



*Thinking
Community
Music*

LEE HIGGINS

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*For all those community musicians that
I have met and collaborated with along the way.
Your commitment to the work takes my breath away.*

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Arrival

The genesis of this book began many years ago. I can clearly remember the initial conversation with the acquisitions editor for Oxford University Press (OUP), Norman Hirschy. We were at a conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the year was 2013 (I particularly remember that week because the Boston Red Sox won the World Series, and the city went wild with excitement). Norm encouraged me to work on something that built upon my 2012 OUP publication, and the following year, I produced an outline and secured a contract for publication. Although that particular title was set for a different course, my overarching project has always dealt with similar questions. Consequently, the book you are reading has many similar overtones and features to the original proposal; however, the path to get here differs from the initially envisioned journey. *Thinking Community Music* has undoubtedly taken some time to arrive—I liken it to being in a holding pattern, waiting for the right time, looking for the approach lights to guide me toward the form through which I can land its ideas. As a “complete” text, this book is a “pulling together” of thoughts, writings, presentations, conference papers, and experiences from around 2010 until now. Some of the things I present have been previously published in different forms, while many of the ideas have only ever existed as notes for teaching seminars, conference presentations, and/or memories of the many conversations with colleagues, students, and practitioners over the years.

Kaleidoscopic in nature, the “chapters,” or *think pieces* as I have called them, can be read in any order, although it is important to read “Arrival” first for context.¹ There are eight think pieces in all. Each contains several elements: (1) a critical question; (2) illustrations of practice: examples of work that ground the ideas through concrete explanations—these examples are embodiments of the ideals and idea to be discussed; (3) a provocation

¹ This idea is reminiscent of the metaphor used to describe Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, that of a vinyl record (1988, p. xiii). *Kaleidoscope* is also an American heist drama where the episodes can be watched in any order.

and/or some theoretical exploration: ideals community musicians might strive for rather than statements of fact; (4) exploratory thoughts and reflection; and (5) closing remarks called “flight lines,” a section that poses further questions and considers how things might connect rather than how things “are.”

The central questions have been constructed as a response to issues and themes commonly arising through the wider discourse as I have experienced it. The eight guiding questions are:

1. *Is the notion of intervention apt for a growing global field?*
2. *What makes the idea of community music as an act of hospitality important?*
3. *Can community music have a pedagogy?*
4. *How might social justice be understood as a framework for community music practices?*
5. *How might notions of excellence and inclusion exist as a balanced pairing?*
6. *How might we understand the “music” in community music?*
7. *How might I do community music research?*
8. *How might community music become?*

Each think piece has been conceived as a self-contained jumping-off point, a moment of reflection and a springboard for discussion, an opportunity to extend the conversation into a larger arena, for example, a seminar, symposium, conference, pub discussion, or further research and publications. The end chapter is entitled “Departure” and takes the key ideas from each flight line and weaves them into five short statements. Labeled “constellations,” each statement represents a particular perspective and suggests multiple connection points. Although “Departure” is the “final” section, it can be read at any point during the reading process and, therefore, can act as an opening for the think pieces, albeit through a different direction.

It is important to acknowledge that the ideas in this book have been written from my perspective and flow from the particular position from within the field that I am part of. This statement might sound rather obvious, but it feels necessary and is in keeping with the book’s theoretical framework. The central driving force behind *Thinking Community Music* was to create something that encourages the practitioner-researcher in a journey of reflection with an overall aim to strengthen community music practices in all its diverse

forms. I am aware that there continues to be some tensions regarding what might be described as the “academicization” of community music. I understand this to mean intellectually colonizing the practice through theory in a way divorced from the “doing” of community music. I know that my book *Community Music: In Theory and in Practice* is sometimes seen as instrumental in bringing this about. In light of this, it feels essential to underline that this book has been written to support current practices, as I understand them, and future iterations that have yet to be. Alongside this, community music can be a powerful critical lens through which to consider other music-making experiences. My aspirations would be that the ideas proposed here will be helpful to those working in music education, ethnomusicology, music therapy, and musicology, among other fields of practice that intersect with community music, such as social work.

The following section offers a broad contextual overview of community music from then until now, providing a historical map to help with orientation.

Historical Map

From an ethnomusicological perspective, music is a distinctively human practice and a fundamental aspect of what makes humans different from other species (Blacking, 1973). The act of “musicking,” as musicologist Christopher Small (1998) might term it, supports us in our understanding of who we are. Music can be a lifeline, a dynamic aspect of individuality, and a significant contributor to personal and group identity (MacDonald et al., 2002; Stokes, 1994). For people of all cultures around the world, music has been a vital form of expression and communication (Hesser & Bartleet, 2020). Community musicians often quote Article 27 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “everyone has the right to participate freely in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.”² From this

² <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>. Owen Kelly (2023) makes the point that these articles are rooted in a particular view of people as individuals and therefore reflective of a “post-Cartesian” view of European history in which nations consist of a state apparatus that oversees individuals who may, if they so wish, form communities or other types of groups. As such, this does not adhere to how people come to be as we are all, first and foremost, born into a community.

perspective, effective community music processes can be understood as ethical responses to issues concerning social justice. As part of a broader musical ecosystem, community music has a vital role in developing active music making throughout the lifespan. It is important because it can propose critical questions about the role of music in society, its value, funding policies, and issues surrounding teaching and learning processes. As a musical practice that emphasizes people, participation, places, inclusivity, and diversity, there has been a growing program of scholarship and international projects. More recently there have been invaluable insights from cultural contexts from the Majority World and Indigenous populations, challenging and problematizing accepted approaches, priorities, and ideas within the field. The growth of scholarship and academic courses has also increased the number of people engaging in community music, and these new voices, agendas, and contexts point toward a field that is expanding and diversifying. To create a jumping-off point for the eight think pieces that follow, I will begin by offering a historical sketch (at least how I see it) of two key moments and describe why I think they are significant both in terms of the field and specifically for this book.³

1984: Establishing Practices

The year 1984 was a “key year” for community music (Joss, 1993). Two significant things happened: First, the Commission for Community Music Activity (CMA) was adopted as the seventh International Society of Music Education’s (ISME) discrete working group.⁴ Second, the Music Education Working Party (MEWP), organized and managed by what was then called the Arts Council of Great Britain, was inaugurated with a mission to forge a connection between the worlds of education, community, and music.⁵ These two developments were of international importance in at least three ways: First, the MEWP provided validation and working opportunities

³ It was brought to my attention during the review stage of this book that another key moment may be located around 2018, a time when the voices of First Nations musicians and those from what is sometimes described as the Global South began to have more prominence.

⁴ <https://www.isme.org/our-work/commissions/community-music-activity-commission-cma>

⁵ In Tim Joss’s original statement, he highlights three significant things. The first was the appointment of an orchestral education manager to the London Sinfonietta and the first full-scale community residency by a British orchestra. I have narrowed these down to what I consider the most important two for the context of this book.

for musicians who had been previously engaged in the capacity of a music leader or facilitator outside of formal music education arenas. Although an initiative from England, the recommendations of the MEWP helped generate a new breed of music professional, initially named *music animateur* or *music development worker*, that has had influence beyond the country. These include musicians who have an aptitude toward socially engaged art, artistic citizenship, community cultural development, and more broadly those involved in community arts (Adams & Goldbard, 2001; Goldbard, 2006; Jeffers & Moriarty, 2017; Kelly, 1984; Matarasso, 1994; Naidus, 2009; Phillips et al., 2020) Elliott, Silverman & Bowman (2017).⁶ Second, the CMA heralded a formal recognition from within music education that valuable musical experiences happen in places such as youth clubs, enclosed environments, and health settings and within local communities. The creation of the CMA provided a much-needed space to discuss and debate issues concerning what was framed as “community music activity.” Musics from other cultures, such as Brazilian samba, steel pan playing from the Caribbean, Ghanaian drumming, and Indonesian gamelan, as well as experimental music composition, free improvisation, and contemporary pop and rock music, were implicit in the discussions of the CMA from its inception. The biennial symposium it hosted became an environment that enabled those interested in participatory music making to reflect on their practices away from the day-to-day business of seeking work or running music workshops. These meetings were a rarefied space for musicians working within a freelance economy and an environment where those teaching within higher education interested in its activities could find out more. Early pioneers of the CMA, such as Einar Solbu, John Drummond, David Price, Tim Joss, Sallyann Goodall, Elizabeth Oebrle, and Kari Veblen, brought a variety of ideas surrounding practice and theory that created a healthy atmosphere of debate and discussion that went on to spawn several regional offshoots.⁷ Finally, both the MEWP and the CMA gave credence to musics beyond the European classical canon, a style of music that had dominated formal music education in schools, conservatoires, and universities. Their existence provided legitimacy for those looking to shake up the music education system.

⁶ For a discussion on the development of the music animateur in the United Kingdom see Higgins (2012b, pp. 46–49).

⁷ For a presentation of its history up to 2007, see (McCarthy, 2008, pp. 49–61).

Essential conceptual touchstones included:

- the ideas emulating from Paulo Freire’s (1970/2002) account of critical pedagogy or liberatory education and his use of *conscientization* as a process of emancipation;
- Christopher Small’s (1977) seminal book *Music Society Education* that challenged the elitism in the musical traditions of Western societies in contrast to the communal music making of other cultures and was a precursor to his notion of musicking (1987, 1998), a verb that emphasized the doing of music;
- John Blacking’s (1973) collection of lectures entitled *How Musical Is Man?* built upon Alan Merriam’s (1964) anthropological discussion surrounding the importance of music in the lives of human beings and later the work of Pat Campbell (1996), for example, the chapter “Music, Education, and Community in a Multicultural Society”; and
- Kari Veblen and Bengt Olsson’s (2002) chapter “Community Music: Toward an International Overview,” which was published in the second iteration of *The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*.

From sociological and ethnomusicological perspectives, both Small and Blacking had advocated a broader approach to music education, which resonated with those involved in community music in those early days. Underpinning these ideas was the concept of cultural democracy. As an idea, cultural democracy “revolves around the notion of plurality and around equality of access to the means of cultural production and distribution” (Kelly, 2023, p. 128). It is “an approach to arts and culture that actively engages everyone in deciding what counts as culture, where it happens, who makes it, and who experiences it” (64 Million Artists, 2018, p. 2). As part of a broader social discourse, cultural democracy’s potency relies on its interactions with the cultural sphere and the economics and political domains, offering a shift away “from a view of culture as consisting of Great Works made by “artists” to a view of everyday creativity” (Kelly, 2023, p. 174). It is not, therefore, to be understood as just an argument for changes to centralized arts funding policies but as a central concept that drove community music at this time. As a key concept, the idea will feature prominently throughout this book.

Between 1984 and the time of writing, a rich array of work can be categorized under the banner of community music. This includes music

projects, education and training developments, networks and national organizations, conferences, reports, evaluations, and research. There has been fascinating work from Singapore to South Africa, Israel to Ireland, Australia to Austria, the United States to the United Kingdom, all made possible by the many dedicated musicians, advocates, and policymakers committed to the larger project. So why begin by describing some of the consequences of what happened in the “key year” of 1984? Historically, this time was influential in establishing many things now associated with community music practice. I propose that the practice reached another milestone, another “key year,” in its growth and development between 2012 and 2013, some 20 years after Tim Joss made the initial statement (see footnote 5). Before elaborating on this premise, please be mindful that I am aware that history is a fuzzy and inaccurate measure and always depends on who is telling the story and, therefore, controlling the narrative. My background, context, economic status, gender, and ethnicity are all part of my experience and thus shape my perspective. That said, I hope to offer a convincing reason for observing that 2012–2013 is an important milestone for the practice.

2012–2013: An Emergent Field

Between July 2012 and January 2013, a trio of scholarly works were published that directly addressed concerns about community music. In order of publication date, these included my *Community Music: In Theory and in Practice* (Higgins, 2012b), the first full-length work on the subject that investigated community music as an active intervention and offered a theoretical framework from which the activities could be described and analyzed. Next came a two-volume set, *The Oxford Handbook of Music Education*, edited by Gary McPherson and Graham Welch (2012a, 2012b). In volume two, and relevant to this discussion, is the dedicated section “Music in the Community.” The section was edited by David Elliott, a North American music educator who has been an important figure in the history of community music scholarship, most noticeably through his influential philosophical framework commonly described as the paraxial approach to music education (Elliott, 1995, 2005).⁸ Previously, with different editors in 1992 (Colwell, 1992) and 2002 (Colwell & Richardson, 2002), *The Oxford Handbook of Music Education* was the

⁸ See Think Piece 6: Praxis.

third incarnation of this type of tome; the others were published by Schirmer Books and Oxford University Press, respectfully. Although different in many ways, *The Oxford Handbook of Music Education* became the first to include a dedicated section on community music activity. The 2002 edition included the chapter “Community Music: Toward an International Overview” by Kari Veblen and Bengt Olsson (2002) and was placed within the section “Social and Cultural Contexts.” Veblen and Olsson’s chapter was isolated in terms of being the only text that directly discussed the concerns of the community musician and was influential in laying out a broad groundwork at the time. The 2012 handbook includes seven chapters and a commentary from the section editor covering topics such as social capital (Jones & Langston, 2012), social justice (Silverman, 2012), at-risk youth (Cohen et al., 2012), and migration and community (Phelan, 2012).⁹ The final publication in this trio appeared in early 2013 and was entitled *Community Music Today* (Veblen et al., 2013). A confessed “labor of love,” this book was an edited collection guided by the music educator and community music researcher Kari Veblen. The tome featured a collection of 20 essays and, according to Veblen’s introduction, “illuminates the work of community music workers who improvise and reinvent themselves and their vision in order to lead through music and other expressive media and attempt to answer the perennial equation ‘What is Community Music?’” (Veblen et al., 2013, p. 1). With over 50 contributors, each intent on sharing their stories and contextual perspectives, *Community Music Today* threads the many ways of community music into a tapestry of voices from across the globe. As a collection of community music moments, what is striking is a general resistance toward any sense of homogeneity, a refusal to ground community music in any one definitive statement. In addition to these texts, the *International Journal of Community Music* (IJCM) deserves mention because, during this time, it moved into its sixth year of commercial publication and had doubled its institutional circulation since its inception in 2008 (see Think Piece 7). Between 2012 and 2013, the journal published 43 articles and project reports responding to issues surrounding work connected to disability, well-being, technology, recreation, lifelong learning, service learning, homelessness, and positive aging.¹⁰ In short, it was during these years that a critical mass of published scholarship provided

⁹ A multivolume paperback has since been released. The community music section is contained in volume 4, entitled *Special Needs, Community Music, and Adult Learning* (McPherson & Welch, 2018).

¹⁰ See the journal’s webpage: <https://www.intellectbooks.com/international-journal-of-community-music>

the “practical” enterprise of community music, a body of scholarship and research that had not previously been available.

Crucial to my reasoning that this period can be understood as significant is the framing of community music as a practical enterprise, which is why I place the word in quotation marks above. Over the years that I have been involved in community music, it has been my experience that many of those working in this domain actively resist the notion of theoretically thinking about the work.¹¹ Vehemently describing activities as “practical” has been used by some to separate practice from theory, creating what I see as a false opposition. In saying this, there are some very good reasons this might be so. Most people who describe themselves as community musicians do not have regular full-time employment, tending to operate as freelancers within the self-employed economy; it is far more common to find community musicians holding a portfolio career, a series of short contracts, part-time work, and one-off engagements. This means community musicians are always seeking and occupied-in, pursuing the next gig or contractual arrangement. For many reasons, such as lost earnings, previous bookings, and individual costs, freelance employment arrangements do not lend themselves easily to the “luxury” of going to conferences to discuss the whys and wherefores of the work. Although a generalization, those who attend seminars, symposia, and conferences are, by and large, professors and lecturers working in higher education. This fact can underscore the sense that those “philosophizing” about the work are disconnected from the practical doing of what they purport to discuss. Describing the work in terms of the practical also speaks to the grassroots nature of community music and its associated processes of engagement.¹² Working collaboratively with people in ways that seek coauthorship can be “messy”; it is challenging work that often takes place in complex contexts and with limited resources. As a practice that has its history in the social activist movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, a call to action in a fight against the privileged few having access to “cultural” activities, it is understandable that musicians who were drawn to its vision were fixed on getting things done, in providing a solution for change rather than sitting around thinking about it.

These may be broad-brush generalizations but nevertheless do speak to my experience. By way of a personal story, when I was halfway through my PhD research, around 2003, I had several comments and accusations that

¹¹ See also Brown et al. (2014) and McKay and Higham (2012).

¹² This is what I perceive Dave Camlin (2023) is referring to when he states that “CM is a practical activity” within his philosophical text (p. 29).

challenged the very need to engage with community music conceptually. In one instance, someone suggested that my time would be much better served running musical activities rather than “navel gazing”! That said, a good number of inspirational people have understood that theory and practice are interdependent and, if embraced together, can and do provide a powerful combination through which arguments about the work can be made.

What of the publications that appeared between 2012 and 2013? How can they be understood as signaling a significant moment in the development and growth of community music? I propose that after this date, community music could be recognized and named as a “field of practice.” This means that (1) its practical imperative, a honed set of skills and approaches, and (2) a growing articulation of its processes and underlying dispositions brought forth through research and scholarship were now being more readily acknowledged as being intrinsically linked. The combination of research and scholarship in reciprocal exchange with the practical business of making music with people meant that community music could be considered a *field* of practice.¹³ The scholarly dimension to the “practical” work supports and enriches its claims and prominence.

Straddling both periods and important to the historical story has been the growth of community music training and education, particularly from the university sector. I have accounted for this from around 1990 to 2012 in previous writing (Higgins, 2012b, pp. 86–91). Since then, there has been continued interest in supporting courses within institutes of higher education in countries such as Australia,¹⁴ Canada,¹⁵ Germany,¹⁶ Greece,¹⁷ Ireland,¹⁸ Italy,¹⁹ Israel,²⁰ New Zealand,²¹ Norway,²² Portugal,²³ South Africa,²⁴ the

¹³ Drawing upon ideas outlined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, a field is a “social space” through which interactions, transactions, and events occur (Thomson, 2008, pp. 67–81).

¹⁴ Griffith University; University of Melbourne; University of Sydney.

¹⁵ Wilfrid Laurier has led the charge in Canada, hosting both graduate and undergraduate programs, including a PhD.

¹⁶ Hochschule Dusseldorf (music/social work/community); Katholische University Eichstatt-Ingolstadt (inclusive pedagogy/community music).

¹⁷ The University of Macedonia

¹⁸ The Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, based at the University of Limerick, has hosted an MA in Community Music since around 1999.

¹⁹ Free University of Bozen-Bolzano; University of Florence IUL.

²⁰ The Academic College Levinsky-Wingate has an ongoing commitment to community music training.

²¹ University of Otago; University of Canterbury.

²² Western Norway University of Applied Sciences

²³ Universidade Nova de Lisboa: See Graça and Rodrigues (2021).

²⁴ University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg; Stellenbosch University.