Building Stories in the Songs

CONVERSATIONS WITH BLUES MUSICIANS IN THE LOW COUNTRIES

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'Harmonica 2,' Jo Alexander 2010

Abstract

This qualitative and ethnographically-informed research investigates the presence, perception, and use of music in the lives of blues musicians in the Netherlands. Unstructured interviews were held with blues musicians from different levels and stages of musical careers and data were interpreted through a combination narrative and thematic analysis. Findings reveal a composite "backbone" narrative with three main phases, each with specific, dominant thematic content. The identification of these phases, or narrative building blocks, makes an empirical contribution to the narrative research tradition by offering a model that connects narratives in this way without categorizing them. Additionally, the study focuses on a niche music community that is often overlooked in academia but forms a high potential group for the study of music, narrative, and identity work in combination; a focus on this type of population addresses a suggested empirical gap in popular music studies. Theoretically, this research combines music sociology and narrative theories, adding depth to the currently limited academic landscape of similar scholarship which investigates intersection points between them.

Keywords: narrative, music, identity, popular music, blues

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Preface

Tia DeNora (2014) maintains that "realities are often multiple, and they are realized through artful practices that weave together words, acts, objects, meanings, perceptions and people." (p. 125)

This project began as an effort to understand the realities of blues musicians in the Netherlands and the artful practice I chose was one that involved most often meeting face-to-face and speaking with those same musicians as they artfully wove their perceptions and impressions of their personal and surrounding realities for me. The project ended with a deep understanding and respect for each person I spoke with as well as for their peers in the blues community in the Netherlands.

 The stories offered to me through this project and its willing participants were deep and rich; I wish more could have been featured within this work. The narratives, personal theories, and advice I received as a part of this project are truly a gift and I left each interview feeling like a better person through the interaction and reality we had created. I felt I held a treasure in my recording device.

 I would like to thank the research participants for giving me their time, attention and these gifts of personal experience. I have enjoyed learning so much on so many topics through our conversations, post-interview research, and the movies, music, and other materials shared back and forth. I've found new places in the Netherlands, new musical venues and groups to follow and enjoy, and even played alongside a few of my interviewees, getting to know them as peers and fellow lovers of the blues. I've also learned a lot about myself through this process and my own identity as a musician and story gatherer, so I also sincerely thank them for that.

 Finally, I would like to thank Stijn Reijnders for his help and guidance as supervisor during this process. His feedback and consultation were immensely helpful and usually just what I needed at the right time.

Introduction

One of the first things I did when I moved from the American Midwest to the Netherlands, was search online for what kinds of opportunities might exist for enjoying or performing live blues music. I was pleasantly surprised to easily find Dutch organizations, festivals, and enthusiasts all celebrating blues music and encouraging its presence throughout the Netherlands. I was taken by the atmospheres I experienced in various bars and performance venues; they each had a flair or feeling that managed to create or reflect something familiar. What was going on in these places and with these musicians and fans of blues music in this northern European country?

Researchers have highlighted the many types of meaning-making accomplished by playing and participating in consumption of "USA-rooted popular music genres" outside of the U.S.; bluegrass and country music as prime examples (Bidgood, 2017, pp. 2; Gibson, 2014; Dent, 2009). For many of the people involved in these studies, music can represent many things: another place on earth, such as "Amerika" in Bidgood (2017); a specific place in time, like the different eras of a genre in Gibson (2014); or within a personal condition, such as the emotional legacies identified in Dent (2009). Large amounts of research also stress that music can create a "vibe" or feeling of being in a place that does not exist merely physically – or is not physically present at all (Wood, Duffy, & Smith, 2007; Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Small, 2011; Bidgood, 2017). In many of the research cases mentioned above, using music to create a personal identity is addressed, with the music genre providing many avenues of self-expression and association that fans and musicians alike appropriate into their personal images of themselves and their musical communities (Bidgood, 2017; Gibson, 2014; Dent, 2009).

Although the blues is often held aloft as a highly crafted and eloquent narrative folk tradition, and rightly so, it began with popularity among black audiences in the United States and many argue that, as the roots of most popular music today, blues music is, in fact, the essential popular music (Wald, 2004). Excluding some of the blues-rock artists, there is rarely the flashy draw usually associated with popular music and it is commonly agreed that the commercial success of blues music peaked in the blues revival of the 1970's and has never returned in the same way to the music industry's fickle spotlight (Barlow, 1989; Wald, 2004). However, the blues has shown tremendous staying power over time from revivals with predominately white audiences in the 1960s to movements of the genre abroad from the US

to Europe and beyond (Barlow, 1989; Wald, 2004). What is it about the blues that speaks to so many people over time in such a profound way that generates and maintains this small, yet dedicated following?

The "following" is not only made up of people who listen to the blues and attend live concerts and festivals - some fans are musicians themselves, maintaining the community through both audience and performance participation. The fact that musicians often fulfil both roles makes them a high potential group for this study. The experiences, stories and contexts within which their interactions with the blues are situated help to address Dave Hesmondhalgh's assertion that "[...] the concept of genre is not sufficient in itself to understand the relationship between social experience of community and musical form or style." (2013, p. 33) If we examine the musicians themselves, who perpetuate both the existence and the exaltation of the blues through their perceptions, interpretations, and actions, we should be able to come to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the connection between the people and the music.

Actions are mostly observable things, but perceptions and interpretations require a different approach. In order to come to this deeper and nuanced understanding, one route to take is that of the personal narrative; in allowing the musicians to tell their own stories it is possible to develop interpretations of *what* is told as well as *how* it is told to sketch an image of those more intangible items. Personal narratives can help us understand many things about music's importance in the lives of blues musicians in the Netherlands. Whether they walk us through the story of how they came to be a bluesman or how they learned to play harmonica, these stories offer a view into the way they decide to personally construct their sense(s) of self and community. How do people go beyond listening, playing, or the concept of passively consuming music to instead actively use it for making sense of, judging, and crafting their own experiences and life stories? By gathering musicians' stories, it is possible to "clarify and explore the *personal* meanings of the participant's experience" which can then be addressed in the reporting phases of the work when the researcher must "analyze the conceptual implications of these meanings" (Josselson, 2006, p. 549, emphasis in original).

This ethnographically-driven, qualitative inquiry investigates the research question, "What is the role and importance of music in the personal life narratives of blues musicians in the Netherlands?" Through a qualitative approach of unstructured interviews conducted with blues musicians in the Netherlands, personal narratives were constructed and collection, serving as the basis for investigating this central question. During the analysis phase, each narrative was examined on its own and then also compared with others to identify recurring

themes and notable outliers in the light of combined music sociology and narrative research theories. As these aspects connected and distinguished the stories from each other, they all remained tied to the central marker of blues and blues music participation in the Netherlands.

So why investigate this question through the lens of blues music in particular? Hesmondhalgh (2005) criticizes a common academic concern with and connection to popular music and young people that arose from historic events and, while an interesting avenue of academic inquiry, now poses a definite potential barrier to broader and more varied explorations of popular music. The blues offers no such taken-for-granted connection, offering a turn from this narrower field. There is no confusing the common age demographics for blues music - a few visits to any blue festival or performance will affirm that it is a middle-age-and-up crowd (and mainly men). Indeed, especially when researching the Netherlands, the group that makes up most of the blues crowd (and the respondents to this research) are white, middle-aged males.

While this demographic may be fairly dominant in a mainstream society—where white men are unarguably the writers of Western history, economic and social policy—within the context of popular music studies they make-up an off-the-radar population. By purposefully addressing this group, this research responds to Hesmondhalgh's criticism. With this interview group being generally older than the usual popular music studies group, for example, this study expected to generate temporal data that equaled longer narratives and retrospective options for interviewees as they looked back over a long (for most interviewees) career and offered insight based on many years of playing blues music. In this way the role of music can be addressed in a more longitudinal way than it could with a younger group.

But why study this topic in the Netherlands? As the blues evolved in meaning and style in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century, it also eventually made its way across the Atlantic, becoming a popular style in Europe and generating a dedicated fan base – especially in Great Britain and the Netherlands with "more blues concerts and record releases in the Netherlands than in all the other European countries except for the United Kingdom" (van Rijn, 2010, pp. 232). Alberta Hunter, jazz and blues singer and bluesman Big Bill Broonzy, to name a few key early visitors, arrived in the Netherlands in 1932 and throughout the 1950s, respectively (van Rijn, 2010).

Blue music's popularity has seen a general curve here in the low countries with the height of popularity saw a great amount of published works on the topic, magazines, recordings and record labels, big-name performances, and long-standing festivals – the largest of which, Blues Estafette in Utrecht, discontinued only very recently in 2004 after its

26th edition (van Rijn, 2010). The Dutch blues festival tradition goes on with annual festivals like Moulin Blues in southern Meijelsedijk, Limburg and The Holland International Blues Festival hosted in in the northern village of Grolloo, Drenthe. Grolloo also boasts a home museum dedicated to one of the most popular Dutch blues bands, Cuby & The Blizzards, and refers to itself as "the cradle of Dutch blues music" (https://www.cubymuseumgrolloo.nl). In the center of the Netherlands you also find thriving local live music scenes that include weekly blues sessions at Leiden's and Amsterdam's time-tested establishments such as Blues & Rockcafé Maloe Malo and De Plug - places of community life centered on the blues and roots music. This history of popularity, the large blues community spread across the country, and the mainly non-Anglo nature of the Netherlands, makes it a high potential case to study blues music outside the U.S. and the Anglo-Saxon world.

In approaching blues music in the Netherlands, then, this study is not necessarily evaluating an "object" of art from a humanities or musicological perspective. Rather, this study is rooted in social science perspectives such as constructivism and interpretivism; of co-constructing value and meaning through dialogue and description that are commonplace in our everyday lives (DeNora, 2000). From these perspectives, and the perspective of this study, meaning and social significance cannot be thought of as exclusively inherent in an object itself without consideration of the people interacting with it through creation, enjoyment, and perpetuation.

Thus, when encountering and examining blues music in the Netherlands, the focus is on the people involved, the significance of their actions, and their interpretations of practice, place, and persons. When viewed through this lens of social constructivism and meaning-making through interaction, this study's theoretical foundations align with Tia DeNora's argument that evaluations of music cannot be restricted to music itself, or a specific genre, but must be interdisciplinary, using insights across different fields like musicology, sociology, and psychology to better understand music's presence as a social force in people's lives (DeNora, 2000).

To better understand the narratives which form this social sciences study, supportive interdisciplinary work from the fields of psychology, philosophy, and history will help to form a context around the theoretical core of cultural sociology and the qualitative methodology of personal narratives. The theories available from music sociology and narrative research resulted in some expectations for this research including those of strong initial experiences as introduction to blues music, musicians' preferences for particular blues

characteristics that reflected and/or shaped their personal identity, and blues music playing a role in strong connections among blues. In short, I expected music to play a strong role in forming identity.

To address these expectations and the central research question of "What is the role and importance of music in the personal life narratives of blues musicians in the Netherlands?", this paper is structured in the following way. First, a theoretical framework will be outlined that draws mainly from Tia DeNora's (2000) theory of music as a tool, or technology, for identity construction. Narrative research and theories of narrative in the creation, maintenance, and understanding of meaningfulness in life will be covered in this section as well with James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium's use of narrative as an exploratory tool into processes of the self and social surroundings. This section ends with a reminder of context as it reviews Dave Hesmondhalgh's (2013) emphasis on music as importantly and undeniably socio-historically situated as well as a constructive force in emotional, social, and personal development.

The theoretical section will be followed by the methodology section which will outline the decision process and relevance of unstructured, conversational interviews for this topic (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). The practical methods of this research will then be presented as well as discussion of limitations and reflexivity, leading into a description of the conducted analysis followed by an interpretation of the data. Finally, the conclusion section will provide an overall reflection on the research and present closing thoughts and findings.

Theoretical Framework

This research aims to better understand personal and social realities by investigating identity through the research question, "What is the role and importance of music in the personal life narratives of blues musicians in the Netherlands?" To address this question, this section will focus on its main elements and, in doing so, outline the theoretical framework from which this research and its data were designed and analyzed. Within this research question, the main concepts necessary to address include music and its place in the lives of individuals and groups – particularly through identity construction, identity, and narrative identity and research.

To elaborate on these topics, this section will begin by taking Tia DeNora's (2000) theory of music as a "technology of the self" as its base; it is this technology, or material, by which DeNora suggests people construct relevant identities for themselves and their social groups (p. 46). After this introduction to music's place and function in identity work, the following section will further reflect on the concept of identity and James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium's (2003) concept of personal narrative as tool by which we further perceive, develop and interpret our self and social surroundings within our everyday realities. This is supported by the field of psychology and so is followed by an elaboration on the concepts of narrative identity and research.

Finally, this section will end by addressing the larger socio-historical contexts relevant for a research, such as this one, that investigates a specific genre in a specific field. This reflective look at the socio-historical contexts that affect music's effectiveness as an identity-building tool, is championed by Dave Hesmondhalgh (2013); he places strong importance on the acknowledgement of context when evaluating popular music and its function as a constructive force in many aspects of identity and narrative identity development, from the individual self to greater community.

Music in our lives

People use many tools to build personal images of themselves and music can be a powerful one, helping to create a sense of self and a place for that self in society (DeNora, 2000). Additionally, using music to build identity is not always explicit or something of which people are aware. In fact, DeNora emphasizes the very often hidden nature of the activity of self-creation by stating that "Individuals engage in a range of mostly tacit identity

work to construct, reinforce and repair the thread of self-identity." (p. 62) In this way, DeNora is presenting complex processes—involving tools and reflection—which have an important presence but often go unnoticed during everyday activities. Everyday activities are usually defined as those tasks and actions that feel routine, not standing out in any particular way from much of the day's work.

Particularly calling out a use of music in the setting of "their day-to-day lives," Tia DeNora (2000) describes music as "a device or resource to which people turn in order to regulate themselves" (p. 62). This regulation includes an ordering of perspective and behaviors for the individual self as a part of a larger group or society in order to function in that society day-to-day. Aspects or events that occur in a seemingly non-remarkable way during the course of a "normal" day or life are as important to the building of social realities as those which happen in an exceptional way. However, what is an everyday activity for some may not be so quotidian for others and there are, of course, many life aspects which can also move easily between categories, providing important material for narrative, self, and social construction in both daily and uncommon ways; music is one of these.

Through the application of an interpretivist view to music, Tia DeNora (2000) advocates this theoretical shift of focus from studying and placing importance on aesthetic objects and what they contain to the "cultural practices in and through which aesthetic materials were appropriated and used (dynamic) to produce social life." (p. 46) For musicians, practices of listening, playing and performing music play a large role in their lives in many capacities and so examining these processes leads to examining the way musicians create their personal images and ideas of community. These dynamic practices include creating an identity of self and community. The music itself is, as DeNora (2000) originally stated, a tool used in this process of creating identity and community, and this research follows her lead in finding the use of that tool most relevant. Although a later section will address generally the genre of blues music to offer a sound context to this research, the real focus of this research is on how music is used in the lives of blues musicians to see how it might fit this constructive theory as elaborated upon by DeNora (2000).

However, while DeNora's work forms a solid basis of interpretivist and constructivist theory for the use of music in identity creation through everyday activities, it remains general in nature and mostly focused on non-musician behavior. Tia DeNora (2000) is heavily focused on the use of music by women in their everyday lives and she finds many ways in which the music acts as a tool for these women to find or create an image of themselves,

within or by using the music. What happens when we discuss a group of people who appreciate and use music in a focused, and arguably more intense, manner through practice and performance? More specifically, people who are both fans and also active advocates of the music itself, carrying on a living tradition through their practice of styles and technical skills which define a specific genre or genres of music. The most important characteristic of potential interviewees in this study was that they both loved and performed the blues; this identified them as a high potential group.

Coming from the popular music fandom perspective, Tony Whyton (2014) uses his work on the "Cult" of John Coltrane as a reminder that musicians themselves are also fans of music; they listen regularly, probably as everyday practices, and use the music they listen to and create as a structuring tool for their realities as a person and as a musician. In exploring how jazz musicians as fans create mythologies around music genres and figures (like that of John Coltrane) Whyton is also investigating the way meaning is created and incorporated into the identities of individuals and their communities; he does so by evaluating the narratives jazz musicians create around jazz and John Coltrane to learn more about how they manage this construction (Whyton, 2014).

Whyton's focus on musicians as a clearly articulated group of fans and everyday music users supports DeNora's theory and also helps direct this study in viewing musicians as a high potential group. His evaluation of musician narratives finds him identifying common themes that he uses to address general topics of musicians, mythology, and fandom—this study used a similar strategy to Whyton's, also focused on the use of narrative to, in this case, create a sense of self and community identity. This research seeks to follow in Whyton's footsteps and further bridge the theoretical and empirical gap between narrative inquiry/analysis and music's role and importance in everyday life as well as throughout a life narrative.

In many peoples' lives, music can not only serve as a soundtrack to daily routines, but also constitute "out-of-the-ordinary" events such as attending a concert or performing for audiences (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). Because it can be a part of our lives in so many ways, music can be a very helpful tool for creating individual and group identity (DeNora, 2000). Musicians form a high potential group for investigating the use of music in this way as they interact with this material of the self in many different and frequent ways to construct these identities.

At this point, it is important to specifically address the concept of identity and supporting theory and practice of narrative identity and research. The next section will

discuss these topics, leading into a final section on the overall context within this research is situated.

Identity

After introducing the theory of use of music as a tool to construct identity, it is essential to establish an understanding of identity and how this concept will be used in the remainder of this work. The general concept of identity—and indeed its etymology—is rooted in the idea of "sameness"; an identification with others that are similar and a distancing from those who are different (Macionis & Plummer, 2012). Identity is not a new concept to sociology, though it has become a more visible topic, addressed much more frequently and with increasing relevance in modern and post-modern sociological theories; in modern times the self was the result of an implied individual task to make a solid, permanent thing while in a post-modernist age the implications of fragmentation and pluralism create a fluid sense of identity, one that is in constant flux and actively avoids categorization whenever possible (Bauman, 1996) Thus, in a post-modern framework, the idea of identity as a "project" is helpful to build the concept as something that is not static but added to, subtracted from, and ultimately existing as a dynamic and changeable thing (Macionis & Plummer, 2012, p. 228).

Following this idea of identity as a type of work, Gubrium & Holstein (2003) claim the key practice at the root of all identity construction projects, then, is a narrative practice which allows for people to navigate different contexts and time periods, generating and maintaining a certain self-perception as well as group membership and belonging. To better understand music's possible role and importance within the lives of blues musicians, for both personal and group identities, this research identified and evaluated narratives created by and with those musicians. The next section will elaborate on the connection between identity and narrative practice.

Narrative identity

When narrative research examines its roots, it finds psychology and philosophy well intertwined. For Jerome Bruner, coming from the field of psychology, the most important practice that humans engage in is that of creating a narrative, or storytelling; he believed that both the reality and meaning are constructed through the "building blocks" of

narratives (Wertz et al., 2013, p. 65). This includes the reality of our own identities and the identities of the groups of people to which we do or do not belong.

Within the field of psychology, Bruner's work is usually cited in combination with that of Paul Ricoeur, a French philosopher. The two complement each other as narratives form the core of their theories, with Ricoeur focusing on "the centrality of narrative for meaning making" (p. 66) and Bruner's work, as just mentioned, emphasizes many aspects of narrative including its strong tie to culture. Before continuing, it is first necessary to provide a definition of narrative as it will be employed throughout the research. This research will adopt Donald Polkinghorne's (1988) use of the term "narrative" meaning a "kind of organizational scheme expressed in story form" and the term "story" will be used interchangeably with "narrative" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 13).

Coming from psychology, Polkinghorne combined the main concepts of Bruner with philosopher Paul Ricoeur and other like-minded scholars into a "self-as-story" theory wherein individuals are constantly in the midst of an act of storytelling; their own personal life story is evolving and changing by the moment and they are constantly in a process of selection and performance of certain events and the larger story itself all while facing into the unknown future (Wertz et al., 2013, p. 66). It is this linking of personal actions through time that results in our most meaningful creation: the narrative itself which defines the meaningfulness of our human existence (Polkinghorne, 1988). This concept of narrative as the core of all meaning in human life is the foundation for narrative research today (Bryman, 2011).

Although narrative analysis is often most closely associated with an attention to the way people structure events with a temporal concept, narrative analysis is not necessarily restricted to life stories (Bryman, 2011, p. 713). Sometimes "narrative analysis relates not just to the life span [sic] but also to accounts relating to episodes and to the interconnections between them." (Bryman, 2011, p. 582) In other words, the use of narrative or storytelling doesn't just apply and provide relevance in situations where people are relating their personal histories; accounts of everyday events or even their constructed opinions on topics can be addressed with narrative inquiry and analysis. The important part is that we understand how people create stories in order to make sense of their lives and the things that happen around and to them, whether that's across their entire lives or during a short episode (Wertz et al., 2011).

In analyzing these stories, narrative research relies on the idea that the stories people create are highly contextualized and used specifically by people to "mark and understand

their actions, construct an identity, and to distinguish themselves from others." (Josselson, 2011, p. 240) The goal of narrative research is to use these contextualized stories to identify themes and highlight interconnectivity within and across narratives, analyzing the interaction of themes through "conceptual ideas" that can shine a light on processes in a more general way: "The aim is to illuminate human experience as it is presented in textural form in order to reveal layered meanings that people assign to aspects of their lives." (Josselson, p. 240) This research's objectives align with this, using personal narratives to learn about the ways music plays a role and has importance for blues musicians in the Netherlands.

The main narratives used are textural, but they also rely on the processes of meaning-making that rely on non-linguistic narratives. Narratives may often be thought of first as linguistic. However, many aspects of people's lives and narrations are not originally textural in nature—the way that people transform and incorporate these experiences into a temporal and linguistic presentation forms a relevant part of narrative research (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000) and is exemplified by the music, a type of non-linguistic narrative. The next section will further explore the connection between narrative and music within the context of identity work.

Narrative and music

In exploring narrative and music, with music understood as a type of non-linguistic narrative, it is important to identify certain connections between the two; what makes music a type of narrative? How do they function in similar ways to address identity work? This next section addresses two main connections between narrative and music: the temporal aspects and their contributions to identity work.

The temporal aspect of narrative can act as a first parallel and connection in this research between narrative research and music. Time and events linked chronologically is also an important and special characteristic of music that allows us to connect to specific "selves" of the past, moments in time, or views to the future (DeNora, 2000). In fact, Hesmondhalgh (2013) investigates the ability music has to allows for a shared experience of time that is different than usual; music can create a feeling that the present is suspended. Additionally, DeNora encourages exploration of this connection, speaking of music pairing with life events in a way that merges the senses "To the extent that music comes to penetrate experience [...] it is informative of that experience." (p. 67) So it is this regulation through

music is a way of orientation, of finding our current place, remembering past paths, and forging a future.

A second connection between narrative and music comes by way of identity creation, as introduced earlier. When it comes to creating a narrative(s) of ourselves, music can be a valuable tool. The field of psychology again offers much in the way of forging a connection between story and self with Dan McAdams and Jefferson Singer as major proponents of narrative as the way we humans construct personality and identity (Wertz et al., 2011). Pair this with DeNora's take on music as a self-identity material "in and with which to identify identity," and we can see how a personal narrative can use music as a tool (DeNora, p. 69). From the social sciences, Holstein and Gubrium offer their take on a complexly varied and storied self which takes a major part of its development from socials sources, either positive or negative (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). Socially, if we return to Bruner, we see that he often links narrative and culture and promoted the idea that "Sharing common stories creates a community and promotes cultural cohesion." (Wertz, et al, 2011, p. 65) Common practice for musicians is to share stories – linguistic or not – with groups, audiences and peers, forming musical communities that carry their own characteristics and expectations (Hesmondhalgh, 2005). This progression further indicates that narrative identity is a relevant and useful way to investigate the ways in which music can act to structure culturally-based social settings like those experienced and created by members of the performing musician, or even blues, community in the Netherlands.

If we bring together the earlier statement from Josselson which maintains that the "contextualized stories that people tell to mark and understand their actions, construct an identity, and to distinguish themselves from others"(Josselson, 2004, p.204) with DeNora's (2000) theories of music as an identity-constructing and self- and group-regulating material, this research creates the expectation that music will also function (have a role) in similar ways, providing value and meaning (importance) to interviewees.

However, value and meaning are never created in a societal and historical vacuum; it is important to acknowledge and, albeit briefly, address the overarching contexts within which people engage in processes of meaning-making (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). The previous sections explored the main concepts behind music's place in individual and social lives, identity, narrative identity, and introduced the combination of narrative and music for telling and understanding stories which form our realities. These processes of identity work through music and narrative practices are part of additional societal and historical environments which affect both tacit decision-making and conscious choice. The next and

final theoretical section addresses the importance of acknowledging a few main socio-historical contexts which reflect, inform and co-create the narratives and main concepts of this research.

Contextualization

Dave Hesmondhalgh (2013) places great emphasis on the importance of including context while studying music. He especially urges researchers to go beyond the categorical boundaries and well-worn paths of genre when considering people as groups—such as blues musicians or even the greater blues community in the Netherlands—when he argues that "the concept of genre is not sufficient in itself to understand the relationship between social experience of community and musical form or style." (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p. 33) He contends that we cannot evaluate music in isolation from the social and historical contexts surrounding and informing it. In the case of this research, two important aspects require additional introduction through contextual means; that which surrounds blues music and the contemporary environment of working musicians. The following sections will address each, beginning with an exceptionally brief overview of blues music followed by a summary of the contemporary musicians' professional field context.

Blues music is a vastly complex topic, academically examined from many angles including historical, musicological, and sociological. A music born from a variety of influences but most strongly that of African musical and oral traditions which grew and morphed and adapted to life in the circumstances of the American south; a product of slavery, sharecropping, and spirituals, the blues has been reborn several times and is undeniably the root of most Western popular music today (Spencer, 1993; Wald, 2004). The blues today is both acknowledged as popular music and revered as something sacred—steeped in legend, it has enjoyed some wild success and its origins have been mystified and characters heroized until it can be difficult to find the remaining threads of history (Barlow, 1989; Wald, 2004; Whyton, 2014). Whether the cause is mythological, musical, or a combination of both, the blues maintains its present today, classic tunes still strummed and well-known riffs perpetually played out in barrooms and big stages from Los Angeles, USA to Drenthe, the Netherlands. Although the blues does not maintain a position as a lucrative genre in the current music industry, there are still an incredible number of musicians playing blues and closely related genres like "Roots" and "Americana" which brings us to the next context to consider; that of the performing musician.

Additional to the socio-historical context of the blues itself, the second context to be considered is that of the music industry within which blues musicians are playing and performing. Working as a musician can have much allure including characteristics of high autonomy and social connection or, what Hesmondhalgh (2013) refers to as the "fundamental sociality of musical collaboration" (p. 129). These are in addition to the many other enticing aspects of a commercially successful career that might come to mind immediately. However, achieving the kind of fame, fortune, and financial stability associated with mega music industry stars is extremely rare because of the field's incredibly high number of aspiring musicians combined with a "winner-take-all" structure; this results in a prohibitively small percentage of artists residing in a top tier position of income, for example (Kretschmer, 2005; Cook & Frank, 2010).

With Hesmondhalgh's (2013) "fundamental sociality of music" we can also look to Lee Bidgood's (2017) examination of Bluegrass music in the Czech Republic where he stresses that, "Music is a social process that becomes real in the spaces between people." (p. 14, 15) It is the interactions between people and between people and the music that we can expect to form the most meaningful experiences and to define the music and its reality in the lives of blues musicians and within the blues community.

In the context of this research, I argue that blues musicians in the Netherlands actively engage with music to construct their personal and communal identities. Furthermore, I propose the personal narratives created in conversation with blues musicians in the Netherlands are useful tools in developing a nuanced view of the people involved in the blues community in the Netherlands as well as of the community itself. Based on the above theoretical framework, I expected to find strong personal experiences leading to an initiation into a relationship with blues music, an affinity for certain aspects of the blues that reflected and/or shaped personal identity, and strong connections among blues musicians with blues music (and music in general) and the musical community – I expected to find music as a main tool of identity formation for the research participants.

The following section outlines the methodology used as a basis for data collection and analysis and shows how these expectations were incorporated into the interview style and consequent narrative analysis. The section will end with reflections on the methodology, data collection, and analysis.

Methodology

This qualitative study is concerned with the role of music in the personal narratives of blues musicians in the Netherlands. The "role" of music implies the meaning and the reality that is both constructed by humans for music and through its use. Through interaction with music and with others, meaning and reality are created for the individuals who form the main group of inquiry for this study: blues musicians. Their personal narratives further construct, for themselves as well as for us, their perceptions and experiences of identity; their realities of self and others. As this study is also grounded in a postmodernist paradigm, it emphasizes experiential pluralism; the goal is not to create a generalizing statement about all blues musicians in the Netherlands but rather to focus on the individual stories of each interviewee as multiple realities that each individual is creating for themselves, taking multivocality as a kind of truth while exploring possible alternative routes and variations (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

This does not mean that the connections between stories was ignored or overall themes disregarded. Rather, to better understand the data after individual interviews were carried out, a categorical and content-based narrative analysis was employed while comparing and contrasting the interviewees' narratives (Wertz et al., 2011). Below, the theoretical basis for the choice of unstructured interviews and the type of narrative analysis applied will be addressed.

The postmodern interview

By concerning itself with individual meaning-making and constructed personal narratives, this study used interviews as the setting in which to elicit those stories. The interviews were conducted from a postmodernist perspective. Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein define postmodern interviewing as "a set of orienting sensibilities" communicating through this definition that the importance lies with being able to maintain a sensitivity and thoughtful reactiveness throughout the interview to moments of complex emotional presentations and personal reflections (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 4).

This research applies narrative analysis to stories that were often but not necessarily collected by asking specifically for narratives. Some narrative research will elicit narratives from the interviewees and then analyze the stories while other studies create and collect their data with interviewees in less story-specific ways, such as creating transcriptions from open

or unstructured interviews, and only afterwards applying a narrative analysis to the data (Bryman, 2012, p. 584). The interviews conducted for this research were initially open, becoming un-structured as a few central themes were addressed or interesting leads followed during the conversation. A qualitative approach allowed for this type of flexibility that permits exploration of topics that arise during the interaction with interviewee and provide perhaps unexpected and relevant data to the research question or concepts (Silverman, 2013, pp. 86). The following section will detail out the data collection planning and process.

Data collection

Eleven one-on-one interviews, including one small group interview, were held across the country in March, April, and May 2018 with blues musicians living and performing in the Netherlands. The sampling was purposive; the first few interviewees were approached based on personal contacts, performances at the Delft Blues Festival, and the information provided on the website of The Dutch Blues Foundation (https://www.dutchbluesfoundation.nl/). Following initial interviews, snowball sampling was also used as musicians suggested and/or provided contacts for other bandmates or fellow musicians.

While there are different categorizations of musicians including amateur, semi-professional and professional, all with slightly different definitions across sociological, cultural, and musicological studies, this research was concerned with a broad range of musicians. The preference was for active performers which equated to those performing music around 50 times per year but was not limited to those who maintain a living based on performance income, for example. In this way, the emphasis for this study remained on the core idea of musicians who both loved and performed the blues. This combination of musicians and music as a tool for constructing identity allows for both concentrating DeNora's theories and addressing the role of music in the stories blues musicians tell about themselves and their social surroundings through a strategy of narrative research.

This research sought out musicians who routinely play and/or have music as a large part of their lives; particularly those playing in blues bands or with other, strong connections to the blues but not necessarily performing at a certain rate (60 gigs/year, for example). This was based on the fact that the music industry is a notoriously precarious field; it is very difficult to create and sustain an exclusively performance-based existence (Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Cook & Frank, 2010). This is especially true for blues music as it is no longer a very commercially viable music genre (commercial success for the genre probably peaked in the

1960's when it enjoyed a strong revival across audiences, especially white and UK-based listeners) (van Rijn, 2010; Wald, 2004). The general demographic for the majority of interviewed musicians was Caucasian, middle-aged, Dutch man. Below is a list of the interviewees, in order of interview date, to give an overview of the participants.[1]

Name	Primary instrument(s)	Age (if given) or Age Range (estimated)	Any additional current occupation/field/ activity alongside musician
Harm van Sleen	Bass, steel pedal	50's-60's	Music teacher
George Reijnders	Harmonica	53	Information technology
Gerrit van der Spaan	Guitar, vocals	50's-60's	Painter
Richard van Bergen	Guitar, vocals	61	Schoolteacher
Peter Boelen	Guitar, vocals	50's-60's	Guitar shop owner
Alan Laws*	Harmonica, guitar, vocals	50's-60's	None/Unknown
Kees Kingsize	Guitar, vocals	50-60's	Private lessons
Martijn Groen	Drummer	30-40's	Music teacher, conservatory professor
Heyn Linger**	Guitar	30-40's	Private lessons
Joost van der Graaf**	Bass	30-40's	Private lessons
Chris Koenen	Guitar, vocals	67	None
Hans van Lier	Guitar	56	None

Table 1 - Interview Participants - *phone interview **informal conversation

The interviewees were not concerned with privacy; while consent was obtained for each interview, none of the interviewees requested to have their names hidden in any in-paper references. All interviews were conducted in English and most of the interviews took an hour (outliers ranged from less than 20 minutes to nearly three hours) resulting in about 11 hours of interview data in total. Each interview was audio-taped and then fully transcribed. After being mailed to the interviewee for transparency and to allow for any corrections, the transcriptions were used to support the analysis process.

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[1] A more detailed overview can be found in Appendix A

Time spent with interviewees was mostly aimed at encouraging a narrative with contents and temporal structure designed by the interviewee. To achieve this, most of the interviews began with a generative question to allow for freedom of response by the interviewee; the beginning strategy followed that of the open interview (Alheit, 1982). Unless the interviewee was eager to begin and started in on their own, this generative question was a version of "Can you please tell me about your experience with the blues?" Not having a specific temporal marker in the question was intentional to allow the interviewee to create their own timeline. Listening was an important tool and, in many cases, especially when allowing a silence to stretch past what is a conversational norm, the interviewee would continue with additional narrative.

Whenever there was a lull that did not yield additional narrative from the interviewee, the effort was on maintaining the conversation by way of the main theoretical concepts of identity, narrative, and music as a tool for constructing individual and group identities. Usually this meant asking for more information about a descriptive or labeling term used by the interviewee or for more information on a story that had begun earlier in the conversations. These topics were brought up in relation to either something just said or mentioned earlier in the interview, with the emphasis on maintaining the storytelling atmosphere and a conversational feel (Alheit, 1982).

The structure of an interview is, of course, still organized in a way that does not feel like everyday life. It is often much more comfortable for people to share stories informally many times a day than to sit down formally and launch into a life narrative for a near stranger. With this in mind I applied Peter Alheit's (1982) concept of the interview as enhanced conversation with some of the interviewees after a certain moment in the interview. Thus, the encounter with interviewees stayed aligned with narrative research in that it was not just about the narrative itself but about getting to the perspective of the interviewee as they chose to tell their story and the contexts in which it altered; in this way the narrative analysis can be applied outside of a strictly life story research context (Bryman, 2012, p. 584).

Reflections

For an ethnographically-driven qualitative study using interviews to carry out narrative research within a postmodernist framework, reflexivity by the researcher is very important—especially when considering the interviews themselves. The following reflections on the execution of the interviews are divided into the following two types: 'setting the scene,' what

contributed positively and what detracted from a physical storytelling environment and 'creating the characters,' how interviewer and interviewee related to each other within the constructive context of each interview's atmosphere and what aspects particularly affected the resulting narratives as a product of our interactions.

Setting the scene: the storytelling environment

Most interviews took place in-person at the interviewee's home or other, familiar settings such as a studio space or the interviewee's guitar shop, while others took place in more public places like hotels or music studios. The emphasis was always on choosing a quiet environment where the conversation could take front stage (and be recorded clearly). In some instances, this worked very well and in others it was not achieved. The best storytelling atmospheres in which the interviewee seemed comfortable and able to relax into their narratives seemed to result from meeting with individuals in their homes, where they felt most comfortable and where we were usually alone without interruptions. In these situations, the interviewee usually spoke at much greater length with more details and color included in their narrative. This is not a surprise when it comes to qualitative interviewing (Weiss, 1995)—its benefits can be highlighted by offering the contrast of other settings.

For example, one interview took place at an outdoor market in Amsterdam in between sets of the interviewee's live performance. This detracted from the interview because the interviewee was very engaged with the performance, as can be expected, and it was difficult to fully switch modes of interaction to an intimate, personal conversation only a few meters away from the performance space, especially while being watched by friends and fans and occasionally interrupted for congratulations or an offering of beer. This greatly complicated the interview goal of creating a comfortable environment for sharing, in which I, as the researcher, was as unobtrusive as possible (Alheit, 1982; Josselson, 2011).

Compounding the difficulties of the immediate surroundings was a perception that the interviewee lacked interest in participation and felt discomfort with the English language—his bandmate had been very enthusiastic about being interviewed the week before and shared with me that he was insistent they both help with the research. While very well-intentioned, I believe this resulted in a feeling of coercion and, in combination with the performance setting and language barrier, negatively affected the interviewee's ease and comfort during the interview. Ultimately, I believe the language barrier was actually much more permeable than

we both perceived, but our lack of time meant we relied on immediate perception and, thus, both acted more conservatively.

All of these factors, while present in other interviews as well, were highlighted by the enforced timeframe of a 20-minute performance break I felt required to be a much more active participant, both in creative the right atmosphere and in acquiring the necessary data. I found myself trying to quickly elicit responses and keep the interviewee's attention, leading to much shorter silences (which may have allowed him space to think and respond) and more leading questions/suggestions from me ("do you mean x?").

Only one interview was conducted by phone; while the interviewee was still at home in a comfortable space, the alterations to the storytelling environment can be felt. Without the in-person meeting and greeting to break the ice and allow for readings of body language and non-verbal communication, it was more difficult to achieve a connection with the interviewee. My preferred method of non-verbal encouragement during the narratives was severely limited with this medium (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). However, the conversation was aided by the fact that the interviewee was British; the fact that the conversation was held between two native English speakers did help bridge the gap of the phone interview, at times helping it feel a bit less structured and unnatural.

As a final reflection on the physical storytelling atmosphere, the small group interview is an interesting example. The multi-person interview emerged out of a very comfortable situation in which I stopped by a combination music school and rehearsal location with Martijn Groen after our 1:1 interview. Two members of his Jimi Hendrix tribute band, Bald as Love, were there, playing in a practice room together. As Martijn introduced me and my research the question arose "what is a 'bluesman?'" and Martijn suggested I turn my recorder back on. What followed was a spontaneous conversation that felt very natural – in some ways more so than the one-on-one interviews, even when they were very friendly.

The configuration of three interviewees and one researcher felt more like four people chatting together and the data gathered was rich, albeit in a different way than the individual conversations. It is important to keep in mind that narratives and interview responses are created with the audience as an active element (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000); these interactions were dictated by four people, rather than two, and the color of the responses was most definitely different than if they had been solicited in one-on-one interviews.

This last example of setting ushers in the next type of reflection—one that focuses on the participants as active characters within the storytelling atmosphere.

Creating the characters

While I tried to hold back from sharing too much information until the interview was over, I did share some information about myself if the interviewee asked—flatly refusing would have negatively affected the storytelling atmosphere that was my goal. With different types of information shared, I felt my presented identity change and often our interactions subtly followed suit. If we talked about my identity as a musician, for example, our relationship shifted to feel more like that of peer-to-peer. I followed Robert Weiss' cautions about sharing too much information up-front with interviewees in order to keep the focus on the interviewee; this was the time for me to listen while they shared their stories (Weiss, 1995). Too much sharing is cautioned against by Weiss (1995), who prefers the interview to remain on more traditional grounds, with clear roles for interviewer and interviewee.

For this research, however, I chose to offer certain amounts of information about myself to facilitate the interview in a way that allowed for the interviewees to feel more engaged and enjoy the experience while feeling more involved in the research process (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Peter Alheit's (1982) concept of interview as enhanced conversation guided my efforts during the interview: if I sensed sharing some additional information or interaction would help the interviewee open up or contribute positively to the "storytelling atmosphere," I went ahead and offered a bit more of myself or participated in moments that, during an everyday conversation would elicit interaction (p. 3).

As mentioned, an interesting effect of sharing more information is that, at the moment of sharing, it adjusted my identity in the perception of the interviewee. I found that, depending on the type of information I shared, I experienced a shift in our pre-set researcher-interviewee relationship that resulted in some additional opportunities for reflection. For example, early in interviews I clearly presented as an American woman in her early 30's, which resulted in one set of assumptions and expectations. I experienced another type of relationship with interviewees if I shared that I am also a musician, and yet another when my own experiences as a blues musician and performer were presented. As younger than my interviewees and in a position of soliciting their stories and experiences there was usually a starting student-teacher dynamic. I intentionally did little to no research ahead of time on my interviewees and their active bands, music, etc. so that I would be learning from them.

When I shared the information that I was also a musician I felt a change in attitude, often towards an experience of becoming peers with my interviewee – on a more equal standing with them. When I shared my experiences of regularly singing blues in the United

States or even joined in an informal jam (in the case of Peter Boelen) or actual performance (during Gerrit's van der Spaan's gig) I felt a shift into the relationship of group member. Interestingly, sometimes I felt myself moving in or out of the interviewee's perception of peer or even blues community member when I wouldn't recognize an artist that was an important musical reference for the interviewee. Particularly during interviews with harmonica players George and Alan, I had to keep admitting that I didn't know the artists they mentioned. Each time I felt a bit more removed from the center of an in-the-know community of blues aficionados. However, when reflected upon purely as a researcher, the situations in which I presented large gaps in my own knowing provided an opportunity for the interviewee to fill those gaps with more of their own details (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000).

Finally, unanticipated additional characters that appeared during the interviews were the musicians' instruments themselves. In some instances, the interviewee had their instrument at a handy distance and were able to grab and use them to illustrate a musical point, accompany part of a song with relevant lyrics, or to fill in gaps while trying to explain the ineffable. When the instrument was not nearby or available, some interviewees expressed frustration or resorted to singing melodies in replacement. With the instrument present to contribute actively to narrative formation, opportunities for more nuanced observations of the interviewee were enhanced but also allowed for a workaround to any language barriers. The constraint to this expressive freedom as presented by the absence of the instrument may have felt like a challenge to interviewees, forcing a translation of difficult concepts from the abstract to the English language; this resulted in some creative linguistic problem-solving. Ultimately, these additional characters and their effects on the storytelling process would be relevant into any further study investigating combination linguistic and non-linguistic narratives.

The next section will discuss the data analysis process and what findings resulted. Some of the initial expectations were met and some were not; either directly negated, present in another form, or absent altogether. The links between the similar elements and variations are discussed and analyzed, with attempts to place each finding in a reflective context as they pertain to the role and importance of music in the personal narratives of blues musicians in the Netherlands.

Analysis and Findings

To analyze the narratives collected from the interviewees from the perspective of the research question, "What is the role and importance of music in the personal narratives of blues musicians in the Netherlands?", this study employed an analysis strategy that combined narrative and thematic analysis. The interview data was considered as constructed data and stories created together during the process of the interview. This section will begin with an overview of the analysis process followed by a thematic presentation and discussion of the findings.

Analysis process

Narrative analysis is commonly approached one of two ways: either addressing a narrative as a whole or through its parts. This study used the latter; a manual, section-based strategy was employed to first break up interview data into segments and then consider them first within both the full narrative of the individual interviewee and then alongside sections or segments from other interviewees' narratives (Wertz et al., 2001). Interview transcripts were first distilled down to more concise summary documents. Within the summaries, sections were identified and categorized as indexical or non-indexical: the indexical segments are exemplary of chronological stories, including a *who* did *what, where* and *when* type of construction, and the non-indexical segments represent judgements, opinions, or general theories (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). After comparing the indexical, or narrative, segments, a composite image began to emerge, forming a main narrative line through the interview data. The process was cyclical, requiring many returns to the original transcripts and quotations from the interviewees; this process was important to ensure the stories were not reduced in depth.

Main narrative line

Through most of the interviews runs a main narrative line. That narrative is one of a young man who discovers blues music through a sibling or close friend during impressionable teenage years and is struck by the music. As a fascination with the sounds and mythologies of the music is fostered, the young man creates his own path of discovery and training, using the limited means and resources available to him. This hard work evolves into a career trajectory starting with first bands, performances and leading to a career of music performance within a

musical community that has lasted several years and provides him with much to look back on and appreciate, while still looking forward to a musical future.

By itself, this is a simplistic tale without nuance or much substance. However, it does allow us a valuable place to begin—a backbone comprised of individual, interlocking vertebrae that can be evaluated as a part or as part of a whole. From this narrative backbone, expected and unexpected variations within the group of interviewees can distinguish themselves.

The follow sections introduce this chronological main narrative line, augmenting the initially straightforward building blocks of its trajectory with supporting and dissenting voices across the narratives. The simplified three phases of the main narrative described above are: discovery and first impressions; forging a personal path of development; and a cumulative career overview. Each identified phase of the main trajectory serves to illustrate distinctive themes which further deepened the storyline: curiosity as cornerstone; balance of freedom and constraints; and connection with self and community. These will be discussed with illustrative examples from the texts.

Phase 1: Discovery and first impressions

The first phase of the main composite narrative is that of a young man who discovering blues music through a sibling or close friend during impressionable teenage years and has a moment when he experiences a strong attraction to blues music. There were many stories across the interviewees of the first time they heard the blues and what kind of immediate effect it had on them. For at least six of the interviewees this was a time during their teenage years and it immediately led to a curiosity about the type of music they were listening to and their initial efforts to play. This leads to a very strong theme that is closely connected to this phase; that of *curiosity as cornerstone*. This theme is exemplified by stories from interviewees like Gerrit, Hans, Alan and Richard.

Gerrit van der Spaan and Hans van Lier are both guitar players and they both had a moment of immediate attraction to the blues and playing guitar when it was introduced to them through an older brother. When Gerrit describes his introductory experience, it rings truer as a personal recognition than a totally new encounter. He describes his reaction to hearing his brother playing blues LPs as, "It was my music, yeah. I heard it and I think, 'this is it...and I want to play it.'" He goes on to specify that it was the slide guitar sound of Johnny Winter's playing that really hit home, "I heard Johnny Winter for the first time – Johnny

Winter! And I heard him play slide guitar on his acoustic guitar and I think 'Yeah. I want- I want to play it!" (p. 1) Not only does Gerrit feel an immediate connection to the blues and to a specific style of playing, he immediately absorbs it into his personal self with the language of ownership, aligning himself with the sounds he had heard. Additionally, the intrigue he feels with the sound of the slide guitar fuels his interest and provides momentum into phase 2 where he plays slide guitar in his first band at age 15.

Like Gerrit, Hans has a strong initial reaction to the guitar after seeing his brother start to play at age 14. "I saw him playing on the guitar and... I think 'Wow! That's also a, a thing for me." (p. 1) However, his initial encounters with the blues are not as specific as Gerrit's, starting gradually, described as almost unknowingly. Hans cites his first relationship break-up at age 15 or 16 as the time when he first started playing the blues, not knowing that was what he was doing. He describes his reaction to the break-up as very natural, "so I took the guitar and I played the blues...but I was not realizing it was the blues...it was only the guitar, played the slow blues. But in my mind, I was not, uh, now I know when I'm playing blues but that's – I was too young to realize it...it was a natural feeling." (p. 4) Hans' discovery of the blues started here but making conscious decisions to use blues music to address these feelings developed later in life and will be addressed in Phase 3.

Alan Laws, a British harmonica player living in the Netherlands for almost 20 years, also described his significant moment in this initial narrative phase as directly related to a specific artist and instrument. After hearing Sonny Terry (a famous blues and folk harmonica player) on Alexis Korner's BBC radio program in the 70's, he was struck by the sound of the instrument itself relating, "I was completely captivated by the sound of what he did. It was just a solo harmonica piece...that's when I got obsessed with the instrument [laughs] and that's when I started playing..." Alan's use of the concepts of "captivation" or "obsession" implies an interaction with a sort of power; his discovery of the harmonica, its sound, and the blues world is part of something that pulls him in and sends him on a journey to satisfy his curiosity. This journey leads to a record store, then to a local harmonica player, and then to a significant open stage experience which results in a pivotal connection with his first longtime musical companion.

The idea of a strong power playing a significant role in the initial introduction to blues music carries through to 'Rootbag' band leader and guitar player, Richard van Bergen's story of the first time he heard the pre-wear blues he had been reading about as a young man. A classmate had a record set that included pre-war blues musicians and, after having read a lot about these musicians and their styles, he finally had a chance to listen.

I was so curious to find out - how do these guys sound? … I went there and it was like a religious experience! … The first time I heard that music...I was like [inhales] 'What's this?!' [eyes go wide] ... that really struck me and that - straight to the heart and I - I didn't understand a thing what [they were] singing about - I could hardly understand the lyrics, which, of course, they sang about their environment- 'Going to Rosedale' - where's that? But the feeling! Well, the music had struck me, and I started to play.

(Richard van Bergen, guitarist in several groups)

Outliers and reflection

George Reijnders, a harmonica player with the mainly acoustic blues duo, The Men Unplugged, represents an important outlier to the general narrative. While most interviewees started their music careers after being impressed by the blues or music as a child, George was not active with music making and performing until his 40's. His return to music followed a different type of turning point in his life narrative; he chose to pick up the harmonica, something enjoyed in childhood, and begin playing the blues when he was experiencing what he terms a "mid-life crisis." He evaluates his time leading up to this decision as one during which he was mostly doing things in the service of other people, particularly having to do with family life.

We can interpret this gradual realization that George needed something of his own and his subsequent determination to create that thing himself as an example of active identity work: instead of continuing as the "taxi driver for the kids," George felt a need to construct a new image of himself that, rather than being based on social reflections and obligations, was instead intentionally constructed by George for himself. He created a new, additional identity first as a blues harmonica player and then as an active promoter within the Dutch blues music scene, taking ownership of harmonica player meet-ups and related gigs as well as his own performances and eventual personal project.

Although his narrative represents an outlier to phase 1 in its temporal and intentional elements, the idea of a strong, external force, as introduced above by Richard's narrative, is again evoked. While he cites blues music as a natural genre choice following that of instrument choice, this need for a personal change and redefinition can feel like an

undefinable force. He also references a sort of entrancement by blues music that he cannot quite articulate such as when he uses language of admiration saying, "You can fall in love with this music - I can" while listening to the Leadbelly's 'Out on the Western Plain' as interpreted by Rory Gallagher.

Overall, the main theme of curiosity as a cornerstone maintains a strong tone within George's narrative. In fact, much of the interview data from the conversation with George is about the harmonica, technical and musical characteristics and qualities. It is clear that mastery of the instrument is a main source of fascination and motivation propelling him forward in his career.

After reviewing the narrative elements that support the composite main narrative's first phase of *discovery and first impressions,* and the main theme of that phase, *curiosity as cornerstone*, we discussed a significant outlier that, while offering a variation to the indexical elements of the backbone narrative, still maintained consistency in the main theme and connections with other narratives. Reflecting on this forward momentum of initial novelty and engagement leads us to phase 2 - *forging a personal path of development*, which is defined by a cultivation and refinement of the lifelong interest created by the curiosity and initial discoveries in phase 1.

Phase 2: Forging a personal path of development

The second and longest phase of the backbone narrative is focused on a growing fascination or obsession with the sounds, instruments, and mythologies of the blues that was instigated in phase 1. While fostering this fascination, the young man must create his own way, discovering and developing musical knowledge and talent, often making use of limited means and resources to continue down the path he is forging for himself. Deeply connected to this second phase is a second theme entitled *a balance of freedom and constraints*. Working through these seemingly opposing concepts featured in many of the interviewees' narratives at different times in their development paths, both in musically- and non-musically-based ways.

The concept of novelty was present in phase one of the main narrative, with part of the allure of the blues being its strange and exotic sounds and lyrics. However, it features strongest in this phase, phase 2 - *forging a personal path of development*, as the musicians' narratives show them engaged in more focused identity work. This recurring concept strongly

supports the theme of a balance of freedom and constraints, as it is often a testing ground for the musicians to continue the process of building their sense of self while testing constraints and establishing new freedoms as a musician and human being. Staying intrigued and interested in new styles of music or, in the case of the blues, new interpretations and the flexibility offered by blues music's basic musical structure, was essential for motivation and continued admiration for the music they played as well as responsible for creating significant meaning.

The main narrative includes learning the blues in an informal setting; eight of the participants are mainly self-taught on their main instrument and style of playing. This finds them learning heavily by both ear and sight. Alan and George both learned harmonica by ear and also both explained that it's really the only way to learn for harmonica; the time difference between their adoption of the instrument has Alan learning from records and George from YouTube, both slowing down the tune to follow along, copy, and master the instrument before branching out into their own styles. Indeed, Alan did at one point purchase an instructional book but found it so difficult to digest that he eventually discarded it (later he found out that the author was not a very good player himself, according to Alan's band mate!).

Hans van Lier, guitarist and front man of The Hans van Lier Band, and Peter Boelen, guitarist and guitar shop own of De Plug, both described their experiences learning by ear but also by very carefully watching the hands of guitar players they admired during live shows. Growing up in Amsterdam, Peter talked about watching his brother and getting into the front row of concerts to be able to better watch what was happening. Hans van Lier, from Groningen, described similar situations and process explaining, "I looked to his hands so I, I remembered that. And I played it because of the...I studied that on my guitar."

Some were lucky enough to have nearby access to concerts in a large town; others had to build record collections slowly, piece by piece from occasional trips to Den Haag, Utrecht, and Rotterdam. Like Richard van Bergen, guitarist and front man of Rootbag, they would slow down the record to half-speed and figure out each note, lick, and riff—slowly and with a lot of effort. Richard even created his own language of notation, finding traditional musical score paper and adding an extra line to create a symbolic sixth string so he could mark which fingers to put where and when, resulting in something that resembles today's tablature found online in an instant.

Gerrit van der Spaan, guitarist and half of the blues duo The Men Unplugged, recalls being sent to classical guitar lessons after picking up the instrument and having to learn the blues and slide guitar on his own at home. The lessons provided structure and an introduction to the stricter world of music, while at home he was free to learn as he'd like. This story brings us to a discussion of the main theme for phase 2 – a balance between freedom and constraints.

The most common examples of musically-based tensions during phase 2 were related to the genre of blues itself. In many narratives, the blues is hailed as a harbinger of creativity, owing to its characteristic blues scale, and chord progressions as well as the standard 12-bar format. However, it can be these same elements that become repetitive and boring; at many as six of the interviewees shared explicitly that they would get bored very easily if only listening or playing to the blues. Chris Koenen, guitarist and front man for The Men in Blues, playfully compares the experience of consuming only one music genre to eating only a plain dish of rice and fish every day, exclaiming, "I can't even imagine someone can only choose blues." Many say the same, some of them acting as if relaying a secret when they shared that they'd struggle playing only blues, and yet why would it need to be a secret to disclose a preference for sometimes stepping into other genres? The answer seemed to lie in maintaining a professional (and playing) position amongst the sometimes fiercely enforced expectations of the blues audiences and communities here in the Netherlands.

Harm van Sleen, bassist and multi-instrumentalist in The Men in Blues, started off his interview directly addressing the point of self-dentification with relation to external entities that he claimed keep strict tabs on music claiming to be the blues in the Netherlands, "First of all, I would not consider myself strictly a blues musician…" His use of the word "strictly" is indicative of the theme of this phase because it can be interpreted as implying a desire to remain agile, free from others imposing their musical will onto you. He goes on to describe that it's these why he felt the need to make this statement right away:

> There's a tendency among certain groups to have very strict definitions [about] what would be a blues and the funny thing is that, you know, they disagree on everything…I find that the musicians that I like to work with and the audiences that come to listen to the bands that I play with, they're more...open-minded, I think…we just want to play the music that we want to play…

> (Harm van Sleen, bassist, The Men in Blues)

He goes on to site the variety of musical styles he hears when he listens to "older stuff," citing the apparent lack of musical boundaries even in a blues icon like Robert Johnson when stories surface about his non-recorded performances. Harm also attended a music conservatory in the Netherlands that focuses on jazz music and he brings up the blues' musical structure as one that offers itself as a launching pad for creativity and into other genres and diverse musical experiences.

> What I really enjoy about the blues as a structure is that, because it's so, such a strong structure – the twelve-bar thing – that you can go anywhere with it…to me it feels like it frees you from a lot of rules because you can improvise…jazz songs…a disco song…an experimental, far out strange song…a really poppy sing-along tune—you can do anything with it! Which is why I love it so much.

> (Harm van Sleen, bassist, The Men in Blues)

Many interviewees felt the same, but Harm's use of this "strong" structure takes an interesting turn when he explains how it is especially useful in an organization where he is employed alongside his professional musician gigs and teaching jobs. United by Music[2] is based in the Netherlands and works with people who are musically skilled and also face a wide variety of cognitive disability. Harm was a formative member of the organization, asked to help out at first and then staying on permanently, and being a part of the organization seems to have proven formative for Harm.

United by Music uses blues and blues-based music and Harm explained that its simple basic structure allows for members' ease in learning new songs. Learning new songs was a challenge for the group as teaching in the traditional Western notation-based style would cause frustration and be counter-productive. Harm shared a moving story about the group's invitation and subsequent trip to participate in the Waterfront Blues Festival in Portland, Oregon, USA which resulted in a turning point for him in his understanding of teaching and learning music; they learned best by embodied methods, learning new music by relying on their bodies' physical knowledge. While they listened to new music being played by musicians they had just met, they were able to join in right away, making mistakes as they figured out the structure and progression, but getting the idea and the groove of the song

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[2] https://www.unitedbymusic.nl/

much quicker and less painfully than through written scores. This lesson was immensely important for the group and for Harm's personal perspective on teaching and learning.

Something about the music and the trip brought an impressive amount of freedom to the lives of the participating members who were on the trip. Harm explained that these were people who are usually very strictly ruled by schedule, routine, predictability and that the festival represented disruptions to all of those rules, without exception. He was amazed that the United by Music members were able to cope and even thrive in these situations that demanded out of the ordinary effort from them musically, interpersonally, and even physically.

Harm's narrative showed blues music as freeing in many facets: through United by Music he has seen its positive effects on physical and mental wellbeing; in his personal performance it allows for variation depending on mood; and structurally "it gives you a chance to focus on other stuff…improvising…remembering a certain arrangement…singing along…it frees you to do the stuff that's interesting about music." In each of these, the blues is used as a tool for moving past obstacles and can be interpreted as maintaining an important element of Harm's personal identity – one which values freedom highly and pursues it with priority during the progression of a professional musical career.

Other interviewees highlighted the ways in which blues itself can be made to be restrictive by outside sources such as conservative audiences and the blues community in the Netherlands. There are, according to participants, a large number of Dutch blues bands who play only traditional blues, enjoying performing skilled recreations of their favorites, and aiming for what they deem the authentic, or traditional blues. Alan would call them "fundamentalists" or, "fundies," for short; he, like Harm, says that he admires their ability to remain in a single genre but finds their lack of musical innovation uninspiring and as contributing to what he describes as the creative death of the blues in the Netherlands. Several other participants described what Harm introduced earlier, which is the policing nature of some groups of people in the blues scene. Martijn Groen, drummer for the blues group Men in Blues, calls them the "1-4-5"'s, referring to the common blues shuffle progression, and the term "blues police" is thrown out in other accounts. Harm even recounts an anecdote about a blues musician he used to play with who has decided to stop playing the blues due to genre policing attendees at his concerts.

In conversation with Heyn Linger and Joost van der Graaf, guitarist and bassist for Bald as Love (a Jimi Hendrix trio of which Martijn Groen is also a part), Joost brings up that the other main genre he plays in is heavy metal and that he experiences similar restrictive expectations in both. He expressed his frustration at this and emphasized that between the genres he carries a purposeful identity working in either.

> […] it's the same intention—I always play with the same intention. It's something I learned along the way…I totally get the reason why people box themselves in, in a way…they need their identity, they need their community, I guess…but sometimes I think it's a shame because you…limit yourself in so many ways.
>
> (Joost van der Graaf, bassist, Bald as Love)

However artistically this may be frustrating during this phase of musical and career development, these genre constraints are a very present reality for the musicians spoken with; bookers, festivals, and venues rely on genre heavily for deciding who to invite for a performance and for anticipating types and sizes of audiences. Richard van Bergen and Alan Laws both speak about the difficulties in experimenting outside their genre but place a great emphasis on continuing to do so for their personal and musical development. Working against the "fundamentalist" mentality and creating new blends of genre and sounds is what maintains an enjoyment in playing. Martijn Groen is also a member of two other bands: one, a funk group and the other, a Jimi Hendrix tribute trio. He cites his motivation to play in all three as a need for a rotation of styles.

However, there is still a pull to the traditional blues and blues-based music present in the narratives of most interviewees. Richard states that even after a lot of experimentation with other styles he returns to pre-war, Delta blues as a preferred style. "It's something about that music – it's so strong, and so direct and so pure…I think I missed the purity of it." There's something ineffable that proves alluring to the majority of interviewees, though they mostly weren't able to put words to why they felt the pull; just that there was a force they answered to.

For Kees Kingsize, a guitarist based near Den Haag, moving through genres helps to define his identity in the moment and gives him the ability to control and manage his mood

over time[3]; he has worked through punk, reggae, rock, blues, and western music and particularly enjoys gypsy music and the blues. For Kees, identifying, working through, and sometimes learning to live with this tension created between freedom and constraints proved especially potent. His narrative was extremely multivocal, with many chronological skips, turns, and sidesteps but a connecting thread ran through both the indexical and the non-indexical elements of his complex account: that of an ongoing process throughout his life and career, one working towards personal freedom through psychological constraints.

Kees shared that he'd experienced an important moment of his musical and personal development while watching a documentary about Jimi Hendrix that was narrated by Taj Mahal. According to Kees, Taj Mahal's stated that, "Musicians get on the stage…they do their thing. They make music about the world. But a blues musician – he can go on the stage and tell what it's like for *him…*" As Kees emphasized the personal quality of this quote, he also spoke of the opportunity blues musicians have to embellish life events through a blues song, describing it as "impressionist" and pressing the point that it's possible with blues to tell your story in a way that both creates and shares your personal truth, as it is colored and nuanced in your own experience.

He went on to share how he greatly admired and connected with the blues music of the past but acknowledged his temporal, geographical, and ethnic distance from that context, emphasizing that he "[is] living here and now" and shares his techniques of working within the lyrics of old blues recordings to create something new within what is already existing.

> I use the lyrics of a blues freely, you know? You can do whatever you – you can…make collages…or transform…and I'm not singing about 'I have no quarter for a shave'…'cause I'm not black in the 1920's but I update some of that stuff…I am living in the here and now. So those lyrics, [you know], I adjust them to *my* needs. That gives you power.
>
> (Kees Kingsize, guitarist)

Alan Laws, harmonica player in The Mudbirds and currently residing in the north of the Netherlands, echoes this respectful repurposing of blues lyrics. Alan, however, will often choose to keep the lyrics to well-known blues songs but uses his position as a performer to

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[3] DeNora (2000) discusses music as a tool for mood management as well as temporal markers throughout our lives' important phases and events.

ask his audience to repurpose the song, imagining its story as applied to current and relevant affairs. He gives the example of Skip James' "Hard Times Killing Floor Blues" which is about the Great Depression in the United States as a number that he performs after introducing it to his audience by asking them to translate the song's intention and emotion to the current state of asylum seekers fleeing war and other dangerous situations.

Reminiscent of the earlier topic of the community's sometimes very strict expectations surrounding blues music, he then laughing describes the situation he often receives if he's performing for a "blues audience":

> […]and then all the blues audience would look at me—'What the fuck's he talking about? We're here to enjoy the music!' You know? [laughs]…I think it's important that you – that the words mean something for you and if they mean something for somebody else well that's, uh, that's up to them really, I suppose…

> (Alan Laws, harmonica, The Mudbirds)

Nevertheless, these accounts support the earlier ones in calling out the room available for stretching artistic limbs within musically traditional blues music. This freedom of storytelling that comes with the lyrical elements of blues music and performance allows for an interpretation that highlights a personal project of intellectual and emotional introspection and growth, a project of the self through collaboration with the music. The agentic freedom of a storyteller telling his own story his own way, the presence of a power created through poetry, and the freedom found *within* the constraints of old blues songs; these accounts particularly share that strength lies in being your own narrator.

Outliers and reflection

While the blues community in the Netherlands was most often regarded as a creatively restrictive force among the narratives, there were also stories that focused on the family and friend-like feeling of the blues community. As Richard puts it, you can "feel comfortable…It's like friends" and Gerrit's interview took place at a market where many friends had gathered to enjoy the music together, creating a very festive atmosphere on that brisk afternoon. It might seem that these places are well suited to and safe for experimentation with how to play the blues.

On the other hand, George emphasizes the blues performance circuit's tight-knit profile which can offer a barrier to performing for those not yet initiated into the "in-crowd" community that Richard talks about; maybe if you *can* play the blues is questioned here. It seems the push and pull of genre and community constraints results in a scene that harbors both traditional enclaves and creative crossovers but offers more performance opportunities for traditional genre-associated musicians/bands.

Phase 3: A cumulative career overview

In the third phase, the hard work of phase two evolves into a career trajectory marked by forming first bands, playing paid performances and creating a career in music within a musical community that has lasted several years, offering an opportunity for a critical and appreciative overview from the present and a chance to continue towards a musical future. There is much overlap between phase 2 and 3 regarding active performance and continued development but this phase's essential item is that of overview. It is here that we have an temporal assessment of the career and the identities created over and through it.

The theme that stood out as especially present during this phase of the collective narrative was that of *connection with self and community*. Music often served as the connecting force for interviewees. Throughout the narratives, music and blues music stands out the most as a connector to identity and personal introspection; musicians chose or dismiss certain labels or feel strong connections to themselves and others through musical moments.

An interesting and specific case of identification came with the commonly disputed label of "bluesman." The general response to this term, whether conversation on the topic was initiated by the interviewee or the interviewee, was one of disassociation. Harm, Chris, Martijn, and Heyn Linger, the guitarist for Bald as Love, all specifically stated, and in some cases elaborated at length why they would not consider themselves to be a "bluesman." Heyn makes a specific, geographical connection to the term stating, "…obviously I'm never going to be a 'real' blues guy because I'm not an American" while Chris makes specific references to the blues as a state of mind – one that evokes the socio- and historical contexts in which the blues was created, "…you can't play blues like a bluesman because you've never been…humiliated or beaten or [treated like] a second-rate—third rate civilian…that's where I never can touch it, that kind of soul."

However, Kees' narrative relayed a strong identification with the identity of 'bluesmen' icons, starting with an identification with the concept of "trouble" and "worry" that features in so many classic blues songs. He had heard that current day psychologists had

posited that many legendary blues musicians probably suffered from bouts of depression and/or manic-depressive disorders; mental health and depression was a connection for Kees that formed a basis for strong connections with lyrical content and the feeling channeled through blues songs. So much that he grew frustrated talking about seeing blues performed by someone in a way that did not match the intensity or message of the song itself. His self-identity in this way seems less of a conscious choice and more a matter of circumstance and hard times.

> […] I was so confined and constricted always and…nobody listened to you, eh, in Scheveningen when you're a kid and you want to do [something different] – they do not understand it…alongside came the blues. The playing of the blues and that helped a lot…

When he describes his battles with alcohol and drugs this also serves as a link to the blues, both symbolically as an indicator of hard personal times and literally as a link to the music of the blues.

> So you don't get any happier with [alcohol and drugs] and your life doesn't run very well…and then, alongside you had blues. And that was a kind of way of dealing with things…it's a cliché but it's true – I did not choose to be a blues musician. Nobody in his right mind would.
>
> (Kees Kingsize, guitarist)

Kees's personal story is strongly intertwined with the blues, especially with this association to the archetype of a troubled bluesman and was not as apparent with other interviewees who emphasized different types of personal connections through music, often with their personal emotions and development.

Hans van Lier and Chris Koenen have both experienced long careers and reflect on how their playing, or the intention that comes with playing when a career is maturing is different than when it is first begun. Hans describes a connection with the music that has changed in intentionality and quality while still valuing a connection with his emotions through playing. Earlier in his narrative he had described how he used the blues as a tool when he had to process strong emotions such as extreme sadness or high points of joy in his life. He describes the changing quality of his guitar solos as an example.

> […] when you uh, get old it's more intensive. More - when you do one note it's more intensive than 20 years, 30 years ago. I don't know why [inhales] I, I think because you uh very realized what you are doing at that moment. And when you are 20 you play… with your mind taking solos but you're not realiz[ing] what you are … last couple of years I just realized why I'm playing the blues … because every solo I play it's a, abstract, random of … your feelings inside, what come from your heart. You know why you're playing the solo but it's very hard to say that - the language.
>
> (Han van Lier, guitarist, The Hans van Lier Band)

Hans maintains this strong connection with his emotions through his guitar and especially through the expressive nature of his solos. He reflects on the maturing element of age as part of what got him to a more intensive, expressive place with his music. The connection with the instrument as a factor in the evolving playing style and approach is also brought up by Chris, who focuses on the relationship as a part of a larger process of self-connection through playing.

> I've played a lot, learned a lot and…I'm still…developing because the older you get, you don't get better – you get more in*to* it, you know? … I remember most of the time when I played, I played fast, tried to, you know, impress people and now, now I'm trying to impress myself because I think that relationship, you know, with your instrument you feel real—a kind of cognitive, or, a kind of thing with your instrument when you're one…that's my goal, you know?…it's more introspective when you get old – at least for me!
>
> (Chris Koenen, guitarist, The Men in Blues)

Reminiscent of the main theme in phase 2, is that of maintaining family life alongside an active career. This was discussed with many of the participants; some of them are involved musically with family members and use music as something they do together; Martijn's wife is also musically trained and their son is learning so the three of them play together to open the annual students' show where Martijn teaches music lessons. Chris Koenen, guitarist, also has a musical family with his son playing jazz at a Dutch music conservatory; during our

conversation he share that he'd cautioned his son to learn something alongside of music saying, "it's a hard thing to learn and much harder to earn some money with it so…but it's his decision…so, gotta respect that."

Richard also talks about maintaining his job as a school teacher alongside his musical career in order to be able to enjoy family as well. He reflects on the identity of the musician and artist as one that is expected to be very ego-centric and perhaps needs to be in order to "make it" in the music industry. He feels that his job as a school teacher allows him to maintain a positive connection with music and with touring but that he needs to be aware of time balances to maintain connection with his children and wife. He goes on to explain that although he hears more ego and machismo in the classic blues music sometimes, he doesn't identify with that attitude; he also doesn't see the blues community in the Netherlands as associating too closely with a strong macho identity either. Instead, he outlines a more laid-back kind of blues performer less interested in rising to the top by whatever means necessary and more of "'I just wanna stick to myself and in my performance'[chuckles]"

Recalling the theme of the previous phase, Richard evaluates times when he might have been able to make a leap into commercially successful bands and music career opportunities. He says he still occasionally thinks about what his music career might have been like had he take the larger opportunities that came his way but each time he brought this up in his thought, he came back to the connection with his family and financial freedom through maintaining another career that gives him the artistic leeway he desires.

> […] the blues is really commercially not interesting, well…Ok, who cares anyway? I don't bother too much about it. I'm happy to be a school teacher three days a week and play music that I like. I don't want to do any concessions…I only play the stuff that I like.
>
> – (Richard van Bergen, guitarist, Rootbag)

In general, the main narrative of phase 3 – *a cumulative career overview* can be boiled down to musicians being able to appreciate being at a point where they can fully embrace their own preferences and occupy themselves with a personal learning journey that continues into the future. This is accomplished and viewed in many ways, the strongest being a sense of connection to the music, to oneself, and to others.

Outliers and reflection

The connection above are mostly positive in nature but it is important to acknowledge that sometimes music, and blues music, creates strong emotional and personal connections for people that, both in the moment and looking back, they have conflicting emotions about. Two such outliers include Richard and Harm.

Richard describes an emotional reaction to a live Mavis Staples concert he attended where he was overwhelmed by uncategorizable emotions during an acapella gospel number and was uncomfortably unsure of how to react.

When Mavis started it was beyond [feeling tears]. I didn't know what happened to me, I felt like…do I wanna, do I wanna feel this? [I be]came a bit anxious about it – do I have to leave? I can't cope with this, it's too much emotion! And then, again I was, of course, I wanted to hear it and be there and be part of it.

(Richard van Bergen, guitarist, Rootbag)

This indecision and confusion about the strong emotions evoked through the music was also the theme of Harm's description of his experience consciously channeling an emotional time into his own performance at the urging of a fellow musician on stage and in the moment. They were playing a sad song and Harm had finished one solo that the band leader deemed not emotionally equivalent to the rest of the song – she asked him to re-do the solo and Harm tried to find a solution. He remembered learning about actors using personal experience to deepen their craft and he reached for memories of his recently deceased father.

I played this solo and I almost felt like crying it was really, I guess the most intense emotional moment that I ever experienced on stage…I felt really involved with it…probably the most emotional stuff I've ever played but I felt so terrible…I mean, suddenly my father was very much in my head and heart and I thought 'You know, I'm really happy I did this' I think it was almost like a cathartic thing but at the same time I thought 'Well, I wouldn't want to do this every night,' you know? [laughs] It takes a lot of energy and I felt so naked. I felt very vulnerable…

(Harm, bassist, The Men in Blues)

In this account, Harm describes a complex reaction to his strong emotional connection through music. He felt very close to his father and the solo received a good response from the crowd, but the intensity of the experience made it, upon reflection, something to be careful

with in the future as a powerful tool for connection. This complexity of response was present for other musicians as well and showcases the nuanced usage of music in the lives of blues musicians in the Netherlands.

In exploring the composite, or backbone, narrative that emerged, linking the interview data, three main phases were identified: discovery and first impressions, forging a personal path of development, and a cumulative career overview. Each of these chronological phases carried within it a dominate theme – curiosity as cornerstone, a balance between freedom and constraints, and connection with self and community, respectively. These themes were discussed within the context of each partner phase including any outliers and nuances that served to deepen the understanding and ensure multivocality surrounding the main narrative. The next conclusion section will provide an overview of the research project and summarize these findings with final thoughts.

Conclusion

This research set out to address the question, "What is the role and importance of music in the personal life narratives of blues musicians in the Netherlands?" To answer the research question, an ethnographically-informed, qualitative inquiry based in unstructured interviews was conducted and a thematic and narrative analysis applied to the resulting data. The core element within each interview was that of blues music as a lens or starting point for exploring the role and importance of music for the research participants. By exploring how music can play a role or be perceived in varying degrees and types of importance to these musicians, the relevant theoretical topic of music as a tool for self- and group- identity construction was investigated.

When the data was gathered, each interview transcript was first evaluated on its own within the context of a single, personal narrative. Then, the narratives were compared to each other and a composite image appeared that offered a chronological main trajectory of narrative events. This main narrative revealed three main phases that featured in the majority of narratives –discovery and first impressions, forging a personal path of development, and a cumulative career overview. Within each phase, a main theme was identified for each phase which focused on curiosity, tension, and connection and allowed for further interpretation.

These chronological and thematic building blocks form the main narrative and provide an empirical contribution to the study of life narratives. Having conducted these eleven interviews and had a chance to assess the rich and complex nature of some of them, I would recommend using these phases and thematic constructive segments for future research, especially in the case of focusing on a few individuals. I believe this study offers a solid start; the main narrative outline that resulted is a helpful empirical tool for future research that could more deeply evaluate the life narratives of three or four individuals over the course of several interviews. I believe that this would expand the initial theoretical contribution that this research offers.

Some of this research's theoretical expectations were met, particularly music as a tool for the life-long process of personal identity construction and, interestingly, particular aspects of blues music such as lyrics and musical structure were cited as facilitating freedom of personal expression. Using blues music in this way generally resulted from a first, emotional encounter with the blues that also resulted in musicians often returning to the blues as a musical touchpoint for the careers they established.

Unexpectedly, there was not as strong of an identification with the blues community in the Netherlands among research participants. The identity work they engaged in was more personal and close to home rather than outwards or group-based. There were, of course, outliers who organized particular blues groups and many felt and expressed an affinity for their musical peers, but overall assessments of the blues community were offered through more of a self-imposed outsider status which had both positive and negative connotations. Also a surprise, the rejection of the label of "bluesman" and of the rules implicitly enforced by the blues community were common across interviews, resulting in identities that were often assembled via distancing.

Theoretically, this research has contributed to the fields of sociology and popular music by combining aspects of music sociology and narrative research, using personal narratives to learn more about how a group of people most often associated with a specific genre might use music as a tool for constructing identity. This research highlighted ways in which blues musicians in the Netherlands experienced music in ways that fit these theories of music as a tool and also ways in which they contradicted this.

Across all interviewees, music maintained an important role and created great significance in their lives, with some interviewees explicitly stating that some of the most wonderful experiences of their lives had been facilitated by music. The processes of creating and sharing their stories carried great meaning for many of the interviewees; some became emotional during the interviews, explaining that they don't often take the time to stop and think about or attempt to create these narratives. This recalls DeNora's (2000) theory of a tacit use of music—sometimes we are not even aware of the importance of certain elements in propping up our visions of ourselves. When they reflected on or took part in actively recalling and creating moments and personal perspectives during the interviews, the storytelling process gave them authority and control over the depiction of life events, even if they'd felt powerless during their initial experiences. Especially when they take on the role of storyteller and create their own narratives to relate to another or to themselves, these musicians can assume an actively agentic state – one in which they control the portrayal of certain life events or items.

Through this research I have found that, indeed, blues musicians actively engage with music in many ways, tacit and explicit, throughout their careers and lifetimes in ways that construct identity over time. Additionally, the process of creating narratives through or about music is very meaningful to this group and to their personal life experiences. The narrative analysis in this research provided insight into individual stories and across multiple accounts

through their similar themes but also through the variations and outliers that contributed to the multivocality of the data. Essentially this research reinforced and widened the understanding that in each of us lies an authoritative storyteller, that creates the defining narrative of our selves and our lives, orders the events which happen along the way and creates meaning through an interpretation of the interactions we have along the way. If that story is accompanied by music, perhaps even blues music, then all the deeper, stronger, and more resilient our stories will be.

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Appendix A – Participant overview

All research participants were male and currently residing in the Netherlands. Almost all were also vocalists in addition to their main instrument.

Name	Age (if given) or Age Range (estimated)	Nationality	Initial musical training type	Primary instrument(s)	Active /personal blues projects	Any current occupation (field) additional to musician
Harm van Sleen	50's-60's	Dutch	Formal musical education	Bass, steel pedal	Men in Blues United by Music	Music teacher
George Reijnders	53	Dutch	Informal/self-education	Harmonica	The Men Unplugged	Information technology
Gerrit van der Spaan	50's-60's	Dutch	Classical guitar training, self-education	Guitar, vocals	The Men Unplugged	Painter
Richard van Bergen	61	Dutch	Informal/self-education	Guitar, vocals	Rootbag	Schoolteacher
Peter Boelen	50's-60's	Dutch	Informal/self-education	Guitar, vocals	The Lady Shavers	Guitar shop owner
Alan Laws	50's-60's	British, ~20 years in Netherlands	Informal/self-education	Harmonica, guitar, vocals	The Mudbirds	None/Unknown
Kees Kingsize	50-60's	Dutch	Informal/self-education	Guitar, vocals	Kees Kingsize	Private lessons
Martijn Groen	30-40's	Dutch	Formal musical education	Drummer	Men in Blues Bald as Love	Music teacher, conservatory professor
Heyn Linger	30-40's	Surinamese	Unknown	Guitar	Bald as Love	Private lessons
Joost van der Graaf	30-40's	Dutch	Unknown	Bass	Bald as Love	Private lessons
Chris Koenen	67	Dutch	Informal/self-education	Guitar, vocals	Men in Blues	None
Hans van Lier	56	Dutch	Informal/self-education	Guitar	The Hans van Lier Band	None

Appendix B – Interview topics and analysis

The interviews began with the generative question, "Can you please tell me about your experience with the blues?" Below are the three main phases that made up the composite main narrative, followed by the main theme in that phase and indicators that were used for manually analyzing the interview data.

Phase 1 - discovery and first impressions	Theme 1 - **curiosity** as cornerstone	- First time they heard the blues - How they learned to play - Development of music - Development of self - Fascination and/or obsession - With instrument - With blues music
Phase 2 – forging a personal path of development;	Theme 2 - balance of **freedom & constraints**	- When music facilitated freedom - When rules were enforced - Freedom - Musical - Playing/performance - Lifestyle - Rules - Novelty and surprise - Moving through musical phases
Phase 3 - cumulative career overview	Theme 3 - **connection** with self & community	- How music connected them with… - How music allowed or disallowed a certain TYPE of connection - Controlled (owning the story/lyrics) - Uncontrolled (emotional reactions) - Shamanic/channel for others/audience - To music - To emotions - Feelings - To self (describe themselves) - To others - Family - Peers & musical community