Musical creativity in groups - the composition process in pop and rock bands

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For many decades, researching creativity meant focusing on individuals' creative achievements and the requirements individuals had to meet to be creative - e.g. character traits, modes of thinking etc. (1), even though allowance has been made for the cultural context in which creativity occurs and is evaluated (2). Recently, this concept of creativity has been perceived as too narrow. Especially education and management experts such as Burow (1999 and 2000) (3) see large potentials of creativity in cooperating groups in which members can combine their specific abilities to achieve a creative output which goes far beyond their individual accomplishments. In this context, any creative output is not only determined by the talents or traits of one person, but also by the structure of the group this person works with; thus it is important to inquire which group structures will benefit the creative process.

Even though musical creativity and composition are generally believed to be attained by individual talent or even genius, group creativity is not an uncommon thing in music: Especially in pop, rock and jazz groups, the creative process is frequently shared by many if not all band members (4). While in jazz bands group improvisation is the most common means of musical communication and spontaneous creation, pop and rock bands often compose and arrange their own material in a cooperative process which may even be based on a "norm of creativity space for everyone" (5).

Even though group improvisation is sometimes called "real-time composition" (6) and is one of the methods groups use to generate their own ideas (7) it is important to distinguish between forms of musical creativity intended to be temporary (8) or "relatively permanent" (9). In composition which leaves time for planning and forethought, musical decisions can be reversed and thus consciously weighed up with alternatives. Thus studying jazz bands, where improvisation often has at least as much importance of as composition, must generally be differentiated from studying the compositional activities of pop and rock groups.

Generating musical ideas is an act of creation usually hidden inside an individual's mind, making it retain a sort of mystical quality (10) almost immune to empirical research. The immediate source of an individual's creative output, especially of a rare genius, thus can hardly be examined in detail. In contrast, group creativity is not only more common, but also easier to observe from the outside: True to Toynbee's hypothesis that in popular music, an individual's "unit of creativity is a small one" (11), original ideas of band members are frequently mere fragments. What follows is a process of further development, supplementation and decision-making, also a vital part of composition (12), which is usually shared in pop and rock bands.

To study musical group creativity in depth, I practiced participating observation in five local amateur pop and rock groups, documenting their creative process on video and interviewed each band member of every group about their musical background and about the composition process in the band. Analysing the qualitative data using the method of Grounded Theory, I extracted traits on the group level as well as on the individual level which appear to determine an individual's compositional activity within a band.
In this paper, I will focus on interview statements on group creativity in the bands, showing which elements within a group structure make it possible for band members to go beyond their individual potential in a common creative process.

In band composition, the method most frequently used is collective jamming - either to generate new material, or to develop complete songs from basic ideas pre-composed by single band members. During the trial-and-error process of jamming, band members influence each other by the way they play their instruments.

**Guitarist 1 (13)**

When we first met, we just started to play, and something developed. It is usually the bassist and I who contribute ideas. The bass player maybe has a riff, or we just start jamming, or I bring an idea from home. I start playing, then the bass player comes in, the drummer starts playing and suddenly the singer sings something. It just develops from jamming.

**Bassist 4**

Usually we just play something - we may have a rough structure, we know what comes when, because the lyrics and some basic ideas are already there. Then we keep trying things out until they fit. That's a nice way of making music.

After a period of jamming, the material needs usually structuring. Ideas have to be selected and filtered; the band chooses as a group which material they will work on and which material will be dropped. However, as band members may become 'experts' for various tasks within *as well* as without the creative process, some musicians may specialise on structuring rather than on developing new ideas, as Bassist 3 reports:

**Bassist 3**

I suppose we are complementary to each other. Each contributes some ideas. Then the band filters them - what makes sense and what doesn't - and each contributes the part of his (or her) own instrument. [...] That is just the thing in our band - sometimes the ideas what to do with a song just pour out, until you add up a thousand new things in a song, and every verse sounds different! Then you've got a musical patchwork and a really long song - and it is my job to make sure something more sensible comes out in the end.

After developing pre-composed material by jamming and by structuring, the result may differ greatly from the basic ideas contributed by a single member; often the groups’ influence on a song is very important. Composers of the original material do not usually mind this, though:
Guitarist 2

You've imagined it in your head as a complete song, but in a manner that is either not realistic or would not sound so great after all. But thanks goodness you've got your competent band members to make a complete song out of it. When I write a song and we finish it with the band, it usually sounds completely different from the way I imagined it. I am usually content in the end.

As described by Burow (1999, 2000), a group's creative work is often superior to the work of an individual; as talents of band members may be complementary, they need not have extraordinary talents to work in a creative manner. Many band members are sure they can achieve more when they compose their music together instead of on their own.

Drummer 2

I believe this results into a certain quality of songs. When I write a song myself, I know it's always a bit - something is missing, a certain kick. And people listening from 'outside' can get this kick into the song best.

Composing together means cooperating; it also means being able to accept criticism and to benefit from it. Musicians who will take nobody's opinion can not benefit from group composition:

Drummer 2

I ask the others: 'Is it alright how I played it or do you have an idea how to improve it?' And if I notice something the singer is doing and think: 'I just had this idea, why doesn't he play it that way', I tell him. And that's alright. Nobody in our band is offended if you want to improve something. Well I know some musicians who don't want any advice. And I believe this influences the quality of the songs. [...] Everyone should play what he wants to, but it must serve the song. And if someone is always left to his own devices and too self-centred in his work, it's neither good for the band nor the song.

Group composition is only possible when the balance of individual freedom and adaptation for the benefit of the song and the band is held. If the band is to benefit from all its members' talents, individuals must not only be allowed contribute their ideas, but are generally expected to.

Singer 4

Usually we've got a structure, and then everybody can make up his own part. Sometimes the guitar player says: 'Why don't you play something like this on the bass?', but then it is up to the bass player whether he does so or not. At first the Cello player wanted to be told what to play, I think. But we don't do that. You have to show some initiative yourself.
For many musicians, contributing to the creative process is a very important aspect of playing in a band; if they are denied the certain kind of satisfaction they gain from participating, they might consider leaving a band.

Drummer 2
If you tell people 'you better play this on the bass, and then you will play that', then most musicians will not be very motivated. It's better to say: 'Here's my tune - find something that goes well with it!'

Composing together is almost impossible without understanding each other musically. A general desire to compose music without verbal communication prevails in the bands; if the band members can guess each other's playing, it is taken as a sign that the band works together well.

Bassist 4
We are pretty much on the same wavelength. And usually I know what the guitarist is thinking, what he wants, if he wants the song to take a certain direction. [...] And probably that's what makes the band, if you come to know (hums) 'well, probably the Cello player will do that and the guitar player will do this, and that's when the singer comes in', and everything runs automatically. That's how it should be, how I like it.

This musical understanding is achieved by a common musical background - listening to the same kind of music and playing together for a longer period. Paying close attention to each other's playing is crucial for successful jamming.

Drummer 2
We do not need to discuss much, because everyone knows what is asked of him. When the singer is introducing one of his songs, everyone knows how it sounds or should be played. We just know because we have the same background and have been playing that kind of music for 15 / 20 years.

Drummer 3
We all listen to each other a bit. And if I play the drums a bit softer, the others drop the volume as well - you know how it works in a session. If you have been playing together for a while, you notice, and it works.

However, discussing aspects of the song verbally can also be an important part of the composition process, especially when working on details and overall structure.

Cello Player 4
Sometimes we arrange a song in detail and talk about single notes: 'If you play this
note, I can't play that at the same time - I've got to do something else.' But usually we don't need to talk about it - it just happens.

Group creativity usually demands of the members of pop and rock bands that they have a broad knowledge of the musical genre played and are willing and able to adapt to the rules of band composition, accepting the musical autonomy of the individual members as well as an overall purpose of composing together. This method of band composition is almost unique in the way composition and performance are "interlinking" (14); while in the jamming process listening to each other and communicating through music is crucial, the structuring of the material involves speaking a common language verbally as well. While a certain initiative to compose is demanded of (almost) every band member, a well-formed group will be able to supply what individuals lack in group composition and to work creatively in a way which is often beyond the potential of each member if composing alone.
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References

(1) For example, Csikszentmihalyi 1997 gives a list of character traits noticed in creative individuals, while Amabile 1989 describes by which upbringing children are 'rendered' creative. Brenneis 1990 criticizes such focuses on individual creativity as too narrow.

(2) See Brenneis 1990 and Andreas 1993b.

(3) See also Kao (1997). Also, Liepmann et al. (1995) put emphasis on the importance of a beneficiary social climate within a work group to enhance creativity. On the other hand, De Bono 1996 stresses that creativity occurs by no means in groups only.

(4) Examples for this process were already described by Cohen 1991 and Witzel 2000. Also Finnegans 1989, Spiess 2000, Niketta and Volke 1994, and Ebbecke and Lüschper 1987 emphasize the importance as well as the extent of composition in bands.

(5) See Bayton 1998, 93.

(6) See Berliner 1994, 221.

(7) See Clemens 1983, 118.

(8) As recordings may turn a musical output of a temporary, fleeting nature into a piece of music fixed as an audio track, the borders between the two categories are a bit blurred. Still and in spite of similarities (see Rösing and Bruhn 1993), the natures of these two forms of musical creativity, improvisation and composition, can generally be considered as differing structurally.

(9) See Lindley 1980, 600.

(10) See Rösing and Bruhn 1993. Cook 1998 explains how 'myths' are constructed around the 'single individual'-composition process in art music.

(11) See Toynbee 2000, 35.

(12) See Cass 1976 and Stiefel 1976 who describe composition as a 'dialogue' between initial and supplemeting ideas.

(13) To insure the band members' privacy, their names are replaced by the instruments they play and the number of the band they play in; for example, Bassist 3 and Drummer 3 play in the same band. Except Drummer 3, all musicians quoted here are male; all musicians are aged between 24 and 42.

(14) See Green 1997, P. 83.
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