Peak music experiences:
A new perspective on popular music, identity and scenes

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Abstract

Peak music experiences are those experiences involving music that stand out as especially affecting, meaningful and memorable for the individuals involved. They are a common topic in discussions of popular music, including in journalism, biography and fan culture, where they are often credited as pivotal in people’s relationships with music and their lives more generally. Examples of peak music experiences are apparent in some previous scholarly studies of popular music cultures, however, this is the first dedicated investigation of the phenomenon. By analysing this way of thinking and talking about music, this thesis contributes to understandings of how music’s meaning and effects are constructed, the role of musical experience in identity and sociality, and the discursive structuring of individual and collective experience in music scenes.

The thesis draws on ethnographic research conducted in 2015 in the local music scene of Brisbane, Australia, including participant observation in activities of music consumption and production, reviews of secondary data sources including popular music media, and in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted with 44 women and men between the ages of 23 and 58 who participated in Brisbane’s dance, hip hop, indie and rock ‘n’ roll music scenes. This research provides the basis for a grounded exploration of peak music experiences, as well as a contemporary ethnographic study of these scenes, demonstrating the methodological value of peak music experiences for music scene research.

The findings are broadly divided into themes of identity and belonging. In the first part, peak music experiences are shown to be epiphanies through which self-narratives are constructed. This involves common tropes including first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences, which offer discursive shape for the construction of identity through popular music and highlight common and divergent priorities between popular music cultures. In particular, these narratives enable and
encourage people to present their relationship to music as personal, authentic, and aligned with specific cultural values. It is common for music scene participants to credit peak music experiences with inspiration and influence on their musical activities as well as other aspects of their lives. Analysing these claims highlights the crucial importance of affect in people’s responses to music and therefore its social agency. This analysis also responds to the important but under-explored question of why some people grant music a central status in their lives, as musicians, fans and in other roles, investing considerable resources and organising their social lives around it. Peak music experiences provide motivation to sustain social commitments and activities, as embodied experiences, memories and sought-after ideals.

The second part considers the role of peak music experiences in belonging and collective identity. At the micro-social level, peak music experiences can both reflect and inform relationships between family, friends and romantic partners. At a larger scale, the music scene participants interviewed attributed peak music experiences most often to live and collective music events, reflecting the status accorded to these in both popular culture and scholarly research. These specifically celebrated instances of live music reveal what people value most in that context and how this differs between groups. Most notably, live music enables the exploration and celebration of individual and collective identity, including uncommon expressions of the self, resulting in especially affecting, memorable and meaningful musical experiences. Thus peak music experiences help to account for the special status of live music. Finally, the role of peak music experiences in music scenes is considered. Individuals’ peak music experiences contribute to and are shaped by collective memory in the Brisbane dance, hip hop, indie and rock ‘n’ roll music scenes. This informs ongoing practices in the scenes, which are defined partly by the shared priorities and ideals that are apparent in and reproduced by the peak music experiences of participants.
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed) __________

Ben Green

Ethical clearance

The research for this thesis was authorised by the Griffith University Ethics Committee under protocol number 2014/762.
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PART I

INTRODUCTION
Why do people engage with music - by performing, listening and in myriad other ways? To answer this question we might further ask, what can music do? More critically, we might ask how music can be said to do these things? These are important questions for the sociological understanding of popular music. They are also questions that musicians, fans and others who participate in popular music culture are often inclined to answer, more or less explicitly, in common ways of speaking about music and themselves. Rock musician Bruce Springsteen addressed these questions quite directly in the following quote, given to an Australian journalist in 2016 (Hann 2016):

"It’s coming on stage with the idea: OK, well the stakes that are involved this evening are quite high. I don’t know exactly who’s in the crowd. But I know that my life was changed in an instant by something that people thought was purely junk – pop music records. And you can change someone’s life in three minutes with the right song. I still believe that to this day. You can bend the course of their development, what they think is important, of how vital and alive they feel. You can contextualise very, very difficult experiences. Songs are pretty good at that. So all these are the stakes that are laid out on the table when you come out at night. And I still take those stakes seriously after all that time, if not more so now, as the light grows slightly dimmer. I come out believing there’s no tomorrow night, there wasn’t last night, there’s just tonight. And I have built up the skills to be able to provide, under the right conditions, a certain transcendent evening, hopefully an evening you’ll remember when you go home. Not that you’ll just remember it was a good concert, but you’ll remember the possibilities the evening laid out in front of you, as far as where you could take your life, or how you’re thinking about your friends, or your wife or your girlfriend, or your best pal, or
your job, your work, what you want to do with your life. These are all things, I believe, that music can accommodate and can provide service in. That’s what we try to deliver.

Here, Springsteen defines the value of music, or in his words its ‘stakes’, by what it can do, or in his words what it can accommodate and provide service in. In this regard, he is clear: music can change someone’s life. It can affect how they think and how they feel, in a general sense and with respect to certain experiences, people and problems. As to how music does these things, Springsteen is equally clear that it does so in an instant. This instant might last for a song or a whole evening, and indeed music can create a transcendent moment that is experienced as outside the rest of life and time, so there is no last night or tomorrow night but only ‘tonight’. However, such a moment lays out possibilities that stretch into the future and these possibilities can later be remembered. Indeed, for Springsteen, such instants might not only be remembered but also anticipated and worked towards. This points to the dual character of transcendent musical moments. People may lose themselves in the moment, within musical experience and perhaps as part of a crowd, but through the search for such moments and reflection on them people may find themselves. According to the quote above, Springsteen draws his motivation as a career musician from the memory of what music has done for him in an instant, and he finds purpose in trying to ‘deliver’ as much.

It is reported that Springsteen made the above speech ‘without pause, without any errs or urrms, in a single perfect paragraph, that requires not one piece of tidying in the transcription’ (Hahn 2016). While no further comment is made, the implication is that the statement itself was a kind of performance, whether consciously or not; the words, or at least their sentiment, were well-worn if not rehearsed. Springsteen had certainly spoken of such instants in the past, beginning with his childhood memory of watching Elvis Presley perform ‘Hound Dog’ on television’s The Ed Sullivan Show: ‘When I heard it, it
just shot straight through to my brain. And I realized, suddenly, that there was more to life than what I'd been living’ (Kreps 2016). In any case, Springsteen was far from the first musician, or music fan, to say such things. While he explicitly challenges historical perceptions of ‘pop music records’ as ‘junk’, he is tracing narratives that must by now be familiar to many fans of popular music. Members of the Beatles, with whom Springsteen credits another life-defining musical experience while watching The Ed Sullivan Show yet again in 1964, have been quoted numerous times in that decade and since, about instants in which the music of Elvis Presley and contemporaries like Little Richard touched and changed their own lives (as discussed in Chapter 4). It is reasonable to assume that Springsteen had heard his musical heroes speak in this way. His story about ‘Hound Dog’ was told on a BBC radio programme called Desert Island Discs, on which such anecdotes are frequently told by guests. Moreover, the narrative is not restricted to famous musicians. Cultural anthropologist Daniel Cavicchi (1998) found the practice of talking about musical ‘epiphanies’ to be common among Springsteen’s own fans in the 1990s. The proliferation of these stories in particular groups and media suggests a phenomenon of cultural practice as well as musical experience.

The broader currency of this phenomenon is demonstrated by its use in marketing. During the television broadcast of the Australian Football League Grand Final in 2012, soft drink manufacturer Coca-Cola debuted a commercial that ‘follows a young girl at a music festival as she is lifted above the crowd to view the stage, experiencing a memorable moment that she will forever connect to the song being played’, culminating in the tagline, ‘every moment has a song’ (Campaign Brief 2012). References to such transcendent experiences are used to promote live music concerts and festivals themselves. These events now form part of the ‘experience economy’, in which the business opportunities for music lie in facilitating and designing settings for certain kinds of experiential encounters as opposed to selling services or objects (Pearce 2013). This
might explain why, despite the technological and cultural domestication and individualisation of music consumption, live performance is an increasingly lucrative and important sector of the broader music industry (Frith 2007). At the same time, as in Springsteen’s examples, music can be seen to have profound effects in private, everyday situations. This was played upon in a 2015 poster campaign for digital music platform Pandora, in which Australian bus passengers were invited to share their personal ‘music journey’ using such social media hashtags as #firstsong, #firstgig and #firstkiss (Lowe 2015). As in the Coca-Cola advertisement, the implication is that every moment has a song and, likewise, every song has a moment, with such moments arising in both public and private settings.

The foregoing discussion begins to illustrate two related ways in which music assumes importance for individuals and groups. First, music occasionally gives rise to singular experiences that stand out from other experience, as especially affecting or meaningful and sometimes transcendent in a holistic sense. People cherish these experiences in retrospect and consciously seek them out. Second, these experiences form the basis of stories that are shared by musicians and music fans, who attribute autobiographical meaning and sometimes profound consequences to them. This is a popular way to remember and explain things about music and also about people’s lives. It would therefore seem that what I will call ‘peak music experiences’ play no small part in music’s social and cultural importance. Instances of peak music experiences can be found in some studies of popular music and in a few cases they have been analysed from specific perspectives, for example in Cavicchi’s (1998) discussion of ‘Bruce stories’ and Kahn-Harris’s (2004) observation of ‘shocking first encounters’ with extreme metal. However, there has been no dedicated study of peak music experiences as a phenomenon. This thesis will develop a sociological theory of peak music experiences, which it will be argued offers substantial new insight into the relationships between popular music,
identity, memory and embodied practice, within the context of music scenes and in everyday life.

Defining peak music experiences

The term ‘peak music experiences’ reflects the elements of the phenomenon being considered. They are peaks because their defining characteristic is that they stand out, in perception, in memory and in description. While the term may be reminiscent of Maslow’s (1962) concept of ‘peak experiences’, it is not intended to import his psychological theories such as a hierarchy of needs. However, the similarity is apt as both concepts (as discussed further in Chapter 2) use the connotations of peaks to distinguish especially affecting and meaningful experiences from general experience, while also recognising how they arise out of and influence the rest of life. As philosopher John Dewey (2004b: 269 [1934]) states, ‘Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They are the earth in one of its manifest operations.’ Conversely, to extend this metaphor, the presence of peaks is not without consequences for the surrounding earth. Dewey’s aesthetic philosophy is concerned with restoring continuity between ‘the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art’ and everyday experience (ibid: 268). Likewise, this thesis will consider both what makes peak music experiences distinct as well as how they relate to the rest of musical experience and social life. In Chapter 2, Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy will be used to help frame this approach, including his relevant definition of ‘an experience’ as an aesthetically and emotionally unified arc of doing and undergoing. However, this is only a starting point for sociological inquiry into how those aesthetic and emotional parameters are constructed. In other words, this thesis will consider how peaks in musical experience are socially defined, as well as how they define the social.
In focusing on *experience*, this thesis will build on what have been termed ‘post-cultural turn studies in the sociology of popular music’ (Bennett 2008: 429). With the recognition that cultural meanings and social identities are produced through the continuing, complex interaction of various influences, in relation to which people exercise awareness and agency, the detail of subjective, lived experience has come to the fore. Study that is close to experience has proved especially important in relation to music, as the very malleability of music’s meaning is key to its social significance. Accordingly, as detailed in Chapter 2, the focus has shifted from semiotic readings of what music signifies within structurally-determined subcultures, to ethnographic explorations of locally articulated, subjective appropriations of music within more loosely bounded scenes and individualised lifestyles. Work in this area has been more concerned with general experience that is typical of particular genres, groups and perspectives, than with discrete and extraordinary experiences that might have unique significance. In developing sociological understandings of music, an understandable emphasis is placed on the study of existent meanings, established practices and objectified tastes. There has been a growing interest in how music forms part of ‘everyday life’ (DeNora 2000; Vroomen 2002; Bennett 2005) and this is associated with a focus on the ‘mundane’ aspects of experience. However, the now substantial body of work arguing that musical taste and practices are not pre-determined raises questions about why and how people commence, continue and alter their relationships with music. A burgeoning body of work considering social memory and social ageing in relation to music (Strong 2011; Bennett 2013) begins to address these questions, and this thesis will argue that the study of peak music experiences advances these understandings. Similarly, the broad abandonment of a simplistic account of unilateral, universal media effects leaves open the question of how music might actually affect people and, as DeNora (2004) asks, how music ‘gets into’
social reality. This thesis will develop the study of peak music experiences as a means of responding directly to these questions.

The experience with which this thesis is concerned is *musical* experience. Music itself is only one part of the cultural worlds that will be considered. Studies of subcultures (e.g., Hebdige 1979) identify a range of stylistic practices, objects and symbols clustered around music consumption, while music scenes have been shown to comprise both ‘hard infrastructure’ such as physical spaces and ‘soft infrastructure’ such as social networks (Stahl 2004). In terms of experiences, people might be deeply moved and attribute profound meaning to a personal encounter with a favourite musician, an achievement in their own musical career, or a social interaction far away from the stage at a music festival, to use examples that arose in my ethnographic research described later in this chapter. However, in this thesis I am concerned with experiences to which ‘music’s specifically musical properties’ contribute (DeNora 2004: 36; emphasis in original). I do not suggest that it is useful or even possible to separate these musical properties from other aspects of a peak music experience. Indeed, a major benefit of considering music in terms of specific experiences is that it opens a window to the multitude of factors that inform music’s meaning and effects for a particular individual at a particular time. However, as suggested by its opening words, this thesis seeks to engage as much as possible with the obvious but elusive question of what is so special about music that it might be said to define or change someone’s life. In this regard, DeNora (2000, 2004) provides a useful framework for understanding how music structures experience in time, giving aesthetic form to feelings by virtue of its specific affordances, which are both inherent and accrued through association. Thus music might not only be associated with the memory of particular experiences but contribute to their construction as memorable in the first place. Additionally, Hennion’s (2010) pragmatics of taste provides a co-productive model of a person’s encounter with music, in which listening engages
techniques that are developed through use and to which music responds. Accordingly, the encounter is uniquely situated within a history of listening to which it contributes. While these microsocial perspectives have been thought to pose a risk of privileging aesthetic over social analysis (Prior 2011), on the contrary their benefit here is to enable consideration of how subjects are not prior to experience, but constructed through it. Paradoxically, in the study of peak music experiences, a focus on discrete moments makes it possible to see beyond static texts and preformed listeners to consider instead how each is produced in encounters over time, within social and cultural contexts.

The interactional perspective described here also challenges the fixity of musical texts and therefore problematises inherent distinctions between popular music and high art music, as reflected in the mixed case studies of DeNora and Hennion. Peak music experiences are apparent in literature about classical music and folk music and there is no reason to believe the approach developed in this thesis could not be applied usefully to them. For example, Bob Dylan (2004: 244) writes of his instant ‘epiphany’ when he first heard a recording of folk singer Woody Guthrie in 1959. Composer George Gershwin experienced what he called a ‘flashing revelation’ as a child in 1908, when from outside the school auditorium he heard a fellow student’s violin recitation of Dvořák’s \textit{Humoresque} (Ross 2009: 155). Like Frith (1998: 19), I prefer to begin from the principle that there is no difference between high and low culture and then to consider how such difference is produced as a social fact. However, in light of that social fact, this thesis is specifically concerned with peak music experiences in relation to \textit{popular music} as that term is typically used in sociology, referring to certain historical, cultural and material frameworks as well as a certain history of academic research (see Regev 2015). Specifically, I will consider peak music experiences in the context of local music scenes, based on ethnographic research that will be outlined in the following section of this chapter.
A problem with studying experience, as Cavicchi (1998: 19) observes, is that ‘one can never truly move beyond one's own; another person's experience can be shared only through the artifice of expression’. It is my intention to examine such artifice as an object of interest in itself. This is a study of peak music experiences as stories through which reality is remembered and explained. The aim is not to determine their objective truth or falsity, since people act on the basis of their understandings and if they define situations as real, those situations are real in their consequences (Minichiello et al 2008: 130-131). The question is how the understandings reflected in stories about peak music experiences are constructed. This inquiry will make use of Denzin’s (2001) sociological formulation of ‘epiphanies’: interactional moments that leave marks on people’s lives as turning points and manifestations of personal character. Epiphanies are narrative resources with which people interpret their lives for themselves and others, and they provide a focal point for interpretive studies of people’s lives within social contexts. By conceptualising peak music experiences as epiphanies, this thesis will advance the sociological understanding of music’s potentially significant and lifelong role in identity construction, building on previous work regarding musical memory (DeNora 2000, Strong 2011) and ageing music fans (Bennett 2013). As Denzin (2001) observes, the meaning of epiphanies is continually reconstructed and this is shaped by group contexts and cultural texts. Peak music experiences will therefore be considered as collective productions, as well as a means by which cultural narratives are in turn reproduced and reshaped. For example, the quote from Bruce Springsteen that opened this chapter presents the musician as someone who both plays for high stakes and works hard to provide a service; the listener as someone with a job, a girlfriend or wife and a best pal; musical experience as a source of felt vitality and a resource for purposive reflection, and perhaps at a deeper level, life as a reflexive moral project. Peak music experiences are both shaped by and contribute to the discursive construction of ways of experiencing and, therefore, experiences and the subjects who
have them. In considering the structuring role of discourse, I will not seek to separate meaning and thought from feeling and sensation, but to consider how they are related. Indeed, it will be shown that this relationship is key to music’s unique power and significance. The affective intensity and frequently ineffable qualities of peak music experiences are informed by, and contribute to, judgments of value and meaning. Peak music experiences may involve the loss or transcendence of the self in sensuous activity and collective affect, but the same experiences may also be rationalised within the narrative, purposive construction of the self. By exploring these two aspects of peak music experiences, this thesis contributes to the reconciliation between two apparently competing macro-social theories of contemporary life, namely affective sociality (eg Maffesoli 1996) on the one hand and reflexive individualisation (eg Giddens 1991) on the other. A detailed review of relevant literature and an explanation of the main theoretical framework for this thesis will be provided in Chapter 2.

Scope and methods

Since peak music experiences are always grounded in social and cultural contexts, I will consider the phenomenon within specific settings, namely four local music scenes in Brisbane, Australia. These are local articulations of global genres: the dance music scene, the hip hop music scene, the indie music scene and the rock ‘n’ roll scene. Accordingly, this thesis will perform two functions. Primarily, it will explicate peak music experiences as a sociological concept, using four Brisbane music scenes as case studies. Among other things, this will demonstrate the utility of peak music experiences as a conceptual lens with which to study and compare music scenes, although some of the chapters will present findings with a more individual and microsocial focus. Secondly, as a consequence of the case studies, this will be an ethnographic study of four Brisbane music scenes. The picture will necessarily be partial, as it is mostly limited to what is revealed by the peak music
experiences of scene participants. However, this will be shown to provide significant insight into the collective identities of the scenes, especially in terms of the affective aesthetic underlying the variety of activities and situations that comprise each one. As a by-product of the research methods used and the manner in which the findings are presented, there will be a non-exhaustive but representative, ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973) of the lived experience of the scenes in question.

The scholarly concept of scene can be distinguished from community, place and genre, although each of these can play a part in a scene. According to Straw’s (1991: 373) influential definition, a scene is a cultural space in which a range of musical practices may coexist and interact, within various processes of differentiation and according to varying trajectories of change. Consistently with this description, a substantial amount of research has identified local, trans-local and virtual dimensions to music scenes, which overlap and interact (Peterson and Bennett 2004). Thus the concept can be applied to the dance, hip hop, indie and rock ‘n’ roll scenes of Brisbane, which are local articulations of trans-local scenes, while at the same time they all form part of an overall, local Brisbane scene. This broader local scene also includes other sub-scenes that will not be covered in any detail here, such as the Brisbane metal scene and the Brisbane punk scene, for example, although each of these will be mentioned in passing. Building on the tripartite model of local, trans-local and virtual scenes, Bennett (2013: 60) adds the concept of affective scene, which refers to a shared sense of sceneness between individuals who are not directly visible to each other, but knowingly consume the same music and related media and above all, make ‘a similar sort of sense out of what they are hearing, reading and watching, based on their shared generational memories and cultural experience of that music’. Peak music experiences can be seen as an aspect of shared sense-making, as collective ideals and frames for making sense of musical experience. I will therefore explore how peak music experiences anchor affective sceneness, specifically as an aspect
of local and trans-local scene activity and identification. Bennett and Rogers (2016) develop the affective aspect of scenes by analysing how the ‘predominant past-tense and memory-based nature’ (ibid: 34) of music scenes informs their ongoing articulation in the present. They argue that despite a lack of attention to this retrospective nature, the study of cultural memory is important to the understanding of music scenes. Peak music experiences, as culturally grounded productions of memory and identity, will be shown to contribute to this understanding.

Brisbane is the capital of the north-eastern state of Queensland and the third-largest city in Australia with a population of over 2 million. The city’s indie music scene in particular has been the subject of previous research by Rogers (2008) and Bennett and Rogers (2016). Rogers (2008) observes that over the last three decades Brisbane has grown from a so-called ‘large country town’ to a rapidly developing metropolitan centre. Consistently with this history, the local music scene has progressed from notions of ‘insularity, punk, isolation and persecution’ within a highly conservative political and cultural setting, to a more global, ambitious and professional image with broader public acceptance, peaking with the recognition of Brisbane as a music industry ‘global hotspot’ by Billboard Magazine in 2007 (ibid: 642). This narrative is reflected in a popular book (reprinted twice to date) about Brisbane’s music history from the 1970s to the turn of the millennium, entitled Pig City: From The Saints to Savage Garden (Stafford 2004), along with other recent cultural texts including a State Library of Queensland exhibition entitled Live!: Queensland Band Culture (2012) and an Australian Broadcasting Corporation documentary entitled Stranded: The Saints & The Birth of Punk in Joh Bjelke-Peterson’s Brisbane (Ou 2015), referring to the conservative State Premier who served from 1968 to 1987. Despite this narrative, Brisbane continues to demonstrate qualities that Bennett and Rogers (2016: 96, 113) attribute to peripheral cities with smaller population density, including a fluctuating live music infrastructure that is highly responsive to policy
changes and ‘architectural churn’, as well as relatively porous boundaries between the audiences for given styles. The overlapping local music scenes are oriented around live performance venues ranging from houses and other repurposed spaces, through small bars and larger clubs to major entertainment venues and festivals. This context is discussed further in Chapter 3 regarding research methods and in Chapter 8 concerning live music experiences.

Brisbane’s dance, hip hop, indie and rock ‘n’ roll music scenes are local articulations of global, mass-mediated genres and trans-local scenes that are documented to varying degrees in academic literature. Dance music refers here to what is increasingly called ‘electronic dance music’ or ‘EDM’, typically produced using synthesised and sampled musical elements with an emphasis on continuous beats, and usually reproduced in clubs by DJs and live ‘P.A.’ or personal appearances by producers, in contexts of collective dancing (see for example Thornton 1995; Bennett 1999a; Malbon 1999; Riley et al 2010). Hip hop is a multi-dimensional cultural system encompassing dance, visual art and postural/style elements as well as music, originating in African American street culture in the 1970s (Tate 2003). The primary musical elements of ‘rapping’ (rhythmically spoken and often rhyming vocals) over beats and the associated techniques of deejaying and sampling (methods of appropriating and repeating parts of existing recordings) have been globally influential and adapted to various local contexts (see for example Bennett 1999b; Bennett 1999c; Schloss 2004; Mitchell 2005). Indie is less defined by certain musical elements and is instead positioned at the intersection of various aesthetic, social and commercial phenomena (Hibbett 2005), encompassing a mixed bag of practical, historical and aesthetic ideologies (Rogers 2008). As the name derived from ‘independent’ suggests, it is self-defined in opposition to the economic, political and aesthetic values of a perceived mainstream. Like punk, the term has been associated with specific stylistic choices such as ‘jangly’ guitars and overtly amateur production values
(Bennett 2001; Bannister 2006), but especially in this century it has been defined partly by conscious eclecticism (Rogers 2008). By contrast, rock ‘n’ roll involves relatively clear musical dimensions as well as attitudinal and visual style. The term rock ‘n’ roll is typically used in popular music literature to refer to a classic style developed from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, typified in its influential guitar-centred form by Chuck Berry (see for example Bradley 1992). However, I will be using the term in accordance with the emphatic self-description of participants in a local Brisbane scene, within a trans-local scene in at least Australia, parts of Europe and the United States. For them, the term refers to an overtly hedonistic culture involving a guitar-centred musical mix of garage rock, punk and hard rock, with accompanying stylistic elements such as denim, leather jackets and tattoos.

My ethnographic fieldwork in the Brisbane dance, hip hop, indie and rock ‘n’ roll music scenes was conducted throughout 2015, apart from an earlier pilot study, and involved three methods. These were participant observation in activities of music consumption and production, such as attending gigs (live performances) and club events as well as performing as a musician in those contexts; reviews of secondary data sources in local and global media relevant to the scenes in question; and, most importantly in light of the research questions set out in this chapter, in-depth interviews with 44 people who participated in the respective scenes by variously listening to, performing and working in the production or promotion of live and recorded music. The process of fieldwork and analysis will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3, including reflection on the consequences of my partial insider status due to my long-term, ongoing participation in Brisbane’s indie music scene.
Outline of chapters

The research findings are detailed in Chapters 4 through 9 and broadly divided into two parts. The first part comprising Chapters 4, 5 and 6 is concerned with the significance of peak music experiences to individual identity, within histories of listening and as sources of inspiration, influence and motivation. The second part comprising Chapters 7, 8 and 9 is concerned with the role of peak music experiences in belonging, as epiphanies in interpersonal relationships, as ideals for live music and as a defining element of each of the four music scenes under consideration.

Chapter 4 considers how peak music experiences are used to map an individual’s history of listening, through which music and biography are linked and take meaning from each other. This involves three prominent narrative tropes through which peak music experiences are woven into such histories. These are first encounters, referring to a person’s first experience of a particular musical object such as a song, artist or genre; gateway experiences, in which possible directions of music listening are revealed or made appealing; and conversion experiences, which are credited with a change in the listener’s taste and consequent identity, for example in becoming a fan. These narrative tropes are common across popular music genres and therefore reveal both similarities and differences in the priorities of listeners. By describing their first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences, people situate themselves in relation to collective orientations to music and the values underlying them, while also emphasising their own uniqueness and agency. These tropes all privilege responses to music which are surprising, emotional and physical, thus promoting notions of natural affinity and of music acting on people. They enable and to an extent require people to present their relationships to popular music as personal and authentic according to specific collective values.
Chapter 5 engages with the idea that music changes people’s lives. This is a popular notion but has tended to be overlooked or dismissed in sociological literature for various reasons. It will be shown that people credit peak music experiences with significant effects, as a source of inspiration to engage in certain activities and thus to become a musician, a fan and so on, and as an enduring influence on ways of seeing and acting in both musical practice and other aspects of life. This draws focus to the situated, embodied experiences from which music’s meaning and effects derive, highlighting in particular the crucial role of affect in music’s social agency. The feelings produced in musical experience are inseparable from subsequent interpretations, judgments and dispositions. The converse of this is that music’s affective power is itself shaped by narrative meaning and underlying discourse. The practice of identifying peak music experiences as sources of inspiration and influence forms part of the discourse of popular music, promoting particular ways of relating to music and emphasising the agency of both music and individuals over more mundane social and cultural factors. I will not seek to disentangle these discursive constructions from music’s ‘real’ effects but rather to consider the real effects that flow from them. Put simply, what music does depends on what people believe it does, and peak music experiences are an important way of believing in what music can do.

People invest considerable time and resources in musical activity, often basing their social lives around it and defining themselves in relation to it as musicians, fans or otherwise. Theories of escape, rebellion and distinction help to explain this but largely fall short of identifying what is specific to music that might attract such devotion. In Chapter 6 it is shown that peak music experiences are an important source of motivation for continuing musical practice and scene participation. As embodied experiences they provide an intrinsic reward that is often described as both therapeutic and addictive. As memories and sought-after ideals they represent what people hold important and why,
acting as affirmations of identity. In the scene-related careers of musicians, organisers and others, peak music experiences anchor narratives of fulfilment, vindication and success, as well as a contrasting narrative of authenticity in which the direct pleasures of musical experience are prioritised over other, extrinsic motivations for musical practice.

The next three chapters are concerned with ways that peak music experiences are involved in belonging. Chapter 7 considers the role of peak music experiences in interpersonal relationships, including between family, friends and romantic partners. This builds on previous theorisations of music as a resource for the identification and articulation of emotions (Horton 1957; Frith 1989), but replaces their focus on lyrics and textual meaning with the experiential approach developed in this thesis. It is shown that music can heighten and define the experience of certain microsocial events and situations, for individuals but also at an intersubjective level. Music can create a common affective space in which extraordinary kinds of expression and interaction are possible. People may consciously plan or seize upon shared experiences of music as a way to acknowledge, explore and celebrate aspects of their relationships. These are ways in which musical experiences can be imbued with highly personal significance and emotional resonance, creating peak music experiences through which people and relationships are remembered and narrated.

Attending or performing at live music events provides the setting for the greatest number of peak music experiences reported by the interview participants. This reflects the valourisation of the live music setting in popular music culture, as acknowledged in a range of scholarly work (for example, Finnegan 1989; Cohen 1991; Cavicchi 1998; Frith 2007; Kahn-Harris 2007). In Chapter 8, analysis of these experiences reveals what people value most in the live context and provides insight into what marks out live music as special. Common factors include the role of venues, sound, physicality, performance, presence and collective affect, each of which involves expectations that differ between
particular music cultures. Together these elements create a space for the exploration and celebration of individual and collective identity, including uncommon performances of self and belonging. By enabling extraordinary feelings and behaviour, live music creates especially affecting, memorable and meaningful experiences, which help to account for its special status.

Chapter 9 develops the study of peak music experiences as a new contribution to the understanding of music scenes. It is shown that the peak music experiences described by participants in the dance, hip hop, indie and rock ‘n’ roll scenes of Brisbane reveal shared clusters of priorities. While these are consistent with existing literature regarding each of the genres in question, this approach provides new insight into how scene participants identify with and reproduce such collective values as an aspect of scene belonging. While the findings show the synchronisation of various elements including musical style, thematic content, physical activity, preferred settings and substance use, these preferences are not attributed directly to structural causes as in subcultural theories of homology (e.g. Willis 1978; Hebdige 1979), but to a shared aesthetic that idealises particular kinds of experience. Beyond the content or objects of taste, such as musical and visual styles, the scenes favour ways of experiencing music and, in turn, the self and its relationship to others. Accordingly, they are bound by an ‘ethic of the aesthetic’ (Maffesoli 1991), offering new insight into affective scene belonging (Bennett 2013). It is shown that these ideals are expressed and reproduced through the peak music experiences described by participants. As shared frames through which personal experience is remembered and understood, peak music experiences are an aspect of collective memory in music scenes, contributing to the burgeoning study of this dimension of scene identity (Bennett and Rogers 2016).

The concluding chapter reviews the findings presented throughout the thesis as aspects of a theory of peak music experiences. This will include discussion of three major
themes that run through the following chapters. First, I will consider how the findings respond to the questions that opened this chapter: that is, what can music do, how can it do so, and what does this tell us about why people invest in music and the scenes oriented around? Second, I will sum up how peak music experiences play a role in both affective sociality and reflexive individualisation, demonstrating the co-existence and interaction of these ostensibly opposed, macro-level theories of late- or post-modern social being (Giddens 1991; Maffesoli 1996). Third, I will underline the ways that peak music experiences are shown to be collective productions, demonstrating the role of collective memory and shared aesthetics in structuring both narrative and affective aspects of individual identity and practice, especially in the context of music scenes. The chapter also suggests further applications and extensions of the study of peak music experiences, building on the findings that are presented. These suggestions include the investigation of the concept among people who do not so closely participate in local music scenes. I also argue for the value of peak music experiences in considering how broader social factors such as class, gender and race shape people’s engagements with music. Finally, I comment on the relevance of peak music experiences to questions of music’s value, with a bearing on cultural policy concerning live music in particular as well as analyses of technological change.

Conclusion

This introductory chapter has established what is meant by peak music experiences and provided an outline of what the concept offers to music sociology and popular music studies. This thesis will develop a theory of peak music experiences that takes account of this way in which people relate to music, as an important aspect of its social and cultural being. It will be shown that peak music experiences are used to map individual histories of listening, in which they explain the construction of musical meaning as well as crucial
matters of inspiration, influence and motivation. Peak music experiences provide insight into music’s role in interpersonal relationships and in far broader forms of collective belonging. They offer a new perspective on what makes live music special and on the structuring of affect and memory as an aspect of music scene identity. The theoretical framework for this analysis will be detailed in Chapter 2, before the research methods are discussed in Chapter 3.
Chapter 2
Theoretical framework: Situating the study of peak music experiences

There has been no dedicated study of peak music experiences from a sociological perspective. Indeed, the sociological study of music has generally not mirrored the popular fascination with singular, extraordinary experiences. Historically, as this chapter will show, this is explained in part by a suspicion of subjective experience as an object of study, although such experience has increasingly come to the fore as sociology has recognised that cultural meanings and identities are produced through the ongoing, complex interaction of various influences in relation to which people possess awareness and agency. Specifically in relation to music, it has been recognised that the very subjectivity of music’s meaning is crucial to its social significance, so that to understand such significance it is necessary to get close to experience. Work in this area has been more concerned with general and typical experience, consistently with a tendency to favour the analysis of established meanings, practices and tastes, although some recent work takes a more biographical approach (for example, the study of ageing music fans: Bennett 2013). However, the study of peak music experiences follows particular disciplinary directions in relation to popular music, which in this thesis is complemented by particular theoretical approaches from sociology more broadly, including interpretive biography and the sociology of emotion. This chapter will position the topic in relation to popular music studies and music sociology, while also introducing the theoretical framework to be used in this thesis.

The following section of this chapter will begin with reference to the aesthetic philosophy of nineteenth and twentieth century pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. Given the lack of a more specific precedent, Dewey’s definition of ‘an experience’ and its relation to general experience provides a useful starting point for approaching peak
music experiences. Further, Dewey’s analysis pulls together the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis, foreshadowing and unifying the scholarly approaches in sociology and popular music studies on which the thesis will build.

**Defining ‘an experience’**

Dewey (2004a [1929]: 251) notes the ancient Greek sense of experience as a store of practical wisdom, distilled from sensation and perception. Experience was considered valuable in judgment and action but was nevertheless placed below reason and science, which by contrast were seen as eternal and universal. This dualism has been deeply influential, though Dewey rejects it in his pragmatist philosophy that regards knowledge, truth, value and indeed reality as the contingent, evolving product of living humans interacting with their environment. On this view, there is no sharp division of practice and experience on the one hand from reason and knowledge on the other, nor of mind from body or fact from meaning. In challenging these dualisms, Dewey’s theory anticipates the more recent corporeal, affective and memory turns in sociology and popular music studies that will be important in this thesis. In setting aside the search for objective truth and focusing instead on the consequences of believing certain things to be true, the pragmatist philosophy turns from abstract universals to the specificities of lived experience, which by the same token must always be socially, historically and otherwise contextualised. This philosophy will resonate throughout this chapter.

Most relevantly for present purposes, Dewey (2004b [1934]: 274) sets out what defines ‘an experience’. Experience, in its modern sense of conscious undergoing, is often inchoate, appearing as a loose succession of elements that lack either distinction from or connection to each other. In contrast, we have an experience when what is experienced runs its course to fulfilment, with a self-sufficient, individualising quality that demarcates it from the general stream. Dewey observes that while philosophy has tended to speak of
experience at large, idiomatic speech refers to singular experiences. These may include tremendously important experiences like a quarrel with a loved one or a narrowly averted catastrophe, as well as slighter experiences like a meal that stands out as an enduring memorial of what food may be, or the passage through a storm. These have a unity — that meal, that storm — constituted by a single quality that pervades the experience, in spite of its various constituent parts. According to Dewey the unity is neither solely emotional, practical nor intellectual, although these are distinctions that can be made within an experience. What defines it more fundamentally as an experience is the integration of elements in a coherent whole, which is an aesthetic quality. Emotion plays an important role in this aesthetic binding of elements (ibid: 277). Pursuant to the pragmatist philosophy, emotions are not reified, private entities, but are attached to events and objects as they move toward outcomes that the individual desires or dislikes. Thus emotion is the force that selects experiential materials as congruous and dyes them with its colour, providing qualitative unity to an experience. In turn, it is through their emotions that people see the shape and character of events and objects. In Dewey’s example, an employer sees by his own emotional reactions whether an applicant’s presence and behaviour harmonise with his own attitudes, leading the varied elements of the interview to a decisive issue. Meanwhile, the intellectual aspect of an experience refers to the fact that it has meaning, while the practical aspect involves an organism interacting with what surrounds it. Every experience is the result of interaction between a living creature and some aspect of the world in which it lives. An experience has pattern and structure because it consists of doing and undergoing not just in alternation, but in relationship to each other.

The aesthetic quality of every complete experience is important in Dewey’s philosophy of art, as it provides the ground for his definition of aesthetic experience in the narrower sense. Art is defined by experience that is distinctively aesthetic, as opposed
to intellectual or practical. In an intellectual experience the conclusion has value on its own, for example as a formula or truth that can be used in other inquiries. By contrast, in a distinctively aesthetic experience the emphasis is on the integration of the parts, including but certainly not limited to the conclusion; for example, the point of a novel or a play is not its closing line (Dewey 2004b: 268) and the same could be said of a harmonic or lyrical resolution in music. Dewey’s general approach would suggest that aesthetic, intellectual and practical experiences should be defined on a continuum rather than by stark separation. In any case, this specific definition of aesthetic experience is not significant to this thesis, and the more important point for present purposes is that Dewey does not locate the work of art in an independent object but in what it does with and in experience. This is so for both the producer and the consumer, as it is in the experience of each that the work of art is perceived as such and has particular qualities. Further, Dewey’s conception of an experience as a perceived relationship between doing and undergoing posits an active and creative role for the consumer of art. To perceive a work of art is not merely to take what is there in finished form, which Dewey calls bare recognition, but to organise elements in a process that is in form analogous to the artist’s creative process. Adequate yielding of the self to an aesthetic experience is made possible through controlled, possibly intense activity. In keeping with the pragmatist, anti-dualistic underpinning of Dewey’s philosophy, an aesthetic experience involves close relations between sensory perception, knowledge and activity, guided by purpose and permeated by emotion.

Dewey’s philosophy as described here draws together the major theoretical underpinnings of this thesis, which in the following sections of this chapter will be situated more specifically within recent branches of sociology and popular music studies. The concept of ‘an experience’ is central to this investigation of peak music experiences, which are defined by their being perceived distinctly from the general experience out of
which they arise. This thesis will follow the broader pragmatist insistence that meaning, truth and indeed reality are produced in experience that is subjectively embodied within time, place and social interaction. That philosophy, especially as developed in more social terms by Dewey’s colleague and mentee George Herbert Mead, was directly influential on the symbolic interactionist perspective within sociology (Ward and Throop 1989; Denzin 1992: xiv), which is reflected in the qualitative, interpretive approaches this thesis will employ (Denzin 2001; Minichiello et al 2008: 130). Dewey’s rejection of strict divisions between thought and emotion, mind and body, fact and meaning, and person and context is also echoed in the recent sociological theory on which this thesis will build. In particular, I will follow Dewey in locating the work of art not in an object but in the experience, which the consumer has an active role in creating. The concept of peak music experiences recognises that the meanings and effects of music are based in the experiences in which it is encountered. Where this thesis will most clearly go beyond Dewey’s model of aesthetic experience, apart from applying it to the specific case of popular music, is in considering the social construction of peak music experiences along with their role in constituting the social.

Mirroring Dewey’s critique of philosophy, the study of popular music has tended to speak of experience at large, in contrast with the idiomatic discussion of singular experiences. This historical tendency will now be considered, before introducing more specific literature on which this thesis will build.

Experience in popular music studies

Mass culture and subcultures

The academic field of popular music studies has developed from foundations in the 1960s and 1970s and employs multi-disciplinary perspectives, including musicology, ethnomusicology, media and cultural studies, anthropology and sociology (Bennett and
Waksman 2015). According to Dowd (2007), the present vitality of music sociology contrasts with the near dormancy of its past, which for the first half of last century was marked by scattered works that did not generate sustained scholarly interest. This is not to suggest that early work lacks contemporary relevance, as demonstrated in the discussion of Horton (1957) in Chapter 7. In any case, a notable exception is the mid-century work of sociologist Theodor Adorno, which continues to be referenced and debated (see for example DeNora 2003 as discussed in Chapter 5). While Adorno (1976: 4), unlike Dewey, locates the aesthetic quality and meaning of music in its internal compositional structure, he is also interested in experiential factors that affect the listener’s access to that meaning. These include the delivery of the music, as discussed in his criticism of radio as a medium for symphonies (Adorno 1941), as well as the listener’s knowledge and effort, in which regard Adorno proposes a typology of listeners ranging from the expert through the entertainment listener to the indifferent (Adorno 1976). Most significantly, however, Adorno (1990) denigrates popular music as a whole in comparison to what he calls serious music, and more specifically good serious music. The key distinction is in popular music’s standardised form and content which, unlike the aesthetic totality of serious musical works, does not require or reward effort but effectively hears for the listener. Concrete musical details and differences are contained within the predictable abstract structure of popular songs, ultimately resulting in a familiar experience. Based on this analysis there is no reason to consider particular experiences with popular music, as their social significance lies in their uniformity.

Musical experience is also restricted largely to typological analysis in the subcultural studies of the 1970s that, according to Dowd (2007), presaged the proliferation of sociological perspectives on the reception of music. In contrast to Adorno’s critique of oppressive mass culture, the work of scholars associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) holds that popular music,
along with other mass commodities such as clothes and consumer technology, can be re-interpreted and re-purposed for cultural resistance: ‘The trivia which trap us can be turned against what lies behind them’ (Willis 1978: 166). This suggests a role for the consumer of music in creating meaning and, consequently, the potential for differing and conflicting meanings for the same music: ‘objects, artifacts and institutions do not, as it were, have a single valency’, and the act of social engagement brings out particular meanings (ibid: 193). However, music is but one element considered in the study of youth subcultures, as noted by Laing (1985: 4) when comparing his semiotic analysis of punk as a musical genre with Hebdige’s (1979) influential study of punk’s broader stylistic ensemble, which favoured its visual aspects. Further, consistently with the focus on subcultures as expressive resistance, there is a preponderance of historical and semiotic analysis over phenomenological analysis, although all three levels are identified by Phil Cohen (2005 [1972]: 90) as necessary for any complete subcultural analysis. In other words, the influential work on subcultures is more concerned with public expression than private experience, as noted in McRobbie’s (1980: 69) criticism that in the 1970s studies, ‘[o]nly what happened out there on the streets mattered’.

A further issue rooted more deeply in theory rather than method is that, when music consumption and experience were considered in the original subcultural studies, it was as products of structural determination. Drawing on ethnographic research among English hippies and ‘motor bike boys’ in 1969, Willis (1978) presents detailed accounts of the particular kinds of musical experience preferred by members of these groups. For example, the motor bike boys favoured rock ‘n’ roll with a strong beat for dancing, while the hippies preferred more complex progressive rock which demanded intellectual attention, enhanced by the use of psychedelic drugs. Willis provides the concept of ‘objective possibilities’ to describe how the unique material features of cultural items like music enable and limit a range of potential meanings, feelings and uses (ibid: 200-1).
However, the ensuing analysis restricts these possibilities by abstracting subjective experiences into types using the concept of homology. Pursuant to this theory, the continuous play between a social group and its preferred items is determined largely by structural factors like class and generation (ibid: 91); the bike boys’ enjoyment of brash and basic rock ‘n’ roll reflects their working class physicality, while they lack the educated hippies’ capacity and desire to engage with the political and psychedelic possibilities of progressive rock. Accordingly, what on the surface appear to be subjective musical experiences are only examples of general, structurally determined tendencies. As with Adorno’s approach, this means there is little point in looking at the specifics of individual experiences.

This homological view of music consumption has been challenged in subsequent ethnographic work. One example is Jones’s (1988) study of how Jamaican reggae and related styles had a collective ‘impact’ on black and white youth and communities in the United Kingdom, with a focus on the city of Birmingham. While considering broad formations of race and class, Jones argues that people’s reasons for liking reggae, and the precise kinds of subjectivity the music might express and produce, may be ‘as diverse as the infinite variety of contexts in which they hear and experience the music’ (ibid: 117). Accordingly, Jones’s study is concerned with the situated, embodied practices through which reggae music was incorporated into local and personal lives. This sensitivity to context and practice allows for varied and unique musical experiences, without downplaying their potential significance in cultural change: ‘For reggae did not produce ready-made forms of political consciousness, but worked through the pleasures of its consumption to propagate values, sensibilities and fundamental perspectives on life’ (ibid: 160). This thesis aims to strike a similar balance between recognising the diversity of musical experiences and tracing their relationships with social processes.
Scenes and fan cultures

Some of the more recent work on music in subcultures has explicitly moved beyond CCCS-style semiotic analysis and structural explanation to bring increased attention to lived points of view, as exemplified in Feldman’s (2009) ethnographic study of Mod culture’s articulation in various global contexts. This methodology is also central in what has been described as post-subcultural research on youth culture and popular music, which has developed since the 1990s (Bennett 2011). A substantial amount of this research has been oriented around scenes, a concept describing cultural spaces in which a range of musical practices may coexist and interact (Straw 1991) at various levels including local, trans-local and virtual (Peterson and Bennett 2004). The study of local scenes, which according to Bennett and Rogers (2016: 25) has formed a large proportion of scene research, is attentive to how specificities of place and micro-social interactions inform musical practice and meaning. This framework and the typically ethnographic approach it entails (see Chapter 3) bring attention to lived experience. Understandably, this is directed toward the elaboration of typical experiences within particular scenes and sub-groups, instead of singular experiences in their own right and, more specifically, singular experiences of music.

However, instances of what I call peak music experiences are apparent in some of the work on scenes. In London dance club culture, Malbon (1999) observes that ‘ecstatic’ and ‘oceanic’ experiences are sought and occasionally undergone by clubbers while dancing to music in a crowd, with those terms referring respectively to experiences with and without drugs. These experiences have an ‘afterglow’ and can provide motivation for the days, weeks or even years to come, informing everyday identity (ibid: 187). This illustrates how particular, extraordinary experiences can be an important and even defining feature of music scene participation. Kahn-Harris (2004: 111) reports on the significance in extreme metal culture of a person’s shocking first encounter with the
genre, which can be ‘a musical experience separate from previous musical experience’ and may inspire a frantic search for more of the same. Further, although this initially shocking music might provide diminishing returns, long-standing scene members can be rejuvenated from time to time by ‘the experience of music through the body’ (ibid: 116). Similarly, Tsitsos (2012) finds that for the ageing punks in his study, occasionally ‘returning to the pit’ to slamdance is a way to reconnect emotionally to their scene. These diverse examples demonstrate that singular musical experiences can have significance for individuals, including as part of their connection to a scene, and I will map their common ground (see Chapter 4) in the course of developing a general theory of peak music experiences. However, while these studies recognise the status of particular types of musical experience within music cultures, they do not engage critically with the origin and reproduction of this status.

Precedents for analysing the narratives of peak music experiences as a discursive practice can be found in two studies of popular music fan culture. Cavicchi’s (1998) ‘experience-near anthropology’ of Bruce Springsteen fans reveals the way they talk about their relationship to Springsteen’s music in online forums and fanzines by way of ‘Bruce stories’. These stories follow common patterns, marked by quasi-religious tropes of epiphany and conversion that emphasise the dramatic personal impact of specific experiences, including experiences of music listening and concert attendance. One fan is shown to have reshaped his previous story of becoming-a-fan to fit the prevailing ‘Bruce story’ formula for an online discussion, by describing a more specific listening setting and a more sudden epiphany. It is not suggested that the story is false and the experience is invented; rather, Cavicchi argues that Bruce stories work to order fans’ personal experiences according to socially derived categories, enabling them to understand their experiences as shared. The story formula also shapes expectations of group behaviour, by promoting values and serving as a model for reacting in certain situations. Similar
observations are made in Bailey’s (2005) study of fans of the rock band KISS, which makes use of media and cultural theory as well as aspects of Mead’s pragmatist philosophy. Bailey finds that the ‘Kisstories’ told by fans about their musical salvation emphasise self-realisation and individual uniqueness, marked by religious intensity, which he theorises as a response to the contradictions between these values and the music’s artificial, commercial aspects. Thus the circulation of peak music experience stories can be seen as a discursive practice that helps define who belongs to a group and enables them to feel that they belong. This suggests peak music experiences may be a window for studying the values of a group and how those values are reproduced. The narrative patterns of peak music experiences will be considered in Chapter 4, while the collective scene values revealed by those narratives will be discussed in Chapter 9.

*Technologies of the self*

Dowd (2007) observes that scholarship on the reception of music has contributed greatly to the vitality of music sociology since the 1990s, becoming a leading area of theory and research following previous work on context and production. This has entailed a closer focus on the subjective experience and use of music, with authors like Tia DeNora (2000, 2003) and Antoine Hennion (2001, 2007, 2010) conceiving an active role for both musical content and individual listeners within particular contexts. This is consistent with some earlier work recognising music’s situational polysemy and the active role of audiences in constructing meaning. Sociologist Norman Denzin (1970) criticises a tradition that regarded artistic productions as social facts independent of the interpretations people brought to them, arguing instead that artistic productions must be seen as interactional creations of artists and audiences. Popular music scholar Dave Laing (1985) observes that music comprises a combination of signs that may be written, spoken, sung, played and gestured, which are not always in the service of communication and to which audiences
may direct varying levels of attention. For example, some listeners might be concerned with a song’s lyrics while others respond more to its rhythm. Music’s polysemy and partial abstractness increase the importance of the context of reception. Simon Frith (1998), who was influential in bringing sociological attention to popular music, notes that music is never heard outside a situation and, further, that different situations produce different aesthetic objects. This view, which is reminiscent of Dewey’s pragmatist theory, suggests the potential significance of specific experiences of music. Similarly, DeNora (2003: 154-6) notes that music may afford different actors different things at different times, as it only acts in concert with the material, cultural and social environments in which it is located. Accordingly, she proposes the study of ‘Musical Events’ (capitals in original), referring to instances of musical engagement, in order to pay equal attention to both musical materials and the circumstances in which they are heard and integrated into social experience.

While the reception of music is shaped by subjective experience, the reverse is also true. DeNora (2000) states that music is a temporal medium that structures experience as it unfurls, not only reflecting and expressing feelings but providing them with the aesthetic form through which they are recognised and shared. Music’s properties in this regard can be inherent (such as tempo), by common association (such as key) and by personal association (such as memories), so that it accrues subjective affordances as it is re-experienced over time in recorded form or, as discussed in Chapter 8, as performed. DeNora’s theory of affordances can be seen as an expansion of Willis’s (1978) theory of objective possibilities, allowing greater scope for highly individual interpretations and uses as compared to a deterministic homology. DeNora (2000) calls music a technology of the self, referring to its capacities for ordering experience and for enabling past experiences, along with the self that experienced them, to be relived and re-evaluated in the present. This is demonstrated through ethnographic analyses of music being used to
manage activity, emotion and memory in ‘everyday’ situations, such as people playing a
certain song when getting ready to go out, responding to a song on the radio by reflecting
on deceased family members, or using particular music to set the correct mood in a clothes
shop. While the focus of DeNora’s empirical work is therefore on common and habitual
practices rather than singular or especially memorable Musical Events, this theoretical
approach provides a useful framework for the study of peak music experiences as a
specific way that music is involved in individual identity.

The importance of context does not mean that every experience of music begins
with a clean slate or produces an entirely new aesthetic object. Music’s lack of fixed,
inherent meaning allows it to be invested with contextual, personal meanings that are
strongly adherent. The highly subjective interpretations of music demonstrated in
DeNora’s work are observed by Bennett (2013) to create strong feelings of textual
ownership, bound up with people’s sense of themselves. This is demonstrated in media
scholar José van Dijck’s (2006: 361) analysis of written responses to a Dutch popular
music poll, including the following examples:

It was 1971, I was waiting on a boat someplace in Norway when I heard this song
[‘Imagine’ by John Lennon] for the first time. It was such a perfect day, everything
was right: the weather, the blue sky, the peaceful tidal waves in the fjord matching
the melodious waves of music. There are moments in life that you feel thoroughly,
profoundly happy. This was such moment [sic], believe me. (posted by Jan from
Eindhoven)

My father died suddenly in November of 1986. That night we all stayed awake. I
isolated myself from my family by putting on the headphones and listening to this
song [‘With or Without You’ by U2]. The intense sorrow I felt that night was
expressed in Bono’s intense screams. I will never forget this experience, and each
time I hear this song I get tears in my eyes. (posted by Jelle van Netten from Woudsend)

These examples show how people’s favourite songs can be bound up with their memory of specific experiences, as well as how those songs may have contributed to the shape and meaning of those experiences in the first place. This demonstrates how DeNora’s theorisation of the double link between music and experience may be applied to peak music experiences, which will be explored with reference to interpersonal relationships in Chapter 7. Additionally, as van Dijck notes, the personal emotions attached to musical experience are articulated in explicit memory narratives that people like to exchange, as in the Dutch poll she analyses. This highlights the social context of musical memories, which I will explore in terms of narrative forms (Chapter 4) and the role of collective memory (Chapter 9).

The importance of subjective experience(s) in the construction of music’s meaning suggests the possibility of a similarly nuanced approach to the sociological question of taste, beyond quantitative and indexical analysis. Such an approach is presented by Hennion’s (2010) ‘pragmatics of taste’, in which taste is not a static, passive disposition but an evolving and active technique, to which an object reciprocates with feedback, so that the taster and the object being tasted produce each other in the encounter. Thus music’s effects are uncertain, variable and participatory: ‘the means we give ourselves to grasp the object – to be able to listen to it, in the case of music – are part of the effects it can produce’ (ibid: 140). This resembles Dewey’s pragmatist aesthetic philosophy outlined at the start of this chapter, and Hennion (2015, 2017) engages explicitly with the sociological relevance of pragmatism as conceived by Dewey’s forebear William James. Hennion’s (2007, 2010) empirical work on this topic focuses in detail on personal engagements with music, showing people who engage in elaborate, personalised routines of listening which they have developed over time and consciously
employ in search of specific, desired results. Importantly, despite this active and conscious listening, there is always an element of uncertainty concerning the outcome. While the focus of Hennion’s research is on established practices more than their development, let alone disruption, his pragmatics of taste offers relevant concepts for understanding peak music experiences. It accounts for how specific encounters with even the same music can be unique and even revelatory, while recognising that they are informed by and contribute to an ongoing history of encounters, of which the listener is reflexively aware.

The main risk associated with the approaches outlined here is that an insufficiently critical focus on people’s subjective accounts of musical experience may lead to mere ‘microaesthetics’ (Prior 2011: 134), which simply adopts the language being studied at the expense of sociological query or explanation. Varriale (2016) argues that both DeNora and Hennion neglect the social histories and differences that inform the ways people engage with cultural materials. However, as Prior (2011) notes, their works discussed above were explicitly concerned with addressing what had been oversimplified or simply overlooked in previous sociological orthodoxies, by taking seriously the aesthetic and everyday concerns that motivate music listeners and the substantial thought and effort they invest in those concerns. The theoretical tools developed in that process are not inconsistent with the sociological analysis of ideology, power and distinction. Indeed, I will be concerned to show that subjective experiences and personal narratives are fruitful sites for such analysis with regard to popular music. Accordingly, this thesis will take up DeNora’s concern with the role of specifically musical experience in constructing the self, and will then connect this to broader processes of social memory and identity. Similarly, Hennion’s model of co-productive encounters between listeners and music will be situated in relation to the discursive frameworks of popular music
culture and scenes. In making these new links, this analysis will bring to popular music studies the sociological concepts considered in the next section of this chapter.

Sociological perspectives on experience

Epiphanies

Perhaps the closest analogue in sociology to the Deweyan idea of an experience is Norman Denzin’s (1989, 2001) concept of an epiphany. Epiphanies are interactional moments that leave marks on people’s lives and in which personal character is manifested and made apparent. They arise out of everyday, lived experience but are distinguished from it by their form, as dramatic events with beginnings, middles and endings, and by the rupture that they represent as liminal experiences. Denzin identifies four kinds of epiphany: the major epiphany, which touches and changes every aspect of a person’s life; the cumulative epiphany, which represents the culmination of a series of events; the minor or illuminative epiphany, which reveals underlying aspects of a situation or relationship; and the relived epiphany, in which an individual relives a major turning-point in their life. These experiences become narrative resources with which people interpret their lives for themselves and others. Importantly, Denzin notes that the meaning of experiences is given retrospectively and is never definitive; like the selves they inform, they are always unfinished productions. Further, stories of personal experience are never individual productions but are produced in and for group contexts that include cultural texts, shared histories, and criteria of truth and form.

Epiphanies are central to the sociological approach that Denzin calls interpretive interactionism, which through a focus on the particulars of lived experience seeks to uncover the social and cultural forces that shape it. This approach is based on the understanding that the self is a narrative production shaped by material social conditions, discourses and narrative practices. Experience, to be remembered and represented, must
be contained in stories and we can study experience only through such representations. The sociologist’s task is neither to accept these stories on their face value nor to determine which are false, but to study how people produce, and learn to produce, stories of personal experience which accord with group standards of truth and storytelling. The stories told within groups are reflective of the larger system of cultural understandings, containing conceptions of lives and meaningful experience.

Denzin’s focus is on personal experiences that are problematic and related to traditional social themes such as addiction and domestic violence. However, he does conceive of both positive and negative epiphanies and is attentive to historical context and the shaping role of cultural texts such as films. Theorists like Giddens (1991) and Chaney (1994) observe that the project of the self is increasingly informed by and constructed from mass media and commodified leisure culture. Thus Woodward (2001), citing Denzin, coins the term ‘taste epiphanies’ for the stories that the participants in his study tell about significant domestic objects, as a way of presenting effective self-narratives. Woodward’s study reveals the fusion of aesthetic taste with ethical values, as well as the significance of taste to broader social and cultural identifications, supporting his proposal for biographical approaches to the study of popular culture to complement the more established study of objectified taste. With work like DeNora’s (2000) as discussed above and Bennett’s (2013) work on music and ageing demonstrating that music consumption features significantly in people’s long-term self-identity, it follows that people might have epiphanies arising out of their interactions with music. The previously-discussed examples of memorable musical experiences in the work of Cavicchi (1998), Malbon (1999), Kahn-Harris (2004), Bailey (2005) and Tsitsos (2012) can be seen as epiphanies, as they are experiences that are remembered by people as having marked their lives and stories that are told to explain identity. Indeed, Cavicchi (1998) uses the term ‘epiphany’ in its broader sense, without reference to Denzin, to
emphasise similarities between the narratives of Springsteen fans and those of ‘born-again’ Christians. This highlights the deep importance with which musical experience can be invested. The case of the fan who reshaped his story to fit the expectations of the online Springsteen community illustrates the provisional, collective construction of epiphanies and their consequent value for illuminating social processes and cultural systems.

The possible application of Denzin’s theory of epiphanies to popular music can be further illustrated by comparing one of his prominent examples of an epiphany, involving religious and political conviction, to a specifically musical experience. In suggesting that there may be positive epiphanies as well as troubling ones, Denzin (2001: 35) makes reference to an experience recounted on numerous occasions by influential, African American civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr. The story is that during a sleepless night of intense doubt and fear in 1956, King sat at his kitchen table and heard a voice that he took to be Jesus Christ, urging him to fight on and promising eternal support. According to primary quotes and biographies, this was a transformative experience that King would reflect on for motivation and recount to inspire various audiences throughout his life. Parallels can be found in a secular, musical epiphany described by civil rights lawyer Charles Black, who played a prominent role in the Brown v Board of Education case in which the United States Supreme Court ruled that segregated state schools were unconstitutional. In an article written for the Yale Review, Black (1986: 1596-7) says that for many years he felt that he ‘started walking toward the Brown case, where [he] belonged’, when as a teenager in 1931 he saw the jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong perform in Austin, Texas. Black writes in poetic detail of the music’s ‘[s]teamwhistle power, lyric grace, alternated at will, even blended’, characterising it as his first experience of genius:

The moment of first being, and knowing oneself to be, in the presence of genius, is a solemn moment; it is perhaps the moment of final and indelible perception of
man’s utter transcendence of all else created. It is impossible to overstate the significance of a sixteen-year-old Southern boy’s seeing genius, for the first time, in a black.

Black (ibid: 1600) claims that from that evening on, Armstrong was a continuing presence in his life, as both a musical passion and as an artist who instructed him ‘as only high art can instruct’ on ethical matters. As in King’s relationship to Christ, this lifelong presence was anchored in the memory of an epiphany. Both stories are powerful illustrations of how a highly subjective, private experience can motivate distinctly social attitudes and action. At the same time, both experiences invite exploration of the historical, social and cultural factors behind them, such as the influence of particular religious traditions on King and the civil rights movement, and the narratives of race and artistic value that informed Black’s youth as a Southern university student.

Denzin’s interpretive approach provides conceptual tools for taking seriously the subjective experiences of individuals with music, not for their objective truth but for their real effects, and not as separate from social structures but as an interface through which those structures are known and navigated. As feminist historian Joan Scott (1992) argues, it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constructed through experience, which does not happen outside established meanings but occurs within discursively constructed ways of experiencing. Experience is therefore ‘not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain’ (ibid: 38). It has been observed that the very definition of music is a discursive production that takes effect in subjective experience. Frith (1987: 139) notes that we ‘hear things as music’ because they obey a particular, familiar logic. Similarly, social anthropologist Ruth Finnegan (1989: 7) states that what is ‘heard as’ music is characterised not by its formal properties but ‘by people’s view of it, by the special frame drawn round particular forms of sound and their overt social enactment’. Consequently, to understand the social significance of music it is
necessary to pay close regard to the subjective experience in which music and its
significance are made real, and then to treat this as a starting point for inquiry. The study
of peak music experiences is specifically attentive to the narratives involved in
constructing and reconstructing music, music listeners and the experiences in which they
interact. In this thesis, the perception, meaning and commemoration of peak music
experiences will be situated within particular discourses, including consideration of how
those experiences shape future subjectivities by reproducing and disrupting such
discourses.

Affective encounters

One prominent aspect of peak music experiences is what may be called the affective
realm: the role of emotions, feelings and bodily responses. I will use the words affect and
affective in this broad sense rather than in the narrow sense associated with debates within
affect studies, in which some theorists like Brian Massumi position affect as pre-personal,
pre-intentional, unmediated and outside signification while emotion is on the other side
of each of those dichotomies (as discussed and critiqued in Ahmed 2014: 207; see also
Leys 2011). This thesis is concerned with emotions, feelings and sensations primarily to
the extent that they are social, in the sense of informing and being informed by social
processes. This will include attention to how these aspects of experience are involved in
judgment and meaning-making about music, as well as how the feelings themselves are
shaped by narratives that promote particular ways of experiencing music. There will also
be some consideration of apparently pre-personal or shared affect, especially in Chapter
8 regarding live music. In these regards, this thesis builds on work in the sociology of
emotions, as considered in more detail below.

Crossley (1998) brings emotions into interactionist theory and specifically the
communicative model of Jürgen Habermas, arguing that emotions form part of a mutually
meaningful, intersubjective interworld and they are accountable, which is to say they can be judged as appropriate or inappropriate, rational or irrational. Indeed, while emotions are part of the pre-reflective structure of consciousness, they are also thought about, talked about and given value in the reflexive projects and accounts of social agents. The rationalisation of emotions will be a recurring motif within this thesis, as it is shown that people remember and discuss but also anticipate and even try to engineer peak music experiences. The partly performative significance of emotions in popular narratives of peak music experiences will be considered in Chapter 4, while the ordering of emotions themselves as part of the shared aesthetic of music scenes is the subject of Chapter 9. However, drawing on the philosophies of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre, Crossley recognises that emotions are more than consciously managed behavioural masks; they are an embodied manner of intending, apprehending and understanding the world. Emotions bestow value or significance on things and a change in one’s emotions brings about a change in one’s conscious apprehension of the world. Here there are parallels to Dewey’s pragmatist, anti-dualist model of experience and judgment, which also emphasises the intentionality of emotions. Further, emotions are part of individual personality; one’s ‘emotional habitus’ is the result of repeated responses and interpretations becoming sedimented into stable preferences over time, not in individual isolation but within a shared history of communicative action. The relevant implications for present purposes are that any emotional response is not reducible to the particularity of the individual’s current situation, but also points backwards to their history, while by the same token communicative situations and actions can have a relatively permanent effect on emotional ways of being (ibid: 33). This offers a means for understanding how the emotional power of a peak music experience can have a lasting influence on an individual as both perceiving subject and social actor, without romanticising or dismissing this as outside social structures.
The idea of emotions mediating our perception of the world through a history of encounters is developed in the work of sociologist Sara Ahmed (2014). Ahmed is not concerned with emotionality as a characteristic of individual and collective bodies, but with how emotions make and shape those bodies as they interact. Drawing explicitly on the philosophy of René Descartes but notably echoing Dewey, she observes that our feelings about objects do not derive from the nature of those objects but from how we are affected by them, although we then come to read those feelings as being ‘in’ those objects. It is through intensifications of feeling that people recognise surfaces and make judgments, constructing subjects and objects, inside and outside, individual and collective. As in Scott’s (1992) notion of subjects produced through experience, Ahmed argues that the subject as well as the object is shaped in their affective encounters, as the object is attributed with characteristics while the subject is reoriented in relation to it. Like Dewey, Ahmed avoids analytical distinctions between bodily sensation, emotion and thought as if they could be experienced distinctly, utilising instead the multiple meanings of ‘impression’ to highlight the contiguity between felt contact and judgment. Importantly, impressions are not created anew or individually in each encounter. Feelings rehearse and test associations developed over a lifetime of encounters in which the most intense feelings ‘stick’. These associations are also based on social expectations, such as the anticipation of happiness on one’s wedding day. As to collective feelings and affective atmospheres, Ahmed avoids the suggestion that it is emotion itself that circulates, either from individuals outward or from the collective inward, as shared feelings are not necessarily about feeling the same and are often subject to miscommunication. Instead, Ahmed proposes that what circulates are the objects of emotion, which are saturated with affect as sites of personal and social tension.

Ahmed’s cultural politics of emotion, as she calls it, suggests a means for understanding how peak music experiences can leave lasting impressions, informing
people’s future attitudes to the objects (songs, artists, places) that they hold responsible for those feelings. As meanings are mediated by feelings, the meanings mediated by the strongest feelings may be the ones that persist. Peak music experiences can therefore provide concrete insight into the question of how encounters with music can affect or reorient people in enduring ways. Importantly, this theoretical framework is attentive to how those feelings are shaped by discourse, enabling consideration of how dominant narratives, including narratives of peak music experiences, influence the anticipation, experience and memory of emotional responses to music and in turn the experiencing self. Thus peak music experiences depend on orientations shaped by personal and social histories but also contribute to their future shape. The narrative construction of biographies around peak music experiences will be considered in Chapter 4, while the influential power of peak music experiences will be investigated in Chapter 5. Further, Ahmed’s model of an affective economy, in which the objects of emotion circulate, is useful in considering music as the object of collective feelings. This includes people’s identification with both near and distant others based on their assumption of shared feelings toward music. Building on this approach, peak music experiences will be considered as an aspect of interpersonal relationships in Chapter 7, as a function of ‘affective scenes’ (Bennett 2013) in Chapter 9, and as a means for understanding the commonly reported type of experience in which people at live concerts and other collective musical events feel as one with a crowd, which will be explored in Chapter 8.

**Peak and flow experiences**

In focusing on instances of subjective experience this thesis does not engage in any detail with psychological and biological theory. However, in taking stock of how the study of peak music experiences relates to existing scholarly work, and in providing a framework for the analysis in the following chapters, it is relevant to consider briefly the resonance
of certain psychological and cognitive scientific concepts. These are peak experiences, flow experiences and bright moments.

The similarity in terminology between peak music experiences, and psychologist Abraham Maslow’s (1962) concept of ‘peak experiences’, is justified. Both use the word ‘peak’ to distinguish especially important experiences from the general experience out of which they arise, as illustrated by Maslow in the following quote (1962: 67):

I would like you to think of the most wonderful experience or experiences of your life; happiest moments, ecstatic moments, moments of rapture, perhaps from being in love, or from listening to music or suddenly ‘being hit’ by a book or a painting, or from some great creative moment.

According to Maslow, the defining features of peak experiences include feelings of internal and external wholeness and harmony, timelessness and spacelessness, complete mindfulness of the present and full use of one’s capacities. These experiences are felt as valuable and lead the individual to see themselves and the world as worthwhile and meaningful, as well as to seek more peak experiences, although they cannot be commanded. These experiences are associated with the self-actualisation that represents the apogee of Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs. Maslow regards as healthy the ability to ‘religionise’ any part of life, including aesthetic experience. Indeed, he considers aesthetic peak experiences to be a central aspect of human life rather than a peripheral one. As observed by Dennis and Powers (1974), there are similarities between the theories of Maslow and John Dewey. These include a dynamic view of the world in which meaning is produced through lived experience; a lack of division between intelligence and emotion; a concern with the quasi-religious and aesthetic qualities of everyday life, and the desire to bring subjective experience into scientific study.

A closely related concept is that of flow experiences, as described by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly (1975). Flow refers to ‘the holistic sensation that people feel
when they act with total involvement’ (ibid: 36), involving the merging of action and awareness; the narrowing of attention; the loss or transcendence of self-consciousness in fusion with the world; a sense of control without concern; uncontradictory demands and feedback for action; and intrinsic reward, although flow goes beyond the simpler concept of pleasure as it is often produced in physically and mentally demanding activities, such as rock climbing or writing. As Csikszentmihaly observes, flow shares many distinctive features with Maslow’s peak experience. In considering circumstances where flow often arises, Csikszentmihaly includes the popular music-based practice of ‘rock dancing’ (ibid: 11). Similarly, Malbon (1999) uses this concept of flow in his sociological study of clubbing to explain the experience prized by dancers, noting how music allows them to focus their awareness on a narrow set of mentally and physically absorbing stimuli.

From the perspective of cognitive science, William Benzon (2001) uses the term ‘bright moments’ for musical experiences that resemble peak and flow experiences in terms of effortless engagement and altered body sense, but are characterised more specifically by a sense of heightened, non-verbal communication with other musicians and listeners. Benzon’s starting point is the prevalence with which such altered states of consciousness are reported. He credits the term to jazz musician Rahsaan Roland Kirk (ibid: 143) and providing the following exemplary quote from Ringo Starr of the Beatles (ibid: 147):

It feels great; it’s just a knowing. It’s magic actually; it is pure magic. Everyone who is playing at that time knows where everybody’s going. We all feel like one; wherever you go, everyone feels that’s where we should go. I would know if Paul was going to do something, or if George was going to raise it up a bit, or John would double, or we’d bring it down. I usually play with my eyes closed, so you would know when things like that were happening . . . you’ve got to trust each other.
Benzon notes that this magic is often said to extend to listeners, with the sense of energy flowing between performers and audience. His argument is that while the literature on altered states of consciousness is primarily about individual brains, we should think of bright moments in music as arising from coupled interaction between brains (ibid: 148). Music is a vehicle for collective intentionality and the sharing of otherwise private experiences, with shared time and rhythm playing a substantial role. In this focus on temporal integration between physically separate individuals, Benzon’s analysis is similar to that of DeNora (2000) in sociology, and the concept of music as a vehicle for shared intentionality coincides with Ahmed’s (2014) theory of objects as vehicles for the circulation of directed emotion.

A number of the exemplary peak music experiences described and analysed in this thesis can be seen to demonstrate elements of peak experiences, flow experiences and bright moments. These concepts are not introduced here as a means of explaining peak music experiences by selective appropriation of psychological and cognitive theory. However, it is worth noting that the concepts broadly complement the sociological approach I have outlined. Rather, they are discussed here as corroboration of the phenomenon that this thesis also seeks to explain. As Benzon (2001: 165) observes, ‘there is no doubt that music affords us deep and powerful experiences, experiences that challenge our ordinary sense of reality’. These experiences have been taken seriously and examined fruitfully in psychology and in cognitive science. My claim is that such examination will enrich the sociological understanding of music.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have situated the study of peak music experiences in relation to existing studies of popular music, while outlining the theoretical framework to be applied throughout this thesis, which draws in part on concepts from other fields of sociology. At
the beginning of this chapter, Dewey’s definition of ‘an experience’ was outlined as a model for understanding how the more specific concept of a peak music experience relates to general experience. This also provided a summary of his aesthetic philosophy, which resonates through the more recent, sociological approaches on which this thesis will build. The through line is an insistence on seeing human activity as a process of purposeful, responsive interaction with a perceived world of people and objects, drawing on and generating knowledge, meaning and feelings in close relation to each other. It was shown that while historically influential theories of mass culture and subcultures tended to overlook or dismiss subjective experience, this has increasingly become a major focus of sociology in relation to popular music. The sociological study of popular music has still tended not to focus on singular experiences, although examples have arisen and in some cases have been granted importance. Further, it was shown that the study of peak music experiences builds directly on particular developments in music reception studies, including the work of DeNora (2000) and Hennion (2010). In advancing this work and especially in linking the personal and unique to the social and ongoing, Denzin’s (2001) theory of epiphanies provides a useful framework. In this way, this study of peak music experiences advances the understanding of how people’s interactions with popular culture and media can have deep and enduring significance for identity and sociality. In considering the specific qualities of musical experience in this regard, this thesis builds on work in the sociology of emotion, especially Ahmed’s (2014) model of how perception and meaning are mediated by feelings produced over a lifetime of encounters. This is a notably Deweyan approach to the construction and interpretation of reality, although Ahmed emphasises the ways in which this process is both socially shaped and gives shape to the social. Utilising this framework, I will explore how emotionality of peak music experiences is central to understanding the social causes and effects of the phenomenon and of musical activity more generally. More specific theoretical frameworks, within this
overall approach, will be set out in each of the empirical chapters (Chapters 4 to 9). The next chapter will elaborate on the methodological implications of the theory outlined here.
Chapter 3

Studying peak music experiences: Research methodology

In this thesis, peak music experiences are both an object of study and a conceptual tool with which to study people’s interactions with music, especially in music scenes. This chapter will detail the scope of the research I have undertaken in the local dance, hip hop, indie and rock ‘n’ roll music scenes of Brisbane, Australia. The methods of in-depth interviews, participant observation and secondary data analysis will be introduced and related to the theoretical framework set out in Chapter 2. The actual research process will be described in detail, including reflection on my status as an insider within some, but not all of the cultural contexts in which research was undertaken, which informed how I conducted the research. The methods of data analysis will be detailed as well as the mode in which the research findings will be presented. The chapter will conclude with a reflection on the limitations of this study.

Contextualising experiences: Brisbane music scenes

The central focus of this research project is a phenomenon, not a population. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, peak music experiences as epiphanies are grounded in collective criteria. Judgments of what is important, what is worth remembering and how a story should be told are all informed by cultural standards, which might vary between groups of people. Further, the circulation of stories about peak music experiences can be seen as a discursive practice that helps to reproduce and develop those cultural standards. Accordingly, studying peak music experiences can provide insight into different cultural values and the ways those values are reproduced, while studying different cultures can provide a better understanding of peak music experiences as a phenomenon. The production and consumption of popular music may be global and mass-mediated, as
reflected in the concepts of trans-local, virtual and affective scenes, but these are articulated in local contexts (Peterson and Bennett 2004; Bennett 2013). In sociology more broadly, while ethnographic studies in particular locations were held in the past to reveal deep social structures that were then deemed applicable universally, it has more recently been argued that an empirical, cultural sociological approach must remain aware of the complex, reciprocal interplay between the local and global (Back et al 2012). For example, studies of hip hop music in the United Kingdom, Germany and Australia have shown how a musical style and culture that originated in particular North American, urban contexts was appropriated and reworked in distinctive ways in quite different local contexts (Bennett 1999b, 1999c; Mitchell 2003). The popular music styles considered in this research project are global, but in drawing conclusions it is important to remain sensitive to the way these global influences interact with local and spatial factors.

In this thesis, the study of peak music experiences is situated in Brisbane, Australia, and more specifically in four scenes that represent local articulations of trans-local genres: the dance music scene, the hip hop music scene, the indie scene and the rock ‘n’ roll scene. These scenes, which were described in Chapter 1, were selected because I was aware that they were active local scenes that drew on global musical genres, based on my prior knowledge and background research as discussed later in this chapter. I did not intend to impose my preconceptions of what each scene was and who belonged to it. Instead, the aim was to remain attentive to how peak music experiences involve and inform shared concepts, particularly those associated with music scenes. In practice, this meant that the sample of participants in the study and the boundaries of the particular scenes were guided by the data as fieldwork proceeded, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Scene is an appropriate concept here, as scenes involve shared orientations to music which are flexible and pluralistic, allowing individual and collective trajectories
within and between scenes (Straw 1991; see Chapter 2). The concept applies to the four
genre-based scenes listed above, as well as the overall Brisbane scene of which they are
a part. Importantly for present purposes, scene participation is not restricted to spectacular
or even publicly visible activities, but may include affective participation by people who
feel a ‘sceneness’ with an imagined community that consumes the same music and related
media, and who make a similar sort of sense of what they are consuming (Bennett 2013).
Peak music experiences will be considered as an important aspect of this shared sense-
making. Accordingly, this study draws on both the scenes perspective and work on
‘everyday’ music fandom and consumption practices (DeNora 2000; Hennion 2010) in
constructing a theory of peak music experiences.

As a result of the necessary location of the research in geographical, cultural and
historical contexts, this thesis has a dual nature. It is the first dedicated, sociological study
of peak music experiences as a phenomenon, in which four Brisbane music scenes are
considered as case studies. At the same time, this thesis is an ethnographic study of those
four scenes and their shared Brisbane setting, using peak music experiences as a research
tool.

An experienced researcher: Motives and insider status

She said I looked familiar and I shrugged and ran through some things: “I’m here
through Helen, I play music around, go to gigs…”. This was the opposite of the
response I had offered a similarly enquiring guy at the Factory Floor show at
GOMA in December. I told him I went to Griffith Uni and worked at a union,
which didn’t ring any bells, then the next time I saw him was at my own gig in
January – “This is where I knew you from! You didn't think to mention you played
music in front of crowds of people?” (Excerpt from fieldwork diary entry about a
house show on 4 February 2015, edited for clarity.)
It is important to acknowledge my motivations and perspectives in conducting the fieldwork and analysis for this thesis. By way of precedent, Cavicchi (1998) and Strong (2011) openly identify as fans of the music they are studying and acknowledge the existence of their own preferences and meanings. While such acknowledgment does not automatically remove problems of bias and power, it does allow them to be recognised and engaged with explicitly. I have sought to follow this open and reflexive approach.

I was interested in the topic of peak music experiences partly because of my own memories of powerful experiences with music that I feel have affected the course of my life. In this regard, I have probably been influenced by my eager and sustained consumption of such narratives in the music press, popular literature, peer group discussions and so on. I was therefore an ‘insider’ to some extent with respect to popular music fans and especially in my particular areas of interest and participation. I have participated in the Brisbane indie music scene for more than 15 years as a fan, performing musician and writer. For the whole of the fieldwork period I was the guitarist in an indie rock band called Tape/Off, which performed a number of local gigs and undertook two interstate tours in that time. These leisure activities blurred with my fieldwork in the course of this project, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

It has been noted that much work remains to be done on understanding the ramifications of insider research (Bennett 2003; Taylor 2011). Indeed, the notion of an insider is necessarily a simplification given the heterogeneity within cultural groupings such as scenes (Hodkinson 2005: 133). However, there can be recognised benefits and drawbacks to an insider position for sociological research (ibid; Minichiello et al 2008: 188-191). These benefits were apparent in some areas of my recruitment and fieldwork – for example, in access to the Brisbane indie music scene and familiarity with its places, artefacts and language. However, where such benefits are not enjoyed or recognised
evenly across the population being studied, there is a risk of uneven data and analysis. Hodkinson (2005: 132) notes that:

…far from being automatic, the realization of such advantages and the avoidance of a series of equally significant difficulties is dependent upon caution, awareness and ongoing reflexivity.

An example of this need for awareness and reflexivity is that my understandings may differ from those of people who I assume share my cultural codes. It would be an error to assume that insider advantages always apply, but it would also be an error to ignore potential insider biases, advantages and impediments. Accordingly, these matters are addressed explicitly where relevant in this chapter, in relation to access and recruitment, interviews, participant observation and data analysis.

**Experience-near: An ethnographic and interpretive approach**

As discussed in Chapter 2, the research value of peak music experiences is premised on the understanding that lived experience must be taken into account in theorising the social significance of music. Accordingly, a mix of ethnographic methods were employed in this research project, building on previous work that has sought to get close to the experience of music listeners and music scene participants. Ethnographic research gained prominence in popular music studies in conjunction with the turn to experience outlined in the previous chapter, following a period in which research was dominated by semiotic and linguistic readings based on textual sources. According to Cohen (1993):

Simon Frith (1982) once bemoaned the fact that students would rather sit in the library and study popular music (mainly punk) in terms of the appropriate cultural theory, than conduct ethnographic research which would treat popular music as social practice and process. Ten years later the literature on popular music is still lacking in ethnography.
Cohen complains that up to that point, assumptions were often made about popular music practices and processes, supported by little empirical evidence. For example, journalistic or statistical sources were commonly relied upon in the study of rock music, despite their unreliability, susceptibility to industry manipulation and the potential for this to lead to uncritical acceptance of their ideology of rock. Exceptions to this approach, as discussed in the previous chapter, include ethnographic studies by Willis (1978) and Jones (1988). However, it is said that Cohen’s (1991) study of Liverpool’s amateur rock bands ‘introduced ethnography to the heart of popular music studies’ (Laing 2008: 487). That study employed the methods of personal observation and interviews, more specifically accompanying two local Liverpool bands to their rehearsals and performances and interviewing them about their practices and preferences. This results in a detailed consideration of how social factors influence aesthetic choices and of the tensions at play in that particular musical world, for example between creativity and commerce. A similar study was conducted at around the same time in Sweden by Fornäs et al (1995). They present an ethnographic study of several rock bands and their fans, from different places and backgrounds, incorporating the voices of these research participants extensively throughout the text. This up-close research enables the authors to present detailed accounts of the ways these young people interact with music as an aspect of identity and belonging, without being unduly celebratory or uncritical. For example, both Cohen (1991) and Fornäs et al (1995) present critical accounts of gender and sexual politics in the respective music scenes.

With regard to fans who are not necessarily performers of music, cultural anthropologist Cavicchi’s (1998) study of Bruce Springsteen fans challenges their dualistic characterisation as either dominated by mass media or engaging in pure resistance. He presents a more complex picture through ethnographic methods he describes as ‘experience-near’, including in-depth interviews, participant observation at
concerts and auto-ethnography (since he identifies as a Springsteen fan) in addition to reviews of secondary data sources like fan magazines. A similarly non-judgmental approach to fandom is adopted in Vroomen’s (2004) study of ‘older’, female Kate Bush fans, in which in-depth interviews grant access to private, mostly domestic practices with recorded music. The role of mass media in music culture is considered specifically in Thornton’s (1995) study of dance music club culture in England, including interviews and participant observation. Thornton presents post-subcultural conclusions about the relationships between music and class, youth culture and media, subcultures and the mainstream, although it has been questioned whether her study can properly be described as ethnographic (Bennett 2002). A more recent and clearly ethnographic investigation of media, power and also memory is presented in Strong’s (2011) study of Australian grunge music fans, in which in-depth interviews and auto-ethnography are juxtaposed with secondary data sources to consider how musical meaning draws on collective memory that is shaped, but not fully determined, by media accounts. Similar tensions are explored in Feldman’s (2009) study of Mod fans in the United States, Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom, which compares in-depth interviews with current practitioners with media presentations of the Mod culture since the 1960s. The role of place in both the production and consumption of music is considered in Bennett’s (1999b, 1999c) ethnographic studies of hip hop scenes in England and Germany, which utilise in-depth interviews and observation to demonstrate the significance of local experience in the meaning of music and style. Focusing closely on the subjective experience of music, Malbon’s (1999) study of dance music combines interviews and participant observation (going clubbing) in longitudinal studies with the same participants, to reveal the subtle ways in which such experience interacts with everyday life. DeNora (2000) and Hennion (2010) also focus on personal experience using interviews and direct observation in a range of settings, but unlike the previously cited works their studies are not limited by
genre or artist-based fandom, instead moving into so-called ‘everyday’ settings in which music becomes involved in various aspects of daily life. The unspectacular, everyday aspects of music consumption are also addressed using similar ethnographic methods in Bennett’s work on ageing (2013) and Strong’s (2011) already mentioned work on music and memory.

Thus ethnographic methods have added significantly to the text-based analysis drawn from cultural studies, especially by challenging prior assumptions about the interactions between social structures and popular cultural affiliations and recognising music’s social importance beyond traditional categories of subculture, fandom and youth. Notably, while all of these authors foreground the interpretations and understandings expressed by the people they are studying, this is situated within a mix of methods, especially participant observation of specific practices along with media analysis. In the work cited here, the adoption of these mixed methods allows music listeners and performers to explain their own experience, while also allowing the researcher to undertake critical analysis.

The methods used in this project draw upon these precedents for studying experience. Specifically, this thesis makes use of three complementary research methods: in-depth interviews, participant observation and analysis of secondary data sources. Most of the ethnographic studies of popular music discussed above and in the previous chapter use the first two methods of interviews and observation. These have been combined with the third where relevant, for example where there is a specific interest in media (Jones 1988; Thornton 1995; Cavicchi 1998; Feldman 2009; Strong 2011). The process of triangulation from multiple methods is considered to be a means of enhancing validity and decreasing the potential for bias (Minichiello et al 2008: 194). This research project does not aim merely to present the experience stories of participants, but to analyse the socio-cultural construction of both the experiences and their telling. Accordingly,
researcher observations of musical events, performances and other practices provide context and meaning for the interview data, and vice versa. Additionally, each of these are considered in light of relevant cultural texts that form part of the participants’ experiential frameworks. Thus triangulating between the data obtained from the different methods assisted in maintaining an experience-near but critical approach in this study. The specific relationship between these methods was further consistent with the guidelines provided by Denzin (2001) for studying social phenomena through extraordinary experiences.

Denzin (2001) outlines an approach to social research that he calls ‘interpretive interactionism’, which seeks to join the traditional symbolic interactionist approach with interpretive, phenomenological perspectives and the insights of post-structural theory, especially in cultural and feminist theory. Methodologically, this approach is distinguished from other interpretive approaches by its focus on epiphanies, those life experiences that radically alter and shape the meanings people give to themselves and their broader experience. It is in these moments that social patterns become apparent and private lives can be related to broader structures. While Denzin specifically recommends this approach for linking personal troubles such as alcoholism to public policy and institutional responses (ibid: 2), it is equally suited to questions of cultural practice and identity, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Denzin sets out six steps in the interpretive research process (ibid: 70). The first is to frame the research question, which must ask ‘how’. In this case, two related questions that follow Denzin’s prescribed form are, broadly, ‘How do people experience their belonging to the scenes being studied?’, and more specifically, ‘How are peak music experiences organised, perceived, constructed and given meaning by people within these scenes?’. The second step is to deconstruct prior conceptions of the phenomenon, by critically analysing how it has been presented and analysed. This includes the review of
scholarly literature, which in this case was done in Chapter 2, as well as the collection of the relevant cultural texts that represent the phenomenon in question, in order to identify their dominant meanings and codes and then expose their underlying values and assumptions. For example, in studying alcoholism, Denzin considers how movies portray drinking and treatment, shaping the lived experience of alcoholics and their families. In the present case, this meant the collection and analysis of popular cultural texts that present peak music experiences. The third step is to capture the phenomenon being studied, through securing multiple cases and personal histories that embody the phenomenon, locating the epiphanies of persons being studied, and obtaining personal experience stories. This was the goal of the sampling strategy and semi-structured, in-depth interviews that were undertaken here as discussed below. The fourth step is to bracket the phenomenon, by taking it out of the world where it occurs to analyse its elements and essential structures. The fifth step is to construct the phenomenon, by putting back together the elements from the previous step and considering how they cohere. The sixth step is to contextualise the phenomenon, fitting it to the social world and personal biographies where it occurs and is given meaning. In this study, these last three steps were addressed through specific strategies of coding and analysis, making use of participant observation to contextualise the interview data. The need to contextualise peak music experiences also informed the presentation of findings in the following chapters. The specific research process that resulted is detailed in the following section of this chapter, including the three major methods of in-depth interviews, participant observation and reviews of secondary data sources, followed by a discussion of the methods of data analysis.
The research process

Pilot study

Between September and November 2012 I conducted a pilot study consisting of in-depth interviews with five musicians associated with the Brisbane indie scene. Pilot studies assist in defining the focus of study, particularly in qualitative research on relatively unexplored topics, and aid the design of ongoing research (Van Teijlingen and Hundley 2001). The five participants involved in the pilot study were known to me through my own involvement in the Brisbane indie scene and were selected to fit a relatively homogeneous group, as amateur/part-time performing musicians aged between 26 and 34. These were not theoretically based limitations but convenient, arbitrary limits to obtain homogeneity, so as to allow a deeper study of the common experience of the participants for the purposes of a pilot study (Minichiello et al., 2008: 172). The findings of this pilot study, which are detailed in Green (2016) and incorporated into the broader findings detailed in the following chapters, demonstrated the significance of peak music experiences to at least these music fans and the utility of such experiences as focus points for research into music-based sociality. The pilot study thus provided the basis for further research with larger and more varied samples and a more extensive suite of research methods. The pilot study was especially useful in testing and refining the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews are a means to elicit information about individuals’ perceptions and constructions of reality (Sarantakos 2005: 134; Minichiello et al 2008: 63). The interview questions used in this element of my research project were open-ended, giving participants the opportunity to elaborate on their responses to my questions and, in so doing, to open new areas of discussion. However, as this is a study of a particular
phenomenon, interviews were also semi-structured, through the use of funnelling questions to ensure the aspects of the research topic were addressed (Minichiello et al 2008: 51-52). Basic interview topics included personal background and context; the development of the informant’s interest, involvement and preferences in relation to music; direct questions about peak music experiences, including where relevant in specific roles, such as performer or listener; and current interests and practices with music. The set of basic funnelling and probing questions was as follows:

- Please describe in your own words your current music-related activities.
- When were you born and where did you grow up?
- Do you remember when and how you became interested in music? [If necessary] Do you remember any particular experiences from that time that made you feel more strongly about music?
- When did you first become interested in [performing, organising, attending concerts, listening to this particular style]?
- Can you think of any times when your taste has changed? [If necessary] Can you recall any particular experiences that played a part in that?
- Would you say that music has had an influence on you beyond your musical taste? Can you provide any examples of this?
- What do you do at a [event]? What do you want other people to do at a [event]?
- What do you think makes a good [gig, event] as a [listener, performer, organiser]?
  Can you think of any examples to illustrate this?
- [Probing questions about particular experiences] Can you describe what that was like? Can you say what it was that appealed/did not appeal to you? Do you think other people felt that way? Did you feel differently about [specific topic being discussed] after that? Did that affect you in any other way? Have you thought
about/spoken about that experience before this interview? Does [that music] remind you of that experience?

- Why do you continue to [perform, listen, etc]?

- Are there any other experiences with music that were special or important for you that you would like to mention?

Pursuant to the conditions of ethical approval from Griffith University, interview participants were given a project information sheet and asked to sign a consent form prior to the commencement of their interview. Usually, these documents were provided by email or private Facebook message as the interview was being arranged, then in all cases I brought hard copies of these documents to the interview meeting, where I drew each participant’s attention to the key points of the documents. These documents, reproduced in Appendices 1 and 2, make it clear that the research is concerned with peak music experiences. In some cases, people told me that they had reflected on their peak music experiences before coming to the interview. Despite this unavoidable forewarning, the interviews were designed to begin more generally, to see whether and how people would draw upon their peak music experiences in discussing musical practices, contexts and developments, before I asked specifically about such experiences. This did turn out to be a common way of answering the more general questions, so perhaps the broadest and most fundamental finding of this research is that these music scene participants did indeed tend to discuss music, and themselves, by reference to peak music experiences. Numerous examples are provided throughout the following chapters.

When I arranged the interviews, I offered participants the choice to bring another person along who might also be interested in participating in the research. This was a part of my ‘snowball’ recruitment method (discussed below) as well as a strategy to create an interview setting that was as ‘natural’ as possible. In several cases, I approached more than one person at a time, for example when potential interviewees were introduced to
me as members of the same band, or as friends or in a personal relationship. However, apart from two couples who preferred to be interviewed together, all other interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis. Most interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, with several shorter interviews of around 30 minutes and several longer interviews of up to 90 minutes. I always allowed the interviewees to select the location for the interview and in most cases this was a bar or café, often at or near a music venue, but in several cases I attended people’s homes and in one case the studio of a hip hop producer. I transcribed each interview as soon as possible and in most cases within one week of the interview taking place, then provided a copy of the transcript to the interviewees via email or private Facebook message, inviting them to correct or add any information. This process is known as ‘member checking’ (Minichiello et al 2008: 187). While only a few participants took this opportunity to provide corrections or further information, most made some comment that indicated they had viewed the transcript, usually to the effect that they were embarrassed to see their spoken words reduced to print. I had a similar reaction to my own transcribed speech and the conversational tics that became apparent. As I said to those interviewees, I considered it important to transcribe the interviews faithfully, including every ‘um’ and ‘like’, to capture the rhythm as well as the content of what was said. I also included gestures, facial expressions, laughter and in one case tears, pauses, and contextual information such as interruptions. This holistic description was particularly useful in capturing when people struggled to communicate something important, such as what made a particular musical performance especially meaningful to them, or when they found certain turns of phrase embarrassing but useful. This is demonstrated in the quotes that are reproduced throughout the thesis. Some participants commented that both the interview and transcript had provided them with an opportunity to reflect on certain aspects of their life and, in one case, a 49-year old musician asked me if he could share his interview transcript with other people for this reason. No one
sought to specifically limit my use of their transcribed words, although one musician was concerned to make sure I would separate his age (35) from his real name, as I have done.

**Sampling and recruitment process**

After obtaining ethical clearance, I identified possible starting points and gatekeepers for research into the selected music scenes. I approached some people with whom I was already acquainted and who I perceived to be involved in the scenes, to ask if they would be interested in participating in an interview or if they would recommend others. This resulted in less than ten interviews. I also attended events as discussed below under ‘Participant observation’ and spoke about my research to people there, some of whom I had met before or to whom I was introduced by mutual acquaintances, and some with whom I had no prior connection. While some people I met in this way showed interest and shared contact details with me, only one person whom I met for the first time at a concert without an introduction by a third party ultimately participated in an interview (and by the time of the interview we had discovered a mutual acquaintance).

After this initial round of participants selected by me, the sample was mostly self-selecting to the extent that each interview participant recommended further potential participants and in many cases provided an introduction, most often by way of a group email or Facebook message. This process, which is known as snowball or chain sampling (Minichiello et al 2008: 172-3), enabled access to people with whom I had no direct relationship and avoided the prejudice of a researcher-selected sample, in which I would have decided who belonged to particular scenes. In practical terms, I found that a third-party introduction or reference made a significant difference in people’s willingness to participate. The risk associated with snowball sampling is that the sample may be somewhat homogeneous, while I sought maximum variation in terms of scene activities and age, along with equal representation of gender and across the selected music scenes,
in order to explore these hypothesised categories and observe emergent patterns (ibid: 171). In pursuit of this goal, I occasionally requested referrals to participants who met certain criteria to rectify shortfalls in the sample. At various times this included women, people over 40 years of age, dance scene participants and hip hop scene participants. This refined my understanding of myself as an insider researcher, as I found that I had stronger and broader existing networks in the indie scene in particular, as opposed to the dance and hip hop scenes. I observed that people in the indie and rock ‘n’ roll scenes would usually mention my band when introducing me to potential interview participants and, subsequently, I began to mention this fact myself.

A total of 44 people participated in in-depth interviews, including the five pilot study interviews in 2012 and the remainder between February and November 2015. This sample is broken down in Tables 1 and 2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Interview participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hip hop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock ‘n’ roll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 20s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 30s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 1: Interview participants

| Age 40s | 9 |
| Age 50s | 2 |

### Table 2: Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performing musician</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing rapper</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing DJ</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fan who does not make music</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing dancer</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event/venue organiser</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recording/production</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video producer</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music writer/journalist</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music radio host</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record label/distribution</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music retail worker</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music teacher (instrument or business)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical production (lights/sound)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
With a total of more than 44 cited activities, Table 2 demonstrates that many of the interview participants engaged in more than one music-related activity. The most common activity described by every participant was listening to music regularly. Also, every participant said that they regularly attend music events in Brisbane, whether live performances or clubs. It is not suggested that every person who engages with the target scenes must attend such events. For example, some of the interview participants who were musicians had national and international audiences, while many more made their music available online where it could be accessed by people who did not attend live performances. Accordingly, this sample should not be regarded as definitive of the scenes as a whole, but as a sample that is biased toward people who participate in local, physical scene activities, at the expense of broader trans-local, virtual and affective scenes, to use the concepts set out by Peterson and Bennett (2004) and Bennett (2013).

The categorisation of each interview participant to only one of the dance, hip hop, indie and rock ‘n’ roll scenes in Table 1 does not mean that there was no overlap in the listening, performance and other activities of scene members. However, it was possible to attach each person to a scene based on their own self-description as well as their activities, as discussed in Chapter 9. I began with the intention of studying only the dance, hip hop and indie scenes. As a result of the snowballing recruitment process and the interview data, it became clear that a fourth category of rock ‘n’ roll needed to be created. This term arose from the precise and confident self-description of some interview participants, which stood in contrast to the reticence of participants in the other scenes to label their musical activity. While rock ‘n’ roll typically refers to a style and era of popular music centred in the 1950s (see, for example, Bradley 1992), the interview participants used this term to describe a local scene oriented around elements of garage rock, hard rock and punk rock, as discussed in Chapter 1.
Participant observation

Participant observation began in November 2014, several months prior to the first interviews. The sample of interview participants and data obtained during interviews then guided the subsequent participant observation that was conducted. Between November 2014 and November 2015 I attended 68 music events, usually comprising multiple live performances or DJ sets. These were located at a range of venues, from ‘house shows’ through small bars (e.g. Bearded Lady, The Haunt) and club spaces (e.g. The Step Inn, TBC), to larger venues (e.g. The Hi Fi, The Tivoli) and festivals (e.g. Laneway Festival, Sonic Masala Fest); one screening of a music documentary (*Beautiful Noise*, about the shoegaze subgenre of indie music) as a fundraiser for a community venue; and several industry networking events (QMusic functions and the three-day Bigsound conference).

The various events were relevant to this project as they involved places, music and artists, activities and styles discussed by the interview participants. In many cases, interview participants recommended, attended, organised or performed at the events. I also utilised performances, rehearsals and recording sessions with my own band, as well as general socialising with friends, as opportunities for observation and reflection during the fieldwork period. I recorded my observations in a fieldwork diary of just under 10,000 words in order to capture details and to reflect on my experiences.

As demonstrated by Malbon (1999), participant observation has been a means of recontextualising the otherwise decontextualised data obtained from interviews. It enables access to the extra-verbal ways in which culture is performed (Back et al 2012: 41). The participation of interview participants at many of these events in various capacities enabled some longitudinal consideration of how individuals anticipated, participated in and remembered the events, again with reference to group and media reports. In some cases, collective events such as gigs or festivals provided discussion
points for multiple interviews, enabling comparison and grouping of data from different individuals who participated in the same events.

I would have participated in some of these events, but certainly not all of them, if not for this research project. My structured engagement in participant observation revealed some advantages of access and some biases. Prior to the fieldwork I believed that I had broad listening tastes and had occasionally attended dance and hip hop events, but I was surprised to find how much easier it was to attend events within the indie scene. Attending other events often required more active research and necessitated going alone, missing events that my friends were attending and changing my usual routines, for example by attending dance clubs in the early hours of the morning. As a result, I attended many more indie and rock ‘n’ roll events than I did dance and hip hop events. According to a tally kept in my fieldwork diary there were 9 hip hop events and 11 dance events from a total of 68, although there were also a number of mixed-genre events.

I was also surprised to observe my discomfort on some occasions. For example, my notes about one techno club night record that I enjoyed the music, performed by local and international acts I knew from home listening, but after my friend went home and as the night progressed I came to feel awkward. I was conscious of my location halfway between an energetic, mostly female crowd of dancers and a collection of young men huddled attentively in front of the performer’s desk. On this night I was tired and wished simply to observe, but unlike a live band performance there was no ‘back of the room’ from which to do so. One of the young men bumped into me on his way across the room and, after apologising profusely, raved at length about the producer who was performing. I was keenly aware of the gap between his hyper-stimulated state and my own and when I found myself deliberately avoiding him a short while later, I decided it was time to leave. On another occasion at a hip hop event, I was standing on a small balcony when I unintentionally became part of a circle of people who took turns to improvise ‘freestyle’
raps about themselves and others in the group. As grateful as I was for this opportunity to observe, I became anxious about my impending turn and was relieved when someone appeared at the door and called us in to see the next act. These are extreme examples and there were also occasions when I participated enthusiastically in events within all of the scenes and felt in sync with other participants. However, the uncomfortable experiences were enlightening with regard to my insider and outsider status in various contexts. By way of contrast, when attending an indie or rock ‘n’ roll event I could usually expect to see people I knew and, in any event, to feel comfortable on my own. During the fieldwork I had some peak music experiences and, on reflection, these also revealed my specific preferences and priorities.

**Review of secondary data sources**

Prior to and during the participant observation and interview period, I reviewed secondary data sources such as advertising, event promotion, music press, biographies and documentaries, so as to examine the cultural texts relevant to peak music experiences. Several of the studies collected in *Remembering Woodstock* (Bennett (ed) 2004) demonstrate the significance of secondary data analysis to understanding popular music events and the way people react to them. For example, Warner’s (2004) chapter on journalistic reports written before, during and after the Woodstock Music and Arts Festival of 1969 shows how particular narratives emerge and become dominant, influencing future recollections. Where possible, I considered media discussions of the same cultural events or items that were discussed by interview participants and observed in participant observation. For example, the techno event described above was promoted on a Facebook page, which presented detailed descriptions of all performers and the event itself (‘a back-to-basics dance party’). The day after the event, the page carried comments from attendees who said things like ‘his mixing last night blew my fucking mind’, ‘the
transitions were excellent’ and ‘I loved the room set up’. I had previously interviewed the organiser of the event about her general approach and, one week later, I interviewed one of the local performers and we discussed this event among others. In this way, the secondary data sources along with my participant observation provided context for the statements made in interviews and also allowed consideration of how personal interpretations of an event might be informed by, react to, and differ from media and group interpretations. For example, my self-conscious experience of the techno event can be contrasted with the superlative appraisals posted on Facebook as quoted above.

In a practical sense, sources such as ‘street press’, music websites and social media forums were useful in identifying locally significant music, people and events, especially in the dance and hip hop scenes with which I was less familiar. These sources also provided additional insight into the ethics and aesthetics of the scenes in question. For example, in May 2015, the administrators of a public Facebook page called The Brisbane Underground Hip Hop Scene posted: ‘Finish these sentences, Brisbane Hiphop needs more .... Brisbane Hiphop needs less ....’. This generated numerous comments about local performers, audiences, business practices, fashion and drug trends, attitudes and hopes. Such information was useful in contextualising the interview data, for example by suggesting the existence of alternative or shared views on certain topics.

More generally, I reviewed such cultural texts as interviews, reviews, biographies and documentaries relating to each of the chosen musical genres, though not restricted to Brisbane media or content. For example, I regularly read international websites in each genre as well as a range of memoirs and biographies concerning international popular music celebrities. In particular, I looked for discussions of peak music experiences, which I found in abundance in all of these formats and genres. It was very quickly apparent that to maintain a full record of all such sources and data would be too onerous within the broader scope of this project. I kept hard-copy and digital clippings of some material and
have quoted some examples where relevant in this thesis. However, for the most part, this immersion in cultural texts provided a general context for the specific discussions and observations in which I engaged. In accordance with Denzin’s (2001) interpretive analysis, I sought to identify the dominant meanings and codes in these cultural texts and their underlying values and assumptions. This informed the discursive analysis that will be presented in the following chapters.

Data analysis and presentation

In accordance with the intention to develop theory from data, open coding was used to identify categories and themes (Minichiello et al 2008: 284-291). I coded the interview data using computer software called Annotations, which permitted text to be manually coded to various sets which could then be viewed together. The participants’ descriptions of their attitudes, practices and experiences involving music were coded and re-coded according to emergent themes and typologies, which informed both the structure and content of the following chapters. The explicitly autobiographic and episodic nature of much of the data lent itself to narrative analysis, which seeks to understand experience by studying how a story is constructed by its teller (ibid: 276). In addition to thematic coding, I coded the data so as to identify recurring narrative devices and structural elements. Specific narrative devices and tropes associated with peak music experiences are the subject of Chapter 4. Further, discourse analysis was applied to consider the power relations and processes underlying these narratives. While it is only possible to study another person's experience through the ‘artifice of expression’ (Cavicchi 1998), discourse analysis examines how that very artifice reveals social and cultural influences (Minichiello et al 2008: 291-293). In particular, I sought to gain insight into the cultural codes of popular music and the scenes under examination (Hall 1981; Back et al 2012: 38-40). I considered what was emphasised, how it was presented, what was understated
or left out, how these communicative practices reflected media presentations and emergent collective ideals, and differences across musical and other identifiers. The results of this discursive analysis are integrated throughout this thesis, presenting peak music experiences as both producers and products of cultural codes. Chapter 9 in particular discusses the relationship of peak music experiences, both as embodied experiences and as stories, to membership of the scenes under consideration.

In presenting the findings of my research, I have incorporated interview material into the body of the text, to the extent that there is at least one specific example and most often a direct quote to illustrate each finding that is stated. This mode of presentation is used to varying degrees in each of the major ethnographic popular music studies cited in this and the previous chapter. In this thesis the quotes serve a dual purpose, as exemplars of what is being described as well as the way it is described. Pursuant to the conditions of ethics approval for this research, pseudonyms have been used for all interview participants. The pseudonyms remain consistent throughout and sufficient information is provided so that each quote or story is contextualised. In the consent package each participant was warned that their identity may be revealed by the content of what they say, although obvious referents such as their band and song names have been removed. Names of places, venues, third-party performers and songs are almost always reproduced directly. In accordance with Denzin’s (2001) rules for the presentation of interpretive analysis, I have sought in this thesis to present experiences and contexts in such a way that they will be recognisable to those who described them and, indeed, to anyone involved in the same scenes. Accordingly, while individuals are anonymous, the material and immaterial elements of their music scenes are described in specific detail.
Limitations

This research project is restricted to the city of Brisbane and its immediate surrounds. Similarly, the research was deliberately focused on four specific, local music scenes within Brisbane. This means that care must be taken when drawing conclusions that go beyond these geographical and cultural contexts. That said, this research project is primarily a study of a phenomenon, that of peak music experiences, as a way that music informs identity and sociality. The studies of four Brisbane music scenes are partly intended as case studies of this conceptual approach. Based on the findings expressed in this thesis, it is argued that the approach can and should be applied in other places and scenes. A related caveat is that while the sample was roughly balanced in terms of gender and included a variety of age groups, all of the participants were people who substantially organised their leisure time and, as much as possible, their work around music scene participation. They were all amateurs, both in Hennion’s (2010) French-derived sense of music ‘lovers’ and, with a handful of exceptions, in the sense that they were not full-time professionals in the field of music. Accordingly, care must be taken in extending the findings to more casual music listeners who do not engage so intensely with a local scene. Typically, when I mention my research topic to people in social situations outside the music scene, I receive some enthusiastic responses and stories of peak music experiences, but also some blank expressions and misunderstandings. By the same token, the attitudes and especially motivations of amateur, hobbyist music scene participants might differ from those of professional, career music industry workers, as discussed in Chapter 6.

As well as the limits of the populations being considered and the sample that was recruited to represent them, it is necessary to consider the limits of the research scope. To begin with a specific example, a colleague who focuses on sexuality expressed surprise that I did not gather more substantial data about sexual experiences involving music. It might be expected that such data could be obtained with appropriate research methods,
perhaps drawing on Plummer’s (1994) work on ‘sexual stories’. Similarly, my semi-structured interview framework did not include any specific questions directed toward gender, race or class. This was because my intention was to study peak music experiences as an aspect of identity and practice within music scenes, without pre-empting the influence of external structural factors, but instead to observe how these might emerge. Some interview participants volunteered substantial thoughts on gendered experiences in music scenes; some participants discussed race, almost always in relation to hip hop music and culture; some participants made reference to socio-economic matters, especially when discussing their youth, families and education. In some cases, these factors were directly relevant to peak music experiences and some examples will be provided in the following chapters. I suggest that peak music experiences can be a useful lens through which to consider these and other aspects of identity and society. Researchers with more specific agendas and scopes would be able to explore such aspects and implications of peak music experiences and this is discussed further in Chapter 10.

Finally, I present peak music experiences as one important aspect of music scene participation and, more broadly, one important way that music can play a role in identity and sociality. In this thesis I argue that the study of peak music experiences contributes new and further understanding for these fields of inquiry. However, to be clear, this is intended as a complement to other perspectives on music scenes and everyday musical practice, including those that focus on unexceptional and mundane experience (for example, Kahn-Harris 2004 on mundanity in the extreme metal scene). I have explicitly situated my findings in relation to existing literature on the various topics to be considered in the following chapters. In this way, I hope to show that this analysis of peak music experiences brings a new and important perspective to cultural sociology and popular music studies. The following chapters in Parts II and III will present the findings that were made using the methods detailed in this chapter. These findings demonstrate the
unique value of peak music experiences as a focus and method of research in music scenes and beyond.
PART II

IDENTITY
First time I heard ‘Like A Rolling Stone’
I felt that magic and took it home
Gave it a twist and made it mine
But nothing was as good as the very first time
(‘Twisted Road’, Young 2012)

These lyrics, written by Neil Young and performed with his band Crazy Horse on the album *Psychedelic Pill* (2012), illustrate the way that people often place their relationship with popular music into a narrative. Songs are interpreted and evaluated not in isolation but through a series of more or less unique encounters on a life’s twisted road. This song’s narrator describes an active role in their relationship to Bob Dylan’s ‘Like A Rolling Stone’. They have taken it home, given it a twist and made it their own, perhaps physically by purchasing the vinyl record and playing it on a turntable and perhaps symbolically by developing their own interpretation of it. However, this person is powerless to recreate the magic that they felt the very first time they heard it. This mixture of a listener’s agency with the unpredictability of musical encounters and effects is typical of such narratives. Unpredictability is especially emphasised in people’s stories about their first encounters with particular music, which are often presented as a peak in the relationship.

‘Twisted Road’ continues in an autobiographical vein, with subsequent verses describing ‘listening to the [Grateful] Dead on the radio’ and ‘singing in the place where I first saw Roy [Orbison]’, presenting these experiences as personal milestones. If the lyrics are read as autobiographical on Young’s part, as is typical in rock music and suggested by this song’s references to touring and performing (as well as Young’s claim
in his written autobiography that he still remembers ‘that afternoon in Toronto’ when he first heard ‘Like A Rolling Stone’: Young 2012: 10), it is implied that these experiences helped to shape him as a music fan, songwriter and performer. The identification of a specific encounter with a given song or artist is common in narratives of music listening, as is the attribution of biographical significance to such encounters. A final aspect to note about this example is that on the album recording of ‘Twisted Road’, the other members of Crazy Horse repeat the first two lines of the verse: ‘First time I heard “Like A Rolling Stone”, I felt that magic and took it home’. With this group refrain, they seem to acknowledge and empathise with Young’s story, perhaps based on their own experiences with Dylan’s recording. Intentionally or not, this models the way that individual narratives of music listening are part of a collective discourse about popular music. Indeed, Young’s (2012) autobiography and his lyrics tend to place his personal memories within the contexts of 1960s youth culture and the baby boomer generation, which are defined partly by the shared experience of certain songs, artists and ways of relating to them (Bennett 2009), including ‘Like A Rolling Stone’ (see Marcus 2005).

This chapter will consider how peak music experiences can be key moments around which people construct their relationships with music, using shared narrative forms. Three narrative concepts that are common across popular music cultures are first encounters as discussed above, gateway experiences and conversion experiences. In a gateway experience, possible directions of musical practice are revealed or become appealing, while conversion experiences are credited with personal change in terms of taste and identity, such as becoming ‘a fan’. These narrative devices offer discursive shape to the identities that may be constructed around popular music, setting up expectations for how popular music is engaged with over the course of a life and promoting certain values and attitudes. The shared use of these narrative forms highlights differing priorities between the cultures oriented around particular popular music styles
and performers. However, at the same time, they construct more fundamental, common ideals of listening and fandom.

The following section of this chapter observes the use of first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences as tropes in the discussion of popular music, with reference to the widely circulated stories told by popular musicians. I will then review the scholarly consideration of such narratives. Until now this has been largely restricted to specific groups of music fans (Cavicchi 1998; Kahn-Harris 2004; Bailey 2005; Feldman 2009) but, considered together, these studies suggest a more fundamental commonality.

The second half of the chapter draws on research interviews in Brisbane’s local music scenes to analyse the defining elements of first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences. This analysis builds on Hennion’s (2007) theorisation of music listening and taste as activities in which the listener and music are co-produced, over time forming a history that is central to how individuals interact with music. The narrative devices considered in this chapter illustrate this subjective historicisation of musical experience and are significant elements with which such histories are constructed and understood. The analysis will also build on understandings of how popular music discourse operates and is reproduced, by considering the function of first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences in reproducing collective identity. It will be shown that these forms emphasise particular values, promote certain ways of experiencing music and create narrative maps (Pollner and Stein 1996) for the construction of identities around popular music. In particular, in the face of popular music’s mass-mediated, commercial circulation, these narratives enable and encourage people to present their relationships to popular music as personally meaningful and authentic in accordance with cultural values.
Common tropes

Discussions about popular music are replete with descriptions of first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences. During an analysis of the impact of radio technology, Simon Frith offers a personal example that he places within a collective context:

I can still remember the instant exhilaration of Little Richard’s ‘Long Tall Sally’, which I heard for the first time when I was about ten years old\(^1\), growing up in a small Yorkshire town, with no idea at all about who or what Little Richard was. That conversion to black music, similar to the experience of small town middle-class children before the war hearing Louis Armstrong for the first time, was being repeated, as a result of rock ‘n’ roll, for teenagers all across Europe, and can’t be explained away in terms of commercial cultural imperialism. (1986: 270)

Frith’s suggestion that his first experience of ‘black music’ was shared across his generation is corroborated by songwriter John Lennon, who ‘spoke several times of the occasion [of first hearing ‘Long Tall Sally’ at a friend’s house], of how the record presented first a challenge and then a wedge that opened his mind to unconsidered possibilities’ (Lewisohn 2013: 87). Lennon is quoted as saying:

When I heard it [‘Long Tall Sally’], it was so great I couldn’t speak. You know how you’re torn? I didn’t want to leave Elvis. Elvis was bigger than religion in my life. We all looked at each other, but I didn’t want to say anything against Elvis, not even in my mind. How could they be happening in my life, both of them? And then someone said [that Little Richard was African American]. So Elvis was white and Little Richard was black? ‘Thank you, God,’ I said. I thought about it for days at school, of the labels on the records. One [Richard] was yellow and one [Presley] was blue, and I thought of the yellow against the blue.

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\(^1\) Simon Frith was born in 1946 and ‘Long Tall Sally’ was released in 1957.
The sixteen-year-old Lennon went on to ‘worship’ African American musicians and his obsession with rock and roll continued, as has been well reported (ibid; see also Riley 2011). In turn, many music listeners remember their first encounters with Lennon’s music, as exemplified by Viv Albertine of UK punk band The Slits. Albertine claims that upon first hearing ‘Can’t Buy Me Love’ by The Beatles at age 9 she felt ‘as if I’d jammed my finger into an electricity socket, every part of me [was] fizzing’, while the single’s Lennon-sung B-side, ‘You Can’t Do That’, ‘pierce[d] my heart, and I don’t think it will ever heal’ (Albertine 2014: 16-7). A local example of a similar experience is provided by Brisbane singer-songwriter Robert Forster, formerly of iconic indie band The Go-Betweens (see Forster 2016). In the following quotes provided 18 years apart, Forster discusses his first encounter with the debut single of The Saints, another iconic Brisbane band:

I heard the record on the radio and the first time I heard it I just (shakes head) was just astounded, I was just sort of knocked right out of bed. I thought it was great. And then the announcer said at the end of it, “That’s The Saints, ‘(I’m) Stranded’ and it’s just come out”. (My transcription of a filmed interview, Wilson & Faulkner 1988).

I was immediately bug-eyed. I was Frankenstein on the slab with electricity crackling out of my feet. My body vibrated on the bed as I lay in a catatonic state, listening and absorbing. And then, like a wind gust, it was gone. I waited for the back announcement. […] My mind tuned out. I couldn’t fucking believe it. I thought of Virginia [a friend who had previously recommended The Saints] and cursed myself for not believing her. I got the single […] the next day […] (Forster 2016: 86).

These stories recounted here demonstate several features that are common to such narratives. Each person describes an encounter with music that evoked an instantaneous
and physical response. They also emphasise their lack of knowledge and even understanding about what they were hearing, though they were moved to seek out information and to make sense of the experience. In this way, they present the music's effect as natural, ‘like a wind gust’ as Robert Forster says, promoting the idea that music acts directly on individuals while framing the specific individual’s response as unforced and therefore authentic. They also assert that the experience challenged their previous ideas about music (at least) and made a lasting impression on their sense of self.

Each of the above examples demonstrates the common presentation of first encounters as instantly affecting and lastingly important. Both the intense experiences and their profound significance are remembered decades later and the stories are recounted on multiple occasions, illustrating the popular elevation of such experiences. This elevation is described explicitly in Neil Young’s lyrical claim that ‘nothing was as good as the very first time’. Accordingly, first encounters are an especially clear and common example of peak music experiences. The stories presented above are also, to varying extents, examples of gateway experiences and conversion experiences with music. Gateway experiences with music are those that are said to open new pathways, in the way that Simon Frith’s first encounter with Little Richard made him aware of ‘black music’ generally and led him to investigate it further. The narrative of the gateway experience, like the first encounter, highlights the contingent nature of musical encounters and their effects, but places greater emphasis on the listener’s agency in taking up the invitation presented by that experience. Accordingly, gateway experiences can be defined as such only in retrospect, when they are placed in a history of musical activity. Conversion experiences are those that involve a change in the listener themselves, most often described as becoming a fan of a musical artist or style. This may be simultaneous with a first encounter or gateway experience (as in Frith’s case), though again there is a different narrative emphasis. For example, Robert Forster had heard his friend Virginia
speak at length about The Saints and he had even seen the band perform live, but it was only when he heard ‘(I’m) Stranded’ on the radio in bed that he was astounded by their greatness, causing him to curse himself for not believing his friend. A conversion experience is a moment when ‘the penny drops’, with this intellectual recognition often bound up with powerful emotion and a strong sense of personal importance. The experience and its consequences then become part of one’s personal narrative, as an explanation for subsequent attitudes and identity. Conversion experiences highlight the unpredictable and contingent nature of music’s effects, particularly when they involve music that has been encountered before. They also demonstrate most clearly the biographical significance attributed to encounters with music.

Stories about first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences, such as those presented above, contribute to popular music discourse in important ways. First, they contribute to the collective appraisal of music. There have been multiple anecdotes published about the first time people heard Little Richard, ‘(I’m) Stranded’ and ‘Like A Rolling Stone’ (for example, respectively: BBC radio host John Peel in Walters 1987; Stafford 2004: 43; Marcus 2005: 32, 146). These songs and artists are canonical within their respective genres and popular music generally, and stories about personal experiences with them both respond and contribute to this canon. For example, in Rolling Stone magazine’s list of the ‘100 Greatest Singers of All Time’, Little Richard is listed at 12th position and the entry begins with the same quote I have reproduced from John Lennon, who also makes the list in fifth place (Rolling Stone 2010). Such lists are acts of cultural consecration, bestowing legitimacy on music and musicians by filtering popular, professional and critical recognition through cultural institutions like Rolling Stone (Schmutz 2005). Within this framework, I would suggest that personal stories about encounters with songs and artists assist in such consecration by providing evidence of popular recognition and, in the case of artists like Lennon and authors like Frith,
professional and critical recognition. Importantly, compared to ostensibly objective measures like commercial success and technical appraisal, peak music experiences justify the cultural status of particular music explicitly by reference to its subjective impact. The reproduction of anecdotal quotes to support historical rankings, as in the *Rolling Stone* example, shows that the cultural value of popular music is not separate from the personal experiences it creates. Consistently with this idea, a reflexive approach to the process of cultural consecration is apparent in the trope in music journalism of a knowledgeable first encounter, in which the narrator admits they have never until now listened to a particular recording (normally an album) despite being aware of its canonical status, in order to set the scene for their actual response (for example, *Ruth and Martin’s Album Club*). These evaluative practices suggest that in popular music culture, the ‘voice of experience’ may in some respects be prioritised over the voice of the expert, as Pollner and Stein (1996: 207) observe in Alcoholics Anonymous culture. This points to the significance of narrative maps for personal experience and evaluation, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The second way that stories about first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences contribute to popular music discourse is by saying something about listeners. While offering an evaluation of particular music, they describe the listener’s response to it, illustrating to an extent that person’s taste and broader relationship to music. This is why John Lennon’s story is reproduced not only in texts about Little Richard, but also in biographies of Lennon himself (for example Wiener 1984: 147; Lewisohn 2013: 87; Riley 2011: 55). Thirdly and significantly for this thesis, the circulation of these narratives promote first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences and the stories told about them as important, while providing possible shapes for those stories to follow. For example, a reader who encounters

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2 http://ramalbumclub.com
Lennon’s anecdote might be encouraged to reflect on their own experiences with Little Richard’s music and on their own significant first encounters with music. This is a way that popular music literature might awaken people retrospectively to experiences that fit certain narrative forms. When the reader later considers what memories to share with others as well as when and how to express them, Lennon’s anecdote and the many others like it act as models. The stories told about first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences therefore reproduce particular ideas about music, including how it can affect people and why it should be valued.

Theorising first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences

First encounters, in particular, have been observed in academic work about popular music, but only among limited groups and they have not been typologised as a broader category. Sociologist Kahn-Harris (2004: 111) reports on the significance in extreme metal culture of a person’s initial exposure to the genre, which is often described as ‘a musical experience separate from previous musical experience’ by virtue of its shocking, overwhelming or exciting effect. In turn, this excitement is often said to inspire a frantic search for similar experiences, which inevitably brings people into contact with the institutions of the extreme metal scene. Kahn-Harris observes that this shock lessens over time with exposure to extreme metal music and practices, consistently with the logic of mundanity as scene members seek to integrate their participation with their everyday lives. These findings illustrate a subjective history of music listening, in which the initial exposure to extreme metal can be seen as a peak music experience. Similarly, Feldman (2009) presents examples of people’s first encounters with Mod music culture, in which a recurring emphasis on the sartorial elements of musical performance and presentation highlights a key part of that culture’s appeal. Again, these first encounters are shown to form part of the self-narratives of Mod participants.
Self-narratives oriented around experiences with music have also been shown to be important in fan cultures oriented around particular musicians. Among the many ‘Bruce stories’ that cultural anthropologist Cavicchi (1998) catalogues among fans of Bruce Springsteen are ‘becoming-a-fan’ stories, which he finds were shared by new members of an electronic mailing list as a rite of passage. These stories position the narrator and establish their credentials for the group. As to their form and content, Cavicchi (1998: 43) finds that ‘the descriptions of transformations found in narratives of becoming a fan are remarkably similar to those found in the conversion narratives of evangelical Christians in the modern United States’. They often involve an epiphany (in the common sense of the word rather than the specific sense used in Denzin 1989), which sometimes arises in a first encounter with Springsteen’s music although this is not always the case. There are also stories in which a person who has been at least somewhat familiar with Springsteen’s music experiences it anew, so that they are compelled to engage further with his work (what I have called a gateway experience) and sometimes to realise that they have become a fan (what I have called a conversion experience). Cavicchi finds that these common narratives order personal experience according to the shared values of Springsteen fans and serve as models for thinking and acting. Similarly, Bailey (2005) observes the circulation of ‘Kisstories’ among fans of the rock band Kiss, referring to the ‘tales of life transformation that have circulated among the Kiss fan community for many years’ (ibid: 121), ‘usually involving one’s early fan experiences’ (ibid: 153). Kisstories are found to emphasise self-realisation and highlight the fans’ sense of uniqueness, individualism and social risk, despite Bailey’s assessment of the band’s mainstream popularity, pre-adolescent appeal and overtly ‘crass’, commercial presentation. Bailey argues that Kiss fandom is particularly intense because of these contradictions, which many fans experience through the resistance of their family and peers, giving rise to the
religious intensity of the fans’ devotion as reflected in their narratives of conversion and salvation.

These separate but parallel academic analyses are consistent with the broader existence of certain narrative tropes across popular music. In this chapter I argue for the existence of first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences in the discussion of popular music. All of these are peak music experiences as defined in this thesis (see Chapter 1), as they are experiences with music that stand out from general experience and are remembered as significant. As outlined in the preceding chapters, this overarching concept recognises that popular music is understood and acts through memorable experiences connected to situations involving people, places, things and events. Identifying major categories within this overarching concept enables recognition of the specific, shared ways that people make sense of music by reference to their lives and, at the same time, make sense of their lives by reference to music. In other words, these categories of peak music experience provide further insight into just how music and identity are co-produced by reference to particular moments. Recognising these categories also enables more detailed analyses of differences within and between popular music cultures. For example, comparing the first encounters described by extreme metal fans with those of Mods can reveal divergences in how those two subjectivities are constructed. Equally, grouping the first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences of hip hop fans (for example) can help to map their collective understanding of the possible shapes of hip hop fan identity across time.

The narration of personal taste, including through ‘taste epiphanies’, is shown by Woodward (2001) to be a way in which people present accountable and convincing narratives of the self with reference to material culture. The concepts I have proposed here extend such analysis to the consumption of music. Through stories of first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences, people express their
relationships to particular music as well as to their past selves, and present explanations for how and why they have changed over time. In studying how individuals narrate their relationships with music, the concepts presented here build on Hennion’s (2007) observation that each person’s music listening has and forms ‘a history’. The interactive model of music listening in his ‘pragmatics of taste’ (Hennion 2010; see Chapter 2) enables us to understand how particular encounters with the same music can stand out, while also recognising that these encounters can form part of an ongoing personal history upon which the listener may reflect. Importantly, despite the active nature of listening and the often conscious awareness of a listening history, there is always an element of uncertainty involved in tasting (Hennion 2010). This is how some encounters with music can be surprising to the listener and therefore memorable, as demonstrated in the empirical examples presented later in this chapter.

The collective narrative forms identified in this chapter provide structure to the individual histories constructed around peak music experiences, while these histories in turn inform continuing identities. As Cavicchi (1998) observes of ‘Bruce stories’, common narrative forms order personal experience according to shared values and serve as models for future action. First encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences can therefore be understood as ‘narrative maps’ (Pollner and Stein 1996) for participants in specific popular music cultures and for engagements with popular music more generally. Narrative maps are created when members of a culture talk about and from their own experience, thus representing the dimensions and denizens of a social world and, importantly, ‘pre-presenting’ them for neophytes. They have consequences for recruitment, by portraying the features of that world in more or less attractive terms, as well as for social reproduction, by transmitting values and norms to newcomers. More generally, these pre-presentations of reality are a part of the very constitution of social worlds they represent, so that the ‘maps’ are entwined with the ‘terrain’ (ibid: 204). In
this way, the common tropes of first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences both describe and define the cultural spaces of popular music and particular scenes. In both of these senses, they ‘map’ the twisted roads through which music listeners may pursue their own life’s journey. In the following sections, I will outline the elements and functions of each concept, based on the analysis of interview data from my fieldwork in four Brisbane music scenes.

First encounters: An experience of something new

The defining element of a first encounter is the listener’s experience of something new, in the sense that it is in some way beyond their previous experience. At its simplest, this might mean that they were previously unfamiliar with the song, artist or style. A straightforward example is provided by hip hop producer and rapper Matt (31)³, who described his first encounter with the genre of gangsta rap:

I remember before that I was listening to sort of rock and metal music a lot. And there was a few like Guns ’n’ Roses songs I was really into and I thought, this is from a kid’s perspective, I thought that was like the bad-ass music ‘cause they had a couple of swear words in their songs. And then I walked [down the hallway] like I said, I heard my brother listening to this song where Tupac was dissing Biggie, and he’s just like swearing his head off saying, “I’m gonna kill you and fuckin’ shoot you” and all this stuff and as a kid I thought, “Whoa! That’s, that’s way more hardcore, I’m listening to -” and I remember that memory and being struck by that.

Through this quote, Matt explains why this first encounter with the artist 2Pac (Tupac Shakur) and the genre of gangsta rap was experienced as exciting and appealing. Matt was already attracted to ‘bad-ass’ music, suggesting music with a rebellious attitude and

³ All interviewee names are pseudonyms and ages are as at the time of interview.
illicit appeal, an interest met by the rock and metal songs of Guns ‘n’ Roses. As he
describes his encounter with the song emanating from his brother’s room, he was
impressed by the even more profane and violent lyrics. His recollection emphasises an
immediate thrill (‘Whoa!’) and a conscious decision to listen to more of such music,
which is reminiscent of the first encounters with extreme metal described by Kahn-Harris
(2004). However, the story includes details that were probably added retrospectively,
such as the identification of the rapper as Tupac Shakur and his target as ‘Biggie’,
meaning fellow rapper Notorious B.I.G., with whom Shakur had a famous rivalry as
expressed in threatening ‘diss’ tracks like ‘Hit ‘Em Up’, which may have been the song
heard on this occasion. There are elements obviously left out of Matt’s story, such as the
steps he took to find out the identity and context of the song, and any influence his brother
may have had on his taste. Instead, the emphasis is on the chance first encounter, marked
by an immediate and intense response which is granted biographical significance. At the
same time, Matt expresses distance from the former self that is described in the story, by
emphasising that his priorities and his reaction were ‘from a kid’s perspective’.
Accordingly, the first encounter helps Matt to narratively situate his current identity in
relation to his younger self, placing both within a history of listening.

A first encounter may be remembered for exposing the listener to music that is
new in a more profound sense, in that it cannot be contained within previous
understandings of music or self but challenges those understandings. Ken (58) described
his first encounter with hip hop music in 1982, via Grandmaster Flash’s ‘Adventures on
the Wheels of Steel’ single, as ‘like hearing [hardcore punk innovators] Black Flag or
Little Richard’, suggesting that it was radically and excitingly new. The song’s use of
samples challenged his previous understanding of what music could be: ‘they were
cutting Blondie and Queen and everything in, and I had never thought of music in that
way and that was just bloody good’. Thus Ken’s story of his first encounter with hip hop
music suggests that as well as perceiving new music, he developed through the experience a new way of perceiving music. Further, in rating the experience as ‘bloody good’ and placing it in historical sequence with his first encounters with Black Flag and Little Richard, Ken narrates his identity as an exploratory music listener who enjoys being challenged by new forms. This example, like the previous one, demonstrates how peak music experiences emphasise particular values as expressed through engagements with music.

*Chance and expectations*

First encounters highlight the operation of both chance and expectations in people’s engagements with music. Popular music’s mass-mediated form, typically accompanied by a plethora of complementary and explicatory media, reduces the likelihood of encountering popular music without specific expectations. On the other hand, by virtue of the same mass-mediated and globalised form, there is a wide range of popular music in circulation and a wide range of circumstances in which it might be encountered. As the narratives presented in this chapter make clear, even the most well-known, widely discussed works of popular music must be encountered by each listener for the first time. The element of chance is demonstrated in the following story by Lisa (34), describing her unexpected but fateful first encounter with a song:

In grade 8, so it was like 1994 [...] I found a cassette tape on the bus. [...] And I put it in my Walkman and the first song that played was ‘Beercan’ by Beck. This would have been just after [the album] *Mellow Gold* came out. And there was that whole like, “I’m sad and unhappy” [manipulated speech sample] bit and I remember just thinking, “Oh my god this is the best.” [...] I remember being, like my mind got blown by that song. And then I got obsessed with Beck. So like all through, probably 14, 15, I was like majorly obsessed with him and I would, you
know, I got every, I still sort of have every b-side, every seven-inch [record] that he ever released from that time up until he got a bit boring. But I remember that being like a really massive moment that sort of changed my taste.

The circumstances of Lisa’s first encounter with ‘Beercan’ allowed her to listen with a relative lack of prejudice regarding the performer and song. However, the unusual situation of finding a cassette tape on a bus while carrying a portable player might have produced a more personal kind of receptiveness. Lisa’s story exemplifies the phenomenon of a first encounter involving a sudden epiphany as her ‘mind got blown’, inspiring an obsession with Beck. As in the stories of radio listening presented at the start of this chapter, Lisa’s story emphasises that her effusive response to ‘Beercan’ was prior to knowledge about the music’s context. The serendipitous circumstances of her discovery contribute to this emphasis, framing the encounter as if the music found Lisa as much as she found it. The story places Lisa’s engagement with ‘Beercan’ outside the typically mediated spaces of popular music listening and suggests that both her affective response (‘Oh my god … my mind got blown’) and her evaluation of the song as ‘the best’ were more natural. Thus first encounters that involve chance exposure to music promote the ideal of authentic, unmediated relationships to music and suggest that these are possible despite its mass-mediated circulation.

Popular music listeners can engage with a substantial amount of secondary information surrounding music, including promotional material, critical analysis and discussion among peers. This creates expectations that inform the experience of music, as acknowledged in the following quote from Sal (27), which echoes the journalistic trope of a knowledgeable first encounter:

When I first was introduced to [hip hip sub-genre] New Orleans Bounce music, it was basically just on YouTube. And I’d heard all about [iconic Bounce artist] Big Freedia. And the thing that got me was, you know the title of the song, ‘Azz
Everywhere’. (Laughing) I was like ‘That sounds great!’ [The participant discusses her interest in challenging norms.] And yeah anyway so I liked that and I went and checked it out and it was like everything I ever dreamed (laughs). It was like colourful; the beat was amazing; he was just chanting constantly, like repeating phrases. […] And then just researching it more I fell in love with it more…

The language used here suggests not only expectations but hopes (‘everything I ever dreamed’) for a positive experience with a musical work, based on the listener’s prior knowledge and reflexive awareness of her own priorities of taste. Music fans frequently acknowledge such expectations and hopes yet, as in Sal’s case, they still report excitement in their actual experience of music and are cognisant of the ‘uncertainty’ of tasting (Hennion 2010). This uncertainty is highlighted even more in those first encounters that differ from expectations. John (25) recalled such an encounter when he was 12 or 13 years old and his mother offered to buy him a CD during a shopping trip:

What do I get? And I remembered that my friend loved Limp Bizkit, so I wanted to get Limp Bizkit. And mum said, ‘No, absolutely not, way too mature, you’re not getting it’. So the shop clerk said, ‘Try Linkin Park’. At the time I had no idea, I was really grumpy, I was like, ‘Fuckin’ I wanted Limp Bizkit, I didn’t want Linkin Park!’ So Linkin Park’s Hybrid Theory, I listened to that on the ride home and by the ride home, twenty minutes later I was in love, I was hooked. So that was a big moment for me. Wow! I hadn’t thought of that in a long time. That was a big moment.

The everyday context, for this teenager, of listening to music on a portable player in the family car is remembered as ‘a big moment’ more than a decade later because of the peak music experience and its place in John’s story of his burgeoning interest in music. A defining part of this experience was the transcendence of his expectations. Peak music
experiences involving expectations, whether they are met as in Sal’s story or exceeded as in John’s, highlight aspects of how music fans think about music and their relationship to it. These experiences demonstrate listeners’ reflexive awareness of their own taste, which they see as important but nevertheless open to change, so that one source of music’s appeal is the uncertain and sometimes surprising response it elicits. Through this element of surprise, such experiences also underscore the mysterious agency that fans attribute to music, which even when it meets expectations can be memorably affecting. Leaving room for unpredictability and excess in musical experience is another way in which the first encounter narrative allows musical experience to be understood as natural or authentic, despite the mediated preconceptions that listeners may hold.

**Immediacy and growth**

Music fans often claim to experience music in a first encounter as immediately compelling, as demonstrated in each of the preceding examples and in the narrative of ‘sudden epiphany’ that Cavicchi (1998) observes among Springsteen fans. This frames the listener’s response not as calculated and therefore insincere, but as immediate and therefore honest, implying authenticity and good taste. However, first encounters can also be used to present a narrative of personal development, which instead emphasises individual agency and the transformative power of music. For example, Allie (27) recalled her negative initial response to a music video by the grunge rock band Silverchair:

I can remember the first time I ever came into contact with Silverchair. It was, I was at my friend’s house, I think I was in grade 3, so it was ’96 and [the album] *Freakshow* had just come out. We were watching [television music video programme] *rage* and we were waiting for the new Mariah Carey video to come on. And then they played two Silverchair songs back to back, they played ‘Freak’
and then ‘Cemetery’. And I remember - ‘cause my school was pretty like hardcore Christian, it was really full on - I remember looking at it and going, ‘Those poor boys’ mothers’ and just thinking that they were really evil. […] I was freaked out.

Silverchair became one of Allie’s favourite bands during her teenage years despite the continuing disapproval of her peers, which would explain why she remembers this first encounter with the band. However, rather than establishing natural affinity and immediate fandom, Allie’s first encounter with Silverchair enables her to tell a story of personal growth and hard-won identity against a discouraging context. This narrative displays authenticity in a different way from a sudden epiphany, by emphasising individual agency and the power of music in transcending social pressures. A first encounter is therefore useful in constructing either a narrative of natural affinity or a narrative of personal growth, which are alternate paths to the presentation of authenticity as a popular music fan.

**Gateway experiences: An experience of something more**

A gateway experience marks a moment in which a person becomes aware of new possibilities. This is sometimes the result of a first encounter, as demonstrated by Matt’s story of his first encounter with gangsta rap, though it may occur in a later encounter. The word ‘gateway’ was used by participants in the research interviews, along with related terms like ‘floodgates’ and ‘opening up’, when discussing such experiences. The symbolism of the gateway is used more broadly in popular music journalism and discussion, for example in relation to ‘gateway bands’. According to the top definition in crowd-sourced online dictionary *Urban Dictionary*, ‘Your gateway band is the band you first listened to which completely opened up your world of music’ (Lest 2008). Indie rock band Sonic Youth, who were cited by a number of interview participants, are often described in the music press and in fan discussions as a gateway band because they are
known to include references to lesser-known music and art in their lyrics, artwork and interviews, thereby introducing them to pop and rock music audiences. It is appropriate to use the same terminology for gateway experiences, which are also claimed by those who have them to open paths to new fields of experience.

An invitation

The defining element of a gateway experience is that it leads to something more, making apparent the appeal of an area beyond the listener’s current sphere of listening. A common instance of this is when the experience of listening to a particular song seems to equip the listener with a way of approaching a particular artist or style. Jim (44) described such a gateway experience in relation to Bruce Springsteen:

I was very much a latecomer to Springsteen. He was very big when I was growing up as a teenager, *Born In The USA* came out in 1985 when I was 14. And really when you think about it, being a huge fan of [Australian rock band] Midnight Oil, why wouldn’t I like Springsteen? Actually I was skeptical, it was too ubiquitous, it was too everywhere. […] So it took me a long time to go back and actually hear it for what it was. And a very important moment for me with Springsteen was when an ex-girlfriend played me the song ‘Downbound Train’ from *Born In The USA*. And the very first listen to that song, this doesn’t usually happen for anybody, but I was moved to tears by that song on the very first listen, it just completely broke me to pieces. And from that point I was like, “Okay, I’m ready to let this person into my life”. I was in my late thirties by then.

This experience, marked by a sudden epiphany, resembles very closely the ‘Bruce stories’ observed by Cavicchi (1998). While it was Jim’s first encounter with the specific song, it was far from his first encounter with Springsteen’s music, but it marked the point at which he consciously let Springsteen into his life in an inversion of the ‘gateway’ metaphor.
With popular music artists who, like Springsteen, have a body of work that can be approached as an oeuvre, fans are often keen to discuss their point of entry. This occurs in everyday conversation but is especially common or even compulsory in more formal fan discussions, such as in online fan forums. By presenting their gateway experience with an artist or style, a fan says something about their history and tastes as a music listener at the same time as making a case for the qualities of the music. For example, Jim’s story makes us aware that he is not one to follow popular taste, but also that he distances himself from his history as a music ‘snob’. We learn about his broader musical preferences by hearing that he was not drawn in by the upbeat singles from *Born In The USA*, but was moved to tears by a more subtly arranged, melancholic ‘deep cut’ (a track that was not a single or hit on its own). Such stories both draw upon and contribute to the fan and critical discourse about which songs and albums are more suitable for newcomers or well-versed fans, or for those who tend to prefer one style to another, demonstrating how music both defines and is defined by its fans.

An experience involving one artist can be a gateway to a wider musical genre or approach. Two such experiences are described by Emily (29):

> And then I remember a friend showing me [the punk and post-punk band] Wire and then it was just like, “Oh there’s actually a little bit more!” *(laughs)*… ah, I dunno, not-straight-down-the-line music out there. And the same with [the band] Can as well, like I remember when somebody showed me Krautrock and I was just like, “Holy shit, this is amazing!”

Emily described her introductions to Wire and Can as introductions to much more than new bands. She presented these encounters as gateways through which her listening tastes and creative projects expanded into areas that were ‘not-straight-down-the-line’.

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4 ‘Krautrock’ is a term used by English-speaking journalists to describe a genre of experimental rock developed in the 1970s in Germany, where it is sometimes called ‘Kosmische’, including bands such as Can, Faust and Neu! (see for example Cope 1995).
Accordingly, gateway experiences enable narratives of growth to be presented. For a knowledgeable audience, Emily’s brief references to Wire, Can and Krautrock provide more specific meaning than a general concept like ‘alternative’ or ‘progressive’ taste. Thus gateway experiences demonstrate the use of peak music experiences to chart and present self-narratives. Emily described her reaction to these encounters as enthusiastic and immediate, emphasising direct, emotional response over indirect, rational evaluation and thereby framing her musical experiences and the overall narrative they construct as natural, unforced and authentic.

**Passing through the gateway**

The second feature of a gateway experience is that the invitation is taken up, as shown in each of the preceding examples. A gateway experience is defined retrospectively by what follows it. In many cases the advancement of taste is evidenced by the new field of interest being less mainstream, carrying more of what Thornton (1995) calls subcultural capital. The role of subcultural capital may be read into Emily’s story and is acknowledged directly in some stories of gateway experiences, such as the following example told by Pete (34):

…my tastes had gone, like I’d come from the suburbs and come from this background of like a really “Oz rock” family, but my ability to think critically about what was going on, what I was listening to, was growing as I was more exposed to it. […] So I bought those albums [by indie bands Gaslight Radio and Pavement on the same day] because I’d [read] reviews of them that sounded like, in hindsight it’s maybe sounding like something I wanted to like. You know it just sounded interesting to me, and kind of maybe it kicked off a few of the things I’d been enjoying in the things I’d been listening to […] it was kind of a gateway into
indie rock I guess, or indie music, but, and then yeah the floodgates opened pretty quickly there…

Self-analyses like Pete’s illustrate the reflexivity of some music fans when describing their trajectories of taste. They acknowledge the operation of subcultural capital and media framing while nevertheless making it clear that their musical experiences were personally significant. A remarkably similar sequence of events a decade earlier was recounted by Julian (44):

I read two glowing reviews of these records [by indie bands The Smiths and The Go-Betweens], I had no idea who these bands were. But I went off to the tiny little record store and I ordered these records, at the age of 13. And the woman standing there was like, “You want what?” […] And that was the moment where I went, “Ah, there’s this whole other thing happening”. And I left behind all of my Eighties tastes really, really quickly. And I started becoming an explorer.

As Julian’s story makes explicit, gateway experiences are remembered not only for introducing new music to a listener with particular tastes, but for empowering the listener themselves to change through engaging with the music. In Julian’s case, this was to leave behind his ‘Eighties tastes’ and become ‘an explorer’. The following section considers conversion experiences, which illustrate both the active nature of listening and the idea of personal development through experiences with music.

Conversion experiences: An experience of change

A conversion experience is a peak music experience that is credited with a change in the listener’s taste or identity. In research interviews, conversion experiences were often described in response to a question to the effect of, ‘Has there ever been a time when your taste in music changed?’ While the answer to such a question might involve the influence of peers and media, the role of those influences is often to lead a person to the crucial
experience with music in which their change of taste is crystallised. Listeners are conscious of the role of the listening environment and their attitude in constructing the experience. This makes conversion experiences a powerful demonstration of the way that people interpret and evaluate music through experiences and, likewise, remember situations by reference to music. These experiences highlight the dynamic nature of people’s relationships with music and the active nature of listening and taste, which are processes that must be learned.

*Memorably different*

The idea that the same music can be perceived differently in different situations is fundamental to the concept of conversion experiences. However, the consistency implied by the concept of taste means that a listener’s perception of the same music in different situations will usually differ only subtly, or at least in ways that are not unexpected. Those experiences with music that produce a substantially different perception are therefore surprising enough to be remembered as significant, as the following quote from Julie (45) illustrates:

I remember it really clearly, I was over at [a boyfriend’s] house and he was playing [thrash metal band] Slayer and I was just like, “This is just noise”, and then all of a sudden it kind of started making sense. Like I could pick out the structure of the song and it was like, “Oh wow that’s actually a tune!” You know, it’s not just loud noise that sounds like ridiculous. And then it started to make sense.

Julie explained that she went on to host a heavy metal show on community radio station 4ZZZfm, covering the thrash metal style of Slayer as well as other subgenres. Her story shows how music fans conceive of taste as a symmetrical meeting of listener and music, in which a change on the listener’s part (‘I could pick out the structure’) is simultaneous with a change in the object (‘noise… started making sense’). This is consistent with
Hennion’s (2010) pragmatics of taste, which holds that taste is not a static disposition and an object does not ‘contain’ its effects but responds, so that music’s effects are variable and participatory. These are the effects that listeners like Julie attribute to a conversion experience. It is due to these effects that such an experience can be surprising and therefore remembered clearly. While Julie’s change of taste might be explained convincingly by her intimate relationship with a fan and associated exposure to heavy metal music, she nevertheless pinpoints her conversion to a precise experience. In this way a conversion experience can, like Woodward’s (2001) ‘taste epiphanies’, act as a mnemonic and narrative device that condenses and concretises more broad and subtle evolutions.

The context of listening

All peak music experiences, but especially conversion experiences, highlight the dynamic, contingent nature of music’s meaning and effects, depending in part on the precise settings in which it is encountered. Nowak and Bennett (2014) call this setting the ‘sound environment’, referring to the assemblage of variables – space, time, body and technology – involved in the consumption of music. The capacity for a physical setting to shed new light on music is highlighted in the following quote from Martin (33):

I remember in [my housemate’s] bedroom one time, he had [‘shoegaze’ indie band My Bloody Valentine’s album] Loveless playing super loud, and… I’d never really listened to it before, kind of thought it sounded a little bit tinny and noisy when I’d previously heard it. So I never gave it the time. But he just, he had it cranked in his room, and it was a nice day, and his bay windows were open, and um, it was just – yeah I just thought that sounded amazing, and um, it sort of

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\(^5\) Peak music experiences in the context of personal relationships are discussed in detail in Chapter 7.
changed my sensibility a bit straight away. Just by opening my ears to harsher sounds that can also be really immersive and beautiful.

Martin said that he had been aware of the critical canonisation of *Loveless*, but that on its own had not ensured a pleasurable experience. On the contrary, he said that this positive experience gave him more trust in ‘music writers’. It is easy to imagine how sunlight through bay windows and loud (‘cranked’) volume might highlight the immersive qualities of music. At the same time, this example highlights the key element of a conversion experience, that the change of taste (described here as ‘sensibility’) endures beyond the immediate setting. Martin’s confession that he had ‘previously heard’ the album yet ‘never really listened to it’ demonstrates again the popular conception of taste as an activity that is developed through practice, consistently with Hennion (2010).

Together with the physical setting, musical experience is informed by the listener’s attitude, which might be based on personal or critical recommendations. For example, Liz (26) never thought she would like music as fast, heavy and ‘punishing’ as grindcore. However, with the recommendation of a friend (‘If someone I respect likes a kind of music, I’ll listen to it’), in the live setting that she considers crucial to being ‘impressed’ by heavy music, she experienced her first encounter with Melbourne grindcore band Agents of Abhorrence as ‘amazing … beautiful music that sent me down the road to hell … it opened me up to being curious about other kinds of grindcore’. Liz’s religious expression here is a mirror opposite of the language of conversion used, for example, by Springsteen fans (Cavicchi 1998). In both cases, the language of salvation and damnation underline the significance to the narrator’s subsequent identity of devotion to particular music. Consistently with these religious metaphors, the emphasis is placed on an epiphanic experience, which is remembered and discussed as pivotal in the self-narrative being presented. The changes of taste described in conversion experiences might remain abstract and inexplicable without reference to the experiential factors that
completed the music in a particular way, but through the prism of peak music experiences such developments can be more concretely explained by listeners and understood by others.

**Conclusion**

First encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences are narrative devices with which people present peak music experiences as milestones in their relationships to music and in their self-narratives more broadly. They are each defined by their position in personal histories of listening, explicitly linking music to biography such that each gives meaning to the other. This demonstrates a popular understanding that the taste and enjoyment of music are shaped through past experiences and re-shaped through new experiences, consistently with Hennion’s (2010) pragmatics of taste. While these particular experiences with music stand out as different and memorable, they are not presented as isolated or random, but as structured and structuring elements in a continuous personal timeline. This history of music listening is an important aspect of identity for people who define themselves as music fans. Through these narrative devices, people present and justify their orientations toward particular music and also toward past selves. They highlight the specific appeal of particular songs, artists and styles, not abstractly but by reference to the personal contexts in which they were encountered and experienced. As well as identifying and evaluating the objects of taste, these stories explain how and why particular evaluations were made at particular times, constructing narratives of personal growth and developing identity.

While first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences are deeply personal accounts of musical experience and demonstrate highly subjective interpretations and uses of music, they contribute to the discursive construction of collective identities involving music. Firstly, as shared frameworks for the discussion of
taste, they make apparent the common and divergent priorities of music listeners. Matt’s description of his first encounter with gangsta rap emphasised the appeal of the ‘hardcore’, ‘bad-ass’ lyrics that are a defining element of the genre, while Martin’s conversion experience with My Bloody Valentine was centred on his new appreciation of the ‘immersive’ quality of their music, a feature commonly identified in critical appraisals of the band and the shoegaze genre they exemplify. Accordingly, by describing their peak music experiences using shared narrative frameworks, people situate themselves in relation to collective evaluations of music and the values underlying them, while maintaining decidedly individual self-narratives and insisting on their own evaluative agency. Thus, secondly, the narrative forms themselves promote certain values and limit the ways of being a music listener or fan, acting as narrative maps within particular groups and in popular music more generally. The circulation of these stories promotes an expectation that for someone to be considered an authentic music lover, they must be able to present a convincing self-narrative involving peak music experiences. The tropes of first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences privilege pre-conscious, surprising, emotional and physical responses to music, promoting the idea that people have natural affinities for certain music and that music acts immediately upon listeners. Accordingly, despite popular music’s mass, commercial context, the obvious operation of numerous mediating technologies and the prominence of interpretive discourses in both specialist and mainstream media, the narrative devices outlined in this chapter enable and even require people to present their relationships with popular music as authentic (pursuant to the kind of cultural definitions explored in this chapter) and quite personal.
Chapter 5
Life-changing moments: Peak music experiences as inspiration and influence

It is not unusual to hear someone claim that music changed their life. A much-referenced example of this way of speaking about music is found in the 2004 film *Garden State*, in which the character Sam places headphones on protagonist Andrew’s head and states, ‘You gotta hear this one song. It’ll change your life, I swear’, referring to ‘New Slang’ by US indie band The Shins. The trope is also sometimes used within popular music itself, such as when Don McLean’s song ‘American Pie’ (1971) asks, ‘Can music save your mortal soul?’ This rhetorical question is answered by the disco staple ‘Last Night A DJ Saved My Life’, first released by Indeep in 1981 and covered, referenced and sampled many times since. As that example shows, the claims people make about music’s effect on their lives often involve a peak music experience, in which specific music in a particular situation has a profound and enduring effect. The idea that music acts on people is taken seriously in censorship laws, commercial and political marketing strategies, religious convention, justifications for state support, and the use of music in social movements (see Street 2012). However, the claims made by individuals about the effects music has on them have been largely overlooked or dismissed in the sociology of music due to theoretical assumptions and disciplinary priorities. This chapter will reflect on this history and argue that paying attention to people’s profound claims about music contributes significantly to our understanding of its social relevance. The now substantial body of work arguing that musical taste and practices are not pre-determined (see the discussion of post-subcultural theory in Chapter 2) gives rise to questions about why and

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6 Among other uses, the song was covered by Mariah Carey on her album *Glitter* (2001); a remix by producer Seamus Haji reached number one on the UK Dance Singles Chart in 2006; Quebecois singer Jean Leloup sampled and translated the chorus into French for his hit ‘1990’ (1991); and a book about the history of DJing was named after the song (Brewster and Broughton 1999).
how people commence, continue and alter their particular trajectories of engagement with music. More generally, following the broad abandonment of a simplistic ‘effects model’ of media influence, there remains a need to consider the ways in which music consumption might actually affect people. The prevalence of stories about music having profound effects on people’s lives also warrants investigation as a discursive phenomenon. The study of peak music experiences provides new insight in relation to these issues.

This chapter considers how people credit peak music experiences with significant effects on their lives and what this reveals about music’s social power. Peak music experiences can provide inspiration to engage in activities and to form commitments, so that they are called upon by people to explain how they ‘became’ musicians, fans and so on. They can also act as an influence on beliefs, values and ways of doing things, both in musical practice and in other aspects of life. The identification of peak music experiences as sources of inspiration and influence forms part of the discourse that constructs popular music and its listeners, emphasising the agency of both over more mundane social and cultural factors. These peak music experiences also make apparent the crucial importance of affect in people’s responses to music and therefore its social agency. The following section considers how music’s social effects have been studied and introduces the theoretical framework applied in later parts of this chapter.

The study of music’s effects

Music’s perceived capacity to affect people has shaped its treatment in both policy and theory. Street (2012) observes that the urge to censor music for fear of its effects is as old as music itself, recurring across every century and continent. In one of the earliest recorded examples, Plato (1966) theorises that different harmonies and rhythms have specific effects on character, necessitating their regulation by the state and their careful
use in education, while the introduction of new musical forms endangers the whole fabric of society. According to Gilbert and Pearson (1999), most attempts to understand music’s effects from ancient times to the present distinguish between meaning and affect. It is the latter that has fuelled perceptions of music as problematic, as it affects us in ways that seem to bypass reason and cannot be explained through language. They assert that this affective dimension has been downplayed in the aesthetic evaluation of music, as music’s value as a meaningful object of intellectual contemplation has been privileged over physical response (although the Romantic movement, at least, involved more positive views of sensation and emotion in music: see Bent 1996). A relative negativity toward affective responses to music can be seen in the pathological and gendered concepts of Lisztomania in the 19th century and Beatlemania in the 20th century, although ‘mania’ had more serious connotations in the earlier context (Gooley 2004).

A similar prejudice historically limited the study of music within sociology, as music’s so-called ‘abstract’ features (involving neither images nor words) were seen as distinct from social realities and impervious to social analysis (DeNora 2003: 152). This dismissal of the social relevance of music’s embodied reception resonated for some time in methodologies for popular music studies that overlooked people’s subjective experiences of music. Relatively recently, DeNora (2000: 21-22) criticises the primacy in socio-musical studies of semiotic analysis. Bennett (2008) observes the historical tendency in popular music studies to treat culture as a structurally determined constraint, presupposing the meanings and uses of music by particular groups with insufficient heed to their own perspectives. Such a framework impedes the consideration of how music may be a resource for subjectively navigating constraints or, as I have asked, how music may have its own social and cultural force. Meanwhile, disciplines such as social psychology took up the question of music’s effects, for example by considering quantitative correlations between heavy metal or rap listening and teenage behavioural
problems (not predictive: Epstein et al 1990), and between country music and white metropolitan suicide rates (indicative of causation: Stack & Gundlach 1992). Such literature established a paradigmatic discourse of music’s pathological effects that sidelined sociological inquiry until more recently, with the cultural and affective turns discussed below.

According to DeNora (2003), Theodor Adorno was the first modern social theorist to take seriously the classic, Platonic concern with music’s causative properties. Adorno proposes that the internal dynamics of a piece of music, involving the compositional handling of ‘musical material’, provoke particular modes of engagement from the listener which can influence their engagement with the world more broadly. For example, Arnold Schoenberg’s dissonant, complex compositions encouraged critical insight into the social character of the period, while the standardised form and repetitive content of contemporaneous popular music invited uncritical submission not only to dance fads but to authority and conformity. As this example suggests, Adorno continues the traditional denigration of physical and emotional responses to music, which he sees as an abdication of reason and therefore of democratic participation (ibid: 87). His method, involving the analysis of musical texts in conjunction with critical social theory, is criticised by DeNora as ungrounded, too general and too abstract (ibid: 153). However, she argues that Adorno’s work is ‘unparalleled as a serious alternative to the otherwise rather scholastic focus on music’s social meanings and social shapings: it exceeds both semiotic and the now-traditional sociological focus on music’s social production’ (ibid: 151). Importantly for the present discussion, Adorno’s work as interpreted by DeNora implicitly rejects the dualism of music and society, by focusing on music’s role in relation to consciousness as causative and constitutive of social life.

The so-called cultural and affective turns have brought renewed attention to what music does, in the sense considered by Adorno. The cultural turn involved the recognition
that culture, including popular culture and media, is not only expressive but constitutive of social identity (Chaney 1994). Accordingly, in a discussion of music and politics, Street (2012: 173) asserts:

Music has the capacity to make us do and feel things that we would not otherwise, and it does so with immediacy and directness. [...] Music can help constitute identities and communities; it can create organization and institutions; it can embody ideals and values.

In considering music’s social import, work that Bennett (2008: 429) categorises as ‘post-cultural turn studies in the sociology of popular music’ has been concerned not so much with what music does to people, as what people do with music. This concern is captured in DeNora’s (2000, 2003) concept of ‘affordances’, referring to what music makes possible. It is through its affordances to trigger memory, to provide a model for thought or action, to signal ambience, and to provide parameters for movement and energy, that music is a medium of both large-scale and moment-to-moment social change (DeNora 2003: 157). Meanwhile, the affective turn involved the recognition that culture and society do not operate entirely at a semiotic level, but through bodies that feel and interact. It is through intensifications of feeling that people recognise and attribute meaning to objects, people and themselves, over a lifetime of embodied encounters (Ahmed 2014). For music, this means that attention must be paid to the non-verbal, physical and emotional effects that were historically feared or dismissed, but which account for so much of music’s unique power and appeal. Gilbert (2010) observes that ‘affect is precisely music’s domain, while music is the cultural practice which deals most directly in the production, orchestration, repetition and interruption of affects’. As a result, music’s power resides not in its capacity to express existing situations and identities, but ‘in its capacity quite literally to make us feel differently while also feeling the same as certain others whom we did not share feelings with before’. The physical effectiveness of
music is most obvious on the dancefloor, where ‘particular configurations of sound (i.e., records) are judged by their success or failure in “making us” dance’ (Gilbert and Pearson 1999: 46). Where Adorno saw in such physical responses the abdication of reason and agency, post-affective turn studies reject straightforward dichotomies between mental and physical experience, and between discourse and affect. According to Gilbert and Pearson (ibid: 51), listening and dancing to music can offer an experience of the self which either stabilises and confirms, or disrupts and alters our previous experience of it. Simon Frith (1998: 274) also stresses music’s physical impact on identity when he states, ‘Music-making and music listening are bodily matters […] musical pleasure is not derived from fantasy – it is not mediated by daydreams – but is experienced directly: music gives us real experience of what the ideal could be’. Music enables experiences of the body, time and sociality that enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives and thereby to construct our sense of identity. Accordingly, musical experience is considered by sociologists Eyerman and Jamison (1998: 35) to point beyond the self and to play a unifying and empowering role in social movements, as it helps create collective identity and a sense of movement ‘in an emotional and almost physical sense’. For example, the collective singing of ‘We Shall Overcome’ at a political demonstration or ‘Solidarity Forever’ at a trade union meeting can ‘capture, in a brief, transient moment, a glimpse of, and a feeling for, spiritual bonding which is both rational and emotive at one and the same time’ (ibid: 36). Similarly, political theorist Jane Bennett (2001) proposes that music can provide the necessary feeling to connect us to others and to motivate moral and political commitments and actions. In summary, music allows us not only to perceive and express meanings, but also to experience those meanings as important and worth acting on.

Since music acts at the level of experience, the study of music as a social agent must have regard to that experience, which is necessarily embodied and situated in time
and place. As DeNora (2003: 154-6) observes, music may afford different people
different things at different times as it acts in concert with material, cultural and social
environments. To these variables we must add the changing dispositions and active
participation of practitioners themselves, as shown in Chapter 4. Given these
contingencies, DeNora (ibid) proposes the study of specific instances of musical
engagement or ‘Musical Events’. Her empirical work (for example DeNora 2000) uses
this approach to consider music’s ‘everyday’ and ‘moment-to-moment’ effects, such as
on mood and attention. Similarly, while Hennion (2005) theorises that people’s
preferences, practices and capacities are shaped through a history of musical engagement,
his empirical focus is on established practices rather than specific moments of change.
By contrast, peak music experiences – that is, memorable and extraordinary ‘Musical
Events’ – are expressly credited with profound and enduring effects, as the empirical
decamples below will demonstrate. What these stories describe is not a temporary change
of mood or attention but a lasting effect from an encounter with music. As experiences of
biographical significance, recalled by the participants to explain developments in their
lives, these are epiphanies (Denzin 1989).

This may seem to pose further research challenges than the study of music’s
moment-to-moment effects, as the researcher’s access to peak music experiences is
mediated by the very discursive processes that construct them as significant. However, as
noted in Chapter 2, the point is not to investigate experiences as objective events, but to
make their (re)construction a further subject of study. Experiences, including physical
experience and the body itself, are constituted in and by discourse (Gilbert and Pearson
1999: 51), so to understand even music’s ‘immediate’ resonance for individuals requires
empirical study of not only its textual properties but its cultural placement. This includes
the discursive frameworks by which musical experience is anticipated, remembered and
presented in different contexts. The study of peak music experiences is specifically
attentive to the narratives involved in constructing and reconstructing music, music listeners and the experiences in which they interact. As in Denzin’s (1989) concept of epiphanies, this includes a focus on how people produce stories of experience that accord with collective standards of truth and form, which is not to downplay the very real significance of those experiences but to ask how that significance is constructed. Rather than trying to separate what music does from what people say it does, this approach recognises that the two are interdependent. Musicians and music fans act on the basis of their perceptions about music’s power, including their understanding of peak music experiences, so that this is a way in which music does inform their lives. The next part of this chapter considers how, in narratives of peak music experience, some musical experiences are constructed as personal epiphanies that account for long-term inspiration and influence.

Peak music experiences as inspiration

The question of why some people become music fans and musicians has received less scholarly attention than how those identities are performed. This is due in part to the historical dominance in popular music studies, as noted by Bennett (2008), of deterministic or ‘top-down’ models of culture in which broad structural categories explain musical taste and practice. The increasing recognition of more complex and subjectively determined links between social and cultural structures opens up the questions of origin and inspiration to sociological inquiry. Those questions are put by Simon Frith (1992: 184) as follows:

What pushes people into wanting to be performers or wanting to create? This can't be answered in terms of their wanting to make money, it involves too a desired

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7 Attitudes toward financial reward as a motivation for practice in the four Brisbane music scenes under consideration are discussed in Chapter 6.
social experience. How does that differ from the social experience of being a fan?

I can't think of a study in any area which addresses this.

On the other hand, these questions are addressed directly in popular discourse and often with reference to peak music experiences. Indeed, as Frith (2007a: 169) observed in his inaugural lecture as Donald Tovey Professor of Music at the University of Edinburgh:

> It is a common trope in the autobiography of musicians that they heard a piece of music by chance – at a concert, on [BBC classical station] Radio 3, on someone’s record player – that so moved them that they then pursued a musical education.

The same experience is common in popular music.

This observation, presented in support of an argument that formal musical education is not a prerequisite to musical appreciation, reflects a popular idea that music can have a serious and lasting effect on an individual. Similarly, popular narratives of ‘becoming-a-fan’ attribute quasi-religious conversions to particular musical encounters (Cavicchi 1998; Kahn-Harris 2004; Bailey 2005; see Chapter 4). Such narratives are prevalent in the interview data, with respondents attributing agency to peak music experiences in words to the effect that a particular experience ‘turned me on to music’ (Rob, 40), ‘set off my musical tangent’ (Dan, 26), provided a ‘big kick-along’ to form a band (Nick, 27) or more broadly ‘changed my life’ (Sally, 30). These experiences were often identified in response to the standard question, ‘When did you become as interested in music as you are today?’, although they arose in other contexts as well. In this way, peak music experiences are credited as a source of inspiration to engage in a range of musical practices, including performance and listening.
Becoming a musician or a fan

Alicia (34), a rock ‘n’ roll guitarist, commented on the ubiquity of peak music experiences in narratives of becoming a musician. When asked if she could remember when and how she first developed an interest in music, Alicia responded as follows:

This is really interesting. I actually did an interview with a fella in Sydney recently who was doing podcasts of musicians. He asked me that, and I’d just been talking to someone about that recently as well, and everyone sort of has this, “Oh I heard Fleetwood Mac on the radio”, you know, “Neil’s guitar lick in this bit of this song and it changed everything for me”. My dad was in the army as a musician and is a music teacher now. We just had instruments everywhere and it was always about music and stereos. So I kind of don’t have one of those moments. It sort of was just everywhere.

The interview data bear out the observation that almost everyone has ‘one of those moments’, so that Alicia is conscious of her lack of such a story. However, she nevertheless proceeded to cite a series of peak music experiences that were significant as she developed a more personalised interest in music. By contrast with Alicia’s quote, indie musician Julian (44) also grew up surrounded by musicians and instruments but was confident in identifying a peak music experience as the effective genesis of his desire to play the drums:

One night they broadcast a [The] Police concert. This was in about 1983 or something and I was just about to start drumming. And I just watched Stewart Copeland drumming and something happened, “I’m going to do that”. And then I just suddenly went, “There’s a drum kit here”. Dad had kinda taught me a little bit but I just saw him [Copeland] drumming and something just went, click. “I’m gonna do that”. And I’ve been drumming ever since, so thank you Stewart Copeland! […] I can confidently isolate that exact moment of, you know, before
the show I wasn’t thinking like that, an hour later I was going, “Tomorrow, I’m gonna do this”. It was genuinely that (clicks fingers) - the light went off.

Julian’s story emphasises the sudden, clear and memorable impact of the peak music experience as an inspiration, which is a common feature of such stories. Upon further reflection he teased out some factors that contributed to this response, including the specific appeal of the music performed by The Police, the unique musical and physical personality of Stewart Copeland as a drummer, and the resonance of these factors with the enthusiasm and energy of his 11-year-old self. Julian’s story exemplifies a common narrative in which people who had access to instruments and musical training as children, nevertheless described their inspiration to become a musician as a separate matter, often hinging on experiences arising from sources outside their families or teachers. In a further demonstration of this divide, indie guitarist Martin (33) described a peak music experience that led him to switch instruments:

Initially I was into like playing the trumpet and I used to go and see, ‘cause I was playing trumpet, my aunty would give us free passes to the Jazz and Blues Festival each year […] but I remember seeing [guitarist] Tommy Emmanuel, he played there and it was just so compelling, I think I was maybe 10 or 11 years old, um, and I didn’t start playing guitar straight away but having seen him play it sort of blew my young mind.

Martin began playing guitar the following year when an opportunity arose at school and he continues to define himself as a guitarist, citing this experience when asked how he came to start playing.

As the foregoing examples show, peak music experiences tend to be central in the origin stories of popular music performers in the Brisbane music scene. These are foregrounded over more mundane but practically important matters like parental encouragement, access to instruments, lessons and practice space. This reflects the
emphasis in popular music discourse on both personal agency and the overwhelming pull of music, transcending normal social and cultural constraints. This discourse can also be seen in the well-known stories of famous musicians who pursued a vocation in popular music despite poverty, as embodied in the famously homemade or adapted instruments of early blues and hip hop artists (Schloss 2004), and despite community disapprobation as exemplified in rock and roll pioneer Jerry Lee Lewis’s fabled expulsion from school for performing boogie-woogie renditions of hymns (Palmer 1979). By privileging the affective power of peak music experiences over practicalities and socio-cultural expectations in their self-narratives, people reproduce this discourse. They affirm the special, transcendent nature of popular music as well as claiming an authentic, personalised connection to it. This narrative emphasis is also consistent with the recognition in the theories of Eyerman and Jamison (1998) and Jane Bennett (2001), and in affective studies more broadly (for example Ahmed 2014), that social commitments and actions are driven by feeling. Accordingly, becoming a musician is not purely a rational calculation of opportunities and benefits, nor the unconscious carrying out of a structurally determined trajectory, but is in large part the embodied feeling that certain things are more valuable and desirable than others. These feelings are produced through experience, with the result that certain experiences are remembered as illuminating and motivating. As Ahmed (2004: 33) says, ‘it is a question of what sticks, of what connections are lived as the most intense or intimate, as being closer to the skin’ (emphasis in original). Julian had access to a drum kit which he had been encouraged and shown how to use by his father, but he says it was in the specific moment of watching The Police perform that he first felt drumming to be important to his burgeoning identity. This is not to discount the role of discourse, but to recognise how discourse operates through feeling. For example, the discourse of musical vocation described above contributes to the construction of certain musical experiences as powerful and compelling.
in certain ways, as well as to the expectation that musicians will provide such an origin story (as Alicia complained).

Becoming a fan of music is also described as something that is felt and therefore associated with the particular experiences in which those feelings are produced. To ‘love’ music is to generalise from feelings that arise in specific encounters with specific objects. This is why stories of becoming-a-fan often involve peak music experiences that are associated with the emergence of new feelings, as shown in the following quotes.

Max (32): I do have a memory of the first song that I ever liked and that is The Models’ ‘Out of Mind Out of Sight’. […] My mum bought the 12-inch maxi-single of that song and she played it and I just thought it was wild. […] That was the first song I was like, “I love music”.

Rob (40): The song that actually made me, that I guess turned me on to music, it was like a lightbulb moment. My music teacher played ‘Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds’ when I was in year eight (laughs). And there was something about it, I’d been a bit indifferent to music up until that point, which was a bit weird because my brother was a [radio DJ] but I didn’t really care so much about it until I heard ‘Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds’. Suddenly I was like, “Fuck that’s an interesting song”. It just sort of did something.

These examples illustrate the obvious but significant point that a love for music is felt and reflexively recognised through actual engagements with specific music. It is in this sense that Rob is correct in saying the song ‘did something’ or ‘turned [him] on to music’. If listening involves actively setting up the required passivity and taste involves techniques learned through use (Hennion 2007), we can see how particular encounters with music might be especially instructive in the development of such personal repertoires. They might entail a change in desires, priorities or ways of doing things, so a peak music experience might not merely be representative of personal changes but
credited as a cause in itself. For example, Elly (32) remembered hearing a song on the radio not only as her introduction to a favourite musician, but as a ‘life-changing’ moment for her as a listener and later as a performer:

I guess one of the key musical influences on my own music is Ani Di Franco and I discovered her music, I think when I was in high school, a teenager some time, and I just remember hearing her on [radio station] Triple J. Hearing a song of hers and I had to find out who it was, and from that moment on I was a fan and it was just, it was immediate. Like it was just an immediate experience. […] I was in the shower (laughs). On the radio. I’d struggle to remember the exact name of the song but I know the album that it was from. And yeah, it was just one of those life-changing moments really. I sort of think, “What if I hadn’t have heard that song, what would’ve happened?” […] It just put a completely different slant on how I connected with music and it was a much more personal connection from that point on.

In her encounter with Ani Di Franco’s song on the radio, Elly experienced a different, more personal way of connecting with music, which became central to her identity. As a result she categorises this peak music experience as a crucial fork in her biographical pathway, or what is often referred to as a ‘sliding doors’ moment, so that she wonders what would have happened if she had not heard that song at that time.

The examples presented here illustrate how peak music experiences can literally embody and, in memory, come to encapsulate nascent attitudes toward music. These attitudes, in turn, reflect on their bearer as markers of developing identity. An experience of being moved by music is evidence of the qualities of that music (and music generally) but also the qualities of the self that was so moved. This is consistent with Ahmed’s (2014) assertion that both subjects and objects are recognised and evaluated through intensifications of feeling that are produced in the encounters between them. Through our
affective encounters with music, we reflexively learn how we feel about it and thus recognise what it is and who we are. As Crossley (1998) observes, these feelings are not reducible to each particular situation but point to a history of feelings within a shared communicative world. The concept of peak music experiences is a part of that communicative world for the Brisbane music scene participants who were interviewed and it refers to those encounters that stand out by virtue of the singular intensity or character of the feelings they produce within that history. These are the feelings which ‘stick’ (Ahmed 2014) and create lasting impressions that give shape to both music and experiencing selves. In retrospect, such peak music experiences can be emblematic of self-identity at a particular point in time and of changing identity or turning points within a longer self-narrative. This is how peak music experiences are a way of recognising, remembering and explaining how someone ‘became’ a music lover and more specifically, a musician, a fan or both.

*Seeing, doing and feeling*

Two common ways that inspiration is found in peak music experiences are through seeing and doing. An example of the former is provided by Dan (26) in the following quote:

> When I picked up the guitar and started writing music was when I first saw [singer/guitarist] John Butler, of all people. So, um, so that, I always remember that moment as being a big, like, seeing him at um, I think Woodford Folk Festival. When I was about 15? 16? And it just set off my musical tangent. […] That was when I first said, ‘Okay I wanna learn the guitar.’

Dan experienced John Butler’s performance as exciting and, in ways that he went on to explain, different from other performances he had seen in ways that appealed to him. Through this he was inspired to do what he had seen John Butler doing, namely singing and playing the guitar in ways that seemed to embody a certain attitude. This is not to say
that every person who enjoys a concert will want to become a musician. An element identified in many inspirational peak music experiences, that goes further in explaining such an urge, is a sense of affinity with the performer. For example, Kim (44) explained that her family ‘wasn’t musical’ and her own interest in music was not ‘expected’, when a televised performance created a peak music experience that partly inspired her to take up the guitar:

I remember, I was nine or ten maybe and I was watching TV, like a Saturday morning music show, and I remember seeing Joan Armatrading. You know, this beautiful black woman playing a [Fender] Stratocaster [guitar]. And she was really normal, she wasn’t like a rock star, she was a normal looking woman, and I was really taken by her. My dad bought me her album and I wasn’t a massive fan of her music but I just remember going, “She’s like really different to everybody else and I want to be like her”.

Kim, recalling her memories of Joan Armatrading from the perspective of being a white Australian child, did not literally want to become a ‘beautiful black woman’ (and joked about this in the interview). However, Kim soon began taking guitar lessons and continues to perform, believing herself and her current role models to be ‘normal’ like Joan Armatrading, meaning authentically unpretentious as opposed to ‘rock stars’. She attributes these aspects of her identity partly to her experience of affinity and possibility while watching Armatrading perform.

In another example, Nick (26) described his reaction to a festival-headlining performance by North American indie-rock band the Pixies, around five years earlier, as follows:

… and when I saw ’em I was like, *(whispered)* ‘Whoa’, like, this is, this is it! After that I was like, ‘I love this and I wanna, like, get involved in that and do this’, yeah. […] I might have been talking about it but I don’t think I was actually
playing at that time. It was definitely one of the big kick-alongs to get myself organised and get into it.

Nick explained that the singer of the Pixies acted as a role model by showing him what was allowed: ‘the way he did things his own way and he was like yelping and screaming and doin’ whatever and it’s like, “Oh, you can do it”, like you can, you know’. This is reminiscent of numerous stories in popular music discourse and especially those at the heart of punk ideology, in which watching a band shows the spectator that they too can form a band without the means, skill or style that the mainstream (supposedly) demands. Famously, punk icon Joe Strummer of The Clash said in 1976: ‘Yesterday I thought I was a crud. Then I saw the Sex Pistols and I became a king and decided to move into the future’ (Coon 2012). This touches again on the idea, implicit in many stories about inspirational peak music experiences, that music’s affective power inspires and enables people to transcend typical social and cultural constraints. One way this power seems to manifest is when music creates a feeling of connection between a listener and a performer, even though it may be mediated through television or concert staging, so that the listener believes they could or do share the performer’s way of being. In such circumstances, popular music’s dual identity as a mass mediated form and an accessible folk culture combine to imbue it with a unique power.

As well as experiences of witnessing the power of musical performance, experiences of engaging in musical performance can be inspiring through the feelings they produce. For example, Trish (37) described an experience during childhood in which she became aware that she was a singer:

I was about six years old or something, and I remember getting on the back of the truck for the Christmas carols and everyone singing these carols all over town and all the lights coming on, and suddenly people started singing in harmony. So I can really vividly remember working out the harmonies and singing along and realising,
“Oh, there’s this thing that people do”. And really, that was a really, um, that was an awakening I guess in that I could do it easily and I felt confident in this thing, that I wasn’t really aware of prior to that moment.

As with the earlier stories of becoming a fan through particular experiences, Trish became aware of her ability to sing through an experience of doing it. In her story, it is clear how the act of singing was presented to Trish as meaningful and appealing, then how her own attempt at singing resulted in a positive experience. A similar process was described in bolder terms by Cam (40), a multi-instrumentalist and frontperson for several bands who said that he ‘became a dancer’ through a single, memorable experience of dancing:

When I was 14 I had a kind of, overnight I became a dancer. I don’t know how to explain it other than: it was the last school dance of the year and I was really excited. […] And I get into this dancehall and this girl goes, “I want to dance with you”. That blew me over the edge, so I don’t really remember what happened, but all I remember is, the night went really fast, and I was in the air a lot, doing splits, spinning around and all that. I sort of realised the next day that was what I was gonna do the rest of my life. Had a sort of a flash of the future: alright, this is my path, I know who I am, this is what I’m gonna do. […] Dancing and music. […] When I did that and it showed me who I was, it was like a massive blessing. I sort of knew what my path was for the rest of my life. So I just followed that.

Cam states that through this peak music experience in a night of dancing, he knew who he was and who he would be for the rest of his life. The realisation arose from reflection on his embodied engagement in the activity.

The inspiration that people attribute to peak music experiences is rooted in the feelings that define them. In the examples presented above, people describe feelings of affinity, love, belonging, confidence, excitement and certainty, which are produced in specific interactions with music that are in turn marked as significant. As in Dewey’s
Pragmatist philosophy, emotion provides the qualitative unity of an experience, by selecting and colouring its various elements. Through emotions we perceive the shape and character of events and things, which as Ahmed (2014) argues includes ourselves. In her terms, intensifications of feeling cause impressions of bodily and social surfaces, marking their inside and outside. This repeats associations that are already in place but could, as I suggest, disrupt them in memorable ways. Indeed, such disruption is a feature of peak music experiences in the common narratives that construct them. The affective aspects of a person’s musical experience, meaning their embodied sensations and emotions, can be the cause of certain impressions: that they are ‘like’ the performer, or want to be; that they belong in a group of singers or among a scene of musicians; or that they will be a dancer. Where these impressions are strongly informed by a specific, peak music experience, it is remembered as a defining moment of inspiration in a person’s self-narrative.

The influence of peak music experiences

The concept of influence is well recognised in popular music culture. Musicians are frequently expected to list their ‘influences’, meaning the artists whose work informed their own practice. These narratives often involve peak music experiences. Music is also credited with influence on non-musical areas of people’s lives, from style to political attitudes to more subtle aspects of being. This section considers how ways of doing things and the priorities they enact are transmitted and absorbed in peak music experiences, highlighting the unique powers of music to affect subjectivities.

Influence on musical practice

Peak music experiences can have an influence at quite a practical level, as they demonstrate possible effects that can be achieved and ways of achieving them. In the
following quote, Trish (37) describes how an affecting performance demonstrated the power of an aesthetic approach that continues to inform her priorities as a composer and performer:

Seeing [the band] Low at Shepherd’s Bush Empire in London, I don’t think I’d ever been to a gig like that. And um, I can’t remember her name, Mimi isn’t it? She sang this song ‘Laser Beam’ and I remember just sitting in this hot, sweaty venue listening to this woman sing like an angel but with this really kind of heavy bass below her voice and I thought, “Oh, it can be so simply arranged and so powerful”. And that’s really exciting. It doesn’t need to be complicated and full and, yeah. I don’t think I’d realised that until that moment, I always thought it was more complicated, or too complicated to reach perhaps. I just didn’t really have an understanding of it until then. [...] Everything surrounding the words [in my music], it’s always pretty simple and it’s always fairly, um, yeah I just don’t overcomplicate it. So I guess in a way it’s rooted in that Low performance that I saw.

Musical influence also operates in less practically-minded ways, as musicians adopt thematic concerns and even motivations from their own experiences of music. A peak music experience can intimate what is worth doing and therefore why, as well as how, to do it. Matt (31), a rapper and hip hop music producer, described a listening experience that caused him to reconsider his own artistic priorities:

I went around to a fella’s house who was already doing [youth music workshops] and he was like, “Have a listen to these songs I recorded” [...] it was songs he’d recorded with people in detention, youth detention. And I was listening to it and I remember one particular song was a girl, she was singing about love, and it was like a particularly touching, lovely song. And I remember thinking to myself at the time, a lot of the hip hop that was going on around me was from like, middle-class,
suburban people rappin’ about hardcore stuff, like we’re about trying to sound rough, and sound tough, and violence. But then I heard this song from someone in youth detention, who actually had lived a very hard life, you know, really hard, is singing, making this song about love. And I kinda thought, “That’s, that’s, I wanna help more of this music to happen”. You know? That feels realer to me than a lot of this other stuff happening.

Matt said that this experience provoked a change in the themes and lyrics of his own music and also inspired him to begin working in community music programs as a teacher and music producer. Accordingly, this peak music experience is credited with influence on both his musical practice and other areas of his life. Matt’s reasoning shows the close connection in popular music between an artist’s musical practice and their identity. Artistic choices imply deeper values that are expected to be consistent in other areas of life, in accordance with notions of authenticity (Frith 1987). In this case, we can see that the judgment of authenticity is not detached from musical experience but involves feelings produced in the experience of listening. The recording of a girl who Matt knew to be in youth detention singing about love ‘felt realer’ to him than his peers rapping about violence. The recorded music and its context, including the singer’s background and the situation in which the music was heard, cannot be separated as causes for this feeling. In turn, the feeling guided Matt’s subsequent self-reflection and action. This example illustrates the relation between discourse, affect and meaning; the feeling produced in musical experience is informed by discourse, and that feeling informs the meaning of the experience and judgments about the music.

*Influence outside musical practice*

The recognition of music as a source of influence is not restricted to the sphere of musical practice. People also claim to have been influenced by music in a number of ways that go
well beyond their approach to performing or listening. One link that is often identified is that between music fandom and visual style, especially in the form of clothing, which has been a focus of attention in subcultural theorisations of music cultures (for example, Hebdige 1979, Feldman 2009). Some interview participants described how their musical tastes, which were formed in part through peak music experiences, guided their sartorial choices not only through direct imitation of musical idols but also through the interpretation and adaptation of underlying ethics. For example, Julie (45) said that when she was a young teenager, David Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust persona demonstrated ‘an anything goes attitude that I really liked, so I picked it up and adapted it to my own wardrobe somewhat’. However, some interview participants dismissed the association of music taste with sartorial style as an adolescent concern or even a historically outdated idea. While some older interviewees bemoaned what they saw as a lack of commitment by younger people to consistent subcultural styles, there was broad agreement about this reality across the generations within the Brisbane music scenes that were studied. This problematises the subcultural view of music fandom and demonstrates a more neo-tribal attitude (Bennett 1999). To be clear, however, this did not equate to a lack of sustained commitment to music or the identities built around it, as shown here and elsewhere in this thesis.

Music fandom has been shown to infuse a person’s life in less obvious ways, for example in Bennett’s (2013) finding that some ageing punks ‘tone down’ spectacular forms of identification like the mohawk hairstyle, while maintaining their identification with the underlying values such as ‘do it yourself’. Similar narratives were presented by interview participants as the following excerpts demonstrate:

Grant, 49: [My attendance at numerous punk rock gigs in the 1980s] has shaped who I am, I can’t deny it. Like I wouldn’t be probably self-employed, gettin’ around in red jeans and that’s the only trousers I own, you know, not giving a shit about
having a shower some days. […] I still do shit like shoplift or whatever it might be, just stuff like that that the normal 49-year-old adult in [my suburb] wouldn’t do, you know?

Ken, 58: Music in the sense of shifting me into what I call punk rock has had a strong influence […] in the sense that it said to me, “If you wanna do something get out there and do it, don’t wait for others, believe in yourself, don’t be something you’re not”. Those things have remained very strongly in my life, yeah, absolutely. As in the above cases, lifelong influences are often attributed to immersion in a music culture rather than instant epiphanies. However, by showing the centrality of music to some people’s identity, these narratives underscore the significance of what they are saying when they attribute their involvement and taste in music to specific musical experiences.

In some instances, people do identify peak music experiences as influential in their broader lives. Liz (26) pinpointed her viewing of a music film as influential in her adoption of particular punk values in her late teens:

I think like, when I was 18 or 19 I watched the Fugazi documentary, *Instrument.* And that was like super influential. When I was getting more involved with like, my musical participation of like how I want things to be and I was trying always to be a bit more like, all-ages where possible, and if I was gonna go to a hardcore show and I saw that one of my friends was like acting rough in the pit then I would like talk to them about it. Just be like honest or whatever.

*Instrument* (1999), which was also cited as influential by another research participant in Brisbane’s indie rock scene, consists largely of live performance footage, occasionally intercut with band interviews and footage of touring and recording, without narration. The viewing of this film can therefore be seen as a substantially musical experience, similar to watching or listening to a recorded concert. *Instrument* includes footage of all-
ages shows at non-traditional venues, including an outdoor performance at the US Capitol in Washington, D.C. which is introduced with the written title, ‘Martin Luther King, Jr. Concert for Justice … 30th Anniversary of the March on Washington’. During live performances, Fugazi singer Ian Mackaye is shown conversing with audience members from the stage and occasionally castigating individuals for rough behaviour. Liz adopted the politically-charged practices and values she perceived in the film and therefore credits her first experience of watching the film as ‘super influential’. She claims that this guided her response to behaviour she encountered in local settings, such as friends ‘acting rough in the [mosh] pit’, which shows the trans-local (Bennett and Peterson 2004) nature of her scene belonging and the mediated sources through which her scene identity is constructed. Indeed, Liz emphasised the importance of sources of information like this film, along with zines and intra-scene conversations, to a young person without access to ‘a sociology degree’, opining that ‘it shouldn’t be hidden away in libraries necessarily’. For her, as a politically-minded member of a punk scene, musical experience is closely associated with moral and political education. Her viewing of the concert film Instrument was a memorably influential peak music experience within that ongoing education.

Musical content and especially lyrics are often cited as influential by listeners. Interview participants described the formative impact of lyrics and extra-musical statements by expressly politically engaged artists like Ani Di Franco, Bob Marley and Midnight Oil. For example, Dan (26) said that after becoming a fan of folk-rock artist John Butler (as discussed earlier in this chapter), the artist’s influence extended into political commitment through both practices and lyrics:

I started going to like, protests and stuff where those bands would be playing, because I’d see them playing. John was always talking about certain things, like refugees – you know, I ended up writing a song about refugees, and all that stuff.

Since music and its presentation can have such influence, it follows that a particular
musical experience might be credited with an enduring influence. This is demonstrated in the following story told by Lily (25), who was moved to rethink her priorities and quit her job after hearing a particular hip hop song:

I remember working a job that I really hated. It was just like a cafe job that I worked a couple of days a week while I was studying still. And [rapper GDP] had a song called ‘Re-evaluate’, which was like, I guess the main message of the song was - it seems pretty cliché of a message, but like it’s touched me super, super deep - like what’s the point in going to work if you’re not really happy at the end of the day or if you’re just watching the clock waiting for the time to be over. ‘Cause all those little bits of time that you spend working for somebody else unhappy and unfulfilled, they end up connecting together and forming like the big chunk of time that is your life. And that really hit me and really, really affected me. And I always had a weird relationship with working and I knew I didn’t really like it, but then this song just put it into words that were so obvious and made, I don’t know, my approach before then was just to like slog it out until something better came along. But I listened to this song and was like, “Oh yeah!” Like, nothing better is gonna come along, I need to actually change my circumstances. So I ended up quitting that job and going fruit picking for a couple of months and working on farms. So that definitely was a big like turning point in my life.

The lyrics of the song were clearly central to Lily’s response, as they put a particular idea ‘into words that were so obvious’. However, in seeking to explain how hearing a song could come to be such a ‘turning point’ in her life, Lily emphasised the importance of the feeling that music induces:

I’m a very, like, emotional thing. And so I can’t like intellectually understand something and be moved to act, it has to like channel me from that emotional, I guess element of myself. So music is really helpful in that way, in that it kinda gets
you inspired about an issue and then I’ll go and like research the fine details of it. Whereas the music is, I don’t know, it kinda like ignites the flame of like, “Oh yeah! This is messed up, we need to do something about it!”

Lily said that she thought about this capacity of music to convey meaning at an emotional level in relation to her own songwriting, when working on her separate folk and hip hop projects. She gave the example that instead of singing, “We must save the trees”, it would be more effective to induce people to feel something about trees. Her analysis here closely echoes the ideas of Eyerman and Jamison (1998) and Jane Bennett (2001) that the feelings produced by music are a crucial motivator in social commitment and action. This feeling informs the meanings derived from lyrics and other signs and marks those meanings as important. Accordingly, music’s influence is located in the embodied experience of reception and peak music experiences offer critical insight into such moments. When it is remembered later, a peak music experience represents the strength of feeling associated with particular ideas. For example, Lily remembers the inseparable emotional and rational aspects of her decision to quit her job by reference to the time she listened to ‘Re-evaluate’ by GDP. Thus peak music experiences can be epiphanies that both drive and mark major turning points in people’s lives, both in their musical practice and in other aspects of identity.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how music can be said to inspire people to ‘become’ musicians and music fans, who engage in particular activities and hold particular attitudes, as well as how music can influence people in terms of their musical practice and in other aspects of their lives. Such inspiration and influence are not fully inherent in songs as written or recorded, though music and lyrics offer specific affordances for specific kinds of response. These work together with the associative affordances derived from the music’s
presentation and surrounding discourse, as well as the situations in which the music is encountered. In an experience of music, these combined factors are met by a listener with specific dispositions formed through a history of previous encounters. That embodied, specifically situated experience is the ultimate source of the meanings taken from music, the judgments made about it and the feelings that infuse both. Those feelings are crucial in motivating subsequent perceptions, dispositions and actions, so that the affective aspect of musical experience accounts for music’s unique reputation as a driver of identity.

Peak music experiences offer critical insight into this process by which music has social agency, by placing a specific focus on the situated, embodied experiences from which music’s meaning and effects derive. People often credit these experiences with the inspirations and influences they draw from music. The ways that people talk about music contribute to the discourse that constructs music, listeners and the experiences in which they meet, so that what music does is to an extent inseparable from what people say it does. It is therefore important to consider the narratives of peak music experiences that are common within popular music culture. It has been shown in this chapter that these narratives present music as a crucial source of inspiration and influence and thus a powerful driver of identity, potentially transcending other social and cultural constraints.

Further, the narratives of inspirational and influential peak music experiences construct an authentic music lover, at least within the local music scenes studied here, as one who has been moved in such profound ways by music. This ideal of music listening is in direct contrast to the aesthetic philosophy of Theodor Adorno and others that holds intellectual contemplation to be superior to physical response (see Gilbert and Pearson 1999), but is closer instead to Romantic ideals in which the value of art is bound up with the feelings it produces. By attributing biographical force to emotionally charged experiences with music, which might involve downplaying more practical or mundane, social and cultural factors, people present themselves as authentic musicians and fans while also investing
music with substantial power. This chapter has not sought to disentangle these discursive constructions from music’s ‘real’ effects, but rather to show the real effects that follow from them. People think, feel and act according to their conscious and embodied understanding that in certain experiences, music did things – for example, it expressed, explained, revealed, connected, endorsed, decried and affected – in ways that inspired and influenced them. In this very real sense, these experiences with music changed their lives.
Chapter 6
Why music? Peak music experiences as motivation

Someone hit the big score
They figured it out
That we're gonna do it anyway
Even if doesn't pay

(Rawlings/Welch 2001)
The above lyrics, from the song ‘Everything is Free’ by Americana performer Gillian Welch, were recited to me by Jim (44), a freelance music writer. I interviewed Jim together with his partner Elly (32), a singer-songwriter who cited Welch as an influence. Jim quoted these lyrics when explaining his view that some musicians, like Elly, seem to have no choice but to create music. He saw this as a marker of ‘authenticity’ but observed that it leaves artists open to exploitation, especially in ‘the culture of free in the age of the download’. Elly did not respond to this directly, although immediately before Jim’s statement she had described her own motivations as both a performer and a listener in terms of self-expression, interpersonal connection and a therapeutic outlet. Two years later, I recognised a cover of ‘Everything is Free’ during a live performance by Brisbane solo artist, Feeding Fauna, and subsequently discovered that a recorded version was included on her album N is for Then (2017). These scene participants seemed to find some truth in Welch’s song, in which the rueful acceptance of economic reality in the above stanza is combined with a more positive and perhaps proud perspective:

I don’t need to run around
I just stay home
And sing a little love song
My love to myself

(Rawlings/Welch 2001)
The idea of music as an act of self-love, or an intrinsic reward, is central to understanding how peak music experiences can be a source of continuing motivation for commitments and activities in a music scene, beyond the initial moments of inspiration and influence discussed in Chapter 5. This is a motivation that is common to musicians as well as those who invest in music scenes through other forms of work, or through the investment of time, money and energy as audience members and listeners, for example.

Peak music experiences provide motivation as embodied experiences, as memories and as sought-after ideals. By representing to people what they hold important and their reasons for doing what they do, these experiences act as affirmations of the self. This chapter shows how peak music experiences therefore play an important and continuing role in self-identity for participants in a music scene, including as performers, organisers, technicians and listeners. These experiences are seen to provide incentives and justifications for day to day activities and long-term investments by offering both transcendence and affirmation of the self. They are described as both therapeutic and addictive, illustrating the nuanced ways that people understand their agency in relation to music. Peak music experiences anchor narratives of fulfilment, vindication and success, as well as a narrative of authenticity that places the direct pleasures of musical experience ahead of other, extrinsic motivations for musical activity, including social distinction and financial reward. By analysing these aspects of peak music experiences, this chapter helps to answer the question of why some people grant music such a central status in their lives, devoting considerable resources to musical pursuits and basing their social lives around them. This is a question that has not been covered directly and in depth using ethnographic research, although relevant observations are made in existing literature, as considered in the following section.
Understanding investments in music

The motivation to participate in musical activities at the level of a local scene has been considered in some studies of popular music. Regarding the activities of non-professional musicians, Cohen’s (1991) ethnographic research among Liverpool rock bands in the 1980s finds that music provided band members with a means of escape from the everyday, an outlet for creativity and a space for friendships. Importantly, the participants enjoyed playing, performing and socialising in bands, although many were also significantly motivated by and preoccupied with by the possibility of ‘making it’ (ibid: 3). The somewhat parallel study of Swedish ‘garage’ bands and fans by Fornäs et al (1995: 251-5) identifies three main motives: collective autonomy, alternative ideals (for example in comparison to family and school) and the ‘narcissistic enjoyment’ of creative self-expression. The latter is facilitated partly by the ‘volume, beat and sound’ of music which afford particular kinds of experience, including the dissolution of ego boundaries; therapeutic feelings of life, involvement and wholeness in one’s own body, and the experience of the individual self as greatly enlarged by merging with the band and being mirrored by audience response. The authors suggest that the great interest in music during adolescence proves the need for such self-confirming experiences to counter the insecurity produced by rapid identity development. In his ethnographic study and insider account of Brisbane’s hobbyist indie musicians, Rogers (2008) also observes the use of music as an escape from adolescent anxiety, but finds that the hobbyist musicians in his study maintained their interest in music after being granted the social mobility of adulthood. For these musicians, music listening and creation brought pleasurable engagements with music, both as a creative canon and as a social binding agent. Rogers further notes that the motivation to continue playing music involves the fear of losing one’s involvement, as the practice provides a balm for feelings of isolation by offering community within the local scene.
Beyond the creation or performance of music, Grossberg (1994: 52) postulates that for rock music listeners, music becomes ‘a way of making it through the day’ by providing empowerment, guidance and a means to navigate and respond to their lived context. Beyond this focus on everyday survival, other authors note the occasionally transcendent qualities of musical experience. Kahn-Harris (2004: 116) notes that while even such initially shocking music as extreme metal might provide diminishing returns for long-standing scene members, their commitment can be rejuvenated from time to time by ‘the experience of music through the body’. Tsitsos (2012) makes the similar finding that for ageing punks, occasionally ‘returning to the pit’ to slamdance is a way to reconnect emotionally to their scene. In dance club culture, Malbon (1999) observes that the ‘ecstatic’ (with drugs) and ‘oceanic’ (without drugs) experiences that clubbers seek and occasionally find while dancing to music in a crowd have an ‘afterglow’, which can provide motivation for the days, weeks or even years to come. Malbon (ibid: 187) links these extraordinary experiences to everyday identity in the following terms:

The seemingly unreal, yet also extremely vivid experiences of clubbing can allow clubbers to go beyond themselves. Yet, and seemingly paradoxically, through this going-beyond they may find something more of – as well as something of extraordinary value within – the very self outside of which they may temporarily slip.

In summary, there has been diffuse recognition that people engage in musical activities partly in pursuit of specific kinds of experiences, which resonate throughout their lives by affirming aspects of identity and empowering social action in response to their specific contexts. This chapter builds on these analyses in considering specifically how peak music experiences are a conscious motivation for various forms of participation in a music scene. As will be demonstrated through various examples, this perspective enables a detailed phenomenology of what it means, for example, to escape, to be empowered or
to experience belonging through musical activity.

The focus on peak music experiences also helps to answer the question, how unique is music in this regard? There are of course many other ways in which to seek and experience self-affirmation. For example, Fornäš et al (1995: 254) refer specifically to diary-writing as an alternative source of creative self-expression in adolescence, besides playing in a garage band, while Green (2010: 192) observes increasing recognition that sport is a way for young people to develop lifestyles and enhance identities. However, for reasons that have been discussed in previous chapters, music offers unique affordances for experiences that define and affirm self-identity. First, music is an especially physical medium and evokes the kind of affective response that, as shown in Chapter 5, marks ideas as significant and motivates action. Second, music’s meanings are especially social, due both to the collective processes of its production, distribution and consumption (which in the case of popular music are mass-mediated processes) and, once again, to its non-verbal affordances for interpretations that are as varied as they are deeply felt. Accordingly, people’s engagements with music always work to define them, for themselves and others. Third, as a temporal medium, music is experienced in specific places, times and situations, which it imbues with meaning and to which it becomes linked in memory (DeNora 2000). These factors together make music uniquely amenable to being implicated in deeply felt, socially oriented, specifically remembered experiences of the self. These peak music experiences persist in memory as reminders of identity and justifications for action, while the pursuit of further such experiences motivates and shapes ongoing participation. The following empirical analysis demonstrates these processes and shows how music scene participants consciously reflect on them.

Findings: ‘Why I keep doing it’

The semi-structured interviews undertaken for this project concluded by asking each
respondent why they continued to engage in their particular musical activities, such as listening to music, attending gigs, playing music or working in various technical and supporting roles. The ensuing reflections provided a sense of closure to the interviews, although in many cases the question had already been more or less answered. Several major themes emerged from these answers, with more than one theme often being touched upon within an interview. One common answer was that making and listening to music is part of ‘who I am’, which is not an abstract rationalisation but a strongly felt embodiment, so that engaging in the activity feels right while not doing so feels wrong or even painful. More than one interviewee claimed they would ‘die’ if they stopped. A related theme focused on the specific qualities of musical experience, describing it as uniquely engrossing, therapeutic and energising. A further major theme was the desire to feel a part of, and to contribute to, something larger than oneself. Music was described as facilitating a unique connection between people, including between performers and audiences, between fellow listeners, and between creative collaborators. Peak music experiences were cited as exemplary for each of these celebrated properties of music. Peak music experiences are also emblematic in narratives of personal and professional success and fulfilment, commemorating particular achievements and encapsulating feelings of validation. However, among long-term music scene participants there is a common narrative in which the motivations of financial success, social achievement and celebrity are de-emphasised in favour of a focus on direct musical experience, which is presented as an authentic motivation for ongoing commitments in the face of practical difficulty and everyday mundanity. As will be discussed, this narrative might be somewhat specific to the long-term ‘hobbyist’ (Rogers 2008) and professional-amateur or ‘pro-am’ (Leadbeater and Miller 2004) musicians and workers who were interviewed, although it is consistent with broader notions of authenticity in popular music. Each of these themes will now be discussed in detail.
In explaining music’s unique appeal, people emphasise their embodied experience of music. Typical elements of this experience include an intense or meditative focus on music with a corresponding loss of other concerns; a loss of self-consciousness together with an increased feeling of connection to others; and, somewhat paradoxically, an increased sense of inner wholeness, power and identity. These are elements of the ‘flow experiences’ described by Csikszentmihaly (1975; see Chapter 2), demonstrating how the experience of music can offer an intrinsic reward. The elements of exclusive focus and self-dissolution are described as motivations in the following quote from singer and multi-instrumentalist Trish (37):

I think, for me, it’s the one thing that I disappear into completely. Yeah, when I’m doing it. And if I do, even though there’s anxiety maybe leading up to a show or lots of work involved in getting it together, there’s that bubble that I enter when I play that only happens when I’m doing it in front of an audience and it’s like nothing else for me. So that’s why I keep doing it.

Trish’s quote also demonstrates the common claim that the sacrifices involved in musical activity, such as the work of organising a gig and the sometimes severe anxiety suffered by musicians prior to a performance, are justified by the singular experiences that music creates. Rapper and singer, Nat (34), described the elements of connection to others and connection to oneself as the definitive elements of her euphoric on-stage experiences, in the following terms:

There are moments I can remember having euphoric experiences on stage. Probably every show I have one, very strong, like a meditation at the height of meditation; that feeling of, where I feel like I’m connected to the universe and
connected to the people who are listening to me, and connected to my music and my heart and my soul and it just feels like no other feeling I’ve ever had.

Once again, such experiences are described here as unique to music, as well as ephemeral within musical practice, so that the various everyday activities and investments involved in being a musician are justified in particular feelings that might be experienced once in each show. This accords with Malbon’s (1999) observation that club dancers’ experiences have effects that extend beyond the moment and into everyday life, which I argue can be extended to peak music experiences more broadly.

The loss of the awareness of time, self and surroundings may ultimately affirm identity by showing what is valuable and worthwhile. People come to know and trust these properties of music and self through their experiences and, sometimes, a particular experience is seen as exemplary. Alicia (34) told the following story about a peak music experience involving both timelessness and, subsequently, an affirmation of identity:

I got asked to play an improvisation guitar relay in Melbourne, so sixteen ladies on guitars; one of my absolute heroes Penny Ikinger was one of the musicians. I was terrified of that every second until it happened. But closed my eyes, two and a half hours later, went “Oh shit! I’m still in this room, this dark room with all these people”. And I got off and said to someone, “Whoa, that was a weird twenty minutes”. They said, “No, that was two and a half hours”. And I had no idea. But afterwards I had this overwhelming, like I had this wonderful feeling again with the guitar. I knew about how I was the guitar player in that two and a half hours and it was just about that. I think sometimes with bands and stuff it’s about performing a show and you get all these other pressures. But that one sort of unlocked this, just playing guitar is where it’s at.

This quote helps to clarify the apparent paradox that a peak music experience marked by a loss of self-awareness can nevertheless affirm self-identity. As she describes this
performance, Alicia was aware of nothing other than the music to which she was contributing, to the extent that she seemed to lose more than two hours. Afterwards, she interpreted this as embodied knowledge of her identity as ‘the guitar player’ and the experience had an afterglow in her overwhelming, wonderful feeling with the guitar. Reflecting on this experience as a memory reminds Alicia of her identity and the feelings that playing music can produce. The affective transcendence of one’s self in musical experience can thus contribute to the rational construction of a coherent identity over time.

**Therapy and addiction**

The meditative, self-affirming, world-connecting experiences produced in engagements with music can be therapeutic. The restorative properties of musical experience are cited by some as a reason for their ongoing investment in musical activity, with specific peak music experiences offering potent, concrete examples of such value. Kim (44), who plays bass guitar and sings in an indie rock band, gave the following example to explain how playing music anchors her:

> I find going to practice to be like a really cathartic experience. If I feel anxious or stressed in life and I go and have a practice, I feel like I’ve had a shower, you know I feel like it’s all washed away. Loud noise, I guess that’s what it is. […] I’ve gone to work and been so stressed out that, I had to go to practice afterwards and I pulled over on the side of the road where a park was and I sat on the grass because I couldn’t breathe, I had lots of anxiety. I calmed down a bit and went to practice and then after practice I was normal. Because it was just, I don’t know, restorative rock and roll. But that’s how it anchors me, it’s just what I know.

Here, Kim attributes the therapeutic properties of band practice to the ‘loud noise’ of rock and roll which washes away other stressors. This is consistent with the previous
discussion of how music as a multi-sensory, time-based medium can physically and mentally consume a person’s attention, thus offering an experience similar to meditation. Rock ’n’ roll guitarist Tracy (39) came to her interview with a similar story in mind, as shown in the following quote:

As I’ve been thinking about it the last few days, trying to sort of sum it up in my head and reflect on it, it does end up sounding a bit spiritual in a way. It’s sort of that feeling of belonging, that feeling that you’ve got something in your life that drives you to move on. And last night at band practice we decided to work on some new stuff, ‘cause we’ve been stuck playing gigs for a year and we hadn’t gotten around to writing new stuff. And within about half an hour we had this awesome song mostly written, and it’s awesome! And I felt really flat at the beginning of band practice and by the end of it I was so fucking excited and happy and inspired. And that is what drives you in life. So those moments in particular, like in the practice room, are some of the most profound I’ve had I think, rather than playing live even. Creating that in the room, with your best mates, sharing that and communicating without words. So I wanted to mention that to you. I thought last night, “I should tell Ben about this”, ‘cause that, you know, it physically and mentally drove me from being quite flat and uninspired and unmotivated, in all aspects of my life, to this morning being really fuckin’ excited and having energy.

And seeing the world in a more positive way. It’s really that infectious.

In this experience of collaborative songwriting, Tracy felt belonging, creativity, friendship and drive, which persisted into the following day at least. Her story illustrates how a peak music experience, even in a clearly defined context like band practice, can have an afterglow that deeply affects broader aspects of a person’s life in different contexts. This afterglow can be felt physically and mentally, as excitement, energy and a positive way of seeing the world in general. By describing her mental preparation for our
interview, Tracy explicitly acknowledges what is implicit in all of the interview data: that peak music experiences endure as ways to remember and explain such feelings about music, one’s self, other people and so on, perhaps for the benefit of a researcher but also for one’s own benefit. They are, as Woodward (2001) notes in relation to ‘taste epiphanies’, resources for the construction of self-narratives. On this basis it is unsurprising that when people are asked why they persist with musical activity, they respond with reference to peak music experiences.

The language of ‘therapeutic’, ‘restorative’ musical experience coexists with more pathological metaphors for how music acts, as people describe their relationship to music in terms of infection, disease and addiction. Such language is not used to disparage, beyond largely tongue-in-cheek comments about the amounts of money and time invested in musical activities, or the indulgence in alcohol and drugs that often accompany those activities. Indeed, music fans relish its dominance over them, as shown in the following quote from Alicia (34) that uses some of the unhealthier aspects of rock ‘n’ roll culture to illustrate the energising effects of a peak music experience:

You can feel like you’re dying of the flu or something, all you wanna do is go home, you never wanna see another cigarette or a beer in your life. And the band [that you are watching] has something so good about it that you just go and get six beers, start chain smoking, you know. It’s so exhilarating, that moment.

The language of addiction and infection serves to emphasise music’s relative agency over the people who claim not merely to benefit from the experiences it provides but to need them, as shown in the following interview excerpt from rock ‘n’ roll musician Ally (27):

It doesn’t make any sense but you feel compelled to do it and you know, I get really antsy, I get really anxious if I don’t play for a while. I think it’s, like it’s a really, it’s a physical thing. I s’pose maybe I should exercise, but why exercise when I can drink beer and play guitar?
Some respondents said that they came to understand more fully their reliance on music at times when it was nearly or temporarily removed, as in the following quote from Liz (26):

I think I only just like came to terms with like, “I guess I’m a musician”. Like last year I broke my leg […] and it was so frustrating to me that I couldn’t do that. […] I think that was like “Oh, I guess like I’m some sort of musician”.

These musicians describe a deep fear of losing their involvement in their music scene, as also observed by Rogers (2008) in the Brisbane indie rock scene. For these music scene participants, music is an essential technology of the self (DeNora 2000). Just as they take motivation and self-identity from peak music experiences, they fear that without music their experience of the self would be so deficient that they would not be alive at all. While music has an inescapable power over them, they can use this power actively to navigate life and to experience it more fully. Tracy (39) illustrates this simultaneous enslavement and empowerment when she says:

…music motivates me to do things. So if I’m angry, I can put on an album and I can get that anger out. If I’m happy I can put on an album and celebrate my happiness. So it’s like blood, it’s in my veins, it’s like this integral thing in my life that I don’t think anything else could replace. It’s like a god. It’s like I’d imagine people who are really religious would feel the same way.

Tracy experiences her emotional self and reacts to the world through musical experience, describing this in language that vacillates between choice (‘I can put on an album’) and necessity (‘it’s like blood’). In this way, music ‘can be seen to function as a prosthetic device, to provide organising properties for a range of other embodied experiences and in ways that involve varying degrees of deliberation and conscious awareness’ (DeNora 2000: 102-3). The comparison of music to religion aptly captures the mixture of devotion and empowerment, as music fans experience their subservient dependence on music as joyous and self-affirming. As in religion, this deep personal connection is revealed and
understood through moments of revelation or epiphanies, which are moments that concretise and encapsulate aspects of identity for self-reflection and communication to others (Denzin 1989). Peak music experiences, such as the memorably therapeutic rehearsals described by Kim and Tracy, and the transcendent live performance remembered by Alicia, are epiphanies that sum up their relationships to music. They make apparent the value of music, through embodied experience in specific situations, which are felt, remembered and described as moments of revelation.

Satisfaction and fulfilment

The previous chapter considered how peak music experiences provide inspiration and influence for musical activity. Beyond those original moments, peak music experiences can also be sources of satisfaction and fulfilment, that reassure people and confirm their choices. An embodied feeling of achievement from performing music is expressed in the following quote from rapper Daz (32):

I think ‘cause it makes you feel good. Doing something productive. At the end of the whole gig, the whole set time, you’ll get off feeling like wow, you’re feeling good about yourself. It’s something like finishing a nice home-cooked meal, like damn I feel settled now, I feel good so I’m laid back, just relaxing when the breeze comes through that window. Just like that, that’s the feeling I get. Come off stage feeling like damn, I did my job.

While satisfaction is presented here in the everyday sense of doing one’s job, musical activity can also create an experience of more profound fulfilment so that participants feel their life is complete. For example, rapper and singer Nat (34) remembered thinking that she ‘could die happy’ after her euphoric experiences participating in a local, weekly hip-hop event:

I do remember one moment thinking in my head, this is pretty epic, I don’t know if
I could even tell [the organiser] this because his head might blow off. But I just remember thinking that I could die happy, because I’d really just had some euphoric musical experiences, especially the freestyling stuff. It’s really like a meditative state that you get in, ‘cause you’re thinking as you’re speaking so you have to kind of really be in an open, clear headspace. Yeah and I was singing, and playing guitar, and rapping, and it was just like, this is the coolest thing, how could I want more? It was exactly what I didn’t know that I wanted.

This quote shows how the moment-to-moment feelings produced in the experience of music can contribute to people’s longer-term sense of identity and fulfilment. It is notable in Nat’s story that she ‘didn’t know’ what she wanted; it was through her euphoric experience of participating in the musical activities that she experienced those activities as ‘the coolest’ and herself as capable and fulfilled. Reflecting later on this peak music experience reminds Nat, and helps her to explain, what music means to her.

Fulfilling and reassuring peak music experiences also arise for listeners and audience members. For example, Ally (27) said that attending live performances by her favourite local rock ‘n’ roll band, HITS, evokes an experience that affirms her own trajectory as a musician and more broadly as a person:

I find going and seeing HITS play is almost like a, I don’t wanna say religious experience but it’s like going to church. ‘Cause I love every single one of them so much and each individually. And they’ll play and, you know, even if it’s a bit loose it’s always fucking great. But it’s really, I find it really life affirming. ‘Cause you know, it’s like that’s what you wanna do. And you’re just as messed up and fucked up as I am, and you’re doin’ fuckin’ great. You know, that’s why you do everything. I think I really, I like that. It always, whenever I see those guys play, I kind of go, “Yep, I have made the right decisions with my life”.

The affective response produced by watching and listening to music informs judgments
about the performers and performance, but also about the values perceived in that performance. The embodied judgment that ‘even if it’s a bit loose it’s always fucking great’ might apply to the band that is playing and, by analogy, one’s own musical activities, but also to other activities and to a lifestyle more generally. Accordingly, an exciting experience of live music can be felt to justify not only the direct investment of time and money to attend, but also a person’s commitment to music listening and/or creation more generally, as well as associated lifestyle choices, so that they can feel they have made ‘the right decisions’ with their life. A similar experience was described by Liz (26), a music fan, musician and promoter who experienced a feeling that ‘this is why we do this’ when watching the onstage interaction of Turnpike, a band who are respected as veterans of Brisbane’s local indie music scene:

They just blew me away and I was just standing there like, every time I watch that band I am reminded of like, the perfect times you’ve been in a band. And that band has been together for like fifteen years or something and they still play a lot of the same songs that they’ve always played, but it still sounds so fucking impressive. And they still like, sometimes fuck up. And, boy howdy, and it’s just like, they’ve got each other, they’re all like watching each other. It’s, it was perfect bandship, for me, when I watch that band. And I was just like watching it like this and then [my friend] came up around me and put her arm like around my waist […] she was hopefully seeing what I was seeing and feeling, like “This is why we do this”. It’s like you want to make something interesting, with a group of people that you admire. And maybe are friends with, or you become friends with. And you want to support each other, you want to like, get to know each other in this way. And that’s why you would do, like, be in music. Or heavy music in particular. Because like nobody else would do it with you except for these people. And like, yep. That’s like, the best way I can describe how I feel about that.
This peak music experience involved Liz’s perception of ‘perfect bandship’ in the visual and musical interaction of the band members on stage, which reminded her in a rational and emotional sense of the experiences that can be found through participation in a music scene. This and the other emotional experiences of ‘bandship’ in this chapter demonstrate an important, affective dimension to these microsocial relationships and microcultural spaces within larger music scenes, building on existing analyses of bands by authors such as Cohen (1991), Fornäs et al (1995) and Finnegan (2007). In Liz’s case, once again, judgments about a musical performance are linked to judgments about ways of being and socialising more generally, while these are both bound up with feelings to which music gives shape. In this way, peak music experiences can affirm sets of ideas and feelings about ‘why we do this’, thus providing motivation for ongoing commitment and action. Notably, while this process can be described as it is in the above quotes, the actual feelings are not fully articulated, although they are subjectively remembered through the embodied, musically-structured experiences. Liz’s story shows how these feelings can seem to be communicated between people most effectively when they share a musical experience (‘she was hopefully seeing what I was seeing and feeling’), which will be explored further in Chapter 7.

**Success and vindication**

Participation in popular music involves shared milestones. Some of the milestones of music listeners are first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences, as discussed in Chapter 4. Some of the milestones commonly cited by musicians in Brisbane music scenes include joining a band or group; first performance; first released recording; performance at a favourite or iconic venue; meetings and collaborations with respected artists, and so on, as will be illustrated in several examples below. The discourse of milestones constructs popular understandings of what a successful life in music should
look like and provides motivation for musicians, as they aspire to reach particular goals. Indie musician Emily (29) acknowledged this orientation toward specific goals when she was asked why she continues to play and listen to music:

I do think about it a lot. I think, you know, my parents make me think about it a lot, especially my dad. But it’s those things that, those dreams that you don’t wanna give up on. Like, I’ve always wanted to tour overseas, so until that happens I don’t wanna stop.

Reaching a milestone is experienced by those involved as ‘an event’ involving a ‘great feeling’, in the words of former musician Ken (58). Ken said that even though the punk band to which he belonged in his youth harboured no expectation of becoming professional musicians, they experienced the production of their first record in this way. Shared milestones and more personally meaningful events outside these categories are experienced by musicians as a justification of their commitment to music, so that these experiences are an important source of motivation.

Performances at culturally significant venues or to large or visibly engaged crowds, especially for the first time in a musician’s career, can be remembered as peak music experiences involving feelings of validation and vindication. A number of instances appeared in the interview data, including the following experience described by Julian (44) when remembering the burgeoning success of a band in which he played drums:

[I remember] seeing this huge mob of people and it was the queue to get into the Zoo [a venue in Brisbane] and it was several blocks long. And I was like, “What are all these people doing here?” People were starting to wave at me. And I’m like, “Holy shit, this isn’t happening.” But it was! And we sold out, people couldn’t get in, the Zoo was just full up to puss’s bow as they say and it was just so unexpected. We just were astounded. And it was such a great night. So I would nominate that as being a major night, and a real, I guess I was sort of five years into being a musician
and being in bands and stuff like that, and it was this real vindication of going, I had done something right.

Singer-songwriter Elly (32) drew a similar sense of vindication from her first performance at the Zoo, which was a memorable experience for ‘the opportunity to play at one of the longest running music venues in Brisbane and also on a decent-sized stage’, ‘having a fair few people rock up for the show’ and having ‘some really, you know, important people come along, special people to me’. What a gig means to a musician depends on where they are in their trajectory as well as the cultural values to which they subscribe. Accordingly, keyboardist and singer Jane (26) felt her performance to less than twenty people in Real Bad, a DIY venue in a decrepit suburban building, to be ‘a stand out moment’:

Just because it’s like, it’s Real Bad. […] Obviously it’s this incredible space that people from all round Australia talk about like, “Oh you’re gonna play Real Bad”, it’s got this reputation. […] And just ‘cause it’s in Moorooka, like the journey there, it’s all this mix, this special experience.

Gigs can also have such personal meaning for people in other roles, such as event organisers. For example, Jim (44) organised a reunion show for one of his favourite bands and credits this personal connection as a major source of his enjoyment of the gig:

[C]ertainly for me it was one of the best five gigs I’ve ever seen. But not necessarily because it was the best musically or anything like that, it was because it had so much else attached to it, for me. […] I just went around that day wearing a grin the size of a fucking planet and I just really couldn’t believe it was happening. In some ways I’ve never quite come down off that personal high. […] these days I can go “Well at least I did that!” You know. So it meant an awful lot. It was a really big thing.

As these examples show, performing and organising gigs has cultural and social value for
participants that motivates them in addition to (or instead of) financial reward. Accordingly, the experience of performing or watching some gigs can involve feelings of affirmation and vindication. These are remembered as peak music experiences, by which those involved chart their own history and from which they can draw motivation for their ongoing commitment.

The initial motivation to become involved in a music scene involves feelings of identification, which guide people toward particular roles within particular groups as discussed in Chapter 5 (see also Bennett and Peterson 2004). Accordingly, subsequent experiences involving a sense of belonging with desired peers are cherished. Sal (27) said that after being criticised for incorporating twerking\(^8\) into her DJ performances, her dance performance with a cult figure of what she regards as the true twerking culture of New Orleans Bounce music:

…felt like a big fuck you to everyone, and very satisfying. It’s basically like the highest goal of anyone who loves twerking […] to get asked to dance for the whole show of Big Freedia with his dancers, is like, yep. That’s the ultimate goal and I’m proud of myself for getting there. Probably sounds really dumb like, “Oh! I got to shake my arse (laughs) onstage with this obscure New Orleans hip hop artist”. That was like a big deal for me.

Here, acceptance by a recognised star of the musical style outweighs criticism by local scene participants, so that the experience of dancing on stage involved feelings of vindication and pride. The memory of such experiences becomes a resource for future self-affirmation and motivation. For musicians, playing on a bill with other artists as the ‘support’ act can mark them as peers. Singer and guitarist Tracy (39) described specific instances of supporting her favourite musicians and explained its meaning for her as

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8 Twerking is a dance style that involves the vigorous thrusting and shaking of the dancer’s buttocks, often in a squatting stance. Sal refers to the understanding that the dance originated in the New Orleans hip hop style known as Bounce, which was associated with African American and LGBTQ communities.
follows:

When you start meeting those people that you look up to and they become your friends, that’s significant; that’s an amazing feeling when you end up becoming their equals.

For keyboard player Lisa (34), touring in the support band for iconic synth-punk band Devo carried a range of additional, personal meanings related to her identity, which she thought about as she performed onstage:

I remember we supported Devo and that was a real dream for me because, you know, they were one of the reasons why I loved synthesisers. And that was pretty special. And also seeing them play a few times and talking to them about stuff, felt really special to me. And also like playing on that bill, I thought a lot about my connection to synths and I thought a lot about my history and my, like what I love about that band and why I’m doing it and it was a real sort of self-realisation tour. And I thought about it a lot onstage too. So that was kind of really special.

This quote underlines the highly personal value of certain gigs for musicians, even at a relatively professional, well-compensated level. Such value can be experienced during the performance, so that motivation is embodied directly in the act of performing, and also remembered later.

Apart from musicians, other people who work in music scenes also celebrate the cultural value of particular jobs and events that they are involved with. For example, Mick (49) described how ‘moments’ from his work as a concert lighting technician provided him with a sense of satisfaction and even privilege:

Yeah I mean the last one was the Rolling Stones. They’re those moments where you go, “Wow, this is exactly where I wanna be, doing this, getting paid”. You know, I would have bought a ticket anyway but here I am in this privileged position, getting paid and maybe I’ll get a T-shirt later for nothing.
This quote demonstrates an important point about the cultural value attached to work in the popular music industry. If a concert is seen as desirable, working at the concert is seen as a privileged position in comparison to being an audience member. This is an inversion of typical social and cultural norms, in contrast with the hierarchies in place at classical music events as described by Small (1998), where ushers, attendants and technicians are seen to perform a service role for audiences, who in turn are separated from the rarified arena of artistic performance. This suggests that popular music, especially in local music scenes, involves a different and perhaps less hierarchical experience of social interaction and cultural status than other art forms and especially non-artistic industries. This is perhaps most obvious when the same individuals inhabit various roles in the scene, as musicians, audience members, technicians and, for example, bar staff at venues. Popular music culture promotes the desire to ‘be a part’ of popular music or a particular music scene so that, for example, record store assistants and concert technicians have more glamour attached to them than other shop clerks and event technicians. Chapter 5 considered how people experience this desire through peak music experiences, while the present discussion shows how people experience its fulfilment in peak music experiences and other memorable moments related to musical activity.

As careers in popular music are notoriously non-linear and risky, people’s memories of their career high points can become important sources of motivation for subsequent effort and investment over long periods of time. Mick (49), who as well as working as a lighting technician has been a musician for several decades, referred explicitly to this process of motivation when recalling the experience of supporting a high profile band:

We ended up going away with INXS just before their Wembley thing [stadium concert in 1991], so we toured with them for two weeks solid as a Brisbane three-piece, unsigned, which was mind-blowing. […] We were playing every night to
five thousand people [...] and actually hanging with those guys. [...] That was a real eye-opener; that was a good turning point. Again, you can look at those big moments and go, “Oh well that spurred me on for another ten years”.

Later in the interview, Mick returned to the idea of experiences that spurred him on:

You get those little things that, like, spur you on for the next period. You go, “This is good. I love this shit. I’m gonna keep doin’ it.” Those little, you know, highs along the way and you just know that that’s what you do. “This is why we do it.” You love it.

The ease with which musicians are able recall their experiences of success and fulfilment bears out Mick’s point that such high points are held onto as a source of motivation. Guitarist Tracy (39) noted the frequency with which she reflects on one such experience, when her band toured in Europe:

Standing in a venue in Paris watching these amazing rock ’n’ roll bands and meeting all these people, yeah, it was just a dream come true. I still can’t get it out of my [mind], I think about it almost every day. This was in 2012. I still think of that being such a significant thing in my life.

Like the ecstatic clubbing experiences observed by Malbon (1999), these experiences of success, fulfilment and vindication stand outside the everyday life and mundane work of musicians but have an afterglow that infuses day-to-day thought and feeling. In this way, such experiences become a resource for sustaining investment in musical activities and identities for years to come.

*Better than success*

As well as the narrative of career success punctuated by the kind of experiences discussed above, music scene participants share a competing narrative of authentic enjoyment of music that is overtly dismissive of extrinsic motivations. In this narrative, peak music
experiences are explicitly cited as the goal of musical activity and the reason for ongoing commitment despite the various costs involved. John (32) drew on this narrative when describing his recent focus on dance music production after working as a DJ for some years:

When you’re producing and you’re making your own stuff, you’re going back to the core of why you loved music and that was because of the way it made you feel. [...] As a kid you’d hear the music and you’d feel the music and you’re like, “This is the best song ever!” and it would make you feel like you were king of the world. And then it would make you feel like a god when you used to play the music that made a whole room feel like they were kings of the world. And then you hear that song being played four times a week and other people doing the same thing, you kinda lose the love for music, or the music sort of doesn’t affect you in the same way. So when you start making music, it becomes like this internal process where you’re just making music and this is the other side of it, like there was the recognition but the other side of it was the way it makes you feel, regardless of the recognition.

In this narrative, the affective experience of music is cited as the initial motivation to become involved as a performer and, later in life, remains a more important driver of participation than social recognition. If the feeling wanes, for example through overexposure, recognition is not a sufficient motivation on its own and it becomes necessary to find new ways of engaging with music to achieve the desired experience. The initial motivation experienced as a ‘kid’ (see Chapter 5) is remembered as a touchstone to which music scene participants consciously return when their commitment is challenged. In a further example, Pete (33) said that transcendent moments of musical experience helped him to overcome exhaustion and disillusionment as a DIY venue operator:
…we went on a journey of going ‘This is awesome!’ and then, kind of, towards the end going ‘Fuuck, I’m tired, I don’t wanna go!’ [...] and in the end, like it just seems like it always comes back full circle to those same experiences of enjoyment that you started with in, like you know as a teen, those things that, when you really enjoy playing music or putting something on like that’s, that’s all there is, like there’s not a lot of the other aspects that you thought were gonna be there, I dunno. [...] And the only way to kind of sustain it is to, um, come back to that feeling that you had as a kid of you know, really seeking out just what you really enjoy.

This quote underlines again the primacy afforded to experiences of musical enjoyment and the dismissal of ‘the other aspects you thought were gonna be there’ in musical practice, such as social distinction and career success. According to these music scene participants, their ongoing activity is in large part a search for peak music experiences, motivated by the memory of past experiences and the belief that more will come. When these experiences are found, they affirm people’s ideas of what they hold important and who they are.

This motivation for participation in a music scene falls within what Fornäs et al (1995: 254) refer to as ‘narcissistic enjoyment’. However, this apparently hedonistic focus is regarded as virtuous among the scene members. By privileging the affective experience of music, the participants present a natural, uncalculated and therefore authentic relationship to it. Such enjoyment pays respect to the power of music and the similarly pure intentions of other scene participants, while extrinsic motivations such as fame and financial reward are seen as inauthentic and truly narcissistic, disrespecting the art form as a means to other ends. Accordingly, for hip hop producer and rapper Nathan (35), the best musical experiences are defined by a feeling of connection to other people, while the financial aspects of the music industry are challenges that he and his collaborators are forced to overcome in order to achieve that feeling. This understanding
of his own musical practice is encapsulated in a peak music experience in which his hip hop crew performed at a festival, following frustrating dealings with the organisers:

… we weren’t getting paid, we were like losing money to this corporate scum, but the gig was like incredible. It was everyone’s best gig that they’d ever had in their life and there was probably fifteen of us involved within the whole scope of the two-hour show, and yeah it was everyone’s best gig they’d ever had in their life. So that’s kind of the trade-off or pay-off of dealing with these corporate fuckhead accountant, bottom-feeding scum is that you have to reach people some way and unfortunately they, a lot of times own the stage that you wanna get on. So yeah that feeling of like connecting with people, providing like a unified feeling of happiness, for thousands of people focusing on one note or punchline or, like, dancer or whatever, when they’re all doing that together, it makes it worth it even though you have to go through very humiliating, financial strife with these fucking dogs. To connect with people.

This quote illustrates how the experience of music is presented as an end in itself rather than a means to other rewards. Financial dealings are presented as a necessary, though perhaps unsavoury and frustrating, practicality in pursuit of the true end of musical experience. In this narrative, the sacrifices and investments required to create a musical event are motivated by the desire for a particular kind of experience and, accordingly, peak music experiences are felt and remembered as moments of fulfilment and justification.

**Conclusion**

The findings in this chapter are based on a research sample in which all of the musicians were working at the hobbyist (Rogers 2008) or professional-amateur (Leadbeater and Miller 2004) level, although some had been full-time musicians in the past. This means that caution must be exercised in extrapolating beyond this group on matters of music
careers. It may be the case, for example, that long-term professional musicians have different relationships to the narrative of ‘authentic’, intrinsic enjoyment over extrinsic reward, especially when it comes to the relative importance of compensation for their services. However, this narrative is based on an idea of authenticity that is widespread in popular music culture, involving a genuine love for music that transcends typical social, cultural and material constraints. A further caveat is that the research sample is drawn from active participants in a local music scene, in terms of musical performers as well as fans and other roles, so that care must be taken in applying the findings about motivation to people with a more casual or solitary relationship to music. However, even such sporadic engagements with music may also be driven by a search for a particular kind of experience, as the following quote from Peter (52) about concert attendance suggests:

I’ve talked to mates of mine, guys in their fifties now, late forties early fifties, who don’t see much live music; a lot of them have got kids, they don’t get out as often as they used to. And if I had a dollar for every time a guy said to me, you know, “I don’t go and see much live music but I’ve really gotta see more bands because it makes me feel so great”. I just think, especially for those people like me who started watching live gigs years ago, it’s therapeutic.

This is consistent with DeNora’s (2000) finding that people who do not necessarily identify with a local music scene recognise music’s affordances for regulating and exploring feelings. However, in addition to the everyday uses of music observed by DeNora, such as getting ready to go out or winding down, music can afford extraordinary experiences of transcending everyday concerns and going beyond one’s everyday self. This may be what drives less everyday, more consciously special engagements with music, such as soundtracking ceremonies and parties, going clubbing and attending concerts. The uncommon efforts that are required to organise these musical activities might be consciously justified by the uncommon experiences they produce and the
broader significance of those experiences in everyday life.

The main contribution of this chapter, however, has been to show the centrality of peak music experiences to the motivations of local music scene participants. For these people, the extraordinary and the everyday aspects of musical activity and scene belonging are consciously related. Long-term identification with the music scene and day to day activities associated with it are consciously justified by the promise of peak music experiences in which the everyday self is both transcended and re-affirmed. These experiences are said to be therapeutic and also addictive, showing how music lovers conceive of their agency as bound up with the affordances of music. Personal fulfilment, vindication and success are embodied and remembered through peak music experiences, making them a key resource in the construction of self-narratives. Peak music experiences are also foregrounded in narratives of authentic musical identities, according to which the powers and pleasures of music itself are placed ahead of other goals associated with music scene activities. In these various ways, peak music experiences must be recognised as crucial in motivating the substantial, long-term commitments to music by which many people define themselves.
PART III

BELONGING
Chapter 7

Listening together: The role of peak music experiences in personal relationships

The empirical analysis presented in Part II of this thesis showed how peak music experiences can be significant to a person’s identity, as a resource for the reflexive understanding and presentation of self. They can mark turning points in people’s developing relationships with music (Chapter 4), act as epiphanies in their autobiographical narratives of inspiration and influence (Chapter 5) and provide motivation for their ongoing practices in a music scene (Chapter 6). Part III is concerned with peak music experiences as an aspect of belonging, in microsocial relationships, collective events and music scenes. In this chapter, I will consider how such experiences can reflect and inform relationships between people, such as family, friends and romantic partners. As will be discussed, the close association between popular music and romantic relationships in particular is so widely accepted as to be the subject of clichés. In theorising the interpersonal functions of music, existing sociological literature has largely focused on what music signifies through its lyrics and semiotic associations. By contrast, through the analysis of certain peak music experiences this chapter will show that music can also create a shared, affective space in which people can experience and express feelings with and about each other. These musically structured and shared experiences can stand out as peak music experiences, that become emblematic of certain people and relationships. These are epiphanies (Denzin 1989) that help to construct interpersonal narratives, in the same way that they contribute to the narrativisation of people’s relationships with music and themselves, as shown in previous chapters. This chapter will also demonstrate a reflexive element to these ways that music becomes a part of people’s relationships. While I have emphasised that peak music experiences may occur unexpectedly and, indeed, cannot be created on command, it will be shown that people
sometimes plan or consciously take advantage of shared experiences of music to communicate, explore and celebrate particular ideas and feelings. For example, this can be an aspect of planning a group concert attendance, or reacting to a shared favourite song on the radio. Accordingly, peak music experiences can perform a specific role in relationships but also exemplify music’s broader interpersonal functions.

**Popular music and relationships**

Popular music has a close association with interpersonal relationships and especially romantic ones, through both its content and the ways it is used. A great proportion of popular music has been ostensibly ‘about’ love, so that the three main categories identified in Peatman’s (1942) content analysis of popular song lyrics – ‘happy in love’, ‘frustrated in love’ and ‘novelty song with sex interest’ – remain familiar to a modern listener. Indeed, this consistent subject matter has helped to define popular music in contrast to other forms such as folk music (Frith 1989). This has also been a focus of criticism of popular music, again in comparison to both folk culture and high art, on the basis that it promotes passive consumption, superficial emotions and even ideological submission (Adorno 1951; MacDonald 1953). Such criticisms are broadly echoed by those songwriters and fans who shun clichéd love songs as a way of positioning themselves against the mainstream, a method of distinction that was significant in the first wave of British punk (Laing 1985: 68-9; see also Reynolds and Press 1995: 87-8). The uses of popular music have also been oriented, historically, around romantic and sexual relationships, most obviously through the popularity of dancing as a form of social interaction. This, too, is so widely understood that it is regarded as a cliché and avoided by some. For example, ‘hip’ clubbers claim to reject the supposedly mainstream practice of going to a dance club to ‘pick up’ (Thornton 1995).

Beyond generalised associations between popular music, love songs and dancing,
Horton (1957) offers a more detailed consideration of popular music’s constructive role in relationships among post-war youth. In his analysis, the somewhat formulaic content of popular songs is what makes them socially useful. Based on the lyrics of over two hundred songs published in popular magazines, which he finds overwhelmingly to be ‘conversational songs about love’, Horton categorises their lyrical themes into acts and scenes in the drama of dating: from ‘Courtship’ through ‘The Honeymoon’ and ‘The Downward Course of Love’ to the final act, ‘All Alone’. He proposes that as well as illuminating a panorama of emotional possibilities, these songs provide a conventional language to young people who tend to lack skill in the verbal expression of profound feelings. This language need not be used in direct discourse, ‘for, if two people listen together to the words sung by someone else, they may understand them as a vicarious conversation’; thus ‘the audience of lovers finds in [the singer] their mutual messenger’ (ibid: 577). The singer may also demonstrate ‘the appropriate gestures, tone of voice, emotional expression – in short, the stage directions’ for transforming the abstract, conventional possibilities of the verse into personal expression. Through popular songs, a young person learns various roles and identifies some as their own as they associate them with lived experience. In these ways, such songs promote a sense of identity.

Horton’s study was replicated eleven years later by Carey (1969) and, subsequently, in a comparison of popular music songs released in the years 1977 and 1986 by Bridges and Denisoff (1986). Using the same approach, these studies found new and changing elements in the drama of courtship as represented through popular song lyrics. Frith (1989: 93) cites Horton in arguing that ‘[p]op love songs don’t “reflect” emotions, then, but give people the romantic terms in which to articulate and so experience their emotions’. He expands Horton’s strict focus on lyrical content by adding that the non-verbal aspects of music such as beat and melody give vitality to lyrics, while performing conventions construct the listener’s sense of both the singer and themselves.
Nevertheless, on the basis that people’s access to songs is primarily through their words, Frith concludes that lyrics give songs their social use.

DeNora (2000), who is also concerned with how music both shapes and captures people’s experience of relationships, decentres lyrics in this process. As discussed in previous chapters, she argues that music can not only express but structure emotional states. Its affordances in this regard are partly inherent (such as lyrics as well as musical elements), as well as by common association (such as the conventions noted by Frith above) and personal association (such as memory). Accordingly, lyrics and their delivery may be significant depending on other factors, but do not exhaust music’s affordances. DeNora observes that one of the first things the respondents in her study used music for was to remember key people in their lives, including family members as well as lovers and former partners, whose memories were often associated with emotionally heightened phases or moments. One respondent proposed that ‘everyone has their relationship songs’ and DeNora considers how listening to such songs enables people to reconstruct and relive crucial times and events that are linked to those relationships (ibid: 64). In the examples she presents, music is interlinked with phases or times in people’s lives, such as a season spent travelling or a romantic affair. In this chapter I will build on this observation by showing how a single musical experience might be significant to someone’s idea of a person or relationship, by giving shape and quality to particular feelings and therefore enabling them to be recognised, expressed and remembered. In turn, this may be a peak music experience, which is remembered as an epiphany in which certain, subjective truths and feelings are encapsulated.

The recognition that music gives form to feelings on an aesthetic and therefore intersubjective plane, explains how listening together can create a sense of affinity or intimacy. Listening to music is a way of consciously ‘being together’ and people can feel that they ‘share’ musical experiences. The existence of a common affective space also
permits and encourages certain kinds of interaction, most obviously in the case of dancing in time together, but also less overtly by influencing perceptions of mood and time. Besides music itself, the often ritualised activities oriented around it also enact relationships and express values (Small 1998), based on collective understandings but with potential micro-social significance, for example when two people make plans to attend a particular concert together. The historical and widespread association between popular music and love might contribute to the music’s affordances, by creating expectations about what may take place between people in the setting of a concert, dance or other shared musical experience. Taking these various affordances into account, it is possible to return to and expand Horton’s (1957) concept of popular music as a tool for navigating relationships and thereby constructing identity. As he notes, musical content can be used for vicarious conversation and also makes available to listeners a conventional language and typical narratives for their own expressions. On top of this signifying capacity, music structures experience and can thus enable and encourage people to relate to one another on multiple levels, which are often non-verbal and sometimes ineffable. Music can provide shape to feelings about and between people, create an appropriate setting for the expression of particular feelings, and supply a lyrical, gestural, tonal and symbolic language through which feelings can be expressed. Also, importantly, music is a way of simply being and feeling together.

The emotionally–charged, interpersonally significant experiences to which music contributes may have a unique importance and thus be peak music experiences - that time we danced, that time we listened together, that gig we saw. Such peak music experiences can act as epiphanies in the sense described by Denzin (1989), as they illuminate underlying aspects of relationships or mark significant changes in relation to them. A peak music experience can come to encapsulate particular aspects of people and events, playing a key role in the narrativisation of relationships. The following sections of this
chapter consider some of the ways that peak music experiences have significance for people with regards to their relationships with family, friends and romantic partners. These are also considered as uncommonly visible demonstrations of the broader role that music plays and the ways it is used in relationships between people.

Constructing and remembering family

The majority of interview participants made reference to their family when narrating the development of their own interest in music, for example by noting either that music was ‘always around’ or that their family was ‘not musical’. This suggests a common belief that a ‘musical’ family is sufficient explanation for one’s own identification with music while the absence of such an explanation must be noted. This is a popular notion of what Rimmer (2011) calls ‘musical habitus’, involving socialisation toward music in the family and home. Rimmer draws a distinction between objects of taste, such as artists and genres, and the practices that people bring to them, arguing that musical habitus is more concerned with the latter. Consistently with this distinction, only a minority of participants in this project claimed a direct ‘cultural inheritance’ (Smith 2012) of the knowledge and objects of fandom, such as following their parents’ taste in specific artists or songs. Instead, there was generally a separation between interest in music, as measured in terms of intensity and defined by practices, from taste in music as characterised by the specific objects of interest. More participants claimed to have inherited the former without the latter from their families. Interview participants identified a variety of ways that music was experienced in domestic settings, bearing out Grácio’s (2016) observation that despite a historical lack of sociological attention, family and domestic spaces are relevant when analysing ‘everyday musicking’.

Music fans often remembered their families by reference to musical experiences. This is demonstrated in Kim’s (44) description of how she associates a particular album
with a family ritual:

My family wasn’t musical but there were certain records that I grew up listening to [and] every Christmas we would always listen to [Neil Diamond’s 1972 live album] *Hot August Night*. The first song is like a string quartet playing this, it’s called the ‘Prologue’ I think and then it goes into ‘Crunchy Granola Suite’, and it’s just this amazing piece of music. And when it starts to change into like the rock song, it gets so exciting, and I just always remember that as being, I connect it to Christmas. Because I’d always be putting the Christmas tree up listening to that record [and] that’s a big memory of childhood for me. [These days] I would only ever listen to that record at Christmas… maybe when no one’s around I might put it on.

This is an example of an enduring connection between particular music and memories of family. Through a series of listening experiences in the setting of family Christmas preparations, Kim formed an association between that setting and a piece of music that is not related to Christmas through its lyrics or other content. To that extent, Kim’s story shows how music can accrue affective powers through its mere co-presence with other things, such as people and events, with such links enduring as a result of the wider significance of the moment (Denora 2000). However, Kim also refers specifically to the ‘amazing’ musical passage when a string quartet is joined by other instruments to begin the rock song, with the effect the music ‘gets so exciting’, and it is this passage in particular that she connects to ‘putting the Christmas tree up’. This bears out DeNora’s further observation that music might not only memorably accompany a heightened moment but also help to create the moment as one that is heightened. In this case, the music’s general affordances are shaped partly by the formal connotations and anticipatory tone of the opening string arrangement (‘Prologue’), the dynamic entry of rock drums and a strummed acoustic guitar, the ensuing acceleration of tempo and the cheers of the audience when the ‘Crunchy Granola’ riff is first played. When Kim was a child, the
album may also have had common or at least family associations with Christmas, as *Hot August Night* was released in December 1972 before charting as the number one album in Australia for 29 weeks (according to the ARIA Albums Chart). Accordingly, this piece of music might have not only accompanied or reflected but also given shape to Kim’s excitement while decorating the Christmas tree, combining with that setting to produce a memorable experience. Reflecting on the experience now, including by re-listening to *Hot August Night*, allows Kim to remember her family and the settings, events and practices they shared, perhaps partly by reproducing the same feelings. This shows how a peak music experience can have a lasting effect on the subjectively perceived affordances of a song, by adding to its personal associations in quite specific and emotional ways.

In another example, Lisa (34) described how a particular song consistently drew her thoughts to her parents in a way that illustrated their love of music:

Well I remember my parents were always really big music fans […] I always remember my parents are obsessed with ‘It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue’, but the Them version, the Van Morrison [-sung] version not the Bob Dylan version. And they played that song all the time and they used to like dance around the lounge room to it together, ‘cause they do like rock and roll and ballroom dancing. And my dad’s Van Morrison and Them record has a skip in it, and forever to this day, every time I hear that song I expect the skip and I think about my parents dancing. And that’s a serious emotional connection to that song. Lisa’s past experiences of hearing ‘It’s All Over Now Baby Blue’ with her family have come to render it uniquely meaningful and emotional for her. Listening to the song now evokes the setting of her parents’ lounge room, their activities within that setting and the people themselves. The experiences associated with the song punctuate a particular narrative about Lisa’s parents, providing a colourful image symbolic of their status as
‘big music fans’. Thus a set of musical experiences has become emblematic of something that Lisa remembers about her parents. Music was a key factor in the construction of these moments as memorable in the first place, as the activity of dancing was overtly oriented around music and, specifically, ‘It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue’ as recorded by Them (1966). This use of the song by Lisa’s parents probably owed more to the musical arrangement than the lyrics written by Bob Dylan, which are commonly interpreted as a firm farewell (‘You must leave now…’; see for example Williams 2004: 138). While Dylan’s (1965) recording foregrounds the singer’s voice somewhat starkly over an acoustic guitar, Them’s recording adds drums, bass guitar, tambourine and a prominent keyboard melody that together create more obvious affordances for slow dancing and feelings of romantic or familial love, perhaps despite the lyrics. Lisa’s further comment about expecting ‘the skip’ (a jump to a later or earlier part of the recording, caused by damage to the corresponding part of the physical record) also highlights the role of this specific music, as she heard it, in constituting her own experience and her subsequent recollection of it. Expecting the same skip, even when the song is heard through a different format, illustrates how a piece of music might not only reference but also reconstitute subjective experience, as the listener’s response traces paths formed in past encounters with that music. The tendency of a piece of recorded music to produce and reproduce particular experiences can be informed by factors intervening between the recorded content and the listener, including playback technology, as part of the sound environment (Nowak & Bennett 2014).

The stories told by Kim and Lisa demonstrate ways that families and romantic couples, at least, use music to be together. Songs are chosen to soundtrack activities, to recognise occasions, to reflect and create shared moods and to create the possibility for certain kinds of interaction. The latter use is obvious in the case of dancing but can be seen more subtly in each of the other uses. The divergent descriptions by Kim and Lisa
of their families, as ‘not musical’ and ‘really big music fans’ respectively, suggest that such domestic uses of music are somewhat universal although they may vary in frequency and importance. These kinds of musicking bear out Horton’s (1957) notion of popular music as a relational tool that offers dramatic shape and common language to micro-social interactions. However, to account for a song’s affective, expressive and mnemonic possibilities and therefore its role in relationships, the focus must be both broader and narrower than Horton’s focus on lyrical content and delivery. Both listeners and the settings in which they listen imbue music with power and meaning. Consequently, the focus must be broad in the sense that it is not limited to the inherent (composed, performed or recorded) content of a song, but also narrow in the sense that musical experience is shaped by specificities of the sound environment and subjective histories of listening and association. Unique conjunctions of these elements create peak music experiences that, in turn, become significant to the future affordances of a song, so that they are recalled and recreated in the act of listening. Accordingly, peak music experiences offer unique insight into the construction of personal and interpersonal musical meanings and effects.

**Epiphanies about relationships**

Peak music experiences involving significant relationships, such as those with family and friends, demonstrate how peak music experiences operate as epiphanies (Denzin 1989) through which people realise and remember specific biographical facts and meanings. An experience of music might memorably capture one’s perception of a person or crystallise a particular characterisation of a relationship. For example, Holly’s (26) recollection of her family’s shared interest in music and their practice of ‘singalongs’ was punctuated by a specific event.

There were lots of kind of impromptu sing-alongs. Yeah I remember, I think mum and dad were cooking dinner and my brother and I were sitting at the kitchen bench, and
[it] must have been the radio ‘cause I remember, all of a sudden Pearl Jam came on, ‘Black’, and we all just kinda went “Ohh, yes!” And then we just sort of sung every word of the whole song together, really loud, it was just, yeah. It was an awesome moment. Really cool.

Holly’s story begins with everyday activities in an unremarkable setting, before the unexpected arrival of a favourite song provokes a meaningful, shared experience that she remembers years later. The family’s reaction to the song demonstrates how music can create possibilities for interaction and expression, in this case the act of loud group singing and through it the mutual expression of exuberance, shared fandom and closeness. Once again, these affordances are probably shaped less by the lyrics of ‘Black’, which fit clearly within the ‘All Alone’ act of Horton’s (1957) drama of courtship, than by other factors. These probably include the shared recognition of the song as a favourite and perhaps the melodramatic style of the singer and music, which might encourage a hearty singalong. Bennett (1997) observes the collective selection of particular songs for singing along to in a public bar, showing that this practice involves the production and celebration of local, group identity. Similarly, the family sing-along described by Holly both draws on and contributes to the shared history they associate with ‘Black’. When Holly recalls this peak music experience, it carries information about her family, symbolising their shared taste, their manner of interacting and her feelings about them, which might be difficult to describe directly or in the abstract without this concrete example. It can be seen as a minor or illuminative epiphany, which is symbolic of underlying aspects of the relationship (Denzin 1989). Accordingly, Holly was able to use this peak music experience in the interview setting to help present these facts about her family.

Another function of peak music experiences as epiphanies is to enable people to explore and recognise the nature of their feelings, both as they occur and in memory. In a potent example of this, Maddy (35) described a peak music experience that gave shape
to uncertain feelings:

This is the most powerful experience I’ve ever had. My mum was dying in 2005 and I was at Woodford [Folk Festival] and saw Dirty Three. And um, just like, it explained, and I can’t even, I don’t know if you, I can’t ever explain what that is or what that feels like. Yeah, it totally made sense, I don’t know, yeah. I just was like, “Wow”. Like, I can actually… I can’t even explain it. [...] Yeah the total loss, just was like, yeah that’s what it is. I always wondered how I was gonna feel, after she died. She had a week out. Yeah that’s when I knew. And it was super sad. [...] I understood the past and the future and right now.

Maddy’s powerful experience, through which she understood her past, present and future as connected to her mother’s terminal illness, could be seen as a ‘major’ epiphany, defined by Denzin (1989) as an experience which touches every fabric of a person’s life and changes it irrevocably. Music was essential to this epiphany by giving it form, so that Maddy could recognise and then engage reflexively with her own emotions. The Dirty Three is an instrumental three-piece band, with a melodic focus provided by expressively played violin, accompanied by drums and electric guitar in open-ended song structures. Their music ranges dynamically between delicate, lyrical passages and intense, loud tumult. It is understandable that the inherent and associative affordances of this music could offer shape to Maddy’s strong feelings about her mother and to anticipate how she would feel after her death. Thus feelings which she says she could never explain in words, ‘totally made sense’ when expressed and reflected back to her in musical form. This highlights the point made at the start of this chapter, that lyrics do not always limit or dominate what popular music can express or facilitate (cf Horton 1957 and Frith 1989). This experience involved instrumental music, like Kim’s memory of the ‘Prologue’ on Hot August Night and some other pieces of popular music discussed throughout this thesis. A better model for understanding what occurred here is DeNora’s (2000) claim
that music contributes to the shape and quality of feelings on an intersubjective plane. To understand ‘the past and the future and right now’ requires that a profusion of lived and remembered experience be rendered aesthetic, that is, selected and ordered perceptibly, and in this case music provided the necessary structure. In memory, this peak music experience continues to be a resource for Maddy to remember and even relive an emotional journey that she remains unable to verbalise. In turn, this remembered experience has significance to Maddy’s relationship with her mother. As her ‘most powerful’ experience, it also represents the power of music and the importance of music in her life, which is the context in which she told the story.

The presentation of the foregoing peak music experiences by research participants exemplifies, in addition to the impact such experiences might have in the moment, their use as a narrative resource. These remembered experiences condense and convey otherwise abstract, subtle or complex meanings associated with relationships. In this way the ideas become mobile and can be passed between people. Demonstrating this mobility, Holly (26) described a peak music experience that was not her own, but nevertheless had significance for her: ‘It was kind of music that brought my parents together, like they first met at a gig, a Violent Femmes gig, which Nirvana was supporting’. This is a story that must have been told to Holly by her parents, which she can now share for her own purposes. To an audience that has some knowledge of the artists mentioned, her short anecdote might convey significant information, for example that Holly’s parents were popular music fans; that they had somewhat ‘alternative’ taste and are probably relatively young parents, having attended alternative rock concerts in the early 1990s; and that they spoke to their children about music and its role in their lives. This illustrates how, by condensing a bundle of meanings into a mobile form, peak music experiences are a powerful narrative resource for talking about people and relationships.
Sharing music experiences

Interviewees suggested that they are well aware of music’s powers as a relational tool and aid, including its capacity to create meaningful and memorable experiences. As I will now consider, it is apparent that they plan and orchestrate shared experiences of music, or seize upon them when they arise, as a way of enacting, exploring and celebrating aspects of their relationships. This is consistent with Horton’s (1957) description of popular songs as a mutual messenger and of listening together as a vicarious conversation, enabling the expression of profound feelings. However, as already noted, music’s affordances for shaping and reflecting emotion go beyond the content and delivery of lyrics that concerned Horton. John (32), a DJ and dance music event manager, described becoming aware as a child and teenager of how music could create a mood or atmosphere, beginning with an interest in the soundtracks to Disney and Star Wars films:

And I think that sort of filled my love of music and brought it into another dimension in terms of how to use it to gauge or even force emotion. Like you can play it a little bit softer and the right type of chords and then you’ve got the perfect sad scene in a movie. I would always be the person who would play the music at a house party or something, I’d bring the CDs as a kid. And then I was able to dictate the feeling or the mood of the party for the whole night. […] Gettin’ the lady with some sexy music whenever you came home from a date. And that was cheesy as all hell!

As John pointed out, the use of music to invoke certain kinds of affective atmosphere is so well recognised it can be considered ‘cheesy’. However, this shows an awareness that music can enable feelings to be shared between people, with the potential to create intersubjective experiences that are memorable in their own right.
A uniquely memorable, shared musical experience is demonstrated by Holly’s (26) description of her attendance at a concert with her father and brother:

[I saw] the Fleet Foxes with my dad and my brother. We bought the ticket for his birthday and yeah, he was just kind of floored that we wanted to do, like go to a gig with him, ‘cause he has this thing in his head that his gig days are gone and he’s too old now […] And yeah, we all really, really loved Fleet Foxes and it was a great night, and there was a lot of moments just, yeah, the three of us just looking at each other with these massive grins just going (whispered) “Shit!” It was nice, it felt great. It was special. […] And I also went just with dad to see Wilco […] and that’s a similar experience. It felt like a real kind of bonding. Yeah, it was great. We were just on such a high afterwards.

The shared experience of the Fleet Foxes concert was meaningful for Holly’s family in several ways. First, through the act of giving their father a ticket and thus proposing to share a particular musical experience, Holly and her brother expressed ideas about him and their relationship in relation to social norms of concert-going. Their father’s surprise indicates the significance of this act of non-verbal communication. During the concert, the three family members expressed their responses through facial expressions, in ‘moments’ that Holly remembers, so she recalls the event as a shared experience. Her recollection that this ‘felt great’ and was ‘special’ suggests that through expressively enjoying the music being performed, she and her father and brother were also expressively enjoying each other’s company, perhaps highlighting their shared love of music and the shared values underlying it. Consequently, by planning and sharing experiences of the Fleet Foxes and Wilco concerts, Holly and her brother and father ‘bonded’ in ways that might not be expressed verbally. For Holly at least, these are peak music experiences that continue to have an effect, as her memories of the concerts enable her to reflect on her family and her feelings for them.
Holly also recalled being taken by her mother to her first concert, featuring singer Vanessa Amarosi. She described this as another occasion when a shared experience of music was significant in the context of a particular relationship:

I remember that just feeling really special as well, ‘cause it was like me and mum going to see this powerful woman. And she was, she actually blew me away, I still stand by that, she’s a powerhouse. She was, crazy voice, insane.

The identity of the singer and qualities of the musical performance are central to what this experience means to Holly, along with the form in which the music was experienced. While Holly and her mother would have listened to Vanessa Amorosi’s music together in other situations, attending a concert (and especially a first concert) is a deliberate and even ceremonious way of experiencing music together. As in the previous example, the very act of ‘going to see’ a concert together can express ideas about each other based on the meanings associated with the event, which in this case are centred on the singer’s identity as a powerful woman. This meaning was underlined by the musical and especially vocal performance, which created musical affordances for powerful womanhood to be perceived, experienced and celebrated. Notably, Holly emphasises the singer’s voice rather than what she sang, or as Barthes (1989) puts it the ‘grain of the voice’, which is part of the geno-song (the materiality or body in the performance) rather than the pheno-song (the communicative aspects of the performance). Beyond the lyrical focus exemplified by Horton (1957) and the communicative meaning of a song more generally, this grain and other corporeal aspects of music performance might be important in contributing to a certain kind of experience. In this case, the singer’s voice contributed to the concert being a peak music experience for Holly which now encapsulates, among other things, particular values that her mother shared with her as a child, including by sharing music (an instance of ‘musical mothering’: Grácio 2016).
Deliberate attempts to set up and share a special experience with music are perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the use of drugs. Gomart and Hennion (1999) find similarities between ‘drug addicts’ and ‘music amateurs’, as both go to some lengths to actively abandon themselves to the arrival of particular pleasures. This active passivity is apparent in the following quote from Pete (34), but with both the efforts and the outcomes being consciously shared between friends:

[I remember] driving around in my mate’s Datsun Stanza [car] listening to OK Computer [Radiohead, 1997, “within a week or two of its release”] on acid. Um, taking turns to drive so you know, the other two of us could be in the back, sort of heads on the speakers and… I think that sort of connected pretty deeply too.

Pete said that the aim of this elaborate, cooperative endeavour and others like it was to ‘listen to how far we can hear into this music’. This intention echoes the hippies observed by Willis (1978), who also combined psychedelic drugs and progressive rock music to explore ‘inner space’. Notably, however, Pete speaks in the first person plural: ‘we’. This is reminiscent of MacDonald’s (2005: 247) observation that The Beatles, who often spoke in the first person plural (for example George Harrison’s statement that ‘we don’t know about that yet’ when asked by a fellow musician in 1965 about his belief in God), ‘advanced through their twenties as a sort of sensory phalanx, picking up facts and impressions and pooling them between each other’. While The Beatles may have been uniquely bound by the extraordinary circumstances of their youth together, their collective self-image may to an extent be exemplary of that shared by ordinary groups of close, young friends experimenting with music, drugs and other aspects of culture together. The intention of Pete and his friends was to use drugs, specific music and a car to synchronise and share a subjective experience. They succeeded to the extent that Pete remembers this as a peak music experience some two decades later, partly as a moment that represents that group of friends and what they shared in that time of life.
Engagements with music can present unforeseen affordances for particular ideas and feelings, as well as those that might be planned or hoped for. In response, listeners may spontaneously seize opportunities for interpersonal expression. This can be seen in Holly’s earlier story of her family singing along to ‘every word’ of a song on the radio, which would surely have been recognised as a ‘moment’ as it went on over several minutes. In another example, Liz (26) described how a night of live music provided a setting for her to explore her own feelings and then to share them with a friend. First, Liz went to see a band in which she used to perform, which was a ‘super surreal’ experience involving conflicting feelings of belonging and disconnection. She then crossed the road to another venue where she watched Turnpike, a local noise-rock band. As described in Chapter 6, this performance demonstrated ‘perfect bandship’ to her, reminding her of ‘the perfect times you’ve been in a band’. Turnpike are regarded as veterans in the Brisbane scene and they are also known for performing sporadically and improvising some sections of their songs, with varying but occasionally transcendent results. I was present at this show and spoke to a number of people who agreed that it was an impressive and even inspiring performance. For Liz, however, there was an additional, personal resonance in light of the earlier part of her evening watching her own old band. Liz described how she shared these reflections with a friend, in terms it is important to reproduce for the present discussion:

And I was just watching it like this and then [my friend] came up around me and put her arm like around my waist and, I was, yeah, we both would have been like, fairly drunk, but I whispered all these thoughts I was having into her ear and she was like, “Aw! Aw.” ‘Cause she’s also a musician who’s been through the shit with bands, and also been in bands with partners where it’s not worked out so well… but also had like the good times. And also she was hopefully seeing what I was seeing and feeling like, “This is why we do this”.

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When Liz sought to communicate her thoughts to her friend, she relied upon the assumption that they shared perceptions of the show and associated feelings, in the same way that they shared certain histories. This demonstrates an understanding that music creates a common mental and affective space, in which the expression of intimate thoughts and feelings might be both more appropriate and easier than it would otherwise be. Liz’s judgment of this musical performance is bound up with the uncommon levels of self-reflection and self-expression it enabled. The result is a peak music experience that represents, among other things, her idea about ‘why we do this’ and her understanding that this motivation is shared by her friend, as well as the longer personal and interpersonal narratives in which this experience has a place.

As the foregoing examples demonstrate, people use music to communicate and relate to each other in ways that depend, to a large extent, on music’s experiential effects. The lyrical and other content of music can provide a language for the expression of feeling, but it can also shape feelings as they are experienced. Thus listening to music together can engender emotional closeness and lay grounds of possibility for particular kinds of action and interaction, including uncommon expressions of emotion. Activities besides listening but oriented around music, especially ritualised activities such as those involved in concerts, can subtly or ceremoniously express ideas about relationships. For example, giving tickets, ‘taking’ a guest or ‘going together’ to a concert can be meaningful gestures in themselves; the extraordinary setting of the concert can permit extraordinary expressions of feeling; and the music itself may provide extraordinary shape and qualities to those feelings and aid their expression. More ordinary settings and uses of music, such as listening to music during a family activity and singing along to a shared favourite song as discussed earlier in this chapter, can give rise to equally extraordinary experiences of being together. People can both plan and grasp these opportunities to share certain kinds of experience with others as a way of exploring,
expressing and celebrating their relationships, which can sometimes create peak music experiences of lasting significance.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the role of peak music experiences in relationships between people. It has been shown that in families, music is used to soundtrack activities and recognise occasions, based to an extent on its capacity to structure emotional experience. This can heighten the experience of certain events and, in turn, forge lasting links that inform the meaning of certain music well into the future. Thus a major element of music as a resource for identity is its capacity to refer to and also to reconstruct experiences that have significance in relation to family and other personal relationships. It has also been shown that music can produce a common affective space for people to interact in potentially exceptional ways, which can create memorable moments within relationships. The intersubjective setting that music produces depends on its inherent and associative properties as well as the socially significant, collective activities oriented around it, such as rituals of concert-going. Finally, it has been shown that people take advantage of music’s capacity to enable uncommon experiences and expressions of feeling, by using shared experiences of music to acknowledge, explore and celebrate aspects of their relationships with friends, family and romantic partners. Such shared experiences can be both planned and seized upon. Musical experiences that are imbued with personal significance and emotional resonance in this way can be peak music experiences, through which people and relationships are remembered and narrated in retrospect. By considering these peak music experiences as exemplary of broader practices, this chapter has argued for an expanded understanding of how music is involved in relationships between people.
Chapter 8
Live music experiences: Presence and affective space

‘Peter’ was a 52-year-old Brisbane man with whom I was acquainted as a family friend and who I encountered regularly in the audience of gigs, by local and touring indie musicians, before and during the fieldwork for this thesis. I interviewed Peter and closed by asking why he devoted his time to seeking out music and going to gigs. He began by noting that he and his wife had discussed their different ideas of a ‘great musical experience’. She was not interested in ‘just standing there, sort of nodding at the music’, but wanted to be able to dance to music with ‘rhythm’ and to see a ‘show’, with both exemplified by a Prince concert they had attended together. Peter, on the other hand, said he was interested in ‘the song’, including how it was performed and how it sounded; being ‘physically present in the environment’; and a venue with some ‘atmosphere’ and, preferably, reasonable acoustics, although some ‘crappy pubs’ had done it for him over the years. He then answered my question more directly by describing what live music could do for him, with reference to a peak music experience:

I reckon it just transports you, away from your normal regular life and it takes you somewhere new. And you’re a part, more than something which has been created and is put on the screen in front of you, you’re there as it’s happening, and you may just actually influence what’s happening. You know, your enthusiasm and the collective enthusiasm of those around you may just have an impact on what happens on the stage. And clearly they have an impact on you. And I love that idea! You know, I saw at [Byron Bay] Bluesfest this year, a band that I’ve got, one of my guilty pleasures of music is the Counting Crows. […] And at the end of the concert [the singer] just stood there, and he sorta said you know, “I’ve just
had the best night tonight”. And they played really well and it wasn’t the best thing I saw at Bluesfest but I just got that sense of us lifting him and lifting the whole band. And you know this is a band that’s been around for twenty years, a bit of a journeyman band, you know, had their really big hits a long time ago, been slogging it out, and ah, you know that sense that everything can come together, the songs sound great, the band feeds off the [audience]. I love that sense that, you know, we’re helping to create that moment as well. And I don’t know where you get that anywhere else.

Peter’s answer illustrates a number of points about live music. He identifies multiple elements that are expected to complement the music itself, including practical and symbolic factors that may be hard to separate, such as acoustics and atmosphere, or a visual ‘show’. Peter’s comparison with his wife demonstrates that people may place different weight on different elements, or evaluate them by different standards. For both of them, presence and participation in collective activity were especially important, although these too were manifested in different ways. These differences were exemplified in the specific concerts they nominated as their ideals. Most notably, Peter emphasised that live music could create a special kind of collective and individual experience, as demonstrated in his peak music experience of seeing the Counting Crows. Indeed, this experience, which he believed to be unique to live music, was the reason Peter gave for investing time, money and energy in listening to music and attending gigs.

Live music is the setting for the greatest number of peak music experiences reported by participants in Brisbane’s local music scene, consistently with Peter’s emphasis. Music fans typically remember and talk about their first and favourite live music experiences as part of the listening histories considered in Chapter 4, while ‘getting to see’ a favourite artist live is an especially celebrated experience. This reflects the special status accorded to live music in popular music culture, which has been
acknowledged in the scholarly research that will be outlined in this chapter. These peak music experiences, as specifically celebrated instances of live music, reveal what people value most in the live context and how this differs between groups. This chapter considers common elements of peak live music experiences, including the role played by venues, sound and physicality, performance and presence, favourite artists and collective affect. Different musical genres and cultures bring different expectations to each of these aspects of the live music experience. However, there is an underlying emphasis on presence, which emerges as a key feature of live music. Accordingly, peak music experiences provide a new perspective on what defines ‘live music’, which is a topic of both popular and academic debate as detailed below. These various elements create an affective space in which people explore aspects of individual and collective identity, including through uncommon expressions of self and belonging. Live music enables extraordinary feelings and behaviour, resulting in especially affecting, memorable and meaningful peak music experiences. These experiences help to account for the special status of live music and emerge as central to people’s investment in music generally. Accordingly, this chapter’s analysis of peak live music experiences contributes to the literature concerning the social importance of live music, as discussed in the next section.

What is live music and why is it special?

The special status of live music has been acknowledged in popular music studies within sociology and other disciplines. Frith (2007) asserts that despite immense cultural and technological changes since the time of classical music, the concert continues to be the experience that defines the musical values of most music lovers across genres as well as being central to music’s value more generally. Frith is referring here to the reasons people pay money for music, and he observes the growing importance of live music as one of the more buoyant sectors of the music industry in the United Kingdom. This is consistent
with literature regarding the Australian context, which places live music within the so-called ‘experience economy’ (Pearce 2013). Campbell (2013) observes that Australian independent music, for example, has since the 1970s shifted from a commodity-based economy with a focus on the sale of recordings, into the experience economy, particularly with a greater contemporary focus on live performance. Beyond economic value, the live experience also motivates people to invest their time, body and emotions, especially at the level of committed, local scene participation considered throughout this thesis. Major ethnographic studies of local and global music scenes highlight the central and special status of live music, such as Finnegan’s (1989) study of local music-making in Milton Keynes, Cohen’s (1991, 2012) studies of local musicians and audiences in Liverpool, Cavicchi’s (1998) cultural anthropology of Bruce Springsteen fans and Kahn-Harris’s (2007) study of the global extreme metal scene. While Thornton (1995) suggests that dance music culture marked the decline of live music in favour of pre-recorded music, she nevertheless describes the centrality of collective musical events such as discotheques. More recently, Frith (2007) observes the rise of the ‘superstar DJ’ centred on ‘in person’ appearances. These points raise the question of how live music is defined, which will now be considered.

In performance studies, liveness is thought to describe a quality of the relationship between performer and audience (Fritsch and Strötgen 2012). Some scholars in this field assert that physical presence is essential to liveness, excluding any performance that requires media to be perceived (see ibid). However, Auslander (2002a) argues that the relationship between live and mediatised performance is not ontologically given or technologically determined but historical and contingent. Indeed, he argues that the concept of liveness was an effect of mediatisation; recording technology made it possible to identify certain musical performances as live, then broadcast technology made it necessary to do so by blurring the experiential distinction, which had to be reinstated.
discursively (2002b). It is now widely accepted that live music may incorporate mediatisation in the form of amplification and video screens, and some recordings are described as ‘live’ (Auslander 2002a). More recent forms of media have necessitated further redefinitions, including webcasts of musical performances (Duffett 2003) and concert presentations of pre-recorded music with animated performers such as the cartoon band Gorillaz (Fritsch and Strötgen 2012). Dance and other electronic music have drawn complex appraisals of liveness, as the gestures of a performer in these styles often do not seem commensurate to the sonic output (D’Escrivan 2006). Some electronic performances are promoted as ‘live’ or ‘live P.A.’ (personal appearance or performing artist), referring to performers using electronic music gear to manipulate pre-programmed or pre-recorded material, as opposed to DJs who play more or less complete tracks, even though both involve physical presence and moment-to-moment creative decisions (see Fritsch and Strötgen 2012: 55). Different audiences bring different understandings of liveness to musical performances, which D’Escrivan (2006) suggests is based on a technological generation gap, although this may be less important than music-cultural differences, such as between rock and dance audiences or between traditionalist and experimentally-minded spectators. This chapter builds on the recognition of liveness as socially constructed, but instead of distinguishing between discursive and experiential understandings (per Auslander 2002b), it is shown that evaluations of liveness continue to be based in the experience of the audience and performer. This is where discursive constructions of liveness take effect and are confirmed or challenged, consistently with theatre scholar Wolf-Dieter Ernst’s extension of Auslander’s theory (according to Fritsch and Strötgen 2012, who discuss Ernst’s German work in English). Peak live music experiences demonstrate that experience is central to how live music is defined and why it is valued.
After defining what is meant by live music, the next question is how to account for its importance. It has been argued that live music is a barometer of authenticity, which is a central value term across musical genres (Moore 2002). In the live setting, musicians and listeners can judge and be judged on whether what they do is ‘real’ (Frith 2007: 8; see also Gracyk 1996: 74-75; Auslander 2002a). However, this authenticating function does not fully account for the significance of live music. Frith (2007) notes that successful live acts like the Rolling Stones reached peak record sales years ago and now release records to promote a tour rather than vice versa. He argues that as, over the last hundred years or so, the Western experience of music has been individualised and become tied up with people’s sense of self, there has arisen an equally passionate drive to share our musical tastes. Live musical performance therefore matters as a deeply pleasurable event at which our understanding of ourselves through music is socially recognised. This is consistent with Small’s (1998) theory that through the ‘musicking’ activities involved in any musical event, a group explores, affirms and celebrates their relationships and values.

As Cavicchi (1998: 37) states for Bruce Springsteen fans, a concert represents a powerful meeting of the various forces, people and ideas involved in their fandom, shaping and anchoring their sense of who they are and where they belong. This chapter builds on these explanations for the importance of live music, by considering what peak live music experiences reveal. The live peak music experiences examined here demonstrate how the live setting can be especially revelatory, enabling strongly felt and lasting interpretations and evaluations of music, performers and audiences. These experiences also exemplify live music events as occasions for the pleasurable recognition and celebration of individual and collective identities. These in turn are reasons why so many peak music experiences arise in the live setting.

Beyond identifying why live music is so valued, we can ask more specifically how this value is created and experienced. In other words, what makes some live music
experiences stand out? Research on live music has identified a number of important elements in creating the sought-after social space, including the practical and symbolic affordances of venues; the musical, gestural and visual aspects of performance; the presence and behaviour of audiences, and the anticipatory and commemorative activities surrounding events. The relevant literature in this regard is discussed through the following sections. Participants bring different expectations to each of these elements and audience studies have begun to identify common qualitative axes, such as intimacy versus spectacle; the unique atmosphere and character of a venue versus the predictable and comfortable running of a show; surprise and the unexpected versus confirmation of already held tastes; and inward versus outward audience participation (Behr et al 2016). However, across these divides, participation in live music and collective musical events involves a common desire for an extraordinary kind of experience, which has been described in various terms: immersive and transcendent (ibid); being taken out of oneself (Frith 2012); oceanic and ecstatic (Malbon 1999, regarding dance music culture); collective, participatory, unpredictable and unique (Cohen 2012). Behr et al (2016: 411) note that ‘[w]hile the concert/gig does not need to attain this ‘transcendence’ to have value, it is the potential for that which keeps people going back’, whether as part of their regular activities or on special occasions. These extraordinary experiences are expressed outwardly, so that people ‘behave in ways that they would not outside the performance … things which would be inappropriate in the context of everyday life’ (Cavicchi 1998: 89). Once again, ways of engaging vary greatly, ‘from rapt silence to noisy sing-alongs, intense mental concentration to the physical exertion of dance’ (Behr et al 2016: 411). The uniting feature is the exceptional experience and expression of identity by individuals in a collective setting. Accordingly, the peak music experiences considered in this chapter are central to understanding the social significance of live music. They illustrate the unique affective space created in live music events and the ways that extraordinary live
music experiences inform ongoing practices and everyday identity. Further, as idealised but actual instances of live music, they provide insight into the elements that comprise it and the measures by which it is valued. The following sections consider live music experiences in terms of place and space; sound and physicality; performance and presence; crowds and collective affect; and the resulting experience that sets live music apart from the consumption of music in other contexts.

**Live music venues**

Particular venues remain central to most people’s idea of live music, despite the proliferation of media through which it can be experienced from a distance. While all musical experience is informed to some extent by setting as demonstrated throughout the other chapters, live music emphasises and ritualises this effect. Behr et al (2012: 404, 414) found that audiences for ‘classical, folk, jazz, singer-songwriter and indie music performances’ at the Queen’s Hall in Edinburgh, when planning their attendance, thought about whether a performance venue would enable ‘the sorts of transcendence’ they prized. Both the practical and symbolic affordances of venues play a role here and these may be evaluated differently by different audiences. For example, Forbes (2012) shows that some (mainly rock) acts and audiences revelled in the physically dilapidated state of the Glasgow Apollo as a sign of authenticity, while ‘pop’ audiences such as those who attended a Neil Sedaka show complained of a squalid experience. Some venues accrue iconic status, as observed in relation to the Glasgow Apollo (ibid) and various unofficial venues in Australia’s local music scenes (Bennett and Rogers 2016). This can inform the meaning and memory of events that take place at those venues. One of the most iconic venues in Brisbane history is The Cloudland Ballroom. Cloudland, as it is known, was built in 1940 and became a post-war ‘social Mecca’, hosting resident dance bands and touring artists from Buddy Holly in 1958 to punk and new wave bands in the early 1980s,
before it was controversially demolished overnight in 1982 (Stafford 2004: 117-118, 125; see also Bennett and Rogers 2016: 97).\(^9\) ‘Ken’ (58) provided the following recollection of a concert at Cloudland from the perspective of more than thirty years later:

I saw The Clash play Cloudland and that was a great show. But Cloudland was a great venue. Reading about the sprung floor is not the same as bouncing on the sprung floor, that was a fantastic experience!

This quote highlights both the reputation of the venue and the embodied experience on which it is partly based. Specifically, the sprung floor was well-suited to the ‘pogo’ dance style of punk fans (see Laing 1985). Accordingly, the physical properties and cultural status of a venue can be interrelated and both may imbue a live music experience with significance.

An iconic venue that still operates in Brisbane is The Zoo, a 500-capacity venue which has been associated with local and alternative music since it opened in 1992. For many local musicians, their first performance, first headline performance and first sold-out performance at The Zoo are remembered as career milestones and peak music experiences (see for example Elly’s and Julian’s stories in Chapter 6). Smaller, unofficial venues in Brisbane are also ‘invested with a high degree of importance, authenticity, and aesthetic value’ due in large part to the emotional work that goes into them (Bennett and Rogers 2016). Simply knowing about such unofficial venues can mark the inside and outside of a particular community (Shank 1994: 120). An example is Real Bad Music, a ‘squatted’ venue with capacity for no more than a few dozen people in a dilapidated building in the suburb of Moorooka, which was destroyed by fire in 2016. Jane (26) cites her band’s performance at Real Bad Music as a peak music experience:

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\(^9\) The demolition of Cloudland is referenced in Sydney rock band Midnight Oil’s 1987 single, ‘Dreamworld’, with the lyrics: ‘Cloudland into dreamland turns/The sun comes up and we all learn/Those wheels must turn’ (Garrett, Hirst & Moginie 1987).
Obviously it’s this incredible space that people from all round Australia talk about like, “Oh you’re gonna play Real Bad”, it’s got this reputation. […] And just ‘cause it’s in Moorooka, like the journey there, it’s all this mix, this special experience.

This example shows again how both the cultural status and physical attributes of a venue, which in the case of Real Bad Music necessitate the journey to a suburb removed from other Brisbane nightlife, inform the experience of both performers and audiences.

Venues can embody the zeitgeist of particular genres and times (Bennett and Rogers 2016; Feldman-Barrett 2017) and can therefore resonate thematically with the music being performed there, imbuing experiences with significance. For example, an artist might perform in a venue that is regarded as their home ground, as demonstrated in the following story by Jim (44):

A very important one, one that really stands out as amongst the most moving and uplifting gigs I’ve ever seen was actually Yothu Yindi. I saw them in 1999 at the inaugural Garma festival in North Queensland. Look it up, it’s a longstanding thing. And Yothu Yindi are from the north east of Arnhem Land, they’re Yolngu people. And I was seeing them play on their home turf, on the beach, with the stage kind of crowded eight deep in Aboriginal kids who were, you know, tiny, less than ten years old; they were heroes to them. And it’s one of the most moving things I’ve ever seen. I cried at that show too. I’ve cried at a few shows but that would probably stand out in the top five, you know. And part of that of course is politics, social conscience, all of that kind of clichéd stuff. That was important.

Jim’s story highlights the importance of setting to the experience of live music, as well as the various factors that inform the meaning of a setting. In this case, Yothu Yindi’s reputation as musical ambassadors for Yolngu people and culture made their performance in an iconic part of Yolngu country especially meaningful to Jim, an informed visitor to
that place. The association of music and place imbued Jim’s experience of the concert with political and social resonance. I understood Jim’s description of these factors as ‘clichéd’ to mean that he considered them obvious in the circumstances, while perhaps also expressing some embarrassment at his own sincerity, of which I was in no doubt. Similarly, singer-songwriter Elly (26) cited her performance at a women’s prison as a peak music experience, calling it her ‘little Johnny Cash moment’ in reference to the country singer’s career-defining, recorded performances at United States prisons such as Folsom Prison (1968) and San Quentin (1969). These examples show that the meanings associated with a venue influence the experience of both audiences and performers. Accordingly, it can be seen that one element that distinguishes live music is the ritualised emphasis on meaningful settings. The following section considers a more physically determined attribute of live music venues, the provision of amplified sound.

**Sound and physicality**

An important element in experiential accounts of live music is the character of the musical sound, especially its volume, which tends to be significantly louder than in private settings. While venues were valued for their acoustic properties before electronic amplification (see Sabine 1923), popular music concerts are now associated with far louder volumes than unamplified musicians could produce. The technological and aesthetic valourisation of volume can be traced most clearly in live rock music, as it progressed from ballrooms in the 1960s to arenas and stadiums in the 1970s and beyond (Frith 2007).\(^1\) High volume emphasises the materiality of sound and the corporeal nature

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\(^1\) In the 1970s and 1980s, the *Guinness Book of World Records* contained entries for the ‘loudest’ live performance, including rock bands Deep Purple at 117 decibels in 1972, The Who at 126 decibels in 1976, and Manowar at 129.5 decibels in 1984. While KISS and Motörhead later claimed volumes well above 130 decibels, Guinness stopped including this category in their records, supposedly in recognition of the dangers of hearing damage. Excessive volume is not unique to rock music, as electronic dance act Leftfield is said to have reached 137 decibels at London’s Brixton Academy in 1996, allegedly causing audience members to faint and plaster to fall from the ceiling (Drozdowski 2014).
of musical experience (Gilbert and Pearson 1999: 44), which can result in a qualitatively
different experience of musical elements. For example, Jones (1988: 156) posits that it
was at high volume that ‘reggae’s drum and bass rhythms, and the sensual “feel” of the
music, were at their most effective’.

Listeners tend to be conscious of volume as an aspect of live music and it is not
unusual for music fans to specifically remember the loudest performances they have
attended. In this regard, local concerts by United States band Dinosaur Jr featured
prominently among indie rock fans in this study, including more than one reference to
physical illness. May (35) remembered the physical experience of volume as central to
her ‘second big concert’ in her early teens, finding it shocking at first but later appealing.

Janet Jackson was crazy ‘cause it was the first time I experienced like bass actually
interrupting your heartbeat. It was so loud. I was like, “What is this?” [...] And
the bass was not like that for [my first concert] Roxette. It’s a shed! It’s a fuckin’
shed, the [Brisbane] Entertainment Centre. Can you imagine Janet Jackson bass
in her prime? It was like, I was shaking.

This description illustrates how high volume enhances particular aspects of musical
experience, such as the physically perceptible vibrations of bass and sub-bass frequencies.
This can highlight musical differences, such as the more prominent bass in Janet
Jackson’s hip hop and dance-influenced pop as opposed to Roxette’s guitar-based pop-
rock. This explains why fans sometimes claim that particular music must be experienced
live in order to fully appreciate it, as demonstrated in the following quote by Aaron (25)
about Australian noise-rock band feedtime (the name of which is uncapitalised).

I guess for years I’d heard that feedtime never translated on a record, like the
strength and the grit of the live sound could never be reproduced through a
recording. And that’s what I found on that day [that I saw them]. So on one hand
that question was answered, like “Why can’t it be reproduced?” Because, you
know, the guitar just like buzzes through parts of your brain that you’d never experienced before.

The collective wisdom Aaron had heard over the years, that feedtime ‘never translated’ in recorded form, also suggests that attending a live performance can be a way of accruing symbolic capital. This is described by Forbes (2012) as ‘I Was Thereism’. As in the earlier discussion of venues, discussions of sound show how practical and symbolic factors can be hard to disentangle in evaluations of live music, of which peak music experiences are an instance. Other research participants cited volume and quality of sound among their reasons for valuing the club setting in dance music. For example, Martin (32) said that he first got ‘really big into’ dance music when he started hearing it ‘in a proper club, with good DJs being able to manipulate the hardware that they had in a club to make it sound great’. This highlights again the physical experience that differentiates certain music and certain elements of music at sufficient volume, which is usually only experienced in the live setting. Accordingly, this is one reason for the preponderance of peak music experiences in the live setting. The greater bodily impact of loud music reveals unique qualities of specific music, as well as imbuing them with affective power, creating memorably unique experiences of feeling and meaning.

**Performance and presence**

People’s descriptions of their peak music experiences tend to highlight the proximity and activities of those performing the music. In accordance with Auslander’s (2002: 21) observation that liveness is first and foremost ‘a relationship of simultaneity’, experiences of live performance are often marked by uncertainty as to what will occur as the performance unfolds. This entails the risks of disappointment and the pleasures of satisfaction or surprise. There is an associated focus on the skill and effort of musicians, although these are evaluated according to various cultural standards. Some people’s
experience of live music is elevated by their perceptions of technical proficiency and professionalism, as shown in the following quote from Lily (26) about Joanna Newsom, whose music is situated in the indie market but incorporates both folk and modern classical elements:

I’ve only seen Joanna Newsom play once but that was probably one of the best shows I’ve ever been to. And that was more, I think, just how polished it was and how nice it is to go to a show when someone is just so well-practised and such a... I guess a professional at everything that they do. So she’s just an amazing harpist, she’s got an incredible voice that is doing the most, just really really complicated vocal melodies that are completely in contrast to the really complicated harp parts and then her lyrics just tell the most vivid, evocative stories. [...] the kind of experience that can be created from just being really good at what you do, really technically proficient, can be really great for a spectator.

Joanna Newsom’s skills as a composer and performer are apparent on her recordings, which have a naturalistic aesthetic that largely emulates live performance. Lily’s emphasis of these skills in concert demonstrates the heightened focus that is placed on performers and performance in the live setting, due to their increased visibility as well as the higher risks associated with making an error when performing for a simultaneous audience.

The different interpretations of liveness in electronic music, as discussed earlier, tend to revolve around different ways of evaluating performers’ skill and effort (see D’Escrivan 2006). Dance music fan and event organiser John (25) focused on these elements when describing an ‘amazing’ performance by the electronic music producer Trippy Turtle:

He was ridiculous, he was incredible. He was bouncing around, he was doing it all live on the fly, hitting samples and MIDI controllers and this and that, blending
all his tracks. I knew all his tracks by heart, he was [performing] new songs that I’d never heard. […] And this guy was just on a whole other level and it really showed me the difference between what a DJ set could do and what a live set can do and the level of control you can have in the room. ‘Cause everyone always says that a good DJ controls the room, controls the flow. But this guy took it above that, he was creating songs at the time with all of his different samples, it was amazing.

This peak music experience highlights the significance of simultaneity in the audience experience of live music, which is experienced through uncertainty (‘new songs that I’d never heard’) as well as the visibility of active performance. John found it exciting that the songs were being ‘created’ in the moment and that this involved substantial activity on the part of the performer. Notably, these are the same elements that some rock fans find lacking in electronic music, based on different interpretations. By placing increased focus on the acts of performance, live music highlights such cultural differences.

The liveness of a performance can also be made apparent by musical imperfection, so that mistakes can create a memorable live music experience for audience members. This is demonstrated in Peter’s (52) experience of a concert by the alt-country band Wilco:

They played a gig at the Tivoli and it was obvious that they weren’t quite prepared for the gig, that they were very much early on in the process of playing that album and integrating the band. And so what made that gig amazing to me, as someone watching a gig, was the fact that it wasn’t polished. So I seem to recall on a couple of occasions they stopped playing a song after a few bars and went back and played it again. And so you got a real sense, it was like being in the garage as the band were playing.
Peter’s comparison to ‘being in the garage’ with the band illustrates how imperfections can contribute to the experience of intimacy with performers, even at a theatre-style venue like Brisbane’s Tivoli, by making apparent the simultaneity of the performance and the human activity involved in it. Such perceptions are shaped by cultural criteria; for example, in indie music, imperfect musical performance contributes to the valued sense of emotional directness and authenticity (Fonarow 2006). Accordingly, when Aaron (25) described his stand-out live experience of seeing grunge-rock band feedtime, he expressed relief that their performance retained the roughness he enjoyed in their recordings. He observed, ‘That would have almost been like the cardinal sin, like the drummer getting really tight. They just started and stopped when they liked […] the songs are kind of these organisms that just have to be awakened’. Such expectations and their significance in audience experience illustrate how aesthetic and social values are performed in live music (Small 1998). The live setting therefore provides unique opportunities for musical experiences that reveal, affirm or challenge values.

Extra-musical aspects of performance also contribute substantially to the experience of live music, including physical gestures, verbal communication and visual style, assisted by lighting and other stage effects. Performers’ clothing has been identified as especially important in, and partly definitive of, the genres of glam rock (Auslander 2006) and Mod (Feldman 2009). However, in all musical genres, visual and other extra-musical signs can reveal or emphasise particular meanings (as Small 1998 shows in classical music). Musicians can take advantage of these aspects of the live setting to achieve greater control over the reception of their music, which helps to explain why live music experiences are often described as revelatory. At the same time, however, cultural expectations are involved in the interpretation of what could be called stagecraft. As Auslander (2002a: 70) observes, ‘[t]ightly choreographed unison dance steps may be necessary for a soul vocal group to establish itself as authentic but would be a sign of
inauthenticity in a rock group because they belie the effect of spontaneity rock audiences value’. People’s descriptions of their peak music experiences highlight such distinctions, but also demonstrate a reflexive attitude toward authenticity. DJ and dance club organiser Joe (32) recalled a peak music experience in which obviously staged elements of a performance combined with his interpretation of a song to create an emotional response:

> When I was a kid and Basement Jaxx had that ‘Good Luck’ track, I remember going to Big Day Out [festival] and [the highlight] was when they started playin’ the song, and then the [guest] singer would surprise the crowd by coming from backstage and would sing it to the crowd as like a surprise vocalist. And you’d be like mind blown cause you’re like *(mock screaming)* “Oh wow!” Especially that song ‘cause it's such an empowering song as well. So that was one of the genuine moments where the music really made the hair on my back of my neck stand up, and gave me goosebumps. See it gives me goosebumps thinking about it just now, because of such, of the impact that it made.

As this quote shows, music fans are often well aware of the calculation involved in live performances, but might nevertheless be moved deeply. Indeed, stagecraft itself may be appreciated as a display of skill or a gesture of generosity. This was the interpretation offered by music fan and critic Jim (44) when describing a moving piece of ‘cheese’ at a Bruce Springsteen concert:

> A lot of this is cheese, you know, this is showmanship, this is vaudeville. But he got this kid, who must have been 10 or 11, maybe 12 at most, got him onstage, he’d obviously seen him with his parents down the front, the kid must have known the words to the songs, and he probably does this every show ‘cause there’s always one, right? […] The E Street Band are pounding away and he takes this kid to the side, next to the drum riser I think, and he’s sort of dusting his knees down with some talc of some kind. You sort of go, “What’s going on here?” He
takes the kid back to the front of the stage and this is all timed right at the crescendo of the song, they go running down the front of the stage and they do this power slide on their knees together. This is the corniest thing you have ever seen. On the other hand it’s one of the most moving things I’ve ever seen on the stage. He’s given that kid an experience he’ll never forget. He’s given everyone else in the audience - I’ll never forget it. And you just go, that is a beautiful thing to do. That’s like, this is the anti-snob. If you were there and you were not moved by that I’d be like “You curmudgeon! You arsehole!” You know? That was the ultimate act of inclusiveness I’ve ever seen.

While Jim’s analysis is uncommonly thoughtful, perhaps due to his perspective as a music critic, Springsteen’s overt irony as manifested in the talcum powder routine suggests that he expects his audience to be somewhat reflexive about rock performance conventions. Thus his exaggerated stagecraft is a way of performing a deeper relationship with the audience, which Jim experienced as inclusiveness.

Musicians at the local and amateur level also demonstrate awareness of performance conventions and their significance. A well-executed stage performance can be part of a peak music experience by creating a feeling of achievement, as illustrated in the following story told by rapper Dee (35):

When we did a show at [small Brisbane venue] the Bearded Lady a little while ago […] we have a bit in one of our songs where it’s like, “Have a rest”. And usually we just sit on the ground and have a rest. I like to do theatrics as well. And there was two couches, so we just sat on the couch and I was like, “Have a rest!” And it was just kind of perfect, the joke, and I wish there were things like that all the time. Yeah, that feeling when you know you were right, I know I’m right, I did it, everything’s working right now, a couple of seconds and yeah. That’s satisfaction.
Dee’s performances include humour alongside more serious musical and lyrical content, which is common in hip hop music. This and the previous quote show that neither humour nor theatricality are necessarily inconsistent with genuine feelings on the part of audiences and performers. They also illustrate that all participants share an interest in the successful creation of a convincing and moving live music event, along with a tacit acknowledgement that there is in fact a performance taking place. To an extent, participants in a musical event willingly acquiesce to performance conventions in search of moving and memorable experiences.

In some genres such as punk and indie, obvious stagecraft and theatrical styles of performance are shunned in pursuit of authenticity and unmediated expression (Fonarow 2006; Hibbett 2005). Nevertheless, these very ideals are performed through particular conventions. For example, the punk values of total commitment and spontaneity can be displayed through bodily abandon, as demonstrated in the following peak music experiences:

Tracy, 39: I’ll never forget seeing Fugazi at the Roxy. That sort of clicked my brain over, that night. It was just the most perfect sound, this was sort of back in the Nineties, and the performance as well. Guy from Fugazi just, you know, scaled up to the balcony and did this huge stage dive and got carried around by the crowd and things like that.

Ken, 58: I saw [Iggy Pop] in Berlin in ’81 or ’82, which is probably the best time I’ve ever seen him, he was fully engaged. And you’d never ever realise, he really is 5 foot 1 [the title of an Iggy Pop song]! Because the energy coming off him just makes him feel like he’s six and a half feet. So you really do feel like you’re part of something when you see an Iggy Pop show.

Physical performance is a form of musicking that enacts relationships, including between performer and audience (Small 1998). In contrast to more overtly staged displays, the
above examples depict relationships built on shared values of immediacy and direct expression. As well as physical exertion, performances are also valued for perceived emotional effort, which is described as an act of giving as the following quotes illustrate:

Nat, 34: [R&B singer] D’Angelo at Soulfest […] just gave to this little Brisbane crowd, like I think they only sold a third of the tickets that they wanted to, but he just absolutely killed it and just gave so much.

Holly, 25: Definitely every time I’ve seen [indie-folk artist] Conor Oberst play, I’ve always come out of it really moved. And I feel like he’s someone who, again, like is really conscious about being at every performance that he does. I mean it may be like one show in a huge tour, but I feel like a lot comes out of it from him. I almost marvel at the kind of emotional stamina he would have to give that kind of performance at every show.

These quotes refer to the emotional presence of musicians, described by Fonarow as ‘beingness’ (2006: 192). The peak music experiences considered in this section show that the experience of presence is a common, underlying goal of the various conventions of theatrical performance, physical expression and emotional display. Presence is performed and interpreted in different ways; the grand gestures of Bruce Springsteen that are seen as generous and inclusive by his audience, might be considered by a punk audience to lack the authenticity of spontaneous action, while an indie crowd might perceive emotional distance in such stagecraft. The experience of presence is definitive of live music, while the different ways in which such an experience is produced help to define popular music cultures such as rock, indie, dance and so on. Peak music experiences, as ideal instances of live music, reveal the importance of presence and the differences in how it is judged and felt.
Identity and fandom

It is common for audiences to speak of the live experience in terms of ‘seeing’ musicians, just as musicians advertise their upcoming ‘appearances’. The persistence of this language, despite the proliferation of musicians’ images outside of live performance, highlights visibility as a major feature of live music. More fundamentally, this shows the centrality of presence in defining and valuing live music. There is a tendency for music fans to list the artists they have seen and those they have not seen, suggesting that the mere fact of attending a live performance by a given artist can be a goal in itself. As Fonarow (2006) notes in relation to indie music, fans ‘collect’ significant gigs. Accordingly, seeing a famous or favourite artist is often cause for anticipation, excitement and remembrance as a peak music experience, as the following quotes illustrate:

Tom, 22: D’Angelo’s set at Soulfest was pretty hectic, I’ll never forget that. I was sort of right behind the VIP area, directly in front. It was just incredible, I never thought I was gonna see him and I’m pretty sure most people here [in Brisbane] never thought they’d see him live so that was definitely memorable for that.

Julian, 44: [The Police] reformed and I saw them when they came out in 2008, so that for me was like: I’m getting to see Stewart Copeland drum. “Yeah, hi Sting, I just wanna hear the drummer”, you know?

As these examples also show, the achievement of seeing a favourite artist is an opportunity for reflection on one’s past desires, acting as a milestone for a continuous and developing identity based around musical taste. These peak music experiences form part of the histories of listening discussed in Chapter 4, along with the first time hearing a particular artist, for example.

A related experience of importance to music fans is seeing a favourite song performed live. The study of popular music consumption and fandom has tended not to focus on songs, but on artists and genres more generally, although DeNora (2000) is an
exception. In popular discourse, it is a cliché that live audiences want to hear their favourite songs even when the artist has tired of performing them. This suggests that while fandom might be understood as a relationship with a musician (as considered for example in Cavicchi 1998), fans can also have a direct relationship with their favourite music. Accordingly, the fulfilment of the wish to see a favourite song performed live can be a peak music experience. In one example, Jill (32) went to some expense and effort to see her favourite band, Radiohead, at multiple concerts in two Australian cities, recalling, ‘The first concert I saw them I was on the front, at the rail, ‘cause I was so excited! I just had to be there. It was amazing.’ More than 10 years and nine Radiohead concerts later, when asked to describe her memories of that first tour, she focused on a favourite song:

   Time just goes by and you forget things, but I guess you remember the general feeling of being there and maybe you remember certain things, songs or whatever. I think they played ‘Lucky’ in Melbourne, and I was really happy because I really loved that song and I really wanted to see that live. So I guess I remember things like that, going “Yes, I got to see the song I liked!”

Similarly, when Lisa (34) was asked if she could think of any highlights among gigs she had attended, she described how her long wait to see a favourite band culminated in an emotional response to a familiar song:

   I was trying to think of something on the way over here that really affected me. In 2008, which is not that recently, Ween toured that year and I’d not seen them play before […] So I was really excited to see Ween and they started the show with that song ‘Buckingham Green’, I don’t know if you’re a Ween fan but I was really excited. And that’s one of the only times I can remember where I’ve been moved to tears. ‘Cause they played, there’s this guitar solo which is a kind of simplistic solo but it’s so familiar to me and I think it meant so much to me that they were playing it, and it was the first song and I was so excited, it was at the
Tivoli, that I just started crying when they started doing the guitar solo. So I remember that really affecting me.

These examples show how the live performance of a favourite song can create a peak music experience that is marked by memories and feelings about both the artist and oneself.

Live peak music experiences with favourite artists come to represent past selves and contexts, particularly as they are assessed differently over time. For example, Peter (52) said that his first Bob Dylan concert was a peak music experience, although with the benefit of seeing more concerts he rated that performance as relatively poor:

Probably the defining early musical experience was seeing Bob Dylan play at the Myer Music Bowl in about 1979 I think. He was touring off the back of his Bob Dylan Live at the Budokan album and this was an album he made, it was like a greatest hits album live, where everything was played slightly to a reggae beat. So it actually was, in retrospect because I’ve seen Dylan many times since, probably not his greatest concert because everything had that sort of reggae flavour to it and the live album’s not very good. But that didn’t matter to me. I mean, seeing Dylan as a 16 or 17 year-old, that was, without any doubt, the big musical experience of my life at the time. Yeah huge, just huge.

As this example shows, re-evaluating a peak music experience in hindsight is a way of understanding personal growth. As shown in Chapter 4, peak music experiences are milestones of fandom as an aspect of long-term identity. Live music events, as settings for celebrating the objects of fandom, are especially productive sites for such biographically significant experiences. These aspects of long-term music fandom are also demonstrated in the practice of seeing a favourite artist on multiple occasions. In an extreme example, Georgie (45) said she has seen her favourite rock band from the United States, Monster Magnet, almost 20 times, having followed them on every Australian tour.
Another example is Jill (32), who had seen the bands Radiohead and Belle and Sebastian on multiple occasions and explained that this was partly a way of tracking her life:

You sort of have memories I guess, listening to a band like that, where you’ve really loved them for like a long time and you know all their records, so just going to see them live is sort of like a flashback to lots of times where you’ve listened to them as well; last times you’ve seen them and where you were and what you were doing then as well.

Peak live music experiences with favourite artists and songs show that live music provides a unique opportunity for people to engage with those objects of fandom, as well as with their past and present selves, within a context of collective performance and celebration. In turn, these peak music experiences form narratives that link music and identity across times and places, contributing to people’s understanding and presentation of their selves. These experiences are defined to a large extent by their rarity and the anticipation leading up to them, making them quite different to seeing local bands on a weekly or even more frequent basis, as is common in the local music scenes of Brisbane. However, at such non-celebrity performances, other factors may still create peak music experiences, as will be shown in subsequent sections of this chapter.

‘Surrounded by people’: Crowds and collective affect

A defining feature of the live music experience is the presence of an audience. Frith (1988: 7) notes that in live music we can see music in the making ‘and in the receiving – the audience was always crucial for my understanding and enjoyment of a show’. The attention, enthusiasm and exuberance of live music audiences can be as important as the musical performance itself (Pearce 2013: 7-8). Live music involves what Urry (1990) calls (in the context of tourism) the collective gaze, involving the celebration of people being together to appreciate what they are experiencing. Beyond merely witnessing an
event together, the enjoyment of live music involves a feeling that we have been ‘in the company of like-feeling people, in an ideal society which musicians and listeners have together brought into existence for that duration of time’ (Small 1987: 67; see also Hesmondhalgh 2013: 106). Live music can demonstrate the particular subjectivity of ‘the crowd’, which Henriques (2010) describes as a corporeal but collective subject, an entity that is not singular but plural or both at the same time: the one who-is-many and the many-who-are-one. This phenomenon is partly explained by music’s synchronisation of people’s sense of inner time (see DeNora 2000 as discussed in Chapter 7). Hesmondhalgh (2013: 118-9) suggests it is also explained by the primal orientation of humans toward shared experience, which he notes is recognised in Durkheim’s concept of collective effervescence and Maffesoli’s theory of neo-tribes. Bennett (1999) argues that neo-tribalism with its focus on site-specific belonging is a useful framework for understanding consumption-based youth cultures, using the example of an urban dance music event to which people bring various sensibilities and ways of participating. Within this framework, live music can be seen to offer an essential social space for identity and belonging.

The experience of being in a crowd emerges as a common element in peak live music experiences. Jill (32) cites this as the determining factor of her ‘best concert’, by the band Chic:

That was amazing. Everyone was dancing. I just wanna dance, yeah. And they just had so much energy on stage that it comes, everyone has that same energy, it’s really good.

While Jill says she wants to dance, it is important that ‘everyone’ is dancing. To dance alone is not the same as dancing in a crowd. Dancing is an especially clear example of how music orders action at a collective level, including through the shared experience of time (DeNora 2000). As Jill’s quote shows, this synchronised movement can be
experienced as the sharing of energy between performers and audience members. The sense of collective affect was also central to a peak music experience described by Tom (22):

I remember a number of years ago going out to Good Vibrations festival down the Gold Coast and seeing Nas and Damian Marley perform together. And um, being in a massive big crowd and yeah, really, really in those situations when you’re really feeling the music, like not just hearing it but, you know, feeling ah, like a physical, um, sensation of sorta rush during the peaks of certain songs and things like that. And the thing of being in a crowd when you hear the whole, you know, you feel that and then you also feel that all the people around you feel the same thing and then everyone makes noise together and you feel it rise up. Yeah very memorable experience that was, yeah.

As this quote shows, crowd members can experience collective affect as quite immediate and physical – ‘you also feel that all the people around you feel the same thing’ – although at a rational level this might only be gleaned from such evidence as noise and movement. This is the crowd as a corporeal and collective, singular and plural subject (Henriques 2010). Tom’s description of a physical rush during certain musical peaks and people making noise together illustrates again the shared sense of time created by music. These peak music experiences show that the simultaneity of liveness (Auslander 2002b) is not only between performers and audience, but also between audience members. Tom’s peak music experience, along with others in this chapter set at festivals, arenas and stadium concerts, challenges any assumption that these large-scale events and the additional kinds of mediation they involve (such as video screens and crowd control measures) prevent the experience of affective simultaneity or emotional intimacy among those present. This too is a matter of cultural preference, such as the virtue that pub bands and punk bands of the 1970s attributed to ‘bar-room’ venues and the particular kind of intimacy these
allowed and imposed (see Laing 1985: 8). By comparison, Tom’s experience and some of those described below by performers seem to be enhanced by the size of the audience.

While live music can create a sense of collective identity based on presence at a particular time and place, it also provides opportunities to celebrate existing feelings of belonging. Liz (26) described a peak music experience at a gig in which her interpretation of the musical content, her identification with the audience and her perception of unanimous passion were related:

One of the favourite gigs I’ve seen is this band Limp Wrist. There’s something that makes you, like, euphoric when you see a band like that. I don’t know, I feel like ‘cause I felt everyone in the room felt exactly the same thing because of the music. It was like, super unique, crazy-fast, Latin-inspired hardcore with queer-focused and uplifting lyrics. And it’s a packed room of people that, lots of people that I knew who had travelled interstate for this show. Lots of gay people, lots of women. So there’s like a hundred people in a moshpit and totally like, not violent but just like pummelling into each other out of like, aggressive passion. And that’s like a part of the music as well. I like, almost passed out in that moshpit. […] That was one of the last times I’ve like, stayed in the moshpit for like that long. And came out all battered and bruised and my glasses were broken and everything. It was really great, I did not regret.

For Liz, this experience involved the celebration of existing ideas of community, based on friendship as well as gender and sexuality, as well as a shared affective experience with ‘a hundred people in a moshpit’ and indeed, ‘everyone in the room’. This illustrates how live music is a site for both the consolidation and formation of social connections.

The peak music experiences described by performing musicians also depend to a large extent on the audience. The experience of performing to an especially large crowd is often a memorable one, occurring for example at festivals:
Lisa, 34: And then another kind of amazing show was the first Big Day Out that [we] did, I think it was in 2008. […] The third time I played [the song] was in front of 30,000 people and when I started playing that intro, the whole audience just erupted and my hand started shaking (laughs). So that was really affecting, ‘cause that was an instant reaction from the audience that was crazy.

Nathan, 35: It was the last rap of the thing and there was like three thousand people, could have been ten thousand I don’t know, it was a lot of people. […] Yeah just the full energy of like three to ten thousand people, whatever it was, knowing the lyrics that I was rapping.

Lisa’s story shows the experience of simultaneity from the performer’s perspective, when an audience responds immediately to musical cues. Nathan’s quote includes another use of the term ‘energy’ to describe his experience of rapping to, and with, thousands of people. As discussed earlier, these are examples of collective, affective intensity at large scales. Crucially, both of these examples describe a crowd that is not only large but engaged. In the peak music experiences of performers, the most important feature of the crowd is that it is receptive to the music being performed. This collective energy can be produced in much smaller audiences with physical intimacy playing a role, as the following example from hip hop musician Tom (22) shows:

The place was packed, everyone was within about half a metre from us, we were crammed in the corner, outside onto the street we had the windows open, the whole crowd was blocked up and the music, the feelings of that, probably one of the most memorable shows for me because everyone was going nuts. It just drove the energy, everyone was, you know it felt like we were all sort of one at that time. Which is pretty crazy.

This quote also demonstrates that the collective subjectivity or ‘oneness’ of the crowd can be felt by performers as well as audiences.
Across popular music genres, live music is seen to hold the potential for an experience of reciprocal exchange between performers and audiences. Musicians are quick to point out that a memorable live performance is not a ‘one-way thing’, as shown in the following interview excerpt from rapper, Matt (31):

There was lots of people there and they loved the music and there was people singing along, rapping lyrics, and lots of familiar faces in the crowd and everybody just really, really felt like we were together. I mean, you know they use the term, “You feel like you have the crowd in the palm of your hand”, which is how it felt, but I don’t think that term’s quite adequate ‘cause it kinda sounds as if it’s just a one-way thing, like “I’ve got them”, but it’s not like that at all, it’s like they feed back.

This exchange of energy is enacted in quite different ways across different musical styles and settings. This is shown in two contrasting peak music experiences described by Holly (26), a regular attendee of local gigs. The first example involves a raucous performance by a guitar and drums dance-punk duo:

I went to this, like, house party in East Brisbane and DZ Deathrays were playing there and I’d never heard of them and found out that they were big later. But they had kind of set themselves up in the middle of the lounge room and then people were just going psychotic, all around them and, yeah, I dunno I just thought that was really cool, it felt really like… a mutual process, you know they were really like getting off on just being surrounded by people who were getting off on their music, you know? It felt really like symbiotic, it was awesome.

The second example involves another ‘house show’ of subdued, folk-style solo performances to a seated audience, which is where I met Holly:

I loved that. I think what struck me the most was how vulnerable I felt that the artists were, and made themselves. And I kind of felt as soon as I walked into that
house and into that room, I felt like it was a really, um, like warm and, just really like non-judgmental space. And I just felt everyone like, enter that room and just kind of be really, feel really comfortable with themselves. And I felt that with the artists as well. And I think that’s why they felt like they could be a bit, you know experimental and try songs that they didn’t have down fully, and it just felt really supportive and respectful. I just felt there was so much respect for the artists and so much gratitude that they were choosing to share that. [...] I felt like there was kind of a shared vulnerability.

While these two live music experiences involved quite different styles of music and physical activity, each was made special for Holly by her sense of an affective exchange among the performers and audience, creating a particular kind of affective space in which to feel and act. The metaphor of symbiosis and the claim of ‘shared vulnerability’ suggest that in a live music event, the sense of collective subjectivity can extend not only to fellow audience members, or fellow performers, but to all participants. Such descriptions of shared affect and subjectivity, which are not uncommon in relation to live music, stand in contrast with Auslander’s (2002a: 57) idea of a gap between performer and ‘spectator’. He asserts that while live performance ‘places us in the living presence’ of performers ‘with whom we desire unity’, it reasserts ‘the unbridgeable distinction between audience and performance [and] foregrounds its own fractious nature and the unlikelihood of community in a way that mediatised representations, which never hold out the promise of unity, do not’. On the contrary, in many of the peak music experiences described by both performers and audience members, these roles remain clear but are transcended by a community of shared feeling or energy. While this experience is temporary by nature, it may nevertheless inform enduring ideas about relationships, such as the sense of belonging to a scene (see Chapter 9) or, as Jill (26) said with regard to her attendances at
multiple concerts by Radiohead and Belle and Sebastian, ‘getting old together’ with favourite artists and fellow fans.

The other departure from Auslander’s remarks is that among the Brisbane music scene participants who took part in this study, experiences of collective affect are claimed far more often in situations of physical presence than in more distantly mediated representations. The connection between physical and emotional interaction is especially clear in Holly’s description of the ‘psychotic’ DZ Deathrays lounge room audience and Liz’s recollection of the Limp Wrist mosh pit, which recall Shank’s (1994) observations about the punk scene in Austin, Texas. He states (ibid: 125):

The importance of this intense bodily stimulation cannot be over-emphasized. […] Within this fluid stream of potential meanings, the audience and the musicians together participate in a nonverbal dialogue about the significance of the music and the construction of their selves. Gestures of the performer contribute directly to the meaning of the musical experience, generating and being generated by corresponding physical responses in the listeners.

These physical cues can also be identified in less physically intense styles of interaction, for example in Jill’s experience of an energy exchange between funk band Chic and their dancing audience, and in Holly’s enjoyment of the supportive and respectful space created by a seated audience in a folk-style house show. The contribution of collective bodily action to the experience and meaning of music helps to explain the special status of live music events.

Peak live music experiences show that the experience of physical and affective community among audiences and performers is valued across popular music genres, emerging as a defining ideal of live music. These are occasions when desired social relationships are performed and experienced, including relationships between audience members, between performers, between both, between individuals and the world, and
between individuals and their selves over time. Such peak music experiences are remembered in narratives of belonging and identity. Live music features significantly among the experiences of motivation discussed in Chapter 6 and, as the discussion in this section has shown, the uniquely collective nature of live music experiences is important for many people. The affective space produced by these collective interactions enables particular experiences and expressions of individual identity, which are considered in the following section.

‘In the moment’: Experiencing and expressing feelings with live music

It is apparent from the preceding sections of this chapter that while various factors contribute to peak music experiences in the live setting, these ideal live experiences share a particular quality, namely an abundance of feeling. As observed in various literature outlined at the start of this chapter, participation in live and collective musical events involves the desire for an extraordinary and transcendent experience. Indeed, at least some fans consciously evaluate live performances by the feelings they engender. Ken (58), who reported seeing hundreds of live music events over several decades, judged his favourites as those where he was ‘lifted’ or ‘elevated’. Similarly, when regular live music goer Peter (52) was asked if any recent gigs stood out, he explained: ‘The way I make this judgment is, how did I feel immediately after that gig, and how did I feel for like a week or two after it’. These criteria recognise the afterglow of a peak live music experience. The special status of live music is based to a large extent on its enhancement of music’s affordances for the exploration and ordering of emotion. As noted earlier, this experiential promise is used in the marketing of concerts and festivals in the experience economy (Pearce 2013).

A particular kind of experience that is valued by live music participants is that of being ‘in the moment’ and descriptions of this experience resemble the state that
psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly (1975) describes as ‘flow’ (see Chapter 2). The many stories told by musicians about experiences of flow are exemplified in the following quote from rock guitarist and singer Alicia (34):

I can think of a recent [gig] we played in Adelaide where it just, like we’d had a really bodgy [sic] one the night before and just everything felt like it was happening without you having to be present for it. And the crowd sort of, maybe we were giving that off, but they were just with us from the start […] Sometimes you just get in there and you’re feeling it and they just want it as well and off it goes. But the moments that are memorable, I can’t even remember the gigs for it, it’s just that lost, that foggy moment thing you get as a player. Where you’re hyper-aware and unaware of what you’re doing and why you’re doing it. You almost sort of log out. Sometimes when [the other singer] and I will hit a certain harmony I just feel like I’m sort of lost in the atmosphere for a second.

Such states of flow are celebrated as peak music experiences. This echoes Shank’s (1994: 126) finding that Austin rock musicians most value ‘magical’ shows where they do not have to think and experience a holistic feeling. While musicians make various efforts to achieve this state using intoxicants, preparation and rituals, the arrival of flow is ultimately regarded as an unpredictable instance of music’s power. For audience members, simply watching and listening to live music can induce a narrowing of attention and loss of self-consciousness, as Holly (26) described:

I remember going on one date […] and we went and saw this band at Black Bear Lodge. And I remember just kind of sitting on the floor and, um, yeah was just really like zoned in on the music and just absolutely loving them and I can’t even remember the band’s name but I remember thinking, “These guys are incredible”. And then after a while just becoming aware of [my date] like looking at me and smiling at me and watching me just being like: (mimes open-mouthed expression,
laughs) and then that just kinda turned into a really nice moment and it just, I realised how kind of, yeah, authentic I was in that moment.

Holly recalls being unaware of her surroundings and her own appearance while she ‘zoned in’ on the music of the band she was watching, demonstrating music’s capacity to enthral and the absorbing, active nature of listening. While it is shown in other chapters that people can engage deeply with recorded music, the live setting directs people’s full attention toward music by way of complementary sensory input, social conventions and a lack of competing demands. It follows that the relatively single-minded setting of live music is conducive to experiences that approach the state of flow.

Holly’s claim that she was ‘authentic’ while she was unselfconsciously absorbed demonstrates how live music is understood as a setting for the experience and expression of particular versions of one’s self. By creating a space apart from everyday life, defined instead by the temporary performance of ideal social relations (Small 1998) and sensual immersion in music, the live setting enables people to explore alternative or ideal selves through uncommon physical and emotional expression. In an especially colourful example, hip hop musician Cam (40) spoke of dancing experiences in which he could see music and move at superhuman speed:

I’ve had these experiences that when you’re dancing inside the dance bubble, with the sound bubble, and you combine ‘em - that takes a bit of time to do, you don’t just get there, you’ve gotta work it, warm up your body and all that - but when they link up, then I feel like I can slow time down, or time distorts. Alright? And when I feel like time is distorting, like this is gonna be out there, but I’ve actually felt time stop, with dancing and listening. Really intense, I can’t describe it. […] I’ve actually felt myself stop time and move within metres, and it starts up again it’s like “Whoa, how’d I do that!” It freaks people out, freaks myself out.
Less fantastically, performers often speak of succeeding at musical or physical manoeuvres while they are ‘in the moment’ that they might not otherwise attempt, including risky group improvisations and acrobatic moves. Cam also described performing experiences in which he seemed to control the movements of audience members with his singing:

I feel like I’m building an energy. My voice can go inside a human body and make parts of their body - I’ve actually done freaky things with my vocals. Like go, “Tiki-dee tiki-doo didi-dee didi-da”, like that with a beat, and the girls were going [moves body rhythmically to that beat] and I’d go [makes vocal sounds that slow down and speed up] and their bodies would go [collapses then comes back up]. And they’re looking like, “How did you do that?” And I go, “I don’t know but that was rad!”

The stories told by Cam make especially bold claims about musical affect. However, other people’s peak music experiences demonstrate wide support for the idea that live music can, at least, permit or encourage a loss of normal inhibitions for audience members. Jim (44) elaborated on this from an audience member’s perspective:

I’ve done some absolutely nutso shit as an audience member. I remember being so caught up in a gig by an Adelaide band called King Daddy that when the singer, a guy called Nazz, was talking about the merch they had, how it was twenty bucks for a CD or something, I was down the front and I retrieved twenty dollars from my wallet and I stuck it down his pants. And that was the kind of showman that Nazz was too, he was completely out there and sticking twenty bucks down his pants was completely appropriate to that show, I swear. Um, what else. I remember seeing a gig by the Vegas Kings […] there wasn’t enough room to dance down the front at Ric’s but there was a speaker stack, so I got on top of the speaker stack and I was just going nuts on top of this speaker stack, dancing like
crazy. I mean obviously I couldn’t move too far ‘cause I would’ve fallen off. The security guard was keeping a close eye on me but there I was. What else. Yeah, I kinda got into stage-diving a bit again recently too, when I was probably drinking a little bit too much and I realised that I don’t bounce quite the way that I used to and I came up with very sore ribs, so I thought I’d better stop that.

As Jim suggests, a range of conduct is considered appropriate at a live music event that would not be attempted in other situations, due to social conventions or physical caution. In particular, live music invites the uncommon performance of emotion, such as through gazing, cheering, crying and dancing. A central theme emerging from peak live music experiences is that live music creates a space in which people can experience and express alternative identities, such as a more powerful, confident, emotional or demonstrative self and perhaps a more authentic self, accompanied by a strong sense of belonging to a like-minded collective. This accords with Gilbert and Pearson’s (1999: 106) observation that on the dancefloor, ‘the transformation of ordinary codes of physical and verbal interaction [is] experienced by many as a life-changing experience which encourages and enables new relationships to the body of both self and other/s’. The anticipation and celebration of this space through peak music experiences shows that it is a significant reason why the live setting is idealised by music fans.

**Conclusion**

Peak music experiences involving live music present a number of factors as important. The variety of these factors demonstrates the multiple, multi-sensorial elements of musical experience, which can be identified in any setting but which are brought to people’s attention most clearly in live music. As a result, the live setting invites deep and committed engagement with music and, in turn, reveals meanings, similarities and differences in music and people. This goes some way to explaining why the live context
is regarded as ideal for musical experience and gives rise to the greatest number of peak music experiences. By creating a collective focus on music and co-presence, live music enables collective values to be communicated and explored through the actions of all who are involved. For individuals, live music permits the experience and expression of extraordinary feelings and therefore enables the exploration of alternative or ideal identities. Peak live music experiences show that music fans anticipate and celebrate these affordances and valourise live music as a result. It is apparent that the cultural value of live music and its subsequent economic value stem partly from its capacity to produce particularly affecting and meaningful experiences. This contributes to the understanding of live music’s social value, which has been identified as an important but under-researched question for policy development (Behr et al 2012; Frith 2012). Further, considering live performance as an ideal setting for music provides insights into the power of music more generally. In the music scenes under investigation, live peak music experiences can be understood as ‘peaks among peaks’, demonstrating most clearly the reasons why people engage with music and rate it as important.
Chapter 9
Scenes and peak music experiences: Collective memories and aesthetics

Peak music experiences are intensely personal. They involve subjective responses to uniquely embodied and situated encounters with music and, as shown in Part I, they contribute to the production of individual identities. However, music is known and valued for its capacity to generate shared experience, as the previous two chapters have demonstrated in different ways. Accordingly, while there is always a reflexive aspect to peak music experiences, they can also have a communal aspect. Alicia (34), a rock ‘n’ roll guitarist, described some of her memorably ‘amazing’ moments as a performer in the following terms:

Just that you kind of know you’re lost to it and, if you can have the moment to glance up, you know that the majority of people there are too. And it sort of takes, it’s not even about sound or anything at that point, everyone’s sort of given themselves up to that exact moment. Those bits are not always easy to catch if you’re not in that space yourself.

Besides echoing some of the points made about live music in Chapter 8, this quote gives voice to the idea of a musical ‘moment’ as something that can be shared, though not necessarily by everyone, thus creating an inside and an outside. Some people might give themselves up to a particular moment, while others might not even catch it if they are not in that ‘space’. In this way, peak music experiences can indicate a form of belonging. As in Chapter 8 and on the surface of Alicia’s quote, this might mean belonging to the temporally and physically bounded collectivity of a live music audience. However, Alicia’s point that musical moments are not always easy to catch, but require a certain orientation, highlights the importance of what the individual brings to their encounter with music, in the live setting or elsewhere. Accordingly, peak music experiences can be
indicative of more enduring forms of belonging. This chapter will consider how they are an important aspect of collective identity in music scenes.

People’s peak music experiences reveal what they value most in musical experience, by definition and as demonstrated across the foregoing chapters. By comparison of these experiences across Brisbane’s dance, hip hop, indie and rock ‘n’ roll music scenes, it will be shown that clusters of shared ideals emerge. The specific findings in this regard are consistent with existing literature that uses ethnographic research to identify the defining aspects of the trans-local dance (eg Malbon 1999, Riley et al 2010), hip hop (Mitchell 2003) and indie (Fonarow 2006) scenes (although rock ‘n’ roll does not align easily with any similar bodies of scholarly work, as will be discussed). However, using the lens of peak music experiences provides a new perspective on how scene participants identify with and reproduce collective values and therefore belong to scenes. This approach shows that the defining values and practices of the four scenes under consideration are bound up with embodied experiences of music, highlighting the emotional and sensual dimensions of scene identity. Scene participants are aware of their affinity for scene values and therefore their belonging to the scene, partly through the strong feelings produced by musical experiences. Accordingly, this study contributes to the understanding of affective scene belonging (Bennett 2013), as well as the operation of collective memory as a crucial aspect of music scenes (Bennett and Rogers 2016). It will be shown that the scenes in question can be understood partly as shared concepts of ideal experience, which are expressed and reproduced through peak music experiences as they are felt, remembered and described by participants. This manifests in ongoing scene practice as a common search for experience and a common way of experiencing. Peak music experiences thus contribute to an ‘ethic of the aesthetic’ (Maffesoli 1991) in these music scenes. This theoretical framework will be discussed in the following section.
Music scenes, collective memory and the ethic of the aesthetic

The scholarly concept of music scene, as discussed in Chapter 2, can be distinguished from the concepts of community, place and genre, although each of these can play a part in a scene. According to Straw’s (1991: 373) influential definition, a scene is a ‘cultural space’ in which a range of musical practices may coexist and interact, within various processes of differentiation and according to varying trajectories of change. Consistently with this description, a substantial amount of subsequent research has identified local, trans-local and virtual dimensions to music scenes, which overlap and interact (Peterson and Bennett 2004). All of these forms of scene are apparent throughout the preceding chapters. While the fieldwork for this project was focused on Brisbane, the research participants situated their musical tastes and practices within trans-local contexts and many described the use of virtual spaces in this regard. The central concept of peak music experiences relates most closely to the concept of affective scene, which refers to a shared sense of sceneness between individuals who are not directly visible to each other, but knowingly consume the same music and related media and above all, make ‘a similar sort of sense out of what they are hearing, reading and watching, based on their shared generational memories and cultural experience of that music’ (Bennett 2013: 60). This chapter considers how peak music experiences, as shared ideals and frames for making sense of musical experience, play a role in affective scene membership as an aspect of more physically interactive local music scenes.

One way in which affective scene belonging has begun to be explored is through the study of collective and cultural memory. The concept of collective memory, as developed in the 1920s by sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992), recognises that individual memories are constructed through and for group contexts, while groups maintain continuity and cohesion through the mutually supportive recollections of their members. From Halbwachs’s focus on the mediation of memory through everyday
communication, the concept has expanded to include cultural memory, in which cultural objects and practices carry the meaning of collective experiences through time and have formative and normative roles in group identity (Assmann & Czaplicka 1995). Individual memory and identity is constructed using these group frameworks and individual biographies are located in relation to collective stories. According to Bennett and Rogers (2016), much of the existing popular music scene literature tends to avoid the predominant past-tense and memory-based nature of the relationship between scenes and participants. They argue that as the articulation of music scenes in the present is often based on past events, ideas and histories, cultural memory is a primary concern for the study of music scenes. Based on studies of music scenes in Australian cities, including Brisbane, they show that the cultural memory of past places, people and events, maintained largely through personal, informal archives and interactions rather than institutional settings, is a major part of scene identity and shapes current practice.

This chapter will show how peak music experiences further illuminate the interaction of individual and collective memory, as an important aspect of scene identity and belonging. The focus here is not on the commemoration of collectively significant objects or events from the past, although peak music experiences could shed light on how individual memories of these objects and events interact with cultural memory. Instead, as in previous chapters (especially Chapter 4), the focus is on how individual memories of musical experience, though often quite personal, are constructed and communicated using cultural forms. According to Halbwachs (1992: 43), no memory is possible outside of social frameworks, while Eyerman (2004: 161) states that isolated individuals are reunited with the group by locating their narrative within the collective frame. Putting these two observations together, it can be seen that every individual memory is to some extent an act of identification. Accordingly, individuals’ memories of their peak music experiences are an expression of belonging, including in relation to music scenes as
considered in this chapter. The remembrance of particular musical experiences as personally important reveals priorities, which align an individual with particular collective values. In turn, the stories that people tell about their peak music experiences contributes to the communicative reproduction of those collective values.

As well as structuring narratives of the past, peak music experiences guide and frame action in the present. As shown in Chapter 6, they provide ongoing motivation for scene participation, including as representations of ideals that are pursued through various forms of activity. The following sections of this chapter will show that the peak music experiences of scene participants reveal shared ideals of musical experience, which are specific to each of the Brisbane music scenes under consideration. These shared ideals shape collective practice, helping to define each scene. They also provide common frames for interpreting and evaluating musical experience as it occurs. As discussed in Chapter 5, affective responses to music are within discourse; they are shaped by and, in turn, shape social expectations, which in this chapter are considered as an aspect of scenes. The dance, hip hop, indie and rock ‘n’ roll scenes of Brisbane are partly defined by preferred ways of experiencing music, as epitomised by peak music experiences. A useful theoretical framework for this form of belonging is Maffesoli’s (1991) ethic of the aesthetic, referring to a common faculty of feeling and experiencing that binds a group. This aesthetic, which is not a transcendental concept of beauty but a collective production, cannot be summed up as a question of good or bad taste nor of content, but the way in which the collective sense is experienced and expressed (Maffesoli 1996: 85). Accordingly, this is a useful concept for describing how music scenes that are not limited by clear musico-stylistic or physical boundaries might instead be held together by a shared framework for understanding and evaluating musical experience. As an ‘ethic’, or value system, the ethic of the aesthetic imposes no obligation other than being a member by sharing it, and no sanction other than being excluded should the shared interest end.
This concept is a part of Maffesoli’s (1996) broader theory of neo-tribal sociality, involving fluid identifications based on shared emotions instead of future-oriented, rational projects. Neo-tribal theory has been taken up in post-subcultural studies of popular music consumption, especially in relation to dance music culture (e.g., Bennett 1999; Malbon 1999; Riley et al. 2010). However, while scenes have been identified alongside neo-tribes as key post-subcultural concepts (Bennett 2011), the specific theoretical links between the two have not been explored. As outlined above and demonstrated by the findings presented in this chapter, the ethic of the aesthetic, which is a lesser-used but arguably central aspect of Maffesoli’s neo-tribal theory, usefully describes important aspects of an affective music scene, which is a recent but growing aspect of scene theory (Bennett 2013). Accordingly, this begins to map at least some shared ground between the contemporaneous theories of neo-tribes and scenes. The following sections of this chapter show through empirical analysis how peak music experiences exemplify the aesthetics that underpin belonging in the dance, hip hop, indie and rock ‘n’ roll music scenes in Brisbane.

**Brisbane scenes and styles**

At least at first, many interview participants struggled or declined to identify with a ‘scene’. Their answers suggested that contrary to academic use of the term, they understood it to refer to a fixed community defined by a specific musical genre. However, the scholarly conception of scenes is appropriate for the more fluid and loosely bounded collective settings in which their musical practice took place. Some participants said that they felt like part of a community oriented around particular venues or key people, but often there was a lack of exclusive commitment to one music-based social network or, especially, one musical genre. Many expressed an omnivorous approach to genre in both their private and public musical activity, as typified in the following quotes.
Ken, 58 (former punk musician, former radio DJ): I would say that I enjoy all music except for opera.

Ivy, 29 (guitarist and singer): It was something I really struggled with when I was younger, because I never really fitted into one of the scenes. Like I always loved experimental music, so I would go to those shows, and I loved punk and hardcore music so I would go to those shows, and I would go to, you know, indie shows as well. I guess to me it’s just a banner of underground music. But also, I could float in between them which is what I wanted. I don’t like the idea of being stuck in the same, ah, same scene or same movement of music or whatever.

As Ivy’s description of a ‘banner of underground music’ demonstrates, the downplaying of stylistic divisions tended in many cases to play up the idea of an overall Brisbane scene, particularly at the ‘underground’ level in the sense of small-scale, overtly alternative music. This is consistent with Bennett and Rogers’s (2016: 113) contention, based on their research in Brisbane and other Australian cities, that scenes are not necessarily clustered around specific genres but may be categorised under broad headings such as ‘independent’ or ‘alternative’, especially in ‘peripheral cities with smaller populations, where the boundaries between the audiences for given music styles are more porous’. In comparing Brisbane to other places for musical activity, there was a widely expressed view that the Brisbane music scene is especially ‘multicultural’, as musician and recording engineer Barry (32) put it. This was consistently attributed to Brisbane’s relatively small size and peripheral location, resulting in a limited audience and range of venues, compared to the larger cities of Melbourne and Sydney. For example, Lucy (35, singer and keyboardist) explained that she felt a connection to dance music and did not ‘like guitar bands at all’, but frequently shared bills with them as ‘it’s kind of Brisbane sometimes, you can’t choose, you know’. Other participants professed to enjoy this stylistic diversity, both as performers and audience members. Within this perspective,
musical genre and style are sometimes described as evolving elements within a broader scene, as illustrated in the following excerpt from an interview with members of two different electronic music groups:

Jane, 26 (keyboardist and singer): I remember when we first started we would just be like, all the lineups [in Brisbane] would just be like one token electronic act, with like four rock bands. And now that’s the opposite.

Col, 23 (keyboardist and guitarist): Now that’s the opposite yeah, it’s like one rock band, so they can bring amps, and then a bunch of electronic bands. And it’s - it probably won’t be this way for much longer - but generally a lot more popular.

Comments like these show how a scene can be defined less by fixed tastes or practices than by a shared narrative or collective memory in which these and other elements change over time. This demonstrates the usefulness of the scene concept and, in particular, the central importance of collective memory in scene identity, as argued by Bennett and Rogers (2016). The interview responses discussed here show that the scenes in question are not necessarily defined by clear musicological boundaries, nor by fixed casts of participants. Likewise, venues in Brisbane do not tend to have a sufficient lifespan to define a scene for more than a few years. Consequently, collective memory plays a major part in the continuity of these scenes, by incorporating such changes into broader, collectively remembered narratives.

An analogous observation can be made about the presentation of individual identity by interview participants. As shown in Chapter 4, individuals may construct a coherent listening history and therefore identity by reference to disparate musical genres and sources. The same applies to the production of music, as a number of the musicians who were interviewed said they were involved in serial or simultaneous musical projects with notably varied musical styles. For example, Karl (30) had recently wound up his long-term work as a hip hop producer and rapper and commenced a new acoustic folk
project, while Lily (25) was writing and performing in an electronic hip hop and an acoustic folk group simultaneously. Liz (26) was in two bands that she respectively labelled as synth-pop and powerviolence, which is a subgenre of hardcore punk. In a number of cases, musicians described their style in hyper-specific terms, with detailed reference to subgenres or even specific musical influences, as in the following examples:

Sal, 27 (DJ): I guess probably I would describe it more as alt-hip hop but I also have crossovers with techno, and ghetto house, mainly ghetto tech.

Allie, 27 (guitarist and singer): Well I guess both of my bands are kind of pale attempts to recreate different eras of [Australian rock band] Magic Dirt’s career.11 These musicians did not define themselves by one genre, but by uniquely detailed approaches to a range of styles over time. Nevertheless, they recognised musical style as significant in various ways. Pursuing the above examples, Karl said that while he was in a hip hop group, his personal listening and gig attendance skewed towards hip hop, reducing his attention to other genres; Lily said that she found expression for different aspects of her personality in her folk and hip hop projects and observed different audiences for each, to the extent that some people have been surprised to learn of her involvement in the project that was less known to them; Liz also perceived audience divisions in respect of her two bands and harboured a desire for her synth-pop band to share a bill with a ‘quite heavy’ band, in response to which she hoped the audience would be ‘a bit confused but not too confused’. Thus, although these music scene participants did not view genre as a limiting choice, they nevertheless associated it with significant collective and personal meanings that informed their practices, relationships and identities. Also, despite the misgivings expressed by many participants, all were familiar

11 Magic Dirt was an alternative rock band formed in Geelong, Victoria and active in the 1990s and 2000s, with regular national touring and radio play. The band progressed from a ‘fuzz’-heavy sound and experimental structures to more concise pop-rock songs across a total of eight albums, so that different ‘eras’ could be identified within their career.
with and more or less able to conform to the convention of situating their listening and production practices in relation to collectively understood categories.

As discussed in Chapter 3, my intention was to recruit interview participants associated with the broad categories of dance, hip hop and indie music, and these categories proved useful in coding the interview data. Due to the participants recruited through the snowballing process and their descriptions of their practices and experiences, the additional category of rock ‘n’ roll was added. The practices of self-identification varied between these groups. People were forthcoming in using the terms hip hop, and rock ‘n’ roll, to describe their tastes, practices and associations. The category of dance music as used in this thesis was comprised of more specific and varied self-descriptions, including electronic, as well as subgenre terms referring to various forms of house, techno and beat-based music, although as discussed below there was a shared emphasis on dancing to music. Some participants used the term ‘indie’ to describe themselves, although in some cases the term was presented as inadequate or embarrassing albeit broadly useful; related terms like underground, alternative and experimental were also used. The interview data showed each of these descriptive categories to refer to a variety of musical styles and production practices, suggesting that it would be difficult to establish purely musicological distinctions between them. However, the patterns that emerged in people’s peak music experiences can be grouped according to these four categories.

Scenes as peak music experiences

As discussed in Chapter 4, particular narrative forms in the remembrance of musical experience can demonstrate belonging to a particular group, such as fans of a specific artist (as in Cavicchi 1998) or genre. Similarly, the qualities and elements emphasised in people’s descriptions of their peak music experiences reveal shared priorities within the
dance, hip hop, indie and rock ‘n’ roll scenes in Brisbane. These will now be considered in turn, using typical quotes to illustrate the way these priorities were discussed.

Dance

The naming of dance music makes especially obvious the collective search for a particular kind of experience. Unsurprisingly, interviewees’ peak music experiences involving dance music showed a substantial emphasis on the act of dancing. More specifically, people’s descriptions of these experiences prioritised dancing that is collective and ecstatic, revealing an underlying ideal of self-transcendence in collective subjectivity. This demonstrates a neo-tribal form of sociality, consistently with studies of dance music by Bennett (1999), Malbon (1999) and Riley et al (2010). However, outside of such moments, this aspect of the experience is reflected upon in more rational and projective terms, as a criterion for evaluating events and defining the identities of performers and other participants. Scene members often remembered and judged dance music events by reference to dancing and atmosphere, as shown in the following, typical interview excerpt:

Jane: I remember the first time I saw [live house music act] Holy Balm. That was amazing.

Col: That’s a great one. Tell Ben about that.

Jane: I just, I remember it was at Black Bear […] everyone was dancing, it was like heaps of people, it was a really good vibe.

This method of evaluation is explicit in the following quote from dance music event promoter, John (25), who claimed to prioritise the physical engagement of the audience above the number of paying entrants when he gauged the success of an event:

Yeah, the successful nights, I always gauge success by response of the crowd. I wasn’t really in it for the money at any time. […] Trippy Turtle saw about 60 to
70 people in. They were crammed to the front! They were up on stage, he came down off the stage and started dancing around, hands in the air, jumping around, and he told me he was like, “Mate, this was a really fun show! This was awesome!” And I was like, “Are you sure? There wasn’t a lot of people.” He was like, “I don’t care, it was awesome, it was so much fun!” So the success that I gauged was how passionate these guys were. How, you know, sort of, how engaged the crowd was. I didn’t wanna bring 200 people through the door and have 150 sitting out back in the smokers’ area, which is what happens a lot of the time, I wanna bring a hundred people through the door and put a hundred people on the dancefloor, that’s all I gave a shit about.

Speaking about another event that he did not organise, John described aspects of crowd behaviour that, along with dancing, contributed to his ideal experience:

One of the best nights I’ve ever had was not my night it was [a performance by music producer] Ten Walls […] and it was one of the most inviting, incredible, euphoric, community-oriented nights I’ve ever been around. People were just smiles all round. You’d bump into someone, they’d turn around and be like, “Yeah bro!” It was just really, really fun.

This quote further illuminates the type of atmosphere that is common to peak music experiences in the dance music scene, described by Jane as a ‘really good vibe’. This is an atmosphere in which individuals lose or transcend individuality by surrendering their bodies to the (dis)ordering effects of music and collective movement, joining a shared emotional state defined by positivity and fellow feeling (‘good vibe’, ‘fun’, ‘inviting’, ‘euphoric’). In this state, everyday boundaries are dissolved, including personal space and decorum as well as barriers between performers and audiences.

The dance music performers and DJs who were interviewed tended to prioritise the creation and maintenance of this atmosphere over other artistic concerns. Making
people dance was a well-understood part of the DJ’s job, guiding their selection and presentation of music. Similarly, live dance music performers designed sets of music to build an audience’s excitement and physical participation. However, collective dancing and the attendant ecstatic atmosphere also emerged as intrinsic rewards for performers, from their descriptions of peak music experiences. Sal (27), a dance music DJ, described two of her favourite performances in the following terms:

I think some party must have ended somewhere and a lot of people came, so it didn’t feel like the stereotypical night at the [bar] with like a bunch of hippies all sitting around outside […] I got up on the bar and was just like dancing, and all of my friends were there, and I was playing all of my favourite music […] and people were just really responsive […] it was really crowded and they all wanted to stay and they didn’t want me to stop. And that was really cool. […] And this other time, I thought it was fun playing at the Four Triple Zed [radio station fundraiser]. I really got to be more, I guess like artistic, just choose what I thought was good music and mix things that I thought would sound good. But also there was a little bit of limitation where like I did have to think about the crowd a little bit, like, I dunno, you don’t wanna be standing there playing and having no one dancing. But that to me is all a part of the skill of deejaying. You can be really self-indulgent if you want to and I totally respect that, but it feels better to have people dance.

Sal’s discussion of these peak music experiences as a DJ makes it clear that while she valued the opportunity to pursue her personal taste and artistic goals, this was made possible and indeed enjoyable for her by the engagement of the dancing crowd. Interestingly, Sal could be seen to submit to the ecstatic atmosphere through dancing on the bar, but also through the more rational process of song selection, in which she was guided and limited by the collective subjectivity but also, apparently, making conscious
and goal-oriented decisions. Thus while participants in an event might share a collective, experiential goal, their modes of participation and therefore their particular experience might differ, depending on their specific roles. The experience of a performer or organiser is further demonstrated in the following quote from Joe (32), who also described rational decision-making in service of a disindividuated, emotionally excessive sociality, for his audience as well as himself:

There was this night that I used to run […] when dubstep sort of became a big thing. And I just loved the explosiveness of the music and the way it made people just go wild and things like that. And I know it’s terrible music, but I just loved the way it made people feel, or made people react. And um, like those nights where I would be deejaying and I would have a whole room of people jumping up and down and, like I would randomly get people, which was completely against the rules, to come and stand on the DJ decks and dance, and I would buy like six or seven bottles of bubbly [sparkling wine] just to give to people and spray people. Like, just to [see], just how wild it would make people go and their reaction. Things like that was like, amazing. […] Just being able to get that reaction from them to me, being able to control that many people at once, was, yeah, like, amazing. That was, yeah, that was a great feeling. And (laughs) at the time I was super drunk and super wasted and I’m glad a lot of that was caught on footage […] because I don’t remember any of it. But I just remember how high it would make me feel.

Joe’s feeling of ‘control’, juxtaposed with intoxication and feeling ‘high’, points again to the unique experience of a performer or organiser in relation to the collectively idealised experience that guides an event. Both the collective ideals of the dance music scene, and the various, individual experiences of those ideals can be seen by analysing peak music experiences.
It can be seen from the discussion so far that the somewhat utilitarian focus on creating a particular experience in the dance music scene informs attitudes toward music itself. This is apparent in Sal’s explanation of song selection as a DJ, as well as Joe’s self-deprecating statement that the dubstep music he played was ‘terrible’ but he ‘loved the way it made people feel [and] react’, although this was probably exaggerated for conversational purposes and also an assessment made in hindsight, after the dubstep genre had passed its cultural peak. Col (23) compared post-punk, where the audience’s understanding of musical and other references would be significant, to dance music, which he considered ‘more accessible’ as ‘you can just go and have a bloody dance’. This contrasts with Malbon’s (1999) finding that, despite the utopian claims sometimes made about dance music scenes, cultural capital and identity policing could operate to exclude people, or at least to require a process of initiation and learning. Accordingly, caution must be exercised in using peak music experiences, which express individual and collective ideals, to describe fully the lived experience of a scene. However, as ideals, they are an important aspect of affective scene belonging. The values encapsulated in peak music experiences may contribute to processes of both inclusivity and exclusivity, and they may inspire individuals to persist with or against the challenging aspects of scene initiation and the limiting aspects of ongoing participation.

**Hip hop**

Studies of hip hop have emphasised that the term does not refer solely to music, but to a multi-dimensional cultural system also encompassing dance, visual art and postural/style elements (Tate 2003). These are often understood as the ‘four elements’ of hip hop, being MCing, DJing, graffiti writing and breakdancing, which originated in an urban, African American context and are articulated trans-locally, including in Australia (Mitchell 2003). Consistently with this extra-musical definition, Brisbane’s hip hop scene
participants emphasised their musical eclecticism. Musician and record label operator Tim (22) described hip hop as, ‘naturally the collage art of music’. DJ and rapper Nathan (36) said that hip hop was, ‘the best part out of all genres. So being hip hop gives me access to all music and I’m not restricted by anything […] so I can play dubstep or Frank Sinatra or whatever’. Rapper Daz (32) illustrated this sentiment with a simile: ‘Hip hop’s like pizza man, you know, you can put any different kinda topping on it. […] Same base, different topping.’ This could refer to the layering of diverse sonic elements over one of the rhythmic patterns or ‘beats’ that are standardised in hip hop. However, the consistent base for hip hop’s diverse flavours could also be seen as a particular set of values, which were claimed by interview participants more explicitly than in any other genre considered in this project, while also emerging through their descriptions of peak music experiences. The key ideals that emerged in these ways were self-expression and community.

Self-expression emerged as a prominent element of people’s peak music experiences as hip hop listeners and performers, highlighting the prioritisation of personality and honesty in the hip hop aesthetic. Fans of rapping tended to remember when they were first impressed by lyrical skill or wordplay, by reference to particular artists and the occasions when they encountered them, as well as times when they were informed or persuaded by rap lyrics (such as Lily’s story in Chapter 5 about quitting her job after hearing ‘Evaluate’ by GDP). More tellingly, local rappers in particular tended to remember the first time they heard someone rapping in an Australian accent, which was confronting for some but was ultimately understood as an authentic self-representation through the musical form. This points to the importance of authenticity in self-expression, consistently with the well-known hip hop ideal of ‘keeping it real’ (Mitchell 2003). A strong illustration of authentic self-expression as part of a peak listening experience is hip hop producer Matt’s (31) story, presented in Chapter 5, of hearing a recording of a girl in a youth detention workshop singing about love, which
‘felt realer’ than his previous experience of ‘middle-class people rappin’ about hardcore stuff’, leading to a re-evaluation of his own artistic priorities. From the perspective of a performer, Nathan, as quoted in Chapter 8, said that his greatest moment was rapping in front of thousands of people, who knew the words and rapped along with him. To have one’s words echoed by a crowd can be seen as a powerful confirmation of being heard and validated as authentic. Accordingly, there is a symmetry between the peak music experiences of performers and listeners with respect to the shared ideal of authentic self-expression.

Rappers placed an emphasis on the personal nature of their words, explaining for example that unlike in rock music, it is not common to ‘cover’ other people’s raps when beginning to perform. More often, rappers learnt and demonstrated their credentials by freestyling, a practice in which lyrics are spontaneously composed. This process of initiation is demonstrated in the following story told by Cam (40) about a moment in his teens when he was recognised as a rapper:

One day, I saw these guys, they were all having a little rap battle-off and I went, “This is my time, I’ve gotta step up”. So I did, to the guy that was actually the king rapper of the town […] and they’re looking at me like, “This guy, we’ve heard about this guy” […] And he just started going off, in my face, going, “You should stick to this, you should stick to that”, all in flow. I’m going, “Oh God”, I could feel inside of myself, “This is real. This is real.” But then I went, wait a minute, this guy’s dissing me, and I’ve loved this guy forever. He’s been a hero of mine. I don’t know why we gotta battle. So when he stopped, he looked at me going, “What are you gonna say to that?” And I said to him, how about we stop fighting and just be friends, blah blah, I don’t even know what I said but it was based on the idea of: I don’t wanna battle you, I don’t wanna take over your job, I just wanna do it, I’d rather work with you, I think you’re rad. And that
stumped him! He was like, alright! And then from that day he was like, “You’re a rapper, you’re in, you’re serious. I’m gonna make sure everyone knows that.”

This quote demonstrates how the skillful yet honest expression of personality is an ideal if not a requirement of hip hop performance. Such expression is presented as fulfilling for the performer, and believable and relatable for the listener. This suggests that underlying the common emphasis on self-expression is a particular ideal of empathetic relations between people. Hip hop fan and rapper Daz (32) explained how he and his friends first ‘listened’ to hip hop as teenagers, rather than simply ‘hearing’ it, when they found they could relate to the storytelling of influential hip hop artists Tupac Shakur, who performed as 2Pac, and Biggie Smalls, who performed as Notorious B.I.G.:

We listened to hip hop and we were hearing it, you know, but we weren’t listening to it until Tupac and Biggie came out. That’s when the five of us boys […] would just play Tupac and sit in the loungeroom and try and analyse everything he’d say. And that’s how we connected with hip hop. That’s when we knew right then that we needed to tell our story. […] I think it was Tupac and Biggie Smalls’s storytelling. I think it was their wordplay, I think it was just, you know that Biggie Smalls track ‘Juicy’, how it says “I’m outside trying to feed my daughter” [in reference to drug dealing], stuff like that. We could relate to that. We saw that through friends, kids who were having kids in high school, who were struggling. We saw that. Same with Tupac, you know, saying the struggle [sic] and saying about “living in the system” and all that stuff.

Thus for Daz, hip hop reflected his experience of ‘the struggle of Inala’, a suburb in Brisbane’s south-west. This shows how the ideal of self-expression is closely related to community identification and representation, which is the other common ideal that emerged in peak music experiences with hip hop.
Daz, who is Aboriginal, said that in his hip hop group, ‘nothing beats performing in front of our people on a NAIDOC [National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee] family day at Musgrave [Park]’, a place of significance to Aboriginal people in Brisbane. This highlights the sense of a community affirming itself through musical events. Equally, hip hop performers claimed to take pleasure in representing their communities to other people through music. Singer and rapper Cam described a performance by his band at a local festival that celebrated various Pacific cultures. This performance was especially meaningful for Cam as an opportunity for cultural representation and exchange, as described in the following quote:

Three songs in particular, one was ‘Point the Bone’ which is basically cursing all these people that are thinking selfishly and monetary-wise, they’re destroying the world so I point the bone at them. Another song called ‘Reggae Bounce’, which is based on when I went to New Zealand and feeling a different vibration. So it was like, “This is a song I wrote about being over in your world, so thank you for that, here’s what I’ve got”. And then another one was like this signature song, which is ‘Shake A Leg’, based on, “This is what our culture is about”, in a modern context, yeah? So doing that, in that performance, and I made sure I spoke to the people and I basically said look, I don’t care what my country says or my politicians say about this, but I welcome you here. You guys are welcome here because I understand, and sing about it, we know that the islands are flooding. So yeah, that’s where I believe that music has a stronger word than politics.

Outside of the performer’s perspective, the sense of community feeling and collective pride idealised in hip hop experiences is well illustrated in Daz’s memory of a local concert by United States hip hop group, Bone Thugs-n-Harmony. Daz met the group members before their sold-out concert and took the opportunity to present them with hats emblazoned with the postcode of Inala, 4077:
I got there, I gave ‘em the hats, they wore the hats onstage. Representing my ‘hood, Inala. So they wore 4077 hats and they were onstage. Just being backstage and watching people from my community in the crowd, seeing their reactions, like, “How the heck did they get them hats?” It was just game, set and match for me. This is what we live for, moments like these.

To represent one’s place in the community through words and other symbols, such as the hats described above, is to ‘signify’, an important practice in hip hop (Mitchell 2003). In peak music experiences associated with the Brisbane hip hop music scene, it is possible to observe the closely related ideals of self-expression and community representation. This is consistent with existing studies of hip hop music culture. However, a focus on peak music experiences highlights how these ideals are embodied and understood through strongly felt and memorable experiences that inspire initial connections, influence modes of scene participation and motivate ongoing practices.

**Indie**

Just as the term ‘dance music’ emphasises a particular activity as a defining aspect of musical genre, ‘indie’ points most clearly to a definitive value system. The ideological aspects of indie have been the focus of scholarly commentary, noting that it is ‘positioned at the intersection of various aesthetic, social and commercial phenomena’ (Hibbett 2005) and encompasses a ‘mixed bag of practical, historical and aesthetic ideologies’ (Rogers 2008). As the name derived from ‘independent’ suggests, it is centrally defined by way of opposition to the economic and aesthetic values of a perceived mainstream, which makes it a stylistically evolving genre. As with punk, the term has become associated with specific sonic elements associated with its original manifestations in the 1980s, such as ‘jangly’ guitars and overtly basic production values (Bennett 2001; Bannister 2006). However, especially in this century, indie has been defined partly by eclecticism,
embracing exotic, often non-Western musics and even commercial pop with ‘varying degrees of irony and revision’ (Rogers 2008). Accordingly, Hibbett (2005) focuses on indie rock as a field of knowledge which distinguishes itself from mass culture in a similar way to the Bourdieusian formulation of high art. Based on his review of popular music literature, he concludes that indie ‘opens up vast space for the management of power and the manufacturing of identities: purposes far removed from the innocuous pleasures of listening’ (ibid: 57). However, ethnographic studies have concluded that this is not the whole story, finding that pleasure and, more broadly, emotion are central to indie music. Fonarow’s (2006: 30, 196) United Kingdom-based study argues that like Romanticism, indie ‘valorises emotion as the wellspring of meaning’, and like Puritanism its obsessive opposition stems from a central focus on ‘how an audience can have the purest possible experience of music’. The Brisbane indie music scene is described by Rogers (2008: 645) as ‘a small, informal but close-knit network of people motivated first and foremost by the desire for intensified leisure’. Based on his research among hobbyist musicians, Rogers finds that the drive for distinction is only an aspect of their more fundamental quest for feelings of meaning and belonging, involving ‘pleasurable engagements with music as a creative canon [...] and as a social binding agent’ (ibid: 646). Consistently with this literature, the analysis of peak music experiences among Brisbane indie scene participants reveals common ideals of difference, exploration and intimacy. Further, and significantly in the context of the above debate, this research perspective shows that these values are inseparable from the embodied pleasures of engaging with music.

The valourisation of difference, usually in comparison to a perceived mainstream, is most clearly apparent in those peak music experiences involved in the personal histories discussed in Chapter 4. As shown there, interview participants who identified themselves with indie (albeit often through alternative terms) tended to present narratives in which their taste progressed away from the mainstream and toward increasingly obscure music
and artists. These narratives were anchored by peak music experiences that illuminated new directions, described in Chapter 4 as ‘gateway experiences’. These experiences highlight the idealisation of difference in itself, as demonstrated in the following quote from indie fan and musician Pete (33) about watching Sonic Youth perform at the Livid Festival in 1998:

[There were] a lot of people there but it was an interesting kind of experience because, you know a third of them were just having their minds blown and I was in that third but another, you know, another third were wishing that they’d play something from Goo [1990, Sonic Youth’s first major-label album and a commercial high-point], and then another third were just there for a look and were just going, ‘What the fuck is going on?’, because it was this sort of, amazing, like my feeling from that was just going, ‘I have no idea what they’re doing’. Like it was just like, just, it was, I’m sure the acid was helping but it just seemed like they were kind of from a place that none of the other bands at that festival were from […] I think that at a certain point, that difference was what I came to really value as a criteri[on] in music.

This quote illustrates the academic understanding of indie as an oppositional or at least separatist culture, distinguishing itself and participants from mainstream artists, music and audiences. However, this quote also exemplifies the presentation of this affinity for difference as strongly felt, rather than rationally calculated. Pete claimed that he found the Sonic Youth performance amazing because it was bewildering, thus foregoing the opportunity to present his response as evidence of superior taste and knowledge, whether innate or learned. His visceral, non-rational experience of difference continued when the community radio station 4ZZZfm, heard in the cab home, played more of Sonic Youth’s music:
‘Anagrama’? Yeah, those kind of, SYR [record label on which the band self-released a series of experimental works] kind of um, yeah lengthy noise improvisations, and I was just, still sort of buzzing along, and I got out of the cab and sat in my car, for like an hour, just having this really intimate kind of experience of noise, really, for the first time. Yeah I think that evening was really pivotal in a lot of ways to the way that I, what I became hungry for, and what I enjoyed, and, you know I think that came into – I guess it was like moving away from form and, you know, pop writing and song structure, and getting more into texture.

In this story, Pete presents his interest in non-traditional, non-mainstream music as very much motivated by the so-called ‘innocuous pleasures of listening’ that Hibbett (2005: 57) describes as distant from power and identity management. Indeed, Pete claims that this peak music experience is not the end but the cause of his taste, which is a common claim among interview participants. In this narrative, people become aware of their taste for musical difference through the strong feelings produced by musical experiences.

The prioritisation of difference is related to the emphasis within indie music culture on exploration and newness, as people seek to stay ahead of both mainstream tastes and their own previous experience. The peak music experience stories of interview participants show that for them, the search for new music is in part a search for transcendent experience. Sally (30), for example, described a youthful and continuing desire to ‘explore music and […] get to the outer limits of what was out there.’ When asked what she liked about hearing something new and different, she replied, ‘It’s kind of exciting, you know, it’s adrenaline or something,’ drawing attention once again to embodied pleasure. This is illustrated in a peak music experience described by Sally, involving a malfunctioning playback of an already outré piece of music, in a youthful context of friends and recreational drugs:
I remember one time um, we were in Byron Bay and we’d gone, like – it was in 2002, and we went down to Splendour in the Grass [music festival] and um, we were taking ecstasy as well as um, as marijuana *(laughs)* and um, we were hanging in the hotel room and we’d just smoked like, a lot, and we were actually listening to *Bitches Brew* by Miles Davis *(laughs)* funnily enough. And then after about an hour, or maybe more, we realised *(laughs)* the CD had been skipping and it was playing the same one minute, like *(laughs)* it had been, like we were just like… I dunno, you know, we just kinda thought it was an amazing one minute of music!

Through such stories, participants in the indie music scene display an immediate appreciation for music that some would find difficult. As Hibbett (2005) notes, comfort with high art concepts can be a marker of cultural capital. Importantly, however, the appreciation the participants evince is not rational but associated with direct and embodied pleasure, which is contrary to typical high art discourse. The stories emphasise feelings of surprise, bewilderment, awe and enthusiasm. It is possible that to (claim to) take physical and emotional pleasure in non-mainstream music is also a method of distinction, as it might show an innate or successfully learnt embodiment of uncommon, good taste. However, this is no reason to believe that the interview participants have fabricated their passionate claims to deeply enjoy such music and to have arranged their lives around that enjoyment. The fundamental point is that both distinction and enjoyment are discursively shaped practices, reflecting the shared aesthetic of a scene. This does not diminish their experiential reality or social significance, but helps to explain them.

As to collective musical settings, peak music experiences in the indie scene reveal a common preference for live and intimate performances. Once again, the participants tended to present narratives of personal development, in which early and inspirational experiences in the relative anonymity of music festivals led eventually to current scene experiences in more intimate contexts. As discussed in Chapter 8, the desired intimacy is
as much between audience members as between the audience and performers, as explained by Nick (27):

You could go with one friend to the Hi Fi [a large, purpose-built, licensed venue] and just watch the show and not talk to anyone, or you could go to something at the Waiting Room [a small, unlicensed, venue in a house] and know a whole lot of people and talk to them.

Rogers (2008: 644) notes that this is partly a necessity of music-making within the scene, as ‘face-to-face informal networking gatekeepers and governs the indie live circuit’, or as one of his interviewees says, ‘You’ve got to go to gigs to get gigs’. However, this intimate community is also an end in itself, as Nick for example claims to enjoy ‘meeting the people, going to the gigs and, you know, swappin’ stories, swappin’ songs’. The intimacy valued in the indie scene also appears as a space in which to experience and express uncommon and personal emotions through musical experience. This is exemplified in Holly’s description of a peak music experience involving her attendance at a ‘house show’ (see Chapter 8), in which she perceived a ‘shared vulnerability’ in the musical performance and the audience response. This is consistent with Fonarow’s (2006: 364) finding that ‘an emotional feeling of community and connectedness’ between musicians and audiences is central to indie music. This emotional intimacy was an element of peak music experiences for indie performers as well, as Trish (37) explained by reference to a gig that was a turning point for her:

Any house show I’ve done has just been very essential I think. Just being involved as an audience member and performer. I remember for my album launch a couple of years ago I played at the Toff in Town, which is great, it’s a bigger venue for me in another city [Melbourne], and it was fine, but then a few months later I went down and played in a tiny bookshop, and they just cleared it out, and again it’s about 60 people, and it was just a totally different thing for me, in a positive way.
And after that I just thought, “Ah, I don’t think I’ll play in venues any more! I’m just gonna do these house gigs and shopfront gigs everywhere and just spread the word on the street rather than using PR and just sidestep the machine that is”. […] I think the smaller shows are really, um, perfect on an energy exchange level.

Here, Trish links the well-known indie imperative to ‘sidestep the machine’ to a desire for a more perfect ‘energy exchange’, bearing out Fonarow’s comparison between indie and religious Puritanism in the search for more direct and meaningful experience, through the removal of unnecessary mediations. This aesthetic can be seen in relation to gentle, folk-inflected forms of indie performed by Trish, as well as more sonically and physically active forms associated with this scene.

Analysis of peak music experiences in Brisbane’s indie music scene confirm that, as reported elsewhere, participants in the scene value difference, exploration, live music and intimate community. However, these values are not solely markers of distinction and exclusivity, removed from the pleasures of listening. Instead, this perspective shows that the values and practices that define the Brisbane indie music scene are inseparable from the embodied pleasures of musical practice. Indeed, scene members become aware of their affinity for scene values like difference, exploration and intimacy, and thus their affective belonging to the scene, through the strong feelings produced by peak music experiences.

*Rock ‘n’ Roll*

The term rock ‘n’ roll is typically used in popular music literature to refer to a broad musical style developed from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, typified in its influential guitar-centred form by Chuck Berry (see for example Bradley 1992). However, the term was used specifically and emphatically by participants in this research to refer to a current, trans-local scene within the Brisbane music scene. This forthright self-
description was itself a point of difference from the other scenes, and is probably related
to the relatively clear stylistic dimensions of this scene. Guitarist and singer Tracy (39)
referred to ‘that sort of debaucherous rock ‘n’ roll sound, not a care; influenced by, you
know, the Stooges, the New York CBGBs sound [referring to an iconic venue], Sixties
garage [rock], that kinda thing.’ When describing her own rock ‘n’ roll band, she included
reference to specific musical elements, the ‘blues formula’ and ‘simple riffs’. Consistently with these descriptions, the rock ‘n’ roll scene in Brisbane was observed to
coexist most closely with the punk scene, in terms of venues, events and social groups,
and this was also noted by some interview participants. The peak music experiences that
people described with respect to this form of rock ‘n’ roll revealed shared ideals of
forthrightness, self-acceptance and communal, physical abandon.

Forthrightness refers here to both honesty and boldness, which emerged from
interviews as ideals for both the form and content of music in the rock ‘n’ roll scene. This
quality is described in terms of live performance in the following peak music experience:

Alicia (34): The Dead Moon gig at the Gabba [Hotel], a million years ago, was -
I didn’t even know the band at the time, they’re now one of my favourite bands.
But they just absolutely mesmerised me. And I haven’t really had that before, I
didn’t know a band and they just, you couldn’t move, you sort of feel paralysed.
That was special.

Interviewer: What was it about that, do you think?

Alicia: I’d just never seen anything like it. It was just so unashamed and forthright
and they don’t care how they play, their songs are classics. Dunno, I really
couldn’t even tell you. You must be hearing that a lot, “I couldn’t even tell ya!”

Alicia elaborated on these qualities when considering how her taste in music may have
influenced her personal values:
I can’t say how but I definitely came to find in sort of punk and rock ‘n’ roll some kind of honesty. Like for all the bullshit and bravado some of it will have, that raw, I’m gonna tell you exactly what’s going on, sorta thing. I don’t know, I guess just the liberty to express whatever. That’s as close as I can come to pinning that down.

As Alicia states here, bravado in rock ‘n’ roll is coupled with rawness, involving the honest and even vulnerable acceptance of the self, often through hardship. In this regard the subject matter, performance tropes and musical limitations of rock ‘n’ roll are complementary. The open expression of vulnerability and struggle was a defining feature of Jim’s (44) peak music experience when he saw a favourite local rock ‘n’ roll band, HITS, for the first time:

[The singer] was onstage, dressed to the nines in this beautiful burgundy suit that of course is long since trashed and he’s probably never been able to wear since. […] And they had two women in the band, that was really important. The women were playing guitar, both of them, they weren’t playing bass, they weren’t playing supportive roles, they were actually the ones that were kinda blasting off on either side of the stage. And then you had a male singer […] who was projecting all of his insecurities and all of his demons from the stage, being backed by a male rhythm section. The men were playing the supportive roles and expressing all of their vulnerability while the women were just kind of -

Elly [another interview participant]: Firing off. (Laughs)

J: Just firing off each other.

In this exemplary rock ‘n’ roll experience, the singer’s performance and lyrics represent the honest expression of vulnerability while the ‘blasting’, ‘firing’ guitars represent boldness, adding an almost celebratory edge to the themes of complaint and acceptance. The same combination of qualities can be seen in Allie’s statement, as quoted in Chapter
6, that it was ‘life affirming’ to see a band that was ‘just as messed up and fucked up as I am […] doin’ fuckin’ great’. The ideal of persistence through hardship is illustrated quite practically in the following memory of rock ‘n’ roll musician, Rick (49), concerning a gig he attended:

When I was a teenager and the QUT campus club used to be Wednesday nights, the Celibate Rifles were playing there, they had a fucking car accident on the way up here. There were two cars, one of the cars went off the road, two of the guys were in hospital in a really bad way. So the Celibate Rifles played as a three-piece and they charged three-fifths of the door price to get in. And that stuck in my head as being one of the coolest things that I’ve ever seen in my life. It was like, fuck, the show must go on.

This story illustrates the tendency to experience rock ‘n’ roll performance as heroic, in terms of its direct self-expression, radical self-acceptance and dogged endurance or even perverse celebration of personal struggle. As Jim’s aside about the HITS singer’s trashed suit suggests, the suffering that rock ‘n’ roll performers express and with which listeners empathise is to some extent self-inflicted, and this is also perceived in heroic terms.

Peak music experiences in the live setting reveal a rock ‘n’ roll ideal of collective, physical exuberance. As in dance music, this is an ecstatic experience of the loss or transcendence of self within a crowd of disindividuated bodies and shared emotions. This is illustrated in the following quote from Tracy (39), as she progressed from describing a specific, memorable performance by her band, to a broader statement about ‘amazing gigs’:

Yeah that [gig] was incredible. Just an incredible - most of the amazing gigs we’ve had have been the smaller shows that are jam-packed, sweaty, rowdy, debaucherous, we’re on the floor, we’re not on a stage, and the crowd is right in our faces. That’s where we thrive. And yeah, those kind of gigs are just really
memorable, just because of that interaction between the crowd and us. It’s like, it goes back to that feeling I had at my first Livid Festival when I went, oh my god everyone’s in this together, like we’re one, we’re one community. Whenever we play on really big stages and up high, there’s always that kind of disconnection a bit. It’s becoming better because when we are playing bigger shows now, we’ve got more of a following so there is more of that interaction. But the dirty, just party gigs where there’s beer flying everywhere and everyone’s just in the moment and there’s not a care in the world about what’s happening outside. It’s just that moment.

Alicia described her ‘amazing live moments’ in similar terms:

[Some were] just fucking chaos and that got a bit addictive. […] I just think that boundary between the band and the crowd gets lost. It’s very physical as much as it’s anything else. Yeah I think it’s just that freedom of it all. […] People don’t seem to care if they’re being observed anymore, I think. I just have this sort of picture of limbs everywhere and lots of bad singing and lots of smiling and people start huggin’ strangers. Yeah that sort of thing!

These quotes illustrate that ideal experiences in rock ‘n’ roll involve the transcendence of self in a shared subjectivity or ‘moment’, in which bodies interact freely (‘limbs everywhere’) and boundaries between audience members and performers are also lost. In these respects, the ideal is similar to that of dance music. However, in rock ‘n’ roll music, the collective emotion is coloured by the specific values described earlier, in contrast to the more positive and escapist emotions of dance music. Interview participants described rock ‘n’ roll experiences with reference to looseness, messiness and dirtiness, as Tracy acknowledged in the following quote:

It puts the grit in life, you know. Things that are too sterile or polished don’t appeal to me. I wanna hear the humanness in things and I think that’s why I love, you
know, going to gigs that have that sort of connection and that looseness about it.

‘Cause it celebrates imperfection.

Participants also frequently used metaphors of drug use, such as ‘shooting up’ (i.e. intravenous drugs such as heroin), as well as literal references to alcohol (such as the ‘beer flying everywhere’ quote above) and other intoxicants. Descriptions of alcohol and drug consumption at gigs were often self-deprecating and celebratory at the same time, reflecting again the simultaneous lamentation of personal shortcomings and celebration of personal endurance. Accordingly, the various elements of musical experience, including but not limited to the music itself, can be understood as complementary in reinforcing particular ideals.

**Conclusion**

Within Brisbane’s local music scene there are articulations of trans-local, genre-based scenes, including dance, hip hop, indie and rock ‘n’ roll. Scene is an appropriate theoretical framework for these loosely bounded, overlapping cultural spaces, within which a range of musical practices coexist and interact (Straw 1991) in local, trans-local and virtual dimensions (Peterson and Bennett 2004). Consistently with Bennett and Rogers’s (2016) observations about peripheral cities, musical practice in Brisbane is not neatly divided along stylistic lines and there are porous boundaries between the audiences, physical spaces and performers for given music styles. However, the genres listed above are the basis of affective scenes bound by an ethic of the aesthetic, centred on particular ideals of musical experience. These ideals are revealed in the analysis and comparison of people’s peak music experiences.

The findings in this chapter are based on a total of 44 in-depth interviews across the four categories, resulting in a limited sample of each scene. Nevertheless, this combined sample was sufficient to identify shared ideals and ideal experiences within
each music scene, demonstrating the potential of peak music experiences as a research tool. The findings are consistent with ethnographic research-based literature concerning the defining values of dance, hip hop and indie music cultures (with no obvious analogue for the Brisbane rock ‘n’ roll scene). However, the lens of peak music experiences provides a new perspective on how these values are understood, articulated and reproduced by music scene participants. In particular, this provides a new way of understanding affective scene belonging and contributes to the developing understanding of collective memory as a central force in music scenes. These scenes are held together by an ethic of the aesthetic (Maffesoli 1991) which, beyond notions of ‘good taste’ and shared objects of appreciation, involves preferred kinds of musical experience as well as shared ways of remembering and describing such experience. A particular combination of priorities and ideals for musical experience can be seen to distinguish each scene, and these are exemplified in peak music experiences. The peak music experiences of participants in all four scenes celebrate live and collective settings for music. Accordingly, this broad ideal seems common to the broader Brisbane music scene, building on the observations made about popular music more generally in Chapter 8. However, the character of the collective subjectivity produced in such settings, and the means by which individuals may participate in it, differs between the scenes as revealed by their respective peak music experiences. In both dance music and rock ‘n’ roll, the loss or transcendence of self is achieved and expressed through energetic, physical participation in collective activity. By contrast, the indie collectivity is joined and experienced by way of emotional intimacy and immersion in musical texture, while in hip hop the individual serves and represents the community through overt identification with recognised symbols including words, movements and musical elements. Meanwhile, the equally physical ecstasies of dance and rock ‘n’ roll are distinguished by their separate emotional focus, which in dance is a euphoric escape from everyday reality while rock
‘n’ roll values a heroic recasting of the everyday. While the latter value is shared in broad terms by hip hop, the difference is that the honest, grounded self-expression of rock ‘n’ roll is self-deprecating and even destructive, while in hip hop it is self-promoting and improving. These various experiential concerns can be correlated with purely musical priorities: both dance and indie emphasise sensory immersion, although in dance music this serves the imperative to dance while in indie it serves more internal, emotional activity; rock ‘n’ roll’s directness and self-acceptance align with basic instrumentation, formal economy and performative ‘looseness’, while its forthrightness and decadent hedonism are expressed in volume and distortion; hip hop’s collage method permits individual self-expression on a communal base, as well as privileging storytelling through rapping. The experiential ideals of the scenes can also be related to different physical settings, or hard infrastructure; for example, while rock ‘n’ roll prioritises an ‘honest’ rawness in its musical style, indie prioritises the same value in its settings and logistics, in service of the desired emotional intimacy. By way of contrast, the ideal venue for dance music serves the scene’s euphoric, unworldly, ecstatic ends. Accordingly, peak music experiences in these scenes reveal a somewhat homological synchronisation of elements, including musical style, thematic content, physical activity, preferred settings and substance use. However, unlike the concept of homology developed by Willis (1978; see Chapter 2) and applied by Hebdige (1979) in the context of subcultural theory, these clustered preferences need not be attributed to structural causes, but are elements of a shared aesthetic that can be understood as the idealisation of particular kinds of experience.

Further and broader research would refine and strengthen this picture. Already, however, this analysis demonstrates the existence and structure of an affective level in these local music scenes, based around ideals that are revealed and reproduced in peak music experiences. Peak music experiences are exemplars for shared ways of
experiencing music and thus demonstrate the ethic of the aesthetic that binds these scenes. As shared frames through which personal experience is remembered and understood, peak music experiences are an important aspect of collective memory in music scenes.
PART IV

CONCLUSION
Chapter 10
Themes and conclusions

This thesis has presented a sustained sociological investigation and theorisation of peak music experiences. This addresses a previous gap in academic knowledge by recognising and framing a significant set of popular narratives and practices, so as to bring them into scholarly consideration. It has been shown that peak music experiences are an important aspect of how many people relate to popular music, as well as a major ingredient in the production of identity and belonging. Peak music experiences are relevant and useful to a range of academic perspectives and projects concerning popular music, both as a subject of research in their own right and as a new conceptual tool in sociological study. In order to make clear this contribution, in this concluding chapter I will discuss key themes that have been developed over the thesis. First, I will return to the questions I asked at the outset and summarise how peak music experiences offer insights regarding the specific appeal of music and its unique power in relation to individuals and society. I will then draw from the various findings to consider how peak music experiences play a role in both affective sociality and reflexive individualisation, demonstrating the co-existence and interaction of these ostensibly opposed models of late- or post-modern social being. Thirdly, I will consider how peak music experiences demonstrate the operation of collective memory and sensibility in structuring both narrative and affective aspects of individual identity and practice, especially in the context of music scenes. I will then outline some significant implications of the findings presented in this thesis for future research. Specifically, I will offer suggestions regarding the extension of the peak music experiences concept from music scenes research into broader cultural settings; the use of peak music experiences as a lens for considering how structural factors shape people’s engagements with music; and the implications of the peak music experiences perspective
Music: why, what and how?

Chapter 1 began with questions that are central to the cultural sociology of music. I asked why people listen to, perform and otherwise interact with music, and further why they place such importance on those activities and thereby invest so much of their time, energy and various resources into music. I suggested that in answering these questions, we might first ask what music can do and how it does so. Throughout the ensuing chapters I have shown that a reason why people engage with music and value it so highly is because of their understanding that it can and has contributed to their life through peak music experiences. Indeed, as this thesis has illustrated, it is common for people to engage reflexively with those questions and answer them with reference to peak music experiences. For those who devote themselves to musical activity through participation in music scenes, these experiences are an important element of understanding what music does, how it acts and why it is valued.

The important roles that peak music experiences often play in people’s self-narratives and identity were discussed in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. People interpret and value music, generally and in terms of specific songs, artists and styles, by way of an ongoing relationship with it, which was described in Chapter 4 as a history of listening. Peak music experiences anchor and frame these histories of listening. The common narrative forms of first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences present these histories as uniquely personal while situating them in relation to group contexts. These forms highlight the specific appeal of certain music and the cultural values underlying such preferences, but also reproduce more fundamental ideals of music and listening that are shared across popular music genres. In particular, by privileging reactions to music
that are surprising, emotional and physical, these narratives promote the notion of music acting directly on listeners who have unmediated responses to it and natural affinities for it. These ideals also permeate the autobiographical narratives discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. There it was shown that participants in Brisbane’s local music scenes credit peak music experiences with inspiring and influencing who they are and what they do. As embodied experiences and as remembered ideals, peak music experiences offer both a reason and a guide for current practice, making them a key source of motivation for ongoing musical activity and scene participation. People invest in music scene activities partly because they remember peak music experiences that revealed and affirmed the subjective value of those activities, and they seek to create similar experiences. In such experiences they find an intrinsic reward for action and an affirmation of identity, reminding them in embodied form of what they hold important and why. Peak music experiences therefore provide substantial answers to the questions of what music can do and, in turn, why people engage with it.

Focusing on singularly memorable and meaningful moments, paradoxically, shows the dynamism of both music and the people who interact with it. Instead of musical texts with fixed meanings and people with certain dispositions, in singular experiences we can see how both are ‘simultaneously recompose[d] … in situ’, as Hennion (2001: 3) puts it, over a history of encounters. Hennion (2001: 5) suggests that people now tend to ‘sociologise’ their music taste by readily citing determinants like class. However, peak music experiences are discussed in ways that downplay predictable social and cultural factors, emphasising instead the unpredictable, transcendent power of music and the authentic individuality of the responses it evokes. Accordingly, like Hennion’s strategies for ‘desociologising’ his interviewees (ibid), the study of peak music experiences draws the focus of research from assumed determinisms and tastes to dynamic practices and states, in order to see what people do with music and what it does for them. However, by
recognising peak music experiences as a particular discursive frame, I have also sought to re-sociologise those details – that is, to show how highly personalised musical practices and states, and the ways people talk about them, are situated in socio-cultural contexts. As I argued in Chapter 2, taking seriously the lived experiences of music lovers means not only paying attention to those experiences, but critically analysing their construction. I will return to this point later in this chapter with reference to collective memory.

Considering music in terms of the experiences it produces has highlighted the extent to which its perceived form, meaning and value are bound up with feelings, in the emotional and physical sense. Indeed, the descriptions of peak music experiences by participants in this study tended to emphasise their affective aspects, with especially strong feelings appearing as a common and often defining feature of those experiences. I have shown that these feelings are essential to the interpretations, judgments and dispositions that people develop through peak music experiences. Repeatedly, people explained the meaning and value of particular music, and more reflexively their own orientations toward it, by specific reference to the embodied experiences in which they encountered it. This demonstrates the intentionality (directedness) of emotions and indeed their importance as a means of intending and interpreting the world, as observed in the theories of Dewey (2004b), Crossley (1998) and Ahmed (2014) that were outlined in Chapter 2. Consistently with Ahmed’s (2014) cultural politics of emotion, people’s feelings about musical objects such as songs, artists and styles depend on how they have been affected by those objects. Peak music experiences are, in part, affective encounters that produce especially intense and therefore lasting impressions, which as Ahmed suggests is an apt term for bodily sensations, emotions and evaluative thoughts that are experientially inseparable. These encounters shape the perception and meaning of specific objects, but also reorient subjects, with broader consequences that can extend beyond musical practice. In these respects, peak music experiences can be taken as
exemplars of the more continuous and subtle processes of affective interaction and world-making in which music is involved.

The theories of emotion cited above refer broadly to interactions between people and the world, although they have been applied here to interactions with music. Similarly, Hennion’s (2010) pragmatics of taste is conceived in such a way that it also applies to food and sport, for example. While I have developed those broader theories specifically in relation to music, I have also sought to gain more specific insight into music’s unique power and appeal. In this regard my analysis of peak music experiences has shown that the prominent affective dimensions of music, as well as its temporality, are key to how music acts. The peak music experiences described in this thesis tend to exceed and sometimes even contradict what might be found by an objective analysis of the musical texts involved, especially in the case of song lyrics, yet it is also clear that that music was crucial to the character and consequences of those experiences. The concept of affordances (DeNora 2000) has been useful in understanding how music offers varied possibilities that are generated as well as limited by inherent, personal and social factors. Peak music experiences further underline the highly contextual nature of these affordances and their ultimate manifestation in particular meanings and effects.

Considering music in terms of experiences, as opposed to separate texts or objects, reveals the extent and importance of its non-verbal and indeed non-signifying elements. While these aspects were identified in people’s descriptions of their peak music experiences, they were also made apparent by a struggle to describe those experiences in words, with frequent resort to exclamations (‘whoa’), superlatives (‘amazing’) and metonymic descriptions of physical reactions (‘goosebumps’). This is not to suggest that those experiences lack knowable structures or meanings. There is a notable difference between the precise ideas people hold about their peak music experiences, on which they purposefully reflect and by which they measure new experiences and organise parts of
their lives, and their limited ability to recount and explain those experiences in words. This points to music’s capacity to organise and encapsulate aspects of experience in ways that cannot necessarily be translated into other media. Consistently with both Frith (1987) and DeNora (2000), I have linked this to music’s direct emotional intensity as well as its relatively open referentiality. As DeNora (2000) argues, music is a temporal medium which structures experience as it unfurls, contributing to the shape and quality of feeling and thus bringing it to the intersubjective plane on which it can be sustained and made known to oneself and others (see also the further theories discussed in Chapter 5). In this sense, music can provide the emotionally-infused, aesthetic unity that according to Dewey (2004) defines ‘an experience’, and more specifically what I have called a peak music experience.

Music’s capacities to structure feelings in time and then represent them in memory are demonstrated most clearly in Chapters 7 and 8, in analysing the interpersonal and collective ramifications of peak music experiences. Chapter 7 considered how music can colour experiences of particular events and situations, individually and at an intersubjective level. It has previously been recognised that music articulates and thereby shapes emotional experience and interpersonal relationships by what it signifies, especially through lyrics (Horton 1957; Frith 1989). The analysis offered in Chapter 7 demonstrated that beyond such signification, music can create an affective space in which people may experience, express and share particular feelings. This depends on specifically musical affordances, such as the tempo and aesthetic features that can structure time and activity, as well as personally and socially ascribed affordances, such as the understanding of what is possible and expected when listening to particular music in particular settings. Examples that were discussed include a slow rhythm and a pretty melody for dancing, a stirring seasonal hit at Christmas, and a shared favourite song on the radio at home. The music lovers who were interviewed described how sharing
experiences of music with family, friends and loved ones enabled them to acknowledge, explore, articulate and celebrate aspects of those relationships, in turn creating peak music experiences by which those people and relationships were understood and remembered. My analysis highlighted a reflexive element to these uses of music, so that for example people might plan their attendance at a concert, or give tickets as a gift, with a view to sharing a meaningful experience and thus celebrating or developing aspects of their relationship.

The creation of a shared affective space through music was explored on a larger scale in Chapter 8, as a defining aspect of live music and a reason for its valourisation. This was the setting for the majority of peak music experiences described by research participants. As ideal instances of live music, these experiences enable identification of the most important factors in the live setting, and the different priorities by which those factors might be evaluated across music scenes (also discussed in Chapter 9 and later in this chapter). Most importantly, these various factors create the conditions for extraordinary experiences and expressions of the self, with an emphasis on affective belonging to both a physical crowd and often a broader, implied collective such as a music scene. The special status of live music across various popular music cultures is attributable in large part to its capacity to produce such peak music experiences. These can be seen as peaks among peaks, as they are ideals of live music which is in turn an idealised setting for popular music. Accordingly, they epitomise the importance of peak music experiences in popular music culture and exemplify a central finding of this thesis. That is, a major reason why people value music and a factor that guides our engagements with it, is that music has a unique capacity to create especially affecting and meaningful experiences that affirm or renew our understandings of ourselves, our relationships to other people and various aspects of the world.
Affective sociality and reflexive individualisation

The findings presented in this thesis demonstrate that peak music experiences are involved in both disindividuating, affective sociality and reflexive, rational individualism. These are ostensibly opposed meta-narratives of contemporary social life, as outlined in Maffesoli’s (1996) theory of neo-tribal postmodernity on one hand and the late modernity theorised by Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) on the other. The former theory describes a movement away from a society of individuals rationally contracting around political, future-oriented projects, into a disindividuated sociality comprising fluid, affectively-driven identifications that find their end in the feeling of being together. The reflexive modernisation thesis associated with Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) also starts with the decline of stable identity and political engagement, but theorises that this engenders a heightened individualism marked by reflexive choice. However, this study of peak music experiences shows how both affectively disindividuating and rationally individualising tendencies co-exist and interact in the sensibilities of music scene participants. This builds on and advances a small body of research that explores both social developments in the context of popular music consumption, with ramifications for the broader understanding of culture and society (Bennett 2009; Malbon 1999; Riley et al 2010).

As noted earlier in this chapter, the most prominent and common feature of peak music experiences is an intensity of feeling, which is often privileged over rational judgment when people describe them. Physical and emotional responses are said to exceed prior expectations and precede reflective understanding. Similarly, chance and fate are emphasised over deliberate planning in the creation of these encounters. Indeed, it is common to grant agency to music over listeners, such as when people claim that music ‘hit me’ or ‘changed my life’. These aspects of peak music experiences, as discussed at length in Chapter 4 in particular, downplay the individual choice that is a
hallmark of reflexive modernity and instead highlight the non-conscious attraction and repulsion of affect that characterises neo-tribalism, which Maffesoli (1996: 90, 147) describes as somewhat ‘animalistic’ and ‘stochastic’. Another celebrated aspect of many peak music experiences is the ecstatic loss or transcendence of the self, in the sensory aspects of music, in flow states and in harmony with a crowd or environment (see Chapters 6 and 8). As discussed earlier in this chapter, live music is especially valued as an opportunity to experience the loss of individual identity, within a collective subjectivity and through the performance of contextual personae. In these settings, belonging is less a matter of rational contracts about future-oriented projects, than emotional affinities with a hedonistic focus on the present. These are neo-tribal forms of sociality, favouring temporary identifications over fixed identity, collective over individual subjectivity, emotional over rational pacts and the tangible present over an abstract future.

However, while peak music experiences are by definition transient and transcendent, they can have enduring significance for everyday identity and collective solidarity. Although they are often irrational and to some extent ineffable, they are rationalised and narrated as part of the ‘reflexive project of the self’ (Giddens 1991). A central theme of this thesis has been the use of peak music experiences as a resource for presenting coherent self-narratives. They exemplify and explain biographical facts and developments, in accordance with Denzin’s (1989) theory of epiphanies. Chapters 4 and 5 presented the findings that immediate, ecstatic responses to music can retrospectively become inspirations and influences for planned courses of conduct and projective identities, such as being a musician or a fan. Indeed, by emphasising the somewhat magical power of music over more mundane social and cultural determinants of taste and identity, peak music experiences contribute to a modernist rhetoric of individual self-construction. Chapter 6 examined the paradox that peak music experiences characterised
by a loss of self-awareness and everyday time can become motivations for ongoing, everyday practice within a music scene, as remembered ideals and future goals. In these ways, the temporary transcendence of the self in intense musical experiences contributes to the long-term construction of the self. As stories, as well as embodied events, peak music experiences can disrupt or transcend but also affirm identity. For example, a temporary persona that is performed in the ecstatic atmosphere of a gig or club can become characteristic through weekly repetition, perhaps being regarded as a deeper, truer self than that which is performed in the workplace or home (see for example the stories of Jim and Holly in Chapter 8, ‘In the moment’). Friends and family might experience and express uncommon emotions in a musical setting, but these extraordinary moments might inform and represent more lasting aspects of their relationships (see Chapter 7). Peak music experiences can affirm a collective identity beyond those who are physically proximate, for example by celebrating the values of a music scene or more traditional forms of community (see Chapters 8 and 9 and the following section of this chapter). Peak music experiences are therefore involved in both the transcendence and construction of social selves.

This thesis has demonstrated not only the co-existence but the interaction of affective sociality with reflexive individualism, as important aspects of popular music consumption and music scene participation. The dialectical relationship that I have identified was recognised to an extent at the practical level by the participants in this study. They presented their music taste and scene identities as ongoing constructions that were deliberate, yet shaped by chance encounters and unwilled affinities. They acknowledged that music motivated actions and attractions partly by its emotional force, blurring any strict division between feelings and projects (see for example Lily’s explanation of how a song led her to quit her job in Chapter 5). While the self-narratives that incorporate peak music experiences are reflexively individualistic in the sense that
they project coherent identities over time, they subjugate rational agency to the power of music and the unexplained attraction and repulsion of affect. Indeed, in explaining their motivations for musical practice, interviewees tended to de-emphasise social and financial rewards in favour of the inherent rewards epitomised in peak music experiences (see Chapter 6). Here, reflexive self-construction involves a rational project that is directed toward an affective present. This is consistent with Maffesoli’s (1996: 17) notion of neo-tribal sociality being exhausted in its own creation, albeit repetitively, through ritual. Further, people’s narratives of peak music experiences show a clear understanding that despite these conscious and ritualised attempts to produce them, music’s effects are ultimately unpredictable. These music scene participants find rational meaning, individual purpose and social identity in feelings they claim neither to control nor to understand fully.

**Collective memory and the scene aesthetic**

Over the course of this thesis I have been concerned to show how the highly subjective peak music experiences that people have, and the uniquely personal stories into which they are woven, are collective productions. They follow shared forms and reflect contemporary cultural values associated with popular music, as well as specific music scenes. In turn, peak music experiences and the ways they are spoken about contribute to collective identities, so that music scenes can be understood as partly organised around ideal experiences and ways of experiencing. These key findings, elaborated below, map out a new perspective on the operation of collective memory in music scenes, which has been identified as a crucial but under-explored aspect of participation and belonging in these cultural spaces (Bennett and Rogers 2016).

The very concept of peak music experiences is a cultural frame that organises elements of lived experience into a recognisable and communicable form. As noted in
Chapter 3, an early but fundamental finding was that, like me, research participants from Brisbane’s local music scenes had a notion of what I have called peak music experiences, and often made reference to them as a means of discussing music and themselves. This is consistent with and probably informed by the frequent representation of peak music experiences in popular music media, as discussed in Chapter 1. However, as also mentioned in Chapter 3, outside of formal fieldwork I have found that the concept is not as prominent or even readily recognisable for all people. As discussed later in this chapter, this suggests further research questions. In any case, it is apparent that having a concept of peak music experiences, and talking about them in particular ways, comprise cultural knowledge and practice. In Chapter 4, I proposed that understandings of peak music experiences are promoted through narratives that are common across popular music genres and scenes, as apparent in media representations, hitherto unconnected scholarly observations and my own fieldwork. The narrative tropes of first encounters, gateway experiences and conversion experiences construct shared ideals of how music acts, what kinds of musical experience are most valuable, and how people may relate authentically to music. They depict music affecting people in immediate but enduring, highly personal ways that challenge and exceed expectations associated with social determinants and mass commercial contexts. They prioritise experiences with music by the emotional response they evoke and the profoundness of their impact on the listener’s subsequent understanding of music and themselves. The circulation of these narratives creates expectations through which people perceive, interpret and present their experiences. Having such peak music experiences is therefore an affirmation of identity, for example as a fan or musician, while presenting such narratives is a performance of that identity according to cultural notions of authenticity. This shows peak music experiences as a part of cultural memory, which is a source of both formative and normative impulses for collective identity and provides a group with self-awareness (Assman and Czaplicka
1995). Peak music experiences shape and are shaped by cultural memory at the level of popular music fandom generally, as well as more specific groups such as scenes.

The common frame of peak music experiences makes apparent the common and divergent priorities of participants in Brisbane’s music scenes. The local dance, hip hop, indie and rock ‘n’ roll scenes have fluid and overlapping boundaries in terms of members, venues and even musical elements. However, the peak music experiences of participants reveal clusters of priorities that show these scenes to be organised around ideals of musical experience. Broadly, peak music experiences in the dance scene emphasise shared euphoria and self-transcendence through collective physical activity; those in hip hop celebrate self-expression and the representation of community; the indie scene privileges experiences of difference and exploration as well as emotional intimacy; and the rock ‘n’ roll scene favours experiences involving forthrightness, self-acceptance and communal, physical abandon. Thus peak music experiences, as exemplars for ways of experiencing music and forms for remembering and discussing it, contribute to an ethic of the aesthetic (Maffesoli 1991) within music scenes. As discussed in Chapter 9, this analysis shows common ground between neo-tribal theory and scene theory, especially the concept of affective scenes (Bennett 2013). These forms of collective identity are bound and structured by shared ways of experiencing music. Further, peak music experiences demonstrate how scene values and practices are bound up with the embodied, emotional and sensory experience of scene participants. The narratives of peak music experiences contribute discursive shape to the affective aesthetics that unite each of Brisbane’s music scenes, as well as providing individuals with narrative maps for rationalising these affinities in the project of constructing identities. Accordingly, peak music experiences help to structure both the affective and rational parameters of scene belonging.
I indicated in Chapter 1 my intention to follow Scott’s (1992: 38) dictum that experience is ‘not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain’. Through the ensuing analysis of peak music experiences, I have sought to explain how ways of experiencing, and therefore experiences and the subjects they constitute are discursively shaped. This brings a new perspective to the understanding of how music plays a role in sociality. It does so not only as an object that is invested with shared significance, but also as a driver of experiences that are known and understood through shared frames. Accordingly, the study of peak music experiences complements existing approaches to understanding popular music sociality and especially music scenes.

Broader implications and further research

Scenes and everyday listening

In this thesis I have argued that peak music experiences must be understood within social contexts, and I have applied this perspective within the specific contexts of local music scenes. The same perspective might be applied to other kinds of music scene, noting the local, trans-local, virtual and affective levels that have been identified (Peterson and Bennett 2004; Bennett 2013) and the centrality of collective memory in music scenes (Bennett and Rogers 2016). While this thesis has shown how the concept of an affective scene is important to understanding physically interactive, local scene activity, Bennett (2013) proposes that an affective scene might comprise people who do not interact at this face-to-face level. I suggest that attention to peak music scenes would be useful in considering affective scenes to the extent they are distinct from local activity. As shared frames for experience and its narration, peak music experiences might play a significant role in these other forms of scene belonging.

Further, the concept of peak music experiences might be considered for use in that field of research that is concerned with music in ‘everyday life’, beyond the most overt
forms of fandom and scene participation (for example DeNora 2000). It might be expected that peak music experiences would be less apparent and important among people for whom popular music fandom and participation are less central to identity, and who are less exposed to the circulation of peak music experience narratives. On the other hand, as identified in Chapter 1 with reference to advertising and non-specialist media discussions of music, peak music experience narratives are apparent in broader popular culture and especially in the commercialisation of popular music in everyday contexts. A clearer picture of the inside(s) and outside(s) of the peak music experiences framework would enhance understanding of the common and differing ways in which people relate to music.

Structure and experience

Among the data presented in this thesis, social categories such as class, gender and ethnicity occasionally emerged as factors that can contribute to the character of peak music experiences and which might be reflexively understood and navigated through such experiences. Sustained and systematic attention to the role of these factors in peak music experiences could provide a new perspective on the structuring of musical practice and reception. The development of a cultural sociology of popular music has tended to challenge theoretical approaches that too readily assume musical meaning and taste to be structurally pre-determined (Bennett 2008). It remains necessary to develop more nuanced understandings of how socio-economic factors might actually structure cultural experience. For example, this thesis has made substantial use of the observation that music is a temporal medium, and it seems uncontroversial that people’s understanding and experience of time is informed by their position within economic systems. If, as Marx (1946: 244) observed, it is no mystery that ‘[m]oments are the elements of profit’ in a capitalist system of production, this might be expected to colour those subjective
moments we call peak music experiences. This thesis has also focused extensively on the role of the body in the reception of music and the construction of meaning. If people’s experience of their bodies is shaped by social definitions of gender, race and ability, then we can expect this to have a significant bearing on embodied musical experiences. Peak music experiences might therefore be a lens that offers nuanced insight into the interaction between social structure, cultural identity and lived experience.

**Valuing music**

Peak music experiences provide an important perspective on how music is valued, as discussed in detail in the first half of this chapter. This perspective could therefore have implications for research in the area of cultural policy, in which the question of how cultural practices and objects are valued is crucial. Paying attention to peak music experiences highlights the substantial role played by music in identity and community, beyond the important aspects associated with music careers and commercial consumption. To take a prominent example, live music has become a significant policy concern for various levels of government in Australia and elsewhere, but as noted in Chapter 8 the research that informs such policy has been dominated by economic considerations while the social value of live music remains under-examined (Behr et al 2012; Frith 2012). In the same chapter, I showed that peak music experiences are a way of understanding the particular social value of live music and identifying the factors involved in creating that value. This brings a cultural sociology perspective to the expanding body of research on live music as an ‘experience economy’ (Pearce 2013), which is focused on its marketisation.

Another area in which the value of music is at issue is technological change. The digitalisation of music and its associated dematerialisation and radically increased ease of access, for example through relatively inexpensive libraries for streaming (the
‘celestial jukebox’: Burkart and McCourt 2004), has fueled concerns about the general devaluation of music (for example Havighurst 2015). Put simply, it is suggested that as less investment is required to listen to a vast and expanding selection of music in a range of contexts, the resulting experience might become less meaningful. This is a contemporary iteration of Walter Benjamin’s (1968) theory of the withering of artistic ‘aura’ in the age of mechanical reproduction. On the other hand, research about the uses of music in everyday life (such as DeNora 2000) including through personal listening technologies (Beer 2007; Bull 2007) reveals ways that increased possibilities for individualised musical experiences contribute to music’s value as a resource for self-construction. Auslander (2002a: 83-84) de-emphasises material factors by suggesting that the self-conscious discourses of authenticity in popular music recreate the conditions that governed the perception of works of art and imbued them with aura prior to mass reproduction. I have shown that peak music experiences are a part of these discourses of authenticity. The various peak music experiences analysed throughout this thesis show music having profound effects in a variety of situations, including at live performances, with objectified recordings, on radio and television and through personal music players, involving both planning and chance. However, these experiences also reveal the specific role played by particular media technologies, such as a cassette found on a bus (see Lisa’s story in Chapter 4), the particular function of television and radio in late 20th century childhoods, the anticipation involved in purchasing an album on a shop assistant’s recommendation (see John’s story about Linkin Park in Chapter 4) and the practical and symbolic effects of the technology used in live performance (see Chapter 8). Accordingly, peak music experiences can show what changes and what is retained across various music media. I have considered in detail how peak music experiences are a way of seeing change over time for individuals; by extension, this perspective could be fruitfully applied to larger-scale change over generations.
Conclusion

Hennion (2007) posits that there is no music without the gradual collective production of listening, or a specific ‘ear’, from general frames of attention to personal habits. This thesis has shown that in the present historical moment, in the context of local scenes oriented around the performance of popular music, people’s relationships to music are partly defined by what I have called peak music experiences. They are a way of understanding the inspirations, influences and motivations of people who participate in music scenes and they help to define those scenes and what it means to belong to them. The analysis of peak music experiences also provides broader insight into how music is significant to individual and collective identity. This perspective contributes to the understanding of contemporary social life, including the interaction of affective sociality with reflexive individualism and the operation of collective memory in relation to lived experience. For academic researchers as well as music scene participants, peak music experiences are a way of understanding what music can do, how it does so and why it is valued.
Appendix 1

Project information sheet

Informed Consent Information Sheet for a Qualitative Research Project

Title of study: The role of peak music experiences in popular music culture

Research Team:

Chief Investigators

- Professor Andy Bennett (Project Leader) is a Professor of Cultural Sociology and Director of the Griffith Centre for Cultural Research at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia with expertise in popular music and youth culture. He has authored and edited numerous books including *Music, Style and Aging, Popular Music and Youth Culture* and *Culture and Everyday Life*. Email: a.bennett@griffith.edu.au

- Ben Green is a PhD candidate at Griffith University. His research focuses on popular music, memory and identity. Email: benjamin.green@griffithuni.edu.au

Administering Body:

Griffith Centre for Cultural Research, Macrossan Building (N16), Griffith University, Nathan Campus, 170 Kessels Road, Nathan, Qld 4111, Australia.

Purpose of this research study

This project will examine how some musical experiences stand out - peak music experiences - and how the memory and discussion of these experiences can be important to some people and groups. The project seeks to provide answers to the following key questions:

1. What makes some experiences with music stand out?
2. When and how do people remember and talk about these experiences?
3. What role do people’s experiences with music play in their lives?
4. How do these answers differ between different music genres and scenes, and between age groups and other social categories?

Procedures

Data will be collected over a period of 12 months from November 2014 to December 2015. Individual and group interviews will be conducted with 45 – 60 people over the age of 18. Interviews will take approximately one hour and will be recorded using a digital voice recorder.

Recordings will then be transcribed and deleted. Transcriptions will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the office of Professor Andy Bennett for five years and then destroyed. During this time the investigators named above will analyse the transcriptions in order to answer the research questions. Segments of the transcripts may be used in academic
publications and by participating in the project you assign the researchers the rights to publish the results.

The research will not be contrary to the best interests of participants and will not create undue distress for the participants due to the general nature of the questions asked during interviews. However, as questions relate to the relationship between music and your identity, this may involve you discussing personal sensitive information, for example, sexual identity or drug use. But at no time are you obligated to divulge such information. Your responses to questions can be as detailed or as general as you are comfortable with.

Right of refusal to participate and withdrawal

You have the right to choose whether or not to participate in the study. If you do choose to participate in the study you are free to withdraw at any time. Likewise, you may also refuse to answer some or all of the questions if you do not feel comfortable with those questions.

Confidentiality and Privacy

The information provided by you will remain confidential. Nobody except the Chief Investigators on the project will have access to the raw data files. Your name and identity will also not be disclosed at any time. However the data may be seen by the Griffith University Ethical review committee. The data may be published in academic journals and other academic outlets, but will at no time disclose the names, or addresses of the participants. If you/ the participants wish for their names to be used in any published material, you/the participants must inform the Chief Investigators prior to the end of the data collection period.

The conduct of this research involves the collection, access and/or use of your identified personal information. The information collected is confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties without your consent, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. A de-identified copy of this data may be used for other research purposes. For further information consult the University’s Privacy Plan http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan or telephone (07) 373 54375.

Available Sources of Information

If you have any further questions you may contact the project leader, Professor Andy Bennett: a.bennett@griffith.edu.au or 07 555 29779.

Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human research. If potential participants have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the research project, they should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on 373 54375 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au
CONSENT FORM

Project title: The role of peak music experiences in popular music culture

Chief Investigators: Professor Andy Bennett and Ben Green (Griffith University)

• I have read the information sheet, and the nature and the purpose of the research project have been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.

• I understand that I may not directly benefit from taking part in the project.

• I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.

• I understand that I may be audio-recorded during the study and that I have the right to request that parts of the interview not be transcribed if, on reflection, I feel this is appropriate. I may also request a copy of the audio recording file and/or interview transcript.

• I grant the University the exclusive and royalty free right to reproduce and use in its ongoing activities the audio-recorded data which have been produced in the course of the project.

• I understand that the raw data files will be destroyed and the written transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the office of Professor Andy Bennett for 5 years after the project has been completed. Only I, and the university researchers involved in the project will have access to the raw data files and transcripts for the purposes of the research.

• I understand that wherever practical, the university will acknowledge my participation in the project.

• I understand that, upon request, I can be provided with a summary of the project findings for my reference.

Name of participant:

Signed: Date:

I have explained the study to the participant and consider that he/ she understands what is involved. Researcher’s signature and date:

www.griffith.edu.au
References


Auslander P (2002b) LIVE FROM CYBERSPACE or, I was sitting at my computer this guy appeared he thought I was a bot. PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art 24(1): 16-21.


