

**If not now, then why? Towards an
autoethnography of interrupted musicianship.**

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*The time has come for me to speak, uh-oh the time has come.
And while the silence picks on me, I pray to not be dumb.*
- The Roches, "Speak"

ABSTRACT (In English)

The text “If not now, then why? Towards an autoethnography of interrupted musicianship” is an organised attempt at understanding myself and the world in which I learned to play music. I approach this topic through the method of autoethnography. By utilising self-reflection and processing the past, I try to reproduce the subjective knowledge that my lived experience has to offer. My aim is to investigate and share how the interaction of my inner and outer worlds prevented a healthy and productive relationship with music (creation). Why don't I feel like a musician after all these years? Why do I withdraw from music and postpone my betterment? What are the social, cultural and institutional factors that contributed to an unattainable image of the exemplar musician? What was that, inside of me that allowed me to buckle under the pressure I was experiencing? The three main parts of the text emerge from the types of restrictive factors/stifling events I look into. These are institutional/educational, social and those of personal health, respectfully. I recall events of my life as a music student to showcase pathogenies of music education and to challenge the prominent image of the ideal musician. I process my experiences with sexism in music, in general and in alternative music scenes, and my experiences with (un)balanced friendships between musicians. I investigate the impact that multiple cases of tendonitis and my unstable mental health had on my relationship to music and the perception of my abilities. Also, I describe my relationship to my bedroom, as the sole place in which my music is created and played, and the feeling of isolation and entrapment that accompanies this reality. Within the text there is a link for a short release of my songs and an explanation towards them. The songs were conceived during the writing process as an immediate outcome of it, thanks to the mental reshaping it has granted me.

Key Words: autoethnography, critical musicology, self-reflexivity, music creation, interrupted musicianship, withdrawal, isolation

ABSTRACT (In Greek)

Η παρούσα εργασία «Αν όχι τώρα, γιατί; Μια αυτοεθνογραφική προσέγγιση στην εμποδιζόμενη μουσικότητα» είναι μια οργανωμένη απόπειρα κατανόησης του εαυτού μου και του κόσμου στον οποίο έμαθα να παίζω μουσική. Προσεγγίζω το θέμα δια της μεθόδου της αυτοεθνογραφίας. Μέσω του αναστοχασμού και της επεξεργασίας του παρελθόντος, προσπαθώ να αναπαράγω την υποκειμενική γνώση που προκύπτει από το προσωπικό βίωμα. Ο σκοπός είναι να ερευνήσω και να μοιραστώ το πως η αλληλεπίδραση του εξωτερικού και του εσωτερικού μου κόσμου εμπόδισαν μια υγιή και παραγωγική σχέση με την μουσική πράξη και την μουσική δημιουργία. Γιατί δεν νιώθω τόσα χρόνια μουσικός; Γιατί αποσύρομαι από την μουσική και αναβάλλω την καλλιέργεια της μουσικότητάς μου; Ποιοι ήταν οι κοινωνικοί, οι πολιτισμικοί και οι θεσμικοί παράγοντες που συνέβαλλαν σε ένα άπιαστο μουσικό πρότυπο; Τι υπήρχε μέσα μου που επέτρεπε να λυγίσω υπό την πίεση που βίωνα; Τα τρία βασικά κεφάλαια χωρίζονται με βάση τον χαρακτήρα των κατασταλτικών παραγόντων/αποπνικτικών συμβάντων που εξετάζω. Αυτοί είναι οι θεσμικοί/εκπαιδευτικοί, οι κοινωνικοί και οι προσωπικοί, αντίστοιχα. Ανακαλώ το βίωμα μου ως μαθήτρια μουσικής για να αναδείξω παθογένειες της μουσικής εκπαίδευσης και να προβληματίσω την εξέχουσα εικόνα του ιδεώδη μουσικού. Επεξεργάζομαι τις εμπειρίες μου με τον σεξισμό στην μουσική γενικά, και ειδικά, σε εναλλακτικές σκηνές, και τις εμπειρίες μου με ανισόρροπες (και μη) φιλίες μεταξύ μουσικών. Σκαλίζω το αντίκτυπο που είχαν οι πολλαπλές τενοντίτιδες και η ασταθής ψυχική μου υγεία στην σχέση μου με την μουσική και στην αντίληψη των μουσικών μου ικανοτήτων. Επιπλέον, περιγράφω την σχέση μου με το δωμάτιό μου, ως το μόνο μέρος στο οποίο δημιουργείται και παίζεται η μουσική μου, και την αίσθηση απομόνωσης και εγκλωβισμού που την συνοδεύει. Εντός κειμένου υπάρχει σύνδεσμος και επεξήγηση για μια κυκλοφορία τραγουδιών μου. Αυτά προέκυψαν κατά την διάρκεια συγγραφής του κειμένου και ως άμεση απόρροια της διαδικασίας, λόγω του πνευματικού μετασχηματισμού που μου χάρισε αυτή.

Λέξεις Κλειδιά: αυτοεθνογραφία, κριτική μουσικολογία, αναστοχασμός, μουσική δημιουργία, εμποδιζόμενη μουσικότητα, παραίτηση, απομόνωση

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Written on the 7th of November 2024:

There is a light that is needed to be shed.

In all my years as a musician, active or inactive, creative or stifled, in pain or in joy, there have been factors, realities, 'interruptions' and, sometimes, just bad luck that I have let bully me into isolation and introversion, putting unnecessary brakes on my trajectory as a creative person.

I have found that the more I aspire to better myself and commit to an artist's life, the more obstacles have seemingly fallen between myself and my perceived want. And, despite the fact that writing a dissertation at the end of my musicology degree is tangible evidence of a persistence, I know in my heart I have been fearful, doubtful and cowardly.

Whether it was a lack of resources, unhelpful educators, intimidating peers, injuries or rocky mental health, I let these experiences get the better of me. I didn't play with other people, didn't form the bands I wanted to, or record the songs I wanted to write, and would put off finding educators who could give me the lessons I so desperately wanted. Despite my regrets regarding my choices and overall disappointing stance, I am sure of two things. One, I cannot be the only one who has experienced the push-and-pull of deprivation and restraint. And two, my 'little resignations' were definitely not for a lack of love:

A love for music, for sound, for creativity, for expressiveness, for vulnerability. I hold a similar love for fellow beings, one of curiosity, empathy and understanding. So if I am allowed to indulge in heavy words, I feel I have a duty to share some stories, to laugh at them, to point out injustices, to reclaim agency from times when I was passive, to finally try and understand what could possibly come between a girl and a love like this.

I truly hope this text will become a beacon for lonely kids, for weirdos, for girls who want nothing more than to learn how to write a song or two, and just be good enough at something. I wish to create a solid entity, able to be lent to anyone that may need it, compact as a fist breaking down some last intolerable walls.

There is a light that is needed to be shared.

INTRODUCTION

This text was written throughout November 2024 up until June 2025. In the title, I claim it to be an autoethnography. You may not know what that is. *I still may not know what that is.*

However, it was suggested to me by my supervisor, in our first discussion about this dissertation, after I had spewed up all my thoughts of past experiences, and how I wanted to talk about them in the hopes of creating a point of connection, between me and the reader, between different domains in music, between the past and the present. I finally wanted to bridge the gap, to understand why I never played music with other people. Why did I feel like I wasn't allowed? Why didn't I feel like a musician? Where were all the voices telling me I wasn't good enough actually coming from?

As I knew I couldn't possibly be the only one 'interrupted,' lost or confused, my questions weren't just personal. I wanted to understand and articulate, what it is about the way we are educated, and socialised as musicians, that stifles an otherwise creative, social and expressive experience. What are the norms composed by the educational systems we enter, the popular culture that we consume and the social narrative that we regurgitate and reproduce, that create such a narrow pathway to success and artistic fulfilment?

Thankfully, my supervisor seemed to have just the thing for my situation and advised me to wise-up on autoethnographies. Autoethnography is a mode of qualitative research. It utilizes personal experience in relation to the cultural setting in which it is situated (Adams et al., 2022). Autoethnographers draw on and work from "embodied knowledge and experiences" (Bartleet & Ellis, 2009). They reflect on lived experience, narrate from their point of view (without limiting the voices being heard to just one), in an effort to interpret and understand the relationships between themselves ('auto') and their environments ('ethno') (Sikes, 2022).

So, mine would be about "interrupted musicianship," a term that provided a great umbrella for the bundle of events and experiences that I have faced, that made me close in on myself, shy away from playing with others, feel worthless, desperate and so on. I have to state that, despite the interruptions, I never stopped playing, bar a few months of real inactivity between 2020 and 2021, due to tendonitis (see sub-chapter 3.2.). I wasn't *inactive* necessarily, but I was isolated, frightful, and in despair. Interrupted musicianship isn't the name for my particular life path, but a phenomenon that I know for a fact that many others go through. "If not now, then why" is an echo of the most rational voice in my mind; the one that knew that my reservations weren't necessary but had been silenced by an almost unanimous vote.

Autoethnography seemed to be the appropriate tool to uncover this type of subjective knowledge that would otherwise be brushed off by traditional research (Adams et al., 2022). It had been here ready to help share my collected wisdom, and at the same time further enrich it, while I was still hung up on traditional ways of reproducing knowledge. Autoethnography came along to help me stop silencing myself, both as a tool of unpacking how I have been doing so in my musical practice and, at the same time, a tool for constructing a piece of work that is full of my voice (Holman Jones, 2018) as an original source, and as an echo.

Autoethnography is an especially great tool for music research, in order to understand the lives and practices of musicians, where music and everyday life are so intertwined (DeNora, 1999). As the cultural affects the personal in a way that their distinctions become blurred (Bartleet & Ellis, 2009), autoethnography can be a healthy medium of investigation, as it already “assumes that personal experience is infused with social norms and expectations” (Sikes, 2022). It can be a healthy gateway to critically dissecting educational institutions, in order to imagine a future world, “of other ways of being” (Holman Jones, 2018).

Autoethnographies give legitimacy to subjective knowledge but also give way to the knowledge that emotions bring. Living in a world where logic and reason seem to be linked with the *Ultimate Truth*, emotions, and the knowledge they can reproduce, are often delegitimised and overlooked, and certainly ranked below *Reason* (Ahmed, 2004). This obviously has heavily sexist connotations, as women are ruled to be hyper-emotional beings, devoid of any reason, unable to reproduce knowledge and hold wisdom, unable to grasp factual logic of the *Ultimate Truth*. I believe emotions, emotionality, rage-quits, crying fits, love so overwhelming it makes you want to crawl out of your own skin, or sickening overambitiousness can all have so much to teach us. I am not willing to disregard them in favour of rigid facts.

*“[...] feelings were expected to kneel to thought
as women were expected to kneel to men” (Lorde, 1977).*

With writing an autoethnography I am not meant to create a stable, concrete, unwavering body of FACT that is undeniable and unchangeable. I am supposed to engage with a “shifting, partial, unfinished reality” (Holman Jones, 2018). I hope I have been doing this. The word ‘unfinished’ can be so soothing.

Critical autoethnography sets out to “challenge the traditional, hegemonic, imposed power imbalances” (Sikes, 2022), to “bring attention to the ways cultures are created and

compromised through institutional, political, social and interpersonal relations of power” (Holman Jones, 2018). I understand my autoethnography to be a critical one, although I can’t imagine how someone can write one, without it being critical. *Who could they be speaking up against?*

My dissertation is a bit of a pinball machine, the little ball bouncing back and forth, and in between the domains of critical musicology, philosophy, psychology, pedagogy and feminist thought. All of these areas were necessary to cover the aspects of everyday life as a student of music, a listener, a girl, a person struggling with their mental health.

I wanted to understand myself, the reasons and the people that stifled me, the cultural settings that allow ‘unspoken’ rules and regulations for entry into musicianship to exist in the first place. I wanted to challenge what we usually think of as ‘musician,’ as ‘talented,’ as ‘ready’ and as ‘worthy’ (Bartleet & Ellis, 2009). Lending my lived experiences to my chronic frustration, I am able to engage in critiquing this culture “through the lens of the self” (Holman Jones, 2018).

I have been swallowing my silence all of these years, experiencing and digesting these instances mostly in solitude. I understand that finally speaking up about them is a political act, just as much as my silence has been (Koza 2007).

The memories I recall are from many different dates, some with more zeroes in the year and less inches to my height. I talk about experiences that I had up until I stopped writing. Throughout this dissertation I have changed massively, I have given up many past selves and finally laid them to rest. Accompanying them was a relationship I wasn’t so willing to let go of, that provided an interesting experiment during the writing process. As I was talking about all the reasons why I never *did* what I wanted during trying times, I was also testing the waters to see what happens if I *do*. This resulted in a small collection of recorded music that I will share with you after the main body of this text. *Hopefully it will make sense by then.*

Like most autoethnographers, my main research tool was the process of ‘reflexivity,’ that is to self-reflect (Sikes, 2022). This introspection is promising to reveal many things. To confront the self, the past, to understand how you structure your narrative, how your narrative voice might be influenced, silenced, coerced and by whom etc. As autoethnographies strive to bring subjective knowledge to light, all of this is valuable information, as it makes up the genetic code of the story being told. Having them all on display brings a transparency that is needed when narrating personal experience.

I treated each draft as an elaborate diary entry. I blurted everything I wanted to talk about on the pages, grieved a little, then came back again and again to reflect, to contextualise, and to link different experiences of my own with each other and with those of other people.

Every entry was written from a newer, more informed person that had even more to say than the last time.

When I didn't have references of similar experiences, I described fictional texts I was hoping to find. Throughout these past months I had a very hard time understanding *what the heck an autoethnography actually is*. I carved away at my text, semi-blind and realised it had somewhat come to fruition when I was finally able to understand that I should be showing what's "behind the curtain" of myself and my experiences, but also *what's behind the process of writing about them*.

I didn't expect to have so much to say, for such nuance to come out of experiences that I thought I had reflected on as much as I possibly could. They are, after all, some of my most gut-wrenching experiences, and I tend to dwell on the past, trying to make sense of it all. It was surprising to make connections that otherwise wouldn't have happened if they all hadn't been laid out on the same text, for the same purpose.

Throughout the text there might be thoughts written in italics to signify a change of voice in my narration. The ones in smaller fonts are impulsive, unfiltered remarks that managed to slip into an academic text. I also use italics, in normal font size, to introduce diary entries, to informally address the reader, even to give voice to my text, to let her complain about any conflict in our collaboration. I use footnotes for references, clarifications, quick definitions and the occasional snarky comment, similar to the voices in smaller italics (*they got to the footnotes too!*). Also, within the text I try to make clear if there is a big gap regarding the time in which I wrote each paragraph (and how I felt each time). In some instances I even used the symbol "[...]" to indicate the passing of time and leave space to picture imaginary tumbleweeds slowly moving along. I have tried my best to highlight the contradictions that emerge from each time period and reflect on each position I take, with respect to where it is situated.

Like autoethnographies tend to, so has mine been used to confront past hurt, to understand the brutal aspects of music learning (Daly, 2022), to confess (Godwin, 2019), confront the self (Webber, 2009), to reflect on the hardest of times (Grant, 2009), to recognise artistry in what I have been doing all along (Daly, 2021).

This text is divided into three main chapters, each prefaced and driven by vignettes pulled from my daily life as a musician who records at home. In the first chapter, "The Lost Adaptor," I describe the frustrations of being ready to record and desperately searching for my headphone adaptor as I recall my experiences with music education. In these first five sub-chapters, I try to take on who is typically considered a musician, to unveil the tacit terms and conditions that go with the title, I talk about the stunted growth I encountered while

living in rural Greece, I attempt to dissect disruptive educator-student relationships, I invoke meanings of institutional musicianship that I find harmful and I try point out the lack of creative agency in classical music education.

In the second chapter, “Amplifier-Saboteur,” I paint the picture of my arch-nemesis, my noisy semi-broken guitar amplifier. I parallel our dysfunctional relationship with other social aspects of my life that stifled my musicianship. I talk about my conflict with sexism in music overall, with the alienation of girls in rock and alternative scenes and my varied experiences with musician-peers, finding space for my own voice through the noise.

In the third chapter, “Tangled Cables and Short Circuits,” I describe the chaos of my bedroom floor and flawed circuitry of my apartment. Its two sub-chapters concern my experiences with tendonitis during COVID-19 lockdowns and my struggle with my mental health (*regrettably, not just during the lockdowns*).

Academically, I was forced to write conclusions. Shortly after that, unsatisfied with this compulsion, I decided to slip in a fourth chapter called “Walls.” It was my effort to capture the feeling of music-making in solitude, confined in bedrooms and the inability to externalise my efforts up until now.

It may seem a bit unbalanced, one chapter of the text having five sub-chapters, the next three and the final one just two. The beginnings of this text were an unfiltered spewing of my life events, and some much needed exposition to create the timeline of my musicianship. The majority of these key life events had to do with my position within and outside of music education. Through these narrations there were plenty factors that appeared, each stifling enough to be considered a singular reason, distinct and solid enough to deserve its own sub-chapter. For example in sub-chapter 1.4, the myth of innate ‘talent,’ for me, equals to one unit of suppressive reality. Just as experiencing tendonitis (sub-chapter 3.2.) equals one suppressive reality; *even though I went through three of the damn things*.

Depending on your geographical location it may or may not be peculiar that you are reading this dissertation in English. To introduce myself, I am first and foremost bi-national; my mother is from the UK and my father from Greece. We have lived here my entire life, but my mother’s Greek isn’t trained to tackle a musicology dissertation, and I wanted her to have the opportunity to read it, if she chose to.

I grew up in rural Greece, on a tourist favourite island in the Ionian Sea. I was a bit of an alien, growing up with references bestowed upon me by a person raised in the 60s in the North of England. My father wasn’t particularly a traditionally Greek man either, so relating to my peers was always a trying task. I grew up in a very specific bubble of references and

values that for the most part have not aligned with my environment and the only people I know who had a common experience are my two older siblings.

Growing up on our small island was like living on a pendulum, swaying from over-flooded streets of tourists and laughter to long pauses of winter's darkness and quiet. It was easy to know everyone but hard to find people to trust as gossip and intrusiveness were common hobbies of our residents. I was lucky enough to find exceptional people when I was in high school, but it seemed that they had taken their sweet time to arrive.

Besides the access I had to unusual references that weren't stemming from my environment, as a family, we were economically privileged enough that I grew up with a computer at home, granting me even more access to music, films, ideas and people all over the world. I am also extremely lucky to have had parents conscious enough of the importance of art to never question whether I should or should not spend all that time (and their money) indulging in this dream of mine.

Regarding my identity, I think I am mostly shaped from growing up as a cis girl, with all that could possibly entail in rural Greece. After that, I consider myself to be an odd-ball, a weird kid, someone in love with music (*though it seems unrequited at times*), someone who grew up reliant on punk and rock music, someone who is reserved and calculated, someone at odds with themselves and the very requirement of living, and, hopefully, to some, a good friend.

I started learning music at age twelve, fell in love with playing, decided I wanted to do this forever and left home at eighteen to study music in Thessaloniki, Greece. Many incidents and setbacks lie in the timeline of that past sentence, but I wouldn't want to spoil any of the fun for you; the next pages are also about that part of my journey.

It is necessary that I talk about my memories and experience in order to get a grip on what really happened to me and why I behaved the way I did. Due to this, I talk about experiences associated with very real people, many of whom are not informed of the existence of this text. This is one of the rocky areas of autoethnographies that some consider morally questionable (Sparkes, 2024). I have granted myself permission to do so, to speak about my memories in the way I store them and acknowledge them, so that I can lend their knowledge to a larger discourse, one that I imagine leading to healthier experiences of musicianship, education and social interactions (Bartleet & Ellis, 2009).

I have done my best for my words to not be accusatory, without compromising the legitimacy of how I experienced these situations. This is especially true of circumstances which have been, amongst other things, hurtful. I acknowledge that people can be many things and have the capacity to be unintentionally harmful to others, as human relationships

are dynamic. I trust that most of the people I talk about have the power to reflect, improve, regret. *I in turn am trying my best.* Even in the very peculiar chance that this may not be true, people have the right to their own actions and rationale, whether I condone it or not. Above all, I wish to be fair and respectful.

I refrain from using real names (*although in some instances I would love to*) because this is not what this text is about. The only names in the text are of my sister Ileana and my great buddy Christos, who have both given consent and shown excitement for being characters in this story. *I am equally excited to have them.*

Lastly, I want to be clear that the text you are about to read is not *my story*, as *my story* is not completely my own. It is shared by all the people that take part in it, so I cannot talk about it as if I have sole ownership of it. So, instead, what you will be reading is *a story* I created out of my lived experiences (Sparkes, 2024), how I make sense of these experiences, how they imprinted themselves on me, how I think it relates to a larger discourse outside of my body and mind.

1. THE LOST ADAPTOR

1.1 Who Is A Musician? Assumptions of Musical Identity

I am sitting in my room. In the background, a freshly-made guitar loop is chasing its tail around a carousel. I want to record it. I place my amplifier and pedals temporarily close to my desk. I pull out the microphone and stand, delicately positioning them as they ought to be. The laptop is in the socket, the audio interface is in place. I reach for my good pair of headphones. I try to plug them in, but I can't find the adaptor.

Combing through some key childhood experiences, before attending secondary education, before any formal musical training, I cannot help but realise I am inspecting a very musical kid. That being said, I didn't meet the criteria someone usually would to be considered a musician. I wasn't attending any music lessons, didn't play any instruments, wasn't gifted in some exceptional way my parents would be equally excited by and terrified of.

Many years separate me from my childhood, 'unmusical' self. Since that time, my perception of participation in music has changed, I regard art and everyday life to be more tightly woven than I used to, and I define creativity under more inclusive and forgiving terms. In turn, the usual 'terms and conditions' of what qualifies a musician seem terribly unimportant, compared to the passion and affinity I had to create, to be part of music in any way I could, even if that excluded the very orthodox path of participating in music. *Which is actually playing it.*

I remember more than anything, listening to my mum's CDs in the car. I was a very anxious kid, and, to the detriment of her patience, couldn't be left alone without her. So at the choice of staying home alone or having to go to the supermarket with her (or the post-office, or to pick up my siblings, or to a friend's house, or to the gym), I would always choose the latter. This amounts to a lot of car hours. It was very comforting knowing I didn't have to be left at home alone, which terrified me, and I knew I would get to listen to the music she had on. She listened to a variety of things, but Billy Joel's "An Innocent Man," the compilation record "Let It Roll - Songs of George Harrison" and the entire Beatles discography are pieces of work I feel are almost hard-wired into my DNA. Listening to them again and again on repeat, I knew every section, change and melody, and like every kid would, I tried to sing them all at once.

Whenever I wasn't a nuisance, carpooling with my mum everywhere, I would lock myself in her room and search the internet for lyric videos to the few pop songs I was aware of. I would scream the lyrics at the top of my lungs, filling up with every note and word, dancing all over poor mum's bed. *How amazing and liberating a lack of self-awareness can be.* When I wasn't allowed in her room I would fantasise about being a pop star in mine.¹ I would make up these simple (and dreadful) songs and I would perform them, timidly and quietly, in my bedroom.

Even though my pop star career seemed to be right on track at eight years old, I was also deeply infatuated with the guitar. I briefly remember visiting an elderly man's house, someone my mother used to visit. I think he was the first person I ever saw play, right in front of me. I remember when he handed the guitar over. Not by any clear image in my memory, or the details, or his name, or any affirmation that this story ever really happened, but from the moment an innate longing started to form inside me. I feel as if I have wanted this forever.

Then, as time went by and I had less restricted usage of the internet, I would scavenge for hours on end and listen to music. I remember how important it had been to spend my summer nights alone; while every member of my family was asleep, I was awake and looking up music and sound. These moments were spent in solitude but I was never alone, I was constantly being introduced to new music as if they were new friends and treated them as such (Bannister et al., 2025). I felt an identity starting to form, wrapping around my body like a new piece of armour (DeNora, 1999).

Even before any formal music education, music and songs were such a big part of my life, almost like a dream was there, waiting for me to sleep on it. I can't possibly recall how I viewed this infatuation of mine at that time. I sincerely doubt at that age I would have considered myself a musician. I wouldn't have considered I am anything close to being a musician. I still wouldn't consider myself one after years of playing and practicing, feeling like "I am not there, yet."

To consider a person a musician is to recognise and acknowledge their musical abilities. The concept of musical ability is socially constructed, "with different meanings in different cultures, subgroups, and even individuals" (Buren et al, 2021). It is hard to pin down what the exemplar of 'musician' looks like, due to its fluid nature and due to the fact that it has not been systematically researched (Hallam & Prince, 2003). For myself, it has been easier to pick out the ways this 'fixed image' can be damaging to young musicians, as it has been for

¹ If you are looking for another instance of a child pop star, one that actually completed and recorded their bedroom songs, search for the Onerous Deb T (Stefanou, 2016).

me. Still, it is important to note, all humans are capable of developing musical abilities and improving their competence, regardless of their present state of skill (Buren et al., 2021).

I know we are only in the first pages of this text, but these sentences will be some of the last I will have written. I may be getting ahead of myself but what the previous statements mean is that anybody can become a musician, since anybody can develop musical abilities. I am very excited to be the bearer of good news.

Only in the process of writing this autoethnography have I found the clarity to understand why I would cognitively exclude myself from these experiences and the title of ‘musician’ (Berry, 2022). While things have begun to seem clearer during this time, it feels like it will never be possible to articulate each and every factor that made up this arbitrary idea of worthiness, of a musician that had surpassed a quota of adequacy.

While writing (and re-writing, censoring, un-censoring and cringing) I feel my lived experience and knowledge have been a tangled mess which I am called to unravel and polish. At best, after this process, I will be left with evident realities that are comprehensible enough to be communicated and have an effect on anyone reading. A good starting point of unravelling seems to be examining what I believed constitutes a musician, before I get to examining my relationship to (and my exclusion from) that title in later sub-chapters.

Although these are arbitrary images in my mind, they didn’t miraculously grow as my cells did in my mother’s womb, but were implanted day by day, living in a world with certain ways of communication, living, evaluation and cultural expectations. Almost every interaction I have had with musicians, aspiring or professional, educators, ‘casual listeners’ has confirmed a universality of ‘what a musician is.’

When we think of a young person, entering the trajectory of becoming a musician, we imagine a linear, smooth process. They will pick their instrument of choice, seek out a competent educator and magically practice their way into excellence. They will be guided and aided into achieving their capable musicality. My path, as those of many others, bears absolutely no resemblance to the previous picture. It wouldn’t know how to talk to it at a party and would probably leave early, forgetting to say goodbye to anyone out of sheer embarrassment.

As I have been reminded in the months of writing this text, for the majority of the years I have been playing music, I have resented my choices in this period of my life for not actually pursuing music at a young age, for not using this precious time to become what I know I want to be now. I have been terrified I don’t have what it takes to be an artist, and *if only* I had more years of experience, I would be more capable, I wouldn’t feel like such a lost cause.

Regardless of the set-backs that have come my way, there are two concepts that shine a brighter light over my life before entering the sphere of playing and creating music.

The first concept that lightens the load of educational expectation, concerns the different modes of learning: formal, informal and non-formal. Advantages and disadvantages are present in all three modes. However, it is in education's best interest that they inform and complete each other (Green, 2008). All three are valuable to a person's balanced and well-rounded education.

Formal learning happens in the classroom. It is institutionalised, hierarchical and relies heavily on the presence of a teacher and a curriculum, where clear goals are set (Johnson & Majewska, 2022). This involves everything from stagnant music lessons in primary school, learning music theory without ever touching a musical instrument, to attending university courses, theoretical or performance-based, to conservatories and so on. Formal learning is intrinsically part of formal education. Yes, *that* formal education, where information is thrown at you like the line of a fishing rod and all you can do is hope the hook has something to latch on to.

I think it is safe to say, when a member of the general population thinks of the pathway to becoming a musician, formal learning is at the forefront, holding authority over non-formal and informal learning experiences.

Often we blindly trust the established wisdom of formal education. Often we don't doubt that it offers anything less than what is needed to artistically flourish. However, in traditional music education, performance skills and proficiency in music theory tend to heavily overshadow more creative processes like improvisation and composition that play a vital role in making a well-rounded artist. Theoretical knowledge and creative practice seem to be segregated into two different domains of learning, when in reality they constantly inform and enrich each other (Yu, 2024).

Non-formal learning consists of intentional, structured and organized learning processes that occur outside of a formal educational system (Johnson & Majewska, 2022), like being taught a musical instrument from a friend's older sibling.

Lastly, informal learning is trickier to define. It includes any process within which a person can learn from experience and their relation to their environment. Informal learning can look like "interactive, non-linear and self-directed processes" (Kanellopoulos & Wright, 2012), that occur in non-traditional learning environments. This is not to say that informal learning occurs exclusively in non-traditional settings. It quite literally occurs in every possible setting, without revealing itself.

An example I can offer you, in the context of honing your musicianship, would be the expectations our ears develop after being exposed to a certain amount of music that follows the same rules (Huron, 2008; Levitin 2006). Like the itch you feel when you expect a note to resolve at the end of a song. That note doesn't know where it is supposed to go, that note doesn't owe you anything; it is being crushed by the weight of expectations of the music it is most similar to.

The problem with informal learning is that, although it is highly valuable, it can remain invisible. As something invisible, it is easy to overlook, misunderstand or devalue. Despite the ease in which it is overlooked, informal learning is proven to be as valuable as formal learning can be, when it comes to becoming a musician. There have been countless self-taught musicians, throughout the ages, that have turned professional (Finnegan, 2007; Papoutsis, 2020; Karamoutsiou, 2023;). Most of them started out alone, with some music playing device or another, trying to emulate what they were hearing (Green, 2008). After breaking out of their isolation they were equipped with many skills they needed to start playing with others, and went on to sustain life-long careers, even though they didn't follow a formal route (Watson, 2016).

My awareness of informal learning as a legitimate and fruitful occurrence has been liberating. It is easier to be kinder to myself when examining the aforementioned period of my life with more than just formal learning in mind. Due to informal learning I am able to say with certainty that I was shovelling precious experience under my belt. I might have not set foot in a music classroom, but the hours of listening to songs alone have provided me with aural, perceptual and emotional skills that are equally important to the technical ones that can make your fingers tango. It just is a bit strange to experience these bursts of growth non-concurrently.

The second concept that I would employ to tint the lens of the past, is Christopher Small's "musicking." Small (1998) introduces this verb as a way to redirect our thought, from interacting with music as a corpus of compositions, to recognising its entity as an action in which people participate in more ways than we usually consider (Kanellopoulos, 2011). Musicking includes playing, composing, improvising, as much as it does listening, dancing, anything a person can do to "take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance."

Small emphasizes the need to separate musicking from any valuation. Each individual's criteria of what constitutes a 'good performance' or an 'adequate piece of work' has no effect on whether they are less or more musicking. The meaning of the musical performance is now found in the set of relationships that occur between players, audience members, every historical event that led to the performance taking its form in that moment, every social

construct that is reproduced through and shaped by the performance, the instrument makers, the ticket sellers, and I will stop here as dissertations have word limits.

I see within myself that I have a tendency to feel on the outside of music making, locked out of what qualifies someone to suppose the role of a musician. It felt like I had to reach a certain level of skill, knowledge and creative output to be able to grant myself the familiarisation of that title. Looking back on this particular period of my life, with slightly more sympathetic eyes, I can see the value in those experiences, instead of detesting my late start to lessons which I will dissect in the upcoming sub-chapters.

I am very fortunate to have had the access to Small's and other theorists' works, that have helped broaden my sense of musicality and creative experience enough that I see space in them for me too. However, I was accessing them through an institution and an academic course that is not necessarily afforded to or chosen by many musicians. Yet, my preconceptions of who is and who isn't a musician seem to be universal and not just existent in the realms of academia. I know that there are larger motions at play that have carved onto me my preconceptions of who is and who isn't a musician. I hope to do my best in finding out where the call is coming from.

1.2. Rural Restrictions / Resources [REDACTED]: Growing Up in Rural Greece

The adaptor is a small little thing; it is easy to forget it is as important as the rest of my equipment. It has taken me quite some time and sporadic spending to own the basic stuff I need to grant me some creative autonomy. I am annoyed as my momentum is vetoed by the adaptor's truancy.

It is the 26th of February, 2025.

This would be funnier for me if I wasn't pressed for time, desperately trying to finish my degree course. I have spent the past days searching for sources that touch upon the topics I am about to. I wish to explain how my experience in growing up in a rural space with restricted resources has been, and I need just a couple of texts to echo my sentiments. There don't seem to be any. I want to elaborate on how becoming a well-rounded musician requires access that is not afforded to most people, and specifically, how the geographical component of growing up in rural Greece factors into this. Now, as if someone out there is having a laugh at my expense, I am again lacking the resources to talk about the fact that the lack of resources can be impeding.

The majority of texts I have come across are addressed to music educators in the hopes of providing insight to better their practices and help them 'survive' and enjoy rural teaching (e.g. Bates, 2018; Isbell, 2005). I found texts, however outdated and geographically removed from my context of interest, that function as descriptive proof of the disadvantages that can, but not necessarily will, come with accessing high quality education in rural spaces, showing not much has changed (e.g. Mann, 1939; Sur, 1941).

Some texts seemed to taunt me, as they talk of the resilience of people in rural spaces, coming together to create community music meetings and overcome the strife their geography lends them (Gibson & Gordon, 2018). I found instances in which the relationship of remoteness and creativity are discussed, but the verdict seemed positive, and so, completely unrelatable (Gibson et al., 2010).

I am disappointed I failed to find anything that philosophises on the hostage situation one can find themselves in while growing up in a rural space with limited resources,

opportunities and creative stimuli that resonates with my personal experience. Although I can't seem to find anyone that can echo my sentiments exactly, I can tell you what kind of text I would be looking for.

I would be looking for a text that points out the cognitive dissonance that comes with growing up in a restricted space and at the same time belonging to a generation (and a social class!) that permits access to the internet. I grew up with a stark awareness of many other ways of being. My friends and I weren't allowed an 'ignorance-is-bliss' rearing, as we were aware and woefully yearning for a life somewhere 'Out There.'

The 'Out There' was romanticised and heavily fantasized about, as we couldn't wait to get out of our hometown. We weren't exactly conscious of what we were lacking, and in turn how we could demand it, we were just aware of a limitation in our experiences.²

It is safe to say (since I am talking about an imaginary text), that it is proven that growing up in urban spaces leads to access to music education of higher quality, to a larger variety in music venues and scenes, and ultimately, access to envisioning, and later, embodying, who you want to be artistically and what you want to play. In turn, it highlights how rural areas can sometimes get the short end of the stick, and not fulfil the needs of its residents. I don't think I am allowed to link an imaginary DOI in an official dissertation, so I will proceed to elaborate.

First, I want to make it clear that I don't think rural spaces unavoidably translate to restriction in creative endeavours. I just know for a fact that it is more common than not for creative individuals to not have access to the same tools someone in a big city would, and this was definitely my case too.

However, when it comes to education, there are far fewer schools and private educators. Bad teachers, to the detriment of many hopes and dreams, are existent everywhere. However, in larger spaces, if one educator isn't exactly helping your journey, you can courteously move on to a different one. Instead, if your educator is lacking, and so is your hometown in personnel, you are going to have to take Billy Preston's well-intended advice and "Love the one you're with."³

² As a teenager I would frequently escape to Athens to attend larger gigs of bands that were more important to me than the ones that would visit our hometown. This would further solidify the notion that what was significant to me, only lied in the 'Out There.'

³ Billy Preston's advice is what sparked Stephen Stills to write a single of the same title (Stephen Stills, 1970).

This is not to say that big cities can guarantee that all aspiring musicianships have a space to grow. Yet, the chances of being provided a satisfying education seem to be slimmer in rural areas.

A lack of variety of educators is problematic not just within the context of constructing a good relationship with them. Even if the musicians of my hometown had been well-intended, educated and friendly, it doesn't mean that they can cover every need of every student or aspiring musician. If anyone was interested in playing instruments prominent in popular music, as I was, or many orchestral instruments (Cello, French horn, Harp, to name a few), there simply wasn't an educator there to teach them.

The quality of music education is quite varied, not only between rural spaces, but between individual students of the same place, due to the difference of their aspirations, the types of music they wish to play, and the luck of the draw that provides them their educator.

Secondly, there is a major advantage in urban centres in the variety of music venues and scenes they host. As an aspiring musician, it is vital to have these spaces as watering holes, as sites of informal learning and networking, and as a place to access representation of the music you are interested in. They are important, as young musicians need to envision themselves playing, participating in a scene, if they intend to act upon their practice.

Of course, a music venue is only as alive as the people that run it, visit it, play in it. Scenes and venues have a wonderful symbiotic relationship. One of the reasons why venues are more diverse and numerous in urban spaces is that the citizens there are too. It makes sense we were lacking, I was betting on a fixed population of about 20.000 people and I lucked out.

Whether the venue is a dive bar, a basement, a friend's garage, or a concert hall, it is insanity to try and imagine a fruitful musicianship in a place that cannot foster the music itself. In my hometown, there was a venue that mostly hosted stoner and punk music and we were happy to frequent it. Although I was interested in punk, I never saw a woman get up on that stage. It was always older men. It never crossed my mind to get up and do the same. I really wanted to, but felt like I wasn't 'there, yet.' I wasn't giving myself the permission, thinking it had to come from somewhere else first.

It's hard to say exactly why, despite my deep desire for music, I restricted myself in my childhood. I never put my foot down so my parents would buy me an instrument, nor made a fuss about lessons. I was of course joined at the hip to my mum, and because of that, physically terrified to do any activities outside of school. However, despite the separation anxiety that had such a definitive role in my upbringing, it still felt like pursuing music wasn't really an option.

My hometown is an island, a tourist hotspot, a small-town. Growing up, it felt like everyone was alive and happy for about four months of the year. Anything before or after the tourist season seemed like it was pulled out of a movie scene about a post-apocalyptic ghost town.

Practically, we had a Philharmonic Society, typical for the Ionian islands,⁴ a Music (Junior) High School and a small conservatory that I remember being semi-functional. My two elder siblings were playing music in the Philharmonic but it didn't seem close to what I wanted to be doing, despite the joy frequenting their rehearsals gave me. I really wanted to play the electric guitar but there was nobody on the island we knew who could teach me.

Being the youngest child it felt like everything and everyone was already tried. "Don't try that, that's too hard." "Don't take lessons with them, they're not very good." "This person isn't worth the money they are asking for." "This instrument would be too expensive." It just felt like it had already been tested and it had been decided for me, by happenstance, that I can't be a part of it and there's no point in trying.

When my moment had finally come, I was twelve years old and about to start my journey in secondary education. Like my siblings before me, I chose to go to the aforementioned Music (Junior) High School. It felt like a promise was about to be fulfilled. I was going to learn how to play music; I was going to be a guitarist, playing in concerts, meeting friends that will want to make a band together. I had set an imaginary deadline in my mind, modelling myself after the Runaways I loved so much. I had decided that I needed to be in a band by the time I was sixteen. *It all seemed to be coming together.*

On my first day of school, during a math lesson, or something else not as rock-and-roll as I was expecting, the vice principal walked in. "Sorry to interrupt, I am here to ask you all some questions and take notes." He took a seat at the teacher's desk and adjusted his glasses "How many of you have had any previous musical training? Show of hands." Out of the twenty kids in our classroom I was the only one who didn't raise my hand. I felt nervous and exposed.

The chasm between myself and my peers was now evident and painful. The sheer panic I experienced in this moment ultimately led to some of the most detrimental and foundational decisions of my life to come. I had to make a choice; I needed to catch up fast. This necessity was corporal; there was a longing to "have already known" and I wished to be in on the joke as it seemed all my classmates were.

⁴ The Ionian Islands have a rich history in philharmonics that are made up of wind instruments and percussion. Throughout Greece, there is this romanticised image of Ionian residents all knowing how to play, and music being an ingrained part of everyday life. Whenever I mention my background and my identity as a musician to someone new I meet, I can always hear a click in their mind "That makes sense!" However, music was being taught in a formal manner that didn't teach casual playing, it didn't teach how to be proficient in and understanding of music as an 'artist' and we were as tethered to the sheet music as most classical musicians are.

Out of the options I had to choose from, to start a parallel music education with that of my school, joining the Philharmonic seemed the most familiar and approachable. I had never wanted to play a wind instrument, bar a couple of odd afternoons when I was nine and fantasising about being a bassoon player, for reasons I will never be able to recall. The Philharmonic also offered percussion lessons. I had previously expressed wanting to play the drums, probably when I was the same age, and was discouraged by my mum and sister from doing so, being told that they are too loud and that coordination is very, very difficult. However, I am realising now, my brother did learn to play and I wonder if he ever had to face the same discouragement.

In a rushed, mindless decision that had nothing to do with interest or desire, I chose the flute. My sister had played for many years, and I would occasionally sneak into her room and try to play, if I could manage to put the damn thing together (Sorry, Ileana). No love, no passion, just a deep prepubescent need to be normal and as good as everyone else, at an instrument I wasn't even aware I don't like.

My plan was to learn guitar in the Music School and simultaneously speed-run through theory and flute lessons to catch up with what I perceived to be 'everybody else's level.' I can almost feel in my hands, the white paper list of instruments that were supposedly offered to us. It would make the rounds of the classroom in the beginning of the school year, for us to choose what we would like off the menu. In that first year I ticked off 'electric guitar' as my first and only option. I would end up doing this for the rest of my years in high school in what became a self-deprecating, bitter tradition, knowing very well that there is never going to be a teacher who would teach me the electric guitar.

I feel there is a naïveté regarding the trust I put into formal education, into the quality of music educators and educational institutions. It wasn't articulated for me how resources can vary, be faulty, disappear, or not exist in the first place. I thought that all it takes is time and practice, which is a very common misunderstanding. Turns out, it has been proven that social factors are much more important (Hallam & Prince, 2003). *Evidently*, I can see now how that is true.

I was in the thick of it. My thinking was by default paradoxical and confused, due to wanting to learn an instrument of popular music, but only being aware of formal educational systems and trying to approach it through that specific route. Not only was the formal education I had access to understaffed and unqualified to teach me, but its very existence as a one-way-street to knowledge secured my resignation from any private and individual attempts to learn alone (Green, 2008).

I have been almost willfully ignorant of these restrictions every time I come across people that are better, more confident in their playing, more social and creative than I am. It is as if, after setting my foot off of the island, I forgot the reasons why I wanted to leave in the first place, and placed all the blame for my inadequacies onto my self and not upon the circumstances I was born into. In turn, I couldn't give myself grace and time to achieve what I wanted and retreated into myself out of shame.

1.3 Didn't I do It For You? Educator-Student Relationships

I look in the adaptor's designated residencies to no avail. I usually don't take it off the headphones, to avoid these situations, but, ignoring my past providence, it is not there. I just want to record my fickle and fleeting idea and this 1.5 inch of metal is enough to dictate if that happens or not. I am starting to get upset. The loop in the background is making me nauseous and the adaptor's absence feels personal.

At this point in time, I am not undergoing anyone's tutoring⁵ or teaching on any of the instruments I play. I also am not sure when I will ever be a student again, if that ever happens. It is an unfamiliar feeling; I have been so busy that I hadn't really noticed until just now.

I am not in a rush to start lessons again, although I would if I found a musician whom I could trust as an educator. I feel calm about this pause knowing that I possess the metacognition⁶ to keep my practice afloat, if not tangibly develop my skills and my writing. I am in the process of straightening up the shape of my self-efficacy that has been severely disfigured throughout my years as a music student.

Self-efficacy has to do with our beliefs on our "capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect our lives" (Bandura, 1994). To put it plainly, that means it is tethered to how we perceive our strengths, how we advocate for ourselves, how we motivate ourselves to pursue any desirable goals.

Self-efficacy plays an important role in how one can navigate obstacles, disappointments and frustrations as a growing musician. If someone is able of understanding each problem they face, and that they are both *entitled to* and *capable of* overcoming it, then they can get to the matter at hand and act upon a solution.

In my case, obstacles have felt like jabs to the stomach and reminders of a deeply-rooted, fixed inadequacy, rather than temporary inconveniences that I can find the means to vanquish. It is as if I am a Jenga tower, and each obstacle I have come across is the equivalent of a disembodied hand pulling out a piece of me, and who knows if I'll collapse.

⁵Dear reader/educator/sufferer, keep in mind how close the words tutoring and torturing are.

⁶ Metacognition is the understanding of our thought processes and the ways in which we learn. More precisely it is "the monitoring and control of thought" (Martinez, 2006).

Our self-efficacy, as musicians, is correspondent to our individual definition of what a musician actually is (Salvador, 2015). If we do not reserve this term for the formally educated, the professionally active and the exceptionally talented, we just might be able to leave enough room for humane standards of ability and performance, and a seat for ourselves at the table (Gerelus, 2018).

One of the reasons why I have been unsure to call myself a musician, let alone a good one,⁷ has to do with the built-in authority of student-teacher relationships. I grew up learning that knowledge is outside of me and implanted into some other, important people. If I am lucky, they will be kind enough to lend their knowledge and patience, as I strive to get a grasp on something completely foreign.

I was taught to seek guidance from others, and ultimately, seek their approval, their permission and their validation. Others not only held the knowledge of one domain, they reserved the jurisdiction to determine who is then the beneficiary of the title said knowledge brings (i.e. who knows enough to be the Musician, the Writer, the Geologist). Even when access is granted to a music education, the fight for the title of ‘musician’ is much more violent (Daly, 2022). Especially, when fallen to the hands of abusive educators. *yeah, I typed it*

I’ll pick up where we left off, at the start of my music education at twelve years old. As a second best resort, not having a teacher for electric guitar, my school put me into classes of classical guitar, as if these musical and learning experiences are interchangeable. I ended up passing through the hands of a few teachers, who were adamant that I need to learn the classical style of playing first, to build up my technique since it is “exactly the same as that of the electric guitar.” These words I would take to heart, and later in life self-inflict painful injuries. Through this belief I conjured up a ganglion in my left wrist, in which it is still nested, to this day, helping me type these words as you are reading them.

In these lessons, I would hear many fables I never understood the intention of. After an exam in which I thought I had performed rather well in, my teachers’ remarks felt rather dismissive and insulting. “She would never be able to play in [our guitar and string ensemble].” Another time, I felt scolded when, after showing affection for the Beatles, I was met with my disapproving teacher’s belief that they were actually Satanists (*my poor Beatles-super-fan, super-Christian mum, didn’t get the memo on that one*).

⁷ To note here that I googled “who is a good musician?” for the purpose of this chapter. Google, before citing any sources, gave me a small list including Paul McCartney, Elliott Smith, Robert Smith and Weird Al Yankovic. A mix of sorts, I am not necessarily opposed to. However, we need to be cautious navigating a world where even a search engine can constitute authority in deciding who is worthy to be seen.

I remember how I had to sit through the second-hand embarrassment I felt for my guitar teacher as he seemed to be uncomfortable with the title of a song I begged to be taught. I felt shame as he tutted at my requested song, all because it could have possibly been perceived as drug-themed.⁸ Lastly, the most bizarre fable of all, which I have yet to hear a retelling of, was one of an “urban myth known between *all* musicians”, that “flautists are not capable of playing guitar.” Not in this environment they aren’t Mr. [*regretfully redacted*]. Give the kid a break!

I hadn’t thought about the last story for many years. Like most of the memories I describe in this text, it appeared to me again when I started reflecting on my experiences, trying to remember what it felt like to be in my frail fifteen year old body, in that particular school, in those particular classrooms. I have since met so many professional and amateur musicians, private tutors, university professors, performers, composers, flautists, and of course so many more guitarists, and not one person has ever uttered those words again.

It is not like I had embedded this thought (at least, not consciously) but I can’t comprehend what the motive behind sharing this idea would be. Even if he had heard it from someone else that was his own authority figure, what could he possibly expect to come of it? How is it helpful? Did he want me to quit the guitar or quit the flute? I don’t believe people can be that illiterate (*to be polite*), but, if he wasn’t, what kind of malice does it take for an educator to obstruct a student’s musicianship in this way?

It is most common for academic texts to exhaust resources and grey matter in order to understand an object of evaluation. Although it is never a failure for comprehension to be partial or flexible, *at least in my books*, it seems that the goal is to understand the object by the time you reach the bibliography.

Admittedly, I would love it if I could understand where those remarks were coming from, to understand what kind of reasoning would permit such unwarranted and possibly harmful comments. However, I often need to remind myself that, in this case, understanding is impossible, and maybe even undesirable. There might be much to learn from these surreal encounters but I feel there is *more* to learn from their inconceivability. Why is it so inappropriate and so devastating for an educator to be anything less than encouraging and informative towards their students?

There is an inherent vulnerability in making and learning music (Wiggins, 2011). This vulnerability can go one of two ways. If it is met with acceptance and compassion, and the teacher is prioritising the facilitation of musical growth, rather than cherry picking ‘gifted,’

⁸ The song was Καινούρια Ζάλη from the Greek rock band Τρύπες. The title translates to “A New Daze” and has more to do with emotional turmoil, at least that’s what it meant for fourteen year old me.

'ready-made' students, then this vulnerability is an asset, a gateway to resilience (Wiggins, 2011). Mattin, in the context of improvisation, talks of "fragile moments," instances of vulnerability that lead to important achievements and creative vaults, massively important to a fruitful musicianship (2008).

On the other hand, if this vulnerability is unprotected, dismissed or in extreme cases of emotional abuse, exploited, that can cause a person to retreat from any future engagement in music (Salvador, 2015). Although some may continue to delve into music making, they do so with immense caution and insecurity stunting their musical growth, shying away from others, now robbed from a disentangled enjoyment of music.

Besides the public and exposing nature of music, the young age of students, racial identity and, in the case of girls and queer folk, gender also contribute to the vulnerable position of the student. The above can conjure different manifestations of power disparity, all in the favour of the teacher. On the basis of these disparities, it is all too common that emotional abuse appears.

It seems that emotional abuse is a part of classic music culture that manifests globally, and not a set of unfortunate instances on behalf of particular individuals (Fernández-Morante, 2018). Guided by the work of Torbjörn Tännsjö, Anna Ramstedt (2023) explores the darker side of the global admiration of winners,⁹ which is "a deep contempt for those who are comparatively 'weak' and less valuable."

Regarding particular students as relatively less valuable can result in treating them with disrespect. In music lessons this can look like: angry outbursts, humiliation, rejection, denial of approval, attention, or support, ill-mannered comparison and maleficent and/or demeaning comments (Stirling and Kerr, 2009).

I was a teen when I started music lessons. My identity was forming as I was trying to figure out who I am supposed to be, what I want to be like. In this excruciatingly common teenage journey, the fact that I was learning music played an enormous part in envisioning my desirable self, since I loved it so much. I couldn't imagine how I had ever lived without playing or understanding theory. So every dig at me, every denial of support or approval felt like a rejection of my very being (Draves, 2008). The part of me that was aspiring to be a musician and the part of me that held my remaining characteristics were never severed. They were always one. This is why it was so painful to be rejected by the people I trusted the most to help me.

⁹ Remstadt states that there is a lack of sources touching upon this topic, specifically in the relationship of *music* teacher and student. She resorts to using sources referencing the athlete-coach relationship, arguing that there are substantial similarities. I agree with her.

Throughout the majority of my music lessons I have been subject to comparisons, either to existing students or to an arbitrary standard of what was 'good enough,' 'studious enough' and 'disciplined enough.' Since the beginning, the birth and development of the concept of (good) musician happened *outside* of me. I watched it grow and manifest away from me, and I pulled my hair, strand at a time, to figure out how to become that character.

As a young adult I took flute lessons in Thessaloniki that had me crying every Friday evening. My sound, instrument and capabilities were constantly put down. As my hearing and perception were developing faster than I could handle them, my sound was not (or at least that is what I was led to believe). I was being forced to listen to 'how bad I was' without ever being given the tools to fix it. Although I was older, it still felt like it was personal, like I possessed a defective nature, that betterment was not available to me.

It has been a while since I have worked with someone so desperately unhelpful. I have been lucky enough to since have positive experiences with a handful of vocalists and guitarists that I will be forever grateful for. Slowly but surely, the patronising voices in my mind are fading away. I am doing my best to progress, I play frequently and I practice. It might not be obvious at times, but I think I am getting better.

1.4 Meet The Gate-Keepers: The Institutional Myth of ‘Talent’

Why can't things go right, for once?

Even outside of the process of writing this text, I have grown very conscious of my relationship to music and strive to be intentional in maintaining it. To be clear, this entails my music practice; how I practice, who I choose to play with, how I evaluate my playing and also how I try to consume music, with what I listen to, where I lend my attention, which spaces I try to occupy and a constant effort to detect and minimize any hierarchies that may have slyly slipped into my subconscious.

Since the journey that brought me here is anything but simple or linear, I have to be mindful of the obstacles I face and how I protect my relationship with music from them. The first time I conceptualised my interaction with music as a relationship that I need to nurture, protect, and be mindful of as a whole entity outside of myself to ensure it doesn't die on me, was when I left my hometown to study, back in 2018.

Continuing my string of absurd decisions, I had chosen to study a degree course named “The Science and Art of Music.” What differentiated this degree course from the one I am in now was its high praise in my hometown, and the promised opportunity to pursue a performance degree. Long story short, that's not the reality for most kids that attended this school, especially those coming from small-towns or those who had chosen to pick up music later in life.

I wasn't aware of that when I had to audition, in the first two weeks of university. I was a fish out of water, thrown straight to outer space. I auditioned the assigned pieces on the flute, accompanied by a childhood friend on the piano. I didn't realise you had to play the pieces accompanied, so I had to ask for his help four days prior to the audition. Of course, he did not disappoint, but I felt like a complete idiot, having overlooked something so -seemingly-obvious. Nobody had specified this, however, probably because it was too obvious. My flute teacher back in my hometown never said anything, and the way I grew up, I was not in a place to think that my educator could possibly not know all they should.

I also had to put together my very limited biography to hand to the audition committee. In a group meeting with the flute teacher, prior to the auditions, she had asked who our teachers

were. She had never heard of mine. The auditions were traumatising in a way that could spark an entire separate autoethnography. To the point of this particular one, I need to state that it was one of my lowest points as a performing person. I made mindless mistakes, felt crushed by the weight of my fellow students' eyes on me, and was devastated hearing how much more advanced everyone else's playing was. I did not get a position for the Performance degree and was left to do a sort of 'General Knowledge'/Pedagogy degree course. This outcome seemed obvious to me at the time, as I had already adopted the admission that I wasn't, and will not be, as good as everyone else, in the few weeks I had spent there.

It is needless to say, a big part of my sense of self had already begun to crumble beneath me. I felt like a hick and a hack. In my hometown, in my school, I was known for playing the flute and how 'good' I was at it. Now, it felt like I was nowhere near semi-decent. Everything about this environment was stifling; the obsession over these auditions, the eighteen year old students who were marvellous at playing, but socially stunted (due to devoting their life to playing classical music), the teachers and their remarks on students, on music, the concept of 'talent' and musicality, as inherent qualities and not a skill to work on. It was heart-breaking.

It was obligatory in the degree course that I chose an 'Object of Music Practice', and since I wasn't qualified as a flautist for flute lessons or to join the orchestra, I had to take up choir conducting. *Emphasis on the "had to."*

It was horrifying, having to listen to a grown up, at 9.00 in the morning, tell you how if someone doesn't pick up music at ages three to six, it's not really worth it, and they can never become soloists. Why are we referring to classical music as if it's the only music out there? What about popular music or outsider music? Indie, punk, jazz, improvisational and experimental music? Why is being a soloist of utmost importance, the end goal to musicianship? What about other routes of musicianship, where creativity and expressiveness are valued in the way technique and virtuosity seemed to be for this particular educator?

Whoever enters the hands of classical music education is faced with a number of riddles in which they are placed. There are many preconceived notions that persist on living parasitically in the consciousness of musicians and the general population that can potentially poison any engagement a person has with music in any capacity. I will gladly take you along with me through some of the puzzling abstractions that seem to live on in practice rooms, concert halls and sheet music forgotten on music stands that have lost too many screws.

First and foremost, there is the fallacy that classical music is the highest and purest form of music art (Weber, 1999). It is associated with images of 'purity,' intellectualism and high society. In the Fine Arts, Western music takes over the leading position, edging out non-western music that is acknowledged as "primitive" or "simple" in curriculums of the History of Music (Bradley, 2015). Within the sphere of Western music itself, classical music is often put on a pedestal to the detriment of popular and folk music.

When classical music education is done eliminating musicians of popular and folk music from the game of 'who is a good and respected musician,' it turns on itself to devour its weakest children. It bases its gluttony on counts of 'innate talent,' on musicality and virtuosity. These meanings, no matter how prevalent they are in collective consciousness, are based on lies. Thankfully, new musicology and philosophy of music education harbour worthwhile discourse to help unpack these fallacies.¹⁰

I clearly have a bone to pick with the concept of 'innate talent' (evident by my childish persistence to use quotation marks). It is a conviction very clear and potent that has wormed its way into every facet of musical life. It can be found at the base of music education, teachers squirming to pick out the kid with the most obvious qualities so that their invested time and effort won't be wasted. It appears in music scenes in casual discourse over beloved bands in an attempt to express our admiration for someone's *earned* artistry. It is in the heart of the music industry, in its grotesque, yet successful, efforts to hoard commercial success for the few 'deserving' artists.

The concept of 'talent' plays a powerful role in delimiting who we consider to be an artist. Since, as a society, we don't tend to anoint our artists overnight, it is in the hands of each individual that desires so, to explore this role to its possible 'fulfilment.' This takes dedication and time, honing each skill of the chosen creative process, exploring and consuming all kinds of art, finding the resources to externalise the practice and share it with the world.

Since becoming an artist is something procedural, and artistry is a point (or many points) of arrival, 'talent' not only defines who we think of as an artist (i.e. 'who has made the cut') but who we decide is worthy of music education, of familial and peer support, who receives unspoken permission in their creative ventures and who attains access to limited resources and opportunities that are valuable to one's advancement in their field. Assuming that there must be a biological factor responsible for a person's ability to learn, progress and excel is unfounded and damaging.

¹⁰ For more research see Stefanou, 2011; Kanellopoulos & Stefanou, 2015; Bergeron & Bohlman, 1992.

I should disclaim here that Mark Vopat's (2020) suspicion towards the existence of 'natural talents' resonates with me. He claims that the acquired skills that are necessary in any field or occupation are not associated with a biological superiority, or with genetic composition, but rather with environmental conditions that will favour an individual's development or not. So we can't really be talking about innateness.

Of course there will be natural disparity when comparing two people's performance. This is due to the access and experience that one person has had over the other. This gives way to the realisation that all people are capable of skill acquirement as long as they are what Vopat calls "practicing deliberately" (2020). He explains that deliberate practice requires certain conditions that include resources that aren't accessible to all. For example, it is necessary that educators are capable of developing the desired skills of their students. In the case of children, discipline is needed to be enforced by parents and "familial support over a substantial period of time" is vital.

What resonates with me the most from his positioning is that the belief that 'innate talent' exists reinforces the social structures that surround us and vice versa. If we were to challenge the notion of one, it would mean we automatically challenge the other. That means, if we were to confute the meaning of 'talent' and accept that no person is inherently more capable than another, we would have to ask the question "Why aren't the means to growth accessible to all?" It makes sense that it is easier for educators and institutions to turn a blind eye.

It is the overlooking of inequalities as evident as this one that makes me so angry that I feel like I have to speak up. It is the mindless absorption of these 'truths' that made me want to write this text in the first place. It seems insane how another form of social repression can occur from learning music, of all things.

I am very fortunate in having understanding parents, with a financial background that can support a music education, that choose to trust me blindly, and I know that the vast majority of people are not afforded this advantage. However, even I can say, I never had that push that I needed as a kid. I didn't have parents that were involved to a degree that they would seek out the best educator, or make sure I was practicing every day and that I took care of my future. *I am sure if they did so, they would feel like they were pressuring me.* The majority of educators I have worked with had not been able to pass on their abilities in cultivating and expanding musical skills.

It seems to me, there is sort of a self-fulfilling prophecy going on. Kids without access to the means that can provide deliberate practice are not progressing in the way their peers are, leading to them being overlooked in school, in the family home, in the conservatory, because

their abilities are not as “promising,” contributing to the restriction of opportunities and resources.

When we believe some kids are naturally more gifted than others, it becomes easy to treat them differently and justify our behaviour by their ‘fundamental’ differences. We tend to give our resources to (musically) gifted children as to not waste them on non-gifted students. We are not Mitski, we don’t bet on losing dogs.¹¹

The concept of ‘talent’ affects the way we distribute opportunities and knowledge which is inherently immoral. It can intercept, redirect or restrict a child’s education, denying them of that basic right.

Simultaneously, effort plays a huge role in education and the rate with which a kid will progress. It is ignorant and inhumane to overlook how a kid’s efforts, regardless of the educational setting, are immediately correspondent to natural preconditions and to their family background (Geisinger, 2020). It is a failure of our educational systems whenever an unmotivated kid gets left behind or overlooked. They are basically being punished for being born into unsupportive environments.

Joined hand in hand with ‘talent’ is the concept of competition in music. There are a lot of misconceptions that present competition as a ‘positive’ motivation for students. As an agent for ‘talent,’ competition seeks out to find the few ‘deserving’ musicians, as if music is a competitive sport. It is dysfunctional in how it creates a habit of standardisation, promoting conformity and stifling productivity (Miller, 1994).

Not only that, but when educators pit students against each other, they are robbing them of experiencing “peer-directed learning” (Green, 2008), in which students can rely on one another, sharing their strengths with anyone that may lack them and vice versa. Either this is a conscious effort or not, if educators are pitting students against each other, or at least, not promoting peer support, it makes a necessity of their role as an authority figure, as the singular person that can ‘show the way.’

When competitiveness is cultivated, educators are also depriving their students of real friendships and a sense of community that is extremely important to the motivation and the emotional skills needed to keep pursuing music. It also instils insecurity in one’s playing as you are always competing with an imaginary ‘other’ for the approval of an educator, institute or audience, when you might actually just be good enough.

Lastly, the word musicality has been tossed around in front of me so much, it seems impossible that I still don’t know what it means. Well, for myself, a person with a lot of

¹¹ Reference to the song “I Bet on Losing Dogs” from the album *Puberty 2* (Mitski, 2016).

musicality would be someone whose technical skills are fortified, that their playing can be manipulated and moulded with ease, producing powerful and emotional performances. I have no idea what the professors of the aforementioned university meant by it.

Musicality was mystified. In this degree course, it was talked of as a 'holy grail' of qualities. Technical skill and virtuosity could be achieved, with a lot of hard work, and under specific circumstances, but musicality was something deep within you. It seemed like it had to do with a person's ability to interpret music, to feel it, to play it as if they aren't just decoding the squiggles on sheet music. Only a select few of our year got told by their tutors that they had 'musicality.' It was almost classified, it was a secret weapon, unwavering and rigid. Something so innate cannot be experienced as anything but tethered to one's identity and self-worth.

On the other side of this coin, were the rest of us, led to believe that our lack of musicality was not only fixed but an indicator of 'faulty insides.' It is common that music education in conservatories and universities tend to promote the idea of musicality as a fixed attribute (Sloboda et al, 1994). If you grow up to believe so, it only takes one adult, or person of authority to tell you that you don't possess it for you to consider quitting music altogether.

I fear I had been gullible and bought into the idea that I was useless. The way I see things now, 'innate talent' is constructed, virtuosity is hard to achieve and admirable but definitely not the only point of arrival for a fulfilling life in music. *I don't think musicality is fixed just because the job position of an ill-mannered, bitter civil servant posing as a musician is.*

Musicality can be cultivated through substantial exposition to music and through different methods of practice (Hallam, 2001), experimenting vocally or with an instrument to music, with constant trial and error. It may take time, time that many educators are lying to themselves in believing that they can't provide, or that it is not worth it, but it can happen. If I can get to where I am today (*not far, but farther*), anyone can.

I do not wish to tear apart the meaning of musicality and 'talent' to take away the magic that appears when playing music and discovering one's abilities. I simply wish to lend that magic to the kids being told they don't, and will never, possess it.

Remarks that segregated us, into 'talented' and 'untalented', worthy and unworthy, were a daily event, normalising and validating this twisted mentality. None of my fellow students were in a position to speak up. Although some did seem to point out dissatisfaction with our treatment, at the time most of them seemed like they didn't acknowledge any problem with the whole climate. *Now, catch-ups over coffee with the few good friends I have from this school always lead to a revealing of a deep, mutual understanding of how problematic things were.*

Back when we were freshmen, in just our first week of this degree course, I remember having four different discussions with four different teachers about John Cage's 4:33. Each conversation was initiated by the teacher, during the lesson, in front of the students, all stemming from the same question "What is music?" It seemed to me that this work was presented as a way to show us how 'music can be challenged' and how 'alien' and 'absurd' music can be, but always in contrast to *proper, enjoyable* pieces of work. It wasn't showcased to broaden our perception of music, but was used as a flaunting of authority, a sensationalist approach to teaching.

Everything felt so artificial and so banal. The teachers maintained an unapproachable facade to the students. Competitiveness and 'showing off' were cultivated by teachers and students alike. Performance skills were almost like a currency, and there was a vast difference between students who had the resources to learn at a younger age, with helpful, skilled educators, and students who were from small-towns, and/or poor, and/or new to music. It was dreadful.

I was pulling teeth. I was attending a degree course I desperately hated and I didn't relate to any of the students there. My week was mostly made up of a dreadful feeling in my stomach that I should be practicing flute for my private lessons, just to have my playing be picked apart and ridiculed by a person I was paying to help me. My friends were much older than I was and I perceived them to be more accomplished, 'talented' and skilled. It felt like I brought these experiences on to myself, by not being good enough. Because of this, I never shared my feelings at the time, as I was going through them; I kept it all for myself.

I had barely completed my first year away from home and I had already decided to change degree courses, quit the flute, rid myself of any expectation to play classical music ever again and buy a bass. This was a tough pill for my parents to swallow, and one I was terrified to serve them, but I couldn't see myself continuing this degree course, this instrument and this lifestyle without resenting music forever.

This is when I discovered I had a relationship with music I was obligated to protect. I fled from the university as soon as I could, clutching this new-born relationship close to my chest. Luckily, I am still playing music today, talentless, unmusical and happier.

1.5 Please Sir, Can I Have Some Chords? Looking for Creative Agency in the Classical Music Classroom

I turn the home upside down, with the help of my roommate. She wants to help me as I am holding back tears. I decide to give up, to search for another solution. I have another adaptor on hand. It is not the 'screw-in' type, so I have to support the connection with external items. I do so. With this fix, the headphones are susceptible to interference. I am afraid I don't know if I will be hearing all I should. Churning with distrust and disappointment, I decide to record anyway.

I'm going to have to start my reasoning on the basis that creativity is important. Most commonly it is presented as a means to overcome obstacles, or make do with the skills and materials you have at a certain point in time (*God knows how fickle and fleeting they can be*). Due to this, creativity is regarded as a personality trait, appearing in a variety of frequency and potency. Again, we have come across another 'fixed trait' of the individual that seems too arbitrary to be developed. By the same token, whoever is not creative in the moment, can be considered to have a 'lack of creativity' in general.

I would like to abandon this reasoning and side with the more fruitful and insightful approach of Glăveanu, who, following Born (2005), thinks of creativity as a distributed phenomenon. Rather than a personal asset, creativity is reliant on the interaction of the individual and the affordances they attain in the context in which they exist (Kraehe, 2018; Glăveanu, 2018).

As my relationship with creativity has been rocky and loaded, shifting the focal point from the individual to the social can be a relief. As this concept resonates strongly with me now, I know for a fact that growing up I was under the impression, like so many other people (Sloboda et al, 1994), that creativity was something to stumble upon, not to actively seek out or find ways to nourish. It was as if I was waiting for someone's permission.

After my first year of music lessons, during the summer of 2013, I had thought long and hard about giving up the flute to focus on the guitar. My sweet dad had rushed to be supportive of me and bought me my very own flute. How could I tell him I wanted to quit?

Despite it not being what I wanted, it was my way to finally play music, understand melody and harmony, to play songs I loved by ear. Although, I realised later that I never really loved its sound or its repertoire, it had been my way to tap into music, as I so desperately wanted. Because I was spending so many hours a day playing and practicing, I was finally watching myself get better at something, standing out in some way or another. This was all that was sustaining my relationship to the flute, a lack of a more likeable instrument, and a need to be praised. As I was seeing myself progress at something, I envisioned myself becoming a professional musician as a flautist. I had fantasies about playing in big orchestras and around the age of fifteen I knew that I would be pursuing music professionally, or at least, trying to.

Simultaneously, I always wanted to create music, to write songs. There was this very cumbersome feeling of not knowing how to, or where to start. I was learning harmony in school so I knew how there is a tonic and everything sort of can revolve around that (not necessarily, but as a starting point this is valuable information), and how a VI chord sounds nice after a V chord, and all these rules and regulations.

It never felt like they were tools for writing songs the way I had perceived all my favourite songs to be written. It didn't seem personal to write something like that, to put a bunch of chords next to each other and loop them around. It didn't feel like I was creating, like something was pouring out of me. Due to this, I never tried to write songs, even though I could and I wanted to, because it didn't feel like I had discovered the process of songwriting, it felt too easy to be true.

In addition, in all the music classrooms I entered, nobody spoke of the tools needed to write music, nobody initiated conversations about what writing looks like, and how a new music student could approach such a feat. It always felt like something I had to stumble upon myself.

It seems to me that the process of songwriting is often mystified. Anyone consuming music, anyone who is fond of it, gets caught up in tales of how anything from personal trauma to divine intervention needs to happen upon artists for them to create; as if there are rites of passage that one needs to go through; as if songwriting as a process is some ritual that is kept from the public eye. At the same time, there are so many ways to approach songwriting, so many different techniques and ideas to explore, that such a thing seems unlearnable.

It is common to think of artists as a separate group from the general population, as higher beings, blessed with the gift of 'talent' (see sub-chapter 1.4.), conduits for divine

intervention. Creativity¹² was considered to be supernatural, a gift from the gods, and later, thanks to the Renaissance's humanism, was regarded as individual genius (Pavitra et al., 2007). Think of Immanuel Kant's theories of how "genius is the talent [...] which gives the rule to Art." (Kant, 2007/1790, 136). He strongly believed that only genius was capable of producing Art. In turn, a genius cannot possibly explain the sources of his inspiration, leading him to withdraw from society, fated to be misconceived by simple folk. So, the Artist/Genius is born. He is withdrawn, tortured and misunderstood (Duval, 2016).

If we cut back to the real world, artists depend on social abilities and sensibilities for their practice to develop and thrive. More often than not they will depend on mentors, teachers, peers, venue managers and, most importantly, an audience to co-operate and interact with. They need to be open enough to allow for mistakes, for heartbreak and many opportunities for disappointment that comes with this process. Trying to fit the mould of the tortured, loner genius, disallows for the vulnerability that is inherent in the process of becoming a musician, becoming the artist you wish to be.

Not only this, but constructing such rigid expectations of genius and giftedness burdens the aspiring artist with expectations rarely simple to fulfil. This evidently leads to various levels of withdrawal. Whether that is a difficulty to identify oneself as a creative individual (Gerelus, 2018; Salvador, 2015), or shying away from social interactions their practice can benefit from (Ramstedt, 2023), or quitting their practice completely (Duval, 2016), these expectations are crushing, and we can't expect every individual to be resilient enough to push through.

You might be thinking, if someone isn't resilient enough to persist through the difficulties, do they want it enough, are they worthy enough, do they deserve to become artists? Yes. Of course they do. It would enrage me that you would think otherwise, dear reader. Do you really believe a lack of emotional fortitude could possibly represent a lack of love or entitlement? Do you think that a lack of genius can get in the way of evocative, creative, inspiring music?

Besides the debilitating stereotypes that represent artists in the collective consciousness, I think that some of the processes of formal classical music education contribute to feeling like playing and making music are severed activities that must be unlocked and developed

¹² The lines between 'creativity' and 'talent' are beginning to become blurry. To make it easier for you to follow my train of thought, when I talk about 'talent' I am referring to mostly technical, emotional, cognitive skills and physical attributes that make playing easier. When talking about creativity, especially as a distributed gift, I mean the ease with which one will create original music. They are related as they are both distributed based on social and environmental factors.

separate to one another. To distil creative agency in students doesn't seem to be a common experience in the classroom.

For one, learning an instrument solely dependent on replicating music off of sheet music can contribute to a lack of creative agency. As a student of classical music, you are ruled by the sheet music (Goehr, 2007), and so, are confined to reproducing what already exists; often forgetting that you are capable of creating something of your own.

However, classical music isn't in itself rigid and fixed; in fact, it used to encompass many instances of improvisation. This changed with the printed sheet music and the solidification of music pieces (Goehr, 2007). Educators are teaching classical music as if it has always been this way, and it is achingly common that students of classical music feel intimidated by improvisation, since it is rarely integrated in their music education.

At the same time, the teacher-student relationship holds a specific authority. Since you are reliant on the teacher for their guidance, insight and approval, you might tend to forget that you need to grant permission to yourself to move outside of the classroom. You might have an inclination or a desire to create, and spend a lifetime waiting for your teacher to tell you that you are allowed to do so.

When music education isn't "empowering learner agency and independent musicianship" it neglects the necessity of students to feel competent as they progress through their musical journey (Wiggins, 2011). Due to this, it is all too easy to feel locked outside of creative processes.

In my perspective and my experience, the cultural emergences mentioned above are more than enough to stunt a person's progress; however, the meaning of permission seems important in this complex of interactions. When music education is limited to this stereotypical form of classical music education (*let us note that it isn't always taught this way*), it is easy to be conditioned into not granting permission to oneself to act upon emerging desires. Often, this isn't visible to the imagination as an option.

To grant permission to the self would mean to dismantle the idea that creating music is reserved for the Artist/Genius, to do away with the image that virtuosic classical music is the only one worth pursuing, but to also neglect any personal hang-ups that might be whispering to you of your deficiencies.

All these years I have been stumbling forth, with a longing I have rarely known how to address. I would come upon maybe a riff here and there, an idea, a nice sounding chord and I would be stumped with what I am supposed to do next to develop it into a song. I have managed to arrive at a place where I can write songs, and in some arbitrary and non-verbal

way, they feel like 'mine.' However, it baffles me to think that I wasn't allowing myself to just mess around and see what comes next, I am sure something okay would have come of it.

Only during the early conversations with my supervisor did I realise that I had been treating my journey as a musician as a row of disappointing train stations that seemed all too far from the final destination of "Ready Musician." As I was tripping over my words, trying to communicate what I wanted this text to be, what I wanted to convey to potential readers and what had been troubling me, I contextualised my behaviour of withdrawal. As soon as I imagined my points of musicianship as 'stations' it became increasingly hard to justify not creating whilst stuck at them. What if the train is late? What if the destination is further than imagined? What if it is not all that it is made out to be? What am I waiting for? What would happen if I just created something out of all the things that I wished to hide (Busch, 2023)?

2. AMPLIFIER-SABOTEUR

2.1 Womanly Sound: Woman as the Other in Music

I turn on my amplifier in the hopes of recording. It is temperamental and moody. It hums like any other amplifier but somehow in a frequency and at a volume that pierces through my guitar playing. When recorded it sounds insufferable. Sometimes, we can come to an agreement and I can mess around with its settings and the microphone distance and gain in order to pick up the least possible noise. Mostly, it seems my amplifier has taken on a voice of its own and it doesn't seem to enjoy sharing the stage with my playing.

In my first year of studying in Thessaloniki, I took up lessons with a flautist at a local conservatory. I sought out recommendations from many people at the time and they all vouched for this person's competency. To this day, whenever I hear people talk about him, the verdict is always positive. I don't doubt that for many people he has been an adequate teacher, he most definitely was an exceptional performer.

This adds to the self-doubt I experience in recalling this point in my life. I don't know what his intentions were, but our interaction was harmful for me. All in all, I am glad it happened, as it led me to give up the flute, in pursuit of things more true to myself. However, it has taken some years to shake off the lingering feeling of inadequacy that, amongst many other things, these lessons also contributed to.

It has been daunting to write about real people in this text. The morality of the process might be questionable as I am recalling events that didn't happen in a vacuum and involved other, real, conscious people (Sparkes, 2024). I am arbitrarily granting myself permission to recall memories the way I have been holding on to them, the way they have imprinted themselves on my body and have carved pieces out of me and made me who I am. This is a common point of concern in autoethnographies; I am lending from a shared experience, but presenting it as an individual. That can be rocky terrain to navigate.

I could not possibly ask for permission to talk about all of the people that were involved in the stories I choose to share here; especially when their behaviour towards me has not been exclusively positive. I have to admit, I do detect a need for vindication within me, a lot of bitterness and a lot of hurt. I still have a duty to protect the people I am talking about, as they are not co-authoring this text, they cannot defend themselves or explain the reasoning to their behaviour. I am trying my best to not let these emotions take over the text, as I am

processing them in their own time outside of it. Interestingly, writing from a calmer perspective, trying to present events in a neutral and fairer tone has brought on a real sense of forgiveness within me.

Despite my hurt and anger, I acknowledge that people are capable of many contradictions, and if I was blinded by a glimpse of someone's light, that does not mean the same beam of light could have not guided someone else. I do not wish to point fingers to individuals but to the pathologies that seemed to emerge from our interactions, in the very honest hopes to create a brighter space for musicians and lost kids. With all of this in mind, I need to talk about how my time with this educator led to a sense of unworthiness and to a withdrawal from playing in front of others, contributing to my "interrupted musicianship." *roll credits*

In our first lesson he picked apart the quality of my instrument and told me how I was never going to get ahead with it. For me, it was relatively new, a gift from my parents and a significant economic sacrifice and gamble they had made for me. For him, it was a worthless piece of junk, and nothing more. I wonder if it ever crossed his mind that I might not be able to afford a better instrument, before making me feel incompetent on our very first day.

Of course, the first day was a very accurate summary of how our year of working together would look like. At the time, it felt as if his main pedagogy method was antagonizing me, often belittling my skills in an effort to provoke me into playing better. I'm sure there are *some* people that might respond well to this kind of dynamic. Personally, I was stressfully sobbing every Friday before our lessons. I would practice my playing at least two hours a day for more than half a year. I saw no progress in my playing, or in his feedback. Instead, I saw a steady decline in my self-esteem¹³ and in my patience with my (very reasonable) abilities. I started to obsess over the many hours wasted on something so miserable, when I could have been playing the electric guitar instead.

Since I was usually scolded in a very subtle way, just enough that I felt dismissed and useless, but never to the extent that it was tangible or accountable for the distress it would cause me, I wasn't able to grasp how this situation was wearing me down at the time. The comments were discouraging, and I didn't feel like I could really get a grip on how he wanted me to play. I understood the words coming out of his mouth but I wasn't given the tools I needed to apply them to my playing. I was never able to make a connecting pathway from my sound to his. I could never really catch it in myself while I was playing, and I never understood what I was doing wrong.

¹³ Self-esteem is the "individual's sense of self-worth, perceived value, or how much one likes oneself" (Kelley & Farley, 2019).

“You are doing it wrong. You need to phrase it this way [...]” Honestly, I could rarely hear the difference between the two examples; I could only make out the very obvious body movement that would accompany his new way of playing. I felt like I was constantly being provoked, when I really needed someone that I could trust and be vulnerable with. I was treated in a way that felt very stereotypically masculine (Davison, 1994; Green 2002). It was like I was expected to “man up,” to grow thicker skin in order to progress. It was as if my emotions and my fragility would get in the way of my musicianship, instead of enhance it. *I mean, they did do exactly that, but not just by existing. They did it because the hostility they faced forced them to become vengeful. That’s why they hijacked my brain and incapacitated me for so long.*

My sub-par playing was being pointed out in the hopes that that would spark some motivation in me, some competitiveness that would ensure I practice every day, keep up a stance of aspiring for greatness, prioritise this instrument like my life depends on it and keep showing up to lessons (*and who are we kidding, keep paying for these lessons*). The way he treated my ambition, my (lack of) skills and knowledge seems, to me, appalling and unacceptable.

[...]

The previous descriptive paragraphs were written months ago by a version of myself mostly guided by bitterness and a need to lighten the load on my chest. In a different light, now I am calmer, I wonder if the endless comments on the fact that I didn’t listen to enough classical music, the scolding looks when I pronounced composer’s names wrong, the jabs at my playing were his way of showing me that I didn’t really care about any of this.

It felt like he was impatient with my deficits, but maybe he didn’t want a student who didn’t care about it as much as he did. Maybe he clocked me as a kid that was forced into lessons. He must have thought I was doing this for my parents. I doubt he could have imagined that I was the overbearing parent forcing myself into something I wasn’t really interested in, for unknown reasons. Despite this push-and-pull of what was unacceptable and what was my sensitivities having a field day, there is a tangible memory I need to recall and present.

During an evening lesson, I was playing a study I had come to hate because of the pressure and inadequacy I was constantly feeling. This was a common outcome for most music I had played on the flute in that year. He was on his feet, towering over me and the music stand. He

had very intimidating, yet apathetic eyes. He was looking towards the floor and he said “How should I say this... you have a very womanly sound.”

He looked back up to me, and I stared back at him, puzzled, but no more baffled than by his usual unhelpful remarks on my sound. He decided to clarify, “Don’t get me wrong, I mean you have a sound that is very typical to women flautists.” I remember looking back at the sheet music, partly angry that he made such a remark, mostly because it was yet another thing that I couldn’t understand. I didn’t know what to do with that piece of information. So I played on, almost in tears of frustration, trying to separate myself from other women and frantically trying to imagine what that would *sound like*.

As I am replaying this memory in my mind, I am thinking what a paranoid conversation it was. What kind of mental contortions can an eighteen-year-old kid do to keep up in an environment like that? But what would be so wrong if I sounded like a woman? Why is our idea of musicianship constructed in such a way, that womanhood would be a threat to its integrity and structure (Sani, 2021)?

Historically, especially when it comes to classical music, composers of utmost importance are white cisgender men (Migga-Gagopoulou, 2021). We think of the works of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven as points of divine genius, and women only seem to appear as the mothers of their many children, the inspiration to their love songs, the cause of their erotic frustrations. Women, as artists, as people with their own volition, are erased from music history (Matsigou, 2020; Sani 2021; Migga-Gagopoulou, 2021). The easy thing to do is assume that, since no works of female composers have survived, and since we never hear of any female virtuosos of those time periods (bar Clara Schumann), that there simply were none. The next assumption in line, due to the misogyny built into our social structures, is that the lack of works is due to the inherent incapability of women to assume musicianship as composers or players (Matsigou, 2020; Migga-Gagopoulou, 2021).

Popular opinion is influenced by the Musical Canon. In her work “Gender, Professionalism and the Musical Canon,” Marcia Citron (1990) gracefully explains how women were so easily excluded from what survived as the ‘musical norm’ due to socially imposed limitations, and a bias towards women as creators. For a piece of music to survive the ages, it needs to be of a decent compositional level, according to the standards of the time, it needs to be played and/or conducted publicly by the composer in order to attract audience attention, and it needs to be published by a printing house.

Often discouraged from composing (as during the 19th and 20th century, after Common Practice harmony, continuing to study counterpoint, fugue and composition was prohibited)

women weren't typically afforded the knowledge to compose to the standard that their male counterparts were (Citron, 1990).

The way that everyday life was composed in Western culture, spaces were engendered more than we notice them to be today. Men were dominating public spaces, claiming active lives, while women were bound to private spaces, leading domestic lives (Dubisch, 1993; Baker & Cohen, 2007). Even if women had written original music, they weren't allowed to play or conduct it to the public (Citron, 1990).

Printing houses were not living in a vortex and, influenced by the social consensus of their times, would not pick up women's work out of fear that they wouldn't be profitable.

Citron (1990) also cites that, besides the evident obstacles that were excluding women from a professional route to music, there was a need to remove any "feminine" traits from their work, in order to be taken seriously. She resurfaces the words of Carl Seashore and George Upton, to paint a clearer picture, of how they viewed women as passive, emotional and illogical, and how music can be composed only by the assertive, composed, logical male.

Because of the stress I carry when referencing works I haven't completely read, I am taking the time to read George Upton's repulsive remarks in "Woman and Music" (1892).¹⁴ It is easy to get excited about writing a feminist autoethnography (Mackinlay, 2022), feeling determined to right wrongs, give voice to the silenced and strive for a brighter reality. Caught up in my righteousness, I forget I have to confront sources and narratives constructed by men that truly make my blood boil.

Upton recognises women in music solely as muses for male composers, something to be experienced, to extract motivation and emotional support from. He acknowledges women's emotional capacity, but belittles them when remarking that they don't possess the power to harness their emotions, in order to turn them into music, as they lack the male logic needed to treat music as a mathematical equation. He is more than happy to overlook the systematic exclusion of women from creating music, as to reduce this phenomenon to a supposed skill deficit, an inherent lack that is communal to all women, that they cannot circumvent, break through, or develop. In the same text however, he weirdly acknowledges the input of women in other arts, poetry, writing and painting, and sciences.

Even though access to music playing and making is arguably better than it was then (because it *is*, and then it *wasn't*), it is far from perfect and welcoming. Misogyny and

¹⁴ Upton has dedicated this book to his wife (*presumably another hysterical female*), who I am guessing has never achieved anything in her life besides inspiring him to write this book, and contributing to the whole of the domestic and emotional labour of their household. But that's nothing, right?

exclusion are still prevalent in music practices across genres and borders (McCarry et al., 2023). So, access to music education is granted, but it is a hell of a ride to get where you want to be and survive.

There is a “straight male” paradigm (Eckhardt & Graeve, 2017) when it comes to creating music. We associate it with ‘typically masculine’ assertiveness, dominance and initiative. In turn, ‘non-males,’ are subject to othering.

Discrimination, as a conjuring of social interactions, can be prevalent in all facets of musical life, since music is itself social. In lessons, at gigs, as an audience member, as a listener subjected to othering by an artist’s misogynistic lyrics, as an artist being received by patriarchal eyes and ears. This can look like “stereotyping, assumptions, condescension, conscious or unconscious exclusion, and blunt sexualisation” (Eckhardt & Graeve, 2017).

When looking for a refuge in the arts, it is disheartening, to say the least, to come face to face with the dehumanisation that you have to deal with in everyday life. It makes sense that there is a tangible tendency of girls to resign and withdraw from community activities, from music scenes and from music education (Baker & Cohen, 2007).

When girls don’t resign, trying to exist in a “boy’s club” (McCarry et al., 2023) can result in the upkeep of a more reserved stance, sometimes, even having to tailor their practices, or complying to misogynistic rhetoric, in order to avoid discrimination (Cooper & Groce, 1990). In any case, they are being robbed of a free-access, welcoming, respecting experience of music. How can we expect women to reach the fullest creative potential when they are being excluded from music practices (Clawson, 1999)?

It is tiresome, to have to constantly defend your abilities, to have the validity of your existence constantly provoked and questioned, and to “prove yourself” to others (Cooper & Groce, 1990), knowing of a general presumption that, as a woman, your playing is expected to be sub-par. This leaves no room for bad days or weak performances that are bound to happen and are substantial experiences for growth. If sub-par playing is shared and perceived by others it can be detrimental to your self-esteem (Eckhardt & Graeve, 2017).

Just like with the concept of ‘innate talent’ (see sub-chapter 1.4), girls (the untalented) are being excluded from music spaces and practices, resulting in restricted access, stunted musical growth and denial of opportunities, while these are handed generously to men (the talented). So, the reasoning behind the initial exclusion is validated by the disparity of abilities; and the cycle never stops.

2.2 Never The Rock-Star, Always The Groupie: The Machismo of Rock and Alternative Scenes

I have noticed the amplifier's distortion switch is broken and it sometimes turns itself on, almost giving me a heart attack with the sudden volume and grit. Turning the EQ knobs can also help the noise kick in. Not because of the rising volume of the high end, for example, where the noisy drone lies, but just by touching the knobs, no matter the direction they turn. In any case, I am being sabotaged by a piece of equipment intended for support, for cooperation.

Being a girl in rural Greece, it was seemingly impossible to become an active musician, playing electric guitar. The musicians in my hometown were scarce. Filter out the people that didn't play music I was fond of and the people I didn't have a personal relationship with and I was left with no one. I longed for the potential of starting a band to play punk, alternative, guitar-heavy music, but there wasn't really anyone around for that. The only example present was a stoner band of five guys, a bit older than me. It was the closest to what I would have liked, but no cigar. It didn't even cross my mind to play with any of them; it was like I didn't have the permission to ask.

The only band I was in, growing up, was a cover band. I was sixteen years old. I played two gigs with them, on acoustic guitar and hated most of it. The person closest to my age was our lead singer/guitarist, who must have been forty-something. In the beginning, it was exciting to rehearse together, but as time went on, I felt out of place and was unhappy with the choice of repertoire and the reasoning behind it. "We don't like these songs. We play them because people like them." There is not a single person on this earth that I like enough to play "Bitter-Sweet Symphony"¹⁵ on a weekly basis. Absolutely none.

Despite my dissatisfaction with the artistic value of this project, I left because I was also uncomfortable with my relationship to the person that brought me into the band. We had met and bonded over common music taste. If it wasn't for my sister having an off reaction when she learned that he would text me somewhat regularly, I don't know if I would have thought of our communication as inappropriate.

I need to disclaim that no events or distinct communications came to clarify whether there were any cagey intentions on this person's behalf. *Nothing ever happened.* I left unscathed and mostly, just weirded out. I cannot fathom holding an accusation this heavy against another person, despite what my intuition tells me (*just typing the word grooming would*

¹⁵ The Verve, 1997.

make me sick to my stomach). For the sake of speaking up as a girl musician, as I am doing in this text, I simply wish to point out the problem just with the possibility of the existence of any dubious intentions.

It seems it would be harder for me to participate in music, either because I was inherently vulnerable and needed to be protected (by my sister, or any other device of protection) by the symbolic “outside” (Dubisch, 1993), and so, would be restricted, or because I would be perceived by male counterparts first as a woman (and so, an object of desire or conquest), and later, if I am lucky, as a musician.

In her work Jill Dubisch (1993) talks about engendered spaces, specifically focusing on rural Greece in the 70s. Men occupied public spaces and public life while women were tethered to the symbolic “inside” of domesticity, and in effect, constantly defended themselves from the “outside” in order to keep a clear name. Often, when sharing space with men (in musical settings or otherwise) I find that people rush to treat girls as something that needs to be protected and sheltered. More often than not, I find this to be extremely alienating. When it comes to music, this can easily rob us of subjective agency.

*You're not adrift. You're not a gift;
You know you're not a flower.¹⁶*

The realization that I wasn't allowed the same freedom and assertiveness as my male counterparts is part of a greater revealing that most cognizant girls go through growing up. It wasn't the first time I felt like my desires surpassed the borders of what would be possible for me as a girl. Yet, up till then, I was still naïve enough to think that being a girl would not affect my relationship to music and my place within it.

Ever since, life has tried time and time again to make it painfully evident that this is not the case. Another instance in which the inconvenience of girlhood reappeared was a fairly recent one. I attended an open mic at a squat in my neighbourhood. This particular environment is one I feel safe in. Sharing the night with me, were a handful of very good friends. We played music together, amongst ourselves and with strangers. After the performances had stopped, I was showing some of my songs to my friend and musical other-half Christos, who was sussing out the chords on the piano next to me.¹⁷

¹⁶ Lyrics from “-Naiads, Cassadies” (Fleet Foxes, 2017)

¹⁷ I talk more about our friendship and what it is like to work together in sub-chapter 2.3.

As I was playing the acoustic guitar and singing, I heard one of the men who had played with us previously, ask a third friend “Who is she? Where do you know her from? What does she do?” I stopped playing, partly because the song had ended, but mostly to stop anyone from speaking on my behalf. We made small talk which ended in a proposed jam session. I thought there was no harm in that and gave him my contact details.

I recognise that he might have been well-intended, but there was an irritation burning my stomach as I was processing what had just happened. Why did he need to address a male counterpart to ask about me? I am in a situation where I am performing as a musician, why does the role of being a girl, with whatever that means, come first in situations like these when we are supposed to be two musicians talking on equal terms? *I feel sick of it.*

Over the past Christmas holidays I visited a recently refurbished bar in my hometown. This place used to be a hangout for me and my friends growing up and for anyone who wasn't into the mainstream culture, at the time. There was a social circle of a handful of generations of skaters, stoners, metalheads and punks (*all watered down by rural living of course, but still*) that would hang out there.

That night, there was a man in his fifties playing music at the same DJ booth we would hang around so many years ago. He was playing a lot of classic metal and rock hits and my company and I were really enjoying it for the nostalgia it caused. We felt like teens again, confiscating a space that had been taken from us around eight years ago; a space very important to our upbringing and crucial to our mental survival.

His range was basic and predictable, AC/DC, Metallica, Guns N Roses, Black Sabbath. At some point, when “Bohemian Rhapsody”¹⁸ was playing, he came over to me and asked me how old I was and how come I knew these songs. *He knew I knew these songs as I was happily singing over them with my friends. That didn't seem to stop him from annoying me though.* I told him, pettily, that I was twenty-four and that *I used to* listen to these songs about a decade ago.

I don't know what can possess a man to see a girl enjoy one of the most popular songs ever written and ask her how she knows it as if she has just walked off of another planet. As if, somehow, my age and my gender could magically forbid my fingers for typing names into a search engine and clicking endlessly on YouTube videos. It was an experience reminiscent of going to high school one morning, wearing a Porcupine Tree T-Shirt and getting asked if I “like the band or just the logo” by a male teacher (as I have been asked about my Pink Floyd, and my Ramones, and Bowie and T-rex T-shirts by various men, in various settings).

¹⁸ Queen, 1975.

As we have already established with music in general, women are subject to othering. However, in rock music, women are not simply left on the outside of active musicianship, of listener equality, of the possession of 'rock sensibilities' but are also subject to sexualisation, belittlement, and degradation as they hold a very particular title in this male-dominated scene.

It is no surprise that the polarity of 'masculine' and 'feminine' appears in music. Firstly, it is echoed in the polarity of vocal and instrumental music; women historically have been recognised as great singers (Clawson, 1999; Larsen, 2017), and in current music making, are often expected to sing, rather than play an instrument (Cooper & Groce, 1990). Secondly, Western music genres seem to be heavily gendered. Rock presents itself, of course, as masculine, as it is aggressive, loud, assertive (Larsen, 2017), whereas pop, folk and disco are more often thought to be feminine due to their softer, more 'emotional' qualities.

Other music might not seem at first glance overtly masculine or feminine, like indie. Although indie seems to be the sensitive, scholarly cousin of the rock Neanderthal, the audience is typically male, white and reluctant to be identified with anything feminine (Bannister, 2006).

Even though growing up I was consuming rock culture through my small social sphere and through any digital engagement, the comment section on a YouTube video was enough to indicate what a boy's club it was. There was inherent suspicion when girls enjoyed any music thought to be typically 'masculine' and, at the same time, detestation towards more 'feminine' or queer music. In a way, to defend my relevancy and position in the music I felt more inclined to, I had to abandon and reject music that I would, and do, enjoy (pop or anything 'softer sounding'). Simultaneously, I didn't realise I was abandoning huge parts of myself, sabotaging my softer traits, to be 'one of the boys.'

Women were drastically underrepresented in the music I was interested in growing up. Most widespread rock idols are male and traditionally masculine too. Rock is tethered to the character of the macho straight man (Eckhardt & Graeve, 2017), and so, caters to him.

When women *are* in rock and alternative bands, it seems that they are a gimmick, a show-pony and an asset to attract larger audiences, due to the rare sight that they are (Clawson, 1999; Cooper & Groce, 1990). They are usually heavily sexualised and their performances judged by "genderized physical attributes" (Wood, 1980) more than purely musical qualities.

At the same time, while male rock-stars have the freedom to express their sexuality through their music, women in bands are there to cater to the audience's sexuality, disallowed from experiencing their own (Cooper & Groce, 1990). Where there is commercial success, the

media never fails to portray women's efforts in heavily objectifying ways (Larsen, 2017), robbing them of any agency as creators, presented as mere products to be consumed.

Systematic misogyny obviously caters to the ideals that maintain rock culture (Larsen, 2017) and the music industry (McCarry et al., 2023) as a boy's club.¹⁹ One of the ways this manifests is through the 'groupie' trope. 'Groupie' has come to describe not only the wives and girlfriends of male musicians, but every woman associated with rock music, even professional musicians (Larsen, 2017).

This prescribed alterity limits women's identity to 'girlfriend', 'wife', 'sex-crazed-fan,' with no substantial interest in the actual music. Like so, women are excluded from the role of an active musician, or a worthy audience member, as they are reduced to their relationship to the man on stage (Baker & Cohen, 2007). As a term, groupie is often used to put down women, and as it usually goes with heterosexual relationships, groupies are shamed and devalued for their sexual desires by the same men in rock culture who would jump at a chance to exploit them (McCarry et al., 2023).

I felt a great betrayal from the music I grew up loving, once I realised it didn't love me back. It had given me shelter from the things in life that made me an outsider, then in turn ostracised me. I was heartbroken when I realised how the Riot Grrrl movement (Jacques, 2001; Wright, 2016) was born out of necessity, fighting against the sexist pathologies within the punk scenes that I had previously thought of as an imaginary home.

Besides the already enraging inequities of unequal pay (Cooper & Groce, 1990), mistreatment, trivialisation of musical endeavours (Wood, 1980), endogenous power dynamics in bands (Clawson, 1999) and of job positions in the music industry being, almost exclusively, filled by men (Grethen, 2017), what can keep a girl out of the scene the most is the sexual harassment present in the music industry (McCarry et al., 2023; Musgrave, 2023).

Personally, I prefer attending concerts alone and have always felt like each gig I was attending was more of a family reunion than a sea full of strangers. I haven't shed this skin of false confidence, and I don't intend to, even as I realise that I am not exempt to gendered violence, and I haven't been free of it either. Many times I have had men rub up against me (with plenty of space for them to roam elsewhere),²⁰ I've had uninvited guys try to grab me to dance, grabbing my hands to kiss them, and as I left the first gig I ever attended alone, at

¹⁹ It is arguably better than it was, more women are featured in bands and seem to have creative agency. However, the alienation of women, their unsolicited sexualization and their belittlement in music scenes are still present and should be cause for alarm despite it being better 'in comparison.' That is not enough.

²⁰ I am deeply annoyed at my past self's need to defend my experience with a parenthesis of 'facts.' I am perpetuating the idea that my own words are not truth without the assistance of some tangible defence. *Screw this parenthesis.*

seventeen years old, the taxi driver asked me why I wasn't afraid of attending gigs alone in Athens and where my boyfriend was. He then made inappropriate comments about my sex life and joked about kidnapping me when I realised he didn't have a GPS and I was unsure of where I was going.

These are extremely mild narrations, when considering the countless cases of men in the industry drugging, assaulting, coercing, exploiting and grooming girls and women. Think of the sexual assault cases of Woodstock '99,²¹ the canonic relationship of frontman and underage fans, men in the music industry taking advantage of their power and assaulting signed musicians (Lady Gaga²² and Ke\$ha²³ to name a couple), men grooming their bandmates knowing they are economically reliant on them (i.e. the case of Crystal Castles).²⁴ How are women supposed to excel professionally when they are being denied their bodily autonomy? How are girls supposed to participate in music as active fans and reap the social and "well-being benefits" (McCarry et al., 2023) that come with experiencing live music? How was I to see a position for myself, as a musician, in this despicable muddy landscape?

All of these pathologies are in place to keep women from overthrowing the boy's club and it is working. There is a valid difficulty penetrating male-dominated spaces, but shying away, creating all-girl 'safe-spaces' is a risk of providing echo-chambers (Baker & Cohen, 2007), through which liberation cannot be achieved. I don't know if it is possible to survive a masculine scene, as a girl, without perpetuating the very pathologies made to exclude you; but it seems worth the effort.

[...]

As I am revisiting my writing, maybe a month after its initial fruition, I read my words as if they are pulled from an educational brochure on sexism in the music industry. I can imagine it would be easy for you to read me as guarded, withdrawn, and speaking for others, instead of speaking for myself and what it means for me to write about these things.

I don't feel the need for these sentiments to be grounded in my specific experiences. I want to be a conduit and an echo for all the voices speaking out against each and every potential abuse. It feels strange structuring these sentiments into an *Academic Text*. It is like I am

²¹ <https://www.theringer.com/2024/09/12/music/break-stuff-episode-six-sexual-assaults-woodstock-99>

²² <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-57199018>.

²³ See Pham Bao & Hoang, 2024.

²⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/oct/25/alice-glass-crystal-castles-ethan-kath-sexual-assault-abuse>

trying to prove a theory, to convince the reader of its existence and of my findings. Yet, this is no different than talking about misogyny in everyday life, trying to get through to a doubtful audience. As if anyone escaping a fire had to show their burns to the firemen before they answer to their call. If you find yourself still in need of convincing, remember the next page.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE CAN LEAD TO:²⁵

FEELINGS OF FEAR

POWERLESSNESS

ANGER

SHOCK

LOSS OF DIGNITY

LOSS OF CONFIDENCE

LOSS OF CONTROL OVER PERSONAL SPACE

NEGATIVE SENSE OF SELF-WORTH

DIFFICULTIES IN TRUSTING OTHERS

DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS

SYMPTOMS OF PTSD

PANIC ATTACKS

CLAUSTROPHOBIA

INABILITY TO WORK

²⁵ (McCarry et al., 2023)

2.3 God Only Knows What I'd Be Without You: The Importance of Peers

I always end up trying to find ways around the amplifier's hostile disposition. I had bought it from a friend, who had bought it from another friend. I knew it was faulty but it was an upgrade from absolutely nothing. I don't ever think of giving it away and getting a new one. I wonder if I am deceived by its size, gullible enough to believe that this is some kind of testament to its abilities. I do love its sound though when it is working with and not against me. In my worst of moods, I feel bitter that not even my tools are on my side sometimes. Why do I force myself to work around them instead of searching for something functional?

I was only eighteen, fresh out of my small space and excited to study music. Although I played classical music, I never chose to listen to it at home. All these years I had forged a special relationship to the internet for the hours and hours of music it gave me. I had carved out an identity for myself that was heavily based on my music taste (DeNora, 1999). As a result, I always felt at ease with people who seemed to be doing their research on bands and sounds that were out there, and felt more connected to anyone that had similar taste to me; pretty standard stuff.

After leaving home to study, in my first months in Thessaloniki, I had met a few people that were major influences for my next, still formative, years. They were quite older than me, and more accomplished, deeply passionate about both playing and listening to music and more experienced and skilled than I was. In my young eyes, they seemed to know everything.

They pursued my company and I did theirs. Although it seems to me now that there was a divergence in our intentions, they did make up the base of my social life for quite some time. I was thrilled that I met people with whom I shared so many references and interests and at the same time knew so much more than I did and seemed willing to share that with me. It felt like I had found friends I spent a lifetime looking for.

Then again, the significant age gap did bring tangible difference in experiences, qualities and abilities that only seemed to highlight my insufficiencies. I was always 'lesser than.' I was grateful that they shared music with me but I was being criticised for some of my taste, without ever fundamentally understanding what was wrong with it (*I still have no clue*). I admired their playing, but would be on the verge of a panic attack at the thought of being asked to join in. Once, I had been invited to a jam session and wondered if it would be too

extravagant to hurt my hands in order to get out of it. In a sickly twist of fate, I quickly developed tendonitis (see sub-chapter 3.2).

I was mesmerised, as they were the first people I saw actively pursuing creative careers. It was crucial to have peers navigating the professional side of music. It was my first encounter with that world and helped me visualise my own possible future. I still acknowledge the preciousness of the motivation it gave me at the time.

Despite the excitement of having role models that doubled as friends, I was behind the scenes hearing them criticise and pick apart various musical projects, with criteria that at the time I was unable to grasp. I still value being able to decipher things you dislike, as a means to shape your own musicianship and identity, but as this behaviour was laying itself out before me, it seemed to me at times to be more malicious than constructive. Since I was struggling with my own inadequacy, I was projecting myself onto the 'criticized' and was discouraged from being vulnerable out of a fear of being picked apart myself.

Music taste and knowledge were highly valued in these relationships. I will forever be grateful for the artists and albums I have learned from our friendship. However, the processes of discovering, sharing, evaluating and interpreting music appeared to have hidden hierarchies that I was late to notice. As the new friend, the girl, the young, inexperienced and rural one, as soon as I acknowledged these hierarchies I saw myself as the bottom-feeder.

I desperately tried to fit in, in an effort to hold on to these friends I had idealised. Again, I was in a situation, desperately unequal to my peers and manically trying to figure out ways to 'catch up.' Like so, another image of 'good enough' had appeared for me to contest. This time, coupled with the puzzle of what 'good music' ought to be.

Cliques are prevalent in musicians and music scenes, even though the lack of literature on the topic can allude to the opposite. The friendships of musicians are intertwined with their artistic endeavours as they can be crucial to accelerating careers (Musgrave, 2023) and detrimental to providing much needed support while navigating the uncertainty that comes with making music (Sippel et al., 2015).

There are two interpretations of the dynamic between I and this friend group that I feel contributed to my resignation from music and, at the same time, influenced my artistry.

First, is the process in which I had put my trust in them, and so, transferred my agency onto them, granting them full authority. At the time, I thought them to be more knowledgeable and more experienced (*in hindsight, they were*), and I had assumed that they had my best interest at heart. In doing so, I didn't grant myself many moments of doubt, in which I could

possibly claim back my agency. As I had done previously with my educators, I waited patiently for permission and guidance, never wondering if I was wrong to think of them as self-evident.

For example, despite their knowledge of the people that made up the local scene and the difficulty I faced navigating my injuries, when I was looking for a guitar teacher they didn't seem to have understood the urgency of my situation, and so didn't provide me with any guidance or recommendations. A few times, when I remarked any inclination towards a specific player, I would get shrugged off with a "They probably don't do lessons anyway." I don't think instances like these were ill-mannered; I just didn't need much to be discouraged. So, I kept retracting and withdrawing.

Secondly, I think that during these years I had a tendency towards a heteronomous view of myself (Sultana, 2015). That is, my sense of self was constructed almost solely by external factors, social interactions and narratives. Because of this, it was also dependent on the recognition and approval of others. I conceived myself through these friendships, as much as I did through the music I was consuming. I was what I was listening to, just as I was who I was hanging out with. I was dictated by my taste, both in people and in music.

I wasn't simply trying to fit in; I was trying to replicate something I could never fully assume, as it was outside of me. Because of this, I was walking on eggshells, avoiding the confrontation with my reality. I wasn't able to do anything for my plight since I was desperately running away from it, trying someone else's taste on for size, trying to convince my surroundings that I wasn't associated with my obvious limitations.

On the matter of taste, Ralph Smith (1987) talks of a 'beneficial elitism.' He seems just as confused as I was, boasting about how *the highest forms of art* should be accessible to people of "all walks of life" and never wonders how the canon of the "professional standard" is constructed, or by whom. He lacks the humility to acknowledge that anyone's list of 'the best' will subsequently reflect the tastes and biases of a certain time and space (Hobbs, 1988).

Smith tries to defend his position by pointing out society's favour of professionals in domains like medicine or engineering. Admittedly, I don't see the correlation between a failed heart surgery and a poor performance. I used to feel as if my inadequacy held such power for destruction, but I have managed to liberate my expectations from these fallacies.

I have not succeeded in this alone. Just as an unfit social circle can stunt your growth, it takes a village to fix your ill-conceived notions of artistry (*or something like that*). I have been very fortunate to make friends that have made my journey towards musicianship a more fruitful one. One were all parties are equally encouraging and enthusiastic to share music and to play together without judgement. I have met people who are inspiring not as authority

figures but as guiding lights, constantly seeking out knowledge and improvement, with whom I am able to share many references and common tastes and stories, that make this journey a significantly less lonely one. I am fortunate to have people in my life that have given me advice, consolation, a shoulder to cry on when my hands were aching, even instruments, so that I learn something new.

In these friendships there is a fundamental solidarity. Even though there are higher standards in what they listen to and what they play, when it comes to playing together, it seems that nothing is more important than creating as a unit and enjoying each other's musicalities. There is no room for judgement or a playful teasing that reeks of cloaked contempt.

Although it could possibly be cause for alarm, or an inkling that I am repeating past mistakes, I have a tendency to feel as a unit in my creative endeavours with my friend Christos. He was once a friend of a friend, someone whose face I had connected to a different name for about a year, someone who I would encounter at parties and talk about music and what albums we were currently enjoying.

Less than a year ago, we had both been invited to a party where we knew few people and recognised each other, so we happily retreated from socialising with strangers and talked about music again. Like always, we bonded over common music taste, but this time, mostly because of our shared resentment for aspects of the local scene, the lack of visibility of something that resembled desirable to us. We talked about how music critics in Greece seemed ignorant and how we want to take over the city, distribute our favourite music through DJ sets, influencing the masses.

Setting aside our plan to conquer the world (for now), we have ended up working together, slowly but surely, making music, learning about audio engineering, simply jamming, and sharing albums very often. I own three abandoned guitar pedal kits I had bought in 2019, and frightfully gave up two months after purchasing, that had been sitting in my attic all these years. One day I just asked Christos if he wants to do them together, so I got them out of storage and took the stuff over to him. We spent many hours listening to music while assembling the pedals, looking up instructions online, making countless awkward trips to the electrical store, trying to infiltrate the space while making sure our cluelessness goes unnoticed.

In January 2025, we attended an online song-writing workshop, set up by The School of Song²⁶ and hosted by Brian Eno.²⁷ I had attended another one of their workshops, hosted by

²⁶ Upcoming workshops are featured online at <https://schoolofsong.org/collections/courses>

²⁷ <https://schoolofsong.org/products/songwriting-with-brian-eno-copy>

Robin Pecknold,²⁸ in an effort to help me understand how to start writing three years ago. We decided to enrol as a single person and split the costs, since we both couldn't afford it, and attended the lectures at Christos' house, watching Eno talk on the television, with Christos' cat Stella roaming around. I was excited to say the least, and more than willing to pretend to be the same person, it seems like a good call.

What doesn't scare me in this tendency of heteronomy is that we seem to be coming from a common place. We both love music and long to be a part of it, but finding people has been hard. There is mutuality in how we appreciate what we do and the effort we seem to put into it. We have both found a space for some of our orphan songs, and have also managed to write together. Playing music has felt like such a daunting task, not only in practicing, but booking venues, talking to people, figuring out gear. Now it is as simple as a text and a ten minute walk that separates our neighbouring houses, putting the day to bed while playing guitars and trying to learn songs together. If there is an idea to perform somewhere, it is easier for me to take initiative, knowing that I am working for two people and not just myself (Bathurst & Ladkin, 2012; Sutherland, 2015).

Having a friend to work with is something I have wanted since I was a kid. It has been a late call, but it came through and I am constantly figuring out ways to amplify the signal so the line doesn't drop.

²⁸ This course took place in January of 2022 and there isn't an available link, as the courses are presented as products on the site and are not always archived.

3. TANGLED CABLES AND SHORT CIRCUITS

3.1 The Call Is Coming From Inside The House: The Brakes of Mental Health

More often than not, I am annoyed at the process of setting up my gear to record. I don't have a big bedroom by any means, so a permanent set up is impossible. I look at the mess of tangled cables on the floor and scoff. "No wonder I don't record as much as I want to."

All cables are linking up my pedals and guitar and are serving as a much needed route to support and harness the sound I am trying to capture. Sometimes no sound will come through and upon swift investigation I am able to detect the odd jack that isn't pushed in deep enough, or a forgotten power cable. If I am lucky enough, that will be the fix.

Yet, there is always the possibility of no sound coming through and no matter how much I dig through tangled cables, I am not able to figure out what the problem is. That is when the real dread kicks in.

I am often stumped at how to explain my ongoing fight with my brain. I am walking on a tightrope to balance explicitness in the name of comprehension, without plummeting to an evocative re-telling that would make an audience coil and retract. As I tend to do in all my social relations, I am willing to risk a little awkwardness and embarrassment for the sake of human connection. This doesn't mean that I am writing this fearless and happy.

It had been incredibly hard for me growing up to seek out music lessons when my physical existence was dictated by separation anxiety. I was never a very social or brave kid. Being extroverted enough to pursue music seemed as unlikely a dream as becoming an actually famous superstar. It is safe to say, the string of self-doubt I still carry was present in these early experiences. My sense of self has been at best blurry, and most times, it was simply unattainable. Subsequently, I have been lacking self-compassion, living truly inadequate of comforting and understanding myself whenever I encountered my inabilities and failings (Kelley & Farley, 2019).

To give a bit of context, as a kid, I would fear imagined scenarios in which my family would abandon me. My vivid imagination was working over-time (*in the worst artistic direction possible, if you ask me*), and I was constantly bombarded with thoughts of them plotting to

leave me. So in turn, I had to be one step ahead; making sure I never left anyone's side. This was particularly exhausting. Bending over backwards to not be abandoned can be a full-time job. Sadly, no side-hustle or hobby was feasible, and I couldn't exactly negotiate with my perceived conditions of survival, to take on my dream of being a musician.

This feeling took its sweet old time to leave me. Embarrassingly, I only started to feel a bit more stable around the age of twelve. By then, I was attending music school anyway. I could never have predicted how important it would become to me, to have started music earlier in life. I probably have spent more time thinking about what could have been if I was more accustomed to playing in front of others, compositionally savvy and technically adequate, than actually finding ways to develop these skills.

Through learning music, I started to construct an inkling of a sense of self (DeNora, 1999). It was the first time I could perceive myself through something real, that wasn't other people, since I lacked the awareness and confidence to have a sense of self that came from 'within.' Because of this, my self-worth was disgustingly co-dependent on my abilities as a musician. This had led, with the help of a lack of exposure, to a fear of playing with, and in front of, others.

This isn't so much a fear of exposure. Frankly, I enjoy laying myself out bare, as you probably can tell, as you indulge me, reading my innermost thoughts. Nor is it a common occurring music performance anxiety (Kelley & Farley, 2019; Spahn et al., 2023), at least it is not only that. What I seem to have been afraid of, is loss. I have been terrified of being abandoned by the people around me. I thought love and acceptance was conditional, that I had to fight to not be left behind.

How could I lay myself bare and admit to others that I was worthy of abandonment? What constituted 'worthy of abandonment' in my mind was an insufficient music performance (see "blurry sense of self" (Vispoel, 2021; Draves, 2008)). This of course made me shy away, not only from communal playing,²⁹ but from any attempts to conquer a skill, if that meant that I had to come face to face with my deficit of said skill. I really shot myself in the foot with that one.

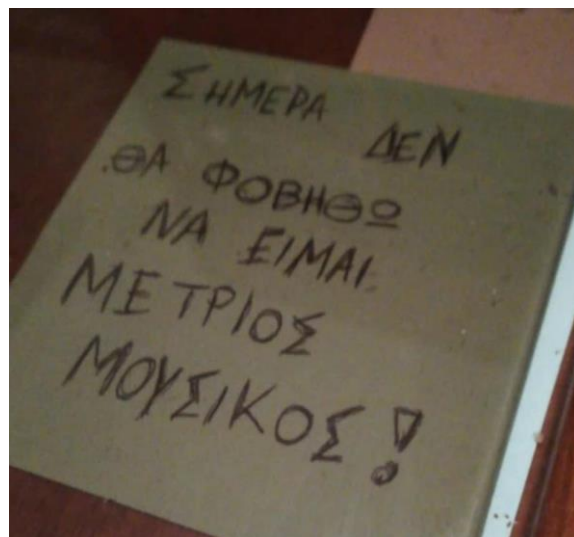
Whenever my performance would fail to meet my, or others', expectations I would be overwhelmed with an intense feeling of shame. This shame would bring out an unbeatable desire to hide away, as the "badness of my actions [was] transferred to myself" (Ahmed, 2004). I would be uncomfortable living in my own skin, in my own insufficiencies.

²⁹ Despite music's social nature, it isn't necessary that engaging with music will provide that socialisation. Vulnerable people can, and tend to, engage in socially alienating ways of interacting with music, further retreating into themselves (Skewes McFerran & Baird, 2013).

My sense of self has been distorted for the majority of my life, it might still be. Only recently have I made the proverbial synapse to decipher its malice. One of the most evident ways in which it has harmed me, was during my transition from my hometown to studying in Thessaloniki. I was crushed when I realised I wasn't as good at playing flute as I thought I was, but the emotional aftermath was obviously pointing to the fact that there was something more personal at play.

Testament to this was a post-it I kept on my living room table. Under the glass sheet I had placed it proudly, pretending I was 'owning up' to my limitations and my deficits. In reality, I wanted everyone to know that I was aware of my lack of 'talent' and skill, as if somehow that would protect me from the pain of other people finding that out in their own time. I was constantly embodying this realization in an attempt to protect myself from it.

The post-it read "TODAY I WILL NOT BE AFRAID TO BE A MEDIOCRE MUSICIAN!" It seems I was aware that I was not reconciled with my playing being below par, but, since it was tethered to my self-worth, I wasn't capable of just letting it go and trusting that in time I would come closer to what I wished to be. I was terrified that I was characterized by inherent incompetence and that no amount of time and effort would help me progress.



1. "DESPERATION POST-IT"

If my brain was a house, it had obviously been built on sand, without a permit. While living in it, hospitality has been compromised by many heavy rainfalls that each, in turn, ate away at these volatile foundations. They all provided factors that disallowed a healthy relationship with creating music and a productive frequency in practicing.

Growing up, I was navigating emotional and physical symptoms of poor mental health, and so, I struggled with finding and maintaining emotionally secure relationships (Bauman-Field, 2023). It is needless to say, relationships play a tremendous role in psychological wellbeing and without sufficient ones, experiencing loneliness can be very painful (Wang et al., 2017). It feels I was constantly caught up in fall-outs, in an unending feeling of loss, rejection and shame, which I acknowledge is typical for many teenagers.

I had long periods of emotional instability, some including suicidal ideation that in my household was seemingly recognised but never addressed. This is how I experienced it at the time, but I am unsure now, maybe what I had communicated was not sufficient enough to convey the urgency of the situation. I don't know how hard it can be to be a parent and have to deal with something like this. In any case, this had led to further retraction, as home didn't always feel like the safest space for creation and expression (Millner, 2023), at a time where I needed to be seen 'warts-and-all.'

Regarding how I wish to be seen, it has been curious to see the ways in which I choose to share myself while conducting this autoethnography. As I was searching an old hard drive for any possibly useful photos, I found a bunch of self-portraits I took in my teens. I know for a fact that I was uncomfortable being in front of a camera, and like most teenage girls, felt ugly in the photos my friends took of me. So in the self-portraits I understand there is a need for me to control my image, to process it, to capture myself the way that I understand myself to be, but was not necessarily willing to share that. Reflecting on my recollection of this time, it makes sense that I would find it so hard to expose myself while playing. I was still very young and inexperienced, with a lot ahead of me to learn. As opposed to these pictures, I didn't have the skill I needed in order to control what is being 'presented.' I desperately wanted to be in complete control of how I am being 'heard.'



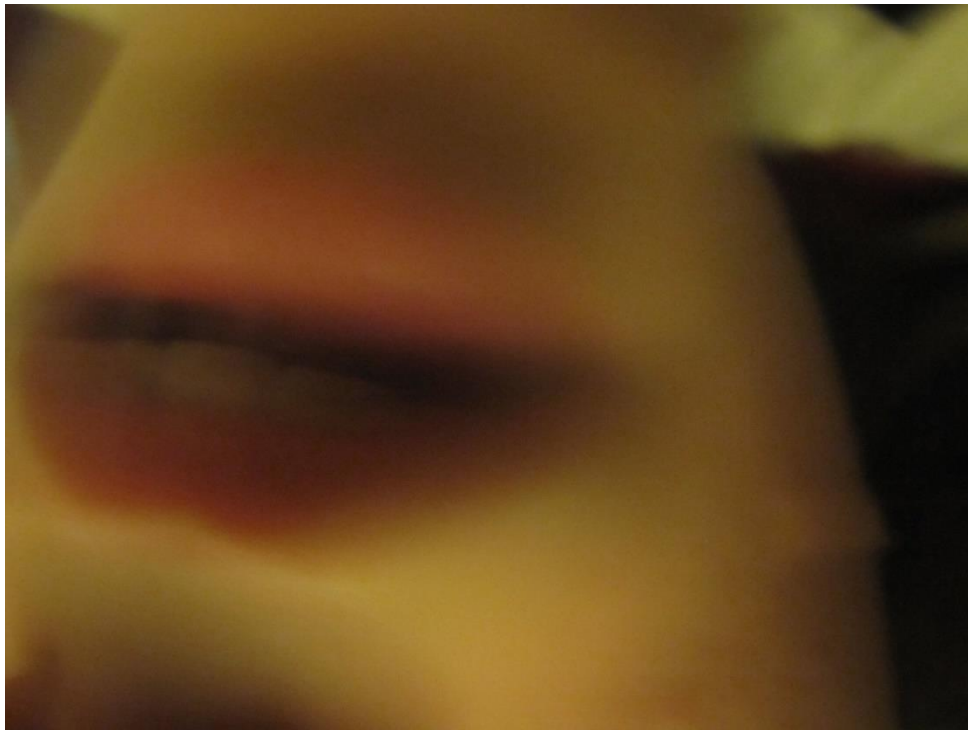
2. "UNTITLED"



3. "THE UNDENIABLE INFLUENCE OF TUMBLR"



4. "BLURRY SENSE OF SELF I"



5. "BLURRY SENSE OF SELF II"



6. "READYMADE BUBBLE BLOWER"³⁰

I had a difficult relationship with food that contributed to my low energy, my disinterest in the things around me and my denial of self-support. I was starving myself, not out of vain, to attain a body so many people think girls constantly dream about, but because I didn't want to take care of myself, it wasn't important to me. I starved myself, as I deprived myself of playing music to the capacity that I would have liked. It served the same coping mechanism.

So how could I practice, create and seek out lessons, bands and gigs when I wasn't in a position to take care of myself? How could I take care of myself when I had a sense of self that was begging me not to? It's hard to think about practicing and preparing for a future when you are actively envisioning a lack of one.

Looking to my peers in adolescence, there were many who 'had it rough' growing up, to say the least, that managed to pull together and hold a personal life of achievement either in music, sports etc. They managed to go after their aspirations whilst simultaneously keeping up with growing pains and interpersonal turmoil. I, for better or for worse, wasn't able to achieve that kind of transcendence.

In the same way, many of my musical heroes growing up were riddled with psychological problems and were still able to achieve commercial success and hold artistic merit. On the other hand, I was getting knocked down by my obstacles, and had no means to turn the pain

³⁰ Reference to Marcel Duchamp's works of "readymades." Readymades were found objects that became "works of art" as soon as Duchamp deemed them to be, whether he modified them or not (Goldsmith, 1983).

into motivation or persistence. Again, by comparison, I felt like I wasn't good enough to pursue music creatively.

Mental health problems have always seemed to be prevalent in well-established artists (Gross & Musgrave, 2020; Wesseldijk et al., 2019); sometimes, even problematically thought of as pivotal to the artistic process (Pavitra, et al., 2007). Healthy creatives are not equally represented in ongoing literature (Pavitra, et al., 2007), or talked about as often in discourse over artistry. There doesn't seem to be a clear picture of how to cultivate a healthy sense of self as a musician.

With a lack of healthy role models and unawareness that creativity can actually be stunted by emotional instability (Pavitra, et al., 2007), it is easy to feel like a failure, when you are unable to break through the pain and turn it into *art*. By the same token, it is easy to think of psychological problems as stemming completely from within, ignoring how our exterior world affects us (Gross & Musgrave, 2020).

We also think of music as a haven during mental tribulations. Though it can be beneficial to mental health (Wesseldijk et al., 2019), this is not a given, it is not inherent simply by engaging with music. Believing otherwise can often cloud our judgement and prevent us from analysing and reconfiguring our relationship to music, making it hard to draw the line between where it is helping and when it is harming us (Gross & Musgrave, 2020).

Musicians, like all people, can avoid seeking psychiatric help (Pavitra et al., 2007), for a multitude of reasons. I, luckily and despite my resignations, did have a deep desire to get better. I sought out my first therapist in my hometown at seventeen years old. To my disappointment, she had to obtain the consent of my parents (legality), and asked to see them before ever meeting me (a fun little initiative of hers!). I felt like my symptoms were being overlooked and the severity and urgency I was experiencing diminished. As she knew I played music, she asked me a question of incomprehensible credibility, "If your life was an orchestra, which instruments would you choose to play louder?" What a stupid thing to ask someone who has just told you they want to kill themselves, I thought. I replied: "the double bass?"

Now I have been in therapy for about six years, with a competent, kind professional, and find myself constantly digging up new nuggets of information to help me deal with the short circuits in my brain. I am keener to take care of myself now that I am reconciled with the fact that I am the sole figure in charge of my care (even though at times I shouldn't have been). I still struggle with bouts of emotional instability, anxiety attacks and psychosomatic symptoms that are now more cause of intense curiosity than hopelessness. I.e. I am

somewhat amazed at the feeling of my torso going numb or how my eye can twitch for three weeks straight; *not so fussed about my hair falling out at faster rates than it used to.*

The main incentive to take care of myself, to intentionally keep living, is to stick around to play and listen to as much music as possible. Though this used to make my relationship to music heavier than it should be, as it held more importance than my hands did skill, I am happy with this knowledge and more than willing to meet myself where I am at each time and make do with what I can.

3.2 Hurt Hands: Navigating Tendonitis During Global Lockdowns

It is my first time recording in my new apartment with my synthesizer for a university assignment. I plug it into the power supply, as to the audio interface, and the noise is horrifying.

I am troubleshooting the situation for minutes and things are looking grim.

It has nothing to do with the DAW or the interface and I am starting to think that maybe it has to do with the electricity. I plug my laptop and the synthesizer into different outlets. Still noisy.

However, when I take my laptop out of the power supply the noise stops. Now I have to act fast because I am up against the miniscule life span of its battery. I didn't know the power in my home had short-circuited.

It can be daunting to not know where the noise is coming from. Diagnosing the problem, regrettably, reveals an obstacle with no promise of erasing it. Just another thing to work around. The cables in my room will always seem tangled.

During the summer of 2020, almost overnight, I started aching in both of my forearms. I was twenty years old, trying to spend a normal summer at my parent's home, in between two global lockdowns. If there ever was a time for a medical emergency that calls for attentive physiotherapy, rehabilitation, systematic exercise and, finally, a mindful guitar teacher with good technique, it *definitely* was not now.

My story with physical injury related to poor technique, bad posture and a lack of exercise has been both a rollercoaster and a haunted house. I was incapacitated, unable to use cutlery or a phone; picking up my guitar and playing was not an option anymore. I would rest my arms on my desk in front of me and cry, I would not use them for anything and they would ache in such a way that I felt like they could never get back to normal. It felt like they were in pain for almost two years straight.

What had happened was I had developed a ganglion in my left wrist due to tendinitis. It would cause a dull, ever-present pain throughout my entire left forearm, and my right arm, despite being ganglion-free, would be in pain too. I still don't understand how that happened; the doctor just said it does. I had to play a waiting game, so the ganglion would naturally die down (it's still there, just not bursting at the seams with liquid).

I did physiotherapy in my hometown that left me in more pain than I was originally in. The workers there seemed to be oblivious to the urgency that possessed me, as they passed me around, between them, never disclosing exactly what I was going through, and in turn what I needed. I was assured that after the first sessions, it would get better and I could continue playing. It didn't get better. I did more physiotherapy, a couple of months later, when I went back to Thessaloniki and that seemed to help the pain.

Despite improvement, I was unable to play the guitar for more than fifteen minutes a day. My hands felt constantly stiff with alarmingly sharp pain. I couldn't hold my instrument in a way that felt tireless. No position felt safe enough to explore. It felt as if I was knocking on a loved one's locked door only to be shooed off like the most undesirable guest. I was kept out and I felt like I was being punished but I don't know what for.

I was heartbroken, now in another lockdown, unable to look for a gym to attend Pilates class, or a guitar teacher to sort out my playing. I would do my daily exercises religiously, even though I held no hope for betterment. The days were dilated and any moment I spent in pain felt like a lifetime. The lockdown had this amazing power to convince the most nervous of minds that we were never coming out of it. Not being able to play music due to tendonitis had a very similar effect.

I was terrified, and despite sharing my lockdowns with a partner who was a musician, adequately familiar with his own resignations and interruptions, I did not possess the language to communicate the pit of despair that was growing in my stomach. I still don't have the power to share this fear.

In May 2021, just as the ganglion started to flare up again, and I was seriously considering surgery, I fell off my motorcycle, landing on my right shoulder and fracturing it. I was in my student home, alone, with my right arm in a sling and my left wrist in a brace. *Quite the sight!*

I was adamant on not becoming a burden to my friends, so I never asked them to come over to clean or to cook. I did most things by myself and ended up developing 'tennis elbow' on my right limb. At the time, I thought it was embarrassing to ask for help. Right now, as I am typing this, I am severely embarrassed by how things could have gone so differently, if only I had decided that I am worthy of support, help and understanding, by others, but mostly by myself.

It should seem obvious that musicians are at high-risk of developing injuries, physical and emotional, during their lifetimes (Bosi, 2017; Wristen, 2014). Taking time off to tackle any problem is not a simple decision and can cause great mental harm, damage self-worth and lead to a loss of identity (Grant, 2009) and to isolation and depression (Stanhope & Weinstein, 2020).

Although this should be common knowledge, I can't recall injury prevention and pain treatment ever being a talking point in my music lessons. In my experience with education, there was this notion that playing through the pain was proof of progress, getting faster and stronger (Bosi, 2017).

As Stanhope & Weinstein (2020) suggest, it is not always in the musician's best interest to stop playing whenever pain occurs. Pain is more complicated than the general population seems to be aware of, and can be driven by psychosocial factors. This I would become painfully familiar with in due time.

I can't ignore that I ventured through this disaster in the middle of a global pandemic, made up of unprecedented realities, surreal everyday life, and an overall sense of panic and dread (Mucci et al., 2020). As the collective mental health of the earth's population was besieged (Pietrabissa & Simpson, 2020), juggling with a personal crisis that was threatening my proximity to music was exceptionally dreadful. I didn't fear a long recovery, a temporary resignation from practicing; I was terrified of the very real possibility of not being able to play music ever again (Grant, 2009).

For professional musicians, COVID-19 threatened music life (Malm & Lundin, 2024), shut down all lucrative musical activity (Mucci et al., 2020), put people's careers on the line (Stanhope & Weinstein, 2020). On the other hand, I, as an amateur, who had been desperate to catch up to her peers, and obsessed with the idea of being 'lesser than,' was handed a global time out that felt like a once-in-a-lifetime gift.

At first it was. I was playing hours of bass and guitar, learning new songs, listening to new music while playing hours of video-games. All we had was time. Due to the fact that I was healthy during the first national lockdown and injured during the second one, I felt like this opportunity was stripped away from me, and there was nothing I could do to settle my plight. There was no space for bargaining, just infinite time and a weird middle finger that seemed to loom over my head as I checked the number of COVID-19 cases every single day and yelled at my laptop whilst reading the news. The rage I felt towards the government's neglect of its people was similar to the rage I felt for lacking a body that did what I wanted it to do.

During the lockdown, I was behaving in a way that I thought to be beneficial to national health. This had to include behaving as if every human I encountered was a possible danger (Pietrabissa & Simpson, 2020). Besides the lingering after-effect this had on my feelings of social anxiety, and my daily duels with intrusive thoughts, I can't help but discern a parallel with a new behaviour towards music (Matsigou, 2020). It was now a possible danger. It

could cause harm that would keep me apart from it forever. It had the power to reject me and the ways I mindlessly abused my body, as I yearned for its favour.

I was kept outside of playing music and locked in doors, indefinitely. Both circumstances felt equally forceful and imposing. I was counting COVID-19 cases, assessing the development of my bodily pain, shooing off the days so I could be reunited with self-determination. I was trapped in my home and in my faulty body, despite my will. There seemed to be so much loss, so much to mourn. Not being able to communicate the desperation I felt made me especially lonely, now without my only tool for comfort.

I am still terrified of any injuries. However, hope does visit me more often. During my recovery, I have worked as a stagehand, gone bouldering, engaged in physical activity that I would have been too scared to pick up five years ago. My endurance while playing has drastically improved, as has my technique, and my awareness of my body. If anything, this experience has made me fond of exercising, and taught me how to decipher my bodily pains, and treat them accordingly.

The relief I feel in getting better is learning to live with my dawdling fear. The dread is always there, ensuring that I will never take my able-body for granted again. The threat of my inability to play is lingering around my throat constantly. At best it will motivate me to go to the gym, or rest more than I would like to on some days. At worst it can come to take away the only thing that makes life feel less like a short macabre punchline.

CONCLUDING STATEMENTS/NEW INSIDES

How can I conclude on what I have been doing all this time? How am I to draw a line in the sand, indicating resolution, when waves of grief and realisation keep pulling about the shore? All the months I have spent writing this text, I have been rewriting my narration, reliving my memories and renovating my insides. Towards the final pages I feel I have at least stumbled upon a more helpful composure that can give my failures a little more grace.

Why didn't I play? Why didn't I write? Why was I shying away from what I loved the most? I don't feel I can provide closure to myself or any reader with a singular angle. I have been resilient but I have also been cowardly. I have fallen into the hands of a, at times, flawed educational system, but have found solace in a handful of brilliant peers and educators that were a part of that system. I have been put down and picked on, but no one has abused my self-worth more than I have myself. I have been paralysed by the image of an ideal musician, but have been lucky enough to have my eyes and ears widened to a broader, more realistic, more comforting range of musicians and musics. I have been incapacitated and incompetent, but at the same time strong and disciplined while fighting to get my body back to healthier states.

There are many issues I have touched upon that point to larger pathologies that exist within and without music communities and cultures. Sexism, unequal distribution of opportunities and resources, dysfunctional conceptions of creativity and 'worthiness,' emotional abuse, misleading hierarchies are all stifling and damaging phenomena, whether they go unnoticed or not. By writing this text I have been able to see them all lie next to one another on these digital pages and grant myself compassion, realising that it would be unfair to think I was *just* a coward or *just* incompetent.

At the same time, I am sure there are people that have been quicker to arrive at a point of bravery than I have been. These factors were heavy burdens, but it was *my* personality, *my* skewed view of my 'self' that buckled under the pressure and led me into isolation. I hope this doesn't read as if I am feeling sorry for myself. If anything, realising how I have been as much of a bully as all of these other emergences gives me a feeling of agency in my present and future actions. If I am capable of causing such harm, I must be capable of turning things around.

Sometimes it would be days, maybe even weeks before I saw my writer's face as she moulded me, brought me into existence, with a new shape each time. Many times I would see her pulling apart pieces of me, tracing the words she, herself, had laced around me. Her eyes were wet and heavy, and when I started to hear the sobbing I knew I would plunge into darkness again for the next few days. I am afraid to be rejected for the things she has been hiding away from. She created me, I am her; when will the sobbing stop?

It has been weird to write. It has felt as if each chapter could be an entire book of its own. I had to be somewhat frugal with my problematizing, as I am writing a dissertation. For the sake of an initial scratching of the surface, I had to know when to let go and when each sub-chapter has blossomed just enough to be conceived as coherent and fruitful, without revealing and highlighting the great rabbit hole just beneath it. I am slightly heartbroken that, at least for now, I haven't been able to dive head first into the depths that these topics can bring. Hopefully, they will inspire and provide a starting point for future research, in any of the many topics I touch upon.

It has been at times very hard to write about the more painful experiences (Bartleet & Ellis, 2009), but extremely liberating to give them their own space to exist, instead of keeping them in the most detested corner of my mind. The intimacy of this process has let me come to understand the assumptions we make of musicians and my relation to them. I have been able to give space to the nuances of these topics, to not stuff my face with barren and indulgent thoughts of "Maybe you're just not meant for this."

It has helped me demythologize common exemplars of musical ability. It has helped me create space in these meanings big enough for me to find hospitality in them, with my ambitions, my limitations, my "hurt hands" and all this experience I carry.

It has helped me organise the factors of 'interruption' in a way that can alleviate the burden they bring. Their damage seems done and final, as my life and abilities seem more malleable than ever. I am no longer afraid of them. More than ever, I am conscious of them and how I let them take hold of me. I think this awareness is strong enough to assure I won't be subjugated to them any time soon.

It has made me softer, more patient and understanding. Seeing descriptions of myself, as a tendonitis-ridden mess, side by side with a young maniac listening to music all day and mindlessly singing to herself has reminded me of how easy it is to change through the seasons without realising it. As easy as it has been to dig myself into this hole... who knows? Maybe in a blink of an eye I'll be playing my songs on stage, not thinking much about those points in my life.

I have the urge to list conclusions as if products in a supermarket. Of course this is part of academic conditioning, but I also really enjoy analytical record keeping. I don't want to make it boring however. If you have survived this far, maybe seeing all of my takes in a few concentrated pieces of advice would be an adequate reward?

Although this is such a played out cliché I will be imagining that I am telling this to my eight-year old self, as she was in much need of a good talking-to. You can be whatever age you feel like you need to be to get the most out of this advice, that's your business. *Reading it again truly makes me cringe, but I think there is something important here that shouldn't be snuffed out by my juvenile need to be perceived as cool.*

Ok kiddo, look, you like the music thing. That's pretty cool, it has way too much to offer for just one lifetime, but that's okay because you are gonna have to concentrate on a couple of things. You won't be able to learn all the instruments and play all the songs that have ever existed or be proficient in all the genres. That's really ok, though.

I know not many people around you do it, so it makes sense you haven't thought of it, but as you discover artists that you like you should listen to albums from top to bottom as much as you can. Don't just go through the same five or six songs you already know. It works miracles on your skills as a musician, but most importantly, life is more sufferable in their company.

You have to pick what you really like, not what's around you. What feels right in your hands? What do you listen to in your favorite music and you wish you knew how to pull off? No, it doesn't matter if there aren't any Sitaris in your hometown, maybe you can find a way to bring the first one, that's okay.

Ok, so you picked your instrument, that's great. You need someone to trust. Are they treating you well? Are they helping you grow? Do they understand when you need a little more time to adjust to something new? Are they teaching you how to play music or are they just showing you the notes? No, come on, you have been listening to music your entire life. You know those two are not the same thing.

If they are teaching you how to play music you probably already know you should be playing with others as much as you can. I don't care if it is scary, I mean I have and I did for years, but that can last forever, and there is nothing scarier than a permanent withdrawal. You're gonna have to be quite bad at it before you get better. Look for the people that are okay with that. If they are okay with that, they will be okay to show you cool new things too and that is the absolute beeeeeest.

You know sometimes when you do the thing on the guitar and you like the sound and you just mess around with it? That's making music! Yeah, I know, right? You always thought it was something way trickier and sophisticated than that. Yeah, don't wait for anyone to give you the green light, just see what you like, go after that and see where it goes. One minute songs are also songs.

I know learning has always been about a school and books and an educator to tell you what to do, but sometimes it is good to know that that's not the only way to do things. Sometimes those things won't be enough. You're on the internet so much, maybe watch a couple of tutorials from time to time. Yes, I know it feels weird, but it is a legitimate way of learning songs. Not everything is gonna be written on paper or shown to you by someone who supposedly knows better.

You are gonna get the urge to write a lot of lyrics, mostly with a melody or a certain rhythm in mind, sometimes not. I have no advice, I just want to say thank you, you really put a lot of time and effort into that and I am trying to keep up your work.

Hey, you were a smart kid and you went after what you wanted when you wanted it. You know how you thought about what you *really* wanted? You're gonna have to do that a couple more times. Be careful choosing universities, be careful choosing friends, **BE CAREFUL WITH YOUR HANDS PLEASE, BE SO CAREFUL.**

Ok, you are only eight so maybe it wouldn't be appropriate to explain exactly how bad sexism is and how much it will hurt you (and everyone, frankly) but keep your chin up, no matter how tired and disappointed you get, retreating isn't gonna do you any favours. If you know that you have nothing to prove, and no one's approval to fight for, it's gonna be a tiny bit easier. Also, seek out more girl friends and listen to the campy music that you like. You can also like punk at the same time, I promise!

Sometimes you get very scared, you think about dying and about losing everyone you love and it seems that every ~~cognizant~~, sorry, waking moment that everything is just scary and awful. I can't really help you with that, that's gonna take a lot of time. You just really need to trust me that you can pursue music at the same time. But only if you want to! I know it all feels like a lot right now. It turns out to be very calming for you, so maybe it will help, I promise if you go to music lessons, there will be someone to pick you up afterwards, I promise.

I turn to you now reader. It is in this fictionally symbiotic relationship that I was able to understand myself and change. Writing to you and re-writing has opened my eyes to pathways previously hidden. You read my patterns before I was able to comprehend them. You saw the bitter pages turn to helpful ones. You witnessed the delayed adding of references, my unripe understanding of autoethnography, and my switches between sufficient and insufficient uncoiling. You swallowed skies of unprocessed thought and waited patiently till they turned into cohesion. Thank you.

4. WALLS: The Bedroom of a Stay-At-Home Musician



7. "THE BEDROOM"

I am sitting in my room. I am preparing to practice, to record, to play but I am shy beneath the four walls hovering over me. My rooms have been few in my lifetime, each with their own liberties and their own suffocating abilities.

My childhood room was massive, the biggest one in the house, and so it doubled as a storage space. I was another object put away, collecting dust, afraid to make a sound or be perceived. I would practice in my room, but the walls weren't thick enough to protect me, in any attempts to rebel against my assigned passivity.

My entire student flat was my room for six years. The apartment was sandwiched between my neighbours' apartments. If I practiced in my bedroom I would annoy V, if I practiced in the living room I would piss off the superintendent. V and I had met after my first year of living in the flat and manically practicing. He remarked "oh, are you the one doing our heads in with the flute?" His intentions were not mean-spirited but I still wanted to vanish into thin air when he said that.

My room now is at the corner of the building. Two walls separating me from the air outside, one from the living room and one from the kitchen. The only person I could possibly annoy is my roommate. She is not a person I am afraid to be vulnerable with, as I display my weaknesses practicing. She in turn has the kindest ears, never complaining about the noise, even though I know she is well in the vicinity of it.

I know I am freer now, as I dial my amp's volume to higher numbers than I used to. I am able to record and sing in the comfort of my own home, knowing how my roommate is a part of that comfort and not a threat to it. I have not reverted to the freedom I experienced as a kid, singing with my lack of self-awareness at full throttle as if the walls concerned only what I saw and weren't testament to a symbolic outside I was being separated from. Instead, I am experiencing and experimenting with a new instance of freedom, one informed by respect to communal living and a newfound compassion towards myself (and the communal living in my brain).

While practicing music I have always been mindful of the walls; of their thickness, of the criticalness hiding behind them, of everyone else's patience. Once I had realised how I can be heard, despite the concrete and the bricks, I was terrified by the feeling of a never-ending audience, and so, my playing was affected by how I thought I was being heard (Profanter et al., 2019; Matsigou, 2020).

My walls were not ever means to protection; they were a reminder of my separation from something. If it was something I was longing for, the walls have been enough to drive it away. If it was something I wanted to hide from, the walls have never been thick enough.

Shying away from externalising my music practice, walls have been my biggest critics, my faithful audience, the guards that took me prisoner, that I developed sympathy for, and craved for their approval, almost forgetting there was more to life than their garrison. I took comfort in hiding away, complacent, avoiding my growth.

As a fan of Bo Burnham in my teen years, I was pleasantly surprised that he released his new comedy special "Inside" during COVID-19 lockdowns (Burnham, 2021). It seemed like a long lost friend appeared in the midst of all the uncertainty and surrealism. One of the special's songs "Look Who's Inside Again" had an engrossing effect on me, as I was reminded of the anxiety of having to answer to others for your isolation. The lyrics of the song that felt like a gut-punch are so:

*" [...]Well, well
Look who's inside again
Went out to look for a reason to hide again
Well, well
Buddy, you found it
Now, come out with your hands up
We've got you surrounded"³¹*

It perfectly captured the pressure of having to answer for hiding away, the attack that was walking into communal spaces and having a family member announce your arrival. "Look who's out!" As I moved away from my family, I didn't have to answer to their expectations of extroversion and socialisation, but I had to answer to my own.

I have been severely disappointed by my inability to get over myself and take my music outside of my bedroom and any small effort towards that would trigger a voice in my head shouting "Look, you're finally doing something!" The preciousness of what was at stake was often enough to scare me away, making me abandon artistic endeavours in fear that my incompetence would tarnish any task at hand. I had fabricated many sets of critical eyes and ears that were stalking me constantly.

Getting my music to live outside of my bedroom has been more of a Sisyphean task. I recently, unknowingly, stumbled upon a loophole in which I brought the outside to my room and to my music. *I guess, I can lead the outside to the bedroom, but can I make it drink my songs?*³²

³¹ Writer: Bo Burnham, 2021. <https://genius.com/Bo-burnham-look-whos-inside-again-lyrics>.

³² To anyone not well-versed in English proverbs (*why would you be?*), this is in reference to the phrase "You can lead the horse to water, but you can't make it drink."

It's the 7th of February, 2025. I have spent the day trying to talk my nerves down off the proverbial ledge. I have walked around the city listening to "Crack-Up"³³ in an attempt to keep my stomach in place. My body is mostly numb and I stare into the bay's waters, watching a tear form in time and space, creating a clear-marker between 'then' and 'now.'

The defining characteristic of this new 'now' is that I am finally living in a world where I am a part of something complete, something I am proud of; something tangible that I can show my friends.

I have recorded some guitars and vocals, and wrote lyrics, for a short E.P. made with my, now ex-, partner and his friends, and today it is to be released. I was anticipating this release to be celebrated in another city, with other people, under other, painfully unattainable circumstances.

In any case, it is coming out today and I am to be listened to, perceived, appreciated, criticized; over-looked maybe? I am focusing on the nerves of the condition to avoid thinking about the heartbreak. I am planning on inviting my friends over for a listening party, to aid me in these efforts.

[...]

In my living room, balloons are hanging from the ceiling. The walls are backed by some of my most precious friends, sitting down almost perfectly still, all gathered to help me celebrate, despite the unsavoury circumstances.

I am crouched over my laptop, waiting to initiate the process. In a last attempt to assure everyone is willing and ready, I look over my shoulder and see nine pairs of perfect eyes reaching out towards me. They are more ready to hear me, than I am to share myself. I press play.

³³ Fleet Foxes. 2017.

PICK UP YOUR CHIN

When I first entered this degree course, my main goal was to get my degree having become an artist, *whatever that meant for nineteen-year-old me*. I hoped that by the time I would graduate I would be in a band and I would have recorded and released my own music. The unlikelihood of that happening terrified me. However, if I think of where I was when I started to write this text, it would have been understandable if these things didn't happen, predictable even.

In an unlikely turn of events, as I am winding up my course as a student, I am part of a two-person band that played in front of, and connected with actual, breathing people. I have a handful of lovely friends to jam with and record with. The most miraculous of all, I have *actually completed a small set of original songs*.

During December of 2024, in the early stages of writing this text, my supervisor advised me to write and record some music and reflect on it, in order to get me out of the rut of writing exclusively about the past.

This led to a brainstorming of concepts and systems which I would use to force myself to act fast, to capture and work on ideas before they escape me. After all, the past five years of owning equipment that allows me to record at home are characterised by a catalogue of unfinished projects and ideas too ambitious to explore.

This worked well for a little while, if I had an idea I only had twenty four hours to act upon it. Touch-ups were permitted, but all the music and the orchestration had to be fixed. 'Almond Tree' and 'Halfway' are two of these songs that were recorded in December/January.

Then, once again, life got the better of me and other ideas got shelved, waiting for me to take initiative to animate them. I loved the ideas so much that I didn't want to give up on them, even though I couldn't get myself in line to do the work. It had been a couple of rough months. I started working on them again in the spring, to figure out orchestration and/or structure. The recordings for these remaining songs took place in May/June over a span of a few days.

This release also includes intros/outros/interludes of guitar loops made with my DL4 pedal. Some days I was too preoccupied to practice in a more structured way. Some other days I needed to confront the tension inside of me and words seemed too small. Guitar loops are my go to practice for these days. *Original, I know*.

The harvesting of these songs was a challenge I set up for myself. I don't think it ever was going to be just a prompt for me to reflect on and extract only verbal content. For all the

reasons I have gone into in this text, I have been writing bits and pieces of music here and there without every pushing through to complete their structure and record their sound. With the exception of the one time I wrote music for a play, and contributing to the aforementioned E.P. release (see chapter 4). If my research was to investigate why I let troubled times and circumstances get the best of me, now was the time for a redeeming act of growth.

'Almond Tree' was the first song. Two days after talking to my supervisor I had spent my entire day recording instruments around a guitar loop and was initially going to call the track 'Slip Away.' I took a break before thinking about the vocals/lyrics and, with impeccable timing, got broken up with over a phone call. It wasn't unfair, unwarranted, or unexpected, just devastating.

Suddenly, an opportunity for experimental research had appeared and in an instant I was thrown into the role of the object of research, with a controlled and simulated environment and everything. I had already been reflecting on the whys to my interruption, and now I could start to ask myself *what would it sound like if I did music in a new instance of emotional turmoil? What if I just did it, despite not wanting to, despite not feeling inspired, despite feeling aggressively unwilling to cooperate with myself.*

It was helpful... it took my mind off things. Forcing myself to complete projects or elaborate on ideas released me from my preciousness and my perfectionism. I usually tend to wait around for the holiest of ideas to appear for each song. It is easy to imagine my past self, as a person initially holding the door for a special someone only to be left awkwardly holding the door open for the heaps of time that decided to pass through instead.

The process of autoethnography had already seemed to be working wonders on my mentality. It had affected my approach to song-writing and recording. At the same time, tackling these songs and proving to myself that I am much more than an undesirable past, gave me clarity in reflecting on my experiences.

During writing and recording I started to observe my endeavours as if they were someone else's. This granted me a lot of room for sympathy. I could see this person who was trying to be a composer, a performer and a recording engineer all at the same time. It seemed, for the first time, admirable regardless of the outcome. I didn't have to see beautiful, validated results to deem it as worthy of existing. I didn't get as easily frustrated when it took 10 takes to get a *severely* mediocre recording of the part. This sympathy was unprecedented for me. Whenever things weren't going my way, I would calmly think, maybe I just need a little more time. Writing has begun just before Christmas break. I was in a home and in a city by myself. I wanted to hide away for the world for a little bit. I had plenty of time.

I frequently felt an aversion towards writing about my relationship and the grief I was experiencing. I started to view it as a form of self-censorship and possible escape route to get me out of doing the work, to get me out of being vulnerable. So I chose to just go with it anyway. It's not like my writing is horribly offensive. *The lyrics aren't, anyway.*

I am nervous to share it, knowing that I have chosen to publish something extremely personal and vulnerable. I will be sharing my disappointment with the world, but I feel okay in doing so, knowing that disappointment was precisely proportional to the amount of love I had for this person.

Of course this won't be the first time my voice or playing will be uploaded for everyone to hear, but these are *my* thoughts, *my* lyrics, *my* inner world, *my* bedroom, all out on display. I am scared, but, for the first time, excited. For now, I know for sure, that I am making something Christos and I enjoy. Even if, after sharing it, we are still the only two people to enjoy this release, it will mean the world to me.

If I were to speak specifically about the themes of the songs, 'Almond Tree' is literally the day of having the news broken to me, that my relationship was over. It is the panic of noticing all the things in my space, material or not, that were given to me by this person, it is wondering if they will forever be heavy reminders of what never was.

'Pick Up Your Chin' I wrote as a way to come to terms with the fact that I was mourning a life that I longed for, but was never sure if this desire was mutual or not. It came from a masochistic tendency to force myself into getting over the situation, as I was angry and sure that it wasn't mutual. Now, I am still unsure, but it sounds more tender to my ears, as I am left with a lot of love for that life unlived.

'Halfway' is about disillusionment and the pondering of uncompleted promises and forgotten people. It was a *pain* to record because my amplifier was acting up, but I worked around it and some freaky sounds appeared that I adored. I was also blessed with a cable malfunction that gave me a sound that felt exactly how my insides did at the time.

'Woodpecker' came about as the city council of Thessaloniki (*my mortal enemy*) decided to butcher the beautiful trees that guarded our fourth floor apartment. This happened in late December, only a few days after getting dumped. My roommate and I had only been in this apartment for four months and the beautiful greenery played a major part in our decision to move here. Only a few weeks before their cutting, we noticed a woodpecker hanging out in the trees. I had never seen one before and it was beautiful.

The morning I woke up with disturbingly loud noises, I opened my window and watched as unqualified workers swung their saws and hacked away at it like it was nothing. I know that

I will not stay in this city long enough to see them grow back. Suddenly, I was also mourning my favourite trees. *This has not been my favourite winter of my life.*

'Favourite Ghost' has to do with my reflexivity habits, my constant inner dialogue with the same ghosts, feeling like I have a relationship with my memories more than I did with actual people. It is as reflective as the rest of this text. It accompanied the realisation that my obsessiveness was getting out of hand.

It has been almost half a year since I started conjuring these songs and counting my losses. I can't say I feel the same way about the songs, or about the situation, as I did when I conceived them. However, I feel like this is the final step of this dissertation. I figured out the reasons for my interruption. I put them in factual order, I compared and associated them. I found sympathy for myself and for my most hurtful experiences. I feel like I understand now. If this were all to stay on a piece of digital paper what good would that do me?

<https://muckling.bandcamp.com/album/pick-up-your-chin>

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