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Drum Tracks: Locating the Experiences of Drummers in Recording Studios

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Introduction: Setting up, counting in

The following chapter locates the social, spatial and technological experiences of popular music drummers by 'tracking' their involvement in the creative processes of recording studio work. The kick drum or the snare drum might become the most prominent part of a finished recording but where the drummer belongs in the process of making a record isn't always at the forefront. From a drummer's perspective, interactions with the rest of the band, and the various personnel involved in the recording process, can be alienating and foreign, as 'Derek' (age 46) described:

I remember my first session, first thing: getting a level on my kick drum. It was taking forever, and I started worrying: 'something's wrong with how I'm doing this. It's taking too long.' The clock was ticking, money being wasted and the pressure was on, and we hadn't even started! Alone in the live room, I could see everyone talking in the control room, and only every once in a while would the talkback mic click on [in my headphones], just to be told to stop or start up again. I had no idea what they had been talking about! Meanwhile, the rest of the band were sitting around, impatient, and – since I was tracking drums alone to start – no one else could do anything. I wasn't given time to settle in, and my takes were nervous, stiff, uptight. The studio was a vast, dark, mysterious space full of alien technology – like a spaceship! I hated it at first; I felt I was supposed to set up, play my parts, and then sit in the corner for days while everyone else spent hours fussing with a new FX unit or making as many overdubs as needed. If I asked to change something – like, 'could you put more emphasis on that chord?' – it was like I'd crossed a line: *get back in the corner!* I didn't feel part of it until I learned to sit in the engineer's chair. Then I started treating myself, and the other drummers I worked with, the way I wanted to be treated – you know, *included*.

This opening description begins to illustrate some of the social, spatial and technological relations and occlusions for drummers in recordings studios, as viewed from a drummer's perspective.

Recording studios are often closed worlds of privileged access, and most notably in commercial record production, can be hierarchical with established divisions of labour, power and agency.[1-3] Although the drums are typically the first element to be captured during the production process, drummers' experiences in the studio are often characterized by the need to get tracks done quickly and efficiently, then to get out of the way for the rest

of the band or group to record, overdub and experiment with their takes.[4] If they are acknowledged as part of creative studio processes at all, drummers are commonly seen as less musical than other participants within the process and largely supplemental to the successive creative practices of producing music in studios as their role is often ‘functional’.[5] Smith argued that drummers are ‘a part, and yet apart’ in marginal positions within bands, groups or musical ensembles.[6] Brennan listed longstanding pejorative characterisations of drummers, widely circulated through ‘drummer jokes’ as non-musicians: dumb, noisy, illiterate, uncreative, broke, and replaceable.[7] Accepted belief systems have been described by Bourdieu as ‘doxa’, which is a universe of common opinions, popular ideas and undisputed beliefs that exist within a field of cultural production. Doxa appear as natural and self-evident; doxa ‘goes without saying because it comes without saying.’[8] One example of doxa within the recording studio is the superficial division between art and craft. Bourdieu labels this division the autonomous and heteronomous poles of an art world, which can be seen in the depiction of ‘art’ based or autonomous practitioners, such as the vocalists or guitarists, and more ‘craft’ oriented or heteronomous musicians such as drummers (or studio personnel such as the engineer).[9] All are needed in the studio to create a recording, but from certain viewpoints, or the doxa of the field, some appear to be considered more artistic and creative than others (i.e., more than *drummers*).

Researchers have begun to deconstruct and contest the accepted beliefs about drummers.[10-13] Through our ongoing ethnographic research in studios[14-16] this chapter draws from observational fieldnotes from sessions when both authors were acting as ethnographers and drummers (‘drummer-as-ethnographer’[17]) and—in Paul’s fieldwork—also as session engineer. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with eight drummers. In our analyses, we identify and critique prevailing doxa by (re)centring the views and experiences of drummers in creative studio practices. In overview, we highlight (or count in): (1) the spaces of drummers in studios (i.e., *where* drummers ‘belong’, or not); (2) the production of social identities in studios (i.e., *who* drummers are in relation to power hierarchies of recording processes); and (3) the knowledge and involvement of drummers in creative processes (i.e., *what* drummers ‘know’ and are able to do with their knowledge in studios). These thematic sections are presented as ‘takes’ to intone the tracking and layering involved in studio production.

First Take: Drummers, Spaces, and Studio Practices

Our first analytical theme explores the social production of space[18] for drummers in recording studios. For Lefebvre, ‘if space is a product, our knowledge of it must be expected to reproduce and expound the process of production. The ‘object’ of interest must be expected to shift from *things in space* to the actual *production of space*.’[19] Lefebvre was interested in the ways that space both shapes, and is shaped by, social relations, and sought ‘to consider struggles over the organization and meaning of space.’[20] The spatiality of recording studios—i.e., who is able to do what, and where—is revelatory in view of drummers’ roles, agency, and identities. For example, in fieldnotes made during sessions with an Americana band, Brett repeatedly noted his peripherality as the drummer, especially after the band finished tracking: e.g., in the control room, ‘I’m sat again in the seats farthest from the mixing desk’ or ‘I’m not involved in discussions of others’ tracks, but the guitarist was very involved in critique during tracking the drums’ and ‘I stayed in the live

room for almost the entire night, only popping into the control room at the end of the session to listen to a rough mix' (fieldnotes, 5 September 2017). These fieldnotes illustrate that studio sessions involve more than the production of music; it also involves the production of spaces: 'The production of social space is a process [...] social space incorporates social actions.'^[21]

This spatialization emerged in our interviews, where staying 'where they belong', spatially, was not only a part of where drummers were in the studio, physically, but also where they belonged in view of making contributions to the music being recorded—that is, within the doxa of studio practices. One drummer (Mike, age 20) commented on his 'place' in creative songwriting processes in the studio:

What I'm quite good at where there needs to be a break or a dynamic change. I can hear that a lot as a drummer. From that point, I can influence when we should put in, you know, "rock star stops." But I guess with other musical instruments I'd say probably not: you stay out of it. If you're doing a track and you know, you're done, your parts are down, and they're tracking the bassline or something like that, you don't say something like "the bass tones are muddy. Maybe sharpen it up in the mix a little bit?" There's a role for the drummer in the group during the songwriting process or during rehearsals that is to contribute to – I'll say orchestrate – the song progression, the place for starts and stops and dynamics, but then, in the studio your role is less; it's just play your parts and then step out.

A similar view was shared by Jess (age 27), who enjoyed the efficient atmosphere of a professional recording studio but drew a clear line between her performance in the live room and the activities in the control room. As a hired session player, she was used to and preferred a degree of distance from the production processes beyond performing her parts:

You're in and out a lot quicker; your engineers know what they're doing. The gear is all ready to go, you're not doing more takes than necessary. They can sort out all that stuff [e.g., production] in the other room, like, they're ready for you, you do your bit and then you're out. I prefer that. Not that I'm busy and I've got other places to be, but I just like to get it done.

Jess's view illustrates the doxa of drummers as efficient labourers best placed in the live room, but not entering into more artistic or technical spaces (i.e., the control room), or like Mike, staying out of broader involvement—'social actions'—in the arts of the recording studio, and thus productive of drummer's spaces in creative studio practices.

Another drummer, Keith (early 30s) described the drummer's contributions to song creation:

I like to think of the drummer as providing the perspective, you know? So if you want to think about it in a relation to painting, a painter might say 'oh I'm gonna paint this flower and we're gonna use these colours and we're gonna use this sort of paint', but I like to think of the drummers role as saying: 'well, how are you gonna paint that flower? Is it gonna be a profile? Is it gonna be from top down? Is it gonna be from the bottom up? Is it gonna look like this massive flower? Is it gonna be right inside? Is it gonna be like a Georgia O'Keeffe perspective and reflect some sort of like body eroticism? [...] it is providing the perspective or the frame.

Note that in this view the drummer is not a painter or part of the painting, but rather the one who frames the creative work of others. This effectively positions drummers *outside* the creative processes, despite – we would argue – being an integral contributor *inside* songwriting and recording processes.

While most of the drummers spatialized—and marginalised—their involvement through phrases such as being the ‘backbeat in the backseat’, some drummers were assertive about claiming space: ‘it is always been a battle; you have to fight your corner: saying ‘I need to re-track that’ or ‘before we move on, we need to edit this’; everyone groans when I say that, but giving me an extra take or an edit now will make them all happier later [when they track]’ (Derek, age 46). Another drummer (Paul, age 37) recounted an experience where other session players weren’t used to playing to a click track while working on a song that started with a bassline: ‘Everybody rushed when the bass came in [following the bass] and it made me look like I couldn’t play to the click track. They decided not to follow me either! Who’s in the driver’s seat?’ These comments illustrate the active social production of space within studios: popular music drummers are positioned in social spaces that are seen as hierarchically lower in status, less artistic and less powerful in the relations that suffuse popular music recording; we read this positioning as manifest in the physical locations that drummers occupy.

Another part of this hierarchical ‘backseat’ positioning involves the broader relations between drummers and other studio personnel, such as engineers and producers, in the spatiality of studios. Echoing the experiences of Derek in the chapter’s opening extract, Paul offered: ‘engineers really don’t understand what it feels like on the other side of the glass. They think it’s really easy and it’s not. It’s a really pressured situation.’ Against this, most drummers commented that it was not easy to act—against the grain, or counter to the doxa—to become involved in production using the technological affordances of the studio. Paul added:

one of the reasons I think drummers make really good producers is because they sit at the back of the band, and that also teaches you how to arrange—not a string arrangement but arrange a song—where you’re thinking about how all the parts work together. Richard Burgess is a really good example of that. There’re tons of producers who are drummers and it’s because that unofficial hierarchy of decision-making in the recording studio and you assume that drummers are at the bottom of that, but I think a lot of bands, if they respect their drummer they also respect the drummer’s perspective.

In sum, our fieldnotes and interviews alerted us to the spatial circulation of power relations in recording studios: the production of music was also the production of space in which the doxa of drummers was also (re)produced. This spatialization was manifest in the role of drummers in songwriting, in the physical spaces where drummers ‘belonged’ in studios, and in the contributions that drummers felt they could make to creative studio practices and production. We extend the idea of ‘positioning’ in relation to drummer’s identities in our next take.

Second Take: Playing for the Song? Identities, Positionalities, and Habitus

One phrase repeated across our interviews was ‘playing for the song’; this is a common trope in discourse about drummers: e.g., Ringo Starr was recently celebrated in *Drum!*

Magazine for ‘playing for the song’, arguing he did so in a way that was more than ‘just some thankless, mundane task.’ [22] In this ‘take’, we critique ‘playing for the song’ as an insight into the doxa surrounding drummers’ identities. For Stuart Hall, identities are ‘always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are [...] not an essence, but a *positioning*.’ [23] Drummers are not naturally or biologically predisposed to be wild or ‘uncreative’, [24] but rather these are ‘points of identification that are made within the discourses of history and culture.’ [25] That is to say, drummers’ identity positions are produced, and drummers often assume stereotypical subject positions. One crucial arena where this production and positioning takes place—where its *mythification* occurs—is the recording studio. ‘Playing for the song’ is much a part of the mythification of drummers as ‘simple’ subjects.

Most of the drummers we interviewed shared views of ‘playing for the song’ by ‘keeping things simple’ and ‘not over playing’ or, as one respondent noted, ‘creating a space to allow the other musicians to shine.’ One interviewee offered: ‘I’m the type of drummer who would rather hear another drummer play parts and grooves, parts for the song. [...] I love the person off the street who serves the song.’ Beyond an appeal to simplicity, this comment infers that popular music drumming is easy (and perhaps it is) but the critical point here is that these beliefs are already in circulation and are part and parcel of ‘who drummers are’ and ‘what they are expected to do’ in songwriting and recording.

When asked about his earliest experiences of recording, one drummer spoke about his home studio, and having to be the drummer, rhythm guitarist, and recording engineer. These multiple roles in formative experiences provide ‘the reason why I’m not a very good drummer technically [...] because of my route into playing drums, it’s always been about a collective thing for me. It’s about playing with a band, rather than being amazing.’ This inference that drummers are somehow rather less ‘amazing’ than other band members was echoed also by Jess: ‘In the group, I felt like the drums are always the ones that need to sit back a little bit in the correct situations and let the people that are standing up at the front be front.’

The positioning of the drummer to ‘sit back’ raises questions of ‘how far back?’ in view of ‘playing for the song.’ Invited to a session to record a medley in homage to the late Americana musician Jason Molina, Brett’s fieldnotes recount a process of repeatedly being told to simplify his drum lines to barest minimums, stripping out accents, fills and ‘softening’ his playing with each successive take. While this barebones aesthetic was in keeping with Molina’s spare songwriting, for Brett it also felt like an exercise in which the other musicians in the session policed the notion of what it meant to ‘play for the song’—a phrase Brett heard throughout the session. Returning to the studio for a second day to track one more song,

I’m waiting for the others to turn up (drummer cliché—I’m early; they’re late!), I just learned [from the engineer] they had already finished the last song: the piano player had tracked the drums after I left last night! I’m not bothered about someone else tracking drums for the tune, but what he’s played is so minimal as to be utterly faceless. Is that what they’d meant by ‘playing for the song’? For me, such characterlessness means disappearing into the wallpaper. That’s not playing for the song, is it? It’s the erasure of the drummer. (fieldnotes, 6 September 2017)

While perhaps an unusual example, Brett's fieldnotes raise further questions about the idea of 'playing for the song.' For Paul, it meant offering 'something slightly different or subtle, [or] interesting' in each part of a song. Yet, the doxa of 'playing for the song' often positions drummers as so simple (in Brett's fieldnotes) as to be 'replaceable' [26], when (in Paul's words) playing 'just to facilitate the song.'

These perceptions have indelible effects on the dispositions of drummers toward their bodies, behaviours and identities. In Bourdieu's terms, what emerged from our fieldwork is a view of drumming 'habitus'[27]: the dispositions toward the body and the behaviours, actions and thoughts to which an individual (i.e., drummer) is *habituated*, through socialisation in families, schools, and—in popular music—in groups, bands, and in the social spaces of studios. For Bourdieu, the habitus 'is a socialised body [...] which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world—a field—and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world.' [28] As Reay put it, habitus is both the body in the social world and the social world made manifest in the body.[29] For drummers, these bodily dispositions are revealed in comments about studio sessions. Derek recounted:

Live, I felt like I was supposed to play like "animal" from the Muppets, or Keith Moon, you know, like a flailing wild man; my motto was 'if I didn't bleed, it wasn't a good show!' But then there was this total disconnect with how I felt I should play in the studio: tight, precise, clinical, simplified. It wasn't me. It never felt right and I don't think my playing ever translated to studio work.

Here Derek hints at a drumming habitus expressed through ways "of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking"[30] about drumming. Habitus is made manifest in everyday actions and, for drummers, through all of the thoughts, actions, and gestures that encompass drumming. The myth of playing for the song, therefore, is part of the habitus of drummers' identities, as well as part of the positioning of drummers within the "the discourses of history and culture"[31] that are part of the doxa of drummers' worlds. As Paul intoned in Take 1 (above), becoming involved in a wider world of creative studio practices also required engagement with a range of studio knowledge and personnel. We explore this expanded world and body of studio knowledge in our final take.

Third take: Agency, Creative Practice and Studio Knowledge

The third analytical theme that arose from interviews with drummers was that of agency within the recording or production process. Agency is a crucial element of creative activity because it is located within a drummer's ability to make choices, take actions or exercise their free will.[32-34] Giddens, for example, argues that: 'agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently.' [35] Agents are considered to be knowledgeable subjects who: 'know how to act [...] know the rules of behaviour, and [...] know the sequences of actions.' [36] Giddens also asserts that: 'it is always the case that the day-to-day activity of social actors draws upon and reproduces structural features of wider social systems.' [37] This can be seen in the previous two takes where the activities of drummers inside the recording studio draw upon and reproduce existing hierarchies within studios and the art world of popular music production more broadly. In this sense drummers can be seen as constrained by the structures of the recording studio and the record production process but it is vital to underline that they are also enabled by these

structures too.[38] Giddens labels this interdependence between agency and structure as 'structuration', which is 'an attempt to resolve the tension which exists between individual and society.'[39] Structuration acknowledges that 'all action, including creative and innovative action, arises in the complex conjunction of numerous structural determinants and conditions.'[40]

A drummer's ability to make particular choices in the recording studio and exercise agency is both enabled and constrained by the institutional boundaries of the cultural field in which they work. These boundaries include studio technologies, studio practices that implement that technology, and the limits that the current institution can assimilate.[41] A studio drum recording can be viewed as the complex result of economic and conceptual influences, which have been: 'mediated through the formal structures of the text (literary or other), and owing its existence to the particular practice of the located individual.'[42] Our drummer-interviewees noted that their ability to exercise agency was most limited at the beginning of their career and in sessions where they were hired to perform on record. Tony (age 57) began drumming professionally in studios in 1982, working for a producer recording drums for jingles and advertisements. As in previous takes in this chapter, Tony was expected to record his parts and then get out of the way. However, two years later after joining a band signed to a record label, he began to have more agency in the recording process. He recounted recording sessions in Trident Studios:

'By now I'm starting to get more involved in not just working on the material but working on the sounds as well and I was allowed to do it. We had a producer called Pete Wilson, who'd done the Style Council, and he let me sort of get involved really and try and develop the sound to a more "big band" style sound, which is what I'd always wanted to do. That was the first time I was really allowed to do that'.

This involvement wasn't without constraints, as Tony explained:

'Studios are expensive and they wanted it done quickly. We were still a new band and I don't think they wanted to spend a ton of money on the studio, they wanted to spend the money somewhere else like on the marketing but it wasn't the pressure of that, it was more the pressure of trying to come up with something that Robert [the lead singer] liked because it was counterintuitive to the type of music that I was into at the time [...] I was always trying to play a bit tighter, a bit safer and in the pocket and he's not having it; he wanted it really raggedy and loose'.

Drummers must balance the expectations of the multiple participants involved and exercising the agency they have within studio processes. A drummer's status within the cultural unit of a band is often related to the amount of agency they have in the recording studio. For example, Keith explained:

'I joined that band after they had two hit records so that's something I try to remember at all times. Of course it's possible for me to bring what I think are great ideas into the project, but it's important for me to remember that their success predated my involvement with them. So, I need to ensure I'm never offended if they don't want my input with songwriting or arrangement or production but at the same time feel confident enough to offer that stuff.'

Session drummer Jess also acknowledged this:

'I wouldn't really get involved in the post [production] side of it. I would only say something if... for example, I always bring my snares in and if a guy in the studio in

post was making my snare drum—which has cost a lot of money and that I know how I want it to sound—sound like crap, then I'd say something.'

Across our interviews, drummers noted that as they became more experienced and developed their status—or in Bourdieu's terms accumulate cultural and symbolic capital—their abilities to exercise agency also changed. Some drummers were able to exercise greater agency inside the recording studio because of their knowledge and experience with recording technologies. As Tony was asked increasingly to work with click-tracks in the studio, he became determined to gain a greater understanding of technologies such as drum machines to the point where he thought of them 'as his friends'. His first experience of these technologies was when his original drum part was removed and replaced with a sampled, programmed part. Instead of viewing this as an imposition upon his agency, Tony appreciated the way in which it contributed to the overall production of the song, stating: 'Because of that, the band actually bought an SP-12 Sampler and I learned how to use it. The next album we did, there's no live drums on it; they're all programmed.'

Other drummers noted that developing experience and knowledge with recording technologies was linked to their agency as a drummer inside the recording studio, too.

Emre, an engineer, producer and drummer, noted:

'I spent masses of time learning how to place parts on the grid so I don't have so much editing to do [laughs]. When people really want that "beat detective" kind of feel, I've spent a long time learning how to pocket the drums right on the grid. I'm naturally looser and elastic when I play so that took a while to learn how to do that, and obviously playing with lots of session players who have perfect time, I thought "right, I've got to learn how to do this because it's not what comes naturally to me."'

The interviewees also highlighted that working closely with other studio personnel was a crucial part of exercising agency over the ways in which their drums were captured on record as Paul explained: 'Because of my experience of engineering I was able to work with the engineer to set up the mics, get particular sounds, then also play the performances which were all done to a click, and then edit them myself.'

Mike reported a close working, creative relationship with the studio engineer during his first studio recording session at age 16. He described this relationship as 'the most immediate', with the engineer the 'pivotal person' in the creative process:

'Me and 'Bill' spent six hours on one single and we just stripped everything back and made everything simplistic for the record, in what I think sounds so much better, rewriting a track and just loving it. So, he had an engineer's and producer's role in it. I would play the section and then Bill would be like "let's make a compromise; like let's take this out, or do you want to add this in?", and it was always up to me but obviously he knew what he was doing, and we changed the track to make it... it's like simplistic, like just very sturdy, and it was just like a classic rock track.

Recording a take, isolating and chopping up its components, and reconstructing a new track (similar to vocal 'comping', or creating an aggregated 'composite' track from a number of takes) shows a luxury of time and production not often afforded to drummers and drum takes. This example also evinces a high degree of alteration, and thus creative control, through editing and reconfiguring an overall track. Yet, by reducing the track and making it 'simplistic', like a 'classic rock track', this again demonstrates the doxa of workmanship and the identity positioning of 'playing for the song' as discussed in Take 2. It also highlights the

ways in which agency operates inside the structures of the recording studio with the expectations of the social field (the fans, the media, the recording) always present within the decision-making process. The examples highlight the interrelationship between agency and structure[43] in which both are necessary in order for drummers (and engineers and producers) to operate inside the recording studio. Agency, or freedom, is therefore bound by the constraints, or the structures, that facilitate its operation. These constraints may include musical style, pre-written musical parts of a song, the technologies used, and the status of the drummer within the recording studio context. Drummers must navigate these multiple, competing concerns in exercising agency inside the recording studio.

Final Take: Concluding thoughts

In conclusion, we offer a handful of take-aways as contributions to the growing body of knowledge about drummers and drumming. First, through sociological lenses, we have called for greater attention to drummers in the social worlds of recording studios. Here we echo Reay: ‘the goal of sociological research is to uncover the most deeply buried structures of the different social worlds that make up the social universe, as well as the “mechanisms” that tend to ensure their reproduction or transformation.’[44] Second, the chapter contributes to the conceptualizations of the ‘work’ of drummers in creative recording environments across its central conceptual axes, or ‘takes’: spaces, identities, and agencies. Third, through ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative interviews, the chapter has sought to enhance the methodological richness of research about, and with, drummers, offering finer-textured and more deeply contextualized accounts of musicians’ experiences—in this case, drummers—in recording studios.

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