The Rise and Fall of a Songwriting Partnership

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Abstract

The working relationship of two novice songwriters is examined in this ethnographic study, which highlights the importance of common goals and values in a songwriting collaboration. Stemming from this core there are a number of sub-themes: the pair saw a popular song as consisting of melody, harmony, and lyrics; they played on the strengths and offset the weaknesses of each others songwriting skills; both writers valued originality; and they believed songwriting had a mystical element to it. Finally, it will be shown how conflict in their status as writing partners resulted in the demise of the collaboration. The difficulty of being a participant observer researcher when only two people are being observed is also discussed.

Keywords

Songwriting, Partnership, Ethnography, and Popular Music

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The working relationship of two novice songwriters is examined in this ethnographic study, which highlights the importance of common goals and values in a songwriting collaboration. Stemming from this core there are a number of sub-themes: the pair saw a popular song as consisting of melody, harmony, and lyrics; they played on the strengths and offset the weaknesses of each other's songwriting skills; both writers valued originality; and they believed songwriting had a mystical element to it. Finally, it will be shown how conflict in their status as writing partners resulted in the demise of the collaboration. The difficulty of being a "participant observer" researcher when only two people are being observed is also discussed. Key Words: Songwriting, Partnership, Ethnography, and Popular Music

Ethnographic studies of rock bands suggest that the composition of original songs is a collaborative process between band members (Cohen, 1993; Finnegan, 1989; Green, 2001; Shank, 1994; Shehan Campbell, 1995). As the composers are also performers of their own material, there is a fluidity between the acts of composition, rehearsal, and performance. This article reports on an ethnographic study of two songwriters, collaborating for the first time, who were not involved in writing songs for a particular band. It is the actual writing of songs, rather than the performance of songs that is their central activity, hence this study of songwriting collaboration provides a different perspective to that of previous ethnographic studies, where songwriting was a means to an end: that end being a recording or live performance of a song. In this case the end is the written song, which the songwriters initially intended to sell to performers to either record or play live. The aim was to examine how these particular songwriters worked and how they viewed songwriting as a creative process, as opposed to the performance

Working from Cohen's (1993) definition of ethnography referring "to data derived from direct observation of behaviour in a particular society" (p. 123), the present study involved observation and interviews with the songwriters. Thus I was engaged in fieldwork, the central activity of the ethnographer for what Cohen (1993) described as a "lengthy period of intimate study" (p. 124).

Ethnographic studies of popular music-making have employed similar methods of data collection: that is interviews with participants and observations (see Bennett, 2000; Cohen, 1993; Finnegan, 1989; McGillen & McMillan, 2003). The methodology of the present study was shaped by two of the challenges outlined by McGillen and McMillan in their study of cooperative songwriting with adolescents: 1) the need to be sensitive to the participants' world-views and 2) to make sure the voices of the participants were not lost: the latter means allowing the participants' voices to "speak for themselves" through direct quotation, rather than having me as the researcher summarise their words. Being

sensitive to the two songwriters' worlds meant demonstrating sensitivity to their respective positions as musicians – one a novice, one a professional – and sensitivity to their musical tastes (i.e., music they liked which influenced their songwriting) and the songs they co-wrote.

Bennett (2000) points to two issues which have emerged from ethnographic studies of local music-making: (1) a focus on the relationship between "music-making activities and the micro-social spaces in which such activities take place" (p. 167) and (2) researcher reflection on the role of the researcher in the field. These studies include, but do not solely focus on musicians collaboratively writing songs. In conducting the present study I was therefore looking for relationships between the songwriting process the two songwriters were engaged in and their local context - this being Sydney, Australia. In terms of my role as researcher documenting their collaboration, I naively believed my impact would be minimal and I would remain in the background. This was not the case, as both songwriters sought reactions from me about the work they were producing, and ultimately about the fragility of their relationship as collaborative songwriters.

Throughout the collaboration I felt that I had to contribute to discussions between the pair and even pass judgement on the quality of a song, or part of the song, when invited. Although initially reluctant to do so, I did so primarily to establish rapport with the pair. On a more egotistical note, I enjoyed being part of the process. I am a music educator in a university, but one of my passions has been writing popular songs. Although the world of academia rarely allows me the time to pursue songwriting, it is something I have been heavily involved with in the past. On many an evening I have played through and analysed songs that I felt were great songs, trying to work out what made those songs so great. On many an evening I have sat down to write at the piano, often "borrowing" elements from these songs to create my own songs.

My own background as a researcher has been in ethnographic studies of my own music teaching and studies of how young children engage in music learning, generally in formal settings such as schools and music studios. I had, however, always wanted to do an ethnographic study that focussed on popular music in some way, specifically on the way popular music was created. However, I had no idea where to begin until I read an advertisement in a weekly music newspaper distributed throughout Sydney. The advertisement read: "Musician seeks collaborator to write classic pop songs. Influences - Beatles, Stones, The Who, Kinks, Beach Boys." I contacted Bradley, the person who had placed the advertisement, by telephone, asking if he had successfully found a writing partner. I had called half hoping that he had not, so that we might try collaborating and I would begin songwriting again. However, I half hoped he had, so that I could suggest to Bradley and his collaborator that I might pursue an ethnographic study of their collaboration. He had received three responses, but only one – Tim's – was a serious one. The pair had already met and decided to work together. The collaboration between Tim, aged 22, and Bradley, aged 38, had begun.

I asked Bradley if I might observe the pair at work. He was hesitant. A week later, when we met, he indicated why – I was a stranger, and he and Tim were only just "getting to know each other." Bradley wanted to know why I was interested in observing them write. I indicated that I had an interest in popular music scholarship; this meant nothing to him. I also indicated that I was a songwriter and particularly admired the work of the bands he had cited as his influences. He asked me to name my favourite two

Beatles album. I named *Revolver* and *The White Album*. "Good choices," he responded, followed by "it might be okay" if I sat in on some writing sessions.

Bradley had invited me to their next writing session, on a Tuesday morning. Upon being introduced to Tim, I asked him if I could sit in as an observer, as well as interview him. Tim was immediately receptive to the idea. Before the pair sat down to write we negotiated what my role would be: tape recording their writing sessions while taking notes and semi-formal interviewing at the conclusion or during breaks, in songwriting sessions. I indicated at this point that I would provide them both with copies of interview transcripts, and would also provide them with copies of my analysis of their collaboration. Tim was particularly excited about this, clearly astounded that I was going "to all this trouble" to find out about how they would work as songwriters. I also indicated that their names would be changed to ensure confidentiality and that I would not indicate the specific suburbs in Sydney where the pair lived and worked.

Bradley and Tim set aside three hours each Tuesday morning to write together. "It's the only time we both have free at the moment" said Tim. "We work weird hours." Bradley is a professional musician. He plays guitar, keyboard, and sings lead and backing vocals in a cover (i.e., songs previously recorded by other performers) band. He has been in the band for four years, which plays equal part 1960s and 1970s "classics" (Bradley's word). "We do a lot of club gigs. Returned Services League clubs (RSLs) mostly. We spend most of our time in the Sydney and central coast area." The band works four or five nights each week. They have an agent and manager. "It's very professional. It's a regular income." In addition to playing in the band Bradley teaches keyboard and piano (popular and classical) from his house in a north-west suburb of Sydney. Bradley holds a Bachelor of Music degree, majoring in piano performance, which he completed, aged 22. "I trained as a concert pianist like hundreds of other people. There's no work out there, not as a concert pianist. Most of the pianists I went through with are either teaching or working as accompanists."

Tim does not hold a music degree. He is a self-taught guitarist and has played in bands, but has never felt comfortable in them. "My vision isn't a trendy one. I like sixties influenced music, and that's just not what new bands are into. Not now, anyway." Tim works part-time as a waiter and part-time in a second-hand bookshop. "They're crap jobs, and very short-term. My real love is music." Tim also spends up to twelve hours a week busking (performing on the street, being paid by donations from passers by) in inner-city areas of Sydney. "It's the best way to hone your skills. You don't get any money if you're no good."

During the first session I was called upon for advice when the pair had decided on a chord sequence for the song they were working on. I was asked if I thought "it worked." It was immediately apparent that I could not just be an observer; now I was a participant observer, even a collaborator observer. My presence would impact on the work the pair were doing, thus as a researcher I had to acknowledge myself in the research process (Ben-Ari, 1995; Hertz, 1997). I needed to reflect "on the role of the researcher, the relationship between the researcher and the research respondents and the possible impact of the latter on the nature of the research data produced" (Bennett, 2002, p. 456). From this moment onward when I was asked for advice I made a point of not "taking sides" with one songwriter. For example, there were three instances throughout the study where Bradley and Tim would have alternative ideas and turn to me to decide

which idea was "best." In these instances I indicated that I simply "could not pick between the two" and that both ideas had merit. In doing this I wanted to make it clear to the pair that I was not judging one to have better musical ideas than the other. However, if they wanted feedback on something they had clearly worked on collaboratively, I was happy to provide this. Likewise, if they asked a musical question, such as "I know this tune, where does it come from?" I would answer such questions – if I knew the answer.

This helped to create rapport with the pair, which proved to be important; not only did it create a sense of camaraderie, but as Alasuutari (1995) suggests, it "makes cheating [or lying] on the part of the informants both needless and morally difficult" (p. 56). Throughout the research project I was intensely aware of the tightrope I walked between creating rapport by being "one of the team" in commenting on their work and not contributing to their songwriting process or output.

Although no timeframe for my immersion in the field was discussed, I hoped to remain with the songwriters for an extended period of time, at least a month and possibly as long as a year. The period of observation ended up being three months. In remaining in the field for a long duration I was hoping not only to build up rapport, but do cross-comparisons of observational and interview data (Alasuutari, 1995, p. 56) in the form of interviewing the songwriters separately and together.

Analysis of the data (observations and interviews) was the interpretation of what I had seen and heard. It was a continuous process throughout the study, based on the assumption that "formal analysis and report writing are more efficient when the ethnographer keeps the data organized and writes sections of the ethnography during the fieldwork" (Fetterman, 1989, p. 20). Using Glaser and Strauss's (1967) theoretical sampling, I simultaneously collected and analysed data in line with a constant-comparative method that generated emergent trends in the data, in the form of themes. As the collection and analysis progressed, the themes presented in this article emerged. In particular a core theme emerged – that Bradley and Tim shared common goals and values in their songwriting collaboration. This core theme or core category – is the link to other themes that emerged: namely the pair saw a popular song as consisting of melody, harmony and lyrics; the pair played on the strengths and offset the weaknesses of each other's songwriting skills; both writers valued originality; and they believed songwriting had a mystical element to it. In each of these themes the pair's common goals and values about songwriting emerged. The final theme - conflict led to the demise of the songwriting collaboration - also reflects the central theme in that the pair's common goals and values digressed towards the end of the collaboration, hence its dissolution.

Common Goals and Values

Bradley and Tim decided to collaborate because they shared common goals and values in songwriting. These were discussed when Tim answered Bradley's advertisement. "We initially talked on the phone" said Tim. "When Bradley realised I was serious he asked me around to his place. You know, to see if it might work." The pair established that they wanted to write a body of work not for their own performance, but to eventually sell to bands or solo performers. "We just wanted to be songwriters" said Bradley. He felt particularly strong about this. "I've only ever been in covers bands. Nobody does originals, not if you want regular club gigs … But over the last couple of years I've started to write, to see if I've got what it takes." Tim also had been writing:

I play my own stuff when I busk. Most of its parody, so I'll take known
songs and change the lyrics, make them topical, or I'll start playing a song
and then change it, so somebody passing by will stop and listen,
wondering what they're hearing, you know? But now I want to write more
serious stuff, stuff that sells, that other people will want to play.

The pair was vague as to how they would sell their material. "We'll have to look into
that" said Bradley. "The important thing is doing the writing."

Apart from this common aim of wanting to write songs that they could sell to
other performers, the pair shared common musical values, namely a love of "classic" pop,
particularly from the 1960s, and a vast knowledge of the music and performers of this
period. Both members had read biographies of popular music luminaries of the 1960s
(e.g., Dylan, Hendrix, The Beatles) and owned songbooks containing the music of The
Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Dylan, and other songwriters of the period. Popular music
was a constant in their respective lives. Both indicated that if they were not performing
music they were listening to music. The pair would often bring albums they liked to their
writing sessions. In most cases they knew the album being presented to them. When they
did not, the person presenting the album would give a lengthy introduction as to why the
album should be heard. For example, Tim was particularly fond of Sonic Youth. When
Bradley did not respond favourably to the album *Daydream Nation*, describing it as
"avant-garde crap" with "non-existing songwriting", Tim presented him with other Sonic
Youth albums like *Goo*, "where the songs are more obviously songs." This was one of
the few times when the pair did not concur in musical taste. Tim, obviously passionate
about Sonic Youth, asked me if I liked their music. As I sat there, thinking how to
respond, I noticed Bradley turn to await my answer. I sensed that my answer would place
me either in Tim's camp or Bradley's camp. I felt like I was back in third grade – me, the
prized possession of two friends at war, out to gain a new friend. "I've got a couple of
their albums, but haven't listened to them for ages" I said. "They're not what I'm into
these days." I felt very diplomatic, acknowledging I owned the albums (one point for
Tim), but that I was not such a fan of their music any more (one point to Bradley). Result:
draw. A lucky escape, allowing me to remain the "participant observer" whose
participation, ironically, is extremely limited.

The pair used sound recordings as examples in their songwriting sessions,
dissecting them for ideas. For example, Bradley played Elvis Costello's "Just Like
Candy" to Tim as an example of a brief song introduction, which he felt would improve
Tim's song "Dismayed." Bradley said he liked the song Tim had begun writing "but the
intro's too mundane. You need to get right into the verse, to the melody, because it's so
interesting." Tim's idea for the introduction was strumming the chords of the final eight
bars of the chorus. "Listen to Costello" said Bradley, indicating the single reverberating
guitar chord that is the introduction to "Just Like Candy." They experimented with the
one tonic chord of "Dismayed" (A minor), then an E minor chord, before settling on a
simple four note introduction.

Sound recordings played a significant part in the time they spent together, just as
Cohen (1991) found with rock musicians in Liverpool, where "music was discussed and
listened to at parties, gigs, in pubs, in each other's flats, and wherever else they happened

to be" (p. 28). I spent an evening with Brad, Tim, and their respective girlfriends. Both girlfriends commented on their partners' need to have music playing at every opportunity. Anne, Tim's girlfriend, said to me, "I bet you're the same, I bet your wife gets sick of you being a muso [musician] and playing music all the time." Tim looked at me. "You're married?" I nodded, realising I had not mentioned this to Tim and Bradley. In fact I had told them very little about myself. "How did you know he was married?" asked Tim. Anne indicated the wedding band on my finger. "Oh, right, didn't notice that" replied Tim. Throughout the dinner Tim plundered his collection of albums, playing songs he thought we might like. When he played a series of songs from the mid-1980s that I associated with first meeting my wife, I nearly told everyone about the good memories the songs had for me. But I did not – I held back, the distanced observer at work again. By the end of the evening I felt lonely, my wife at home, with Tim and Bradley here and their respective girlfriends. We drank some wine, and as the alcohol took effect I began having feelings of guilt; these were genuinely good people and I liked them. Yet here I was, not being me, or at least not being a friend, yet they were treating me as a friend.

Melody, Harmony, and Lyrics

In analysing the rock'n'roll scene in Austin, Texas, Shank (1994) notes, "While in most bands one or two individuals produce most of the lyrical, harmonic, and melodic content of the songs, almost every band expects each musician to develop her or his instrumental part, to contribute to the arrangements" (p. 141). This implies that the lyrical, harmonic and melodic aspects of a song are the backbone, but it requires other musicians playing a song to bring it to fruition. From the onset of their collaboration, Tim and Bradley saw their songwriting as primarily being about writing lyrics, melody, and harmony. This agreement reflects the core theme, that the pair shared common goals and values. "We want anybody who picks up our songs [sheet music] to be able to sing them and accompany them on piano or guitar" said Bradley. From the onset the pair had decided to notate their compositions. Tim would write down lyrics with chord symbols above them, but did not notate melodies. This form of very basic music literacy was also observed by Shehan Campbell (1995) in her observations of young rock musicians. Tim explained that "I can't write down the tune, I don't have that kind of skill." Bradley, however, did. Tim would sing him a melody, the pair would work on it and then Bradley would notate it. Once a song was notated with lyrics, vocal melody, and harmony, the pair considered the song complete. "For now, anyway" said Bradley. "We can come back to it, but it's down on paper. Eventually we'll make a demo, though. You've got to." He indicated that the demo would be "very basic, with no fancy keyboard sounds or drums, just piano, guitar, and voices. Let the song sell itself."

McIntyre (2001) suggests "a songwriter can be seen as the person who instigates the creative work known as a song" (p. 100). Both Cohen (1993) and Green (2001) have observed that songwriting in bands is not restricted to one or two writers, but is an act where all members of a band contribute, even if "one or two main songwriters … come to the rehearsal with ideas … [that are] embellished to varying degrees by other band members" (Green, p. 80). This is something that Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones encourages band members to do with the material written by himself and Mick Jagger:

> I just go in there with a germ of an idea, the smaller the germ the better, and give it to them, feed it to them, and see what happens. Then it comes out as a Rolling Stones record instead of me telling everybody what I want them to play. (Dalton, 1980, p. 99)

I mentioned this quote to Tim and Bradley. "We're not the Stones" said Tim. "We're after something more, I don't know, structured I guess. Something where you don't have to rely on a bunch of people. It's just us. We're keeping it basic." I asked him if he had a preferred way their songs should be performed. "The style you mean?" he asked. "The style" I replied, "the instrumentation, the speed the song is performed at." Bradley said

> That doesn't matter. For us it's all about the essence of a good song and that's a strong melody, lyrics which make you think, and some chords that work, that maybe are a little daring. After that it's up to the performers to work with the song, to build on it. If those things that we've written are strong, the song will always be recognisable as ours, it'll have our signature on it. Like Lennon and McCartney's stuff. No matter who sings "Yesterday" you'll always know it's theirs because of the actual song.

Bradley then asked me about the reading I had done about the Beatles' songwriting: "So how do we compare with Lennon and McCartney? Are we up there with them?" What could I say? I was reading about famous songwriting partnerships to see if the Tim and Bradley collaboration shared any characteristics with those collaborations. But I was not "judging" their output. "I'm looking at the way you guys work" I said. "And I love what you're writing." Bradley paused. I half expected him to say, "You haven't answered my question." But he did not fortunately. What he did indicate was that he would like me to lend him some of the books I was reading about songwriting so that he could understand how "the greats" worked. I immediately agreed to do this because I felt I was finally able to give something back to the pair for letting me observe their collaboration.

Tim and Bradley viewed themselves as songwriters and thus had a clear idea about what comprises a song. They perpetuated the:

> continuing assumption amongst many musicians that there is a difference between writing a song and aiding in the arrangement, performance, and recording of that song … [although] recognising the multiplicity of ways a song may come into existence, [they] insist on these prevailing assumptions. (McIntyre, 2001, p. 108)

It should be noted that when the collaboration ended, Tim told me that he was thinking about doing a sound engineering course "so I know how to record and produce stuff." I asked him if he was referring to the songs he and Bradley had written. "Sure" he said, "I want to be able to control how the songs sound when they're recorded. The arrangements, you know, like Brian Wilson did with the Beach Boys' stuff." In wanting

to do this Tim was acknowledging that he now saw a song as being more than just melody, lyrics, and harmony.

Playing on the Strengths and Offsetting the Weaknesses of Co-writers

As the collaboration progressed Tim and Bradley got to know each other's strengths and weaknesses in songwriting. Acknowledgement of these traits allowed the pair to focus on their shared goals and values in the songwriting collaboration. "That's the best part of working with someone else" said Tim. "Brad can do stuff to a song that I'm not so good at, and vice versa. It really works." Such an approach is acknowledged by established songwriters. For example, Madonna writes melodies and lyrics, and her co-writer, Pat Leonard, will "figure the rest out" (Zollo, 1997, p. 617). She says of this:

> In my very retarded fashion I will sing it [the melody] to him. Or hum the melody line to him, and he will put it into a chord progression and we'll come up with the song that way. (p. 617)

The Burt Bacharach and Hal David partnership is more formalised, with David writing the lyrics and Bacharach the music. Bacharach says, "He [Hal David] always knew how to put the words in the right place. It's great when you have a lyric writer like that" (Zollo, p. 202).

Bradley and Tim had both written original songs in the past, but neither felt their material was exceptional. "I think some of my stuff had potential, but it needed someone else to make it better, to make it something" said Tim. Bradley held a similar sentiment: "I really struggle with lyrics, I'm just not good with words … but Tim is great with words, he's really improved some of the material I've come up with." A case in point was a song that Bradley brought to one of their writing sessions, titled "It's Over." He was dissatisfied with the lyrics he had written to date:

> *Phone is ringing/got a feeling/something's happened/it's over.*
> *Left me speechless/eyes are tearful/heard the news now/it's over.*
> *They say that he was speeding/maybe even stoned/he turned that fatal corner/now it's over.*

Tim said he liked the melody and the harmony, but agreed that the lyrics "just aren't working." He asked Bradley if he could take them away and "come up with something" for the next writing session. In discussing these three elements of music Tim was confirming an earlier theme that emerged, that he saw a popular song as consisting of melody, harmony and lyrics.

The following week he presented a rewrite:

> *She picks the phone up/fingers tingling/something's happened/it's over.*
> *Voiceless angel/puts the phone down/her man's gone now/ it's over.*
> *She can't believe it's happened/her one and only love/dead at twenty-one/now it's over.*

Bradley was immediately receptive to the changes, indicating the lyrics gave a "better picture" to the listener. Tim asked if Bradley minded the change to a female perspective. "No, I like it. But what about how her boyfriend died?" Tim suggested they leave that for future verses, "to keep the listener listening. I like songs where not too much is given away up front. It keeps you guessing." Bradley nodded, indicating again that he was very happy with Tim's changes.

When the pair started writing "from scratch", they would often jam, throwing ideas at one another, singing over a chord sequence, or just humming over a chord sequence. During the second time I observed the pair writing Bradley invited me to jam with them. "I'll pass" I said, "I'll just watch you guys go at it." Bradley smiled, "Afraid we'll show you up?" I nodded: "Got it in one." This was a lucky save; I did not want to be part of their music-making process, particularly at this early stage of their collaboration, as I suspected my involvement would cloud the collaboration between Tim and Bradley. It was often at this stage of jamming that Bradley's strength in developing harmonic sequences emerged, an area where Tim admitted "I'm really weak in." For example, Tim was very excited about a simple four bar chord sequence of E minor, C major, A minor7, and B major. He started improvising a melody on top of the sequence, which he repeated four times. Bradley said the melody was okay, but the chord sequence was unoriginal and too basic. He changed the C major chord to a C major7 chord and instead of repeating the sequence four times, repeated it twice and added four new bars (A minor, G major, F major7, and B minor), before returning to the initial four bar sequence. Bradley effortlessly made these changes in just over a minute, leaving Tim in awe. "I could never do that" he said. "You know so much about harmony, what works, how to make it more interesting."

Collaboration in songwriting can lead to a superior song which could not have been written without all those parties involved. Peter Buck, of REM, says, "All of us can write songs on our own. But having the four of us all do it has really made the difference" (Zollo, 1997, p. 638). Keith Richards says that 'sometimes I might record the odd song alone', but it only really comes 'together' when he collaborates with Mick Jagger (Dalton, 1980, p. 98). Midway through their collaboration, having completed six songs together, Tim and Bradley shared similar sentiments. "What we've written together is far better than what we did alone" said Tim. "It's all about coming to terms with the parts of your songwriting that aren't strong and letting the other person strengthen them, make them better."

Originality

When Tim played the aforementioned chord sequence of E minor, C major, A minor7, and B major, Bradley's initial reaction was a shaking of the head, followed by "Leonard Cohen could sue you for that." He indicated the chord sequence was from Cohen's "Famous Blue Raincoat", which he proceeded to play and sing. "It is too" said Tim, who went red. "I didn't realise … how lame of me." Bradley then went on to change the chord sequence, adding some "originality."

Both Tim and Bradley valued originality in their songwriting, thus reflecting the core theme of the pair sharing common values and goals in their songwriting. This is not unusual in popular music, with Frith (1992) writing, "Young rock bands and musicians put the highest value on originality and self-expression, on music as a means of defining

one's individual identity" (p. 174). Established songwriters too strive for originality, as Hal David indicates

> The way I write and the way Burt writes is to try and find something that is a little original, and not follow the pack. There's no fun in following the pack. And still you want to write songs that people like and you like. (Zollo, 1997, p. 211)

Bradley described writing "popular" music that was also original as being challenging:

> It's about providing a new twist, maybe a change that's unexpected but still works, you know, without alienating the listener. Kind of like what Radiohead did on *OK Computer*. You know, that was kind of prog rock, Pink Floydy, but they made it their own, they put their own stamp on the music. And people loved it.

Tim provided a similar example when he played an Elliot Smith album to Bradley, who had never listened to his music before. "You hear it and it sounds kind of Beatlesque" explained Tim, "but in a good way. Not like Oasis. You hear a song of theirs and you know they've ripped it off from a couple of Beatles' songs, they've taken whole chunks of Beatles' songs. That's lame." I acted as devil's advocate, asking, "But what about sampling in rap?" They both laughed. Bradley responded: "Rap's not about real songs, rap's about rhyming, not music, not original music." Tim nodded in agreement. I was tempted to continue the argument, stressing the importance of rhythm in rap, and the original use of rhyme and vocal delivery in much rap. Yet I did not speak, for fear that I might somehow influence their musical beliefs and thus change the dynamic of their collaboration.

Mystique

Lilliestram (1996) points to "the mythical and mystical conceptions" of popular music composition, whereby musicians "cannot or do not want to talk about" why they might use one particular chord sequence and not another or why the melody turned out the way it did (p. 209). This is clearly illustrated in Zollo's *Songwriters on Songwriting* (1997), where a number of famous songwriters (e.g., Madonna, Burt Bacharach, REM) are interviewed about the songwriting process, yet often see it as something magical or mystical that simply happens. For example, Peter Buck of REM says: "There's a huge amount of songs that are totally unplanned. We don't know where they are or where they come from. It's just being in the room there all together helps it occur" (Zollo, 1997, p. 639).

Whenever Tim and Bradley suffered writer's block, Bradley would say they should relax and "not try too hard." Early on in the collaboration Tim looked to me for inspiration. "Help us out here, give us a tune, give us a riff." I shrugged, indicating I was "dry". Dry or not, I decided, again, not to contribute to their musical collaboration, for fear of contaminating their collaboration. Instead, I suggested they go for a walk. "It works for me, gets you breathing, then all of a sudden the ideas come."

They did not go walking. Rather, at such moments of writer's block the pair would often put an album on or talk about something other than the song they were working on. After such intervention they generally returned to the songwriting and ideas flowed. "You can't explain it" said Bradley, "It's just something that happens, the music comes out. Who knows where it comes from?" In these situations the pair chipped away at the song they were working on, generally not finishing a song in a single writing session. However, there was one session when the pair wrote an entire song in an hour, titled "She Covers Me with Love." Both agreed it was the best song they had written together. Ecstatic when they had finished it, Tim said, "Can you believe the way it just came out like that? I have never experienced anything like that before, it's … it's …" He could not finish the sentence. Brad nodded in agreement, the pair sharing another belief about the songwriting process.

Conflict

Despite the apparent success of their songwriting collaboration, there was conflict. By this time the pair did not share common goals and values, the core theme which had defined the collaboration. The collaboration ended after three months when Bradley departed on a two month tour of South East Asia with his band. Tim wanted to continue the collaboration when Bradley returned. Bradley would not commit to this. In a one-on-one interview he indicated that "the partnership's run its course, there's not too much more we can do together. It feels like we've come full circle." After a significant amount of further questioning Bradley finally opened up further, indicating "I hate saying it, but Tim, despite his good points, just isn't professional. I mean I'm a professional muso and I was hoping to be a professional songwriter, or at least become one, but he just hasn't got that." I asked him what he meant by professional. "He's not got formal music training, he can't notate music properly, he doesn't earn a living from music." This was the first time Bradley had voiced these reservations. Previously, the pair had offset their respective weaknesses in songwriting through the strengths of the other. I reminded Bradley of Tim's musical contributions and his constant punctuality at writing sessions. "I know, don't get me wrong, it's been good for this period of time, but long-term I don't think it'd work. Maybe that's just me, I'm a musical snob or something, but it's the way I feel." I wanted to say more, to remind Bradley of Tim's contributions. I wanted him to change his mind, to continue the collaboration because I felt the music they had written was very good. I had to decide on the spot, do I leave my role as researcher and say what's on my mind or simply leave it? Bradley made up my mind for me, by saying, "Look, it's finished, there's nothing you or Tim can say to change my mind. My mind's made up."

So I asked Bradley if he felt the collaboration had been collegial, where authors share work as colleagues, or more of a mentoring relationship where a senior author mentors a junior author, (Hart, 2000):

> I guess more of a mentoring thing, what with me being older and a pro, though sometimes it was equal, particularly when he fixed up my lyrics. But that's just lyrics. Musically I felt it was more my contributions and he benefited from me.

 I asked Tim how he viewed the collaboration. "Definitely the first, the collegial. I really felt like we were equals."

Two days later I received a telephone call from Tim. He had spoken to Bradley on the telephone, indicating Bradley had told him he did not want to continue their partnership once he returned from overseas. "He was really abrupt with me" said Tim. "I guess maybe we didn't get along as well as I thought we did." This comment resulted in my going back over the recordings I had made of their writing sessions, looking for possible hints of conflict in the relationship. What emerged were little comments made by Bradley on occasion, particularly when Tim was vague in describing what he wanted musically. For example, when Bradley played a chord sequence on piano he asked Tim if he liked it. "It's not mellow enough" Tim responded. Bradley asked for clarification. "It's just not mellow enough" said Tim. "You know?" Bradley, somewhat abruptly, said he did not know what he meant. Ten minutes later Bradley had significantly changed the sequence. "That's it!" said Tim. Bradley nodded: "It's amazing what a couple of major ninths can do." Like other musicians who played by ear, Tim did not use traditional music terminology, but more personal terms (Lilliestram, 1996, p. 200). Bradley reacted against this, albeit in a non-confrontational way.

Conclusion

The end of the collaboration came as a surprise to me. Watching the pair working over three months I was taken by their commitment and the quality of the songs they had written. Although only nine songs were written in this period, Tim and Bradley constantly revisited them, seeking to improve them. When Bradley announced that the partnership would not continue I wanted to say, "But listen to the songs, they're great!" I particularly felt for Tim, who obviously had invested a lot of himself in the partnership and wanted to continue the collaboration. Yet as researcher I held back, not expressing my personal views. This had become increasingly difficult as I had gotten to know the pair, both during the writing sessions and on more social occasions such as dining out. I enjoyed the way they asked me for my opinion when songs were completed, even though I made a conscious effort not to give too much input, as I wanted them making the musical decisions. That is, I did not want any musical input from me to impact on their collaboration. However, I did want to create rapport. This occurred through interactions with the pair; with them inviting me to participate or talk about what they were doing. However, I tended to hold back, rarely talking about anything except their songwriting. Yet Bradley and Tim let me into their world and treated me as a friend. This realisation led me to question my role as researcher.

Could I be a "researcher" and a "friend"? Possibly, but in this case I had entered "the field" with the intention of not participating, at least in a musical way. As a result a true friendship did not develop. Leading on from this was the feeling that I was not giving anything back to Bradley and Tim, with the exception of lending Bradley books about songwriting. Of course I could have given something in return if I had contributed, when invited, to comment critically on their songwriting, or even getting involved with the actual songwriting. Thinking back, I would like to do the study all over again, but involve myself as much as the pair wants to involve me. This time I think I would like to be one of the musicians, one of the writers. But with this particular study it is too late.

With Bradley and Tim I made my "moral choice" (Tedlock, 2000, p. 455) in interacting with them in a somewhat distanced manner, in an effort to remain "objective". I have experienced first-hand "the oxymoron [that] participant observation implies simultaneous emotional involvement and objective detachment. Ethnographers attempted to be both engaged participants and coolly dispassionate observers of the lives of others" (Tedlock, p. 465). It just does not "sit" right, at least in a closed situation like the one I found myself in, working with just two people who were engaged in a singular activity. Ultimately, I see this impossible situation as the greatest limitation of the study. Ellis & Bochner (2000, p. 750) suggest that "the truth is that we can never capture experience … [with my narrative being] one selective story about what happened written from a particular point of view for a particular purpose." My purpose was to examine a new songwriting collaboration from a distance. This was not possible. However, my selective story has indicated that the collaboration did occur, and was initially fruitful, because Bradley and Tim shared common goals and beliefs about songwriting. Therefore they were compatible writing partners, despite the differences in their age and musical experience. This core theme or category emerged as analysis of observations and interviews occurred. As is the case in grounded theory, this core category generated a number of sub-categories – or sub-themes – that related to the core category. That is, the pair clearly shared common beliefs about particular aspects of the songwriting process, which they were engaged in, namely: they saw a popular song as consisting of melody, harmony, and lyrics; they played on the strengths and offset the weaknesses of each other's songwriting skills; both writers valued originality; and they believed songwriting had a mystical element to it. Each of these sub-themes reflected core aspects in their ongoing *practice* as songwriters collaborating. The final theme, conflict resulted in the demise of the collaboration, confirmed the core theme in that when the pair's common goals and values were no longer in tandem the collaboration ended.

I had expected that the study would reveal the relationship between "music-making activities and the micro-social spaces in which such activities take place" (Bennett, 2000, p. 167), as this was one of two prominent issues that Bennett suggested emerge from ethnographic studies of local music-making. That is, I expected the geographical location where Bradley and Tim lived and worked – Sydney – and their socio-economic status to impact on their songwriting. The pair, however, did not make specific reference to their living and working in Sydney and how this impacted on their songwriting. In fact, looking back at interview transcripts and observational records, there is little that even suggests the pair was working in an Australian context. This perhaps can be explained because the pair was not making music for a local audience. Rather, they were writing songs that they hoped to sell. They did not specify if they were targeting a local or international audience. Bennett's (2000) ethnographic work, and works by Cohen (1991) and Finnegan (1989), focus on communities of musicians who play in order to perform to local audiences. Bradley and Tim were not doing this. In addition, there were only two of them involved in the process of songwriting, as opposed to larger groups of people being involved in music-making in the work of Bennett, Cohen (1991), and Finnegan.

Middleton (1990) has pointed to the neglect of scholarship examining with older age groups in relation to popular music. This study presented two age groups, one older and one younger, working together in a popular music context; Tim in his early twenties

and Bradley nearing forty. Although the age difference was not mentioned by Tim and Bradley, it ultimately impacted on the demise of the partnership. Bradley's age meant he spent fifteen years as a professional musician. The more youthful Tim did not have such experience, which Bradley ultimately viewed as being detrimental to their partnership. Despite sharing common goals and values in their songwriting, Tim and Bradley's case suggests that this is not enough to sustain a writing partnership. Ultimately partners need to respect each other and work in a collegial way to sustain such a partnership. With the partnership at an end, Tim and Bradley went through the process of copyrighting their material. Tim has been performing the songs when busking and hopes to cut a "cheap, raw CD" of the songs to sell when he busks. Meanwhile Bradley has presented "She Covers Me With Love" to his band, who "really like the song" and might even perform it in one of their sets.

Postscript

That was over a year ago. I subsequently tried contacting Tim, wanting to ask him about my role in the rise and fall of the songwriting collaboration. This was something I had not asked either Bradley or Tim throughout our interviews. I had simply assumed that I had little to no impact, that I was invisible, or at best semi-visible. Tim's telephone has been disconnected. He no longer works at the coffee shop or bookshop he had been working at a year ago. I could not contact him. I had more success with Bradley. My first question: "What impact did I have on you two disbanding?" Pause. "None, you just helped me realise what I already knew." *I helped? But I had not said a thing!* "I didn't say that, did I?" (putting words in Bradley's mouth - a big no-no when interviewing, but still, I have to know). Pause. "I guess you didn't … I guess it was my decision. What I mean is, that, like, you were there, that helped me see things."

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