Community Music, my LIPA, and Questions of Research and Scholarship

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> *I was driving my bright yellow, ex-British Telecom Ford transit van on the A47. As usual, the vehicle was filled with samba drums and assorted instruments as I made my way from one to another of the regular workshops I had initiated since being a music animateur employed by Peterborough Arts Council. A news item came on the radio. It was a feature that sought to highlight a new performing arts institution in Liverpool. David Price was the spokesperson; I recognized his Sunderland accent immediately. I knew Dave through my association with Sound Sense, the UK professional association for community music. The place, the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts, LIPA for short, sounded intriguing, particularly because Dave was the Head of Learning, and his background was in community-based work. As I drove between workshops, I reflected on the LIPA news item and was curious to find out more. As it happens, I had been considering my next move because I wasn't sure what else I could achieve in my current position. I kept an eye and ear out for any openings at LIPA, any job opportunities. Within the year, a few arts posts were advertised. I applied and was hired in 1997 alongside Roger Hill. Our main task was to 'deliver' the European Social Funded (ESF) community arts programme to a large section of the City. I recall Roger and I trooping all over Liverpool providing a plethora of drama and music workshops –at least within the areas with the 'right' postcodes. Liverpool was a new place for me, but not so for Roger, and it was during our many Taxi rides that I began to get to know and understand Liverpool. As the student cohorts increased, my teaching role at LIPA expanded. I became a 'main grade lecturer' reflecting my shift from LIPAs community 'outreach' to its academic teaching and learning staff.*

I was an employee of LIPA for 12-years. Following Nick Owen's departure as Head of Community Arts, I led the department from 2001-2008, before leaving the institution to take up an academic appointment in the USA. LIPA has been a significant part of my professional career and provided key foundational experiences in terms of working in higher education, for example, teaching, curriculum development, programme management, and negotiating working life within an academic system. These experiences are still important to me and have provided a constant source of useful and reliable lived-knowledge. As I reflect on this time, I think it was the first five years that stand out as particularly impactful. During this period, I

experienced LIPA as a place with so much energy and dynamism – a reciprocal cycle between staff and students, a hot bed of activity working together to generate a creative crucible. For many of us, LIPA was an amazing place to work and *be* and I'm welcoming this moment to think about its importance in my life. Although the degrees were validated by Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU), as I remember LIPA was mooted as the first newly established HEI for around 100 years in the UK. This meant, that as a staff member, it felt like being part of a start-up project, full of unknowns but open to all kinds of potentials. I was working in a place where I felt anything was possible. A short walk from my office would put me squarely in the Mezzanine where I could chat to Ian (Head of Finance), Ray (Head of HR), and Mark (CEO). After work on a Friday, the LIPA bar provided space to have a drink and discuss ideas, there was a collaborative sense of building something together, a pioneering spirit that I think both staff and students felt. I was immensely proud to work at LIPA. It was a place with a growing national and international profile. When friends and family visited me, they always wanted to look around the building. It felt like everyone had heard of the place.

To some extent it's easy to remember the 'good' times, especially when considering a fun-packed weekend reunion. However, through the process of writing this piece I have also recalled the challenges I faced whilst employed at LIPA and acknowledge the significant impact these have had on my professional life. Gradually I became more curious about, and interested in, the role of research and scholarship within the practice of community music. I can now better understand how the tensions I was feeling pushed me towards much of what I have done since working at LIPA. Although not the first of its kind, LIPA's Community Arts course (which initially had two pathways, Drama and Music, Dance was added later but only had a short run) occupied an unusual space in education institutes; it had been given a profile that situated it as an 'equal' amongst what was more commonly understood as the performance arts, namely Music, Acting, and Dance. This outward facing rhetoric rarely transpired into day-to-day reality and from a staff perspective I felt we were often pushed to the edges. What's new? – Well, nothing really, being on the margins has been perhaps where community artists have felt most comfortable – we might say it is where the work happens. However, LIPA had a 'promise' to be different, a structure of openness to the future of how things could be. In reality though, the community arts staff rehearsed the same old arguments, perpetually defending the importance of the practice and why it needs/requires the same level of resourcing as the other programmes. Whilst at LIPA I undertook PhD research. I explored

the personal challenges of the conversations I was having at work within my research and articulated community music as a ‘supplement’. Through the philosophic writing of Jacques Derrida, the supplement attests to an inbuilt paradox, a dilemma that sees it as both an add-on and a means to take the place of. From this perspective, I would argue that without the pathways, openings, tracks, and marks generated through participatory music-making experiences, there would be no “professional” music, virtuosic techniques, or music degree courses.

Within LIPAs community arts programme, the community music strand always had significantly lower student numbers than drama and was eventually deemed untenable around 2005. From a wider perspective, there are plenty of examples of UK undergraduate community music programmes and courses that started but were cut later or radically amended. What lies behind this reality has fostered insightful discussions both nationally and internationally. It is a question that forces those invested in the practice to consider community music pedagogy (if it has one), the current needs of practitioners, and the various changing contexts through which current work is taking place. One line of thought concerns readiness to ‘study’ community music specifically or community arts more generally. Most people embark on undergraduate courses straight from A-Levels aged around 18-19 (not forgetting that one of the exciting things about the early LIPA cohorts was its high proportion of ‘mature’ students). It has been frequently suggested that community music degree courses might be better placed at the master’s level rather than at undergraduate level. The broad argument for this case would be situated around the thought that choosing to do community music comes more readily later in life, after developing a stronger sense of who you are as a musician.

It was around 2005 that Evelyne Jamison (Head of Dance), Steve Buckwald (Acting) and I developed a suite of master’s courses for LIPA titled Integrated MA; courses included Performing Arts Education, Dance Theatre Practice, Contemporary Theatre Practice, and Community Music. These courses were validated and ran for around 4 years. The
The programme as an idea was never really met with much enthusiasm from many of the institution's employees. From my perspective at this time, there appeared to be a significant push back toward anything seemingly associated with the notion of research and/or scholarship. My thinking around the education of community artists had changed over the years and as a member of LIPA’s directorate, I was beginning to feel frustrated around

conversations seeking to polarise practice and research. I was fully aware of LIPA's inception story – dancing on taxis in New York - Fame style - and understood, and celebrated, the purpose of the institution and the monumental effort that had ensured its opening. But for me, there were growing philosophical questions to grapple with about music and arts in higher education and at the heart of my struggle were questions associated with the relationship between practice and research. Questions I pondered during this time were along the lines of: How important is research in the practice of community music? Where is the scholarship, what fields of study intersect with community music? Can a theoretical framework be developed that would help describe and promote understandings of community music practices? What place does research and scholarship have in the education/training of community musicians?

These formative experiences (LIPA was my first HE position) led towards the development of the *International Journal of Community Music*[1], which had its inaugural issue in 2007 (whilst I was still at LIPA) and later in 2015 the development of the International Centre of Community Music[2] housed at York St John University. Questions surrounding community music research are very much part of the work I am currently involved in, and the platform of this work, I would attribute to my time at LIPA. In a recent publication (2024), I ask, how might I do community music research? To some extent, my response to this question now in 2025, has strong resonance to what I understood as the beating heart of the LIPA project 30 years ago. For example, in 2020, the International Centre for Community Music hosted a symposium titled *Critique not Criticism: Why we ask the questions we ask*. Kathleen Turner, a community musician, songwriter, and storyteller, was the keynote speaker and performed her response. Deeply auto-ethnographic, Kathleen sings her 'data' and, in so doing, questions her assumptions about the value of music-making and her motivations for doing the work. Wider implications for community music research might be that thoughtful, critical questions can lead to a richer understanding when asked with care, compassion, and without judgment. Turner (2020) poses, "As a result of critical questions, I now look for evidence of fearlessness, kindness, consideration, commitment, enthusiasm and joy. I seek out agency, reflexivity, solidarity, shared spaces and experiences, empathy, imagination, vulnerability and gratitude" (p.13). Creating what Lee Willingham and I termed a 'culture of inquiry'

[1] https://www.intellectbooks.com/international-journal-of-community-music
[2] https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/research/international-centre-for-community-music/

community music research must involve diverse viewpoints and a multitude of perspectives (Higgins & Willingham, 2017, pp. 129-144). An excellent example of this flows from those working with Indigenous knowledges in Australia (Bartleet, 2021; Sunderland et al., 2021; Swijghuisen Reigersberg & Lloyd, 2019), Aotearoa New Zealand (Rakena, 2018), and Canada (Laurila, 2021). Projects like these bring Indigenous traditions and knowledge systems to the fore, rooting research in specific Indigenous methods emerging from language, culture, and worldview. In this sense, the work presents both a system of knowledge creation and a response to colonial practices (Evans et al., 2014).[3]

In resonance with concerns of our age, decolonization, and ecology, for example, the research landscape has changed dramatically. Governmental emphasis has changed from a domination of disciplinary-specific subject areas to a significant increase in multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and now transdisciplinary approaches to knowledge creation (Leavy, 2014, p. 725). The notion of transdisciplinary is well within the purview of community music research as the practice has collaboration and co-creation as one of its mantras. Of course, these orientations are responses to themes of our times, issues of social justice such as LGBTQ+, Woman's rights, Black Lives Matter, state oppression, and displaced peoples through war and natural disasters all reveal the inequalities in our society. How might community music researchers effectively work in these spaces? Where are the examples of those already doing this, what can we learn from them, and how might we increase its visibility?[4]

As community music scholarship moves forward, and with it an increasing range of research strategies and data collection approaches and methods. consideration must be given to how the field positions itself to the challenge and development of knowledge production, critique, review, and dissemination in an environment where there is a growing ethical responsibility to do so. Publishing academic writings in established and 'traditional' venues can be influential acts that enable community music research to sit alongside, and thus interact, with other fields. Albeit in a limited context, this will raise the visibility of the work, opening it up to new ideas and reminding community music researchers that there is a lot to

[3] For further discussions, see the work within Critical Development Studies. For example (Stewart-Harawira, 2022).
[4] See (Bartleet, 2023) for a presentation of a conceptual framework that works toward a way to understand and articulate social impact. These ideas edge us towards some responses to the questions posed within the above text.

learn in areas such as theory building and methodological approaches. Working collaboratively within the academy alongside non-academic partnerships becomes vital in a world where public scholarship carries significant weight. Recent experiences of leading projects have illuminated the need for robust dialogue with funders and non-academic partners regarding the difference between research and advocacy, critique, evaluation, and criticism.[5] Such things may make for challenging conversations but might prevent compromising the findings through interference and censorship.[6] Rather than a direct challenge, community music researchers might see this as an opportunity to flex our proverbial welcoming muscles and think hospitably. With historical roots in social activism, I hope the *scholar-self* and the *community musician-self* can organize around a power of the powerless and sustain sensitivity for the exceptional and singular, for the different and left out.

I wanted to contribute to the 'Not-the-30th-Reunion-Reunion' publication but didn't know what form this might take. I began writing and was led by what emerged. In doing this, and amongst the joyful recollections of working with many who will read this, it became apparent that my ongoing questions surrounding community music research and scholarship were sparked through a fertile creative time at LIPA. I realize now that my LIPA experiences are in the DNA of the multiple discussions that I have led globally on this topic. So, in closing – I wonder what questions come up for you as you reflect on your time at LIPA? What moments were significant? Can you pinpoint events that disrupted preexisting frames or contexts? In what ways did your LIPA experience shape your thinking? Beyond the warm fuzzy glow of an event like this, are there questions you have carried since your graduation? If so, what are they and how are you considering them today?

What a journey I've had, beginning with an unexpected radio announcement whilst driving my yellow van – the traces of this 'regular' day as a community musician and the subsequent experience in, around, and through the multiverse named LIPA continues to haunt and touch the work I do today.

[5] The Centre for Cultural Value is a good starting point to explore discussions regarding the relationship between these domains. https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk

[6] For a discussion on contemporary challenges with research, see (Mantie, 2022).

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