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Banging the Drum for Aesthetics

Book review of *I Drum, Therefore I Am: Being and Becoming a Drummer* by Gareth Smith (Farnham, Ashgate, 2013.)

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Judging from the title of his book, Gareth Dylan Smith is a man who lives his art. As a drummer, Smith began his craft around the age of 12 with a "kit" improvised from saucepan lids and other household items before landing his first real gig as snare drummer in the marching band of his local Boys' Brigade troop. Since then his education and career have taken several turns - music student, music teacher, session musician, husband, father and now author - but throughout it all has defined himself predominantly as "drummer".

Throughout his study, Smith challenges existing tendencies to dump drummers *en masse* into a single homogenous "community", socio-cultural group, or market segment. He believes instead that rather than simply a community of practise, a singular tribe, or stereotype, drummers are a much more varied group than is usually acknowledged.

Part auto-ethnography, part survey, Smith's study reveals rich insight about *being* a drummer, as a career, as a lifestyle choice, and as a principal basis for self-identity. As a window into the world of drummers it works well and should appeal to its intended audience; scholars of sociology of music and of music education, music educators and to drummers. Furthermore, the book tells us things about how being a musician influences - and is influenced by - a person's other "identities", such as "the day-job", as well as the tensions which may arise. An example of this is the response from one interviewee who had spent many years as a full-time professional drummer before deciding to become an osteopath.

The book then turns its attention to contextual identities within the identity of "drummer". For example, those who define themselves as "rock" drummers finding that they have to take work playing pop or country and western. Furthermore, Smith explores the group dynamic within bands - what do drummers perceive their role to be and to involve?

Smith's model shows that drummers' identities evolve and change over time and through the human lifecycle. This, of course, will make immediate sense to anyone who is used to juggling an interest or passion for creative arts or sports, with a day-job with family life and weekend/evening work or study. A particular strength of the book is in the richness of its data, reporting interviews with drummers from across the musical career ladder, from teenage novices to some of the most well-known and highly regarded professionals in the

business, and most points in between. The book therefore reveals rich insight about *being* a drummer as basis for self-identity.

Smith writes in a conversational and reflexive prose, whilst citing from a breadth of literature which encompasses Descartes as well as “rock star” autobiographies. This makes for an enjoyable and intelligent read, and is enhanced by Smith’s sharp sense of humour which comes through well and in places made me laugh out aloud.

Of interest for *Organizational Aesthetics*, this book illustrates how its subject matter - people who principally identify themselves as drummers - live their lives through their craft and art. Smith identifies two intangible characteristics, “rhythm” and “groove” as having particular influence on the ways in which drummers express themselves and communicate or inter-relate with other musicians, and with their audience. For example, the way in which drummers improvise and create with other musicians involves not only leading or dictating the pace and rhythm but also being open to them, using the senses, reacting and responding in order to co-create.

Throughout my career as a lecturer I find that my own experiences as a guitarist and bass guitarist in rock bands serves me well. Not only has it prepared me for communicating to an audience (and being prepared for AV equipment failures!) but also the ability to interact and work with other people creatively. There are practical lessons from working within a band or musical ensemble - yet to be satisfactorily theorized - that can be applied to teaching students undertaking group work or assessments in project teams (see also Comer and Holbrook Jr’s 2011 paper about how they used a documentary film on the making of a music album to help students learn about working in task groups).

It appears, therefore, that a basis for further research could be to investigate the ways in which drummers behave and interact when working with other musicians to create music and to compare and contrast with the ways in which they conduct themselves when interacting within other organisations. Is it common for semi-professional or part-time drummers to co-create using the same “openness” with their colleagues during “the day-job” as they do when performing with a band of musicians? Secondly, are there any lessons for businesses and other organisations from the ways in which drummers work in groups, teams or collectives to mutually create? Can we learn something from the world of music about teamwork and creativity for Project Teams and creativity in other industries?

Taking the latter question further, could a drumming metaphor incorporating Smith’s “groove” concept be applicable, similarly to rhythm and flow, in manufacturing or service processes? For example, would it be accurate to consider organisations as existing along a continuum (at one extreme predictable and efficient, but ultimately unresponsive and overly-automated “drum machines”, and at the other end, highly interactive “improvisers” characterised by openness, creativity, value co-creation, but with a high degree of unpredictability)? Such research might extend the findings of similar studies which have applied a jazz metaphor to develop organisational typologies (e.g. Dennis and Macaulay, 2007) and to explored improvisation as a metaphor for organization (e.g. Meyer, Frost and Weick, 1998), and which have investigated the aesthetic leadership of symphony orchestra conductors (e.g. Koivunen and Wennes, 2011).

To conclude, Smith has written an interesting and entertaining text which contributes to debate within sociology of music, and music education. The book provides fresh insight into its subject matter and presents opportunities for further study in relation to organizational aesthetics and other fields of management, business and marketing studies.

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About the Author

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