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## **‘Instrumental’ playing? Cultural policy and young people’s community music participation**

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Over recent years, young people’s participation in small-scale, locally based arts activities has increasingly come to be viewed by policy-makers as capable of playing a valuable role in both re-engaging ‘at-risk’ youth with mainstream education and providing a means through which communities might combat social exclusion. For some commentators, however, the political imperatives underpinning this approach sit uncomfortably with the multifarious uses and ambitions of creative youthful cultural participation, leading some to criticise the adopted approach as an ‘instrumental’ use of the arts. Presenting findings from three youth-based community music projects set in the north of England, this paper explores some of the ramifications of current policy relating to the community music participation of young people, particularly those considered ‘at-risk’. The analysis reveals ways in which such use of cultural policy can have a negative impact on participatory activity, leaving community music projects in danger of missing their at-risk target.

**Keywords:** community music; youth; social exclusion

### **Introduction**

This paper explores a number of ways in which current policy aimed at encouraging the social inclusion of especially ‘at-risk’ young people through community music participation risks failing to engage this very group. I begin by outlining the nature of community music and discuss its increasing alignment with the policy agenda affecting much of the recent funded UK arts activity. Following this, I trace the delegation of funding and policy relevant to young people’s community music activities from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), on to Arts Council England (ACE) and from there to the relevant funding distributing body, the National Foundation for Youth Music (hereafter simply ‘Youth Music’). After pausing to explore some of Youth Music’s funding stipulations and policy interpretations, I turn my attention to community music project participation, making use of three cases of community music projects in order to assess the effects of the aforementioned policies.

### ***Community music: definition and background***

Perhaps the most succinct introduction to the idea and ideals of community music is the short-hand phrase ‘music making with social goals’. Although definitive and concise statements of what community music is and does are hard to come by, it typically involves a small number of musicians working with groups of varying sizes to enable them to develop active

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and creative involvement in music making and music-related activity. Naturally, this covers a wide range of activities, from an orchestra's community outreach work in hospitals or health centres, to singing or drumming workshops in schools or prisons, through to pre-school children's exploration of sounds. The policy statement of the Community Music Activity Commission of the International Society for Music Education (ISME) reflects the sheer range of activities falling under the rubric of community music, providing less of a definitional and more of a descriptive account of community music in portraying it as 'a vital and dynamic force that provides opportunities for participation and education in a wide range of musics and musical experiences' (ISME 2003).

In this paper I want to focus upon an area of significantly increased recent UK community music activity, that of community music projects seeking to engage young people (aged 11–18), especially those considered 'at-risk' of social exclusion. Community music project activity seeks to work with participants in a sustained way, typically seeking to retain and attract participants over time, creating opportunities for a range of musical and music-related experiences in line with participants' interests. Projects typically meet for sessions of somewhere between one and three hours, once or twice a week, during which time community musicians work, through the use of a variety of teaching–learning strategies, to facilitate 'hands-on' musical activity. Projects take place within both formal and informal settings, covering a variety of project forms and working within a range of musical styles.

### **Community arts and UK cultural policy: background**

In recent years the community arts have come to occupy a more prestigious and recognised position within British cultural policy than ever. Yet a glance across the last 40 years of the community arts movement's history shows that, in order to arrive at this position, it has moved some way from its initial roots. These roots lie in the late 1960s, when the movement consisted of a relatively loose collection of activists and young artists who adopted unconventional methods in their practice. In *Community, Arts and the State: Storming the Citadels* (Kelly 1984), the author describes the then guiding philosophy of community artists as offering a means of embracing the zeitgeist of the day, one that viewed radical cultural and political activity as a means of challenging the oppressive instrumental rationality that had dominated the political and social landscape of post-war Britain. The artists belonging to this first wave of the movement were aiming to create an alternative society as much as they were using arts to ask questions.

By the early 1970s, the burgeoning community arts movement had begun to attract some funding and institutional support (from organisations such as the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation) yet the decisive role in the movement's future lay with the Arts Council of Great Britain. Following several initial assessments<sup>1</sup> of the movement and the offer of slight funding by the Arts Council, the recognised need for a fuller exploration of the precise nature and potential role of community arts took the form of a working party established under Professor Harold Baldry in 1974. By this time the movement had formed the Association of Community Artists, yet in a conscious and pragmatic effort to retain its particular ideological leanings and not allow itself to be pinned down to a specific set of functions, it offered no real manifesto or set of definitions and goals. Instead it issued a loose and general set of statements which have since been characterised as a 'strategy of deliberate vagueness' (Kelly 1984, p. 21). Nevertheless sympathetic to the work of the community artists they had witnessed, the members of the working party overlooked the movement's more radical elements and contentious practices, presenting it instead to the Arts Council as at once

benign and reasonable in its efforts to work with children and society's disadvantaged (Arts Council of Great Britain 1974). While the Arts Council's response was to provide some funding,<sup>2</sup> this was inadequate to enable the movement's growth – a situation reflective of the enduring concerns within the Arts Council about the ideological leanings of those calling themselves 'community artists'. Indeed, while the theme of 'cultural democracy' (an idea encapsulated in community arts practice) became prominent within arts policy debates in the late 1970s,<sup>3</sup> the Secretary General of the Arts Council of Great Britain condemned the valuation of people's self-expression through art above that of the encouragement of high-arts appreciation as 'nonsense in its extreme form' (Shaw 1981, p. 92). Despite gaining recognition by the Arts Council, the result of this for the community arts movement was for it to become evermore subject to the government's idea of what it was and what it might be best suited for.

As responsibility for supporting the community arts was delegated down to Regional Arts Associations<sup>4</sup> in 1979, and with the emerging public expenditure crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the movement found itself increasingly marginalised. Throughout this period many funding agencies came to view the community arts as aligned with various forms of social and educational provision or community work, largely overlooking the original movement's emphasis upon processes of art making as connected to the notion of cultural democracy. As community artist Owen Kelly commented at the time: 'We have become foot soldiers in our own movement, answerable to officers in funding agencies and local government recreation departments' (1984, p. 27).

This period in the relative wilderness continued largely unchanged until 1993 when the independent research consultancy Comedia began lobbying for support to prove the effectiveness of investing in socially orientated arts initiatives. In a series of publications around social impact, which culminated in François Matarasso's influential *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts* (1997), Comedia claimed arts-based projects' credentials as tools for social renewal. Matarasso's report heralded as many as 50 ways in which participatory arts programmes could help tackle weighty social problems and proved influential in cultural policy-making circles.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, following New Labour's election victory in 1997, the nature of the social outcomes now proposed (including personal development, social cohesion, community empowerment and self-determination, local image and identity, imagination and vision, health and well-being) sat comfortably alongside the newly formed DCMS's explicit concern to contribute to the government's manifesto commitments, particularly with regard to tackling social exclusion. The oft-cited PAT 10<sup>6</sup> report to the Social Exclusion Unit (DCMS 1999) made the government case clear when it concluded that the arts, cultural and recreational activity 'can contribute to neighbourhood renewal and make a real difference to health, crime, employment and education in deprived communities' (DCMS 1999, p. 8). This effectively shifted arts funding away from a situation characterised by grant giving, to one under which now '...public spending on the arts is justified in terms of an "investment", which will bring about positive social change and contribute to alleviate social exclusion in disadvantaged areas of the country' (Belfiore 2002, p. 94).

### ***The 'new approach'***

The DCMS's aim of meeting social inclusion objectives, part of its 'New Approach to Investment in Culture' (DCMS 1998a), configured the relationship between it and the bodies that it was to fund as ones which, in ensuring the delivery of the appropriate outputs, introduced 'new three year funding agreements ... placing clear responsibilities on those

[sponsored] bodies to deliver against demanding targets' (DCMS 1998b, p. 15). With these funding agreements constituting an 'explicit and challenging statement of the outputs and levels of performance expected' (House of Commons, Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport 1999, para 11), it was clear that the DCMS would need 'to see measurable outcomes for the investment which is being made' (DCMS 1998c, p. 4) in order to justify the provision of continued funding. This was to become an increasingly important aspect of the DCMS's relationship with ACE over the following years: 'We would like you to continue the work you are doing to *maximise* and *exploit* the contribution of the arts to *core policies* including education, health, crime, regeneration and the well-being of the public at large' (DCMS 2003, p. 15, my emphasis).

Thus prevailing over the arms-length principle,<sup>7</sup> the funding agreements subsequently established between the Arts Council and the DCMS were required to explicitly incorporate the latter's aim 'to develop and enhance the contribution the arts make to combating social exclusion and promoting regeneration' (DCMS 2000, p. 2). Naturally, these aims were subsequently passed on by ACE to the organisations that it, in turn, funds: 'We have a funding agreement with these [funded] organisations and we review them regularly to ensure the funds we invest in them are meeting the terms of their funding agreement' (ACE 2006).

The organisation in receipt of ACE funding to support young people's community music activity in England is Youth Music.<sup>8</sup> Established in 1999 with National Lottery funding, Youth Music is the UK's largest children's music charity and the dedicated provider of government funding of community music activities, distributing £10m per year of Lottery funding on behalf of ACE. Naturally, given its position as one of ACE's regularly funded organisations, as part of its remit Youth Music is expected to contribute towards DCMS's objectives as they relate to, amongst other things, the socially excluded or 'at-risk'. This much is reflected in Youth Music's stated aims:

Youth Music is targeting children and young people 'at risk' as this is a significant group of young people who lack the opportunity to take part in music-making. Youth Music has recognised that social and economic barriers are contributing to a cycle. Low achievement in schools can lead to disengagement from education, exclusion from school leading to crime. Youth Music believes that music-making is a tool that can be used to engage young people in their own development. (Youth Music 2008a)

Such is the primacy of this area of policy for Youth Music that, from its inception, a key element of its work has involved the establishment of a number of national action zones,<sup>9</sup> located in identified areas of social and economic need. A main aim of this measure is to 'establish the value of music-making opportunities as a force for regeneration in communities, fostering social inclusion and community' (Youth Music 2008b). Since 1999, a series of directed programmes have been operating with the intention of engaging young people in music-making activities that contribute to their development and, ultimately, help foster social inclusion.

### ***Proving the case for 'investment'***

Having for so long championed the potential value of the community arts, its practitioners and provider organisations must now effectively respond to the pressure from government to justify its 'investment'. Yet demonstrating the success of community music initiatives in terms of their contribution to social inclusion is a far from straightforward matter. Despite the claims persuasively made in his subsequent work (Matarasso 1997), François Matarasso

actually noted the methodological difficulties facing attempts to quantify the effects, on actors, of participation in locally based, small-scale creative arts projects back in 1996. Principal amongst these are not just the difficulties of establishing a cause-and-effect relationship between actors' participation and any outcomes subsequently claimed, but also measuring and accounting for participants' 'intrinsic reactions' to creative experiences – the subjective and often idiosyncratic effects of their engagements with cultural activity.

Even where attempts have been made to overcome such difficulties, much of the research carried out to date is still considered anecdotal and has been criticised by commentators for its lack of robustness and occasionally simplistic and misleading use of statistics (see, e.g. Coalter 2001, Merli 2002). In addition, case study findings are often presented in a generalised manner that appears more concerned with advocating the work than actually providing substantiated findings: 'Despite – or perhaps because of – what is now the prevailing orthodoxy, it has become increasingly pressing for a distinction to be drawn between advocacy and evidence, potential and actual fact' (Selwood 2002, p. 10).

A number of more critical reviews published in recent years reveal a growing consensus of opinion questioning the validity of much of the evidence presented to date, not only with respect to the lack of robustness of the methodologies used and the non-substantiation of some of the claims made, but also arts providers' lack of evaluative experience and the limited jurisdiction of community arts projects and their potential to influence claimed outcomes. In one of the most even-handed reports focusing on arts activities and social inclusion, Jermyn soberly recognises the difficulties involved as she concludes on the way her work 'has possibly raised more questions than it answers' (2004, p. xi).

Given the difficulties experienced by professional researchers in their attempts to understand the community arts' contribution to social inclusion, it is little surprise that its providers are no less challenged by the need to provide evidence of the effectiveness of their work. The situation is only compounded by the fact that the abiding culture of the sector means that, more often than not, practitioners are both relatively unused to and fairly disparaging of formal evaluative procedures. Nevertheless, across the community arts, a certain weight of evaluation must be borne in order for sponsored bodies such as Youth Music to justify the funding received from ACE.

In light of the above situation, Youth Music's responses, in terms of firstly, the evaluative requirements and secondly, the policy stipulations that it passes onto its funding beneficiaries, are, while seemingly reasonable and uncontroversial, also somewhat detrimental to the achievement of some of its basic objectives. In terms of the evaluative requirements, recipients of Youth Music funding are asked to provide regular narrative and statistical reports detailing projects' achievements along with basic numerical information<sup>10</sup> about their work. In its policy stipulations, meanwhile, Youth Music alerts applicants to the fact that proposals must include 'structured music-making activities which are planned to advance children and young people's music skills' and 'composition, song writing and/or improvisation' (Youth Music 2006a). Given the anticipated competition for resources, applicants are also informed that one of the priorities against which funding decisions are made includes the provision of 'performance and/or recording opportunities' (Youth Music 2006b).

As we shall explore below, it is at the point of imposing such seemingly benign evaluative obligations and policy stipulations, that the broader project of using music as a means of engaging young people, particularly 'those previously denied access to creative music making opportunities for reasons of economic, demographic or geographic exclusion' (Youth Music 2002), begins to unravel. The aforementioned stipulations and policy priorities fed directly into the aims and objectives of the community music organisation

with whom I conducted research, consequently setting the parameters within which individual projects and the practitioners delivering them operated.

### **Conducting the tune: community music project activity**

The data presented below is taken from three case studies undertaken as part of a larger ESRC-funded CASE research project, the aims of which were to explore the complexities and multi-dimensionality of young people's participation in community music activities and their potential role in community development.<sup>11</sup> In line with the noted difficulties of understanding individuals' participation in community arts activities (Matarasso 1996, 1997, Moriarty 1997, Allin 2000, Coalter 2001, Jermyn 2001), the methodological approach adopted was predominantly ethnographic in nature, employing data collection methods of participant observation, (in-)formal group discussion sessions (many of which were tape recorded) and approximately 40 semi-structured interviews with young people, project partners, practitioners and arts organisation employees (also recorded). Data was subsequently coded and analysed using qualitative data analysis software. The study from which the findings presented below are drawn involved four in-depth case studies, each of which was studied over a period of six to eight months. These projects were purposively chosen for their relative ability to represent several key dimensions of community music projects (e.g. nature of project partnership; urban/rural setting; socio-demographic make-up of participants; human and material resources available; average number of participants; musical and participatory form employed; length of time in operation).

During the study's fieldwork phase, my roles vacillated between those of researcher/observer, co-deliverer and co-participant in community music sessions in such a way that I effectively became a 'friend' or 'helper' to projects. Due to the nature of this role, the duration of my fieldwork and my broader interactions within research settings (e.g. at regular youth centre sessions, in refereeing football games involving project participants or in 'afterwork' discussions with practitioners), I was able to develop good rapport with my research participants and gain valuable insights into the ways music and music-related activity operated within the broader conditions of their lives. Given the networked nature of the relevant arts organisation's programme of delivery and its active encouragement of collaborations, celebrations and gatherings between projects, I also collected data within a variety of other contexts of community music-related activity and visited numerous non-case study projects, performance and participation events as well as researching young people in contexts beyond those directly related to community music participation (typically in and around schools and youth centres). In preparation for my participatory involvement in the case studies, I also followed a six-month community musician traineeship, attended project planning meetings and assisted in the organisation of young people's music events. Such close involvement with the community music provider organisation allowed me to learn a great deal about its structure, aims and modus operandi, as well as providing insights into the pressures and constraints facing community music practitioners.

#### ***Project 1 – suburban song writing***

The first project (hereafter Project 1) was based in a youth centre on one of the largest council housing estates in England, located on the outskirts of a northern city and within an electoral ward which, according to the multiple indices of deprivation published in 2000, ranked amongst the most deprived 500 of the 8414 in England (DETR 2000). The area is

affected by a host of social problems, many of which impact severely upon its young people. Despite the presence of the youth centre in which the project was based, the area largely lacks facilities for young people and suffers from significant levels of vandalism, petty theft and anti-social behaviour.

The project had been ongoing in something approximating its current form for three years prior to the beginning of my fieldwork. Over this time it had maintained a focus on encouraging the participation of the youth centre's girls (aged 11–18) through song writing and performance. Although project activities were supported by three community musicians and a youth worker, the fact that the participant group consisted of only four regular participants served as an indication that something was wrong at the level of attracting and maintaining young people's involvement.

As I got to know the girls in the centre and learnt about their relationships with music, it emerged that for all but a few, music making (in terms of the active manipulation of sounds) did not play a particularly significant role in their lives. Although most had sung and some had received instrumental tuition while at school, almost all now espoused a general disengagement with the musical opportunities available there; indeed, most demonstrated low commitment to school and low academic aspirations. The situation outside of school was little different; few of the girls played or ever really had played musical instruments concertedly, with opportunities noted as being scarce and the levels of support forthcoming from the home being negligible:

- M<sup>12</sup> What about musical instruments and that kind of thing, is there anyone musical around your family?  
 R [shakes head] Not really.  
 M Has anyone ever tried to teach you any music at home or...?  
 R [shakes head]  
 M Encouraged you to be musical?  
 R No.

(Lisa,<sup>13</sup> age 13)

That said, music did nevertheless play an important part in their lives and the girls had quite distinct ideas about what it was about music that they appreciated and that interested them. This mostly revolved, as it does for many young people, around what might be termed the representational, symbolic and denotative<sup>14</sup> elements of musical meaning – the lyrical content of songs, the assumed subject positions adopted by popular music artists (what they were 'about' and the ideas and attitudes they represented), along with 'look'/style and other kinds of visual musico-cultural statements tied up with particular youthful identities (the girls were, for instance, avid watchers of music videos). This is not to say that strictly 'musical' (i.e. purely sonic) elements of preferred music did not bear significant meanings for many of the girls – in terms of their pop music listening they certainly did in certain, albeit broad respects:

I dunno [I] just like catchy tunes...

(Caroline, age 13)

In essence though, this element of the musical experience was presented by many of the girls as somewhat secondary to altogether different aspects of their favoured music's meanings:

- M So what it is that makes a good piece of music for you?  
 R Gotta have good lyrics in it and its gotta mean something.

(Elsa, age 13)

Undoubtedly then, those aspects of musical experience to which the girls related most readily, and (significantly for their creative participation) in whose manipulation they had both the greatest interest and facility, concerned its representationally significant dimensions. In an attempt to accommodate such interests, the community music sessions adopted a singing/song writing focus during my fieldwork, with the four girls working in pairs to develop song lyrics to which the community musicians would subsequently provide backing music (using piano, guitar or computer software) and offer guidance in vocal delivery and performance. This corresponded with Youth Music's policy aim focussing upon musical practice ('composition, song writing and/or improvisation', Youth Music 2006a) as a means through which to engage young people in their own development. As was typically the case across the broader programme of the community music organisation under study, responding to the requirement of evidencing their work in an ongoing way responded to Youth Music's prioritisation of 'performance and/or recording opportunities' (Youth Music 2006a) by placing an emphasis upon public performance. The leader of this project thus sought to encourage its participants to perform their work at a local Youth Music Action Zone gathering<sup>15</sup>:

- M So what were you looking to achieve with the group?  
 R Erm, that they accessed the big days [youth music gatherings] ... I don't think performance is the be-all and end-all, I think it's part of the process as opposed to the end point, but that they achieved that ... was massive.
- (Project Leader, Project 1)

Within community music circles, performance is recognised as a valuable means of consolidating group activity, setting a clear goal and developing participants' confidence; when done at the right time and in the right way it can be a spur to further aspiration. In light of the increased pressure to provide evidence of the effectiveness of their work however (and in the absence of other means of effectively doing so), there now exists a strong tendency for community music practice to seek to respond to Youth Music's prioritisation of performance/recording. With the achievement of visible outputs inscribed in community music policy in this way, the resulting orthodoxy is for community musicians to place an emphasis on the achievement of group performances in their practice. Indeed, the more young people one can involve in this, the better:

- R I just feel so jealous that they [other youth-based community music projects] have armies and armies of [young] people to go to places.  
 M Is it important to try and get a lot of young people to come along to the gatherings?  
 R Well, you feel you ought to [laughs]...
- (Project Leader)

In the case of this struggling project however, the push towards performance produced more of a negative effect:

- R I was scared in the first place and just [thinking] proper 'Oh, it's a crap song'.  
 M What about afterwards did you feel...  
 R Really glad it was over and done with.  
 M Really? Did it make you want to do it again though?  
 R No, not really.
- (Lisa)

Lisa's reaction was, in many ways, understandable. For one thing, the girls had only minimal prior performance experience and were evidently nervous to the point of discomfort

during their performance. Subsequently judging their pieces against those of the other, more musically competent groups at the gathering (the majority of whom played instruments or else sang as large groups), several of this group's already unselfconfident members became evermore critical of their own abilities and efforts. Following the gathering, the adopted format remained in place (as it did throughout the months I spent with the project) despite the fact that, over time, the majority of the group's interest had begun to wane, with attendance becoming correspondingly irregular. What made the situation worse, in terms of simply encouraging these few girls' continued participation, was that the experience of the gathering heightened their awareness that they had little control over the nature of their participation:

I've kind of been thrown in at the deep end kind of thing ... like we weren't doing the music that long before we did wa [our] first performance, \*\*\*\* (Project Leader) was just like, 'Oh, there's a performance coming up' and 'Are you gonna perform?' kind of thing. But we felt like we didn't really have a choice.

(Caroline)

...there's, there's always like, making one song and then straight onto the next one is more important than our say really ... I'd rather make videos and stuff like that but we cannot make videos because \*\*\*\* (Project Leader) is being too serious and she's concentrating on making the songs and once we've made the songs it's straightaway onto the next song.

(Lisa)

Having spent the greatest part of their participation engaged in a predominantly textual approach to song writing, several of the girls became increasingly keen that their participation should now come to involve more means of creating and exploring musical meaning in ways that were accessible to them ('making a [music] video, T-shirts...' – Elsa). Yet given the low number of participants involved – a clear indication that the style of musical provision on offer was unattractive to many of the centre's girls – no significant changes took place, nor were the girls and their non-participating peers constructively consulted about alternatives. Indeed, to have responded to the girls' particular interests would have implied a move away from the 'structured music-making activities' emphasised in the policy of Youth Music and this community music provider organisation.

I mean we've said a few times that we wanted to do like, make a video and they've [community musicians] said 'Aha, we'll do, we'll make the video, we'll make the video' but it's never, like, been done.

(Lisa)

As the months drew on and with little change in the status quo and further performance 'opportunities' looming, all but one of the girls quit their participation. The one remaining participant, Elizabeth, had been involved with the project over several years. Elizabeth was more self-confident and outgoing than the other girls and throughout my fieldwork had demonstrated resilience, enthusiasm and a far more flexible approach to musical activities than her peers. Interestingly, of the four girls involved in the project, Elizabeth was also alone in benefiting from involvement in other music-making activity (however informal), as well as some support in her efforts from home:

Yes, we [Elizabeth and her mother] both know songs and that and so we just sing ... she likes loads of stuff that I listen to, she likes all that but she still likes loads of old stuff as well.

(Elizabeth, age 14)

Indeed, of all the girls attending the youth centre, it was Elizabeth's musical interests and abilities which corresponded most with those valorised by the project leader (and Youth Music), and it was she who consequently appeared to benefit most. Having been involved for some time, Elizabeth had undoubtedly gained valuable experiences and further developed her confidence, promoting something of a virtuous cycle. Yet in order to benefit in this way, Elizabeth had needed to demonstrate personal and emotional resolve of the sort less readily available to those such as her co-participants:

- M Do you think you need that kind of determination and confidence?  
 R Well otherwise you would just get so far and just change and be like 'Nah, I couldn't do this', I mean I know that if I had done that I would just regret it, whereas no matter how scared I might be at the time, I know that I'll come out of it and I'll be like 'Thank god I didn't turn away'.

(Elizabeth)

While Elizabeth's determination is undoubtedly to be applauded, there appears to be little doubt that for the other girls involved (not to mention the many more choosing not to participate in the first instance), this project's attempt to encourage 'at-risk' young people's development *through* structured music making and subsequent performance not only presented the latter with considerable challenges (particularly in terms of confidence, both in music making and more broadly) but also failed to effectively engage with some of the key components of these young people's relationship to musico-cultural activity. For an insight into how Youth Music's emphasis upon active music learning fared with more musically able and confident young people, let us turn to our second case of community music activity.

### ***Project 2 – rural steel pan band***

The second project (hereafter Project 2) was based in a small village in rural North England, within an electoral ward ranking around 4000th, in terms of deprivation, of the 8414 in England (DETR 2000). As this figure indicates, despite suffering from a relative degree of geographical exclusion, this host community was far less affected by economic deprivation, crime and poor health than that of Project 1.

Taking place outside of school time in a tractor barn converted by participants with the help of their parents, this project had accessed a good level of funding and consequently took the form of a steel pan band project that sustained the regular attendance of around 25 young people (aged between 11 and 16). The band convened twice a week, for three hours each time, and the young people involved displayed good commitment and standards of behaviour. The group was largely composed of strong academic achievers who were, on the whole, far more compliant than the young people in attendance at the youth club of Project 1. Many of the project participants had, prior to beginning their participation, already developed their music-making skills, with many undertaking extra-curricula music learning (either with peripatetic teachers in school or with private tutors at home) in addition to their largely well-liked in-school music learning:

Music at school? I enjoy that more than almost any lesson ... we always get to compose and do improvisations and things which is, which is great you know, you get to work and make up our own pieces of music, which I think is brilliant and err, I'm taking music for GCSE...

(Alex, age 14)

In comparison to Project 1, the confidence and ease in music making displayed by these young people was notable, in many cases being rooted in a home environment characterised by parental support and the validation of music learning:

M Was there much music around when you were younger?

R Yeah, there was. My mum was always taking me to piano lessons and drum kit lessons so I've done a lot of piano, theory and drums.

(Craig, age 14)

Yes, my Mum played the piano so there was always a piano and when I was seven I started to learn how to play the piano so...

(Alice, age 12)

Yeah, you know, my parents, my parents and my family are very, very proud ... they like the way that I'm interested in music and not football and other stuff. They like me to do artistic things and that's great.

(Alex)

In terms of their musical tastes, the young people involved in Project 2 demonstrated a great breadth of musical preferences (from hip-hop, R&B and jazz to classical music, numerous forms of rock and metal as well as punk and 80s rock/pop). Indeed, the bases of these young individuals' musical appreciation were wide-ranging, variably taking in both the lyrical/textual and representational as well as appreciating sonic-aesthetic elements with some sophistication ('Now I always listen to the articulation of the beat ... there's a lot of phrasing involved with the pans, so I hear rhythm' – Craig). Some of the band's older members viewed music as a source of numerous sorts of meanings (personal, political, life-style-oriented, ethical, aesthetic and social) and had incorporated many aspects of music-related or derived activity and meaning into their everyday lives, from instrument practice, theory learning and live performance to vegetarianism (following one young man's brush with an album by The Smiths) and myriad other kinds of personal and social listening experiences. In sum, there appeared little doubt that a slowly acquired hands-on familiarity with a range of musical styles was closely bound up with these young people's passion for music and its manifold possible meanings, providing a sphere of experience in which one can 'use your imagination' (Jake) and 'show off your talent' (Edwin). On the basis of such confident and fluid approaches to music and music making, the opportunity to participate in this project was warmly welcomed by many local young people. The following was quite typical:

[My] musical taste just kept changing and changing and changing and naturally \*\*\*\* [Project Leader] turned up and then said, 'Who wants to learn to play steel pans?' So I thought I'd give that a shot as well, I was kind of open to learn every sort of music...

(Jake, age 14)

As one might anticipate, given the musical style adopted within the project,<sup>16</sup> there was little sense that participants viewed this choice of music-making activity as a crucial component of their broader identities. Where any representational or symbolic aspects of steel pan playing did figure, it was in respect of its relative novelty ('we're unique to everything else' – Alice) along with loose associations to beaches and generally sunny climes. An apparent corollary of this relaxed attitude to musical identities, together with the aforementioned 'open' attitude to music learning, was for the participants to express little need to maintain a strict sense of control, ownership or direction over their participation. Indeed this was far

less significant a matter to them than that of learning and achieving a good standard of musical performance together.

M What do you like about the project?

R [I like] the sound, the things you get to play, like the learning of music ... I just like it, learning music.

(Thomas, age 14)

It's like really satisfying to, like after you've worked really hard, to hear how it sounds at the end.

(Rebecca, age 12)

As I was to learn however, the project's participants had not always demonstrated such a hard-working and compliant attitude. At the time of its inception (three years prior to my fieldwork), around 100 young people from the local middle school had signed up to participate. From these, teachers hand-selected those young people who they felt could benefit most from extra-curricula activity. Very few of those who began their participation in this way had continued their involvement up to the time of my fieldwork however. As the Project Leader explained:

[Initially] we got a lot of people involved who just couldn't manage their time. You know they're just not gonna be reliable, they're just not in that headspace of looking after their time, so you give them the opportunity, probably the teachers knew they wouldn't stick at it...

(Project Leader, Project 2)

Having witnessed the commitment, acquiescence and high musical standards required of those who did manage to maintain their participation, it was not difficult to see why so many less 'reliable' young people had moved on from the project during its initial stages. The approach adopted at this project took Youth Music's prescription of 'structured music making activity that develop children and young people's music skills' (Youth Music 2006c) particularly literally, placing musical skills development high on its agenda<sup>17</sup> and organising activities around this. Indeed, in instances when the Project Leader perceived that attention to musical skills development was inadequate, individual young people were regularly singled out:

I don't have a problem with challenging them as in making them play in front of everybody ... that might be a really scary thing to do for some people but it isn't an issue here because we did it from the start.

(Project Leader)

The whole message that I try and get across, which is why the project is successful, is that it's all about the music, everything else is secondary.

(Project Leader)

The nature of the music teaching activities undertaken and the way the project was organised more generally were notably directed and focussed upon skills development – a situation which consequently left little scope for devolving decision-making to young people, especially in respect of their musical activity:

M Would you say you got to be creative?

R Well, you can be creative with your dancing...

(Edwin, age 12)

You're told 'you play this and you play this' ... it's not so much creation as carrying out someone else's creation but it still feels, gives you the same sort of buzz.

(Jake)

The project was undoubtedly successful in engaging young people and encouraging their (particularly technical-musical) development. So much so, in fact, that it has featured in a number of arts reports and is viewed as something of a paragon of young people's community music activity. It must be borne in mind, however, that whatever the project has achieved, it has done so at the cost of encouraging young people's creativity, decision-making and ownership. Additionally, the project was unresponsive to the specific challenges faced by young people with low ability and confidence in music making, something which appears to be a common trait of 'those previously denied access to creative music making opportunities for reasons of economic, demographic or geographic exclusion' (Youth Music 2002). Rather, by focussing more upon artistic products than upon participatory processes, and putting outputs before outcomes, the project set in motion a number of mechanisms liable to dissuade the less musically confident, able and 'open', but instead encourage the involvement of those capable of rising to meet the challenge:

The music, that side of it's really challenging, but I like being challenged.

(Craig)

### ***Project 3 – inner city DJing***

The final case study is set on an estate characterised by significant levels of social deprivation,<sup>18</sup> this time located in an inner city context. Project 3's community music sessions took place over several hours one evening per week with the explicit aim of engaging the young men (aged 13–18) attending the youth centre.

My fieldwork at Project 3 coincided with the disengagement of an older group from the project, following the departure of the community musician with whom they had worked. The previous project had been successful in its efforts to engage the lads at the centre, and they had acquired both music-making skills and broader confidence through their involvement. Having reached their late teens, this older group now returned to the centre only once each week and they did so solely to make use of its music-making resources and the eminently social main space (furnished with settees, a pool table, graffiti-decorated walls, an in-house P.A. system, lights and a DJ booth) on what was the centre's recognised 'music night'. The occasion regularly drew in young people from across the city to practise and demonstrate their DJing and MCing skills in a particular musical form known locally as 'new monkey', a high tempo blend of techno, 'acid' house and modern, commercial dance music accompanied by a rapid stream of live 'rhymes' delivered by one or more MCs. As I was to discover, the young people attending the centre expressed an almost totally exclusive commitment, in their musical tastes, to 'new monkey' and it played a key role in their young lives.

The strict exclusivity of these young people's musical preferences came in stark contrast to those of the young people at Project 2, as did their notably low levels of instrumental music-making experience, the general absence of support or encouragement (in pursuing music) from the home and their wholesale rejection of the musical activities presented within educational contexts. Indeed, for many of the young people I spoke to, such rejection of 'school-music' was simply symptomatic of a broader disinvestment in mainstream education, placing them squarely in Youth Music's target group of 'young people who have little opportunity to engage with music activities and are both drawn to music making and would benefit from it' (Youth Music 2006b):

- M At school, did you ever, well, what was music like at school for example?  
 R Actually I had a gan [go] on an organ, that was it like, just an organ.  
 M Did you enjoy it?  
 R Aye it was alreet [alright]. I didn't really like school to be honest with you...  
 (Steve, age 18)

Indeed, in some instances, these lads' musical interests were something that they used to sustain them against the boredom of school lessons:

- M And do you write your own rhymes [lyrics]?  
 R Aye, I've been doing that since I started ... I've got loads. I used to just, boring lesson in school, used to write them in there.  
 (Paul, age 16)

Instead, music played a pivotal role in these lads' lives in different ways and perhaps most significantly, in terms of its social functions. Many of the lads undertook a wide variety of social activities closely associated with 'new monkey' such that it sat within a web of deeply contextual and situated social practice. For the older lads such practices included attending musical events in local bars, pubs and clubs, practicing DJing and MCing together in bedrooms and garages as well as performing at parties. Together with some of the above (where access could be gained), the younger lads listened together in a range of situations and made tapes to trade with one another. Indeed, in numerous ways, the musical activities undertaken by these young people appeared to be significantly *about* the social ties that they implicated. Such was the significance of the group-belonging element of 'new monkey', for instance, that many of the young people I spoke to had come to appreciate it more by virtue of the relationships through which it had reached them than any sonically immanent properties to which they felt drawn:

Well at first I hated it, but then every time I heard my friends listening to it I just got into it and ever since I've liked it.  
 (Tony, age 15)

Aye, sort of like, my mates told us, sort of about rave and that, my mates told us about it ... didn't like it at first but then, then I just kept on listening and I started liking it.  
 (Brian, age 14)

I never really liked it at first but, err, now, I met my mate Mark and he introduced us [me] to music [meaning new monkey]. It's the best thing that's ever happened really like...  
 (Dave, age 16)

In effect, for these young people, musical allegiance played an important role as an adjunct to social interaction and the sort of significant rituals (such as attendance at a 'new monkey' club) so powerful in cementing group belonging around a shared and positive in-group identity. This was something of particular importance to these young people, many coming from socially stigmatising economic backgrounds and who, with few educational achievements and prospects (low-income employment or benefit dependency), occupied the position of being both a vulnerable and yet feared and often derided social grouping.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, such was the prominence of music's social functions in this context that the sonic artefact, the music itself and its properties were rarely discussed by the lads ('We don't really talk about it...' – Tony). Although undoubtedly integral in contributing to the euphoria associated with its idealised listening experiences, these aspects of the music's meanings appeared far less important than its functioning as a 'label' or 'badge' of

identification (Frith 1981). Nor was participation in the act of music making integral to the crucial sense of belonging that the youth club's music nights conferred. After all, when working with one set of record decks and one microphone, one set of speakers and one space, there is a limited number of people who can participate in this form of music making at any one time.<sup>20</sup> In this, the group hierarchy dictated that the older lads' activity took precedence in the youth centre.

As I began my fieldwork, the new regime of community music sessions initiated in the centre unfortunately paid little attention to such important, socially embedded elements of this musical form and its meanings, nor to the distinctive attitudes and aptitudes of the younger group of lads whom it sought to engage. In line with Youth Music's emphasis upon structured music learning, the community music activity at this centre took the form of DJing lessons. Yet crucially very few of the younger lads had actually expressed a particular interest in wanting to learn how to DJ at that time. As I discovered (during a period of absence by the community musicians), the majority of the younger lads were actually far more interested in feeding into their local music scene by organising a new monkey event for the young people in their neighbourhood. Having largely rejected the structured music learning made available by the community musicians, these young people maintained a desire to organise a music event, subsequently approaching the centre's youth workers for support, guidance and possible sources of funding.

Organising such an event was important to them for several reasons; the distinct lack of such events and performance opportunities for local young people was one important factor, as was, undoubtedly, the fact that it conferred upon them, and on the local community of new monkey devotees of which they were part, valuable sub-cultural capital (Thornton 1997). Since the older lads were to be the ones performing at the event, it also sought to act as a kind of tribute to them on the part of the younger lads, and one that fed directly into crucial aspects of their relationship to the new monkey sub-culture. Indeed, the sort of objectives ultimately sought by Youth Music, particularly in terms of engaging 'at-risk' young people 'in their own development' (Youth Music 2008a), were far more readily achievable, for this group of young people, through the music-related processes of event planning<sup>21</sup> than through the attempted provision of music learning. It is not, in the opinion of this author, coincidental that such effective, concerted and voluntary youth engagement should both grow out and feed into a pre-existing local music culture in this way. Paul Willis' (1974) words are instructive:

What we are confronted with is a whole way of life interpenetrated by a whole symbolic system, not a series of discrete bits of behaviour alongside a series of discrete cultural artefacts. The meaning of any particular elements of behaviour, or of any isolated expressive work, rests totally on its intricate relations with other parts of the whole integrated cultural system. (Willis 1974, para. 17)

While Project 3 does not necessarily show the provision of 'structured music-making activities' (Youth Music 2006a) to be wholly ineffective as a strategy for engaging young people (since in its previous incarnation, the project had met with success through such an approach), what it does demonstrate is that an exclusive focus on this overlooks, as it also did in the case of Project 1, the genuinely meaningful elements of young people's broader relationships with music and musico-cultural activity. The approach to young people's local music activity inscribed in Youth Music policy, and subsequently enacted by this community music organisation, might thus be seen as needing reorientation if they are to be more successful in engaging 'at-risk' young people in activities of genuine interest to them.

## Summary

This paper has addressed two problematic effects of the policy currently encouraging community music work that seeks to work with young people, and especially those considered either socially excluded or 'at-risk' of becoming so. These relate to the effects of the need to provide evidence of the value of the 'investment' in community music activity and, associated with this, Youth Music's somewhat exclusive prioritisation of structured music-making activities and the development of music skills in achieving its stated goals.

Firstly, attempting to use cultural methods to address problems of a decidedly 'social' nature implies measuring their effectiveness in much the same way as other areas of policy. Yet given the recognised difficulties of evidencing the success of community music activity in tackling social exclusion, a resultant tendency is for community music practitioners to seek to validate their work through the achievement of high-visibility outputs (attendance at Youth Music Action Zone gatherings, quality artistic products, recordings).

Too often ... I have also seen the desire to gain a creative product take over and arts workers having to be directive to gain a quality end result. (Gant 2000, p. 30)

Despite their markedly different effects on project functioning, this was evident in the cases of both Projects 1 and 2. In both instances, the prioritisation of such outputs set in motion a series of mechanisms that pressurised young people's participation and served to deter the ongoing engagement of those least confident, experienced and practised in music making. Unfortunately (in light of the stated aims of the work), these very characteristics are particularly prevalent amongst 'those previously denied access to creative music making opportunities for reasons of economic, demographic or geographic exclusion' (Youth Music 2002).

Related to the above, Youth Music's emphasis on structured music-making activities and music skills development results in provision that effectively rules out of bounds many of those aspects of music-related activity and musico-cultural experience found appealing by many young people. From my findings, the tendency is that upon reaching their early teens, many of those with little experience in music making seek either something more or something other than a simple engagement with appropriately structured music making/learning activity. The crucial, and often missing, component of much current youth-targeted community music activity is that dimension of musical experience that connects with its significantly meaningful representational, symbolic and contextualised social dimensions (what I have elsewhere termed 'music-related activity').

Perhaps most inhibitive of 'at-risk' young people's engagement, however, is the fact that, when an exclusive emphasis upon music skills development coincides with that of providing evidence of achievement, community music provider organisations and the practitioners employed by them are strongly constrained in the degree to which they might incorporate young people's own decision-making into project activities. Such an absence of young people's decision-making in no way contradicts Youth Music's community music policies, even though it is recognised as setting limits on young people's development through such activity.

If young people do not at least partially design the goals of the project themselves, they are unlikely to demonstrate the great competence they possess. Involvement fosters motivation, which fosters competence, which in turn fosters motivation for further projects. (Hart 1992, p. 5)

At a more basic level though, and as each of the case studies illustrated, when a lack of genuine decision-making is afforded to young people in their music-related activity, those with little experience and confidence in music making/learning (something characteristic of many 'at-risk' youth) tend to disengage from projects. Unfortunately, the effect of this is to reduce projects' chances of encouraging the kind of broader competence and confidence building that 'at-risk' young people's participatory cultural activity might ultimately help foster.

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### Notes

1. These were carried out by the Arts Council's New Activities Committee in 1969 and again by its Experimental Projects Committee in 1971.
2. The Report of the Community Arts Working Party concluded that a community arts panel should be established (for two years initially) to deal with community arts matters. The panel was provided with a budget of £176,000 in its first year (which it awarded to 57 projects) and £350,000 in its second year (distributed amongst 75 projects) (Kelly 1984).
3. This debate was notably fuelled by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's publication, in 1978, of Su Braden's *Artists and People* which argued for the need for an emphasis upon 'cultural democracy' (i.e. community arts) rather than the 'democratisation of culture', a perspective which maintained an emphasis upon public access to the 'high arts'.
4. Regional Arts Associations were established from 1956 (the last being set up in 1974) and effectively took the form of partnerships between local arts interests and Local Government. Following the Wilding Review (1989), the 12 Regional Arts Associations were abolished and replaced by 10 Regional Arts Boards (independent limited companies with some Local Authority representation on their boards). In 1994 the Arts Council of Great Britain was split to become the Arts Council of England, Arts Council of Scotland and Arts Council of Wales. The Regional Arts Boards lasted until 2002, when Arts Council England absorbed them into a single new body and reverted to the policy of regional offices of which there are now nine.
5. The report was cited by the then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Chris Smith, in speeches at the Fabian Society conference at the Playhouse Theatre, London, on 19 September 1997, and at the University of Hertfordshire in Hatfield on 14 January 1998 (Smith 1998).
6. 'PAT' stands for Policy Action Team. Numerous policy action teams were set up by central government in 1998 to look, in an integrated way, at the problems of poor neighbourhoods. The PAT 10 report to the Social Exclusion Unit focussed on the contribution that sport and the arts can make towards neighbourhood renewal.
7. In theory, the arms-length principle is intended to maintain the relative autonomy of the Arts Council in deciding how to allocate available resources, safeguarding that these are not affected by political considerations. Nevertheless, all of the Arts Council's decisions relating to funding provision are informed by the Funding Agreement between the DCMS and the Arts Council, and thereby incorporate the DCMS's objectives for education, access, excellence and social exclusion.
8. Youth Music works alongside the formal and community-based sectors to support music making and training. Its mission is to 'to provide high-quality and diverse music-making opportunities for 0- to 18-year olds'. In particular, Youth Music funding 'targets young people living in areas of social and economic need who might otherwise lack opportunity' (Youth Music 2006a).
9. The Youth Music Action Zones are made up of a consortium of partners that link together organisations from the public, voluntary and private sectors to provide music-making activities for young people.

10. This primarily concerns the number, ages and gender of young people engaged, together with information about the number, length and regularity of the workshops provided.
11. For further information about this study, see *Songs in the Key of Life: The Musical Habitus and Young People's Community Music Participation* (Rimmer 2006).
12. 'M' is used throughout to indicate my speech. 'R' indicates the speech of respondents.
13. The names used throughout have been changed.
14. By 'representational', 'symbolic' and 'denotative', I refer less to the way that music can bear meaning *as sound* (through an interpretation, by listeners, of the meaning of structure, texture, tone, timbre or tempo) than the way in which music functions *as text*. Such representational elements of musical meaning thereby include both what listeners perceive to be the associative, social given meanings of particular types of sounds together with the significations of lyrical content, the assumed meanings of performers' dress or 'look' as well as that of other, associated visual imagery (e.g. record covers, music videos).
15. Such gatherings take the form of organised activity and performance days that bring together Youth Music projects from across action zone regions. The quarterly events I attended typically involved project participants, community musicians, project partners (such as key youth workers) as well as, in some cases, members of participants' families. Although gatherings varied in their specific focus and nature, youth group performance often played a central role and gatherings would bring together anything between 100 and 250 people.
16. The band largely learned traditional Trinidadian steel pan songs as well as a number of popular hits from the British charts, chosen and adapted for steel pans by the Project Leader.
17. The project had sent two groups of young people out to Trinidad for upwards of a month each to compete in the world Steel Pan competition 'Panorama', with one group finishing third on one occasion. The band also played at Notting Hill Carnival and had performed around 150 times nationally.
18. The electoral ward within which the project took place ranked well inside the 100 most deprived wards of the 8414 in England according to multiple indices of deprivation measures published in 2000 (DETR 2000).
19. Witness, for instance, the relatively recent emergence, in the UK, of the term 'chav' and its associated stigma – a term which many would undoubtedly see as appropriate to this group of young people. The term is intended to refer to a young person/young adult adopting a distinctive fashion and lifestyle and occupying a particular (i.e. lowly) social position. Often associated with the 'chav' demographic are a variety of fashion items: heavy and often fake gold jewellery, Rockport clothing, peak caps, stripy or Burberry shirts, tracksuits and white trainers. For evidence of the disdain to which this somewhat nebulous group is subject, see: [www.chavscum.co.uk](http://www.chavscum.co.uk). For a more even-handed exploration of the term 'chav' and its possible origins, see: [www.worldwidewords.org/topicalwords/tw-cha2.htm](http://www.worldwidewords.org/topicalwords/tw-cha2.htm).
20. As such, the material affordances of this form of music making are at considerably variance from those of, say, a steel pan band.
21. Planning and organising this event provided a great deal of insight into the ways in which the younger, less musically confident lads in the centre could be drawn into creative, confidence and skill-building music-related activities. Members of this group helped design flyers and posters, find, book and decorate a suitable local music venue, print and sell tickets, hire and set up appropriate sound and lighting equipment, organise performers and fulfil a host of other responsibilities. Following the event, those involved spoke of their sense of achievement and their keenness to repeat the experience.

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