faces pale against the sky.

Where do they go?

No one seemed to know and

No one would even ask why, why? (Chorus)

Both the experience of adding to and layering on top of a basic version of the song, and the activity of hanging around in the group while one person was recording, helped to shape the group's sense of connection—to both the music and to the community. The fact that something (a song) was being built and that as it evolved it became more and more of a group effort was combined with the sense of shared time and connection that the group members experienced.

In the video that follows, Chris and Kevin talk about the activities involved in making and mixing the tracks:



See Additional Files for Transcript:

<https://doi.org/10.15760/harlot.2015.14.5>

What's a Community, and How Do You Make One?

Here, I would like to include a video where group members talk about their understanding of what it might mean to “craft community.” Each member of the group offers similar ideas about what it has meant for them to be a part of the group, and how they understand that in terms of community:



See Additional Files for Transcript:

<https://doi.org/10.15760/harlot.2015.14.5>

Conclusions: Crafting Community

People making music. That's not new. And the ambiguity that infuses our understanding of how artistic productions should be categorized and named isn't a new issue, either. Maybe music can be thought of as a kind of crafting, and maybe not. It all depends on the kind of boundaries we want to draw and enact. But thinking about “musicking” as a crafting activity does offer us a chance to visit borderlands where crafters must be collaborators and where the activities of producing artistic artifacts can be brought

about through relationships between humans that extend beyond the boundaries of the craft activity.

This matters because our individualistic American/Western culture makes it all too easy for us to enact understandings of craft activities as solitary, individually centered, and done in isolation from outside influences (of people or tools). *Handmade Nation* does illustrate that crafters often think of themselves as belonging to a larger community or culture and that they understand their work as crafters to be part of that culture. As Maggie White, owner of Youngblood Gallery & Boutique explains in the documentary, “We’re getting tired of the watering down of our culture. If you don’t like the culture that you’re living in, you have to create your own” (101:04–101:12).

“We’re getting tired of the watering down of our culture. If you don’t like the culture that you’re living in, you have to create your own.”

But our particular version of 21st century media culture allows for understandings of artistic activity not only to be centered on the self but also to include binaries of producers and user/viewers (I make it. You buy it, watch it, listen to it). These understandings are embedded deeply in our culture and find expression in the ways we draw boundaries around and between certain kinds of crafting activities and artifacts.

So it’s useful for us to draw new connections. Not just to explore what it means to our definitions if we consider a collaborative, aurally-based activity as a kind of crafting, but also to think about how different perspectives on groups making “artistic” meaning can alter our understanding of the potential of these acts of meaning-making to impact the communities that work together to produce them.

Music, some scholars think, may have evolved in part as a way for human communities to work together socially. As Daniel Levitin notes in his book *This is Your Brain on Music*, “Music is unusual among all human activities for both its ubiquity and its antiquity. No known human culture now or anytime in the recorded past lacked music” (Introduction).

For the particular group featured in this article, the powerful role of music-making as a collaborative act is clear. The project's origins and implementations extend significantly out into the roots of an existing community of people, whose shared understanding of "musicking" as a valuable group endeavor shapes how music-making can be taken up and used, as both an opportunity for self-and-community expression and as a tool for building and enhancing community relationships.

But it's finally my argument that an understanding of shared endeavors like this, which employ crafting as a collective verb, can extend beyond music-making to all kinds of acts that help people to feel as if they are making meaning in concert. What defines this Kalamazoo music community is the belief that it's worth our while to seek out these kinds of collaborative opportunities and our commitment to making the collective experience of the group richer and more meaningful.

So yes, this group is crafting community. Oh yeah, and some songs, too.

Joyce R. Walker is an Associate Professor in Writing Studies and the Director of the Illinois State University Writing Program (www.isuwriting.com). As Writing Program Director, she has conducted multiple program assessments and research studies specifically designed to focus on the uptake and transfer of writing skills. She has published in *Kairos*, *Computers & Composition*, *PMLA*, *Pedagogy*, and in multiple edited collections. Her forthcoming book project, "Mapping the Literate Lifeworld (You are Here): Locating Learning Transfer in Complex Writing Situations" will focus on rethinking ways to understand how "acts of transfer" can be identified in diverse learning settings. In addition, she is specifically interested in how Narrative Inquiry, as a research method, can be combined with Cultural-Historical Activity Theory to uncover and examine how the diverse activities of communities can work to shape community and personal identities.

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